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## Nola Bizi, Hala Hil.

A story from Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain

I met someone in San Sebastián that personified the foam of the beer we shared while we ate pintxos, fried crab tart and fresh prawn. He called it a woman, he said it danced, and to me it resembled a cresting wave but perhaps these things are all the same. In those moments, the air lingered with saltwater and the communal laughter of a Basque afternoon rang like church bells. There has been nothing so familial to me in previous months, than the midday of Donostia's Parte Vieja.

My feet almost froze in the Bay of Biscay, and the sand from La Concha, Zurriola, became hearth. I'm not a decent surfer, a *grom* if you will, but there was never a doubt about springing into the water to give it a go. In Donostia, do as the Basques do— so I surfed, I ate my heart out, drank vermouth in an open air plaza and let myself dream of a life lived in the sprawling green hills of that fortunate North Spanish coast. Would I tire of the serenity? Donostia was the warm blanket on a frigid morning from which we, unwillingly, must eventually leave. I've gone to sleep with the sounds of battering waves against fables, against aged flysch, every night since my departure— and I've rested easily knowing that Donostia exists in my memory.

There's something about Euskera that sounds like folklore, broken tones that emanate an unknown history— words and phrases like myth to my Anglophone ears. The Basques say *we are because we were*, and I pray they continue to be— it is hard to imagine ever being the same after standing in the rain on those beaches, puffing at a Ducado, planning a pintxo feast in coming hours while watching the choppiest of sets fade in from the storms in the distant Atlantic. It is all a myth, and it's all something better left to be found on one's own.

The people there feel removed from any sort of history, because history is not something distant for the Basques as it is truthfully ever present. Every sunrise brings history, every shared glass of txakoli becomes fable– the chipirón soaked in its own ink that sits on your plate existed far before your lifetime, and will continue far beyond it. The families and faces of Donostia share their blood, eight last names ago many were still Basque– and there is hope that eight generations forward, they still will be. Through the tests and trials and lamenting of contemporary, globalized life– the great Basque story never wavers before the daunting test of time.

I had one of the best meals of my short life at Ganbara, a pintxo bar frequented by a late idol of mine, and somewhere in the smiles, faint rain and kitchen chatter– I felt him there. But I found that spirits exist in all of these corners, in every corner of Donostia. These are the spirits of the coming-and-going, and I feel as though nobody ever truly leaves. I know that I never left Ganbara, and if I, or my words, are ever the cause for which someone weaves their way through the world to this little side street bar– they will find me there still. I beg of you, have a kalimotxo for me. Turn towards the open doors and watch the corridors of the city move and speak, soak it in, and then trust that you too will never fade from the unspoken past of that town.

To be born Basque is something of legend, something of responsibility– to be born a carrier of an ancient and ongoing tale is a burden and blessing all in the same. But to know the Basques, to love them, only leaves me feeling spoiled, and almost makes one feel the need to keep it all a secret. I seem all the wiser for having ever so briefly thrown myself into Basque culture– into a life comprised of fierce passion, tranquil thought, admiration of the common, shere resilience, and perfection of joyous routine. The days in Donostia are all so unique, and all so the same in their minutely accented details.

A chapter of one's life either finishes or begins when visiting Donostia, it exists as a paradox, a place of constant beginnings and ends— the frequent end of singular moments strung together into days that are remembered in vignettes. My txikiteo left me at the foot of Parque Urgüell, so I continued on. Then at the peak, with a gut packed full of Basque hospitality, I closed my eyes and only heard the gulls, the winds, the tides, and the clamor of so many full hearts a hike away from me. I took a heavy inhale, and I let that moment lie. Few times have I ever come so close to divinity.

In Euskadi they say, *nola bizi, hala hil*. How you live, is how you will die. A proverb that will take a lifetime to understand in depth and gravity. I am an imperfect sinner, I laugh often and I try to keep good company— but I have lived better for having journeyed to Donostia. I will find it again, soon or in another life. But I will carry on now, peacefully, with the knowledge that the Basque people exist and are a testament to all that makes the human spirit so incapable of comprehension. *Nola bizi, hala hil*. Eskerrik asko, from a visiting and loving groom.