

Burnout, Overload and Resilience: A Creative Writing Workshop

Elvira Navarro, *A Working Woman*, translated by Christina MacSweeney (Two Lines Press, 2017); originally published as *La trabajadora* (Penguin Random House, 2014)

Set in Madrid in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the novel tells the story of the protagonist Elisa Núñez who, in her forties, is employed on precarious contracts as a proofreader for a publishing house. Facing financial instability and forced to share her Housing Association rented apartment with another tenant Susana, Elisa experiences anxiety and panic attacks. By the conclusion, she has overcome some of these problems: she has been paid for her work and has moved in with her partner, Germán. She finds resolution through writing a book about her experiences, as revealed in the final twist of the novel.



EXTRACT 1:

A few days later, when I was on the street, I experienced a sudden sense of foreboding, a runaway premonition, an absolute chaos of my nervous system. I noticed that the store where the year before I'd ordered an exercise bike had closed. Bankrupt businesses are, I thought, minor details in an organism whose heart is still beating at full capacity, and shouldn't alarm me. That's what I said to myself when I arrived at the Plaza de Aluche shopping mall, from the dome of which snowflakes were being blown onto the ashen street. There were signs advertising the January sales, and the stores were full. Despite it being an everyday scene, there was something not quite normal about the bustling crowds, something reminiscent of outlying French boulevards, where the indecisive clientele take their time milling in front of the store windows. I boarded a bus; I needed to see more, and as the vehicle sped up everything around it slowed down, as if the dogs were taking twice as long to sniff corners and the trunks of plane trees. The only people not on the move were the retirees sitting on benches in the hazy sunshine, an ordinary scene, even if there did seem to be too many of them, and the way they were bunched together in certain squares, under statues and around particular official buildings, offered a different, distorted reading. For a few seconds those old

people became monsters looking at me with cajoling smiles. It took me some time to find the appropriate words to express that perception, to recognize they were visions. I noted the throb of my pulse in my ears. And this thought also occurred to me: someone, or something, is sending me a warning. For a while I was poised on the verge of collapse.

The bus moved away from the parasites. I tried to speak. The blood wasn't reaching my hands and feet. They were cold, dry; they were going to detach themselves from my body. When I took a step, I couldn't feel the ground, and I grabbed at a woman's coat.

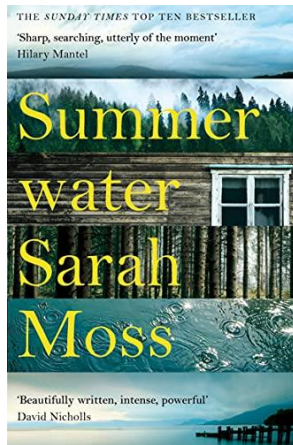
“Are you drunk?” she asked disapprovingly. (95-96)

EXTRACT 2:

During a course I enrolled in after moving to Aluche [a district of Madrid], when I was mulling over the idea of starting up a publishing services company, they taught us the keys to time management in business; that is to say, doing things in a purposeful way, without thinking about coffee breaks or the beautiful but horrendous landscape of a brick-building neighbourhood. The arguments included in the class were supported by scientific studies carried out in American universities that demonstrated the inefficiency, and resulting increased stress levels, of going, as I do, straight from between the sheets to the computer, with a dozen trips to the kitchen or checks of email before returning to bed. The studies included experiments in which freelancers were made to spend weeks in ghostly looking lofts, with no access to social networks, or anything besides their clients' deathly dull web pages. Their output increased significantly. I made an effort to translate that code into pages and word counts, but sweat, an aching back, cooking oil, dust, my respiration, the images each lexical item or sentence generated all got in the way. It was impossible to convert my activities into pure action. Thanks to the enforced discipline of the experiment, the freelancers in those American university studies (Trevor Harris, Doron Nissim, Robert Herz, Morgan Stanley, Jerome A. Chazen, Gauri Bhat, Ryan Wilson) who, like me, had previously worked very late into the evening seven days a week, were able to finish their tasks in the late afternoon, and take Saturdays and Sundays off. During the course, we did some exercises designed to give us an approximate experience of the levels of efficiency achieved by a good dose of willpower. There were days when I tried to follow those guidelines, summarized on a piece of blue paper in one of my drawers. True, by sticking to them, I was able to finish the work I'd scheduled for the day earlier; however, everything still left to be done the following days only reminded me of how alone and frustrated I was. My anxiety levels then rose a sufficient number of notches to make free time undesirable. By contrast, the constant activity, sautéed with the strange depths of nothingness on the Internet, paradoxically increased the possibility of forgetting my situation. That sense of evasion was no big deal, although it did increase my anger, and the feeling of having had it up to here, so I'd get to the end of the day with my adrenaline pumping. And then I enjoyed my walks. (105-06)

Sarah Moss, *Summerwater* (Picador, 2020)

The novel follows the perspective of twelve people on holiday with their families at a Scottish cabin park in the pouring rain.



EXTRACT 3 - a teenager Alex goes out on the water in a kayak:

He spins the boat, knows exactly when to plant his paddle to point the prow downwind and down the loch. He is right in the middle, as far from both shores as can be and he would like, he thinks, to be further, he would like a greater expanse. He rests a moment, balances, lets himself and his craft drift. He has been going to school for twelve years, three-quarters of his life gone in the routines of bells rung and queues for nasty food and the feel of nylon trousers, another one to go. It's a lie that Highers are going to be different. Another year. Well, ten months, Jesus. And then what? University, only he's no idea what he'd do there, he's OK at Maths but what do you do with a Maths degree? Then fifty years of work. You shouldn't be thinking about retirement before you've even started, there's something wrong with that and anyway he'll be basically dead by then, sixty-six. If there's still a planet to live on, if the crazy governments have spared anything. He picks up the paddle, but once the kayak's going the right way he's only really steering, dipping and pushing for stability while the water pouring off the northern hills and the wind pushing along the loch carry him back. Hot shower, he thinks, and please God not more of Mum's sloppy brown 'home cooking' for tea. It's not much of a holiday for me, she says, I don't know if you've noticed that there are still meals to cook and toilets to scrub and actually more of it with everyone in the house all the time and no shops to pop to when we run out. And whose choice was that, who the fuck goes on holiday somewhere there isn't even a chippy? (87-88)

EXTRACT 4 follows Claire's perspective as the mother of two young children:

She brought a whole plastic storage box of toys from home, trying to choose those of interest to both children, which is an efficient use of space and/or a recipe for fights. If you really pay attention, you can build a farm on which Izzie can take the cows in for milking or – the new favourite – borrow the wolf from the zoo to run amok while Pat presses the buttons that make the brown cows moo in spectral tones. She'd thought they might see real Highland cows this week, maybe standing in the water the way they do in all those postcards and jigsaw puzzles, but if there are any they have sensibly been inside all week. Izzie, she says, shall we build a farm? She carries Pat over to the toybox and kneels down, tries not to let herself think that all they've achieved by spending so much money to be away from home for two weeks is to deprive themselves of the usual resources for passing the time: resources such as the swimming pool, which is hellish while you're doing it but worth it afterwards when the kids are exhausted and most of the day has gone by the time you've reached it on the bus with the buggy and got both of them and yourself changed and put things in lockers and let Izzie have the key pinned on her costume and taken her to pee and inflated all the armbands and helped both of them into the water and played at mummy and baby seals or water pixies or whatever and praised Izzie's doggy-paddle and applauded when Pat propels himself half a metre and remembered how you used to swim miles, up and down, tumble turns as you'd learnt at school, twice a week before work, just silent swimming with other silent swimmers, and lifted them both out of the water which is tricky, like that puzzle with the chicken and the fox in the boat, and gone back to the changing room and through the shower and put them into dry clothes and then sorted yourself, double quick, don't really bother drying because it's while you're vulnerable without your knickers or your glasses that one of them's going to go drown itself, and then persuaded or wrestled Pat back into the pushchair and swept the area for toys and stray hairbands and flaccid armbands and walked back towards the bus, both children now whiney, needing biscuits you packed earlier and patience and tact while you pray that there isn't already a buggy on the bus, kept them occupied while you waited, nursery rhymes and good cheer, and more on the bus, singing very quietly the wheels on the bus go round and round, lurching through the same old streets, round and round, round and round. And here, she thinks, setting out the plastic fences, we must make our own fun. She must make their own fun.

Claire, says Jon, what if I take them out for a bit, he might sleep in the pushchair and if he doesn't at least it's some fresh air and a change of scene, and Izzie's got her boots and puddle suit. She looks up at him. It's pouring, she says. He shrugs. We've got coats. They can jump in the bath when we get back. It couldn't be for long, anyway, but you'd like an hour to yourself, wouldn't you? (105-07)