

THE PREDICTED END OF WILL

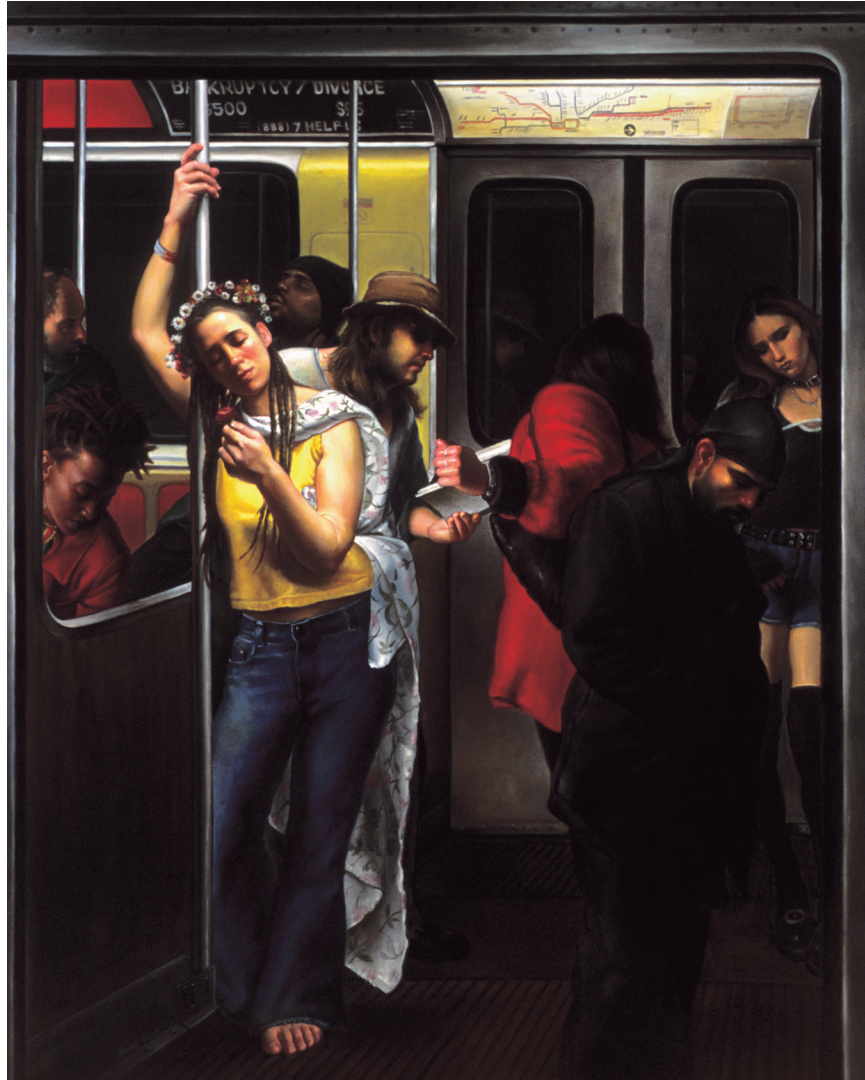
Paco Aramburu

inspired by

Flora of the Subway

Oil on Canvas

Bruno Surdo



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I admit to counting five-and-a-half good-looking women between downtown and the Fullerton stop. It's a male thing, I tell myself. Yet, beauty is not the only thing that attracts me to people. An otherwise normal woman sat in a single seat facing forward and read as if she was entranced in the interpretation of a concert, channeling her emotions through her brown eyes as she scanned the pages of an old book with fast, acquisitive jerks. After I stared at her for long intervals, I realized—with distaste—that what I felt was a form of jealousy; that I craved to be in the rapture of an unraveling story, within the confines of a world made real because it was imagined so fetchingly. The jostling of the train and the swaying of her body prevented me from seeing the title or the author of an obviously fascinating book.

I couldn't bring myself to interrupt such a special moment to ask my question. As the L train approached the Western Avenue station, opportunity presented itself when she closed the book with a snap. She stood up. Her eyes, a moment ago so intense, were now retiring, wide-open and unfocused. She tottered towards the door.

Wearing my widest smile, I asked what she was reading. When she turned to me, I noticed tears welling in her eyes. I regretted my forwardness, even though I'm not sure she saw me; her mind was obviously somewhere else. That's why I was surprised when she took a piece of paper from the book and shoved it in my hand. The doors opened, and she ran toward the platform, beige raincoat floating after her.

As backyards sped by the windows of the train, I inspected what she had given me—an old bookmark. I could have sworn it was made of parchment that had acquired its edges with time instead of by any process of manufacturing. Handwritten in Gothic calligraphy with faded ink, it read: *The Amazing Tales of a Wommen Name Mabel Jenks*. Below that, in faint angular cursive, it read: *Timles bookfins*. At the bottom, in pencil and by a less steady hand: *corner of Roscoe and Claremont*.

Sometime later, on a day that our capricious Chicago weather made sunny and warm, while replacing the wallet in my back pocket, my fingers bumped into the forgotten piece of parchment that the mysterious woman had handed me. As I was leaving Tavolo on Roscoe, the spring breeze encouraged me to take the five-block walk.

Looking for some sort of odd bookstore, I was not ready for what I found. Of the four condo buildings at the corner of Claremont and Roscoe, only one had large, retail windows at street level. It seemed that the occupant treated them as walls since they were covered inside with gray and brown construction material that had accumulated a visible coat of dust. I shaded my eyes from the sun to peek between two panels of plywood on the door. Hanging from a string was the cut-out bottom of a shoe box with the words 'Timles bookfins' written in black crayon.

The door was locked, so I knocked on the old square glass panel; it shook under my knuckles. A red convertible playing loud music went by, its loud, simple rhythm disturbing the atmosphere. When I brought my attention back to the door, I noticed it opening. A short woman with small, reptilian features looked me up and down. Sandwiched between the door and the jamb, she let her gaze pose the question as to what I wanted with her. She closed her eyelids slowly, then re-opened them to

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resume her beady stare. Behind her I saw rows of dusty books, criss-crossed by streams of gray light.

I told her I wanted to buy the *Tales of Mabel Somebody*. As she started to retreat inside, I blocked the door with my foot and produced my parchment. Her small hand snatched it with surprising speed, after which she walked inside and disappeared behind shadowy bookshelves.

I went in, gingerly walking on shag carpet that desperately held on to its greenness. I heard an instrumental polka coming from the back of the store accompanied by the unmistakable sound of frying. The smell of mildew and burnt kielbasa mixed with the dusty air reminded me of my old apartment on Milwaukee Avenue.

Once my eyes had adjusted to the dim light, I looked around and noticed dozens of bookshelves holding row after row of books of similar dimension and material. I walked, with the reverence due a semi-dark library, among the dusty shelves. All titles were handwritten in the same faded ink and in the same letter style as my parchment. Running a finger over several brittle spines of the pale beige color of untreated leather, I read: *The Amazing Tales of a ...*, each one finished with a different name. I took one out—*Tobias Slykovic*—to see what it said about these people that was so fascinating.

Just as I was about to unfold the creaky cover, a door banged in the back of the store. The small woman walked toward me with a petulant shake of her shoulders, snatched the book from my hands, sighed loudly, put it back where it belonged, asked what my name was, listened with an exaggerated roll of her eyes, and ordered me to wait for her by the front. I walked to an empty glass counter bearing layers of dust over a coat of yellowed fingerprints. A minute later, she came back with a book, similar to all the others, but with my name on

it. She dropped it on the counter with a sigh and asked for five hundred dollars.

Of course, I protested and demanded to be told why she charged such an exorbitant amount for a book that admittedly looked like an antique but was written for a very limited readership. Her reddish-brown eyes, unmoved and void of any sign of life, aimed at mine. Mesmerized and chilled down to my lower spine, I chuckled perhaps because I wanted at least one of us to have a human reaction. I suspected that my argument was part of her routine; that her predatory stare meant she was certain of my purchase. After verifying that my name was indeed on the spine, she told me she took Visa and Master Card.

Perhaps because I had seen the emotions that the book provoked in the L woman or perhaps because "I don't know the value of money," as my dad would often tell me, I took out my credit card and laid it on the book.

Leaving the bookstore, I took a step back into the reality of traffic, Sunday walkers, and my life as it was until a few minutes ago. Scared of what I would find in a book purporting to know about me, I couldn't bring myself to open it until I sat at my kitchen table, facing dinner in a plastic tray.

I inspected the book. Its brittle, delicate sheets had been bleached by at least four centuries of existence; a corner broke off when I flipped the first page. Entirely handwritten in that same angular cursive that I had seen on the bookmark, it began: *"Born the sonne of Francis and Amanda, I ever honour and praise them for their worthynesse. For though he was a parfit gentil man and she a lady of grace and cheere manere, they wonderly delyvere with greet strength to born and to raise me to serve the world in a land faraway.*

I was born litel and not too servysable and seek every fourtenyght. My parents toiled and laboured taking no keep of their

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own maladye. A doctour of phisik was of my town with drogges and letuaries this worthy man clad in white and named Mortinot kept his pacient two stepe ahead of death."

I closed the book and stared at its leather cover. How could it know my parents' names—or even my doctor's? I stood up and walked to the window, in part to verify that the world was still moving normally and in part to put distance between me and that old artifact I couldn't bring myself to call a book. How could someone guess my genealogy, before it had happened, before the invention of the printing press? It occurred to me to ask if there was a 'me' before my birth. Were there records of my existence archived in a hidden cosmic, accounting dimension, waiting for me to burst out of my mother and enact what someone had prescribed in a handwritten page?

Mom believes that our destiny is written in the stars; but they turned out to be billion-year old photons coming from distant suns that may no longer exist. Dad quoted Kant as saying that reality is like a fisherman's net: we only see what is caught in it, but there is a lot more out there that we don't know.

Of course, soon I was back taking in the tight handwriting of this obviously very old story. It read: "*When I was litel child, lone from everychon as I had no brother, just parents, my only delit was to be alone with no hinder of other except for my fancied friend. Of name Syl, the lad had wisdom and chivalrie not surpassed as we roamed in pley the many citee of my mind."*

No one in my life knew about the imaginary friend of my childhood. I hadn't even confessed to my adult self that I had used my imagination to provide for my companionship.

Interrupted only by feverish walks to my darkened window, I spent most of that night reading the very old story of my life until, at dawn, I found a bookmark made of parchment where my future began and the disappointingly few pages left until its end.

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The wan noises of the awakening day brought my attention to my present life, lived, as it turned out to be, by the book; a book with the answers of my past and my apparently predictable future. Back at the window, the glowing red city urged me to don my usual business casual attire and follow the rest of the ants to the hill.

Were there few pages left after the bookmark because my future was dull, repetitive, or simply just short? Would reading my future allow me to change it or would I be a slave to the handwritten story on those pages left until my inevitable end? Would the end of the book coincide with my own?

I picked up the odd artifact with the intention of dumping it in the trash, to negate its powers, while making the instant decision to plow my own destiny. One side of my brain machine-gunned resolutions to eat healthier, lift weights, read all of Sartre (because he talked about existence), start my own business, ask Sabitha on a date, go on a cleanse, get out of this going-nowhere job. But halfway through my kitchen, I decided to read just a few lines ahead. It was the only way to satisfy my curiosity about my predicted future.

I read: *"A worthy knight, I lyve in great citee. In searche of a wonnen who knew my hearte. A wonnen who may with Venus hold companie. A fair wonnen fit for any yeoman to wed. On the month of Juno the tyme com to full of joye and blisse Miranda joins me in the taverne of Julnar. We are as bright as any day ..."*

Since the book has me marrying this woman, I decided to skip to the very end.

"My wyf Miranda, weeping with piteous heart, hold this worthy man of great honour in her armes, cries to the Lord. We liven a short felicitee. Lord, choose an other lad to take, but not ..."

My boiling blood generated such heat in my head that I felt it was about to explode. The implacable walls of this ditch in

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which I found myself allowed me to see ahead or behind, but without any specifics. Even if there was a woman who could hold company with Venus in my path, there was only one way out of my apparent short destiny. To avoid meeting my fate, I threw the book in the trash and went to the bathroom to shower, and to clear my mind. I must climb out of this ditch, and allow myself to find my own way—my unwritten fate—and never, ever meet this Miranda woman.

With my future on my mind, I rode the morning L. I jammed myself into a train car filled with dozens of destinies that each, like a plate of spaghetti, followed a different direction, one on top of another or coiled in on themselves, but with unknown endings. All destined to be devoured by Father Time. As I bounced along with my fellow itinerants, a dose of everydayness rushed my system. Like me, they had bosses and subordinates, schedules and deadlines. Why would I be different? Could this be a scam? The only person who could answer to the authenticity of the manuscript was the little book peddler on Roscoe Street. Instead of going downtown to work, I got off the train at the Paulina stop and power walked to the bookstore.

In place of Timless bookfins was a swanky children's clothing store. I walked down the pristine main aisle, lined with rows of little pastel garments and displays of multicolored toys until I reached a long-haired, apparently malnourished attendant who, after a polite greeting, assured me that that store had been there for at least two years and that they would never fry anything in there, particularly something as unhealthy as kielbasa. Before I exited, she asked me if someone was playing a practical joke, for someone else had asked the same thing not a week ago. A woman.

Back on the street, hands in my pockets, I walked because my body needed a physical activity. I knew the street I was

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ambling on; I knew it was time for me to get my morning coffee at the donut shop across the street from work; I knew who I had been until the moment I had opened the damn book. Adrift, with no map, no North, nor destination, I didn't know where to go to restart my life.

I stopped my ambling, leaned on a lamppost and brought myself to think. The book began with the mention of my parents and my doctor. I couldn't talk to Doctor Mortinot, as he had passed some years back in the old country.

Not a matter for texting, I called Mom and Dad's number. "Weell! What happened? Jou okay?"

"You remember how old I was when we came here, to this country?"

There was a silence that I interpreted as her pointing to the fact that I had not said hello. "Do I remember? Of course! Why? Do jou wanna go back to Argentina?"

"Mom!"

"Jou used to have a sense of humor." She paused. I heard her drink something, then come back to the phone. "Dos ... jou were two and a half."

I understood that to get more information out of my parents, it would take more than a phone call. "Are you decent?"

"Jou lost your job? Frankie! Weell is coming over."

The L dropped me a few blocks from the old house on Wolcott Street. I walked the blocks of my past, the train line to the suburbs where I used to put pennies on the tracks and face my fear of being close to the heavy monster roaring by, the smells of the Chinese restaurant where I took my first real date, Julia, my introduction to adulthood. Walking on the newly finished sidewalks bereft of chalk drawings and hopscotch games, I realized I hadn't moved that far. I didn't want to face the fact that I was about to ask my parents for counsel, but had to admit

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that I was walking back to the familiar, the beginning. If this had been a game, I had just hit restart and retraced my life steps to end up back at home base.

Mom must have been waiting for me, for just as I arrived, she opened the door and came out to greet her only son. It had been a long while since I'd seen her, and she felt small in my arms. Dad smiled with his eyes but otherwise restrained his enthusiasm. I was walked to the kitchen; they never used the plastic covered living room furniture or the darkened dining room. I was offered tea, coffee, and cookies that my Dad should not eat but does anyway. When they stopped fussing, I told them about the book, their names being mentioned, the circumstances of our arrival, all except for the ending. When I finished, they both stared at me in silence.

"We meant to tell you a long time ago," Mom made a dramatic pause. "I guess this is as good a time as any. You're really the son of aliens. We adopted you when your vessel crashed..."

"Mom! It's not funny."

"To you." She got up to make coffee.

"It was a little funny." Dad wanted to score points with his wife. But he had that look that he gets when he's about to say something important. "Will, you and I need to talk."

"It says, I'll marry a girl named Miranda."

Mom dropped a cup in the sink. "We know her. She's a good person. We have her phone number. Are you going to call her?"

"Mom! No, in fact, I want to be sure not to meet her" I didn't tell them my life depended on avoiding this woman.

Dad picked up a couple of books to make room on the table for the tin of cookies. "Why not? She invited us over for coffee at her apartment. She's our new neighbor."

I heard Mom whisper: "It would be nice to have grandchildren."

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"We both want that." Dad stood up. "Will, you and I need to talk, just the two of us."

"Wait a damn minute! Why just ...?" Mom's face turned red.

Dad pointed a finger at her nose. "Remember that night in Montevideo? We agreed to not ... remember?"

She nodded and turned around to give us her back. It was unusual for her to concede in any fight, particularly one with Dad.

With a gesture, he invited me to the living room. He didn't turn the light on, he just sat at the farthest corner of the couch, and patted the seat next to him. "Do you know why you're named William, and not Guillermo?" I shook my head no. Dad lowered his head and cleared his throat. "It was written in my book that we would come here to the States, and I thought that naming you Guillermo would hamper you here."

I felt my blood draining, I was paralyzed, but I managed to utter, "What book?"

"Until today, I didn't know how accurate my book would be. Yes, I ran into a book like yours. Mine was in old Spanish."

"How can it be that all this was written by hand? Obviously before the printing press."

Dad's eyes, staring at the plastic covers, looked just like mine, only after many years of trouble. He cleared his throat. "Listen hijo, my conclusion is that all our destinies were written down. We're mere actors following a script from long ago, like you said, before the printing press. I thank whoever wrote it that it included you."

I felt imprisoned by invisible bars that had taken all control off my hands. I ran out of the house. Running gave me the sense I was doing something on my own. As I turned the corner, I bumped into someone's grocery bag.

"Hey, look where you're going." She said.

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"Sorry, sorry. I ..." I couldn't utter another word. Her cascading curls framed a face that made me feel seen. Her skyblue eyes opened a portal into her beautiful, sweet soul. Her lips spoke as if kissing the air in front of them and the air was thankful for her breath.

"Are you ... Will? You look just like your dad."

"Yes." I hated my sudden lack of inspiration.

"Hi, I'm Miranda."

* * *

Paco Aramburu is an adopted son of Chicago where he has been writing in English since the eighties. He was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. After high school, he was accepted at the Instituto Nacional de Cinematografia. There, he began a career in movie directing. The harsh repression following the military coup stopped all his plans. With his wife and children, he escaped to Uruguay. The United Nations granted them the status of refugees and shortly after, the U.S. government sent the family a visa.

Paco is currently Vice-President of the Off-Campus Writers' Workshop in Winnetka, IL. He has written two novels, with another one in progress, and won first prize in two flash-fiction contests.

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A CONVERSATION WITH PACO ARAMBURU

How did Bruno Surdo's painting spark your story?

Riding the L in Chicago, I found myself in close quarters with homeless people, expectant mothers, out-of-work men holding leather portfolios with useless resumes, executive assistants, would-be-rappers, clueless teenagers and an endless cornucopia of silent, untold stories.

But your story is about destiny.

That's what I'm getting at. All these destinies on display led me to think about who has their life predetermined. I would posit that kings and paupers have their future established before birth and they may not even imagine not belonging to their fate. The rest of us, we take for granted that we are the writers of our own story.

And yet, we're all sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, parents, bosses, employees, clients ... you know. We have strings attached that pull us in this or that direction. With *The Predicted End of Will*, I wanted to explore the reverse of a future available to all, and how much the formation of our future is dependent on our own free will. How we spend millions of dollars a year to have gurus confirm that in fact we are the architects of this scaffolding that is called a free will.

So, tell me a little about your personal story.

I was born in Buenos Aires and lived in the countryside. I was raised without television. At one point, I left the house, and hitch-hiked through the Argentine North and Brazil. Later I married my first wife and we had a wonderful child. Shortly after, because of the military coup, we escaped to Uruguay where we had a second, equally wonderful child. The U.S. sent us a refugee visa to come here.

How did you adapt to the U.S.?

Some say I'm still adapting; some find that I adapted too much. You know the way you feel when you try on a new outfit, when you look in the mirror and see a different version of yourself? Life in a new country is like that but multiplied by a 100. I had to learn that Polish sausages are not polished, but from Poland, that guns can have sons, that change means coins, that we're not all under the weather, but only those who are sick, or that a pigeon stool is very different from a stool pigeon. It took a while.