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Grove. A Field Novel

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From Part I: OLEVANO (pp. 11-23)

I plans un mond muàrt.
Ma i no soj muàrt jo ch'i lu plans.

Pier Paolo Pasolini

viř / morři

In Romanian churches believers light candles in two separate places. It might be two niches in the wall, two ledges, or two metal cabinets, in which the candles flicker. On the left side of the partition are the candles for the living; on the right side, the candles for the dead. If someone dies for whom a candle was lit in the left partition in life, then the burning candle is transferred to the right partition. From viř to morři.

I have only observed the tradition of lighting candles in Romanian churches; I have never practiced it myself. I have watched the candles flicker in their intended places. I have deciphered the letters above the partitions—simple niches in a wall, ledges, filigree

containers made from forged iron or perforated sheet metal—and I have read them as names, designating the one space for hope, vii, and the other for memory, morți. One group of candles illuminates the future, the other the past.

I once saw a man in a film take a candle that was flickering for a relative in the niche of the vii and move it into the niche of the morți. From what-shall-be to once-was. From the fluttering of the future to the inertia of a remembered picture. In the film this observance was moving in its simplicity and acceptance, but at the same time it inspired disgust, obedient and impersonal, a mutely followed rule.

A few months after I saw this scene in a film, M. died. I became bereaved. Before being bereaved, one might think of “death,” but not yet of “absence.” Absence is inconceivable, so long as there is presence. For the bereaved, the world is defined by absence. The absence of light in the space of the vii overshadows all flickering in the space of the morți.

Terrain

In Olevano Romano I live for some time in a house on a hill. Approaching the town on the winding road that leads up out of the plain, the building is recognizable in the distance. To the left of the hill with the house lies the old village, vaulting the steep hillside. It is the color of cliffs, a different shade of gray in every light and weather. To the right of the house, somewhat farther up the hill, lies the cemetery, angular, whitish cement-gray, surrounded by tall, slender black trees. Cypresses. *Sempervirens*, the everlasting tree of death; a defiant answer to the unexacting pines, projected sharply into the sky.

I walk along the cemetery wall until the road forks. To the southeast it leads through olive

groves, between a bamboo thicket and vineyards it becomes a dirt road, which grazes a sparse birch grove. Three or four birch trees, scattered messengers, accidental vagrants between olive trees, holm oaks, and vines, stand at a slant on a kind of nose, which rises up next to the path. From the top of this nose one looks over onto the hill with the house. The village lies once again on the left, the cemetery on the right. A small car moves through the village alleys, while someone hangs laundry on a line, strung beneath the windows. The laundry says: *viř*.

In the 19th century, this nose may have served those who came here to paint as a good lookout point. Perhaps the painters, pulling their handkerchiefs out of their jacket pockets, carelessly and unwittingly scattered birch seeds, brought from their northern-colored homelands. A birch blossom, picked in passing and long forgotten, spread rootlets here between blades of grass. The painters would have wiped the sweat from their brows and continued painting. The mountains, the village, perhaps the small columns of smoke rising above the plain as well. Where was the cemetery then? The oldest grave that I find in the cemetery belongs to a German from Berlin, who died here in 1892. The second-oldest grave is for a man with a bold gaze and a hat, of Olevano, born in 1843, died in 1912.

Below the vagrant birch trees, a man works in his vineyard. He cuts bamboo, trims the stalks, burns off the ragged wisps, brings the lengths of the stalks into line. He builds scaffolding out of them, complicated structures out of poles, formed around the burgeoning grapevines. He weighs down with stones the points where the interlocked stalks meet. Here the *viti* thrive between the *viř* in the distance, on the left, and the *morřĩ*, somewhat nearer, on the right.

It is winter; the evening comes early. When darkness falls, the old village of Olevano lies in the yellow warmth of lanterns. Alongside the road to Bellegra, and throughout the new settlements on the northern side, stretches a labyrinth of dazzling white lamps. Above on the

hillside the cemetery hovers in the glow of countless perpetually burning small lights, which glimmer in front of the gravestones, lined up on the ledges in front of the sepulchers. When the night is very dark the cemetery, illuminated by *luces perpetuae*, hangs like an island in the night. The island of the *morți* above the valley of the *viș*.

Distance

I arrived in Olevano in January, two months and a day after M.'s funeral. The journey was long and led through dingy winter landscapes, which clung indecisively to gray vestiges of snow. In the Bohemian Forest, freshly fallen, wet snow dripped from the trees and clouded the view through the Stifteresque underbrush to the young Vltava River, which did not even have a thin border of jagged ice.

As the landscape past the precipice stretched into the Friulian plains, I breathed a sigh of relief. I had forgotten what it is like to encounter the light that lies beyond the Alps and understood, suddenly, the long-ago euphoria that my father experienced every time we descended the Alps. *Non ho amato mai molto la montagna / e detesto le Alpi*, said Montale, but they are good for this shifting of light upon arrival and departure. At the height of the turnoff to Venice dusk fell. The darker it became, the larger, flatter, broader the plain appeared to me. The temperature dropped below zero. There were dotted lights, even small fires in the open here and there, or so it seemed to me. I stopped in Ferrara, just as M. and I had planned to do on this trip. Ferrara in winter. The garden of the Finzi-Contini in snow or freezing fog. The haze of the pianure. Italy was a country in which we had never travelled together.

The next morning, I found the car with a bashed-in window. The backseat and everything

stored there—the notebooks, books, and photographs, the cases filled with pens for writing and drawing—were littered with shards of glass. The thief had only taken the two suitcases with clothing. The one suitcase was filled with things that M. had worn in the last months. I had imagined how his cardigan would drape over a chair in the foreign place, how I would work in his sweaters and sleep in his shirts.

I reported it to the police. It had to be done in the questura, in an old palazzo with a heavy portal. A small policeman sitting behind a desk in a chair with a high, carved back recorded my complaint. His police cap, adorned with a magnificent gold cord, rested on a pile of papers beside him, looking like a forgotten prop for a sailor-themed carnival party.

On recommendation of the lower-ranking police officer who handed me a copy of the report, I spent hours searching for the stolen suitcases between bushes and shrubs near the parking lot at the foot of the city wall. I only found a bicycle, carefully covered up with dried autumn leaves. When it got dark I gave up my search and made a few purchases, only what was necessary. That evening I noticed the address in the letterhead of the papers from the questura: Corso Ercole I d' Este, the road that accessed the garden of the Finzi-Contini.

The next morning I left, heading towards Rome and Olevano. It was bitter cold, the grass on top of the city wall was covered with frost, and large clouds formed in front of the mouths of merchants, who assembled their stands on the Piazza Travaglio. A few freezing Africans loitered around the cafes. Market days promised more life and opportunity than other days of the week, a bit of trade, wanted help, cigarettes, coffee.

The light beyond Bologna, the view from the highway, evoking memories of my childhood—even the gas station markets, with their pompous, saccharine structures—were a strange comfort, as if the whole world could be so innocuous and incidental, as disconnected from all pain as the bright landscape that glided past me, a moving panorama-stage that was trying to

fool me, in my deep fatigue that no amount of sleep would relieve, into believing that it was the only thing moving, that I remained stationary. For a time, I believed it.

But after exiting the highway in Valmontone, I was in unknown territory, remote from the space of memory. Crawling in traffic through the small town, it became clear to me that this Italy was a world away from the country of my childhood experiences. Behind a small range of hills sprawled a plain, with mountains surging up at the other end of it. The summits in the second and third rows were capped in snow. Perhaps it was Abruzzo already, still linked with outdated fantasies of wolves and highwaymen in my head. Disquieting terrain, like all mountains.

On the first morning in Olevano the sun shone and a mild wind blew through the withered leaves of the palm trees, which protruded into the view of the plain at the foot of the hill. A bell struck every quarter-hour. Another, tinny one followed a minute later, as if it had required the intermission to verify the time. That afternoon the sky clouded over, the wind became cutting, and a shrill noise erupted in the village. The village appeared so far away—a peculiar illusion seen from the perspective of the house on the hill, since it took only minutes to reach the square where the festival was taking place. At this festival Befana presented children with gifts to the tune of loud radio hits. Befana, the epiphanic witch; on the previous evening grandmothers had haggled in supermarkets for discounts on cheap toys in her name. They had wrenched the gifts from the sale baskets that blocked the aisles at every turn. Silver-clad Barbie dolls, neon-colored soldiers, lightsabers for extraterrestrial use. An announcer called out, a timid choir of children's voices repeated her, and again and again I heard the word Be-fa-na! stressed on the first syllable, like the dialect dictates.

On the night of the day of Befana, moped drivers dinned through the alleys, and I learned that every sound is multiplied here, broken by numerous surfaces and evidently forever returning

to this inhospitable house on the hill. I lay awake, contemplating how to squeeze my life here in the next three months into a new order that would allow me to survive the unexpected unknown.

Village

Mornings I would walk to the village. Via a different alley every day. Whenever I thought I knew every route, a staircase would reveal itself somewhere, a steep corridor, an archway framing a vista. The winter was cold and wet; along the narrow corridors and stairs moisture crackled in the old stones. A good number of houses were vacant and around lunchtime it was very quiet in the village, practically lifeless. Not even the wind found its way into these alleys, only the sun, which usually failed to materialize in winter. I saw elderly villagers with scanty purchases, bracing their feet against the incline. The people here must have had healthy hearts, trained on these gradients day after day, with and without loads and under the weight of winter's dampness. Some climbed very slow and steady, while others paused, drew breath, whatever breath there was to draw here, without light or any scent of life. On these winter afternoons, not once did it smell of food. In the early afternoon hours of brighter Sundays, clattering plates and muted voices sounded from the open windows on Piazza San Rocco, but on gloomy winter workdays the windows remained closed. There were no cats roaming about. Dogs yapped at the scanty passersby, but if they had a bone would remain silent.

Then one day the sun shone again. The elderly came out of their houses, sat down in the sun on Piazzale Aldo Moro and squinted in the brightness. They were still alive. They thawed like lizards. Small, tired reptiles in quilted coats trimmed in artificial fur. The shoes of the

men walked-down on one side. Lipstick crumbled out of the corners of the women's mouths. After an hour in the sun they laughed and talked, their gesticulations accompanied by the rustle of polyester sleeves. During my childhood, they were young people. Perhaps they were young in Rome, rogues in yellow shoes with mopeds and young women who wanted to look like Monica Vitti, who wore large sunglasses and stood in factories by day, occasionally partaking in demonstrations, arm-in-arm.

Above the valley whitish clouds of smoke unfurled, more buoyant than fog. After the olive trees were pruned, the branches were burned. Daily smoke sacrifices in the face of a parasite infestation that threatened the harvest. Perhaps the stokers stood in the groves by their fires, shading their eyes with their hands, on the lookout to see which pillars of smoke rose in what way. All was blanketed with a mild burning smell.

Cemetery

In the early mornings I walked the same route every day. Up the hillside, between olive trees, curving around the cemetery to the small birch grove. The two kiosks with the sugary colored cultured flowers and the garish plastic bouquets were not yet open. The municipality workers, busied since my arrival with thinning out the cypresses that had grown into one another, arrived in a utility wagon and unpacked their tools. The roadsides were littered with the felling debris: sprigs, cones and pinnate, scaly leaves. Next to the cemetery entrance a sloppily amassed pile of larger tree clippings was accumulating, interspersed with stray tatters of plastic bouquets: pink lily heads resistant to all wilting, yellow bows. Seen from here, the house on the hill lay between the village in the background on the right and the cemetery in the foreground on the left. A different order. The village, quiet in the blue-gray

morning light. Behind the cemetery wall the men called back and forth to one another.

From the birch grove I looked onto the village and the cemetery, from which not a sound reached this spot in the morning. I could only see white smoke past the wall and a row of ascending cypresses. Tree remains were burned. The arborists were not yet felling. First, they brought their small sacrifice. They must have stood there and watched the fire. When the smoke thinned, the first saw revved.

In the afternoon I visited the graves. Both flower kiosks were open. On the left, fresh flowers were sold: yellow chrysanthemums, pale-pink lilies, white and red carnations. The kiosk on the right offered artificial flower bouquets with and without ribbons, hearts, little angels and balloons of various sizes. The woman selling flowers at the kiosk on the right was occupied with her phone for the most part, but occasionally cast a sullenly mistrusting glance.

I wanted to find out how the grave walls that made up a large part of the cemetery are called. Stone cabinets with small plaques, mostly bearing the name and photo of the deceased, rendered on ceramic. Rocchi, Greco, Proietti, Baldi, Mampieri. The names on the graves were the same as those above store entrances and shop windows in the village. The walls are called columbaria, I learned, dovecotes for souls. Later someone told me that in everyday language the grave compartments are referred to as “fornetti.” Ovens, into which the caskets or urns are slid.

The cemetery was busiest in the early afternoon. Young men, in particular, came then to fulfill their duties as sons and grandsons; their cars raced in, they jumped out, forcefully slammed the doors, slid one of the rattling ladders in front of their fornetto in order to trade wilted flowers for fresh ones, wipe off the photographs, check the small burning lights. Old men scuffled slowly past the grave walls, exchanged greetings, carried wilting bouquets to the trash, and filled the vases with fresh water for the flowers they had brought with them.

In front of each fornetto was a small lamp, its form evoking an old petroleum lamp, a candle, or an oil lamp like the one from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The lamps were hooked up to electric cables, which ran along the lower edge of each tier of the grave walls, burning at all times. *Lux perpetua*, someone explained to me. Everlasting light. In the light of day their faint glow was barely perceptible.

On rainy days I would stand by the window, not wanting to go out. I fought the fatigue that the heavy, wet air brought with it. Sometimes the rain was mixed with snow. From the rear windows of the house, which faced north, on the low ground on the left between the cobbled-together, angular new construction and the hillside—too steep to be developed—with narrow sheep pastures and a forest of holm oaks, I saw the new settlements of Olevano, the road to Bellegra, the concrete-levelled market place, the new school, the athletics field. Above on the right was the cemetery, a darkly framed stone lodge with a view to the ripped-open valley. From their lodge, the dead could watch how the ambulances were cleaned at the foot of the hillside, while paramedics made phone calls and smoked, how the Chinese set up their booths on Mondays, in order to sell cheap household goods, artificial flowers and textiles, how the soccer games took place at the athletics field on Sundays. During soccer games, whistles and calls echoed off the hillside and the dull-green ground glistened in the rain, while old women on the steep path up to the cemetery carried their umbrellas slowly across the olive groves.

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From Part II: CHIAVENNA (pp. 121-132)

La scintilla che dice
tutto comincia quando tutto pare
incarbonirsi

Eugenio Montale, l'anguilla

Altipiano

Words rolled in my hand like marbles, damaged glass marbles with dull, scratched surfaces and tiny nicks, scoured by sand, dirt, concrete, the glass of other marbles. A soft click when they bumped against one other, a sound that my entire body would strain to hear, to see if it would form a picture.

Marbles were mysteries in my childhood, there were never rules for a game, nor players; they were something to have, in their beauty inexplicable. I once stuck a marble between my upper and lower eyelid and looked into the light. I did not come any closer to the marble's mystery—it was merely black in front of my eye—yet I felt blinded. A short time later I had an eye infection and I secretly believed it stemmed from my experiment with the marble. I lay in my room with bandaged eyes. It was summer. I felt cold in the blackish, blind darkness and studied a small world with my hands: paths from one room to the next, along walls, railings, and doors. Each fingertip felt a different color.

My father read to me, but in Italian, which I did not understand. You don't have to understand everything all the time, he said and read. Over time, the words became soothing, I found them beautiful and thought to myself. Sometimes I asked about a word, and my father would respond tersely in German. *Hier. Vielleicht. Links. Berg.* I am not sure what book he read from, but it might have been a travel guide. One time I asked about a word that I had to

repeat several times: altipiano. *Hochebene*, said my father eventually—plateau—and the word was just as strange to me as altipiano. But I did not pursue it, because my father's explanations were endless and clarified very little, and I preferred listening to Italian.

The eye infection was cured before long, the blindfold was removed, and I was able to see again. The world had not changed. But I had the word altipiano in one hand and the word *Hochebene* in the other, and sometimes I held them furtively up to the light and tried to see through them, always taking care, however, not to bring them too close to my eye.

Some time afterwards we watched a film in school about the River Po. Only much later did I come to know that the film is called *La Gente del Po*, and that it is by Antonioni. At the time it was just one of many black-and-white films about rivers; I also remember a film about the Rhône delta and the Rhine near Rotterdam. The films flickered upon the canvas, damaged due to the many mended sections, tearing often, and the sound was accompanied by a constant crackling noise. When we watched the film about the Po, I immediately identified with the child, who lay sick in bed below deck, even though it was the mother, and not the father, who read to her. Even though her eyes are not bandaged, she lies ill in the belly of the boat and sees nothing of the river or the landscape outside. I identified so strongly with this child that for a long time, when I thought back on my days of blindness, the smell of the school gym where we watched the film would rise into my nose and the sound of the heavy, rubbery blackout curtains, drawn by larger children, would shuffle in my ears.

Many years later, when I had no longer been a child for some time, my father suffered from a broken blood vessel in his eye. He had to lie calmly and was not allowed to strain his eyes. I read to him; he wished for Italian stories, despite the fact that my Italian was poor. He corrected my pronunciation and interrupted me occasionally, in order to elucidate things in a very long-winded manner. One of the books that I read was *Narratori delle pianure* and I

remembered the old, beautiful secret-word from long ago, *altipiano*. While my father used another pronunciation mistake as an opportunity to interrupt me, to correct me and provide a long-winded account of a carousel factory along the Po, by Mantua—apparently world-renowned—I imagined a slice of river landscape in northern Italy, blanketed in undulating fog, hovering between heaven and earth directly beneath a low-hanging cloud cover. Sparse poplar groves anchored the landscape into the skies.

Positive

My father died during a heatwave in June, which had already begun in the last days of May. For two weeks on daily walks through suburban streets, parks, and dirty sidewalks around Euston railway station, I cut a path through the sticky city air. Fans hummed at work, dogs prowled, panting behind their owners along the edge of the park, sleepless children whined until late into the night, and in the small, boxy backyard gardens people sat, drinking too much—because of the heat, the whining children, the panting dogs, because of these mild nights, which had something unprecedented about them.

On the day that my father died, while crossing a bridge over the Thames my shoes became stuck in melted asphalt and it was quite a task to free them, since walking barefoot on the steamy, hazy tar street would not have been possible. Traffic came to a halt and the traffic police walked along the street awkwardly, nervously; they too feared becoming stuck in asphalt and moreover, they were unsure what kind of gestures they should elongate, fold or cross their arms and hands into, as there was no protocol for dealing with melting asphalt, upon which wheels are no longer able to spin.

The call came in the early evening. Sounding from the open windows of neighboring houses,

clattering dishes and children's shouts mixed with the murmuring of news anchors and television theme songs. From the large garden of the villa at the next crossroad, which was slid between the square courtyards of the surrounding rowhomes like a gusset, clouds of smoke rose and became caught in the shading branches of a cedar, it smelled pungently of burnt fish. The airplanes landed at some distance that evening, on the other side of the Thames. I stood hesitantly in front of the ringing phone and watched the ungainly airplane bodies sink from the heat-gray sky into the blueish air above the housetops. The shrieking roar of the throttled engines remained far away.

Death notices are like scissors or sharp knives that sever the film of the world. What cuts cleaner, a knife or scissors? A futile question, which arises anyway, only years after the event, for instance while attempting to repair a severed reel. Never can the ends be put back together so that things match, the result is always overlapped or displaced with one half of a child's face, poised to laugh, positioned below the other half, or stuck to a rose bush or a door post, much too high for the small body, and the laugh is forever failed, a never-ending miss. I found myself from one moment to the next sitting in the dark between two dangling celluloid strands, while the soundtrack played on, for reasons incomprehensible to me.

The next day I was in one of those ungainly airplane bodies, like the ones I had watched on the previous evening, landing in the hot gray air. It was even hot where I arrived, the air similarly gray and viscous and the landscape lay motionless, disintegrating under its weight; on hill-crests and the occasionally visible stream fronts, clung fragments of memory which had torn away from a larger picture and landed there.

In the evening we sat in my father's room. Even years after he had given up cigarettes it still smelled of cold smoke. It smelled of old smoke, of stale wine, of dust, of the desk chair's threadbare seat, of the blackness of vinyl records. It smelled of maps, of a dark-green pen,

and the tasteless onyx desk set. We played the St Matthew Passion and when it got dark we unpacked the slide projector.

We removed two pictures from the wall and positioned the projector so that the beam of light landed on the bare spot. It took a while to stack the books in the correct height on the table, to place the projector on top of. My father had always used two volumes of the encyclopedia, but they were no longer in his room. We switched the projector on and moved the table with the tower of books farther away from the wall, so that the image would become smaller and sharper. It was still just a white square. The projector hummed. We closed the curtains and my brother, already drunk at this point, dragged over the slide trays that were standing behind the door. Halfway to the projector the stack tumbled over, and the contents of a few of the slide trays scattered onto the ground. My brother knelt down onto the carpet and began indiscriminately stuffing the slides back into the slots. My father had always kept his slides in a meticulous order that was nevertheless unintelligible to outsiders. This order was now torn, irrecoverable. We did not utter a word about the fact that we would now never know *what* was out of order. This sudden recognition of irrevocability, however, on account of the circumstances—drunkenness, clumsiness, the expectant humming of the projector—had something small, pitifully obvious about it. My brother shed silent, drunken tears onto the mixed-up slides and knocked-over cases. Still wordless, we both politely tried to let the other operate the projector; in the end, the role fell to me.

We were using the old projector, which only held two slides. It had to be alternated by hand, and the just-viewed picture had to be replaced while the other one was being projected.

Surrounding the projector was a cloud of heat and in front of the lens in the white beam of light, dust particles danced like tiny animals.

The first pictures were scenes from a family trip to Italy. Judging by our age, it must have

been shortly after the darkroom had been removed and was thus one of the first times my father had shot slide film. Perhaps his inexperience with the material was the reason for the overexposure, for our paleness in the pictures, for the washed-out and threadbare quality of the colors, forms, landscape, through which the bare wall and the clearly delineated rectangles where the photos had been were visible. Nevertheless, I was flooded with memories of my stay which had little to do with these pictures, of the white light, the sultriness, of walks between fields where corn stood high, of the smells in the guesthouse, of the saltless bread, of the evening walks through the village with my father when he still had purchases to make after dark in the small stores and I, at my request, was allowed to wait outside alone, between boxes of tomatoes and peaches, between conversations and laughing passersby, as if I belonged there, as if I were familiar with the street and the customs that prevailed there, as if I lived in that vespertine space, filled with new sounds, together with the people there who carelessly brushed by me on the street corners, on the waysides.

It became unbearably stuffy and hot in the small room behind the drawn curtains, and after viewing half of the first tray I ended the show. As I pushed the pile back into its corner, I thought about how it was a collection of my father's gaze. Through his eyes we looked at these scenes cast on the wall, and for a moment I believed that the thinness and paleness of the images may have resulted from the irrevocable absence of his gaze. Each slide projection humbly staged an instant, the blink of an eye. Perhaps that's why my father had given up the darkroom and developing photographs. He was tired of being the sole witness to the picture's slow emergence in the sloshing chemical bath and wanted to stage his gaze on a grander scale. For a moment, the decades-long grudge that I had held against it disappeared.

The night had become black and dense. Above the low hills behind the river it heat-lightninged, but it was only a distant flicker in which the outlines of the hill-crests became

briefly visible before disappearing again into the darkness, which felt so clammy and palpable, as if you could shape it in your hands; an anti-snow, hot, soft, and black. My brother walked up and down the garden, his footsteps were silent on the lawn and only the glowing tip of his cigarette, floating back and forth, was visible.

Night

Throughout my childhood we often drove to Italy. We had neither family nor place there, but my father spoke Italian and there was a connection between his speaking, or his desire to speak, in a language unintelligible to me and the trip that I accepted without question. The journey to the Italian border, or at least to the language border that we would cross over in Switzerland already, always felt to me like a deep breath, drawn and held and released at last when my father spoke. This release of tension and the disorder of air in my lungs and head, which came with exhaling, were forever connected with the names of the towns that we encountered first on the south side of the mountain pass which, as if under a spell, always lay in the sun. Airolo! said my father, in a voice already different than usual, and farther down the valley a reddish city would spread out in a bright spot of sun, while we were still stuck in snow.

Once we stayed overnight in Chiavenna. We found a guest house, managed by a woman with a severe gaze. Every piece of furniture and every step creaked. We were given a family room, which smelled of mothballs; the beds stood somber and massive in the large room, as if randomly placed and left there staying. My parents had a fight and my father went out. I lay under the stiff sheets, pretending to be asleep. My mother sat at the window, waiting for my father. The dull-yellow light from the street lamps filtered through the trees along the avenue.

The guest house must have been located at a crossing or at the approach of a curve on the through road; the droning and squealing of cars and trucks braking could be heard time and again, bringing with it a breeze which caused the shadows of the leaves to tremble restlessly in the dull-yellow puddles of light on the floor. The lamp was switched off and my mother sat quietly in the dark in a chair, black like the beds, while I listened into the night. Not a word was uttered. I must have silently asked myself where my father might have gone and if he was even coming back. Perhaps he sat in a bar, drinking and talking, self-consciously eager to cover up his not belonging. Or he strolled through the alleys, looked into the illuminated apartments of strangers, ascended a mountain path, maybe he would never return. Or he had climbed back into the car and kept driving, towards Milan, Padua, Bologna, the entire country stretched out before him. What would become of us here in Chiavenna? My mother did not speak Italian. How would she feed us? I lay stiff in the saggy bed and tried to recollect the overheard fragments of Italian that were set aside somewhere in my head, but they seemed unfit for the situation. They were flatland words, not suited for that mountain village, whose barren hinterlands I had seen on the journey in, not suited for a light defined by shadow, unlike the white light of the lowlands, which casts everything in the same shadowless smallness. Would I have to climb the stairs and steep alleyways up to a tiny village schoolhouse, dressed in an apron or smock, like the ones I had seen the local children wearing? Was I afraid? What remains in my memory is only the feeling of inner excitement, provoked by the thought of my father's potential disappearance and the potential connected upheaval of our lives, stranded in an entirely foreign place called Chiavenna. A word which I quietly muttered under my breath, half in expectation of a future in which, when asked my place of residence, I would answer this—admittedly beautiful—name. I live in Chiavenna. Yes, kia-vein-na, not chee-a-venna.

It was not the first time that my father had simply left after a fight and stayed away for hours.

My mother, standing in front of the open window of the children's room, staring out into the night, was a familiar sight. I lay in the far end of the room in bed and looked up at the black sky, which seemed to recline around her head. My eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, which lost its blackness the longer I looked, gradually revealing itself to be a gauzy layer atop a distant, diffuse, and inexplicable shimmer. The gloom of the night was an invention. A fairytale, intent on inspiring fear. My father always came back, usually in the early hours of the morning, peacefully drunk, speciously invoking unexpected encounters with relatives who happened to be passing through, emergencies of strangers, old acquaintances; the train station always played a role—delays, changeovers, missed departures. Later I would often imagine my father in the musty 24-hour cinema at the train station, where he would occasionally drop us kids when he had something to do. The cinema was frequented predominantly by men, some unwashed, some swathed in a cloud of aftershave, clutching small suitcases on their laps, some sipping silently from beer bottles and smoking, while others would cry at the passé, kitschy films that ran between the newsreels and often tore, their tears provoking in us kids a nervous giggling above all.

My father's return to the bleak guest house in Chiavenna escapes my memory. Either I was asleep, or I let the hissing dispute that undoubtedly followed his return sink into oblivion. On the following morning it rained thinly. It was now quiet in the street and drops of rain fell audibly onto the leaves of the trees. In the breakfast room, which was equipped with the same blackish furniture, we, the only guests, surrounded by quite a number of tables covered in white linens, were served coffee with milk and bread. The drizzle persisted past Milan. Then it yielded to the even, vibrating white light of the plain, in which the abandoned and partly dilapidated farms seemed to hover.

[...]

From Part III: COMACCHIO (pp. 195-206)

Le parole. Già.
Dissolvono l'oggetto.

Come la nebbia gli alberi,
il fiume: il traghetto.

Giorgio Caproni

Bassa

The earth in the Bassa Padana is bright brown in the light of these bitter-cold winter days, which I have never before seen it in, cast almost purple, so surfeit with blue is the air beneath the vast sky. To the northeast the Colli Euganei are a wispy blue, a timid sketch in the lower cusp of the sky. The fields are neatly plowed into small, broken-up clods of soft earth, alluvial land. The farms lie like islands in an ocean of fields, surrounded by trees, their bare branches reddish and motionless in the frosty, still air; everything rooted, bound to the ground is under the sway of this bright, earthy tone under the sky. In the open farmyards between sheds and barns they store agricultural equipment, far and wide not a pasture—perhaps a lesson learned during flood years, when the river, risen quietly above the banks overnight, wrested the cattle from the meadows and carried them downstream, belly-up, until they became tangled in unwieldy thickets or wedged between splintered beams from the wrecked roofs of barns and farms, while the water level sank and farmers began counting what they had to mourn.

The age of alluvial land is past and the Po is hemmed on both sides by a dam; the small hamlets and villages lie in its shelter and shadow. This January very little water flows in the river, bright gravel islands have emerged, and from the dam, the stream towards the delta, which already begins on the eastern horizon, is barely discernible. Between dam and river are

plantations of fast-growing trees, their spindle trunks like lines drawn into the fallen leaves. At a bend the causeway retreats a distance from the river in order to make room for a construction site, which seems to lie fallow, as if left in haste. Arranged in a circle, pipes are overlapped with pallid grass and a collection of rusty objects, pressed into the concave embankment of the dam, shows just how well this uneven brown-red suits the landscape, as if it stemmed from the river-blue and earth-brown, from the thin wood of the willow thickets and the thorn bushes, which appear either yellowish or violet, depending on the fall of light and shadows. Between thickets a large machine like a crane stands against the sky like punctuation, put up hastily, not following a sentence; all of the equipment gathered here can at most be regarded as letters, signifying nothing but colors. On the other side of the river a tall church steeple stands crooked, in contrast to the coppice, where lines from the grove jut out of the ground in taut, regular rows. It is a slash in the horizon, punctuation as well, however clustered around it is a collection of small roof-words. A flock of pigeons takes to the sky next to the village, shifting from a dark speckling to a brightly shimmering scroll: a small writing in the air. Over there, below it on the other side of the river is a sentence, addressed to the plain. This short sentence, made unforgettable by the forward slash, forms the introduction to the curve that the river is preparing for in a gesture of peaceful generosity towards the land, which in its flatness must be prepared for every interference, every encroachment, yet is embraced by the river with such mercy that it yields to it wholly with all the unkempt grace of its pastures and thickets. This curve, too, is a sentence, a small, murmured excuse from the river that is so on the brink of unraveling into the countless incoherencies concealed beneath all inconsistent names.

On top of the small promontory formed at the beginning of the curve, a man stands in high boots and fishes. The gravel islands and sand banks are a stone's throw away; the water cannot be deep here. The fish must be sparse during the low flow, and all the more in this

coldness, which drives most fish to push their way into cavities in the riverbed in order to survive. The man, the fishing rod, the line—everything is motionless, the water flows almost imperceptibly. A small writing as well: the man by the river, the catcher in the gravel, no hope of catching, nevertheless he holds tightly onto his fishing rod.

Along the path on the dam approaches a woman with a resolute gait. The sun lies low, encircling her figure in a halo of light. Difficult to say her age. Her gait is young, but her outfit is out of another time. She wears a white coat with a wide collar and a belt, tied tightly around her waist, causing the coattails to stick out. Hanging from her forearm is a black handbag suited for the town promenade and her hair is styled stiffly, sits around her head like a bonnet. She walks resolutely, her gaze lowered slightly, in elegant shoes with high heels. In the direction she is coming from there is no village, as far as I can discern. She keeps walking even past the small village behind the rocca, becoming smaller and smaller against the afternoon sky. A remaining extra from one of the many films shot here in the past, perhaps she did not want to give back the beautiful coat and walked and walked out of one scene and into the next, never hired, attuned to all of the transformations around her, la donna del Po.

The stout edifice of the rocca, a miniature counter-castle that was in earlier days situated directly on the water, which since receded from it, casts a long afternoon shadow in the corset of scaffolding that it wears to keep from breaking apart. A crack, broken open by an earthquake, extends across the wall. The church steeple on the opposite side of the river may also have the earthquake to thank for the slope that transformed it into an exclamation point, in order to remind the region of the shifting terrain.

From the fields at the foot of the embankment drift clouds arisen from the chirping of sparrows, concise metallic winter syllables of small birds, fluttering in swiftly shrinking spots of sun. A man climbs up to the path. He is wearing high boots, a weatherproof jacket, a

leather cap, around his neck binoculars. Like a hunter, who wades in reeds, might look. Only the dog is missing. The woman in the white coat is a tiny figure in the distance. Should I follow her or continue in the other direction? At a loss, I turn to the huntsman-like man. Which direction is more beautiful? I ask. It's beautiful in every direction, he says, and raises his hand to gesture to the path, the small municipality, the fields and farms, the tree plantation and the construction site, the river and the distance. Equally beautiful everywhere, he repeats.

Later, at dusk, small country roads lead back into the city. It is a holiday, the last detour of the Christmas season. In the streets around lunchtime there was hardly any traffic; parked cars are now crammed into the villages. A family day. On the sunlit uneven village streets children, shivering in their holiday clothes, clumsily tested their new roller skates, scooters and remote-control cars until they were called in for dinner. Now it is quiet between the houses, here and there the lights are already on, dusk falls, the last flocks of crows assemble and take to the sky, clouds of birds flying toward the trees where they sleep—bare elms, alders, willows, poplars—which stand like drawings against the thin evening-blue. Outside of the small villages extend long avenues, moats, plowland. Here and there an abandoned farmstead in the middle of plowed, tended fields, slumped and buckled under the load of its broken rooftops. A very thin ground fog rises from the fields and ditches, imperceptible from the perspective of the town.

Corso

I returned to Ferrara to walk up and down the Corso Ercole I d'Este and look at the gardens—read, imagined and real—on both sides of the street, to peer over walls and through gates in the walls and into the small side alleys that forked off from the unswerving street. It

was January once again and I wanted to walk until I reached the Porta degli Angeli, and from there on top of the city wall. And so I arrived at the small station and stepped out onto the courtyard, where African refugees—who whiled away the lonely, cold, and hungry days in the vicinity of the station—were waiting for busses, to return in the night to idly quiet and half-abandoned industrial towns, whose factories had either been shut down or were now operated merely for the sake of appearances. There, in the outskirts of the city, they had accommodations in sparsely furnished erstwhile public buildings, which still were able, just barely, to pass for basic shelters. They frequented the small urban area around the station on the fringes of Ferrara, loitered, perhaps met other refugees, and on market days would wander to the Piazza Travaglio, hoping to find odd jobs, to trade, to help out the Chinese, who spread out their textiles, for a sac filled with pairs of socks, which they were allowed to sell in the streets.

When I arrived on the commuter train from Bologna, it was already dark and the fog that arose had begun to freeze. I welcomed the fog, I had hoped for it to cast its veil over objects and dissolve distance, being familiar with other lowland landscapes teeming with rivers. But it was deceiving, to be received with the evening fog. Over the next few days the sun shone in a cold sky, frost covered the grassy areas, and a thin sheet of ice formed on the body of water that surrounded the castle in the city. I rented a bare bones apartment in a sloppily renovated building. It was in the attic and in the mornings the reddish landscape of bricks, gables, and chimneys in front of the kitchen window slowly stepped forward to meet the bluish light. Once daylight broke, pigeons would appear on the roof ridges, silent for frost, and in the grooves and cracks of the old tiles sat moss and short-stemmed weeds, which even bore tiny white blossoms. A construction site projected into my field of vision, where a modern house, which rose above the other rooftops, was either being repaired or given an additional story. A building crane was in motion there daily, and on the scaffolding men

began working at dawn in the freezing cold; now and again snatches of their exchanges in Romanian reached me.

On the night of January 6, it was loud in the alleys and after midnight raucous groups rambled about, awakening my memory of the street festival honoring the epiphanic witch in Olevano, the intensifying echo that moved so erratically between the hillsides and houses, causing the monotonous music and shrill voices to hover in the air for so long.

My first walk down the Corso Ercole blurred the painted maps that I carried around in my head. The uneven cobblestones seemed to want to impress the soles of my feet like a tactile writing, directing my footsteps over to the severe, sleek house facades with closed windows, which seemed so unblinking and stiff, as if the whole facade were merely a mockup. Behind it everything was possible: no man's land, overgrowth, the disturbed territory of old stories. Then someone stepped out of the house, a lady in mink, closing the house door so rapidly behind her that I could not catch a glimpse inside. Above the walls that occasionally interrupted the facades towered the rigid branches of bare treetops, cypress crowns, listless winter palm fronds. Nothing moved in the frost. Bassani's winters are icy as well, not as bright as this Sunday, but rather misty, rimy, gray, or full of snow. Hardly anyone was out on Corso, the long street lay hushed in the sun, and I found not a hint of the vague traces that I was looking for. Before long I abandoned my search for the mythical garden from the thirties; I had trouble locating it on the town map and found nothing to help orient my mental picture. The garden of the Finzi-Contini remained the space that was shaped and reshaped by memory and interpretation, the area of loss that refused to be found. The meaning of my search in these foreign streets with familiar names lay in sensing the narrow tracts of intuited borders which hemmed-in that area of forlornness. The names alone had to make do as a stop, together with my memory of the reality of the walkways between the greened burial

mounds of Cerveteri.

At the end of Corso I came upon the Porta degli Angeli, the Gate of the Angels, on the path along the top of the rampart that encircles the city, with a view onto the city's outer border trail, the still waters of a canal—which must smell foul in summer—and a heavily trafficked arterial road, leading to both the rural and the eagerly suburban, fraying urban textile of Ferrara, flatly interspersed with rows of poplars, here and there a sparse grove situated on a piece of land that evaded utility, or a thicket, tolerated because it concealed decay. Nothing, that had not been shaped and reshaped, forever suspended between erasure and left traces.

Joggers in loud tracksuits passed me by in droves on the path to the montagnola, a kind of gallery in the corner of the city wall, which veers there to the southeast. The gallery looked out onto the random, overdeveloped sprawl on the outskirts of the city, which left the land unsuitable for cultivation. A picture came to my mind: young men, emerging out of the foggy plain on bicycles with tools or food in their packs, climb the fortress wall day after day, attempting conquest and then, once they have reached the top, simply cycle on, scatter in different directions, pay visits to their market stands or workshops, and in the evening take to their heels again through one of the eastern-bound city gates. Without being recognized as conquerors they cycle off into the dusk, which slides across the plain. No longer were there farmer boys who climbed the grassy wall, shouldering bicycles, in order to avoid the short detour to the open city gates. There was not even a market in Ferrara anymore, aside from the stands run by Chinese with textiles and household goods made from brittle plastic at the Piazza Travaglio, the mouth of the city.

The bell tolled noon, the colorful joggers trickled out into the distance, and before long the path was empty between the rows of sycamore trees. Below, on the foot of the wall with the sycamore path, stretched gardens and meadows with fruit trees, small country idylls within

the city, situated within the city wall, invulnerable to the openness of outside. A trail led down into this quiet landscape, enclosed by thorn bushes and hedges, where the jangling chirping of sparrows in the dense shrubbery spread out like a thin cloth beneath the silence. On a bench sat a man wearing an old tweed coat, very white sneakers and sunglasses with wire frames that had something old-fashioned American about them, a touch of the 70s, recalling photographs of New York with casual men on the Atlantic coast, skyscrapers reflected in their lenses. Between his coat lapels a matt brown, tiny dog peeked out, pointy muzzled and practically naked on account of its short hair. The skin on the dog's neck formed thick wrinkles. The man stood up as I approached, as if he had just been waiting to join a solitary passerby. *Ha freddo*, he said, jerking his chin towards the dog, and for the first time in years I thought of how my grandfather's sister would mutter *ich hab so kalt* under her breath—I've got so cold—as if there were not a single remedy for it in the entire world. The man was very small and had trouble keeping up with me but he did not let off. I bet you want to go to the Jewish cemetery, he said, as we came upon a long, bright wall. Just watch, he advised, without my having given an answer. Watch your step. The dog gave a quiet, plaintive cry, as if he too wanted to comment on the matter.

You have to ring the bell there. The man pointed to the gate. He wore a perforated glove made from crochet and brown leather. The old word driving gloves occurred to me, nearly forgotten; it had been so long since I had seen a pair. The cemetery caretaker opened the gate and allowed me to enter, wordlessly. He held a napkin in his hand and from rooms behind an interior ajar door sounded a clattering of plates; he was in a hurry to get back to the food. Without turning around to the man in the tweed coat, I stepped out into the graveyard.

The layout of the cemetery was unintelligible. Perhaps it followed the complex system of the Ferrara Synagogue on via Mazzini, where the Italian, German, and Spanish synagogues can

all be found behind a single entryway from the street, side by side and nested into one another. Guarded from the outside only by the large, yet rather unremarkable portal, and divided into various levels of meaning and importance, they formed an inner world, that you could lose yourself in. Spread out over a large area and despite the wide, open lawns, the cemetery—divided into sections by the hedges, narrow avenues, and groves—also had something disorienting and nested about it. It was situated below the city wall, and had a view uphill to the promenade lined by sycamores, where at midday there were no more colorful joggers out and about. The sycamores, clinging to what rigid leaves they had left, their color faded almost entirely, stood motionless against the cold blue sky. For a moment in the distance I heard the call of a pied flycatcher, no trill, only a succession of diphthongs, which always sounded to me as if the bird's throat were trying to reverse and swallow the ejected call with the second syllable. A tone for empty, bright February mornings, which was befitting to the smell of the city; it smelled like February in the alleys, a not-quite-winter-anymore scent from my childhood with thin fragrant veins of deep-fried dough; an air, which reveals that more frost lies ahead. I could not find the bird anywhere. He must have been sitting guarded in a strip of sunlight between the last leaves, which waited in January's drought for a storm to unsettle them. In the shady areas of the cemetery, frost blanketed the soil, the grass, and the withered leaves. In places the ground was littered with ginkgo fruit, which emanated a nauseous odor. Perhaps that is what the man with the dog was referring to with his word of warning. The frost had caused the fallen fruits to burst, the stench cloud crept in every direction, seemed to adhere to my shoes for days, hanging in the air.

A few visitors walked between the graves, searching, deciphering epitaphs. An older woman had taken a seat, exhausted, on a sarcophagus-like grave, and a young man with a shadow of a mustache stood next to her, shoulders hanging, looking utterly clueless. Where is Bassani's grave? The woman called to me in a shrill voice, tampering with her ankle boots. She sent the

young man to ask the cemetery caretaker. Two men, both in elegant winter coats with distinguished hats on their heads, walked purposefully. I saw them stand in front of a family grave, where they lingered, perhaps praying, before sauntering about between other graves, inspecting the names. I found Bassani's grave by chance, situated at the edge of an expansive lawn, with a dog rose bush with large rose hips casting its shadow on the memorial stone. Later, as I contemplated the inscriptions on the headstones at the other end of the lawn, examining them for traces of stories I have read, I saw the two elegant men also stop at his grave.

[...]