

DEALING WITH UNEXPECTED CHANGE

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WINTER 2019/20
Display until Feb 28



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Trying to escape the sea

Seneca was a Roman Stoic with a sensitive stomach. In a letter addressed to Lucilius, he recounts the time he found himself seasick aboard a boat, his illness so unsettling that he threw himself overboard and flailed to shore. Seneca craved land, *terra firma*, stillness, but his body didn't register the change at first. He warned Lucilius that "one does not escape seasickness by escaping from the sea". Hard ground wasn't enough to still Seneca's stomach.

Jean-Paul Sartre's nausea is even more famous. His 1938 fictional protagonist Roquentin became nauseated by looking at a tree and getting lost in its roots. The longer he looked, the more certain he became of his own nothingness, which hurled him into another type of sea: doubt. The indifferent tree rendered Roquentin's life meaningless, and consciousness of this change turned his existential stomach. In the end, Roquentin's nausea affirmed his contingency – and his freedom. Sartre concluded that there is no cosmic reason to choose A over B, or in Roquentin's case, to eat or not to

eat. Our lives lack inherent meaning, so we alone are responsible for how they turn out.

European existentialists like Sartre often assumed that their experiences were universal and ahistorical, that anyone who contemplated their groundless existence would become nauseated. Mexican existentialists of the same era, in contrast, more modestly limited their diagnoses to Mexicans alone. Their descriptions began with historical events and didn't stretch to encompass all humans. Emilio Uranga was a philosopher who, ten years after Sartre published *Nausea*, diagnosed Mexicans with a similarly depressing existential condition: *zozobra*. While living in Mexico this summer, I wondered if *zozobra* wasn't another name for nausea.

Seven days after arriving to Mexico City my stomach cramped. I assumed it was the raw vegetables, which tourists are warned not to eat, not because they are dirty but because our stomachs host different bacteria. For a day I lay in bed until capitulating to an antacid, which quieted my stomach considerably. It was liquid land and it provided a temporary, if artificial, lining for my intestines. From then on, my stomach didn't know where it was or what to believe in, and I concluded that when we lack a place to stand, we

fall ill. The next day got worse: a text message revealed that my 85-year-old father had suffered a minor heart attack that led to a severe stroke. He was dying and I was abroad. My stomach lurched northward.

Uranga believed that Mexicans were ontologically accidental, not psychologically deficient. For him the Mexican is simply a by-product of Spain conquering an Indigenous land. As such, Mexicans do not merely *feel* inferior, as earlier Mexican philosophers had posited, but their very beings are historically inessential. Contingency and accidentality characterise the souls of Mexicans, for Uranga, and the result is existential disappointment. If we who are not Mexican are also discouraged by our ontological deficiencies, then Uranga's insight might appeal to a wider audience. It would mean that even non-Mexicans are born to cosmically unplanned pregnancies. It would mean that *zozobra* isn't exclusively Mexican.

Uranga scholar Carlos Sánchez describes *zozobra* like a "shipwreck" that reveals us as "contingent and accidental". A shipwreck is different from seasickness, however. In seasickness the boat is intact, but you are a disaster; in a shipwreck, the whole situation is broken, you included. Uranga described *zozobra* as being "at the mercy

of whatever might come" and called the human experiencing it "constitutively fragile". We suffer from *zozobra* when we come unmoored and get sideswiped by life's obstacles. Ambiguous conditions like my father's abound: a deathbed that might not be one, a summons to the boss's office, an urgent phone call from a family member, an unexplained lab result. Uranga calls *zozobra* the anticipation of what we do not yet know. If nausea is seasickness, a disoriented stomach that obeys the waves against the will of its owner, *zozobra* is oscillation, a back-and-forth movement, undecidability. It is perhaps closer to the anxiety that Søren Kierkegaard writes about, which fears an indeterminate something, but which also grants our humanity. Like anxiety, *zozobra* knows neither what's coming nor from where, only that there is no exit. *Zozobra* involves failing to grasp the fixity we crave, and worse, failing even to see the land that Seneca risked his life for. Uranga wrote that Mexicans don't suffer from Sartre's nausea because they don't see their lives as "insignificant and gratuitous", so much as accidental and contingent. Still, *zozobra* and nausea both insist that it could have gone differently. If my father's heart attack hadn't been treated with blood-thinners, he might not have had the stroke. His life isn't insignificant, but it's certainly contingent.

Upon re-entry into the US to say goodbye or watch my father recover, my expat stomach struck again. It now rejected the US bacteria found in the

Caesar salad I had assumed was safe. *Zozobra* says: wrong again; count on nothing. Again, I coloured my intestines pink, and for five days my now-

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Mexican stomach swung back and forth between grief and hope like a pendulum. Were my father's strides evidence of good conquering evil, or were they just buying time until the next round of anguish? The most certain end for my father is death, but there are worse fates for him: becoming a vegetable, quadriplegia, Alzheimer's, dementia, schizophrenia. Death is not the worst outcome for an 85-year-old, and it will come even if he suffers the rest. My stomach asked if life wasn't just a string of sad words punctuated by joy. *Zozobra* answered yes and no and prayed for my father's recovery as well as for his death.

Back in Mexico afterwards, my stomach kept vigil in *zozobra*, swinging between pleasure and pain while reminding me of my own impending degeneration. Just as each day I could not say once and for all that my stomach was cured but had to wait to find out after every meal, I could not say whether death was better, or life.

The back and forth was troubling, and yet Uranga suggested, like Miguel de Unamuno thirty years before, that we do not try to escape agony; that we prevent our wound's healing by occasionally sticking a finger in it. But it's tempting to recover, to forget *zozobra*, to jump overboard. Heidegger would diagnose this response as fleeing from mortality. He would say that when my stomach heals, I will be further from the truth. Uranga would agree, and he'd accuse me of seeking substantiality instead of accepting accidentality. Sartre's response to nausea was to take responsibility for our freedom; Heidegger's response to angst was to occasionally give a nod to death; Uranga's response to *zozobra* was to stay in the ship. His is most like Kierkegaard's advice about anxiety: imitate the kingfisher who nests upon the sea.

I want my stomach and my father to stabilise as much as Seneca wanted land. But just as Seneca's firm ground wasn't, my relief would only be temporary. For Uranga, Mexicans have an existential advantage over others in that they cannot flee *zozobra*, but the shipwreck awaits non-Mexicans too. We should be thankful for the somersaults of the stomach, since they are reminders of a profound existential truth: we are accidental creatures. Instead of splashing toward substantiality maybe we should adopt contingency. Admittedly, peeling a scab or intentionally eating a rotten meal is madness. But so is trying to escape the sea. ■