The year we spoke with the sea

Andrés Montero

Summer

We saw him arrive when summer was already taking its leave. The warm air, the churning sea, the movement of the birds, everything seemed to herald rain, or the premature emergence of autumn. We soon realised this wasn't the case, that there were still a few days of heat to go and that what was really going on was that the island wanted to let us know we had a visitor. That's why it was a little out of sorts, to put us on the alert, because it well knew, our island, that what would get our attention wouldn't be noise or silence, not the roar of the sea nor a tremble of the earth, nor the light of a meteorite or the thunder of cruise ships, not the big, not the enormous, because what is in plain sight has no need of us at all and so it is simpler just to keep going on the same island, which knows so well that what will move us, however, are these minimal alterations that cry out for a second glance, a step back, a pause to assess what has changed: all those signs that reveal themselves to us suddenly and lead us to understand, fascinated, that they've been there for several days, swirling around the island to make a path for themselves among the crevices of sameness.

That's how we were warned that morning, by the gusty warmth of the air, the subtle choppiness of the sea, the nervous fluttering of the birds, and of course the ghostly and distant tolling of the sunken bell, which was in fact what ended up rousing us, what forced us to take our eyes off the ground and receive the flock of signals the island had been spinning for us over three or four days, with the patience of a tiny spider.

"Someone's coming" we said then, and we left our spades impaled in the ground and our rakes lying flat and we whistled twice to the dogs to bring back the sheep and we told the children to feed the animals, while from afar you could just begin to make out the hum of Mike the gringo's plane.

We went unhurried to the airstrip, meeting each other on the way. Maybe we talked about something, or maybe we didn't say anything and just looked up, noting how the sound was growing between the clouds, and the sea and the wind churned a smidgeon more, while the black dot on the horizon was getting bigger, noisier, until the wings appeared, it gave a seagull's turn around the island, showed its wheels, descended to an always disconcerting

altitude, adjusted its undercarriage and finally came in to land, dancing here and there along the runway, which always looks too short and sometimes, sadly, is.

Then we let out the breath we'd been holding, as we do every time we take it upon ourselves to come and watch a landing.

First Mike the gringo got out, stretching his arms and legs as though the journey from the continent had taken him seven hours and not a measly thirteen minutes. We extended our necks so as not to miss the moment when the visitor disembarked, to see who would recognise him first, to see what visitor was so illustrious as to merit the efforts of the island and its swirling signals.

Finally Mike opened the door and we saw him jump to the ground and leave the runway at a trot, as if he thought it possible that another plane could follow at the tail of this one, ready to charge at him like an angry bull. A tourist, clearly. He was the only passenger. Mike took out a smoke, leaned his back against the plane and watched him, amused. All the luggage the stranger carried was a small suitcase with wheels, an overnight bag that he shifted from shoulder to shoulder every so often, and a camera hanging from his neck. His shoes were smart, as were his trousers and jacket. He looked ready to meet the mayor. He also seemed unaware that we have nothing approximating a mayor here. At a glance we'd put him at around seventy, going by the grey hair that he ran his hand through every five minutes to tidy it up, uselessly. Behind him, the wind whistled around the wings of the aircraft, as though about to lift it into the air.

So that's all he was: a tourist, with his camera and his suitcase, with the perennial relief at not having crashed and a likely interest in going as soon as possible to see the fire that ignites in our sea, because the days are few and that's what he came for, and also, although he doesn't know it, to be disappointed because the truth is the whales no longer come past the coast of this island although the tourist brochures on the mainland keep advertising them with high-spec photos of the white sperm whale, so famous around the world that every now and then the idea of catching a glimpse of him ends up winning over a couple of airheads who contact Mike the gringo and just pop over here, and who on the third or fourth day, having seen the fire that comes out of the sea, disappointed by the absence of whales and the century-and-a-half dead sperm whale, bored of the calm and the swell, no longer know what to do with themselves on an island where what happens can't be seen.

A tourist, then. That's what we impaled our spades for, and laid down our rakes, that's what we threw aside our work for that morning when the summer was beginning to take its leave. A first wave of disillusionment rose among those of us who were there, which however wanted to fade away when some of us began to see what afterwards would be impossible to unsee:

"His face looks really familiar."

Then we screwed up our eyes, trying to beat the distance. And we saw him.

"Shit. He's the spit."

"No, come on. Not the spit."

And maybe it was nothing more than the great excitement we all felt that something, anything, was happening. The despair, or the boredom, or the sadness that we had been carrying for seven years broke once more against the island.

"He doesn't look that much like him, really" – the wave approached.

"In the swarthiness a bit, maybe" – it retreated.

"And the way he holds himself" – a little further in.

"With a beard he'd look like him, but like this not so much" – here it came again.

"I can't see it myself" – and the wave of disappointment came crashing, crashing down.

What foolishness, when it was probably pure coincidence, a silly conjunction between the island's diffuse signals and a look-alike who with a bit of luck would serve to give us something to talk about in the taberna that afternoon, and ask ourselves what don Julián might be up to.

But once he was off the runway, when he seemed to feel safe, or at least calm, or at least stable, the stranger turned his back to the sea, rested his fists on his hips and gave the island a good long look, while he ejected the air from the journey through his nose, slow and deep, to the rhythm of the countryside.

He took it all in, the island, far and wide and up above, as if he were making it his own with his gaze.

That's when we finally recognised him.

“Ah, chucha! It *is* him!”

“The brother!”

“How long since he was here last?”

“I thought they were more alike.”

“Yeah, maybe it isn’t him.”

But it was. We knew it from the lengthy contemplation of his surroundings, from the sigh of those who come back. He said it with his eyes, too: there was something in them that spoke of time and nostalgia, of the need to fit the images of his memory with those he had in front of him now, to put one on top of the other to see if they matched, or if he needed to make some alterations in his memory.

Then he waved at Mike, gave his case a push and left. A little further on the paved road ended and the wheels on his case became redundant.

We went back to our business. It was just past midday.

Maybe there was still some doubt, but if there was it evaporated that same afternoon. Don Hugo’s daughter came by the taberna and told us that she’d seen him from the new cemetery. The man was standing in front of the abandoned Garcés mansion, leaning on the handle of his case and looking at it all with his mouth open, affected by the ruin that was his family hacienda. Every now and then he would cup his hands around his mouth and call “Holaaaa?” and then “Alóoooo!”, but each time slower, each time with less hope, casting glances around as if asking himself under which tree he would have to spend the night, or what time the storm would decide to break.

“Hey, if you’re looking for don Julián you won’t find him here,” the kid said to him from the other side of the gate, worried that so much shouting would disturb the sailors’ rest.

“And where will I find him?”

“You have to climb the path up the hill. Follow the smoke from the chimney. Do you see it?”

The stranger looked up. He had to bend his neck right back for his eyes to see beyond the foliage of the forest and make out the smoke rising from The Peak.

“Damn it. What’s Julián doing up there?”

“That’s where he lives. At The Peak.”

“At The Peak? That was miles away.”

“Not was. Is. That’s why we don’t see much of don Julián. He never comes down anymore.”

“What does he live on? Why did he leave the mansion? And what the fuck is this cemetery doing here?”

Don Hugo’s daughter had neither answers nor much taste for talking, so she shrugged her shoulders before losing herself again amongst the headstones, while the new arrival swore a bit, moved his bag to the other shoulder again and accepted that his fate, at least for that afternoon, at least on his first day on the island, was to go to the literal peak of the hill.

“How long was it since he was last here?” We asked ourselves again that night in the taberna.

But the truth is that we had no answers either, and we’d lost our taste for talking a long time ago. It was better like that, listening to the rain, raising your eyebrows from time to time, wondering once in a while whether the images of our memories also needed some alterations, and forgetting the subject altogether after the second caña.

At the end of the day, it was no big deal.

It was on its way already, the summer was already on its way out when we saw him arrive. The last few days had been cloudy, and this one too. The warm air, the rough sea, the movements of the birds, the tolling of the sunken bell: the island had a knack for warning us about the rain and also a visitor.

Jerónimo Garcés was the visitor.

The rain, well.

The rain was the rain.

Two days passed, maybe three. When we saw him again his shoes and trousers were covered in dry mud, his jacket peppered with rebellious little leaves of boldo and laurel. He came so covered in forest that he no longer looked like he was going to meet the mayor. The three-day beard, a little white, a little grey, suited him. But he didn't look relaxed. We didn't know yet that the meeting with his twin hadn't gone well, although we certainly could have guessed.

He had come down to the pueblo as soon as the good weather returned, with the intention of finding out where there was a cash machine. Those of us who were there laughed. Then he asked about the pilot. We explained that with Mike you never knew.

"You want to go back already?"

He shook his head.

"Not yet, but I'm worried he'll forget to come and find me."

Then he asked, showing us an enormous mobile phone, if we knew where he could get signal. We laughed again. Someone slapped him on the shoulder: our way of saying welcome.

"A word of advice, don Jerónimo."

He widened his eyes, surprised.

"You know my name?"

"Aren't you don Julián's brother?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"The writer."

"You know I'm a writer?"

"There's one of your books in the library."

"There's a library?" (He seemed surprised about everything, this man).

"There's a library, yes, it's tiny though. Cash machine, signal, librarian: these things, no."

"OK, OK. And the advice?"

"What advice?"

"You were going to give me a word of advice."

“Oh yeah. The advice is not to accept advice from anyone.”

He was silent for a second. Then he asked:

“Are you taking the piss?”

“Eh?”

“I’m asking if you’re pulling my leg.”

“Oh! Yes, we’re pulling your leg. What does ‘taking the piss’ mean?”

“The same thing, in Spanish.”

“And what language are we talking in?”

“Spanish from Spain, I mean.”

“You live in Spain?”

“Yes. Well, in Catalonia.”

“And do they speak Spanish in Catalonia?”

“No, Catalan.”

We were silent, waiting to see if anybody had understood.

“It looks like we’re lost, don Jerónimo.”

“No matter. What was the advice?”

“Of course, the advice. The advice is not to ask the island for what the island can’t provide. You’ll only ruin your holiday.”

He thought for a moment. Then he nodded.

“I’ll take it. Although I haven’t come on holiday.”

“And why have you come?”

Don Jerónimo let out a long sigh. The island shifted a little, alert.

“I guess to visit my brother.”

“Ah yes, that we knew.”

“That a visitor was coming to the island.”

“How did you know?”

We looked at each other again. Then we all spoke at the same time:

“Well, the birds… well, the sea… well, we heard the sunken bell.”

He looked at us as if we’d come from another planet.

“Come by the taberna one afternoon for a caña, don Jerónimo,” we added, to fill the silence and because we were starting to enjoy our time with him.

He nodded several times, slowly, as if he was weighing up the invitation and was inclined to accept it, although the gesture could also have suggested that he didn’t want to offend us by refusing straightaway, and so he chose this sort of limbo, this silent agreement that was neither here nor there, that simply told us he had heard us and that’s that.

But we had already said what seemed right to us to say, and here on the island nobody issues an invitation twice because why would you.

He appeared in the taberna the next day. He looked a complete mess. He descended the ladder carefully, suspecting perhaps that the rungs would break beneath his weight. When he got to the bottom we waved to him. Don Jerónimo came to sit down casting curious glances at the old rudders, ropes, coloured flags, the rusty diving suit, the portholes to port and starboard.

“What do you think of our taberna, don Jerónimo?”

“I remember this ship well. It arrrived with the tsunami. Of course back then it wasn’t a taberna. I think we were afraid of it. We thought it was cursed.

“But you like it now?”

“It’s different. Whose idea was it to turn it into a taberna?”

“Your brother’s.”

“Ah. Of course.”

“Help yourself to a cañita, why don’t you.”

“I don’t have any cash. How can it be that the island now has an airfield, planes and hotels, but no cash machine?”

“OK, OK. We’re getting there. Planes is overstating it a bit. There’s Mike’s, who lives on the mainland, and sometimes the ones belonging to the milicos. There’s only one hotel although barely any tourists come these days.”

“Hombre, I’m not surprised, with the effort it takes to get the gringo to bring you here.”

“It’s not just that though. The hotel was full of tourists for two years. There were more flights, too.”

“And what happened?”

“The sea happened. On top of the island. Just like when you were a kid. Didn’t you hear about it? This time the tsunami wasn’t as huge as the one before, but even so the water almost came up to your parents’ mansion. It took everything. They had to rebuild the airfield from scratch.”

“Did people die?”

“Four in total. Those who didn’t manage to get to The Peak. The island couldn’t do anything for them.”

“But that must have been a few years ago now, no?”

“Yeah, but the tourists are still scared. Bah, it’s better they don’t come. They didn’t know how to take away their rubbish.”

“And then every fifty years, paf, the wave.”

“Exactly. At least we’ve got the mountain.”

“And doesn’t it scare you that the taberna’s so close to the sea?”

“Of course not – can’t you see it’s a ship?”

Don Jerónimo raised his eyebrows, as though he didn’t believe it possible that we were capable of steering the ship across the sea when the moment came. But he was wrong. We knew our sea well and our taberna even better. We’d already designated the command posts and everything. Maybe we even looked forward a little to the day when the taberna would become a sailing ship again, because then we could view the island from afar, and remember her with that old seafaring nostalgia, feeling that we had a place in the world that was waiting for us.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” said don Jerónimo. “How does the hotel survive if the tourists don’t come?”

“When one does come Gaby wrings them dry. Just like Mike.”

“That gringo made me wait three days before he’d bring me here and he didn’t want to tell me when he could come and get me, but he did insist that I prepaid for the return journey. That’s why I haven’t got any cash. How can the journey be so expensive?”

“How much did he charge you?”

Don Jerónimo told us the sum. We stared fixedly at our empty glasses, not daring to speak.

“OK, we’ll get this one.”

Martita brought out a glass for our guest and another bottle. He served himself and knocked the whole glass back in one.

“In Spain, caña means beer, not a shot of wine,” he commented, drying his mouth with his hand.

“Ah. Beer we don’t have.”

“No matter.”

He poured himself another glass, although this time he didn’t down it.

“So there’s no cash machine.”

“You got it.”

“Not to mention a bank…”

We let out a guffaw. Don Jerónimo smiled. Then he became serious again.

“What does it matter. I don’t even know if there’s money in my account.”

“Ah, so it’s not the cash machine that’s the problem.”

“The problem is that they’re not paying me. That’s the fucking problem, actually.”

“Who isn’t paying you, don Jerónimo?”

He toyed with his glass for a moment, searching for the words. Finally he found them.

“My editors. It’s complicated, it’s not like it was before, if I don’t send a preview of the report, they can’t pay me an advance. What do I know. And then, they throw it in my face that they paid my airfare. Hombre, now it looks like I have to thank them for letting me do my job.”

“Did they send you to write about the island?”

“Ha, no way. Even God’s never heard of this island. No, they sent me to report on what’s going on in the country. What do you guys think about what’s going on in the country?”

We glanced at each other.

“To be honest, we don’t really care about the country, Jerónimo.”

“Why not?”

“Because the country doesn’t care about us.”

He was silent, chewing on our answer. Then he took a notebook from his pocket and wrote something in it.

“Did you like what we said?”

“What?”

“Did you write down what we said for your report?”

“Oh. Yes.”

“So you liked it.”

“It’s not about whether I like it or not.” He said, scratching his head. “It’s about whether what you said can speak to something more, if it gives a broader view on the subject.”

“What subject?”

“What’s happening in the country, no?”

“But we’ve just told you we don’t care.”

“And that in itself says something. That you don’t care, I mean. That’s why it’s good.”

“Aha, so you did like it.”

“No, no. I don’t think you understand me.”

“No, we do understand you. But we’ve said lots of things and you haven’t written them down, and then this time you did. That’s because you liked it.”

He was about to respond further, but instead he remained silent, thinking.

“Maybe you’re right.”

We smiled, satisfied.

“Still, I don’t think I’ll write this report,” the old man continured.

“And why not?”

“The easy answer is that I’m not going to finish it until they pay me an advance.”

“And the difficult answer?”

“Just that now…”

Just then he choked on his words and that put us on the alert, like when you realise that someone is about to cry and you have to think quickly of the best reaction, the most appropriate, the least annoying, the most understanding: all those good intentions that at the end of the day are no use to anyone. To get through it, we chose to think it was just the wine, catching in his throat, and we carried on watching him, waiting for him to finish his thought.

“Just that now what, don Jerónimo?”

“Well… just that maybe now I’ve got nothing more to say. Nothing more to say.”

His words permeated to our very depths: they were words that took the same form as our injury, that quiet wound left with us from Milena’s death, that didn’t know how to heal. It was as if they placed themselves there, precise as the final piece as a puzzle, and the burning was so intense we had to cough so as not to cry. In the end we chose to think it was just the wine, catching in our throats.

Once we had fully recovered, we attempted to cheer up the old man.

“You’ve travelled all around the world, no? You must have lots of things to tell.”

He smiled sadly.

“Yes. But, unfortunately, having something to tell is not the same as having something to say.”

The taberna was a gift from the sea. We don't know who the sea borrowed it from. It probably came from some distant port, when it was not yet a taberna but a ship tied up somewhere, rocking as it waited for adventure. It arrived on the island a long time ago, when don Jerónimo and don Julián were barely even kids, that day when the earth exploded and the sea covered everything, just as it did a decade ago, just as it will every time that the serpent of the sea and the serpent of the earth clash in their eternal war.

But that time, they say, was really something. The waves grew so big they brought things from the mainland: oars, nets, boats, rudders, roofs, saucepans, ragdolls, dogs, sheep, and a few bodies too. From up high, at The Peak, where our parents and grandparents had taken refuge, terrified, you could see, among so many surprises, a ship run aground on the beach, its keel buried in the earth, causing the pebbles to leap in the air, with the stern facing land and the prow looking out to sea, ready to set sail again.

The next day the sea gave up on swallowing the island and became as mild as milk, as if all that kerfuffle had been a joke, nothing more. For years kids kept finding things thrown on the ground, that they swapped between themselves like little treasures from beyond.

It didn't occur to anyone to take the vessel out to sea: A ship run ashore must sail no more, said the fishermen, and so there the boat remained mulling over its own obscurity until, after a few years, the kids thought that it would be an excellent place to play and they made it their own, not knowing that in time it would become a lovers' hideout and much later, our taberna.

Damp has eaten away at the wood many times, and we almost had to replace it after the last tsunami. In fact, we had to go and retrieve it from the sea as soon as the waves called a truce, because no other taberna exists like this one and we wouldn't lose it for anything in the world. The wind rocks and rattles it all the time; the chairs are hard and it's a job to keep glasses from tilting over on the uneven tabletops, which causes disasters and exasperates the tourists. On the other hand, you can be out on the deck in summer, and downstairs, in the bodegas, where we almost always are, we can forget everything, feel like we're in the middle of the sea, on a circular voyage that always ends up at the same port.

"At the end of the day, every taberna is a ship about to set sail or a ship run aground on an island", said don Julián, who was the one who convinced Martita to convert this forgotten vessel into a taberna with all the bells and whistles. The mourning period for her husband, the beloved don Ulises, was going on too long and don Julián couldn't stand to see her so sad. So he rescued her with the idea of turning the ship into a taberna. They had played thereas kids,

and had even exchanged a few kisses there at fifteen, among the seaweed, the crabs and the limpets clinging furiously to its timber and to the fractured mast, on whose broken point now waves a Coca-Cola flag (although there was only Coca-Cola for the opening, it's never turned up again since).

Don Jerónimo began to come often, because we offered him wine and perhaps because he liked to chat with us. He always chose to sit in the prow, by the round window with a sea view. He looked like a retired sea captain.

"Did you know Milena?" Don Jerónimo wanted to know one of those afternoons. He had been quiet for a long time, just watching the waves through the window, in a silence so thick we had already realised that when he did speak it would be to say something of note. Anyway, we'd spent several days wondering when the subject of Milena would come up, so we were ready to answer with a steady voice.

"Of course, yes, Milenita, she was a darling."

Jerónimo Garcés put his hands over his face.

"Julián didn't let me know, he didn't say anything."

"How could he have let you know?"

"I don't know, by letter."

"Ah, you wrote each other letters?"

"Actually, no."

"Never?"

"Well, there was one time, but it was nearly half a century ago."

"So he had your address."

"No, no. I've lived all over the place."

"But you could have written to don Julián."

"Well, yes."

"But you didn't give him your new address when you moved."

"Hombre, well, no."

“So how was he supposed to send you a letter to let you know about Milenita?”

He fell into silence, like a little kid who’s been caught out.

Then he mumbled, very quietly:

“Even so…”

He poured himself another caña and downed it in one. Now he really looked like a retired sea captain.

“And how are things going with don Julián up there at The Peak?” We asked to change the subject, because one isn’t always ready to talk about any thing at any time and we were starting to feel uncomfortable.

“They’re going. I give him a hand with the vegetable patch. He seems sad. He shuts himself in the woodshed to do who knows what. At night we light a fire and we try to talk.”

“What do you talk about?”

“Life. Things like that.”

“And does he say anything about the sunken bell?”

He looked at us, incredulous.

“Shit, you’re not telling me he’s still going on about the Spanish bell.”

“Ask him, why don’t you.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Ask him, then you’ll have something to talk about.”

“We’ll see.”

After a while he wanted to know if someone could lend him a horse to get to The Peak and back. He was exhausted and his shoes were in a sorry state. We wanted to help him, but nobody had a horse to spare.

“We’re sorry, don Jerónimo.”

“I’m leaving then, so as not to climb up in the dark again.”

“I’ll come with you as far as the path,” said Fernández. “My house is just next to it.”

They climbed the ladder, went out onto the deck and climbed down again to get off the ship. It was late, but the sun had not yet hidden itself fully.

When we were alone, Martita brought out another bottle and sat down with us. She rested her crossed arms on the table and drank like that, on the diagonal, looking out of the starboard porthole, through which she could make out don Jerónimo walking slowly next to Fernández.

“A sad man,” pronounced Martita after a while.