



TWO BROTHERS

BERNARDO ATXAGA

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About the Book

As he dies, leaving his two boys as orphans, Paulo's father charges him with the duty of looking after his slow-witted younger brother, for otherwise Daniel will be put in an institution. But Paulo is unable to exert any authority over Daniel, who - though 20 - is still in the throes of puberty and goes off in a fumbling, inept pursuit of the village girls.

Among these girls are pretty Teresa and her plain friend, Carmen, a girl disfigured by a birthmark on one cheek. Teresa is the reluctant, indeed disgusted, object of Daniel's dreams, but both are sweet on Paulo, the quiet, irresolute but handsome lad who has inherited the family sawmill. Each girl schemes to win favour with Paulo. The narrators of this story, who take turns to continue the tale, are creatures of the wild, driven by their inner voices - a bird, squirrels, a black snake ... Delicately told, in the simplest language, this is an elegiac tale of lost innocence and the ruthlessness of the natural world, where the hunter all too soon becomes the prey.

About the Author

BERNARDO ATXAGA, a Basque, was born in 1951. He published his first work at the age of twenty in an anthology of Basque writers. He has written plays, children's books, radio scripts and novels, including *Obabakoak*, which has been published in fourteen languages including English, and won several prizes. His most recent novel published in English by Harvill, *The Lone Woman*, was praised in the *New Statesman* by James Hopkin for its "taut, elegant sentences which generate a sense of restlessness and foreboding".

MARGARET JULL COSTA has translated three other novels by Bernardo Atxaga - *Obabakoak*, *The Lone Man* and *The Lone Woman*. Spanish writers whose work she has translated include Javier Marías (whose *A Heart So White* won the Dublin International IMPAC Award), Carmen Martín Gaité and Arturo Pérez-Reverte. Her translation of Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* won her the Portuguese Translation Prize and, in 2000, she was awarded the Weidenfeld Prize for her translation of José Saramago's *All the Names*.

Also by Bernardo Atxaga

OBABAKOAK
THE LONE MAN
THE LONE WOMAN

Two Brothers

The Fourth Song

Bernardo Atxaga

Translated from the Spanish by
Margaret Jull Costa



Harvill Secker
LONDON

A man or a stone or a tree will begin the fourth song.

*Les Chants de Maldoror,
Lautréamont*

THE BIRD'S STORY

*Concerning the inner voice. A death and a promise.
Paulo and Daniel*

THERE IS A voice that comes from deep within ourselves, and just as summer was beginning, when I was still an inexperienced bird and had never strayed far from the tree where I lived, that voice gave me an order. Before I heard the voice, I knew very little of the world: I knew the tree and the rushing stream beneath it, but almost nothing else. The other birds in my flock used to talk of houses and roads and about a huge river into which the waters of our stream and those of many others all flow, but I had never been to those places and did not know them. Nevertheless, I believed what they told me because the different descriptions tallied – the roofs were always red and the walls were always white and the huge river was always called the sea.

There is a voice that comes from deep within ourselves, the other birds told me. A voice unlike any other, a voice that has power over us.

“How much power?” I asked one day.

“We have to obey the voice,” replied the birds who were at that moment resting amongst the branches of the tree.

But they couldn't be more specific, for not even the older birds had ever actually heard that powerful voice. They knew of its existence not from personal experience, but from what they had been told by other birds from other times. They believed in it, though, as surely as they believed in the existence of houses, roads and the sea. For my part, I took it to be just another story and didn't give it much importance, never dreaming that the voice would speak to me. Then, on that day at the beginning of summer, everything changed.

I felt suddenly very restless, the way birds do who are hungry or ill, and I spent the whole morning hopping aimlessly about the tree. This restlessness was combined with the unpleasant feeling that my ears had gone

completely mad and were hearing things in a strange, disorderly fashion: the waters of the stream seemed to thunder over the pebbles; the birds nearby sounded to me as if they were screaming; the wind, which was no more than a breeze, was as deafening as a storm. Around midday, I began to experience difficulties breathing and I was suddenly alone. The other birds left the tree and flew off somewhere else.

“Why are you flying away from me?” I asked one of the last to go.

“Because you’re dying,” came the reply.

Convinced of the truth of that response, I decided to review my life. But my life until then had been so brief that the review only lasted a moment. Then I looked up at the sky, and its blue colour seemed to me more remote than ever. So I looked down at the stream, and the sheer speed of the water frightened me. Finally, I looked at the ground, at the brambles and nettles covering it, and into my head came a story I once heard about a girl who had fallen ill. Apparently, the doctor went over to the bed where she was lying and said:

“A torn skirt can be mended, but not this young girl’s health. There’s nothing to be done.”

Her relatives did not tell her the truth, but decided to take her to a folk healer. After examining her, he said:

“There’s nothing I can do. Her legs are swollen and her breathing is weak. She’ll be dead within a couple of months.”

They said nothing to the girl then either, because they did not want to cause her needless suffering. They put her on a horse and carried her back home. But time passed, and she eventually realised there was no hope for her. One evening, her brother found her in the garden crying.

“What’s wrong, sister?” he said. And she replied:

“Nothing’s wrong. I was just thinking that I’m still only nineteen and that soon I’ll be buried under the earth.”