A Sampler of New Italian Writing in Translation
During the last few years, thanks in part to the runaway popularity of the author Elena Ferrante—the so called “Ferrante Effect”—Italian literature has experienced a great deal of notoriety and success in the English-speaking world. The quantity of translations has more than doubled, and authors who were once known only by literary experts in Italy have now started to appear in American bookshops.

The Italian Cultural Institute of San Francisco has been committed to supporting this growing interest, collaborating with publishers and cultural institutions, and dedicating special attention to its literary programs.

Among other initiatives, we founded the Italian Caffè Letterario online during the pandemic; organized events with authors such as Donatella Di Pietrantonio, Marco Belpoliti, Alessandro Baricco, and Andrea Bajani, to name just a few; and invited American authors to share their perspectives on their Italian colleagues.

In July, ten of our selected members participated as jury panelists for the Strega Prize, one of the most prestigious Italian literary prizes; we also brought to the United States the so-called Biliardino letterario challenge (Literary Foosball Challenge) to encourage the studying and reading of Italian books, and next year we will publish a collection of ten graphic novels never before translated into English.
However, many important authors are still waiting to be ‘discovered’ by English speaking readers. That’s why, following the example of the IIC London and other IICs around the world, we were eager to continue this work in one of America’s literary capitals, and thus, LITaly was born.

In this volume you will find a selection of excerpts from novels by Italian authors whose work has yet to be translated into English, ranging from established writers to newer voices.

We hope you will think of this book as a collection of reading suggestions, a sampler to introduce you to some contemporary Italian authors who, we believe, are worth discovering, and a way to spread new Italian Literature in the U.S. among scholars, universities, and publishers.

Finally, Marco Cassini and I would like to dedicate this volume to Lawrence “Lorenzo” Ferlinghetti, an Italo-American publisher, writer, artist, and poet—the beacon of literary freedom in San Francisco and throughout the entire world—who died this year at the age of 101.

Annamaria Di Giorgio

San Francisco, March 2021

Foreword

I have been a publisher since 1994, and although I have worked exclusively in the Italian market, and only in independent publishing, my quarter-century of exploring how publishing projects—and publishing in general—function has given me a privileged vantage point.

During that time, I have founded two publishing companies, a bookstore, and a literary festival in Ivrea (the hometown of Olivetti typewriters); I have taken part in ten or more cultural initiatives (which even included City Lights Italia, a Florence affiliate of the legendary San Francisco bookstore!); and I run a publishing and writing school, which has produced authors, publishers, translators, editors, booksellers, and literary agents with whom I’ve continued to be engaged over the years in our world of books.

On superficial observation, one might say that over this timespan, publishing has changed a great deal. But I really don’t believe it has. Its structure, objectives, and essential workings are the same as ever. And even as the landscape evolves, the steps speed up, and the tools change, there is a single foundational idea that, fortunately, will never change: one person falls in love with a story and tries to persuade another person to embrace it. The world of books is based, in the end,
on this idea. It’s what an author does with their agent, the agent with the editor, the editor with the designer, the publicist with a journalist, a book blogger with their followers, two members of a book group with each other, a bookseller with a customer, a teacher with a student (and, perhaps, vice versa), a literary critic with newspaper readers, and—through that much-desired phenomenon, word of mouth—a reader with another reader.

Even by the numbers, in the last 25 years the Italian publishing market hasn’t changed so dramatically. The number of new publishing houses is equal to the number of those that have closed.

New forms of consumption like e-books and audiobooks, which have been endlessly cited as the death of the novel, have in fact produced not abandonment but a change in reading habits (and, for us publishers, new challenges to address), because the paper book still exists, and a reader will often switch from one format or device to another without ceasing to be a reader.

The arrival of Amazon in Italy has caused—or at least contributed to—the closing of many retail outlets; but it has also sparked an incredible renaissance of independent bookstores.

Even a look at overall sales, the most telling statistic of all, indicates that in this timeframe, the book market has been essentially stable. And even as the number of readers who say they haven’t read a single book in the last year is decreasing, there are now other kinds of readers, such as people who listen to audiobooks and podcasts.

We also can’t ignore the constant appearance of new festivals, book groups, bookstore collaborations, publishing networks, and local book fairs. So, if we’re talking about stability, we might look to a fitting metaphor, coined in 2011 by a great Italian writer, Raffaele La Capria in Lo stile dell’anatra (the way of the duck), that is, “floating along with no apparent effort, calmly and impassively on the surface, while under the water, those webbed feet are paddling wildly and with tremendous effort.”

On the other hand, amid all this apparent consistency over time, something surprising is revealed by analyzing the Italian publishing market from the point of view of imports and exports—or, to put it in a less boringly bureaucratic way—the relationship between foreign books translated into Italian and our authors being translated into other languages.

The AIE (Associazione Italiana Editori, the Association of Italian Publishers) recently shared data on the sales of rights to Italian books abroad, and they are reassuring: while we sold translation rights for 1,800 works in 2001, in 2019 this number saw a nearly five-fold increase to 8,569.

Moreover, while twenty years ago foreign book acquisitions were three times greater than foreign book sales, today they are essentially equal: we are exporting as much as we are importing. If the lion’s share of these sales remains children’s books (around 4 out of 10), the genre that interests us here, narrative, has a similar ratio, but has tripled in volume since 20 years ago, rising from 13 to 38 percent of rights sold abroad.
All of these numbers are likely to increase if we take into account a significant contribution in support of sustaining Italian publishing and Italian books abroad by the MAECI (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation). Thanks to this 400,000 Euro fund, in November, 2020, 238 Italian works were selected to be translated into forty different languages. Nine of these titles are destined for the United States.

Let me give you a little more detail about what led the Italian Cultural Institute of San Francisco to produce this volume. Only 3.9 percent of Italian publishers’ foreign sales go to the United States, although it is one of the most extensive literary markets in the world. This statistic is even more compelling when seen in the context of what has come to be known in American publishing as the “three percent problem.” Even if the percentage isn’t accurate, the figure can be seen as a symbol of a phenomenon: the concern that in the United States, not much international literature is translated (and thus, not much is read).

When I visited San Francisco in March, 2019, for the celebration of the 100th birthday of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the director of the Italian Cultural Institute, Annamaria Di Giorgio, commissioned me to put together this sampler of new Italian narrative, of course, we weren’t thinking about these numbers. We were inspired not by statistics, but by an idea.

Considering how, over the last half century, the contemporary Italian authors whose names might be somewhat familiar to American readers were limited to Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino, Primo Levi and a handful of others, we realized that we have entered a particularly fortunate time in which the work of a new generation of writers—and especially women writers—is arriving in the United States.

The exemplary undertakings of many American publishers, in large part independent ones — and certainly the outstanding work of Europa Editions, an imprint based in New York with deep roots in Italy — have finally made our narrative literature less “exotic,” causing the widespread “Ferrante Fever” to give rise to a “Ferrante Effect” (as an investigation of the phenomenon by Anna Mogliano that appeared in The New York Times a few months after our meeting in San Francisco was called).

In 2014, the Tuscan poet Elisa Biagini won the Best Translated Book Award (a prize whose very existence signals the possibility of moving beyond that three percent threshold), thanks to the translation by Diana Thow, Sarah Stickney and Eugene Ostashevsky of her book, The Guest in the Wood. A similarly hopeful sign is the reinstatement of the National Book Award for Translated Literature, which had been awarded from 1967 to 1983, but had then ceased to exist for 35 years. While in the past the award had recognized mostly translations of classics of other cultures, it is now given exclusively to translations of the works of living authors. In its first year another positive sign was the inclusion in the top five of the novel Scherzetto by Dominco Starnone (in a translation by Jhumpa Lahiri).
So, it seemed to us like the right time to create something that would help encourage further interest in our authors on the part of American publishers.

The authors we present in this anthology are born between the 1950s and the 1980s, but the translations were all done in the last few years. Some of these authors are making their debut here, while others have many publications to their credit.

All of these authors came to narrative writing through different professional paths, and their output alternates between narrative, film, memoir, documentary, advertising, academic, art and literary criticism, poetry, philosophy, anthropology and publishing work.

Esposito is a bookseller who wrote the screenplay for the highly acclaimed film, *Et in Terra Pax*, Roghi writes historical documentaries for the Rai Radiotelevisione Italiana series *La Grande Storia* and has published books on Don Milani and Gianni Rodari. Marangoni also wrote a screenplay, *Design is a Verb*, has worked as a copywriter, and has written about Marcel Proust and Monica Vitti.

Pomella has published essays on Van Gogh and Caravaggio, teaches autobiographical writing, and has written both fiction and memoir. Pecere teaches history of philosophy, has written about Kant and Tolkien, and edited a high school philosophy textbook. Rapino teaches philosophy in high schools and had published mostly poetry before writing the novel that won him the Premio Campiello. Gaspari, too, is a philosopher and wrote *Lezioni di Filosofia*, a book of “philosophical exercises for putting life to good use.” Longo is a literary critic and, before publishing his novel, wrote *Il Mare di Pietra*, a piece about the Aeolian Islands of Sicily. Trevisani worked for many years for a prestigious literary review, *Nuovi Argomenti*, and is now editorial director of Tlon, a Philosophy publisher. This diversity of backgrounds doubtless influences the writing of these authors, giving each of their works its own sense of originality.

None of the books or the authors in this sampler has been translated into English until now.

LITaly was born of that simple desire that, as I said, drives all literature and publishing: we have fallen in love with these books, and we would love to see them pass from hand to hand, find a wider audience, be discovered, and hopefully even published in another language and in another country.

Marco Cassini

Rome, March 2021
ABYSS
by Andrea Esposito
translated by Olivia E. Sears

from VORAGINE
A Region Darker than Sleep

His father said he would make him bleed. He would split his head open and shatter his bones. He would break his neck and throw him in a hole. He would fall in the hole and remain down there. He would remain in the dark and never get out. His eyes would go dark and his skin would rot. Everyone would forget him. They would forget his face and forget his name and he would never have existed.

He wakes up in the dark. His brother is still sleeping. Giovanni leaves the house and walks across the grass to the clearing of dry chalky soil where his father is working. On one side there is a small metal shed where his father works when it rains. The shed squats against the walls of the Roman aqueduct that looms over their house and in two strides of its arcade cuts and crosses the train tracks. On a large iron table his father has laid out a piece of an old tin roof. With a saw, he cuts the metal into smaller pieces. He watches Giovanni without interrupting his cutting. Then he stops and slowly straightens up and pushes his shoulders back.

Let me see, he says. Giovanni unzips his sweatshirt and slips out his arm and his shoulder. He shows him the bandage still tight and clean. His father says Go, and with his chin motions to the dog’s pen. Giovanni zips up his sweatshirt and goes over to the chain-link fence. The dog is awake now and waits for him without wagging his tail and without barking and without his tail between his legs.

He is a Maremman sheepdog with a patch on his side where his fur doesn’t grow. He doesn’t have a name. Giovanni puts the leash around his neck and the dog immediately begins to pull. He tells him to be good but the dog doesn’t listen. The dog is stronger than he is, and standing on two legs the dog’s muzzle tops his head. His father watches them without comment and then lifts his shoulders up and back and lets out a yell. The dog doesn’t stop, but his ears twitch and the pressure of his neck on the leash loosens up. Giovanni winds the leash around his wrist. His father watches him for a bit and then returns to work with his grim fervor. Giovanni takes the stick leaning against the fence. He walks down toward the tracks and while he looks for the place morning comes. He follows the train tracks. He reaches a point where they begin to curve. He carries on where the white-and-gray gravel ends and climbs a small promontory of dry grass. He passes through the oleander bushes. His body and the dog’s make the leaves rustle.

Behind the bushes there is a small clearing. Giovanni looks at the earth and all around him. He makes a circuit of the clearing. Then he yanks the dog and goes down in the opposite direction from which they came. Here the air is humid. The grass is dark and shiny. He skirts the sandy and gritty wall of the aqueduct. The strands of brush graze his sides. He reaches the mouth of the tunnel that swallows the tracks. He’s never seen a train pass. The tunnel’s about ten meters long, and from the other side he sees the road and the crossing clearly.

Inside it’s cold and their bodies are gray and blue.
The arm holding the stick hurts up around the bandage. He puts down the stick and rubs his arm through the sweatshirt. He leaves the leash on the ground, and the dog doesn’t run but sits down and waits with his tongue out. Giovanni picks up the stick and looks at the dog, who is looking ahead toward the crossing on the other side of the tunnel. He takes a few steps back and holds the stick with his other hand too. Slowly he brings it up over the dog’s head. The dog turns and looks at him but doesn’t run away because he’s never hit him before. His breathing doesn’t even change as Giovanni tightens up on the stick and raises it over the dog’s head and his own. The dog looks at the walls of the tunnel and again looks around and ahead while Giovanni holds the stick lifted over his head and breathes harder to conjure up strength in his arms. And then his arms hesitate and his shoulders drop, and Giovanni lowers the stick and looks at the dog. He lets the stick fall and the dog perks up and turns around in a tight circle. Giovanni watches him wandering around the tunnel. He takes his muzzle between his hands and his ears twitch.

Go on, scram, he says. Scram and don’t come back. He repeats it right into his ears. Then he repeats it looking the dog in the eye. He removes the leash from the dog’s neck and pushes him with both hands toward the end of the tunnel. He shouts at him and the dog barks as if in imitation. The echo of the tunnel renders the voices alien and shrill. Giovanni grabs the stick and waves it at the dog. He pretends to hit him even though he’s too far away, and the dog disappears beyond the crossing. Giovanni turns and runs away.

Along the road he slows down to check, but the dog isn’t following him. He walks past the promontory and the oleanders and reaches the fence that encircles his house on the side of the railway. He walks past the iron table where his father is watching him. He puts down the stick without saying anything and goes inside the house. He goes into his room and lies down on the bed under the window. The cold is coming on. The window lets in freezing drafts that stab him in the night. His brother used to sleep there, but when he got sick they changed places. Giovanni looks at the bed where his brother is huddled with his face to the wall. He’s thirteen years old and Giovanni is only eleven, but his brother still seems younger. He’s gotten thin, and the illness has drained his color and eaten away at his voice.

Did you do it, he asks. Giovanni doesn’t answer. His brother turns his head and looks at him from the corner of his eye. Then he turns his whole body and huddles with his shoulders to the wall and with his face set between his shoulders he looks at Giovanni. Did you do it, he asks again. Yes. How was it. Terrible. You didn’t do it. I did. So then how was it, he asks. Giovanni starts to tell the story while his brother stretches his neck beyond the edge of the bed and opens his eyes wide with a smile that seems like the start of a sneeze. He took the dog past the tracks and past the promontory. Past the aqueduct walls and toward the tunnel.
In the tunnel he put down the leash for just a second to grab the stick with two hands. And then the dog scuttled off. Idiot, his brother says, smiling and wrinkling his nose. Giovanni says he followed him beyond the tunnel and beyond the crossing and beyond the road where the cars go by. One of them almost hit him. He heard the horn fading away while his eyes looked for the dog, and he slipped into a field with tall yellow spikes of grain. He ran through the field and reached a pond. He saw the water stirred up and knew that the dog had passed through there. He continued on and got to where there was no more grass or mud, just white gravel. The dog was waiting for him under an enormous tree without leaves. He had stopped trying to escape and was waiting for him. He growled but didn’t attack him. Giovanni raised the stick. The dog stopped growling and waited for him in silence. Giovanni brought down the stick and hit him on the neck. The body of the dog followed the neck as if something was pulling it from below and he landed on the white gravel.

The first blow didn’t draw blood. Giovanni raised the stick again and waited until the dog looked at him. The dog looked at him without growling.

The second blow was on the shoulder and the third blow on the head. He raised his hand again and the dog wasn’t looking at him anymore and he struck him again and again. All those blows without blood. The dog’s head shifted under the blows. Then he struck again, and the dog’s eyes opened for an instant like embers in the darkness and on the top of his head a red streak appeared amid his fur.

The streak widened and turned blacker and blacker until the dog seemed hollow inside.

Now the dog’s neck was bent, and his forelegs spread and extended as if he was about to get up. The rest of his body was heavy and slack and shuddering with the blows as they came slower and weaker.

Giovanni looks out the window and sees his father holding the stick between his hands. He sees his father examining the stick with no traces of blood or anything else. Giovanni turns toward his brother. How are you doing, he asks. His brother smiles again and doesn’t answer. He doesn’t want to drop the story of the dog. He turns belly up and puts one hand behind his head.

They hear barking. Giovanni looks out the window. He still can’t see him, but the voice is growing louder with every passing second. Outside the front door he comes upon his father thin and long like a pole stuck in the grass. He has a blond mustache and the patchy beard on his cheeks looks like dust. The crown of his head is shiny, but around his head his light hair is long and gathered into a ponytail. You only see him with his hair down when he first wakes up in the morning. He ties it back right away with a few sharp flicks of the wrist. Today like every day he’s wearing a green sweatshirt and blue pants with reflective stripes from when he worked at construction sites. He looks at the precise point where the dog will appear. Giovanni sees the dog go straight toward the outstretched hand of his father. The hand curves into a small hollow where the dog rests his muzzle, and with the other hand his father pets the top of his head. He pets
him with so much force that the dog’s eyes open wide when his hand reaches his neck. His father stands up tall. You told him not to come back. But he’s a stupid dog and he doesn’t obey. He moves away, and the dog and Giovanni follow him as if there were no choice. His father goes toward the work table. He takes the hammer. He bit you and he’ll bite you again, he tells Giovanni. He pats his thigh twice to make the dog come. The dog comes to him and he pets him on the head. He bit you and he will bite your brother. He’ll never learn.

He brings down the hammer and his arm follows his shoulder, and the dog is crushed to the ground with a kind of whimper. His head slowly sags onto his shoulder and then everything stops. His father puts the hammer down on the metal table with a clang. Giovanni can’t stop crying, and his father’s blow is so sudden that his jaw slams onto his shoulder. He doesn’t fall down but remains suspended with his head shaking. His father doesn’t notice the tooth, but Giovanni searches his mouth with his tongue and discovers the hole. His father walks off toward the house. Giovanni stays standing and cries until he can’t cry anymore. Then he kneels down and begins to search for his tooth but doesn’t find it. He gets back on his feet and crouches and searches the same few meters amid the stones and the grass and legs of the table. He goes close to the dog’s body to search there too but manages to look at him only once. The dog’s eyes are half-closed and his mouth half-open as if he were on the point of doing something or being something.

Giovanni continues to search without hunger and without fatigue. Then both arrive at once together with the darkness. He goes back into the house and hides his hands caked with dirt.

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He wakes up and hears the night stretching. For a while it outshines the one who is nearby. And then come the violent coughing fits. The rasping coughs don’t stop and Giovanni calls his brother’s name. He stands up and calls him again. His brother holds his hand over his mouth, and the pillow is black and lusterless in the blue shadow. His father is already there before Giovanni can call him. His brother disappears behind the door with his cheek on his father’s pointy shoulder.

Giovanni is left alone. The screams come. They are like the cries of unknown animals or like trees crashing in the darkness or like rain falling while you sleep.

Time passes and the cold increases. Giovanni rubs his hands on his arms to keep warm, but the cold creeps into his bare feet and moves upstream in his veins. His father returns when the cold has taken everything and is holding him suspended in a sleep without sleep. He gets up with difficulty, and his father goes around him without looking at him to put his brother on the bed. He lays him down. His mouth is swollen and full of cotton or gauze. Now he is calm. He only occasionally shakes his head with another muffled coughing fit. His father observes his brother, who falls back to sleep.
Then he turns toward Giovanni and looks at him with a hollow gaze. Giovanni gets into his bed and looks at his brother while his father continues to look at him and his brother with the same lifeless expression.

When his father goes out he hears the sounds around him becoming impalpable as the darkness engulfs them.
ETHICS OF AN AQUARIUM
by Ilaria Gaspari
translated by Anne Milano Appel

from
L’ETICA DELL’ACQUARIO
For a long time I thought I should forget Pisa. But each time I fled, I always ended up going back. Sometimes I would find myself at the train station in the early evening at dusk, sometimes it was morning when the plane landed, and the sun was shining, and there was a white taxi and a taxi driver who wanted to chat. And right away I heard that accent again, having not yet figured out if it was essential or unbearable. Or both.

It had been years since I'd gone back, then one morning I arrived by plane: there was sunshine and a dusting of snow on the low, crystalline mountains. The houses with their cracked plaster were as quiet as they once were, the muddy river high as a result of the autumn rains. The taxi driver wanted to chat, but I was nervous. As if all the obsessions I had gradually tried to expunge over the years had come back to haunt me, and I realized that I hadn’t forgotten a thing. Or maybe I was simply afraid of suddenly feeling old in a city where I had once lived during a phase when it seemed that time did not exist in one’s life. It seemed vulgar, in Pisa, to have an age and ambitions, or at least it seemed so to me and my friends back then. But in fact we had all lived on, dragging our years and our desires elsewhere, convincing ourselves that we had forgotten Pisa. Of course we were mistaken. As we would soon realize.

The first time, fifteen years earlier, we were nineteen and we were tanned, September was nearly over and it was still hot. Tanned and proud to have passed the competitive exam for admission to the Scuola. We were homesick, each of us with his own nostalgias, for the life we’d lived up till then in our parents’ houses, as spacious and bright as those in glossy interior design magazines, with a sofa, television, and shopping in the fridge; nostalgic for the rooms we had grown up in, with our school books and photos of friends, with brothers and sisters and doors that didn’t lock. Some missed a sweetheart who had been left behind, or merely the aroma of coffee in the kitchen signaling an afternoon study break; not to mention the phone, friends, the unexpected buzz of the intercom, and evenings in the piazzas in towns or cities that were not piazzas in Pisa.

At first we were euphorically bewildered. The college rooms were dingy, rundown. The floor tiles in the hallway outside the doors were loose, we could hear them wobble every time someone passed by. But there was always sunshine, in those days, and for the first time October seemed like a summer month to me.

The city dozed, but we thought it was a temporary state, and even when we realized that it wasn’t temporary, we weren’t too concerned because we knew that we would never be as lethargic as the city’s true inhabitants, at times vaguely resentful, but always placid. On the serene October afternoons of that first month in Pisa, it never rained and I would peek in at the gardens beyond the gates; sometimes I would go and read at the botanical garden, under towering palm trees that seemed to be about to collapse and were anchored to the ground by braided steel cables as thick as an arm. The city seemed beautiful and full of mysteries. We’d go and get gelato on the Lungarno
promenade and sit on the riverside embankments and talk. In the dark, the river looked less muddy and the streetlights tinted our hair with an orangy glow. The weekends were warm and we quickly became friends.

The Scuola was a strange place, it disoriented us. We were still dazed by the fact that we were there, at first maybe intimidated. I had arrived in Pisa on my birthday. Nineteen years old, a cool, blue-sky morning at the end of September, a gentle breeze drifting among the outflung boughs of the umbrella pines along the shore. I landed there certain that I would live in the historic building with the ancient tower where the Count and his sons had been imprisoned.¹

Instead the Signora who held sway over housing issues, solemn and Junoesque in her vivid red suit,—“it's signorina, dear”—escorted us to a big building on the Lungarno, dilapidated but full of light. And there, with the clucking and perhaps somewhat cynical solicitude that we would come to recognize in everyone assigned to look after us, she handed us the keys to our decrepit rooms, doling them out one by one in hands bedecked with scarlet nail polish and costume jewelry. The rooms—I discovered at the time—had the abandoned air that college rooms always have. The furniture was old and battered, the paint on the walls was peeling. There was a narrow bed in my room with a sunken mattress, a large wooden table for studying, a tiny bookcase and a closet covered with aquamarine wallpaper. I later learned that even aquamarine can fade. But from the window, which had aluminum frames (twenty years earlier someone must have thought they looked modern, maybe elegant), you could see a garden hidden from the street; it seemed forgotten, yet it was flourishing. There was an artificial pond, a very tall magnolia with shiny leaves and a ginkgo biloba tree, the most ancient tree in the world, though I didn’t know it then. The bathroom was narrow, a dark passage with a slit window, a bare lightbulb over the mirror and a hole in the floor. Every so often, water gurgled in the hole.

All my friends in Milan had stayed at home, and in those first days I caught myself thinking how different my life had become; I felt a little homesick, but more often I was glad to have managed to get away, because I really felt like I had come a distance. I liked the heady feeling of melancholy and freedom under the uninterrupted blue of the sky. At night I traced the silhouettes of unfamiliar leaves on the ceiling, outlined in the light of the streetlamp.

The other residents at the college were unsettling to us. We soon realized that we were an attraction: they studied us in the cafeteria and in the corridors and we felt that they were talking about us with an insolence that they did not bother to hide. Some of the students in our year, the ones we already knew we would not make friends with, seemed flattered by all the attention. We, those who would become friends, couldn’t explain the interest at first, but it seemed ridiculous and vaguely sinister.

One day, in the elevator, I heard three older boys, second or third year, joking and snickering. From time to time the library’s elevator would get stuck, and it happened that day, too. One of the boys pushed
the emergency button; they kept sniggering. They were talking about nipples, they kept repeating the word. Every time one of the three said it, every time he said “nipples,” or even just “nip...”, the other two would be in stitches. One of them had to fish his asthma inhaler out of his backpack; he kept laughing and inhaling, he’d inhale and laugh some more. Besides them, I was the only one standing there in front of the elevator mirror. I remember I was wearing jeans, as I did every day back then, my old jeans that had survived my senior year of high school, and a white ribbed cotton T-shirt with a scoop neckline. I was taller than the boys. One of the three, the asthmatic one, was beginning to lose his hair. The elevator started moving again, and we made it to the ground floor. I didn’t think any more about it. But some time later I found out that the elevator incident had become legend; it was being told around, and everyone was laughing. Because that day, while the elevator was stuck, those three had been laughing at me. Back then I never wore a bra, and that’s what they were laughing at, facing our reflection in the mirror. It was later explained to me that—who knows why—those guys thought I was there on a grant, a foreigner, French, maybe. But when they learned I wasn’t, the idea of humiliating me seemed irresistibly funny to them and they started spreading the story around, hypocritically pretending to be embarrassed. I didn’t yet know it, but that’s how you got by at the Scuola. I began to sense the looks, the stifled giggles that I drew wherever I went. I didn’t quite understand why, but behind my back eyes were fixed on me, along with smirks and knowing whispers; I tried not to pay attention to it, and just followed the rhythm of my pace. One day, on the sign-in sheet at the library, I found a small sketch next to my name, merely a scribble. I thought someone’s pen may have faltered, or that someone started on the wrong line. I initialed the sign-out column and started to leave, but as I pushed open the glass door, I remember being assailed by the certainty of what that hieroglyphic squiggle alongside my name meant in the register that everyone leafed through when entering the library. It was a bare breast. And poorly drawn, at that.

I held my head high, avoided the glances, and let the whispers be a background noise that accompanied my deceptively bold steps. The murmurs that I tried not to hear in order to convince myself that I had only imagined them gave me a false brazenness, an arrogant bearing that in turn multiplied the whispering. Occasionally I would toss my hair, which I wore long and loose, like a mane. Head held high, shoulders straight, I learned to walk without seeing anything around me. It was the first important thing I learned at the Scuola.

The Scuola was a small community within a small city. The city ignored the Scuola, and the Scuola ignored the city. Five hundred young men and women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five lived herded together in the ancient heart of the old town, destined for great intellectual endeavors or perhaps great frustrations. For the benefit of something impalpable that they called excellence these five hundred individuals resided, ate, and slept together, in large common areas and tiny rooms eclipsed by the massive shadow of the building.
where they only studied. Because you might live badly, but not study badly. You might be unattractive, wither away at twenty, but you had to remain ambitious. Each day was marked by eight hours of study in the library. From the first year, everyone called studying work, to distinguish themselves from other university students, the ones who bore no resemblance to those at the Scuola. We were destined to become specialists, if we survived the college screening, the cafeteria food, the library: they trained us to know as much as one could know about subjects that had never been dealt with. As a result, the pomposity of pure science was able to produce singular forms of alienation. There was work, and after work there was free time, to be spent in the common rooms, in the cafeteria or in front of the television. Our school mates were touchstones, sometimes friends, sometimes adversaries, sometimes competitors; but always, the most important thing was to feel bound to the others by a shared sense of belonging to the realm of that indefinable, elusive excellence.

Our age made everyone touchy; our compulsory cohabitation could feel coercive; the isolation from the outside world, from the drowsy city outside, had something cruel about it. The constant observation of others at the Scuola soon became an obsession; ambition a mystical calling, the group a herd. And the sacrifice, rage. The life of the Scuola, in the slow repetition of its daily rituals had established its own moral code. The five hundred twenty-somethings who lived together, willing to forget that they were twenty years old for the sake, once more, of excellence, were fearful of those who, with their questionable recklessness, were able to remind them of it. An imperceptible shiver in the elevator must have strained the T-shirt’s fabric. The boys must have noticed it in the reflection; one of them may have leered, another probably winked. A nipple that became rigid for an instant, right under the little asthmatic’s humped nose, there, a few inches from him, the fellow who was already beginning to lose his hair. The beginning of my solitude had been that long moment in the elevator. Now I am careful with necklines and I pay attention to many things, and I can tolerate men staring at me; but I can still hear that asthmatic laugh.

Anyway, the stories made the rounds among the tables at the cafeteria, up the stairs to the library, inside the musty rooms; and in the competition and jealousy, misunderstandings and individualism—the glue that held that voracious community together—they could become cruel. There was always something primal, something reminiscent of barracks and prisons, a sense of repressed violence among those adolescents forced into a precocious old age. One day, long after I arrived, I saw it distinctly. It was the day I was staring at the fish in the college pond that I understood everything. The little pond in the garden was actually a concrete tank, but the water was green and still, the bottom murky, and the fish that were swimming in there did not look like any fish I had ever seen. They may have been goldfish, but they were too big, and the red-gold faded into a pale pink mottled with white where the bellies bloated and became transparent. The deformed, flashing bellies of those huge fish had
developed, so they said, because one day someone got the idea of throwing piranhas into the tank to see what would happen. As the story goes, the result was a slaughter, and I imagined the goldfish bloody, there in the pond, and in imagining it I felt a pleasure that I was ashamed of. It was also said that the few survivors had become gigantic, and their bodies had ballooned into those translucent shapes.

Matteo had disappeared shortly before and the day I stopped to stare at the pond, I finally understood it all. In the concrete tank in which the fish developed those monstrous features in order to survive, the water was stagnant; it had turned green and mossy. And I suddenly saw that being at the Scuola was just like being in an aquarium. That explained the sense of exile in an unnatural place, which at times could become more savage, more violent than the outside world. Only I hadn’t yet known anything about this on the day I was ridiculed in the elevator. I felt the ferocity when I learned that people were going around laughing about it. But at that point I exaggerated everything and anything seemed cruel to me.

I straightened my blouse. The taxi driver wanted to chat, but I didn’t feel like it. The reason I’d come back, why we’d all come back, wasn’t a happy one, on the contrary. Anywhere else it would have been tragic; in Pisa, I thought as the taxi silently crossed the sleepy streets, even tragedies remain suspended, as if waiting for a thunder clap. That anxious waiting was a feeling I had often had during the Pisa years. And only now did I find it unchanged, after so long, as I tried to imagine what I would have to go through in the next few days. The police interrogations, the investigators’ questions, taking stock of what was left. All of us were left, too, and they would rummage through our past with a fine-tooth comb. But what bothered me, more than anything else, was the idea that no matter what they found, they would label it the truth.

Between us, on the phone or in the brief texts we wrote each other now and then, more and more infrequently, we had not talked about the Pisa years again. We talked about work, studies, old and new loves. Who was seeing an analyst, who had stopped; few had never gone to one. We had gotten into the awful habit of updating one another on our lives, as if we had a duty to relate that someone (I, for instance) had married, someone (me again) had also already divorced, that children had been born, that work was going well, or sometimes not, that living abroad was great, any place but Italy; some had been happy, others less so, but for all those years we had always pretended that it was enough to be alive. One of our closest friends, Matteo, had killed himself, but it had been many years ago, and the grief of that act that we had not been able to predict had dissolved in the relief of still being alive. We had pretended that there was no nostalgia, that there were no loves that had been born and ended there: running away from Pisa, I had fabricated (all of us, in fact, had fabricated) a dark sense of destiny, inescapable and relentless, which we used as a cover for our choices and our mistakes.
They were all there. Streaming in from the windows overlooking the Lungarno, the winter sunlight enveloped us all with its fine dust motes that I remembered well from the halls of the library and the university’s classrooms. We had all returned, we were still young, and alive; and that was a good thing, we knew it, and we smiled at one another like on the first day, when we didn’t yet know each other.

Only now we were in a bare room, at police headquarters. We were together again, the four of us, who before forgetting one another, or convincing ourselves that we had forgotten, had promised ourselves a thousand times that we would remain friends forever. But with us in the room, now that we’d been reunited, was a rotund, ruddy police inspector. Holding a notebook that in his sausage-like fingers looked like a plaything. When I entered he jumped to his feet; I saw that he had already started with a list of questions, and was jotting the answers down one after the other in his little book with an indelible pencil – at least that’s what it seemed like to me, because it certainly wasn’t a pen and the idea that it was a simple pencil seemed absurd.

Now that we had all arrived, the inspector who had summoned me—and had summoned the others as well, as far as I knew—had decided to begin in earnest. The questions asked up till then, he told me with a sly, or perhaps just uncomfortable, smile, were preliminary to the real interrogation.

He asked us what our relationship was with the deceased; none of us said a word. We were embarrassed, and although admitting it would have been even more embarrassing, vaguely amused by our own conspiracy of silence, as if it were a game. The truth was that we had all detested Virginia, at least on one occasion, and that her act, so theatrical, seemed like a tasteless joke. She had always done things that were in poor taste, she had no sense of humor yet she insisted on joking—though only at certain times, such as Mardi Gras or April Fool’s Day. That day had been neither April first nor Mardi Gras, it was November, and that should have been enough to persuade us that it was not a joke. The truth was, we didn’t believe in her suicide. But we soon realized that the inspector didn’t believe it either. And for me, that was not good news.

The inspector kept writing in his notebook, with his chubby, greasy fingers, and I still didn’t know that those scribbled pencil marks would be my conviction and that I would never be free of Pisa again. His slick hair had a perfect part, and such meticulousness in an eyesore like him disturbed me. But the sun was shining and it seemed like nothing irreparable could happen.

We had changed, but not all that much. Him, the one I had been so afraid to see again as I’d tried again and again to imagine how he would be—he still had the ironic, mildly cynical expression that I remembered, and even with a few gray strands in his hair, he was as gorgeous as when we’d met. I was afraid he’d say something to me; something like “you’re looking good,” one of those heartless phrases that destroy the intimacy between two people and incinerate years of memories in an instant.
He didn’t say it, instead he didn’t say anything. Good.

“What were your relations with the victim, signorina?” the inspector was asking me, and calling me signorina, with his ridiculous French “r.” I sensed him grinning as he sensed my smile—we had always joked about my vanity—and at that moment I realized that it had been utterly pointless to run from him, just as it had been pointless to run from Pisa. To forget him I’d had to go away, I had married, I had risked having a baby and then risked dying to have it; in the end there had been no baby, and I had survived, but not my marriage. And not, as Massimiliano told our married friends during dinners to which I was not invited (friends, discreet and merciful, now only invited us separately, and tilted their heads with a contrite, encouraging air whenever one of us mentioned the other), when he went around sniveling about the divorce, not because we had lost the baby. It was just that, losing it, I’d realized that I wouldn’t have wanted that baby at all. It wasn’t Marcello’s.

“Well then, signorina? Can you describe your relations with the victim?” I don’t think I can describe them, I thought, and therefore I didn’t grasp how troubling that insistence on calling her a victim was, and the whole tone of the questioning in fact.

“If you had to qualify them with an adjective, with a word... Make an effort, please, signorina.”

Qualify them. “A nightmare, I would say. A prolonged drawn-out nightmare.”

At that point Marcello grinned and I saw he had a wrinkle, a long, definite wrinkle at the corner of his mouth. At first I hadn’t noticed it.

“What do you mean by a nightmare, signorina? If you please, this is an investigation. Could we stop playing games?” Marcello kept smiling and I thought how clearly I remembered his smile. Massimiliano had no sense of humor.

“I’m not playing games, believe me. That’s the only word that comes to mind. A real nightmare.”

_Translator’s note: Count Ugolino, who appears in Dante’s Inferno, was charged with betraying the city of Pisa. He and his sons were detained in the Muda Tower, which is now the Clock Tower and library of Pisa’s Scuola Normale Superiore._
OTHER SEAS ARE ROUGH
by Francesco Longo
translated by Olivia E. Sears

from
MOLTO MOSSI GLI ALTRI MARI
“The big breakers are rolling in!” The timbre of her voice seemed to announce a world that was taking shape in that moment. I recognized her blond hair among the green patches of the banana trees. Silvia had come rushing up to our yard. Her tone was a mix of impatience and satisfaction: “C’mon, move it!” I went down. She was chewing on a licorice rope, the whole thing stuck in her mouth, she was out of breath after running up the hill. Her big eyes begged me to hurry up. She was wearing white tennis shoes, without laces, and shorts with a long-sleeved T-shirt thin enough to allow the blue of her bathing suit to show through. Clothes for the last days of summer.

It had been a very humid and sun-drenched summer. Twice I’d been laid low with a fever and twice I’d recovered: on nights when the temperature got above thirty-nine, I’d dreamed of a Greenland shark following me in the open sea and a fire burning the forest with flames high as skyscrapers. Swarms of mosquitoes swirled below the patio. The night before the big breakers rolled in, Cristiano Bodoni, a chubby and tormented young boy, had won the tennis club’s raffle prize: a multispeed cyclo-cross bike with shocks and fenders. In his disappointment, Cicogna, a skinny kid who always wore light-colored shirts, had gone home not even wanting ice cream. The sea had been blue and calm for six or seven consecutive weeks. The glassy transparent surface had been so docile as to induce apathy. At eight o’clock every evening on the beach, we were seized by an infinite series of sunsets that set the sailboats ablaze on their way out to sea.

That morning for the first time the air was cool.

We walked down along the dirt path and stairs that lead from my house to the Bay. “I want to introduce you to my friend Micol, I think you’ll like her,” she said.

“Who is she?”

“She’s really easygoing, you’ll see when you meet her. She’s very attached to the Bay, like us. Even though she’s been coming here forever, we’ve never run into her before. Listen, they’re Jewish, don’t go saying anything weird.”

The rhododendron leaves scratched our legs, or maybe the worst cuts were inflicted later, by the rocks in the water. When we got down there, next to the bike rack where some of the resort’s bikes were lined up among the prickly pear blades, we were suddenly speechless. The sea was covered with bands of foam.

“Wait for us!” she yelled.

I recognized Guido’s bushy blond head next to the shore, Margherita was hugging a boy who only came that one summer and never again, they were kissing and dancing to a song on the radio. A few meters away, Cicogna, with a big book in his hands, ignored them.

Scattered along the crescent-moon beach, the last vacationers were soaking up the sea air. Guido greeted me with a bow and a half smile. Silvia went straight to her new friend and brought her over to introduce us: “This is Micol,” she said. I heard a certain pride creep into her tone, as if the proximity of Micol, the mere fact that she was introducing us, gave her some thinly concealed satisfaction. For Silvia,
Micol was someone she could show off. Their recent lightning-fast friendship for her was the realization of a lifestyle that her family’s origins and her environment had not allowed her.

They’d known each other just a few days, and yet, judging from the complicity in the way they took each other’s hands when they met up on the beach, they looked like longtime confidantes. In the moment when Micol and I were about to shake hands I caught in Silvia a flash of regret, as if an alarm bell had just gone off, warning her that one day she’d be unseated by Micol.

A wooden hair clip held a mass of curly brown hair bound on her neck. Her smooth amber skin appeared impermeable and shining. Her eyes were luminous, blue, lit by tiny gold specks, the same gold I’d observed on the surface of the moon through my telescope for years, every night before I went to sleep. I’d never seen eyes that color. Only later did I realize she was shorter than she seemed—at first the proportion between her arms and legs had made her look like the tallest of all the girls.

The sun disappeared. A sudden gust of wind picked up.

Margherita, with an insincere expression on her face, said something to her boyfriend and then stole his cap from his head. Together they threw themselves down on the towel, seeking the warmth of the sand. On windy days, in the Bay, the temperature can fluctuate, and it changes everything. Driven by the high currents, the clouds arranged themselves one over the other to block out the sun. Silvia’s new friend made me feel like I had at the end of certain afternoons in the sea when, swimming until I could no longer feel my arms, I’d reach the point where the blue tried to dazzle me with its precise, devious intention of holding onto me forever, and every time it had been an intoxicating, delicious, and terrifying sensation.

“You going in?” she asked, grabbing my hand instead of offering me her name.

She was wearing a T-shirt with blue and white stripes, long enough to reach her knees, the sleeves cut with scissors right above her slender wrists. She wore sandals with a leather flower between the toes. On her towel, worn thin by sea salt and washing, she’d left her sunglasses and a book that must have sat outside in the humidity for at least a couple nights.

“You’re not going in, are you?” In an instant Micol’s question had already changed.

“Oh yeah, I’m going in,” I corrected her, wanting to recover the brightness I’d spoiled with a moment of uncertainty. I who’d been cold all year, I who at the time hesitated to go in the water even in mid-August. I was sure Silvia was observing me, her gaze full of innuendo. The desire for a final swim of the season infected Margherita and her boyfriend too and transformed Silvia’s lukewarm consent into resolve.

Micol slipped off her T-shirt, balled it up on the towel. Her dark hair, which until that moment had been held back, grew in an instant like the crown of a tree would in a century, and revealed its curly, extraordinarily soft nature. Her hair radiated the brilliance of
certain shells sold in the port shops, but though equal in light, it was alive, and I thought I could smell its scent, even if the air reeked of decomposing seaweed. She left her sandals on the shore, she moved weightless toward the water. The wind lifted up all her hair as one.

She complained about the cold water but with a hint of amusement. She turned toward us one last time, arched her back and swore at us when she realized we were still dressed. The white and blue roofs of the historic cabanas down at the end of the resort creaked with every gust of wind. The red-and-white beach umbrellas, left closed, flapped in ribbons of fabric, producing an ungainly racket of metallic jangling.

Silvia stiffened, became uncertain again. But in the end she got undressed. I unbuttoned my shirt. I took off my glasses. I wedged everything under the base of a beach umbrella and with my scrawny chest and disheveled hair, I moved toward the water. From behind the bluff, a hoarse boom of thunder shattered the sky, ringing like a gong. Micol had already plunged in.

§

The first few minutes we yielded to the will of the waves. Then Silvia, having swum out and exchanged a few words with Margherita, told us they were getting out. The cold and the jostling of the sea had exhausted them. Neither one was a great swimmer, for them the sea meant only the life of the beach. Long white puffs of water rushed to seize their calves, making them stagger. They ran toward their towels, Silvia’s hair hung all the way down her back. They wrapped themselves in their towels, curled up like two castaways.

“Amazing, right?” said Micol.

Now we were the only two swimmers on the whole Bay.

“I’ve been waiting all summer for this day. Actually, all year. But the big breakers always roll in eventually,” I said.

“Today is also Micol Day,” she added.

“Is it your birthday?”

“No. But the last Friday of the month you always have to do what I want. If for some reason you can’t, the following week is my week. You make up for Micol Friday with seven days. We don’t have school on Saturdays. This year everything’s different, I’m starting high school. You?”

“Micol Week,” I said aloud, but she had already vanished under the water. She came up a few meters farther out. Over the years, the dense crowns of the old pines, blown around by the wind, had grown higher than the houses. The wide sky loomed over the vacationers who were hastening their departure due to the bad weather.

The waves broke one after the other with a continuous roar. To hear each other we had to yell. She pulled a strand of black seaweed out of the water, offered it to me, smiled. For a long time we remained silent, far apart, it was the sea that wanted to hold us together, but at a distance. I tried to get closer again, a wave flung me against her shoulder.
“You’re not from the Bay, right?” she asked me, as if we hadn’t just crashed into each other.

“I live up there,” I pointed at the bluff with my finger.

Covered with vegetation, with three sweet little bumps on its nose, the mountain rises up to 400 meters and juts into the sea so abruptly that it divides the coast in two and makes the north and south beaches different, as if they belonged to two distant continents, the southern one gentle and tame, the northern one inhospitable, wild, and barren.

A family was facing the beach.

“In Santa Virginia?”

“A little farther down. You should see a stone-colored rectangle, but today you can’t see it. The dirt path that starts behind here passes right in front of my house and then continues for a stretch to Santa Virginia.”

Too much wind, the family was already packing up to leave.

“Watch out!” she yelled. A wave swamped us. A big breaker pushed my head under water and kicked me shoreward. The bitter water choked me, my knees scraped on the sea bottom. I pulled up my bathing suit. I resurfaced bruised, my eyes burning.

Micol’s fate was similar to mine. Her hair covered the sides of her face, the water had flattened her curls. She had been flung to shore, she was breathing hard, she refastened her bathing suit.

“So you live here?” she resumed.

“We’ve been here for three generations. The hurricanes seduced my great-grandfather. He had a boat, he was a fisherman, he settled close to the port. My grandfather, who’s dead now, was born in Santa Virginia, and my father was born here too. And so was my mother. But my grandfather spent a good part of his life far away, in the oil fields of Karachaganak, in Kazakhstan.” I paused. “Now you know everything about my family.” In my childhood, Karachaganak was a recurring name, powerful, dizzying, I realized that even just rattling it off still conjured inside me an immense desert, with an encampment of tents and men busy at night cooking lamb over the fire and ingesting greasy vegetable broth.

“I’d love to see the wild boars on the bluffs. Have you ever seen them?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course. The first time was actually with my grandfather. Where do you live?” I asked. The sea was allowing us a truce. But now my lungs were contracting and taking on water. The waves gently lifted us. We were going up and down, up and down. I looked at the sculpted profile of the bluffs against the sky and right away I noticed Micol’s profile, equally sculpted against the sea, and in that moment I was certain there was a deep bond—although I still didn’t know why—between those two profiles, two lines that from that moment on would frequently overlap in my mind, to the point that many times, when I looked at the bluffs from a distance, at the top of the forest there I’d recognize Micol’s profile, the plateau of her forehead, the deep hollow of her eyes, the delicate slope of her nose, and the prominence of her lips. Many times during the winters that followed
I’d see her face there above the crest, gazing up to count clouds and airplanes.

“I live in Villa Argentina.”

She pointed toward a tall house, from which descended a steep wooden staircase leaning against the bluff. A patio supported by two columns covered with ivy stood in the middle of the ledge where the house was built, a natural recess of the mountain. Usually a motorboat was bobbing in the water down below. She lived on the opposite side of the beach with respect to Guido’s house; the two dwellings on the outcroppings that closed off the little cove at both ends guarded perhaps the most precious features of the whole coast, the first fruits that would be sacrificed to appease the sudden demands of a god of the sea.

Any truce was illusory. New sets of breakers kept moving us several meters at a time. Micol bounced right back untroubled, while I struggled to track her down among the peaks of gray water that constantly changed the landscape. Between swells I saw her rubbing her nose, or disappearing under the water, or kicking her legs. The peaks leveled out, the valleys flooded. In the morning light, I studied her movements, how she adjusted the straps of her blue bikini, how she cleaned the seaweed off her chest, and I soaked up the image of her tanned face that in the coming months I would endlessly try to reconstruct from memory.

I swam toward her.

“You’re shivering,” she said, with a smile. Those words opened the way to a greater intimacy, they planted the first seeds of affection, and there, in the freezing water, I felt a surge of heat.

Now the sea imposed its color on the sky, darkening the parts that sagged.

“I don’t know what your greatest fear is. Mine is that my parents are going to put our house up for sale. I would never forgive them. It’s the only thing I couldn’t forgive,” she resumed, as if to relieve my embarrassment. She was a centimeter away from me. I looked at her eyelashes, her soft lips turning blue from the cold.

“You know what salt does to bicycles? Imagine if our memories of this place came to the same end,” she said as she began to cough.

I used the last of my energy to squeeze my jaw shut and conceal my trembling. My body was shuddering. Her mass of hair, pasted to her head, made her seem like a wet bird that had just flown in from some remote archipelago. I hadn’t noticed she was chewing gum.

“Beautiful house,” I said, returning to the interrupted conversation.

“You should’ve been there last night.”

She told me that her father had gone out during the storm to tie up the palm fronds and banana leaves and to stow the beach chairs and the ping-pong paddles, nets, and balls. She asked me if I knew how to play ping-pong but without waiting for me to answer she resumed her story. Her mother had gotten up and searched for her father in the garden, while she was pretending to sleep. Morris, her brother, actually stayed asleep.

Standing on the shore, for who knows how long, Silvia and
Margherita waved goodbye. They were already dressed, ready to go home. Hand in hand we dove into a wave to get back toward the beach. But while we were pushed toward them, Micol asked me if I felt like staying out just a little longer. Cicogna and Guido moved farther away. On the shore Silvia covered her mouth with her hand and said something to Micol that she didn’t want me to hear.

“If Guido knows,” I heard.

Then she walked away. She turned back and made a final motion in the air to confirm that we’d see each other later, before she left. I should’ve realized then that by introducing me to Guido years before, and then to Micol, Silvia had given me everything she held most dear and that in return I’d stolen them, choosing the gifts over the giver.

“If Guido knows,” I repeated to myself.

“And you, where are you from?” I asked as we headed back into the surf.

Like everyone else, she came from Rome. She passed a hand over her hair and with a grimace of disgust pulled a hair from her lips. A dimple formed in her cheek as she was thinking.

The waves scraped the pier. They coarsely rubbed up against the rocks.

We were the last ones left. The wind had dragged her towel up against a beach umbrella, and my glasses had blown away from my shirt. But maybe the sea was starting to calm down.

“There are three orange trees in our garden.” She described the parties her parents organized in their cottage on Via Adelaide Ristori, starting in May. She mentioned the guests’ clothing. She talked about the rug in her room, her passion for earrings and for hikes in the mountains, and the collection of opalescent Venetian glass she’d inherited from some relative. She loved going to the movies. She could make a decent apple strudel. And me? What did I like? I had trouble answering her questions. She’d hand-carved two granite fish to stand guard at their front door. Then she mentioned a fantastic bakery. What kinds of sweets did I like? Was there a Chinese restaurant in Santa Virginia? Was it possible that I’d never eaten spring rolls? A nanny had raised her on meatballs made of eggplant.

I’d never been to Rome, though it was little more than an hour’s train ride from Santa Virginia. I realized all at once everything I’d missed. Twice I’d been about to go. Once for the second wedding of my aunt Lucia who, having been widowed at a young age when her husband was crushed by a big rig, got remarried at the age of fifty to a pharmaceutical representative. And then for the baptism of my cousin’s daughter Adele. Both times I’d prepared for the trip months in advance. At night I dreamed of crowded train cars and immense train stations of iron and glass. But both times, the night before, my asthma and a sense of suffocation made me reach for my throat. Nothing makes me feel vulnerable and lost like the taste of Netaprina, swallowed by the spoonful to prevent an asthma attack.

My tonsils were swollen, chills and coughs had caused my legs to buckle, so while everyone was partying in the city, on both occasions
my only company was the telephone, my mother calling to ask me if my fever had gone down. Before she hung up she swore they were already saying their final goodbyes and that she and my father would be getting back to Santa Virginia very soon. When they returned from the wedding my mother came into my room—slender, her red hair fresh from the salon, stiff with hairspray—carrying a slice of chocolate and raspberry cake, covered with jam. They’d had it wrapped up at the end of the reception. All these years later, there in the water, I wondered if the cake I’d eaten back then under the covers might not have come from that very same fantastic bakery Micol was telling me about.

My skin was tingling from the cold, it was shriveling up. She was telling me stories, opening up worlds.

“So then you aren’t leaving?” she asked.

“Right, I’m staying here,” I said.

“If I could I’d marry the sea,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“We’re leaving after lunch,” she said.

“So this is the last swim of the season?” I dared to ask.

She looked at me harshly, as if I never should’ve uttered those words.

I got out of the water abruptly, my back hunched against the cold. I limped along behind her, letting my teeth chatter freely. The salty skin of my chest contracted with the cold, and blood trickled down my knee. She slipped on the sandals with the leather flower.

She retrieved her book and sunglasses. She wrapped herself up in her towel, she tied it in a knot above her chest.

Still dripping, I put on my shirt. I slipped on my glasses.

To wring out her hair she fashioned a tail. She stopped up her right ear while bending her torso to the side, like a bamboo reed, to empty out her left ear. Then she repeated the gesture on the other side. Her towel wrapped around her body, and she held it tight. The wind had picked up again. Her eyes fixed on mine. She stared at me a moment too long. It was that gaze that unsettled me, in the years that followed. Behind me the sea still raged on.

“Well then, ciao Michi. Enjoy the sea for me too,” she said, her eyes still fixed on me, with a mix of unrivaled depth, self-confidence, and a hint of shyness that took my breath away. She seemed to be on the verge of telling me something that she never did tell me.

I said goodbye: “Ciao Micol.”

My eyes followed her as she crossed the final stretch of beach toward the wooden stairs. She climbed the stairs all the way to the top, without looking back.

I entered the kitchen like a ghost, I flew up to the floor above. In my room I took off my wet bathing suit. The breakers had filled my pockets with a handful of tiny stones that scattered across the tiles. I slipped on some dry shorts and a T-shirt. I got down on my knees, red with little scrapes, and rummaged on the floor to retrieve the stones.
Every stone a memory. I put them inside a piece of paper, folded it, placed it on the nightstand. Halfway down the stairs, I turned back. I picked up the little packet, wrote Micol on it and the date of that September swim. I slipped it under my pillow.

The smell of coffee that had greeted me when I got home had vanished and in the air there lingered the scent of flowers and the chirping of the cicadas. On a plate, under a napkin, they’d saved me some sea bass, roasted potatoes, and balsamic carrots. In the kitchen on a stack of plates to wash, the bone from my father’s steak. Now he was asleep in the hammock hung between two laurel trees.

“Hi honey. How was the beach?” My mother’s fluffed-up hair framed her face.

“Big breakers,” I said. “Fantastic.”

“Since when do you like big waves?”

“There are strawberries,” interjected my grandmother, in her blue housedress with yellow speckles, wearing gold rings on her fingers and heavy earrings.

“You really enjoyed the waves?” my mother persisted.

In the past, when there were rough seas, she always had to convince me to get in the water by pointing out all the ecstatic kids who had to be cajoled to get out of the water. She’d walk out up to her waist, turn to me and say: “See? Nothing happens.” Then the waves would strike her in the back. It was important to her that I’d have friends at the beach, that in the spring my classmates would come over to drink juice in our garden.

“They were pretty big waves. I had a long swim.”

In the back of the garden my grandmother passed by us with roses freshly cut from the bush. She went in the house. She came back out with a clear vase full of water. She positioned the bouquet in the center of the table, now cleared off.

“So you’re going to do it now, or not? Are you ready, Michele?” I looked up, my mother was watching me, waiting for me to answer, but I was mentally reviewing the words Micol had left me with. Do you know how to play ping-pong? If Guido knows. I went back over the scene of her father going out at night, her pretending to sleep. If Guido knows. My father went out in the middle of the downpour. I imagined the three orange trees, the two granite fish. If I were to repeat those phrases to myself often enough during the winter, they might keep me warm.

“What? Sorry.”

“I see there are some vines that need to be trimmed. Otherwise they’ll come in through the window and you’ll find them in your bed. But I can do it, it’s better,” she said, looking at my father dozing in the hammock. The seawater still buzzed in my ears, still pooled in my lungs. Even the empty house hummed.

That night it was pointless to force myself to sleep. I went down to the ground floor, threw myself on the garden swing with a blanket
over me. I stayed there until from the depth of the sea the first blue light of day ran across the water’s surface and then scaled the whole cliff. Then I went back inside and laid down on top of the sheets, I reached under the pillow for the packet of stones. Along with the map of the moon that covered my whole wall, yellow like the reflection of her eyes, the little stones were the second presence of Micol in my room. It seemed like a promising beginning. All through September I managed to sleep only because of the stones. I reached for them in the dark, while my other hand rummaged on the nightstand for my inhaler.
LUX
[FROM "PART ONE: THINGS THAT HAPPEN"]
by Eleonora Marangoni
translated by Olivia E. Sears

from
LUX
“They’re just beyond belief, the crickets in England...,” Fairfield said after he read the final phrase, raising his shining eyes toward Thomas and then turning his gaze to the garden when he realized that the boy was staring out the window. The attorney remembered very well the day when Cecilia Edwards had pulled that blue envelope out of her bag and asked him to keep it alongside other family papers: Cecilia had moved to France at the start of the summer, had returned to England for a couple weeks and, when she stopped by to see him, had brought along some cherry jam for him and his secretary. She was wearing a forest green dress that left her back uncovered in an elegant half moon, and the attorney Fairfield, although he’d known her for more than twenty years now, had possibly never seen her so serene. Even now that summer was ending, and Cecilia was gone, sharing that memory with Thomas seemed more indelicate than wise, so he let it pass before his eyes without saying anything. “The crickets in England...,” he muttered, refolding the papers one inside the other and passing them slowly between two fingers to smooth them out as if, at that point, replacing the letter in the envelope without crumpling it was the only thing that mattered.

Sudden deaths generate certain bureaucratic complications and—with the added weight and anguish of an only child who now finds himself alone—Thomas was forced to deal with a series of unavoidable tasks after his mother died. He never returned to Fairfield & Sons, but for weeks he corresponded with Fairfield and his secretary, Miss Dunn, a strapping gal from Croydon, smooth and soft like gelatin, who wore only pastel twinsets and was equipped with an intolerably piercing voice. Ever since that time, Thomas couldn’t help linking that voice—just as he did the sight of the old attorney’s handwriting—to somber memories.

Then one day the legal questions seemed to run out. London was half empty, immersed in the quiet of the late August bank holiday.

On that Monday, which seemed like a Sunday, Tom was struck by a pain he didn’t recognize. It was as if for months he’d slept a sleep that insulated him from everything and he’d awakened suddenly with the certainty that nothing would ever be the same. He didn’t cry even then, however, and he didn’t stare at the ceiling more than necessary. He got up, took out a travel bag—threw in some clothes, his mother’s letter, and a bottle of Hicks & Healey—left the house, and walked to the station, gazing at the city as if he’d never see it again. He boarded a train to cross the Channel and from that day on, for five months, he did nothing but wander around the world, losing himself wherever he wound up, alone or with people he’d never see again, leaving behind what he found on his journey, indulging in everything without concern for anything, traveling without cease and sleeping without ever finding rest. He never wrote home, because no one expected news from him; he thought every day about Sophie Selwood, but he never once looked for her.

Almost six years had passed since then, but still today, when he
heard talk of Tangiers, Hamburg, or Barcelona, something inside him seized up, and an old void once again sucked him in, as if in that aimless wandering a part of him had been lost and never recovered. But life had gone on, and in the meantime Thomas had founded his own studio, gone through two houses and as many cars, some four assistants, and at least a dozen girlfriends.

When Miss Dunn reached him on the telephone that afternoon, he no longer even had the number of Fairfield & Sons in his contacts, and the piercing vowels of the secretary's voice took him by surprise, propelling him down an alley of shock and annoyance. After the usual situational phrases—the sort of questions people who don’t travel much address to those who are always on the move, with a tone that combines the desire to demonstrate curiosity and the pursuit of a certain elegant self-pity, Good afternoon Mr. Edwards, and what part of the world are you in now? Good afternoon Mr. Edwards, sorry to disturb you, which continent are you on today? Good afternoon Mr. Edwards, I hope it is still afternoon wherever you are—Miss Dunn made sure to follow up with some measured condolences.

His uncle, Valentino Tilli, had passed on to a better life the week before, at the premature but ultimately respectable age of seventy-five. With the world’s most professional tone, Miss Dunn thus conveyed to him the final wishes of the deceased, according to which “the naturally effervescent mineral spring Zelda as well as the attached hotel property and surrounding land, not well delineated, including an inactive volcano and eighteen dwarf baobab trees, will become the property of Cecilia Ann Tilli or her heirs.”

Thomas didn’t know much about his uncle, and he definitely didn’t know he’d been the owner of a mineral spring and hotel in the middle of the sea. Valentino was his mother’s older brother, and Thomas had met him only once, when the Edwardses still lived in the old house on Chiltern Street.

Valentino had shown up on Christmas Eve with no forewarning, which any Englishman—the Edwards’s father included—would’ve found outrageous, and with improbable gifts: a box of Arturo Fuente cigars for his father (who only smoked a pipe and detested the smell of cigars), a dress in silvery muslin for his mother (who would never have worn such a dress, not even to a costume party), and a pocket watch for Thomas (who was not even eight years old). He wore a sailor suit with gold buttons, was very tanned, and had reached that indefinable age of men who never marry. Amid the pale and wrinkled friends of Mr. Edwards, Valentino stood out to Tom as original and lighthearted, a little awkward, and strangely cheerful (drunk, he would say now).

Even today, if he let his thoughts return to that night, he could hear Cecilia’s laughter echoing around the room at every one of his uncle’s jokes, while his father watched their last-minute guest a little crosswise: the dinners annoyed him, and Valentino was, in the
eyes of Oliver Edwards, the classic Italian, or just the sort of dodgy narcissistic playboy from whom he often swore to have rescued his wife.

To Thomas, Valentino had seemed instead like a somewhat lonely gentleman with a restrained elegance, who went out of his way to help others enjoy themselves but never seemed to enjoy himself in turn, as if the lusterless veil over his big blue eyes prevented him, for what turned out to be a fateful number of years, from focusing on his own happiness. Thomas didn’t have the opportunity to study his uncle in the definitive way only children can pull off, however, because the following morning, when he ran down the stairs in his pajamas to the living room to open presents, his mother told him his uncle had already left.

The firstborn of the Tilli family, Valentino was eleven years older than Cecilia, and he’d left home when she and her sisters were still wearing braids. The Tillis lived in Northern Italy, in a seaside city with a large port: from there, one day, Valentino had set sail toward the South, and from the South he’d never returned.

Sometimes, especially early on, when the three Tilli sisters still lived together, swapping clothes and books, Valentino would write home and send presents or strange postcards with names of places and people that the family had never heard before. No one could say precisely where he lived, nor what his profession was, but everyone was certain he’d never come back.

The Tillis were what is termed an “old-fashioned family,” and when Cecilia married Oliver Edwards—namely, a divorced foreigner twice her age—she set herself at odds with the whole family. Her mother, Maria Teresa Serra, was a gaunt Classics teacher. Descendant of an old family fallen into straitened circumstances, she never missed an occasion to remind her daughters of their noble birth, and the day when Cecilia, her favorite (because all mothers have one even if they don’t dare confess it), announced her engagement with a letter from London, she put herself to bed with an explosive migraine and didn’t get up for three days. Cecilia’s father, Alfonso Tilli, called his daughter on the phone with a voice that rang of empty living rooms and blinds pulled halfway down. “Do as you wish, Cecilia, it’s your life,” he told her in a way that underlined how in reality it was they who’d given it to her. “After your brother we hoped that maybe you’d at least have your head screwed on right. I hope you know what you’re doing,” he concluded, and for years Cecilia pondered the meaning of the expression “to know what you’re doing” without coming up with a solution. Especially when it came to questions of love, it was said, “to know what you’re doing” didn’t really mean a damn thing. After Valentino, then, Cecilia was the second and last to really leave home: her sisters married, one to a schoolmate who’d become a notary, the other to a neighbor who was a psychiatrist; they never left the city with its large port, they went to live a couple of floors apart from each other, and for thirty years they shared the rental fee for the umbrella at Giglioli beach, the bill from the upholsterer Corazza,
and the monthly expense of the maid. Cecilia spoke only reluctantly of the family she’d left and that now held her at a distance. Valentino was practically the only one she ever mentioned anymore, and that Christmas morning, after Thomas had unwrapped his gifts, his mother told him the whole story. Raising her eyes to the sky—eyes the same blue as her brother’s—she described him as a cross between a fairy-tale character and a head case, a scatterbrained trailblazer, an incurable optimist, and a romantic wheeler-dealer.

She loved to say about him, with more amusement than regret, that he wasn’t someone you could lose track of because he left no tracks at all: “Your uncle went out to sea for years without ever having learned to sail, he crossed America by car, and once he even fell in love with a woman he’d never seen.” She then began to recount, with quite a wealth of detail, the story of the woman, but back then Tom was too young for stories of love and too distracted by his new Meccano erector set, and he’d immediately forgotten the story. Now he remembered only that in the middle of it there was a crowded train in an Arab city and a beguiling voice.

Also memorable from back then, Cecilia went on, were the things Valentino bought during his world travels. From what she knew about him—and there was plenty she didn’t know, she explained—her brother over the years had managed to collect a concert hall on the side of the highway, a radioactive lake, hundreds of voiceless parrots, a plot of land infested by moles, and an entire, extremely fragile collection of “akishtra” instruments that no one had ever heard played.

Hearing that list left Thomas so stunned that he had, in this order, on the spot ceased to regard his brand-new Meccano as incomparable, asked what “radioactive” meant, understood that in the world there were two kinds of men, those like his uncle and those like his father, realized, once and for all, that he resembled the former more than the latter.

He’d only met his uncle that once, and this was more or less everything he knew about him. Enough, anyway, not to be too surprised when he learned that he hadn’t inherited a collection of antique stamps or gold cuff links from him.

“It’s impossible,” Miss Dunn explained to him that day on the phone “to estimate the exact value of the property. The island is practically deserted and reachable only by sea. The spring is still active, but the facility has been closed for years. The hotel appears to be open, but it is run by locals about whom we know almost nothing.” Of the state of the baobabs, the secretary added with a note of inexplicable pique, she had no information.

“Mr. Fairfield asked me to advise you that the best solution would be to initiate a precise valuation, then perhaps sell the property, or perhaps think about how to redevelop the land. In any case,” concluded Miss Dunn, “it would be advantageous to meet with us here in order to assess the various possibilities and seek out the most
astute solution.” This word, Thomas thought, has very little to do with the matters of sudden grief and run-down hotels; he had no idea what to do with a mineral spring and no intention of finding “astute” solutions in that regard.

Not that the news of his uncle’s death hadn’t shaken him. And yet—despite the sensitive nature of only children raised in close contact with their mother—Thomas G. Edwards’s sense of empathy and concept of emotion remained profoundly English: they courted fatalism and detested haste. At that moment he only hoped not to have to appear anew before Miss Dunn’s pastel sweater and Fairfield’s silver paperweights. He promised to get in touch as soon as possible and limited himself to the kind of pleasantries that, he was certain, the diligent secretary considered indispensable for bringing the conversation to a close.

He hung up without noting down the number for Fairfield & Sons, opened the window halfway, raised the volume of the radio four points, went down the hill to the right, and headed toward a London sunset made more brilliant by the rain. A handful of vintage memories, a light dinner centered around a bottle of Absolut Elyx and cold roast, spiced up the tail end of that midseason day.

At that very moment, on the top floor of the house where she lived, and where the sun was still high, Sophie Selwood was finishing a watercolor painting. The result, frankly a little bumbling, depicted her view across the street. There was a long straight walkway and a slightly stooped woman crossing it. On the right side of the painting a dog slept huddled in the shadow of a large jacaranda, whose leafy branches cast patches of shadow and light all over. It was supposed to be a painting in three colors—blue, violet, and yellow—but in a couple of areas the water had spread, mixing the paint colors and staining the page a dark green. The patches of sunlight seemed like butterflies, and the dog’s tail was so big around that it appeared to be that of a fox. Sophie didn’t have a great talent for drawing, but she’d always loved painting, and it helped her to focus before she began her workday. And of course whatever scribble came from her hands was a masterpiece for little Daniel, who collected her sketches in an album of soccer trading cards and wanted the most beautiful ones hung in his room above his bed, between the Great Map of the Sky and the Stars and the giant poster of Nemo.

§

The Edwardses were the kind of family that owns a big farm in the countryside but, depending on the season and how business is going, may find themselves with no money to fix the roof. In London, they had a governess living with them full time, they handled their correspondence on stationary embossed with their initials, and every year they invited at least twenty people over at Christmas. And yet, not infrequently, to balance the bank account or allow themselves a tropical vacation during winter months, Cecilia would give up going
Eleonora Marangoni

The 74-year-old went to the salon for two months or pass entire weeks without eating out at a restaurant, giving her maid the “Dickensian” order (as she liked to call it) to deplete the cupboard. They were among the precarious privileged who didn’t know true privation but also couldn’t enjoy the serenity of consistent affluence. This was above all due to the work of Oliver Edwards who, after years working as a real estate consultant for a large firm in the City, one day went out on his own and opened Edwards Real Estate. After some years the company could count on fairly brisk business, with regular customers and commerce that reached all of England, a good part of Scotland, and some regions of Brittany. However, it was a private company and thus based on intuition, influenced by the vagaries of the market, kept in the black by stubborn dedication, and inevitably tied to a certain amount of apprehension. Thomas, who from a young age had heard his mother speak as often in English as in Italian, for a long time had believed that “Edwards Real Estate” meant “The true state of the Edwards family.” Cecilia recounted the anecdote to friends in her exercise class, but given that they were all English, they didn’t find it quite as funny.
THE DISTANT LIFE

by Paolo Pecere

translated by Olivia E. Sears

from LA VITA LONTANA
The August day when Livio and Marzio were born, we got up early and went down to wander the deserted streets, like a couple of deep-sea divers in the diving suit of our car, sleepy and without direction. Elio drove slowly, laughed randomly, gently brushed my arm. I felt a shiver of electricity in my belly. Life forms were beginning to emerge from their homes to seek out food and newspapers, the wind fluttered beneath clothes on the line, the strands of the clouds unfurled.

A musical scale drifted down from the roofs of the apartment houses: a musician practicing the flute, barely discernable among the snorting car engines, an auditory mirage that a whispering voice inside me swore was real. A day when you were happy.

“Beach?” Elio said, and then silence. We communicated with our thoughts, following an invisible, centrifugal track that by some migratory instinct carried us away from the shell of the city, beyond the Roman countryside, toward another life.

We stopped at the fence of an abandoned construction site, on the outskirts of Casal Monastero. Grass was poking out from cracks in the concrete between the red brick outposts, stirred by the clean, dry wind. There was no school here, I observed. For Elio, as always, this observation wasn’t enough: it should all be torn down, everything remade all over again, as he put it, waving his hand over the prehistoric profile of an excavator bowed to the ground, then over the whole world. I stroked his head, already warmed by the sun. We left again. The countryside stretched out all around us.

I lost my bearings in the featureless terrain, maybe I fell asleep, while Elio proceeded confidently. Brushwood was burning in the distance, under a patch of gray. The dry wind swirled around thick with smoke. The strong heat warped the light, mixing up thickets and lots built up along the horizon. Then the colored squares of the buildings disappeared: here the past resembled the future, and we could have been anyone.

We found our bearings again on Via Pontina, where we stopped to cool off in the shade of a fruit stand. Two young Sikhs were smoking, leaning on bicycles. They told us they were brothers. Elio stared at their black hair and the embers of their cigarettes with the introverted concentration I adored. The fruit seller agreed to take our picture: the two of us with the Indian brothers, all with embarrassed expressions, willing to recognize fate in that casual encounter.

We closed the car doors. The crackle of cicadas and pine needles crushed on the asphalt resumed, was lost in the buffeting air, came back distinctly as the Circeo waterfront came closer, and then stopped. We glided between our shadows on the sand, joining the groups of bathers who’d sought refuge under the mountain, between the ridge of bushes and the sea. Beyond the dune the cars disappeared and the collective drowsiness became the backdrop of a film from fifty years earlier, where Elio’s likeness to Marcello Mastroianni became almost oneness: I watched the sweep of his brow crease slightly as he knelt down, sank his arm in the ground up to the elbow, drew out the black earth, and planted the beach umbrella. In the frenzy of my
hormones, I imagined surrealistic details drifting by: Greek athletes, metaphysical bronzes, towers in the void.

We pulled the books from our bags. On the beach, between heat, gravity, and inglorious paddleball competitions, everyone succumbed to torpor, and reading was a way to reaffirm who we were. I took the bookmark from an Austrian novel I was struggling to finish, in which it wasn’t clear whether the narrator loved a ghost or a real character. Elio leafed through his Focus magazine, a double issue with ten hypotheses about the self-destruction of the human species, commenting aloud.

The light was blinding and the shoreline, beyond the shelter of my eyelashes, resembled the preparatory sketch for a painting that couldn’t be finished. Beneath the enameled sky lay two primitive figures, with two black holes and a mute slit in place of their faces. A dog was staring at something in the turquoise space.

Elio read to me, his voice at times annulled by the wind, the typical summer article about a discovery made by a group of California psychologists. It spoke of an identical dream dreamed by thousands of people: the high tide that rises slowly around the ankles, and no one is alarmed until the water reaches their necks. Men and women, wearyly surprised as their clothes become a second skin and the weight of their bodies merges with the current, observe with silent resignation the surface of the sea rising, exchanging glances that express primordial questions: who’s to blame, and why don’t they do something? A representation in the collective unconscious of an imminent catastrophe, which Elio brought sharply back around to his convictions.

“Everyone knows, but they don’t react: what a miserable end!”

“Nonsense. Besides, what do you know?”

“I can’t predict the future. But I know it’s bad.”

The apocalypse, no less. And there he goes again, gesturing toward the bathers, guilty of moral lethargy. But the day seemed sweet to me. Holding a hand on my belly, I propped the open book between my legs, I saw the peaches and bananas packed in the cloth bag and, beyond the edge of the umbrella, the profile of a torso: everything seemed like a riddle from Puzzle Week, with the impartial expectation of a solution. And again our idle game, which had basically carried on since high school: he, annoyed about our abused planet, in despair about the human species’ resistance to facts, about stupidity as an autoimmune disease, with a smile that sought a reaction; I, giving him a little rope, trusting his excesses more than my compromises, but concluding that things would work out, I didn’t know how.

Two children were chasing each other, splashing about below the horizon line. For me in that moment the world—not the planet—was beautiful, made just for the eyes and for thoughts of the sublime.

Right at twelve noon, my book got swamped. The water soaked the letters until they swelled up. “I didn’t feel anything!” I said. Just a faint sting.

§
We climbed back up the dune, our feet seeming to sink with every step. We tromped over the scalding asphalt to the car, laughing proudly, admiring our own recklessness, our still-young breath running short. We plowed through the hot air, letting cars flow around us, ahead and behind, unconcerned, happy for the continuity that meant we were still us, in the uninterrupted trajectory that, by way of another weekend excursion, ended in a mad rush to the hospital. The sand fell off our skin in sparkling particles. His father called and he passed me the phone making the “no” sign with his left index finger. With Carlo, we were teenagers again: I claimed we were at home and about to leave. I recited the contents of the bag we’d settled on together. He knew I was lying and he reassured me: he was in the maternity ward to operate and he was waiting for us.

When we got back to the city, the familiar streets were already receding into the shadows, transforming into those old orange photos. The warm timbre of a philosophy professor on the radio, delivering a serene monologue on “the ineffable and infinite expression of language.” Other days I would’ve found it verbose and vaguely soporific, but in that moment—it is a single moment, a circular lagoon in my memory—I carefully followed the chanting rhythm, happy for the existence of the radio, for professors of philosophy, for endless abstract discussions: the human voice as cosmic background radiation.

In the shower I tried to focus on the pain of contractions, to awaken consciousness of my muscles. We ate something and wasted more time sitting on the edge of the bed until Elio looked at the clock, and then at me, with the slightly pained smile he’d get when he had to implore me to hurry. “Labor should be over by now!” I exaggerated, with a laugh that revealed my fatigue. There was no traffic along the Tiber. We slowly crossed the bridge of Isola Tiberina, the white coats appeared.

Late in the evening I found myself still in the moonlight of the labor room, already exhausted. Elio, having used up his repertoire of distracting blather, held my hand. His father bent over me once more, checking with a quick gesture how it was going down below: he said C-section, ordered an epidural. I saw—I can still see—his towering back coming out of the room and stopping in the blue atmosphere of the corridor. Slowly he raises his arms toward the neon lamp, puts on the long white plastic gloves—ritualistic gestures of the summoner. He pulls the elastic of his surgical mask over his neck. He stands still in concentration, while Elio’s voice, in another world, laughs at something someone just said.

I was a little agitated when they laid me down in the operating room; apparently I said some illogical things: I invoked Orsa Maggiore, the blue stone, the sea. Elio comforted me, his father barked out an order. I fell asleep feeling myself sinking in the water, I woke up again.
I saw Marzio first, his face round with slits. Then the jet-black eyes of Livio, observing me with his penetrating gaze, and my breath caught. They’d been arranged in a plastic crib near the bed. Marzio opened his moist mouth wide. Livio watched him with the whites of his eyes shining on his gray skin. Still sedated, I gazed at him, contemplating without regret how painfully different he was from his twin.

The round heads swayed in the undertow of my visual field as I tried to define them. Marzio a natural beauty, a sentient planet that establishes itself in the center of the world. Livio a terrified pilot who’s losing altitude there in his sheets and preparing for a heroic maneuver. I’ll take care of you, I told myself, recovering the use of my legs. I stood up slowly, ignoring the flashing pain of the wound, and washed them both with care.

§

I looked around that strange room where everyone seemed lifeless, waiting for a real beginning. The nurse cleared away a dinner tray no one had touched. I went back to watching Livio, who was staring at me with a miniature version of Elio’s gaze. I was already afraid he might be able to catch my thoughts, repelled by his mask: pale and gaunt, with pointed ears and a long hooked nose that skimmed the sad cut of his mouth, emitting a grim wheeze without crying, giving off a bad smell. In his eyes, sunken into bulging orbits—though I initially avoided his gaze—I imagined a bitter and sorry creature in retreat. The word “ugly” came to mind, which deflects from the unpleasant object, but it didn’t suit him at all: he was the bearer of a temporal paradox—a newborn with a scrawny body and the sweet thoughtful eyes of a mature intelligence—that captured one’s attention, transforming it into love, disorienting and irresistible.

All I had to do to cheer myself up was return his calm gaze. He knew what I knew. He knew more than me. He ignored the illusion of time. He seemed to be on the verge of speaking to me, then he fell asleep. Everything seemed to cast a shadow over the sense of a new and interesting life, which would be revealed to me with the circuit of the hours.

Slowly the day brought me back from sleepless brooding to simpler obligations. Elio came in and out of the room. Always essential, secretly constructive, stranger to anxiety and manifest enthusiasm: in short, inscrutable. In my memory I see his broad shoulders shadowing me, the calm in his immobile chest, his gnarled hands stretched out like a tree over his two children. His face isn’t there.

§

Even now, in another house, I sometimes wake up and find I’m not tired. I get up, go drink a glass of water. And there you are, Elio,
standing by the window. You act like nothing’s happening, afraid I
might question you, might ask about your inappropriate presence: I
still have this vice.

“Remember that car ride?” I begin. “I was staring at the dashboard,
growing fond of its every detail, I was talking. While you, actually,
were silent.”

By dint of going back over them, memories get muddled, and
now they are shaped by the future you were leading us to. The cluster
pines of Monte Circeo stretch and grow broad dangling leaves. The
two Sikh boys are Livio and Marzio, they get in the car with us. The
burning shrubs are a funeral pyre surrounded by murmuring Indians.
We approach: around the flames there appear garlands, offerings of
fruit, flags with the hammer and sickle, sun-yellowed photos of the
deceased. We’re all there, the whole family. Italy is no more, it is the
past.

“People leave,” you say. “Ideas remain.”

“Maybe so, but even before you left, when we lived together, it
seemed like everything was happening in a hidden place, far away
from us.”

You agree: you disappear.

§

PART ONE: An Education

I

Now the house is empty. The television was next to the window,
where the sofa stands today, and vice versa, as if a mirror had reversed
the places of things. Imagining I’m sitting down I see, reflected on
the blank screen, four people on the sofa.

I went in the house and put my shopping bags and keys on the
table. From that periscopic position I inspected the living room:
the children next to Giuliana, the friend who’d replace me during
absences; in the background the floor lamp which illuminated the
post-Cubist lithograph with the Indian raising the head of Columbus
like a monstrance, the ochre fabric sofa, and other fragments of a
bourgeois living room reproduced in miniature, a microcosm where
the most obvious threat is boredom. Then I would take action, and I
could repeat the gestures here wearing a blindfold. With a little effort
I can even smell the milky scent again, when they weighed warm in
my arms. But I can no longer see them in detail, Livio and Marzio
toothless, when uncovering their eyes brought everything into focus,
myself included. And of the hours we were together at home, with
Elio, I remember few conversations, artifacts with an uncertain
meaning. Even if I were to watch some of the old videos I have stashed
somewhere in Rome, I’d no longer know what we thought back then.
In the seismography of the body that remembers, only clues remain.
When I wasn't busy I'd go sit on the sofa, to keep watch like a primitive mother. Due to a banal social mechanism that was gradually revealed over time, like the load-bearing walls of a building in ruins, Elio went to work while I stayed at home. All the explanations we constructed to tell ourselves about the evolution of our relationship today appear inconsistent with the fact that he was the young entrepreneur, engaged in the business of waste disposal, and I the professor without students. For years my name had founndered deep in a pit of schoolteacher waiting lists, hoping to be fished out in some possible future. And so I waited, and only in the evening did I receive their papa’s physical help. He played with the kids a lot, and was keen to cook, in a slow, ritual process: he divided the ingredients on the table, weighed them, arranged them in a system of containers around the stove, combined them, contemplated the result, and after dinner washed the dishes, dried them slowly, lined them up, and watched them shine.

I told myself the story of his day in parallel to mine, like a tale from a children’s book, sparse and interspersed with dots, pastel-colored figures, and white spaces: as I progressed through the sleep-wake cycles of an existence reduced to biology, I imagined him arriving in his office, greeting Mangili and the guys at the firm, remaining motionless for hours at his desk, going to a business lunch, explaining the phases of biomass disposal, then withdrawing to sip a coffee by himself, leafing through a newspaper to catch up on the world, which I barely followed at all. So when he came home, I didn’t ask him to tell me what he’d done—I already knew that—but anything else he had news about.

Actually, I was fine with it, this arrangement that went on for years. In fact, I preferred to go out only when necessary, and when I did I walked around with no interest in the pantomime of the street. Bumping into the old folks explaining the world to the barista who feigns interest, dodging the guy on the moped who briefly fixes me with his cold stare, observing the misery and boredom of the merchants who stand looking out the doors of their shops: all this brought me down. The malfunctioning machinery of the city that every day swallowed and spit out lines of cars and mountains of trash, and the hard-nosed responses that the Roman people always had at the ready, their loneliness in the life machinery, I experienced these as an error that couldn’t be remedied, an outrage. Like me, I thought, it must terrify other young people, whose material and spiritual poverty not only wasn't cured but was rendered chronic by the city of Rome. But these, as I understand better today, were Elio’s antisystemic ideas, which crept over me and pulled the strings of my puppet fists into a gesture of protest, taking advantage of my naïve disillusionment as an emigrant. I had believed that studying would get me somewhere, and I’d dedicated myself to the cause with missionary zeal. When I was majoring in German literature, I spoke five languages (mostly to myself), I painted, I wrote free verse: an
assortment of skills that society considered about as useful as false eyelashes. But I was still convinced I’d meet someone at the finish line, who would welcome my Renaissance talents, as I called them, and invite me up to the podium. There was the summa cum laude and then the buzzing of a fly in the empty classroom. While the glorious mirage of an academic career faded like a bruise, I had turned to the presumed security of teaching school where at least, I told myself, I’d be doing something useful. But in five years I’d been assigned only one week of substitute teaching, and the only comment came from Elio, who began: “In a just society, you’d already be...,” and away he went with the flogging of the World of Today. So regret for my nonexistent work was mixed up with the protest against all that for me was Rome: infinite beauty=sadness, false friendships, disrespect for rules, the mockery of honking horns.

My maternity was not a retreat but the continuation of a wait-and-see maneuver. I lived clinging to a shore—which in my case wasn’t my family but the multitude of books in my room—from which I formulated choices that turned out to be already made, as I discovered parapraxes made by an unconscious that took charge of deciding for me that I wasn’t deliberating—had been no exception. And now I was at ease inside this being who was even more obviously a spectator: of my body environment, of my children who were staging a documentary there, of my parapsychological awakenings that anticipated their nightly calling out.

Elio was the axis of my mental wandering, the eyeglasses for my incurable myopia, the one who dealt with the uncomfortable business I called “reality”—always in quotation marks. With him as boatswain, I as commander, always closed up in my room with my papers, I learned where we were going and what to expect from others, sometimes even from myself. For him everything was intuitively obvious, too much reflection was fundamentally unnatural, remembering was a practical expedient not to be abused, which would serve us wonderfully only when our backs no longer sustain us. He was convinced he could change anything with a glance at the horizon, an impetuous burst of will, and the formidable ideas he’d wake up with some prophetic morning. Precisely because I was missing the most basic instructions on the concept of action, I maintained a certain indulgence toward his theatrical proclamations against the fate of humanity.

For example, that morning on the Sabaudia waterfront, the sermon on the apocalyptic dream of citizens in Western countries. Which perhaps, at least in part, he had invented himself: I was well aware of his fixation on the villainous destruction of planet Earth, a fixation cultivated from heterogeneous sources: essays on economics and ecology, but also journals of dubious scientific authority, volumes of classics in political thought in the white-red-and-black uniform of the Editori Riuniti but also pamphlets with effervescent rainbows on which an egg-yellow sun dispersed the darkness of skeptics; I was well versed in his taste for pointing out the destructive blindness of the human species, the reckless draining of natural resources, the torment of pigs and geese in crowded farm pens, and the failure to
heed the warning signs of economic crisis by the slavish consumers of Capital. In the stratigraphy of books on his bedside table I had seen his political passions rise and fall. Recently, the Revolution had been mysteriously displaced by the East, which concerned me. But deep down, despite the objections I raised, I believed there must be something solid in his analysis—after all, he was the expert in reality and I the eternal student who’d continued to spend days reading her favorite novels. That unwavering gaze, which up close could seem shallow and manic, if not downright confused, hid the secret of a far-sighted method. But above all, while I didn’t decide if he was really right (or wrong), I was seduced by his call to *instinct*—which officially I considered evidence of weakness. I contemplated him like one admires a big cat for its dense fur and its readiness to pounce.
On Q’s Side

It was eight o’clock in the evening, September, the last remnants of summer, when I met him for the first time.

The sun was still setting late; the city had just begun to come alive again after the August holidays. The light left splotches on the hive-buildings of Piazza della Radio, in the Marconi district, one of the bleakest and most congested areas in Rome. The Timba was located in Via del Fornetto, a little street just behind the Trastevere station. You had to pass through a narrow arch wedged under the railroad and go up a few meters, sticking close to the wall so as not to risk being crushed by the cars coming in at full speed. The entrance to the rehearsal studio was on the left; a small flight of stairs led to an unkempt garden—nettles grown over the walls, exposed roots twisted like snakes—where waiting musicians often improvised furious djembe sessions.

The Timba was a school of percussion. It got its name from a particular Caribbean rhythm. Our band had reserved the first available rehearsal date after summer, but during the time we’d been apart something had changed. Our old guitarist had begun a six-month trip through India, so the drummer had begun to look for a replacement. He had tracked down a guy who played guitar like a god. So we were very curious—there’d never been anyone among us who played an instrument in a way that could be defined as “godlike.” That evening, when I turned into Via del Fornetto, Q was behind me, smoking a cigarette and chatting quietly with the rest of the band.

At first I mistook him for a girl, with his long curly hair tied up in such a bizarre and lavish way, like a hairdo fit for a wedding. He had enormous eyes, dark and alert, made up with mascara, where he allowed his thoughts to surface, only to quickly drown them out, driven by terror. He wore rings on his hands and rigid bracelets on his wrists and his ears were swarming with piercings. He was wearing a leather jacket from the seventies, ripped bell-bottom jeans, and combat boots. I liked his rock aesthetic immediately, but as I tried to explain our musical genre to him, he gave the impression that he didn’t hear me. It was like he was ambling through fields of a surly and solitary brilliance, in the vast expanse of his own personal fantasy.

It was a long night, so calm, so beautiful. We played for two hours. And when we went out, the cicadas chirped in the garden and the moon shone over the old railroad pediment. Q didn’t reveal himself to be a virtuoso on the instrument: he wasn’t a disciple of the hyper-technical religion that emerged in the late eighties, with people like Allan Holdsworth, Greg Howe, Tony MacAlpine, and even earlier Van Halen, shredders without soul. But he had a great style, a personal touch, rough and sweet at the same time. He was a son of grunge: few effects, distorted sounds, fierce solos constructed from a handful of piercing notes. He played an imitation Gibson Flying V, the swallow-tail guitar, a must for metal guitarists. I, in addition to being the singer, played a Fender Stratocaster 2-Tone Sunburst, the same model used by one of my guitar idols: Stevie Ray Vaughan.
Back then I wrote songs full of angsty sadness, featuring gloomy scenes, queens of the night, and streets invaded by fires around which were consumed what Benedetto Croce would have called “healthy youthful melancholies of skepticism and pessimism.” Q's style paired perfectly with that kind of thing. I knew right away that he was the guitarist for us.

A few weeks later we left the Timba and moved to a rehearsal space in Pietralata. The landlord was a man of few words, greasy hair tied back in a ponytail, a chronic air of defeat, he always wore the same Peruvian sweater suffused with the smell of hashish. He helped us record a five-song demo that we’d use to drum up gigs in the clubs and venues around Rome. We decided the new lineup would be called Sinki’s Sauna, from the title of a William Burroughs story.

The other members of Sinki’s Sauna made up the classic rhythm section: bass and drums. The bassist lived in an apartment in Via Gregorio VII overlooking the dome of St. Peter’s. The drummer studied at the Chateaubriand—the French school attended by the children of diplomats and the scions of the Roman upper classes—and he was engaged to a descendant of an aristocratic family that owned an entire building in Via del Babuino. Q on the other hand grew up in the proletarian neighborhood of Casal Bertone and worked pumping gas. Although the different social conditions didn’t affect the dynamics animating the life of the group, I naturally gravitated to Q’s side because I came from the far outskirts of the city.

But being on Q’s side meant giving up seeing things with acuity, rationality, a sense of justice and righteousness. Because Q wasn’t involved in the crucial debates of the world: he had no political feelings, he didn’t bother to determine what’s right and what’s wrong. He lived in a mental space of complete anarchy. There was nothing that interested him: not the movies, not literature, not even television. He couldn’t care less about social issues; he was bored by discussions of the future. He simply didn't feel he was part of anything and for this reason he was the freest human being I’d ever known.

He worked at a gas station on Via Olimpica with a view over the athletic fields of Acqua Acetosa, where he spent his days filling up the gas tanks of cars heading to the Foro Italico. He often sang a Vasco Rossi song under his breath: “Run off, fuck pride, it’s done more damage than petroleum.” Petroleum was his living, ramming it up the world’s ass. In cars, in mopeds, in trucks. At twenty he found himself exactly in the heart of the problem of contemporary capitalism. And when evening came, he’d jump on his moped and take off along the eastern ring road, traveling along the overpass that soars above the San Lorenzo freight yard, accelerating to within one meter from the windows of the nineteenth-century Umbertine buildings in the Prenestino blackened by smog. From up there he’d watch the sun setting over a Rome of industrial archaeology. And maybe inside he was anticipating the imminent climax of his day: the moment when he’d be holed up at home, he’d stick the guitar jack in the amp and attack the riff of “Smells Like Teen Spirit”—the first
track on *Nevermind*, probably the most famous Nirvana single—loud enough to make the walls crack.

We held our first concerts in the clubs on the slope of Monte dei Cocci di Testaccio, which in the early nineties was becoming one of the most popular areas for Rome’s night life. We were almost always drunk, and we didn’t care at all about the quality of the show, about the precision of the playing, or about a clean sound. One night Q showed up on stage after downing eight Negronis, one after the other. At the end of the first song he passed out like a tree at the final blow of the ax, dragging the guitar and amp behind him. I spent the rest of the concert playing my parts and his, trying everything to keep him propped up, with the result that I ended up seeming like a ridiculous ventriloquist trying to animate a lifeless puppet.

Some time had to pass, though, before a real feeling of friendship developed between us. We studied each other a long time, aware that when we picked up our guitars that feeling of connection would be like a spark that barely has time to shine before it’s gone. For my part, I felt myself drawn in and at the same time repelled by his schizophrenia, his lightning-quick fits of rage, his cynicism, the crazy and total detachment he maintained toward other people, his laughter thick with the unfailing derision that he used to maintain his distance. At that time I rarely went out. The poets of the Beat Generation accompanied me through the afternoons of my twenties. Sitting in the garden in spring, downwind of the first roses of May, I’d let flow before my eyes the life of the hipsters, those open-hearted innocents who would run from one bar to the next, from one city to the next, from one woman to the next, seeking bliss. And reading them something happened that I’ve never experienced with other novelists or poets: with the Beats, the distance between me and the pages I was reading vanished. It was as if Kerouac had invited me to sit at the bar, and with drinking as the excuse told me about himself, about his wife, about his little brother Gerard who’d died at the age of four, about America’s fields and solemn riverbanks. And that’s why I found it so absurd that that hour of the evening should come, when the sun was sinking at dusk and the arrival of the mosquitoes persuaded me to lay down in the library the atlas where I scribbled the routes described in *On the Road*, just as it seemed absurd to me that Dean Moriarty wasn’t there waiting for me, just beyond my garden gate, with a worn-out suitcase and a cross around his neck, ready to leave for who knows where.

Q intersected with my life just as Dean Moriarty did with Sal Paradise’s. And much of our solid, lopsided, caustic friendship had its origin in a gesture he made one spring evening, the first of hundreds of identical evenings that we spent under the pylons of the beltway where we used to hole up for hours sipping scotch and eating snacks in the car, listening to CDs from the grunge era, waiting for the setting sun to move back behind the doleful peaks of Rome’s buildings. That night Q said, “You gotta hear this” and pulled from the glove compartment a cassette with a pink cover dominated by
the image of five arms reaching up together as one. He slipped it into the cassette player and soon a slow instrumental interlude began. The intro, floating and mysterious, preceded a flurry of guitars and drums which launched the grim confession of a serial killer sung by a hoarse, feverish voice.

They were from Seattle, they were called Pearl Jam, and those were the first words of “Once,” the opening track of *Ten*, their debut album:

“I admit it, what’s to say...”
THE LIFE, DEATH AND MIRACLES OF BONFIGLIO LIBORIO

by Remo Rapino

translated by Anne Milano Appel

from VITA, MORTE E MIRACOLI DI BONFIGLIO LIBORIO
1926

*The year that Liborio B. makes his entrance on earth, but in summer*

Now those people, those others, everybody in this shitty town, go around saying I’m crazy. And it didn’t just start now, those people, those others, all the people in this shitty town, having to tell me I’m crazy. I know it too, and I think about it all the time, night and day, winter and summer, I think about it every day that God Almighty delivers births and deaths, in sunshine and in darkness, I have always thought about it to try to understand how come this noggin of mine went from being more or less normal to having bats in its belfry, an unraveled muddle nutty as a fruitcake. Which is as if you were walking along a straight road, and then all of a sudden, at a junction, it’s crooked like a snake, you get twisted up and take the wrong road without even noticing it, and so out of nowhere you find yourself in a place you’ve never seen before, where not one thing is familiar, you don’t recognize the houses, the trees, people’s faces, voices, even your mother’s lovely voice jolts you, and you can’t even find the fountain in the main piazza, though it’s a really big one, and after the pigeons shit on your head for spite, you can’t even find the house where you were born with its old ugly dilapidated wooden door, because public housing breeds woodworms and they feed on the wood piece by piece, those woodworms even eat rust and mold. It can happen. I think that’s what happened to me too. It may well be that it all began right when I came into the world, at least according to what my mother told me, as for my father I don’t even know who he is or where he is now, whether he’s still alive, or whether he died like the poor devil he was, because he was a poor unfortunate devil. Those who remember him say he went to L’America, to Argentina or Brazil, somewhere across the sea, but an enormous sea, they tell me, but what can you expect me to know about him after such a long time. How big must that fucking sea be? Well anyway, when I was born all these and many other things happened, and many more would happen. So much water came down even when I was born, it was an evening in August so my grandfather, Peppe Bonfiglio, was always telling me, and my mother, God rest her soul, between shrieking and shuddering, gripping two candles in her hand to give a bit of light at least, swore at wave after wave of pain, screaming: *Holy Mother of God, where the hell is that jackass Don Nicola? Where the hell is that slut comare Elisa?* And so in a round of swearing and *madonne*, I was born. Then a whole life of chicory and greens. That was how it was then. And even though hunger was never absent in my house, I didn’t die after all. My grandfather, on the other hand, died unexpectedly, no one thought you could die just like that, in the space of a day. Because it was in the afternoon that a scaffolding plank had broken, a wooden board rotted by water and wind, a cracking under his feet, there at the site where they were building the new school, and he fell right on a stack of newly unloaded bricks; his back, which was already rotting on its own, shattered into a hundred pieces, maybe more, and
he died too, renouncing Christ on the cross. That’s the only way my grandfather could die, repudiating. After that my mother started getting sick, little by little, a coughing fit every now and then, but it went on for a long time, until she started spitting up dark blood on the pillow, anyway she spit blood, she spit and didn’t talk anymore, even though in the evening she told me stories and tales that I don’t remember too well now and maybe it’s best I forgot, apart from the story about my having the same eyes as my father’s. How can a person not get angry at the world, heaven and earth, the priests who wanted to console you with an Our Father and a Gloria, and also with the idea of paradise, and the angels, already I could smell a rat, the stink of deception, though I only later became aware of this hoax. So I got the idea of recounting everything that’s happened to me from the time I was born until now when I am over eighty years old, sitting here at the marble table in the kitchen. Which is cold and I don’t know why this marble and this cold, the table with the marble surface makes me think about death. Now and then I think about death even if I’m not at the table, you take a look around and you see that every day people die, and even if you don’t know them there are notices about the dead, obituaries written especially for the dead, you see them, you read them and you always feel a little sorry, even if the name printed there is a stranger to you. I also think about my own death, but not often, small potatoes. That’s why I write, write and rewrite, that way death will wait, even though sometimes I seem to see it, with its ashen white face and black-rimmed eyes, like those who suffer from heart disease, and I tell it to wait a few more months, if possible until Christmas so that at least I’ll remember the creche they put up at the big church one last time, when the book is finished then I’ll call it myself, in short I let it hear that I’m ready, because death understands these things right away, it doesn’t take a whole lot of explaining. Death is also a tiny bit kind, it puts on a show of patience and believes me and goes away; once, but only once, it even smiled at me, though just barely, something that just sort of slipped out. It bid farewell to me with a shriveled hand that was all creaky when the fingers moved to wave ciao, like someone with osteoarthritis who when the weather changes feels the stabbing aches as if pricked by thistle spines. Meanwhile now that death went away I breathe a big soothing sigh, close my eyes to remember the things I have to remember, and I start writing but slowly, because if I proceed slowly like this, life will last me a little longer, and that’s good too.
SMALL TOWN: A COMMON STORY OF HEROIN

by Vanessa Roghi

translated by Anne Milano Appel

from
PICCOLA CITTÀ: UNA STORIA COMUNE DI EROINA
Prologue

“I want you to know, as you read me, precisely who I am and where I am and what is on my mind.”

When I was a child, there was a drawing on a wall in my father’s house. It depicted several ostriches in profile, at sunset. Their silhouettes emerged from an inscription that I learned by heart, even though I didn’t understand it: “The small town had always been no joke for its inhabitants, just as it will always be no joking matter. And the hours held the magical tenor of boredom, of incapacity.”

The small town was Grosseto and the ostriches its inhabitants. So I thought then. Or maybe not. Maybe the ostriches were my father and his buddies who had written and drawn on that wall. The incapacity was theirs. And the sand was heroin. But I was a child, I didn’t know anything about incapacity, or heroin, and I chose to think that the ostriches were the others, not my father.

Of course, there was no doubt that the small town was Grosseto. Grosseto, in the middle of the Maremma, on the outskirts of the World: Kansas City, as Luciano Bianciardi had described it, but I didn’t know that then either.

So this is the story of the small town, its ostriches and a little girl.

But it is also the story of so many small towns, transformed by the economic boom, ravaged by heroin, of ostriches that let time flow by until all the little girls became women and the little boys men, and that still haven’t come to terms with some elements of their story.

I will try to do that here, insofar as it concerns me personally.
Fifteen

“Do you curse where you come from?”

When they arrest my father for heroin use and dealing, I am 15 years old. It’s 1987. I’m in my fifth year at Grosseto’s only humanities high school.

A provincial high school, attended by children of lower middle class families as well as those of the city’s professionals. I remember that November morning, the milky light filtering through the ancient halls of the Carducci-Ricasoli lyceum, the feeling of disassociation in performing the same acts, seeing the same faces, listening to the same phrases. When they arrest him, I don’t say anything at school. I can’t find the words to do it, I don’t think I even tried to find them, it’s something that happens, and that’s that.

Irma: “Maybe you should describe how lonely you were when you were 15 and you couldn’t share this experience with your schoolmates. I went to talk to the professors the day after Mauro’s arrest, and it’s lucky you were good in school otherwise you would have been ostracized.” But no one ever ostracized me then, either at school or anywhere else. The solidly united city supported me, political militancy gave me strength, my young age saved me.

When things happen to me I don’t know how to recount them. And besides this is something you don’t talk about. It’s not even a fact worthy of history. It’s an inconsequential ignoble story. How can you? “Is Vanessa crazy telling this story?” a researcher asks after I suggested the idea of a social history of heroin in a seminar.

I phone Nanni Balestrini, I’m looking for a way to shape this story, so as not to seem crazy even to those who are stupid and unquestioning, a way to transform the life of a generation into a research topic: “Hello? Good morning, my name is Vanessa Roghi, I’m a historian, am I speaking with Nanni Balestrini? Hello, yes, forgive me for disturbing you, you gave me your number, can I ask you a question? See, I’m doing some research on the history of heroin in Italy, I wanted to ask you if we might meet to talk about it.”

NB: “Sorry, on what?”

Me: “Heroin, drugs. A historical study, but also autobiographical. I would like to talk to you about the diffusion of heroin in the Movement.”

NB: “No idea, I wouldn’t know, I don’t remember, I’ve never had the experience.”

Me: “Well no, of course not, I certainly don’t mean you, only that your attentive eye, and the things you’ve written, well, they make me think that maybe you’ve formed some idea.”

NB: “No, look, I really haven’t.”

Me: “Not even to have a few words?”

NB: “We’ll talk again, maybe something will occur to me and I’ll tell you.”
Me: “All right thank you.”

Thirty years to think about it. Maybe that’s what I should name these notes. Many people, in fact, responded in the same way: “No idea, I wouldn’t know, I don’t remember.” Or, they simply don’t respond to my emails, letting requests for appointments drop into the void. The only exception being priests and cops. Because the history of heroin in Italy is a history of assistance or crime. Never a social or cultural history, and it becomes political only when it’s about conspiracies, “Oh, you’re writing a book about heroin? Then you’ll certainly talk about Blue Moon.” No.

Yet in Vogliamo tutto, perhaps one of the best books among the infinite accounts of that period, Nanni Balestrini dealt with drug addicts, from the very beginning. That’s why I want to talk to him. Why now after so many years has it become a topic of so little interest? Aldo Cazzullo’s response to a Corriere della Sera reader following the death of a young woman who died of an overdose seemed extremely significant to me: “I clearly remember the day when, as an intern at La Stampa’s Italian news desk (thirty years ago), I was given the instruction not to run notices about overdose deaths anymore: there were too many of them, and they were no longer news. A curtain of silence fell over drugs.”¹ It’s true, a curtain of silence descended over the discussion of drug addictions, partly because of those who stopped talking about it. As if the problem no longer existed, indeed had never existed, since the silence also applies to historians.

No systematic study, not even, for example, among the many volumes released to mark the anniversary of 1977; too little data and not very informative. An inexplicable memory lapse, especially because by now in France or in the Anglo-Saxon world the history of heroin has become part of the social and cultural annals and not just of criminal accounts.

You have to start somewhere. A few years ago, discussing Benedetta Tobagi’s book about her father, Come mi batte forte il tuo cuore, I suggested starting with Francesco De Gregori’s lines that have stayed with me all my life: “Bene se mi dici che ci sono anche dei fiori in questa storia...”—well, if you tell me there are also flowers in this story... Exchange flowers with one another, wherever you find them along the way.

Benedetta Tobagi writes: “To come face to face with suffering is very frightening, having a close brush with it you learn to keep it at a distance, choosing long, circuitous paths. Often to avoid obstacles, you stray too far from the path of your soul and end up getting lost... I didn’t know where to start.”² For years, I didn’t known where to start either.

I wish I could do as Marguerite Yourcenar suggests, detach myself from everything, eliminating, as far as possible, all the ideas, the feelings that have accumulated, layer by layer, between the time narrated and us now; and, at the same time, prudently us—or use only as preparatory studies—the possibility of associating and deriving new gradually formulated perspectives. Requiring myself “to ignore the shadows that have subsequently been cast on the
story to be told.”³

But, replies Emmanuel Carrère: “I am convinced that the shadow subsequently cast will always be seen, that the tricks with which one tries to erase it will always be seen, and that it is therefore better to accept it and present it.”⁴

My shadow is the one I am casting. My shadow, here it is.

Sixteen

“Now I feel like talking about my shoes.”
—Natalia Ginzburg, Lettera a Silvio Micheli, 1946.

I was born in Orbetello, on the lagoon, below Mount Argentario, on October 4, 1972. At the time my mother is 19 years old, almost the age my daughter is now. My father is 23. They are two separate figures, never together in memory, but in my heart as a child I wish that they were only one, like the Pictor tree.⁵

The tree named Pictor was happy and did not count the years that passed. Many years went by before he realized that his happiness was not perfect. Only slowly did he learn to see with the eyes of a tree. At last he could see, and he became sad. He saw in fact that around him, in paradise, most of the creatures transformed quite often, that everything actually flowed along in an enchanted stream of perennial transformations. He saw flowers become precious stones or fly away like shimmering hummingbirds. He saw more than one tree around him vanish suddenly: one had dissolved
into a spring, another had become a crocodile, yet another swam around, cool and content, with great enjoyment, like a cheerful darting fish, inventing new diversions in new forms. Elephants took on the look of rocks, giraffes the appearance of flowers. He, on the other hand, the Pictor tree, always remained the same, he could no longer transform himself.⁶

Favola d'amore (a love story or Pictor's Metamorphoses)⁷ is published by the press Stampa alternativa in 1981. I'm nine years old and my mother reads it to me at night before I go to sleep. Herman Hesse wrote it. Siddhartha is a book that everyone has read. Pictor's story is Hesse, but for children. For children of the seventies.

I'm a child of the seventies.

My mother takes me to the seaside in her Mini, she is 25 years old, we listen to Sally, the song by Fabrizio De André: "Dite a mia madre che non tornerò," tell my mother I won't be back. She tickles me, she asks me, laughing: "Why won't you come back?"

It's 1977. Mama is 24 years old and has a cassette that plays, Disperato erotico stomp. It's the song I listen to most often, with a girlfriend, in Porto Hercules. We laugh when Lucio Dalla utters the word puttana, whore. We know the song conceals a secret, but we don't get it. So, at five years old, I sing erotic phrases without understanding a thing: “Before climbing the stairs I stopped / To gaze at a star / I’m very worried / The silence is making my glans swell / I took the stairs three at a time / lay down on the couch / closed my eyes a little and / My hand started moving slowly.” It's summer and I go with papa to London: jumbo jet, the queen's jubilee, a deluxe restaurant where I play, sitting on the carpet, and cry when they bring me a banana which they set on fire. My father is 28 years old.

Another summer, the summer of 1978, I'm at Marina di Grosseto with my grandparents, I spend my afternoons in front of the television because “now it's time to take a nap.” Deafening cicadas, the pinewood, the news of papa's death and the interruption of the television programs. Despair.

I start elementary school, I live mostly at my grandmother's, I begin keeping a diary, I write every day from the time I'm six until I turn 19.

"Today I went with papa to the Festa dell’Unità,” “today I had fun at school,” “today I went to my cousin Silvia's and we had a good time,” “today was a very bad day because mama was sick.”

Mama gives me an encyclopedia called Io e gli altri (Me and the Others): It's for doing research,” she tells me. I don't have to do research, though, because mine is an experimental full-time school, I stay there until four in the afternoon, I have no homework, and we spend an hour a day in the labs.

The labs are where you go at 11 o'clock, and every month we have to choose one: there's music, typography, manual activities and the library, which means that I go and read the “Corriere dei piccoli,” or
Silver Skates, or Little Women, which I borrow over and over again, or Daddy-Long-Legs. In typography we print the school newspaper, in manual activities we do a bunch of things but I remember crocheting because one year, with the teacher, we join together the squares made by all the boys and girls of the school and produce a beautiful, colorful blanket that is auctioned at the local street market at the end of the year. Papa buys it for me.

Full-time school is a recent innovation and labs are not yet very common, but I don’t know that.

At school, during class hours, we read Mario Lodi’s Cipi and the teacher makes us observe the vegetable garden that we have planted in the yard; in winter we all think that those sparrows on the black clods are hungry and we crumble up our afternoon snacks. Then Mario Lodi himself comes in person, when I’m already in middle school, and I am still so moved by his stories that when they make me read a welcome message I burst into tears.

Mario Lodi is a teacher and he wrote a beautiful book. It’s called C’è speranza se questo accade al Vho (There’s Hope If This Happens at the Vho). He writes: “It’s cold in the classroom without the sun and we went outside to warm up a bit, but the sunny area is scant and always overcrowded. So when we returned to class the kids thought up this math problem: in our schoolyard there is very little sun and during recess we children go there to warm up. Today at 11:15, that is, when there’s the most sun, Stefania, Luciano and Claudio measured the area: the space was triangular, the base 9.40 meters long and the height 58 cm. Find the area of the sunny spot we have to warm up in.” I, unknowingly, attend the school that he also imagined for me, the full-time school on Viale Giotto. Mario Lodi is not alone, he is one of the many teachers who after the war roll up their sleeves and decide that education under democracy begins right there among the benches of elementary school classrooms. Find the area of a sunny strip. Take everyday life and turn it into a math problem. Make it worthy of being measured, written, recounted. My teacher does that, too. That’s why she makes us read Cipi.

(The small town even has time to criticize full-time school: you don’t study there, you don’t learn to study there, full-time is for the children of those who don’t want to take care of their children).

My nonna Isolina is like Cipi’s mother, she sees to feeding me, dressing me, teaches me a love made of tangible acts, making my bed, preparing my lunch, ironing my clothes. And taking me to the country on her bicycle, that countryside that she calls the Land, with a metonymy that teaches me the span of duration, seasonal time, something that seems static because it has always flowed slowly.

At the beach she keeps me strictly within the “safe waters” line. She can’t swim, I at 10 years old am already taller than the confining stake.

My grandmother tells me: “giudizio diede fuoco al pagliaio,” judgment ignited the haystack;
“a dar da bere a un ciuco erano in tre quando ebbe sete bevve da se,”
three men gave the donkey water, when he was thirsty he drank on
his own;

“chi non ha cervello abbia gambe,” those who have no brains
should have legs;

“chi vole Cristo se lo preghi chi vole il pane se l’affetti,” those who
want Christ should pray, those who want bread should slice it;

“Vane se ci perdiamo qui non ci trova neanche Cristo ai conti,” Vane,
if we get lost here, Christ won’t even find us at the reckoning;

“studia, pensa solo a studiare,” study, don’t think about anything
but studying.

I listen to her. Partly because she’s always there, whereas papa
and mama aren’t. Too young, too caught up in a life that is theirs
alone, they make me wait, in front of the phone, outside the school,
as meanwhile I grow up and day after day learn to break away from
them, from this waiting.

Seventeen

“People misinformed
Or bigger liars than the devil
Say that you were born
Under a cabbage leaf!”
—Sergio Endrigo, Gianni Rodari,
Mi ha fatto la mia mamma (My mama made me),1974.

Among the members of the Barbapapà family, Barbottina is the
one who reads. In her room there are two posters, that of Angela
Davis and one of “The Struggle Continues,” icon of the May 1968
events in France.

An appeal to girls growing up in these years to keep up the struggle
and study.

I read, I read a lot. I read everything.

It may be because at my school, as I said, there is a library where
I can find peace and quiet, and even read the comics, Corriere
dei piccoli and Asterix. It could be because when I’m around ten I
become chubby and I’m ashamed and withdraw into reading (on one
seaside vacation with mama in Sardinia I remember reading David
Copperfield in a week, shut away in the house so I wouldn’t have to go
to the beach).

It may be because nonna, who only finished second grade, reads,
mama reads. And so, I read too.
Each generation learns to relate the feelings it experiences with the fairy tales it reads. Italo Calvino writes that fairy tales "are the catalog of the potential destinies of men and women, especially for that stage in life when destiny is formed, i.e., youth...." The stage of life when destiny is shaped.

[...]

Sealing the encounter of me the child with the adult world is Linus: "Translating from the cro-Marcusian and the Straussian Leviticus you get: ‘Linus is not a revolutionary magazine. It is content to ironize on customs and perhaps also on social structures in an attempt to entertain.’" That’s how editor and journalist Giovanni Gandini, in 1968, explains what Linus aims to be, the magazine that is a symbol of the decade that is about to arrive.

On the cover Linus almost always has a character from Peanuts, sometimes from Altan. Horror and delight. Cipputi and Charlie Brown. Because there is that intensity in those covers, "that horror alternated with enchantment, and often they were fused in an ambiguity that consumed me," though I, as a child, was unable to understand why. Michele Mari wrote that about the covers of the Urania series, and it’s the same for me.

So I read Linus, not skipping a word, and, alongside Lucy, Schroeder, Snoopy and Woodstock, I discover the comics of Milo Manara, of Guido Crepax. Linus is certainly not a publication designed for children, and the educational short circuit that must have resulted in those who, like me, read it around the age of 7, is yet to be studied.

Thus through the letters to Linus and the comics of Frigidaire I discover that drugs exist and that they are a problem.

But I don’t associate it with the hookah, with my father.

Drugs are in the comics.

Drugs are the thing they put in the candy they give you in front of the school.

Drugs are infectious, like a disease.

Drugs, along with kidnappings, are the nightmare of normal mothers and fathers: when I leave school I am watchful, a child’s fate is to end up kidnapped and drugged by candy.

If I were to escape this fate, there is the atomic bomb, which will be dropped during the third world war that is imminent, Ronald Reagan said so: that if the Russians don’t stop, that’s how it will end.

The decade comes to a close, for me, with the discovery of Japanese cartoons. The anime series Candy Candy airs for the first time in Italy in 1980. Nothing will ever be the same again.

And so, year after year, song after song, cartoon after cartoon, I become a young girl.
I write in my diary every day, but when they arrest my father for heroin use and dealing and I am now fifteen years old, I don’t write a single line about him because the thing I care most about is the boy I like. It’s 1987.

I’m in my fifth year at Grosseto’s only humanities high school.
Author’s Endnotes


Translator’s Notes

b The story, “Pictor’s Metamorphoses,” is found in the anthology Pictor’s Metamorphoses and Other Fantasies (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982, Picador 2003). Written in 1922, several months after Hesse completed Siddhartha, the fairy tale-love story was inspired by the woman who was to become his second wife.
c The Vho refers to an elementary school in Vho di Piadena, Cremona, where teacher Mario Lodi started teaching in 1956, and began experimenting with alternative methods of instruction.
d Barbapapà is a 1970 children’s picture book by Annette Tison and Talus Taylor, originally written in French and later translated into many languages. Barbapapà is both the title character and the name of his blob-shaped family who can turn into anything they want.
e Italo Calvino, Introduction to Italian Folktales, Einaudi, 1956, George Martin translator, p. xviii (paperback).
THE BOOK OF LIGHTNING
by Matteo Trevisani
translated by Anne Milano Appel

*from* LIBRO DEI FULMINI
“It is the thunderbolt that steers the course of all things.”
Heraclitus¹

1

Fabled Rome

The year of my death had started well. I had managed to adjust and step back from some painful ambitions, and had diligently begun to go along with the flow of what was happening. I was working at a small publishing house that put out books on spirituality and philosophy. I liked the job and it paid the rent on a room in an apartment full of books in the San Giovanni area. If I were willing to risk falling into the garden and leaned out far enough, I could see a section of the cathedral from the living room window.

For some time now I’d been wandering around Rome, alone, to discover things that everyone’s memory had forgotten. I recently wrote about it for a magazine. I loved abandoned museums and churches that no longer had a history, obliterated Roman temples and the inscriptions that can be seen on the walls of the Domus Tiberiana, on the Palatine Hill. I had lived in Rome for more than ten years, but just as you fall in love with your best friend, who in the end is practically a sister, I had begun to marvel at Rome as if no other city had ever existed in the world.

I could never have imagined that while I felt like I was living a quiet life for the first time, without any rude jolts to bewilder the mind, fate was preparing a journey for me. A journey back through the world of the dead.

All that remained to me of the place where I was born were hazy suggestions of a silty beach that could be considered a marsh, memories of a happy enough childhood and the provincial illusion that no other place will ever be good enough for someone who has been accustomed to cleansing his thoughts in the sea.

I left the Marche at the age of eighteen to study philosophy in Rome. The first time I saw the city, I had the impression that I had always known it. I truly thought that a city was the highest human form, the space where man’s spirit is best expressed. And in my thoughts the city was not distinct from nature, but rather an extension of it. The columns of the temples were the trees of sacred woods, its piazzas were lakes, its narrow streets the impenetrable paths of enchanted mountains. For this reason, the one city worthy of that name could only be Rome.

My father had driven me down on the Autostrada, leaving me there to live alone in a place that had no seaports or fishing boats bobbing along its docks, no lighthouse to illuminate the fog of winter nights.

I had grown up resigned to the idea of having little history and little past. My entire genealogy was summed up and squandered in
the closed vowels of my grandmother’s dialect, in a certain hardness of heart, in old foreign fishermen who came from the port like lost souls, and in the faces my parents and brothers wore when they looked at the sea, the same expression I tried to assume, but with a frenzied, affected fear, as if I did not know what awaited me and especially whether I was worthy of it.

Rome was completely the opposite: it was glorious history, the influential past, the axis on which the doors that opened the world’s future had turned for almost a millennium. Yet I was unable to discern a clear difference between those two places. It was as though they were able to dialogue within me in a continuous dialectic, talking about what they missed, and the peoples who had inhabited those lands prior to history.

What I remember of that first trip is the castle, nestled among the maritime pines that surround Rome and grow along its outlying streets. The kind where you wander along distractedly, looking briefly at ugly gray churches in the midst of abandoned gravel parking lots, hardware stores and police stations: illegal landfills and suburbs where in the early morning weary men drive old cars to go to work in the outer reaches beyond the perimeter road. I learned to recognize that type of landscape, and over time it became familiar to me. I came to know that of the many languages that a city uses to communicate its desires, its emptiness, its hopes with you, that of the landscape is the most immediate and yet the most difficult.

I wondered if Rome still had a destiny coupled with it, and whether that destiny would intersect with mine. Glancing at the branching limbs of the pines, I wondered whether that destiny was something I should wish for or if it was simply part of my calling: I was not yet familiar with the legends surrounding the city’s gardens and the crypts of its villas, nor with the altars of lost deities that fearful engineers sometimes find and quickly bury again beneath the ground floors of the old center’s palazzos, like tombstones silently placed on things that must remain unspoken.

I felt like I was sneaking into the city like a thief. I soon learned, however, that when you become part of it, escaping Rome’s destiny turns out to be impossible.

I had realized from my first explorations, enchanted and irritated at the same time by the promptness with which it can become inaccessible, that Rome is a city made of flesh and blood, of no particular order, of jumbled aggregations that make sense only when you learn to have a point of view. In Rome a point of view is everything. For years you can just go on studying its contiguities, trace its outlines with your finger from the belvederes, and marvel at the vistas, at the extreme complexity of the architecture, at the perfect lines that expanding districts have notched on the contours of the hills.

But then something happens. As you are riding along the usual road for the umpteenth time on your motorbike, a different angle in the terrain, the slanting light striking the facades of churches you’ve never seen before, the birds wheeling around in circles make you
grasp for a split second that you are not really in that time and place, but experiencing that moment and another concurrently.

I wandered aimlessly, erratically, letting myself be dazed by the number of things that in all those years I had looked at and yet had never seen. The niches to the Madonna, the spires, the grotesque masks at certain art libraries, the red bricks surrounded by reinforced concrete, the rosy granite of the obelisks. The articles I wrote were pretty much an excuse; it seemed to me that Rome was the only thing I might attain, and I kept tapping at her doors, asking her permission to enter, praying that she would let me see what I was certain she revealed to the chosen ones. Subconsciously I was praying that I would be admitted to that multi-faceted secret, in order to fathom the truth as one fathoms one’s existence, one’s nature or one’s destiny.

This was what made anyone who really saw Rome a kind of initiate to ancient cults: he experienced the transition from a condition in which reality is simply that which is apparent, to a state of dual reality, whose meanings are like anchors aiding those who want to get lost to lose themselves completely. I wondered how I would know when I had become one of them, one of those individuals who walk the streets and are aware of what they see.

Would I be capable of recognizing that which is invisible, and consequently lose myself in Rome’s secrets without sinking and vanishing forever before the grandeur of the absolute, without going mad?

Messages

One September afternoon, as I was walking in the opposite direction from the flow of tourists who, faces flushed, were retracing their steps on their way back to their hotels and rented rooms, I came across a distinctive, formidable church that I had wanted to visit during all my years at university, but that for one reason or another I had never found time to stop and see: the church of Saints Domenico and Sisto. Its verticality towering over Via Panisperna had always simultaneously frightened and fascinated me.

Riding along the street beside it, I had noticed that the small door at the top of the staircase was open. So without thinking, I had parked the motorbike below the elevated park of Villa Aldobrandini, Rome’s hanging garden, whose neglected beauty is concealed behind the high walls that drop steeply down to Via Nazionale. The rugged stairs rewarded my effort with a spectacular view of the Torre delle Milizie at sunset.

I passed the large stained glass partition that divides the entrance from the single nave with its marble decorations, the sculpture Noli me tangere, and the ancient velvet drapes. The interior of the church was packed with worshippers attending Mass.

The last pews were full of men in bad shape, wrapped in thick
blankets, and twitching in the grip of strange muscle convulsions, their eyes unseeing. As they flailed about, a few elderly women walked among them and lay a hand on their foreheads, as if to soothe them. The priest, a hoary, bald man, stood at the pulpit intoning words that I could not make out clearly: from time to time the faithful responded to the invocations with a guttural response, unsteady and agitated at the same time.

I listened to the priest for a few minutes until the part of all masses that causes vertigo, the point at which the centurion says he is not worthy to be present at the table with the Lord, but asks that he only heal his servant. Lord, I am not worthy to partake of your Communion, but only say the word and your servant shall be healed. At that moment a cry rose from a boy who had fallen to the ground, a few feet from me. He was young, with long, black hair stuck to his forehead and dark eyes that stared blankly. His hands writhing and clutching the brown hospital blanket revealed his disability. I assumed this must be a healing mass, like the kind that had been common throughout Europe until it was decided to put an end to that superstition.

I repeated the words of the centurion to myself. I had turned thirty a few months earlier, and there in the church I felt the full weight of that mid-life age. The comparison between my years and the men lying there was frightening, and I felt the need to get out of there immediately. It was almost instinctive for me to make the sign of the cross, but I resisted the temptation. As if I knew I wasn’t worthy of that symbol of sacrifice.

Outside the panoramic view and the fresh air were a balm. I felt like I could breathe for the first time.

As I went down the stairs, my cell phone vibrated. I was hoping for a message from a girl I’d been deeply in love with and maybe still loved, though I’d split up with her some time ago with no hard feelings and much sadness. It wasn’t her. The number was an unfamiliar one and the message merely said: go up to the terrace of the Tabularium, tomorrow after sunset.

I thought it might be a joke, someone who wanted to make fun of what I wrote, but that would be odd, I had never received any indication of animosity. Then I thought it might be another girl. I considered the names of women who had meant something to me, but I told myself that everyone knew me well enough to know that any such tricks were pointless. I went down the steps of the church, climbed a little way up Via Panisperna, got on my motorbike and headed back to San Giovanni.

The sky edging toward the blue hour and the wind whipping across my heated face calmed me down. I thought then that an age can go by differently depending on where you are, and as I struggled to keep the motorbike steady on the tram tracks of Piazza Vittorio, I imagined Rome’s youth, when decisions were part of nature and everything flowed from the city, an ascendant torrent that couldn’t help but course along, overflowing itself. This was what Rome’s youth had been, water spilling over from a jug that was too full.

And me, how much of my thirties was I wasting? I had no
answer. I rode down the long avenue to the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, and when I reflected on what that place had been, a mountain covered with hallowed ground, a repository of relics and nothing more, I felt as though I were at the end of something. It was a dark thought, but also liberating.

When I got home, I tried to remember everything I knew about the Tabularium, the magnificent terrace that overlooks the Fori Imperiali. The first time I had gone up there I’d been awed by the beauty of what I saw. I decided that I would show up at the scheduled time, even if things didn’t work out, I could take a little spin around the Capitoline Museums.

The next day, around seven o’clock in the evening, I rode the motorbike to Torre Argentina and parked just off the square: from there I would walk to the Campidoglio. I paused for a moment in front of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. No one knows or notices that the statue is a copy. Its double, the authentic one, is in a magnificent room inside the museum. I could hear the evening traffic of Piazza Venezia behind me and some dampness in the air after the September rain that had drenched the marble sidewalks and darkened the streets. It was just past sunset, the piazzale was practically deserted. When I felt ready, I went in.

At the entrance I pretended as usual to have forgotten my journalist’s ID, but the guy waiting for the machine to spit out the ticket wouldn’t have paid attention anyway. Entering the museum, I came across only a few tourists with cameras and audio guides, their faces dazed by all they had seen. I could understand it: taken all together Rome can be disconcerting, at worst nauseating.

Once inside, I stored my bag and coat in a locker, taking only a notebook and pen as I always did to jot down what I saw, or to try and copy the inscriptions and figures carved on the marbles. I then headed briskly towards the tunnel connecting the two wings. The guard, a middle-aged woman who was chatting through a grate with her colleague at the museum bookshop, recognized me and waved. I smiled in response and set out along the stone underpass that acts as a passageway between Palazzo Nuovo and Palazzo dei Conservatori.

I was quite familiar with the panoramic view of the Foro Antico that can be seen from there, as well as the history of the State Archives, the bronze plaques that were once kept there, decrees, peace treaties, declarations of war. It was from those tabulae that the Tabularium, the place that preserved them, got its name. Situated above the Forum like a precious stone safely set among the temples, it had the task of guarding the most precious treasure of Rome: the memory of its past, which is essentially the reproducible archetype of its future.

I checked the message again to make sure I wasn’t dreaming, because when you’re alone in a museum, life acquires uncertain contours: Go up to the terrace of the Tabularium, tomorrow after sunset. I kept wondering who the sender might be. It occurred to me that a few months earlier I had spoken to the old priest at the Church of
Sant’Anastasia about a certain statue of a Madonna, which he’d had removed from the courtyard of the church and placed in the crypt. He wouldn’t tell me why, but his feverish look had made such a sharp impression on me that at that moment I thought of him: the text I had received was the kind of message that a person like him could undoubtedly have sent. Maybe to play a trick on someone as gullible as he imagined I was, maybe because he had viewed my curiosity as something more than a youthful love for ancient things.

I walked through the tunnel without looking at the funerary urns and the inscriptions to the god Silvano. I turned right and climbed the last steps finding it difficult to breathe and struggling to relax. I felt my heart straining, as if I were expecting the arrival of someone who frightened me. The terrace was deserted. The station where the guard who protected Rome’s most ancient panorama usually dozed was empty. Everything was shrouded in a kind of faint mist, like a foggy mountain landscape, waiting for the sun to unveil it. As I went to look out over the parapet, I felt like I was entering an unfamiliar space. I got up my nerve, put my hands on the cold, recently painted railing, and stared out.

The view was the usual one: the Arch of Settimius Severus, built in the third century to commemorate the Parthian victories, and one of the four accesses to the Forum; the surviving columns of the temple of Saturn, illuminated by large floodlights whose glare blinded the eye; the Via Sacra, lit up by unnatural lightning; the three columns of the temple of the Dioscuri and, in back, part of the Colosseum, Rome’s ancient death machine, which turned the many gears necessary to resolve the eternal conflict between the government and the people. A large crescent moon emerged from the vaporous mist of clouds against the indigo of the sky.

Something inside me began to quiver, impatient and charged. I nervously began pacing the entire length of the balcony, occasionally glancing at the rooms that opened all around it. I was completely alone. I went back to gazing at the view below, and I thought I could make out gray shadows moving in the Forums. I knew I was dangerously close to letting my imagination run away with me and mistaking the shapes of cats or birds for things that could not be explained; nevertheless I stared at the vast empty space in front of me, waiting for something to fill it. As I waited, I thought about the life I had had up to that time, about the kind of man I had been, about the times that I had been happy, and those when I had not allowed others close to me to be happy, out of selfishness or malice. I recalled the times I had been in love, and how that means being willing to vanish into the thoughts and desires of the one beside us. The feeling of not being able to really touch the world had always been with me: along with the fear of being destined to only approach the borders of passion, to only come close to success, to retain what little good is left in a story once the book is finished. I didn’t consider myself a better person than I really was, but it occurred to me that if Anubis himself were to come and ask to weigh my heart against his feather, maybe, if I were lucky, I could hope for essential parity. I also...
thought that good people don’t need luck.

Something told me honestly who I was, who I had thought I was, and recounted all the mistakes I had made. For more or less no reason, I felt a great compassion for the person I had been up to that time, and my eyes brimmed with tears. I felt a deep weariness in my shoulders and legs, and thought I’d better leave that place and forget it all.

All at once the floodlights went out. I clung instinctively to one of the parapets, and my gaze was drawn by a small fiery flash that had flared up in the distance, below the columns of the temple of the Càstori. I was reminded of ancient torches, wooden staffs whose ends were covered with pitch and rags. They could burn for hours without being extinguished. The flame grew to three, the first one must have passed the fire to the others. I was probably observing a ceremony, but I couldn’t make out the shapes of those who were officiating it, nor the significance of their movements; yet something about that strange dance was familiar to me.

The three torches started moving in circles, revolving around something. With only the moon for light I could not see what they were pivoting around, what the fulcrum of that ritual was. I was scared, but I couldn’t move a muscle, I couldn’t go closer or run away. The only thing I was able to do was take a picture on my cell phone.

When a person dressed in white came out of the darkness and stood in the middle of the torches, they stopped moving. Then, one by one, they went to the figure in the center, as if to offer a sacrifice, or a sign of benediction. At some point I got the feeling that I was no longer alone on that balcony. I glanced behind me looking for something that might confirm my sensation, but when I didn’t see anyone, the sense of solitude came back stronger than before. The torches resumed their circling for a little while longer, then they went out. A swirl of dust rose in the air and when it settled again, the figures were gone. The sky had turned clear again, and clouds no longer covered the moon, whose watery light once more illuminated the marbles of the timeworn columns.

Then, suddenly, the torches flared up again, and at that instant I heard the footsteps of someone approaching the terrace. I saw that it was the guard. I must have had a strange expression on my face because instead of greeting me as he usually did, he asked me if I was all right. I wondered if he was aware of what I had just witnessed, but I couldn’t manage to say a word and hurriedly headed for the exit. I got my things from the locker and rushed outside without meeting anyone’s eyes. When I was out the door, I checked the time on my cell phone: it had only been ten minutes since I first arrived on the terrace, though it felt like it had been much longer. I sat down on the damp steps of the Campidoglio to try and figure it out, and turned to the bell tower. The clock showed a different time. According to the hands that moved slowly over the Roman numerals, I must have been in the museum for more than an hour. I thought maybe I had dreamed it all. But I had the picture on my phone. I looked at it again, and ran my fingers over the screen, as if it were possible to touch the faint
glimmer of those torches. So what I had seen had really happened.

    Why, I then wondered, had anyone wanted me to know about that ceremony at the Forum? What did it mean?

    All of a sudden it was not only the streets and localities and structures that held secrets, but also my own thoughts, the things I knew, the relationships I had had, and what I remembered about other people. On my way home, I looked up and saw the church from the day before, towering and frightening as always. The same moon I saw from the Forums was now slowly disappearing behind its cross.

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¹ From the treatise *On Nature*. Taken from *Fragments of Heraclitus*, translated by John Burnet (1920), Fragment 64.

Translator’s note to the editors who selected the excerpt:

Since the passage chosen does not mention lightning, readers may want to know that the book's title is related to the cult of lightning, which will become clearer in Chapter 3: *Fulgur Conditum Summanium*. See pp. 28/29:

“I had more luck with the inscription. Among the many meanings that the engraving could have, F C S was also an acronym for *Fulgur Conditum Summanium* and indicated the place where lightning had struck the earth. In ancient Rome lightning bolts were held in high regard as bearers of the gods’ will…” ("Ebbi maggior fortuna con la scritta. Tra i molti significati che quella dicitura poteva avere, F C S era anche l’acronimo di *Fulgur Conditum Summanium* e stava a indicare il luogo in cui un fulmine aveva colpito la terra. Nell’antica Roma le saette erano tenute in grande considerazione quali portatrici della volontà divina…”).
About the Authors

Andrea Esposito was born in Rome in 1980. His stories have appeared in various magazines, including Prospektiva, Cadillac, L’inquieto, and Nuovi Argomenti. He was a finalist for the Premio Calvino for his novel, Voragine, published by Il Saggiatore. His second novel, Dominio, will be published in 2021.

Ilaria Gaspari was born in Milan in 1986. At 18, she moved to Pisa to study philosophy at the Scuola Normale. She then moved to Paris, where she wrote her doctoral thesis in French on the Theories of Passion and Self-consciousness in Spinoza and Pascal. During a stint at Valentino while writing her thesis, she started writing her first novel, Etica dell’acquario (Voland, 2015). She has subsequently published Ragioni e sentimenti (Sonzogno, 2018) and Lezioni di felicità (Einaudi, 2019), which was translated into several languages. Her forthcoming book will be published by Einaudi in 2021.

Francesco Longo was born in 1978 in Rome, where he now lives. He is the author of the travel book Il mare di pietra. Eolie o i 7 luoghi dello spirito (Laterza, 2009). In 2015, he edited Bernard Malamud’s Per me non esiste altro (minimum fax, 2015). His first novel, published in 2019 is Molto mossi gli altri mari (Bollati Boringhieri). He is a member of the editorial board of Nuovi Argomenti.

Eleonora Marangoni was born in Rome in 1983. She published the essay, Proust et la peinture Italienne (Michel de Maule, 2011) and Proust. I colori del tempo (Mondadori Electa, 2014). Her debut novel, Lux (Neri
Pozza, 2018), won the Neri Pozza and Opera Prima awards. In 2020, she published the illustrated essay, Viceversa. Il mondo visto di spalle with Johan & Levi, and, with Feltrinelli, E siccome lei, a collection of stories inspired by film characters played by Monica Vitti.

Paulo Pecere is Professor of History of Philosophy at the University of Roma Tre. He is the author of several scholarly publications—most recently the book Soul, Mind and Brain from Descartes to Cognitive Science (Springer, 2020)—and of the novels La vita lontana (LiberAria, 2018) and Risorge (Chiarelettere, 2019). He writes frequently for the magazine Il Tascabile and other publications. His latest book is the narrative essay Il dio che danza (Nottetempo, 2021).

Andrea Pomella was born in Rome in 1973. He writes for the cultural reviews, Doppiozero, and minima&moralia. His published novels include La misura del danno (Fernandel), Anni luce (Add Editore, long-listed for the Premio Strega), L'uomo che trema (Einaudi, winner of the Premio Napoli and the Premio Wendy) and I colpevoli (Einaudi). He teaches autobiographical writing at the Scuola del Libro in Rome.

Remo Rapino, born in Casalanguida (CH) in 1951, is a high-school philosophy teacher and former soccer player. He lives in Lanciano. His publications include Un cortile di parole (Carabba, 2006); Esercizi di ribellione (Carabba, 2012); and Vite di sguincio (Carabba, 2017). His poetry collections include: Terre rosse terre nere (Nobus, Chieti, 1999, Premio Bellezza); Ultima lettera ai Corinzi (Croetti, 2001, Premio Montale); Cominciamo dai salici (Croetti, 2002, Premio Betocchi); La profezia di Kavafis (Mobydick, 2003); and le Biciclette alle case di ringhiera (Tabula Fati, 2017). His novel, Vita morte e miracoli di Bonfiglio Liborio (minimum fax, 2019), won the Premio Campiello 2020.

Vanessa Roghi, a historian and documentarian, has written historical documentaries for Rai 3 for ten years. She has taught at the Università di Roma La Sapienza. For Laterza, she wrote La lettera sovversiva (2017), a book about Don Lorenzo Milani; and Lezione di fantastica (2020) about Gianni Rodari. Her research on the cultural history of heroin, which began with Piccola città. Una storia comune di eroina, will continue with a fellowship at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies of Columbia University.

Matteo Trevisani, born in San Benedetto del Tronto in 1986, is editorial director of Edizioni Tlon and editor of the literary magazine, Nuovi Argomenti. He has written, and continues to write, for la Lettura del Corriere della Sera, Internazionale, Rivista Studio, Sirene and L’indiscreto, among others. For Edizioni di Atlantide, he wrote Libro dei fulmini (2017, finalist for the Premio Berto; finalist for the Premio Biblioteche di Roma) and Libro del sole (2019, Premio Comisso Under 35).
About the Translators

Anne Milano Appel has translated works by a number of leading Italian authors for a variety of publishers in the U.S. and U.K. Her awards include the Italian Prose in Translation Award, the John Florio Prize for Italian Translation, and the Northern California Book Award for Translation.

Olivia E. Sears is founder of the Center for the Art of Translation and the journal Two Lines, and her translations of Italian women poets have been published widely. Forthcoming translations include Ardengo Soffici’s poetry volume Bif: Simultaneities and Lyric Chemisms (World Poetry Books, 2020).

Book Synopses

Abyss

Voragine

At the edge of a besieged, ruined city—a city that is yesterday and tomorrow, here and somewhere else—lives Giovanni. His house sits on land scorched by the freezing cold in a wasted suburb slumped on the ruins of a Roman aqueduct near an abandoned railway. This is the house where Giovanni lives, and his father and brother die. It is the house Giovanni is thrown out of to begin his wanderings through tunnels, ruins filled with dogs, carcasses of cars, and frightened men. Abyss presents a metaphysical landscape, an apocalypse of wreckage. It is the debut of Andrea Esposito, a narrator who reveals a ferocity of both organism and language, telling the dark tale of a past in ruin, a millennium in decay, and an orphaned present.

Ethics of an Aquarium

L’etica dell’acquario

In her first novel, Ethics of an Aquarium, Ilaria Gaspari has written a story of love and death, avoiding clichés about the fear of growing up trapped by habits, the secret anguish hidden in memories, and human solitude. The protagonist, Gaia, is beautiful, egocentric and unhappy. One November day, she returns to the city of her youthful studies after an absence of ten years. In Pisa, nothing seems to have changed, but in fact, everything has. Gaia reconnects with her old friends and her lover from her university days. But now, the passing years have come between them, as well as the death of a classmate, Virginia, who died under uncertain circumstances.
The inquiry into her mysterious suicide unfolds in the streets of the city and the dormitories of the Normal School, bringing long-repressed memories and obsessions to light.

**Other Seas Are Rough**  
*Molto mossi gli altri mari*

*Other Seas Are Rough* unfolds like a perfect map of nostalgia, telling a love story composed of silences—a love that develops amid automated sprinklers and manicured hedges, fueled by canoe and bicycle rides, and lived between the ping pong table and Guido’s splendid swimming pool. It is a love shaped by glowing sunsets and by the summertime rituals of a place suffused with melancholy. The golden light of September pours out of the writing itself—a marine light that casts the long, menacing shadows of the passage from adolescence to adulthood. Francesco Longo’s short novel has the sweep of a classic that takes us to that special age in which all Italians experience eternity for three months of every year—from June to September—when summer finally flings open the doors to the desires that have lain dormant all winter long.

**Lux**

Tom is a young Italian-English architect from a good family who lives in London and travels frequently for work. He runs a successful lighting design studio and for almost a year has been involved with Ottie, a driven chef with a seven-year-old son, Martin. But Tom lives entirely on the surface: shy and insecure, he lets life go by without giving it much thought. His memories of a past love for Sophie are a constant, tangible presence, casting their light on everything around him. An unusual inheritance from an eccentric uncle forces Tom to break out of his daily routine. A trip to an island in southern Italy, a fascinating, rundown hotel, and an unexpected weekend give him the perfect opportunity to look at things from a different point of view, and finally settle his scores with the past.

**The Distant Life**  
*La vita lontana*

*The Distant Life* follows the childhood and adolescence of twins Marzio and Livio. After their birth, their father Elio, husband of Dora (the narrator), abandons the family and moves to a Jainist monastery in India, where he becomes a leader of the religious community. Dora, a young substitute teacher, brings the twins up on her own. Although inspired by humanist ideals, their upbringing is filled with violent conflict. Livio, who is harassed by his peers, shows signs of distress. Marzio takes a job abroad, moving away for good. Dora becomes aware of the bourgeois myopia that has shaped her life. When Rajesh reveals Livio’s whereabouts to her, she flies to India to look after him. Having written many essays and academic articles, Pecere, in his debut novel, already reveals his mastery of literary language.

**Light Years**  
*Anni luce*

*Anni luce* is a short, intense coming of age novel, and Pearl Jam is its soundtrack, a mix of light and shadow that fascinated an entire generation. Andrea Pomella tells a story of passion for music, of a special friendship
with a drinking buddy, the guitar player Q, and of nighttime forays in search of cheap whiskey. He tells of a trip across Europe, and of an uncertain age and way of being in the world. And he does so with a literary voice based on the tones of another voice, that of Eddie Vedder, the lead vocalist of Pearl Jam, who accompanies the protagonist of this book all the way to the threshold of adulthood.

**The Life, Death and Miracles of Bonfiglio Liborio**

*Vita, morte e miracoli di Bonfiglio Liborio*

Liborio Bonfiglio is a strange madman, taunted by everyone, who lurks among the basalt slabs of an unnamed city. Yet through his twisted voice, the twentieth century passes before our eyes with the sweeping, joyous rhythm of a procession led by a marching band. For Liborio, everything turns into a story, a word, a cartwheel, a memory: school days, his apprenticeship in a barbershop, the brothels, the war and the Resistance, the factory job, the union, the madhouse. In a hilarious and melancholy chronicle of failures and comebacks, Liborio celebrates the carnival of the twentieth century—its dark side, but also its madness and its courage. Using his own unpredictable language—a mix of tradition and tightrope walking—Rapino, who won the Premio Campiello for this book, has written a novel that pulsates with a fragile, yet persistent humanity.

**Small Town: A Common Story of Heroin**

*Piccola città: una storia comune di eroina*

In this book, Vanessa Roghi weaves together a public and private journey using historical and memoir-style investigation and drawing on a vast selection of references and quotations to paint a picture of one of the most significant social, political and cultural phenomena of the second half of the twentieth century. It is impossible to talk about the ’80s without referring to heroin and HIV, words that instantly evoke that dramatic time. Words that surround themselves with an aura, a light, a depth, a vision—and that powerfully conjure up an unmistakable narrative universe. Roghi does this not only as a historian, but also by sharing her own personal story.

**The Book of Lightning**

*Libro dei fulmini*

_The Book of Lightning_, Matteo Trevisan’s debut novel, is a work that doesn’t fit the trends and fashions of contemporary Italian fiction. It is a journey that takes the reader on a dizzying immersion into the history and mystery of Rome. A journey that follows the footsteps of an ancient cult of lightning that makes its way through places where thunderbolts struck the city, to the kingdom of the underworld, and back to the land of the living—or at least those who think of themselves as living. With its harsh, rhythmic style, based on the arcane traditions of Roman fortune-telling and its plot derived from ancient Latin sources, _The Book of Lightning_ is both a story of death and rebirth that unfolds between two dimensions and two worlds and an original coming of age novel that combines history, philosophy and esotericism.
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Contents

5 | Preface
Annamaria Digiorgio
Director, Italian Cultural Institute of San Francisco

7 | Foreword
Marco Cassini
Publisher

15 | Andrea Esposito, Abyss
translated by Olivia E. Sears

27 | Ilaria Gaspari, Ethics of an Aquarium
translated by Anne Milano Appel

43 | Francesco Longo, Other Seas are Rough
translated by Olivia E. Sears

63 | Eleonora Marangoni, Lux [from “Part One: Things That Happen”]
translated by Olivia E. Sears

77 | Paolo Pecere, The Distant Life
translated by Olivia E. Sears

95 | Andrea Pomella, Light Years
translated by Olivia E. Sears

105 | Remo Rapino, The Life, Death and Miracles of Bonfiglio Liborio
translated by Anne Milano Appel

111 | Vanessa Roghi, Small Town: A Common Story of Heroin
translated by Anne Milano Appel

133 | Matteo Trevisani, The Book of Lightning
translated by Anne Milano Appel

151 | About the Authors

154 | About the Translators

155 | Book Synopses

160 | Acknowledgments

161 | Publishers
A selection of excerpts from novels by Italian authors never previously published in English

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Excerpts selected by Marco Cassini

Andrea Esposito
Ilaria Gaspari
Francesco Longo
Eleonora Marangoni
Paolo Pecere
Andrea Pomella
Remo Rapino
Vanessa Roghi
Matteo Trevisani