

DOTS

THE PAREIDOLIC EFFECT: UNITY IN FRAGMENTATION AND FAILURE IN UNITY

by

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Dots

Impossible

Impossible love is a low-ceilinged room half-full of water where you spend the time of your life, wading in circles. The air, saturated, blocks the pores, it plasters the hair, and blurs the eyes. Skin macerates, but you don't care. Wounds infect, but you don't care. Water babbles, lapping the pelvis, the crotch, the labia; the only thing you care about. For the last ten years my life has been licked apart.

impossible takes time

When, in your usual chicken-hearted way, you wrote those words in the usual place, your WhatsApp profile, I could hear the metallic hue of your voice. The photo was one of your Porsche, the yellow one, to disguise, as usual, the substance of the message. You were, as usual, buying time, God knows what for. However useless, it confirmed that you too were aware of low-ceilinged rooms. It didn't change my wading, apart from a flickering yellow glow in the lukewarm water.

What did change my wading however, and the lapping which drove me crazy, was finding the book. On the last day of the decade, 31st of December 2019. To mark the occasion, in the morning the little one had made a point that we had no plans to celebrate.

I was randomly observing the dust on books I had forgotten about when a whiff of damp came from its acid green cover. Petrarca is mandatory in Italian schools from the age of ten. We learn about his perfect unrequited love, his wasted solitary life. But, you see, now I was ready to recognise the brackish, sexy scent of

his room because impossible love stinks. When I touched the spine of the paperback edition, my psoas muscle twitched.

Martha Graham said that every movement begins from the pelvis, no matter its size. I wrap the dressing gown tighter around my breast and press the hip bones against the bookshelves looking for the edge. Obsessive lovers are heroic. We share a sordid determination to not let go, not yet, not ever.



On the cover the awkwardness of Laura is transfixing. Around her, the space obeys rigid lines: the overhanging barren rock, the trees in the background, the edge of a curb, the straight line of the landscape, even the shower of petals falling over her feels abstract and masculine. The centrepiece of her naked, unerotic body is the protruding notch of her pubis. Chunky and almost obscene. The half-moon shape multiplies all over the image: the hair, the elbow, the muslin draping from her hand, the folds of her breasts. Everything around Laura follows a curve movement. It must be because she stands naked in the middle of a stream, water frothing and licking her vagina.

But no. She is pointing at something on her chest. A slit that runs parallel to her left breast. The circular movement emanating from Laura has at its centre not her pubis, but a long cut almost hidden under the fold of her bosom.

The image, it says on the back, is taken from an 'incunaboli', one of the first copies of the *Canzoniere*. Venice, 1470. Extraordinary that in 1470 the anonymous illustrator drew Laura pointing to her wound.

If I were to write a Canzoniere for you, which of your profile pictures would go on the cover? Head turned down, not victorious, no. Staring forever into the space next to your right foot. I would choose one where the vein on your arm is visible, and that smirking smile of yours would be your wound. Because you are both: awkward and hot.

Pressing the book to my chest, I stride along the corridor. In the kitchen my husband is bent over the washing basket. On the red and white chequered tablecloth, piles of small clothing are organised by item's category: a square tower of socks rises next to a banana skin, and the peels of a half-eaten apple. T-shirts are folded in a mesh of sizes and colours next to the sliced bread. Knickers and bras lay scattered between honey and yogurt, yet to be considered. He is a scientist.

'I don't get it,' he sighs. It annoys me when he pre-empts me with lamentations.

'What?'

Halting his rummaging, he lifts his head from the washing basket.

'I don't understand why there are so many stranded socks.' It annoys me when his answers are too long, and precise.

He stares at the book. 'You have always been obsessed with that,' he says nodding at my chest, pausing for drama. That. The green book or the Canzoniere? Does he know the difference?

He returns his attention to the dark end of the washing basket in search for a good enough pairing sock. Years of stranded socks have made him blasé.

My bras scattered on the remnants of his breakfast's breadcrumbs are a good image, I think, as I strut away along the corridor, a perfect image, but I am not sure yet of what.

On the first page, scribbled in pencil by long lost me, a place and a date: *Berlin, November '99*. My husband and I married in late October the same year. After the ceremony, we took a fast train to Venice where he had booked the Hotel Danieli in Piazza San Marco: our two nights' honeymoon. The extravagance a compensation for the lack of something else. That night we didn't make love. It had been more than eight months since we last had. In the morning, before breakfast, after he took a long shower, we consummated our marriage.

I often ask myself if my marriage was already finished then. Is there a precise moment after which everything changes and there is no coming back? And if this moment exists, are we aware of it or are we blind as to the direction in which we are proceeding?

Winter

Maps

map

1 A diagram. A two-dimensional representation showing the special arrangement or distribution of something over an area.

2 *informal, dated* a person's face: *you ought to know my map by now.*

In the morning, as I turn the light on in the kitchen, I think about the ants, the effect of the warm breath whispered on their bodies. How the sudden beam of light might derail them slightly. I press the switch and inevitably the bulb's brightness bamboozles me as well, as if the floor suddenly turned into a slanted and warmer surface. By the time I reach the sink, the momentary flicker settles, and everything returns to what it is: my kitchen, a North facing room damp and freezing cold.

During the night the ants reconquer the territory lost under the evening sponge wipe out, and in the morning, they spread anew around the biscuit tin, the oil bottle, all the way to the sink. Their scattering conceals a fierce determination, task driven and relentless.

There seems to be a fearsome centre, a knot, a weight keeping them close to the diameter along which they move. Before wiping them away with vinegar, 'the best way' to annihilate them, according to my mother, I follow the lines traced by their invisible pheromone trail, tiny dots that hurry through their day, the extension of their restlessness. And the nonsense of it all.

On Sunday afternoons the little one and I go for walks. The gloomier the weather, the fiercer our determination to go out and walk.

Because it is often windy, and wet, and no one really cares, we wear old, ragged clothes [otherwise discarded]. She put on the same worn-out trainers and her brother's torn tracksuits bottoms. 'You can have this,' she said handing me her sister's bleached hoody. Since her siblings left for Uni, going out for walks on Sundays is what we do to escape the silent house where my husband prepares his lessons under the hideous kitchen light.

Recent studies show that walking is strongly related to cerebral activity: there is a strong connection between acute mind activity and legs in motion. When we walk, our neurological system is active. The cortex, the frontal part of the brain, is where information of movement is processed, but it is also the part of the brain which becomes very active during thinking tasks.

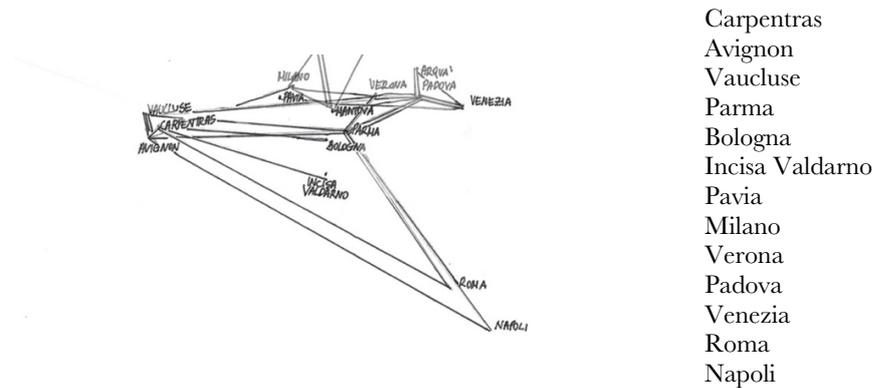
That explains for instance why we sometimes stop mid walking when a sudden thought catches up with us, as if the brain needs a moment to readjust to the extra load of information, or, conversely, why walking at a regular pace allows the relentless pondering over the same thought.

In the *Canzoniere* Francesco is often found walking away when he thinks of Laura. Measuring steps is a way to enter a distinctive mood, almost a method, a *modus operandi*: walking until something appears, walking to make something disappear. A way to release the body whilst delving further into his unrest, because movement is a false perception, there is no progression, only a circular, spiralling accumulation.

Stare nescio, Petrarca repeats in his letters.

I can't keep still.

One afternoon I draw a map of his restlessness, joining the dots, routes crossed over and over.



During our walks we don't talk much. We particularly don't talk about school. Not since last month's parents evening.

'She is going through a rough patch,' the teachers said.

'Struggling', I explained to my husband walking back from school, but thinking rather making no progress, regressing.

'Fidgety?'

'The teachers mean that she can't keep still.'

'So?' What annoyed him most was the fact that restlessness was considered a problem, and not a particularity.

As we set off, sometimes we quarrel about which route to take. She likes walking from park to park, between residential areas and council estates. She likes mapping out our neighbouring worlds according to the smell. As we move from British to Indian, and Far-Eastern neighbourhoods, she lists to me the spices they use to

prepare their food, and mention recipes I have never heard of.

‘There is a lack of smells in the Canzoniere’, I say aloud during one of our walks. I know she finds my obsession tiresome, but she is kind enough not to ignore me completely when I mention it.

‘Scents’, she says, ‘would be a better word’.

Of course, I prefer the sombre atmosphere of the old railway where it is silent, where the straight track disappears in the distance under thick barren branches. The smell of rotten wood and mulching leaves. On the trudged lane, the deep creases on the mud are new deep lines around our mouth, lovers who get old but don’t stop sniggering. A deep cut I press my boots in, enjoying the squelch.

Sometimes after school we sit together in my studio. The room is the illustration of the neglect I am applying to the whole house, like a paint, only concentrated. Once this lack of domestic order would have thrown me off, but now I don't really care (mind! don't use that word!) my attention has shifted. I don't see the mess. Under the two windows overlooking the old oak trees and the roundabout, the little one sits at the head of the table, and I at the longer side. After her schoolwork, she takes out sheets of white paper and draws in silence.

'What are you drawing?'

'Nothing.'

With a ballpen she forms delicate outlines of faces, girls mainly, who live in neat houses attached to trees. She fills the outlines with perfectly aligned strokes of colour. Not a smudge in her felt-tip work. As controlled and unpredictable as the psoriasis on her back.

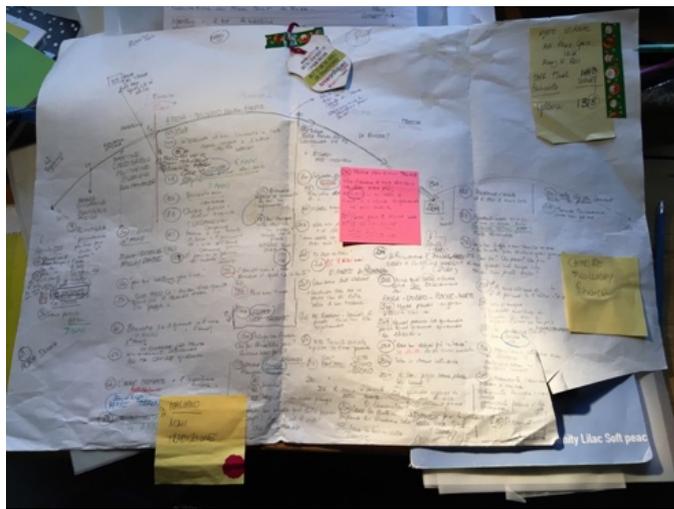
'What are *you* drawing?' She doesn't lift the pen.

'A map.'

'Let me guess,' she says moving her sheet away and sliding a blank one in front of her. She lifts her gaze pointing her chin at the large sheet in front of me, 'Looks like you are writing a yearlong shopping list.'

It is believed that Petrarca was in possess of the first map of Italy made for King Robert of Naples and reported extant as late as 1601. Now lost.

According to his correspondence, in his old age Petrarca took on map travelling : ‘Therefore, I decided to travel on a tiny map, so that in the course of an hour I could go to those shores and return as many times as I liked...not only unscathed but unwearied too.’



Mapping the *Canzoniere* is helpful to tame restlessness, and a good mental exercise in the matter of convergences. On the map I transcribed selected numbered poems and added an extra mark with a rose pencil for everything that felt particularly relevant. There are certain things *I* see better in the contemporaneity and interactivity of a functional map where I could scribble arrows and add colours. For instance, the change of seasons grafted onto the passing years. The change of moods grafted onto the seasons because Time enters the equation early in the *Canzoniere*, its circular rhythm is its mute sound, a dark shadow, the brain-eating worm.

Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro/ per la pieta' del suo factore i rai

The entrance of Santa Chiara, on the day Petrarca saw Laura for the first time 'in the first hour', a prosaic three in the afternoon, is a narrow, thick, wood panelled door, in a severe square building within the complex of the Clarisse convent. When the convent was founded, in the thirteenth Century, the only clock would have been a sundial. Time must have been important for the Clarisse nuns, although they measured it differently through the rhythm of their prayers, the day divided into three sections of eight hours, or four sections of six hours.

The day when the sun's rays lose their brightness in mourning for the death of their creator is the 6th of April 1327, a Holy Friday. In the catholic liturgy, the day marks the end of the forty days of the Passion of Jesus: his death on the cross. On that day, masses are suspended, but people would still go to church to attend vigils and kneel at the bleeding body on the cross. The body would be covered for the occasion with a shiny purple cloth until his Resurrection, two days later.

The sense of baffled surprise; the arrow's point of entrance is this time through the eyes straight to the heart. How I like the fact that this pagan scene happens in Church, during the Easter vigil. The entire generative contradiction of the Canzoniere is hidden in this scene. The cauda of the sonnet is a murmuring objection: that Cupid was unfair to hit him so hard and not even show Laura the bow. There it is: the first tiny shift to the left, or right, out of trajectory. With the cauda, *their* story begins.

Not just falling in love, nor being in love after twenty years, but recording it. Every day of his life has been measured by a sense of yearning, that measurement, which is the essence of the Canzoniere. A returning clock to break the relentless passing of time. Sifting through the sonnets, I made the connections, my dots, with the past ten years, and now I report them on the map. The circularity of it all.

The map is also a declaration of intent on my part. It might help to find a way by which one (I) can follow it as a story, find the narrative arch, if there is one, internal symmetries; contradictions perhaps; even turning points. To find their story to understand ours better. [‘There is no story’, you’d say here.]

On the A3 page orderly I jot down words that you said, or text which you sent in the last ten years. Next to the entries sometimes I file the date and the time (that is the time of your ‘last seen’ of that day), adding another layer to this madness.

When I look at Petrarca’s words next to my ‘last seen’, our stories side by side on one sheet of A3, it is only a flicker, but for a dazzling moment this maddening delusion seems grow into a shape, and the map becomes our moving dot-to-dot game, on which we travel side by side every day: our virtual travelling.

But the bamboozlement is soon over, the grey sky presses at the windows, the map disappears again into a yearlong shopping list and the reason I do this might be just to train us both to sit still.

Petrarca, it is believed, owned a miniature portrait of Laura which he always carried with him. He mentions the portrait in his letters. Her expression, he says, not so stern, her downcast eyes encourage me to talk because it looks as though she is listening, her gaze resting on a vague low point in front of her.



The original miniature portrait is now lost, but a Sixteenth Century copy survives in the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence. Made by an anonymous.

Would it change the quality of her downcast gaze if we knew whether he showed Simone Martine, the painter of the portrait, the pew in Santa Chiara where she might be sitting to attend Mass? The portrait is supposedly taken in 1337. Could Francesco read through the subtle change of the expressions of her face by then, ten years after he met her for the first time? Did he *want* her eyes downcast in the portrait? Did he know her map by then?

He always carried the portrait with him but never composed one in verse. Every time he tries to praise her beauty, he says, *l'ingegno s'agghiaccia*, his ability freezes. He handles it better one detail at a time: eyes, hair, the sound of her voice, her smile.

I too would struggle with a full portrait of you but recognise the downcast eyes. If I think of one detail of you it is your eyelashes, blond as children on holiday.

When she realises Francesco's feelings, Laura lowers her gaze and covers herself with a veil to avoid what could be a distressing eye contact.

*'Lassare il velo o per sole o per ombra, donna, non vi vid'io poi
che in me conosceste il gran desio
poi ch'Amor vi fece accorta, fuor i biondi capelli allor velati, et
l'amoroso sguardo in sé raccolto.'*

Petrarca's attempt to describe her elusiveness, the first of numerous variations, is a good synthesis of what you have been doing over the last decade.

Other veils that you have used extensively (sometimes two or three at a time):

Book
Baseball hat
Tent Pole
Vases
Shutters
Hideous Australian hat
Orthogonal positioning of the sunbed
Plain back

Since you became aware of my desire you never failed to cover your eyes and lower your gaze in my presence. Baseball hats, sunglasses, books have been your props for so long now, that I hardly have the strength to imagine what it is that you have been hiding.

According to some critics, the only places where Petrarca attempts to draw portraits of Laura are in the sestinas. *Laurea*, her name made of six letters, everything about the number 6 is Laura). ‘The sestinas,’ they say, ‘are special portraits, where the woman becomes the landscape.’

Sestinas were considered an intricate lyrical problem, amongst the most challenging compositions. In six stanzas of six hendecasyllables each, the same six words alternate at the end of each verse. The order of the rhyming scheme follows a backwards movement, an inverted numerical progression, which mirrors the disposition of the numbers from 1 to 6 on the die. The rhyming scheme is called *retrogradatio cruciata*, or centripetal permutation. A cerebral, virtuoso solitary effort.

The technical challenge was a way to overcome the emotional shutdown *l'ingegno s'agghiaccia* triggered by her physical attributes. It makes sense. Other critics suggest that the arduous challenge is supposed to perform, mime, act out on the page the obstacles, the rejections, the rebuffs that the lover has overcome to reach the beloved.

Or an act of onanism

The intricate mechanism of the sestina stages a courting dance, a troubled manoeuvring between lovers: an easier portrait to draw. Petrarca overcomes his unease by staging it: in the sestinas he performs the struggle of composing the portrait.

Sestina 66. On my map I wrote 'bellissima' (in blue). I guess the first line, the fog and grey sky, those wintery words sounding so like Emily Bronte, was what attracted me straight away. Your coldness is what attracted me straight away. It is defying reason that even now when I should well be over you and all this, even now, if I am honest, it still feels like winter when you are not there.

66. The double six points straight at Laura, saying this is about her, (and no doubt it is). Petrarca reels, wobbles, wavers through the six rhyming words: *nebbia, venti, pioggia, fiumi, valli, ghiaccio* (fog, winds, rain, rivers, valleys, ice), while in the depth of a narrow valley, capped by a heavy sky, Francesco is trudging the wet soil in a hostile wintery landscape (the misty grey light of an early morning. The air, *l'aura*, Laura, is also a place in Francesco's heart.)

*L'aere gravato e l'importuna nebbia
compressa intorno da rabbiosi venti.
Heavy sky and hostile fog
smothered by furious winds.
Et io nel cor via più freddo che ghiaccio
o di gravi pensier tal una nebbia
In my heart colder than ice
fog wraps my heavy thoughts*

Along the six stanzas he trudges through the slanted coldness of her gaze and her glacial silence. But as Francesco moves forward along the valley, Petrarca commands the rhyming scheme to a backward direction, walking forward thinking back. The reason a sestina is also considered by some the meter of memory. And so, the permutation of its elements is a progressive advance towards a memory: an image from the past still lingering, hovering, haunting. The six stanzas build up the moment when something turns and opens up. This happens in the *chiosa*. In the last three lines the obstacles are finally overcome, the task is completed, the rhyming words are tamed for the final thrust.

Ma. But. The twisting adversative turns around suddenly to face the blustery wind but it captures

instead amongst clouds and icy rain a sunbeam escaped from the mute sky.

*Ma non fuggio già mai nebbia per venti
come quell dì, ne mai fiumi per pioggia
né ghiaccio quando il sole apre le valli.*

In a final, arresting movement *quell dì*, that day, appears finally clear from icy mist and gusting winds. It lands where memory is pointing, towards light, where a sun beam cuts through the grey clouds. What Francesco saw that day might have been a permutation in her expression, one elusive smile escaped from Laura's muslin veil, a moment of weakness. A permutation of its elements – the rhyming words in a sestina are like the changing, returning elements of moods grafted in years. Like the permutation of the expression on a face. That slanted look is such a perfect synthesis of her, and of you, but you see?, it leaves us, Francesco, and I, the story's fools, doing the talk, wandering, and wondering.

Other critics claim that sestinas are milestones suggesting a direction, even a structure perhaps. Amongst the large majority of sonnets (317) and songs (29), there are, carefully laid along the way, only 9 sestinas. Not scattered at all, they mark a progression in the story, a change of the mood.

If there is symmetry in our stories by now, after ten years of falling in love, I might be ready to enter the second phase of detachment, and sublimation, though I feel everything but spiritual about you.

Behind her, rather through her, I see you, champion of indifference. It is a strange, spellbinding moment.

Well, the winter elements are in fact melting into a warm September afternoon.

You looked down at the bench behind me. A distant, remote gaze. My Laura.

‘I’ll probably see you next summer,’ you said.

From the small modern square, we had walked along the canals to this bench overlooking a pond where swans and ducks bathed in the warm September afternoon. We had walked to this bench where we sat following the soft free lines the ducks drew on the water surface, whilst our bodies clung stiffly to each other.

When we kissed on the bench in the park, your kiss felt incomplete, like wading through a resistance, a difficult, elusive ground through which I stumbled, accepted, and rejected. I tried to be patient, determined to arrange my rhyming words, permutating their sounds against your lips, but you would not give in.

We sat until the arms of my watch said four o’clock and I stood to leave. By then it had already happened, I had already said that word back in the small modern square, and you had been listening.

You looked down, somehow resigned, and said what you said.

The clarity of your trajectory stuns me now for its precision. For this was your *chiosa*, which slashed the soft blue sky of that afternoon, a slanted blade that tore the deceptive blueness and revealed behind it the bleakness of the winters ahead, the rain, the winds, the heavy grey clouds through which we would walk our way forward, away from each other.

Yet, where memory is pointing, the contradictive knot, for you can’t imagine how many times I have been walking through the hours of that afternoon, the

numbers of the dice have long moved from that aloof, downcast gaze. Because your *chiosa* was a result of what had happened before, of what I had said before.

When interlacing your hands with mine, after we had a cranberry juice in the small modern square, you became very still until I too stopped fidgeting and we both sat quietly. Then you rested elbows on knees and turned to face me,

‘What do you want?’ Your gaze piercingly serious looked at me from a lower point. I noticed that you added my name, for emphasis.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

Everything that followed, the ten years which followed that afternoon in September up to this moment, everything started and stood on the empty foundation of my little trick of a word. It should be considered that you did ask in Italian, *cosa vuoi?*, you said, and I am just translating the *niente* into nothing to make it perhaps more credible. To me today mainly, as I write this. And I might have been sincere, as for a moment it did occur to me to look at our lives ahead, at our families, the youngest child not yet four, the commitments, the complications. Everything was against us. We were impossible. And you were listening.

If a sestina tests a lover’s stamina and determination, who of us showed more determination that day? At four, feeling rejected by your hesitant kiss, I stood and left.

Knowing your map as I do now, how reserved, and self-restrained, how undemonstrative, and reticent you are, it feels miraculous that you acquiesced to that intimacy in full light. But no satisfying force was returning my thrust, and no real resistance held its weight. Performing physical intimacy is natural for Mediterranean people, but you are not.

That day you made the journey, cancelled your appointments and meetings, ‘personal reasons’ you had

told your secretary; you had planned for a change of clothes the night before, left the office just after you arrived, stood the doubts of the two hour journey. You crossed the distance, overcame the obstacles, and walked the underpass to meet me at twelve in the small modern square, where, when you bent to kiss me, I ducked and kissed your neck instead. It is just so typical of me to think that my searching kiss was a sestina and your journey to me wasn't.

'Nothing.'

So, our next ten years stood on the deceptively empty foundation of my little trick of a word *niente* uttered in Italian. Deceptively empty, because the fact that you used a foreign idiom to ask the question and I, consequently, answered in my natural language, mutually changes the foundation of what we were saying. You were already entering the possible worlds of the speculative, whilst I didn't really mean what I said. I mean I didn't mean what you think I said. *Niente* doesn't only mean nothing. *Niente* means, don't worry, no bother, it'll be fine, we'll see, it's not a problem. I googled it: *Niente means nothing or anything and it refers to things*. But you took it so literally.

‘Can you scratch my back?’

As we walk, I press my nails gently between her shoulder wings and move in little steps along her spine, like when she was little. She says it helps to release the itchiness. The area covered with psoriasis on her back has expanded into inflamed, bleeding blotches.

‘You and your brother never had anything like it,’ my mother offers her wisdom, slightly annoyed.

Now when we walk, she brings her phone. She shows me a map of the UK on the screen. Figurines, or avatars, shuffle their heads like Chinese cats.

‘What’s that?’

‘Snap Maps. Maps. On Snapchat.’

She is happy to be able to find out where her friends are. Under the figurines, their names appear next to a status bar: ‘Seen Now’, ‘Seen x minutes ago’, or ‘Last seen’, she explains, ‘depending on how long ago they signed off’.

A slight fuzz, a short electrical vibration tickles the sides of my neck when she shows me the ‘last seen’.

‘Where are you?’

She shows me a figurine with no face.

‘Why?’

‘They are not called faces, mum, they are Bitmoji.’

It is easy to become trapped and tangled in the haze of one’s thoughts. Complicated numerical schemes matched with a total lack of communication can cause a temporary loss of referential function, a detachment from reality, a place where the possible form of us is just a crazy permutation of numbers.

A brave side of me tries to accept that the meaning of ‘us’ could be just that for now: existing in different places at the same time. Existing on the same map, waving our hands like Chinese cats.

'Trust that you are where you should be,' the yoga teacher often says.

The ants are becoming braver by the day. It is not unusual that during colder months ants look for shelter inside the house, particularly if they find a good source for their foraging. I have tried with salt, but they dug into it, like children playing with snow. Ignoring my sponge dripping with vinegar, they tirelessly keep coming and going, industrious and stubborn.

Now, when I stare at your profile pictures, reading your map, I look at the direct smile you offer to the camera, to your wife, the one who most likely took the picture. When I look at your profile pictures, though part of me believes they are there to tell me something, what I see is you smiling at her lovingly.

Consequently, I have become less squeamish. Pressing my index finger on the black dots, I collect three or four ants at a time and with a flick send them flying into the sink.

Ma

Ma: 'The interval, the blankness that creates a regular, rhythmic reoccurrence between fullness.'

The days are short and the evenings long. During the winter semester I teach till late. Away from WhatsApp for the entire afternoon, I feel exhausted but stronger. One night after the lessons I walk into the library and borrow the book.

In 1961, Ernst Wilkins published *Life of Petrarch*, a 'critical' biography based on his works and more than six hundred letters. 'Petrarch was the most remarkable man of his time; and he is one of the most remarkable men of all time.'

Page 2. The contents is a list of dates and places, a sequence which somehow captures both men's essence. Wilkins' hurry to cover the first half of his life, until he was forty and famous, in seven chapters. By pg. 17 it is all done. A detailed account of each year after his coronation follows, one chapter for every remaining year of his life (twenty-eight in total), till pg. 249. The silence around those first forty years is irritating and pleasing at the same time.

Pg. 19 'There was indeed in his nature a certain restlessness. [...] As a result of his readiness to shift his attention from one task to another, he ultimately left several works unfinished.'

Not restlessness. Unrest
you texted once.

Petrarca moved through countries, lands, and cities as through projects, hungry for fame and validation, [here is a man who had very little time to think about Laura, but Wilkins is of the idea that fame and Laura were the same: Laura/Laurea]

When it rains, like today, the vibrations of the traffic coming from the roundabout hit my hip bone through the work top in a denser, heavier, sexier way. On my fingers, the brown cover feels velvety. People wrapped in scarfs walk briskly, head down. I have learnt to admire the way people walk in this country, their battered shoes, their no-nonsense clothes, their trudging sense of purpose.

The phone rings. My mother's favourite time to call, nine, will never change so I have stopped answering in the morning. This slash of rain would abhor her anyway, where here, ladies her age march on, with rain bonnets and shopping carts, grudgingly forward.

Restless (or shifting?) I kill an ant. It tickles. The companions, initially confused, tap the antennae at the splotch, but soon create a new route around it. The ants are not restless. There is a sheer, blind determination in their movements focused on sublimating the body through the accomplishment of tasks.

In the evening, when we both run out of practical tasks, as a way to sublimation, I put on Art documentaries, which also helps to sending my husband straight to sleep. Last night I was transfixed by the raspberry red of his skin devastated by acne. What if the little one's splotches spread to her face? Andrew Warhola Jr. naturalised Andy Warhol, of Austro-Hungarian origin, grew up in Pittsburgh. There he returned at the end of his life to set up the Andy Warhol Museum. Closing the circle and slapping the ass of the bullies of his adolescence.

The museum is the largest collection of Warhol's art works, and it also includes his archive. In labelled cardboard containers the size of a shoe box, he collected objects. Each a portrait of a year of his life. His *time capsules* contain photos, letters, tickets, postcards but also lipsticks, dry flowers, dirty pants, birthday cakes, half eaten hotdogs. The piece of hot dog from 1992 is a provocation but mainly for the curators who are still in the process of opening the twenty plus boxes.

We are not to unpack his randomness, to know what memory he attached to the hot dog. That's personal. The Proustian itemization is touching, yet I would like to know the ratio between what was his and what had been given to him by lovers, friends, other people, beside the 'What for?' A queer way to transcend time [the immortality of art and all that], or a self-punishing exercise to measure and endure it? Now Pittsburgh has taken on the idea and members of the community are creating their own time capsules to form a *collective* Time capsule for the city of Pittsburgh which will contain the story of its immigrants.

(Young) mothers do that (my mother did and mother-in-law didn't, go figure). A memory box for each child, but I find the idea of closing the early possessions of my children into a shoe box upsetting more than anything. I have kept their tiny shoes, but they live scattered around the house as ornaments next to vases, on chest

of drawers or on shelves in the kitchen next to other silly objects of my liking.

In the past, my boxes had been lists of everything that happened [*nothing* happened you'd say] during one year: if that summer you brought some tobacco for me, if you wrote something nice in a text, if I managed to talk to you alone and said something not too stupid, some random symmetries between last seen and profile pictures, if we brushed against each other briefly, secretly.

If I were to time-capsule this secret life that I have shared with you in the last decade, whether you know it or not, whether you *accept* it or not, I wouldn't need a big box. Yellow things, from the time you brought me some yellow tobacco one summer, and train tickets of my trips to London. The truth is that I do not have anything which belongs to you. Even in this respect you have managed to remain invisible. There is nothing, in any case, nothing that goes beyond a digital presence.

Yet those tickets, like my children's possessions, live scattered in coats' pockets, random bags, tobacco pouches. They survive to surprise me sometimes, when out of the blue, they emerge from oblivion, and I find myself pressing their hardened edges onto my infected finger to release their essence.

Wilkins: 'He had a mild fetish for precious objects perhaps: codes, coins, maps.'

Fetish is a strong word for a collection of objects. Once paying for a silly biscuit tin box I told the cashier, suddenly feeling that I had to justify myself, I said that I had a fetish for tin boxes. The little one next to me froze and blushed.

'Could you please don't use that word when I am around', she said as we left the shop. 'I don't want to know what get you off.'

And since when does the little one says *get off*?

Petrarca was obsessed with his Vergil, the book he always carried with him. There he returned over the

years, making notes on the margins with dates and locations. Francesco's secret folder is not the Vergil but what the critics call *codice degli abbozzi*, the heart of the *Canzoniere*. A handful of scattered white sheets, a sketch book of twenty-five sonnets and the first eighty lines of a song, all written between 1336 and 1338.

[As for me, no yellow bikini, shells or train tickets would ever compete with the folder of all the profiles photos of you I saved in my phone, contravening your intimation of deleting everything, always.]

In those years, between 1336 and 1338 amidst the restless travelling, he buys a small house in the district of Vaucluse. 'Vaucluse *was not* Avignon,' Wilkins writes, 'and Vaucluse *was* Vaucluse: two compelling reasons to live there.' Meaning, I suppose, that Vaucluse was close enough to Avignon (Laura) but also distant enough. Though Wilkins portrays a man enjoying his solitary life, those first sonnets are images of a man on the run, they describe a void rather than a stable centre.

Like my train tickets, those first scattered sonnets survive to prick his heart, when out of the blue, they emerge from oblivion,

io non so d'onde

I don't know whereof

to release the essence of Laura.

From the letters of that period, it is possible to follow his movements on a map. Like the tour in the North of Europe. It is 1333. He is twenty-nine. Curious, restless yes, but also heartbroken.

‘I will try to forget what is left in Avignon.’

At the beginning of June, he is in Cologne from where he travels for more than forty days on his own, he crosses the Ardennes on horse back, then on boats along the Rhine, with little food and little shelter. ‘Through wild and dangerous forest, I wander singing, because the only thing that I really fear is her, not this darkness.’

Io l’ò negli occhi, she is in my eyes.

‘I see her shape in firs, hear her voice in birds’ chirping and waters’ murmur. No matter how far away, I still feel the knot, *il nodo*, that ties me to her.’

As he gets closer to Avignon, a sense of anxiety grows within, the well-known torment of being close to someone you love, the well-experienced torture of being submitted to opposite forces. A force both centrifugal and centripetal determined his movements, something able to attract and reject him at the same time. Laura is not just a point on a map, but the main coordinate upon which Francesco’s movements acquire a dimension, and a meaning. The centrifugal force of his wandering and travelling is determined by ‘what is left in Avignon’, movements that seem to be always measured against Laura’s fixity.

On the radio last week, a young Japanese architect spoke passionately about ‘the first UK exhibition to focus on Japanese domestic architecture from 1945 to today.’ The exhibition at the Barbican felt surprisingly relevant, so applicable to my everyday situation, so appropriate as cognitive background to explain things otherwise more difficult to explain, that Japanese architecture became something I ought to be more aware of, something that I should consider with

attention, the exhibition something that by necessity and without doubts I must see.

I send apologetic emails to cancel today's lessons. No one will be home before four anyway to check on me and by then it will be already too late to change plans. Before setting off, I check the freezer, and leave a note on the counter. The keys are in the usual place.

London is my Avignon. Outside Euston, a sudden gust of cold wind makes me wobble. London doesn't waste time to make you feel obsolete. I too feel the knot, and the fear.

Peregrinus ubique, Wilkins indulges this self-eponym of Petrarca. A peregrinus is by definition *persona non grata*.

peregre, adverb: outside the city walls. I always felt a *persona non grata*. I think you even used it in a text once.

But it could be just the fact that I have never walked to the Barbican from Euston. Google Maps shows that I am wandering dangerously close to the tangled ball of streets which enclosed your office. I circumnavigate the knot, dreading, and secretly hoping, to run into you. How bad could it be? You would stop on your feet to regain balance, and wait for me to come closer, [say my name with a mixture of mockery and tenderness, spinning my command of English out the window], ask why I am here, [expecting to hear that I am here to see you 'A Japanese what?'], shake your head ['Never been to the Barbican']. The fantasy of a *persona non grata*.

In the first room, in a black and white video of the shades of an outdoor structure, a long series of poles, called gates, move through time. The poles project their shifting pattern on a sandy floor. This is a visual representation of the concept of 'mah'.

When Arata Isozaki, architect, urbanist and theorist organised in 1978 an exhibition in Tokyo called 'ma time-space in Japan', for the first time the concept was interrogated as a link underlying the entirety of Japan's traditional culture. In the following years during its various, but intermittent, appearance in Europe (Paris, Stockholm and the USA), confronted with the western culture, the concept proved to be difficult for a non-Japanese person to understand. Even Isozaki, his acolytes say, had seemed to struggle to find the words, almost becoming a different person when he tried to explain the concept in English. 'There is a margin of denial. The more it is interrogated, the more elusive it becomes.'

Be it in the garden, windows, walls, rooms, flowers compositions, the attention, according to this elusive concept, is shifted on the empty space, the interval, the blankness that creates a regular, rhythmic reoccurrence between fullness. Ma is the in between space. Not a lack of space. Not absence but a different quality of presence. The perfect cognitive background to make sense of things otherwise difficult to understand.

In the last room, a refreshing short video by Isao Tsujimoto, director of the Japanese Foundation in New York, simplifies ma for the western audience. There is lots of pausing in his short speech, as if he is also *enacting* ma for the western audience.

'Ma means empty, distance, blankness. Even in daily conversation with Japanese there are lots of ma. There is always a sense of difference between that kind of sense of time (timing?) between Japanese and Western, especially Americans. In conversation with American people, you need to keep talking. So, I think people have a kind of fear of having ma between my talk and

your talk. But somehow Japanese people have a sense to enjoy that kind of blankness.'

Our daily, elusive, intermittent 'conversations' on WhatsApp make some sense if considered through the cognitive background of ma.

I worked on my intervals today. I haven't been on WhatsApp once. So close, yet so far.

It was Farringdon, not far from here. A restaurant not far, a Portuguese place where a colleague of yours had been recently and said it was nice. The winter following the day in September, when I left you standing by the bench, after my trick of a word. No baseball hat or sunglasses this time, but a blue paletot, suit, and tie, you walked briskly towards me. It took some effort to reconcile the man of summer days to this corporate specimen of the city. No golden eyelashes but red eyed.

‘Sorry I am late,’ you said opening the flanks of the paletot with your hands tucked in the pockets, ‘I was in a meeting.’ This was said in light reprimand, looking at my low-cut jumper.

The waiter took our coats and led us to the back of a grey room where tall windows overlooked a brick courtyard with big leafy plants. ‘I asked for a nice table’, you said, pleased. Back straight, you put the phone next to the plate and checked the time, ‘Meeting at half past two.’

As we waited for the Serrano ham you ordered for both of us, ‘the meat tastes of the mushrooms the wild boars feed on’, (your colleague became a third figure sitting between us), you scrolled through the pictures on your phone to show me the new puppy, telling the story of him weeing on your new rug (how many times had you already told this story?) For the first time I saw the neutral tones of your house, admittedly boring, the dark wooden floor of the room, all in tone with the beige fur of the puppy, which was sweet.

‘So,’ with two fingers you grabbed a slice of Serrano ham and dropped it in your mouth, ignoring the stains of olive oil left on the starched tablecloth.

‘So,’ proper as to impart a lesson but mostly pathetic, I cut one slice with knife and fork.

As if inspired by the chunky piece of meat that you were chewing, ‘I am married,’ you said, tucking your feet under the chair, to help you swallow the mouthful. I was grateful to the serrano ham, now a ball stuck

midway in my throat, because it helped me to buy some time. I stared at the drops of olive oil soaking the tablecloth, your clipped nails, your ringed finger. I took a sip of the red wine,

‘Do you love her?’

‘Yes.’

The promptness of your answer turned me into the serrano ham you seemed so keen to taste, now a ball of fat and sinews stuck in your throat. Or the stain of wee on the new rug. A most impressive image of the *persona non grata*.

But a *peregrinus* is someone who, by definition, keeps going.

‘Just a form of us,’ I muttered, trying to detangle some flesh from my teeth.

‘A what?’

It took you a few moments to process. To realise that I was answering the question you had come to ask in September. Only fair you took your time. It took me five months to come up with an answer.

‘Us,’ I bravely put a finger in my mouth to dislodge the serrano, and repeated myself to give you some more time, ‘I want us. In any possible form.’

Your forearms rest on the table, careful to avoid the oil drops, and crossed your feet in a knot under the chair tilting slightly forward, not toward me, beyond me. As if you were interrogating the small courtyard, considering the dash of green moss on the cement slabs, the leafy plants now wet and almost black, an exotic space where a form of *us* might exist.

‘Mah,’ you sighed eventually.

In Italian, depending on its position at the beginning or end of a sentence, *ma* means doubt, uncertainty, indecision. The addition of the ‘h’ at the end suggests unrest, resignation, bitterness. It is one of your favourite words. Undoubtedly perfect for someone with as little time as you.

As the Barbican is undoubtedly perfect for the Japanese exhibition: silenced traffic, the flapping of pigeons, a regular, dynamic pattern of dark corridors, concrete courtyards, still water, spiralling stairs: a brutal Japanese garden. Here is the place where I feel most at ease, [when I am so close to you]. Here I am close enough but out of touch. The epitome of my Avignon.

The meaning of 'ma' in Italian has no connection *whatsoever* with the Japanese 'ma', and yet I can't help seeing connections. For instance, the fact that in Italian 'ma' is either interjection or conjunction. A doubtful, silent sigh *or* an adversative interruption, the equivalent of an empty space between two poles in a Japanese garden. 'Ma' merges fullness and blankness: time and space [and its intervals]. A knot of complexity, but not as far as you are concerned.

I open WhatsApp for the first time today. You have just been there.

‘I will try to forget what is left in Avignon.’

The knot around which Francesco gravitates, unable to detangle the contradiction within, constantly attracted and rejected, *by definition* attracted and rejected, *inevitably* attracted and rejected, like blankness attracts fullness, the knot is hidden in the *codice degli abbozzi*, written in those years, between 1336 and 1338. The last lines of the uncompleted first song, a lump as central as it is unfathomable.

*mi aperse il petto e il core mi prese
con mano dicendo: di ciò non far parola/
e mi lascia sbigottito come un sasso*

She tore my chest open,
took my heart and said: tell no one,
and left me stunned like a stone.

‘What is left in Avignon,’ is this. Laura grabs his heart but intimates him to tell no one. This is a complex lump, a knot of contradictions: an intimation, a declaration of intents, a threat, a challenge? Tell no one, she says.

Enough of a knot to be the centre of the whole *Canzoniere*, to store the energy needed for the (nine) future editions, the rest of his life, during which she slowly releases her fist. In terms of time capsule this moment is the one, as much as London, the Portuguese restaurant is mine, where the impossible resides. A lump of contradictions. The centre from which an intermittent frequency has started, that syncopated hiccup of my last ten years, oscillating through time and space. Such a perfect lump to hold in my throat.

Wilkins, pg. 252 ‘His love for Laura was not returned, but it continued, though eventually fading, until her death, after which it remained as a cherished memory.’

The self-celebratory arrogance of St. Paul guards the city walls, it dominates the skyline with the self-assurance of its privilege. I paid the entrance ticket [£15 which of course, only tourists, *peregrini*, would pay to enter]. Here people wrapped in tweed scarves rush along the Millennium bridge, swaying tote bags. Their stride descends from within the city wall, carrying with their shopping an equal weight of self-worth.

I wonder if now that I am so close against the city walls, you detect my physical presence as a fastidious twitch on your neck, a little hitch on your scalp. If I sent you a message with a picture of Saint Paul, proof of my insolent trespassing, would you left swipe me or would you turn instinctively towards the bridge where I am standing now?

The ring of the phone startles me.

‘How was school?’

‘Good.’

‘180.’

‘Leave it on 10 minutes before you put the pizzas in.’

‘I know.’ [for God’s sake, it’s just two pizzas in an oven]

‘Sorry, I’ll be late.’

On this narrow strip of metal above the river, I am a still dot amongst a flow of people swept by gusts of cold wind, miles away from where I could be of better use, where the little one is left to guess the temperature of the oven (it is written on the packaging!), where my husband will leave his keys and his gloves on the kitchen counter next to the salad spinner, where people are still grudgingly marching on, in the other direction. An even number, a 2, would be enough to make me swipe off the little guilt that I still feel, because my knot, I know, my centre is here.

In another sonnet in the *codice degli abbozzi* Francesco is walking away from Avignon. At every step he turns around to draw in the air still saturated by Laura’s presence, every step he takes away from her measures the void, but a sudden thought interrupts his stride: how will I survive away from her? Love answers promptly,

‘It is lovers’ privilege not being human,’ Love says. ‘It is lovers’ privilege to live a disjointed form of life, where the body is in one place and the spirit miles away.’

We have been very privileged. The body spending his days typing numbers, selling and buying air, in a place guarded by the perky arrogance of the *cupola*, whilst the spirit miles away bakes pizzas in the oven, or chase ants, or watches people walking along the pavement. Or the other way around, for, who knows? I might be the body, and you, the spirit, might be wishing to linger in my North facing kitchen infested by ants.

Sometimes the effect that distance and longing have on people is to transform everything into an inescapable synaesthesia, where all that one does, touches, sees and breathes becomes part of the same yearning. But in the process of becoming a living synaesthesia, things simplify into one single quality.

M'è rimasta nel pensier la luce
The memory of her is light

In absence, Laura becomes light.

At 19.00 I open WhatsApp and you are online.

This phone contains all our mas, the intervals (time obviously, but space too). The daily variation of our 'last seen', our dots, the intervals command the space, and time, I move in and the effect they have on me is immediate and pervasive. Whatever your 'last seen', it pervades me, and all the things that surround me, in a form of crazy synaesthesia, where everything simplifies into the sense of love that I feel when you are online, or I find 08.02; or the sense of anger and despair when you haven't opened your WhatsApp for more than 12 hours.

It is possible that numbers in general, and 'last seen' in particular, affect you in ways that will remain obscure to me. It is possible that you will never explain what it is that you are actually doing all this time on WhatsApp, all these strange hours, all these weird symmetries apparent only to someone, me, who pays a great deal of attention, but for me during the last ten years those numbers have taken over my days. At times even, or so it seems tonight when the little one is baking pizzas on her own (alas), more important than anything else. Everything becomes that number, in absence the quality of you simplifies into your last seen.

A form of us, I think.

You are still online. I want to send a text telling you about the Japanese exhibition, but I decide not to complicate things. So, I just stare at the online, so close yet so far, for as long as it lasts. At 19.02 you leave me on the bridge, but I don't mind because I am suddenly flushed with love.

Ants

In the morning the little one walks into the kitchen startled, and annoyed, to find me sitting at the table instead of the usual place dangling my feet from the work top. She grabs the box from the low cabinet and pours the oats into the bowl I have prepared for her, spilling a good deal of it out. Milk goes into the oat, spilling again, and the microwave door slams.

She hovers behind me,

‘What is it?’



I know straight answers are best, the dialogue is to be limited to a minimum during breakfast, but I am still absorbing the image on my screen.

‘Guess.’

She considers the image for a few moments.

‘Gorgon’s hair.’

Lately she has become obsessed with Greek mythology. A mild obsession compared to mine with the *Canzoniere*, but it is indication however of a change, a new attention to pattern recognition in terms of behavioral responses. This sometimes leads to difficult questions, like the other day when out of the blue she asked me if I *wanted* to be a mother.

‘No.’ I turn around to look at her. ‘It’s too sparse,’ only too late to realise that I keep missing her sense of humor, ‘but great guess.’

The microwave beeps. She gets her bowl, slams the door, and sits next to me scooping up the pulp whilst staring at the gold cascade.

‘What is it then?’

‘It is an ants’ nest.’ The excitement makes vowels and consonants tangle in my tongue.

She flicks one speckle of oat from the rim of the cup hiding her irritation for the conversation, already wearisome, or my pronunciation, always wearisome.

‘A what?’

‘Ants. Nest.’

‘Aww.’

She glances at me checking that I am serious, [I am deadly serious], then observes the screen with a more intense look.

‘Gross.’

‘Yeah.’

‘How do they make it?’

‘They pour liquid metal into it.’

We watch a video on YouTube where a man splashes a silvery boiling liquid into the top of a sand hip.

‘Why?’

‘To create memorabilia.’

‘And remember what?’

Her eyebrows lift cleverly, as they do when she guesses the meaning of a new word using her linguistic connections.

‘The ants nest. And sell it.’

‘You mean people buy it and put it on a shelf?’

‘Between a few hundred to a few thousand. Dollars.’

We stare at the ants’ cascade in silence.

‘Imagine the smell,’ she says eventually.

We fix the screen, smelling burning flesh coming from the kitchen work top.

‘And the noise.’

We hear the crackling small explosion of the ants' bodies when they come to contact with the liquid metal.

She finishes her oats, and drops the bowl in the sink, 'Poor ants,' she says leaving the kitchen and me staring at the screen.

I look around feeling suddenly protective of our ants. I know I need to get rid of them, but perhaps their presence is important for reasons I am not yet able to understand. They might be here to remind me of the existence of something else underneath the simplified surface of my day. And I like that.

After kissing her forehead and tucking her scarf in, I close the door and walk straight into the conservatory, where the phone stays overnight. I open WhatsApp. When your 'last seen' is early, between half past five and six, the time you get up, it suggests unrest and I am satisfied. If it is more recent, more likely a good morning to your wife, I disappear for long hours [long for me mainly], resentful. Today, because of the ants, I open WhatsApp with a more fatalistic mood.

7.55

Whatever.

I open the doors to let out last night's stale smell of smoke, turn on the radio on my phone, and pick up the mugs. Listening to the radio during very essential house chores reminds me of my grandmother, who kept the radio on during the bare essentials of her housekeeping and recorded her life on the calendar on the wall, with the weather, every day, until she died.

On BBC 4 they are talking about number stations, special radio stations that broadcast only sequence of numbers. Auto referentiality, when it is conscious, is charming.

It is speculated that number stations are a remnant of WW2, that the MI5 could be involved, that it is a sort of Morse code in figures. Julius Caesar used to encode his war messages: a shift of three positions from the first letter of the alphabet. It is called the Caesar shift. On bad days we shift following a progression of the number seven, or six, depending on the reason of the annoyance.

[clear away everything except milk and sugar for my husband's later breakfast]. Her bowl is left soaking in water, like her father taught her [soaking means avoid engaging with the mug any further].

The voices of the number stations sound like faked shipping bulletins sent from another world, mocking but mesmerizing.

The pre-recorded voices of the broadcasters are haunting: there is the Spanish lady, the east European male, the Northern lark, the Lincolnshire Poacher. [with the edge of an envelope, delicately guide the small black bodies into the safety of their hole].

The meaning and purpose of these number sequences are unclear. One reason, the expert suggests, is based on pattern recognition, on which our cognitive behavior is based. For some of us recognizing a pattern, even if just in the form of a number sequence, might represent an important source of reassurance. A form of consolation against the chaos that reigns within, feeble proof that some things might be under control, something like a numeric pattern. The comfort of discovering a pattern in the chaos that surround us is simply the beauty and consolation of the hideous known [in the living room fold blankets and plump cushions]. But a pattern for some is a random sequence of numbers to others. [straighten the towels and hang the shower mat to dry in the bathroom].

The journalist and the expert are now walking the streets of London in the attempt to detect a signal. Along the Southbank they suddenly hear the voice of a young male. [from our bedroom leaks the soft snoring of my husband] The male voice is transmitting a sequence of numbers from one to one hundred. Before the expert and the journalist manage to articulate more detailed observations, or find the pattern, the signal fades and disappears. As exciting as it is, there seems to be no sense in why and what the young voice is broadcasting. [make her bed, fold some clothes, steer away from her desk].

My pattern recognition starts in the morning and ends at night, where I stay online for as long as it takes to smoke the last sigarette of the day, waiting for something to happen, that is for you to appear online. Sometimes it does happen, but most days

you don't bother at all, or are already sleeping. Before falling asleep, I lie in bed reviewing the daily sequence, looking for the sequenced pattern of our transmission, because, as maddening as it might sound, on the other side of this reality you broadcast a daily number sequence for me, your only listener.

On the desk, the map of the *Canzoniere* has acquired a tired look: layers of murky coffee stains, felt tip marks, faded post-it quotes have turned it into a hazy landscape, in tune with the general feeling.

7.55 means that you have not bothered to find me this morning, busy or travelling. 5 according to our code, means not available, [when I have classes, the last figure of my last seen is a 5, after which I disappear for two hours], but when you leave a 5, it does, invariably, bother me.

In the last ten years, thanks to this moronic dot-to-dot game, we not only mapped our day, but also the grey tissue of our brain, because now there is hardly anything I do without thinking somehow of you.

7.55

When lost, look for the pattern. I don't know the reason why the numbers on the map have faded quicker, perhaps because I stared at them for too long. The combination of his numbered poems and my 'last seen' add an extra layer of possibilities to the impossible, or random coincidence. Numbering his poems could have been a way to control the fragmentation of the initial scattered white sheets, or an old man trick. The controlling nature of someone living in the past.

I look for figures 5 on the map.

sonnet 35.

The sonnet which long ago initiated the rhythm, even before I became aware of it, the sonnet which started the broadcasting that played in my head before I found my acid green copy, that very first and only sonnet, the very essence of the *Canzoniere* for me is paired to an undescriptive figure 5.

'Read,' the teacher pointed her chin at me with commanding assurance. The neon lights were on, and the cuffs of my pullover still damp, it must

have been winter. Her unusual alertness, [it was revealed to us later that narcolepsy is the clinical name of her condition] so unlike her, condemned me to walk along those lines forever as in a winter day. Standing by the desk I also hear my father's voice declaiming those words with a mix of solemnity and mockery, mostly mockery. He never liked Petrarca, but sometimes would recite this sonnet.

*Solo e pensoso i più deserti campi,
vo misurando a passi tardi e lenti.*

I ponder through solitary fields
with lonesome, slow strides.

A silent conversation with love. What is given to the reader is silence, the stamping of his feet on the ground, woods, mountains, rivers elected witness to his wandering. His internal dialogue edited, deleted, confined into the word 'pondering'. Like most of the dialogues with my father were.

It is all so clear now. Perhaps this is the reason why in a simplified collective memory, or just that of my family, the sonnet *was* quintessentially the *Canzoniere*, [the binary rhythm, the rumination, the landscape, the solitude, the walking onwards in silence].

Then, over that of my father, I hear your voice.

'So', you were looking down at your feet. It was the end of a summer of another life when we were just neighbors going for a run in the morning. 'From tomorrow you'll be pondering through the streets of Birmingham.' The fragrant pinewoods our witness. That September afternoon in the small modern square was way ahead of us, nowhere to be seen. Yet, that word felt like a piercing arrow, as if more than me pondering, you were talking about yourself thinking of me pondering. And you were right of course, I did spend most of my running hours pondering over you.

Sometimes I wonder what triggers your pondering mood. As much as I would like to imagine you *solo e pensoso* measuring with long strides the pavements of the city, in my imagination, when you consider your feelings, you are always in the back of a taxi, rushing somewhere, observing your feelings left behind like walkers in traffic, like that Arctic Monkeys song.

As it happens, Francesco's pondering didn't take place in winter. The critics seem to agree that sonnet 35 is inspired by an actual event recorded by Petrarca in his letters: on the 26th of April 1336, with Gherardo, his brother, they climb Mt. Ventoux. The windy beast dominates the landscape for miles. 'Located some 20 km northeast of Vaucluse', its whitish round summit can be seen from Avignon, fifty miles away. Pondering happens on a spring day.

After spending the night in Malaucène, a village at the foot of the mountain, in the early hours of the morning they set off for what will be considered the first ever recorded mountain ascent. 'To hike it, you need at least 7 hours. You ascend (and descend) 1500 meters and walk more than 23 km. [but no other than fools, *peregrini*, would want to climb that barren place]. The brothers soon come apart: Gherardo through the more direct, faster trajectory up the steep slope arrives on the summit when the sun is still high in the sky. Francesco wanders along the unexplored flanks of the mountain. The diversion, functional as well as metaphorical, serves the narrative expedient of recording Francesco's thoughts. Because what in sonnet 35 was edited is now disclosed. What the sonnet doesn't reveal is recorded in his letter, along with the account of the ascent.

'It has been ten years, and I am still troubled. I don't love what I used to love. Rather, I still love her, but less. No, I am lying. I love her but with

sadness and a sense of shame. That's it. I love but I wish I did not, or rather, I wish I hated her. I love but I am sad, miserable and wretched, forced to love.' Ah. The arrow oscillating left and right.

'I want to hate you, if I can; otherwise, I will love you, but against my will.'

Yes. I will love you, but against my will.

Mt. Ventoux dominates Vaucluse.

Mt. Ventoux, the tallest mountain of the Carpentras region, dominates Vaucluse where Petrarca lived in a house so close to the spring of the Sorgue that during the melting months the spring's tumultuous uproar gashed out with uncontrollable violence.

From the Paleolithic the spring has always attracted the human consortiums in or around its mouth, seduced by the mysterious sound emanating from it. One of the biggest in Europe: its shape, a circular opening in the rocks, looks like an open mouth emitting sounds, different according to the season, mute and deep in winter, gashing and deafening in spring [a number station].

In 1985 the mystery of its origin has been revealed: the lowest point of the siphon is at minus 308 mt. The spring of the Sorgue in Vaucluse is the only point of exit of an underground reservoir that is more than a thousand kilometers long. It collects the waters from Mt. Ventoux, the mounts of Vaucluse and of Lure.



A hidden aquatic ants' nest.

In 2000, scientists in Japan found evidence of a super colony of ants 2.7 km. large. A super colony can spread over a huge territory. In 2002, an even larger super colony was found in Southern Europe. It seems to be spreading along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coast, covering an area of 6.000 km. In 2009, the existence of a mega colony joining Japan, California and the Mediterranean coast was proven. The mega colony is the most populous animal society on earth, other than humans.

We might all be connected in the map traced by the ants. If I followed the pheromone trail disappearing into my kitchen worktop, I might find a way to the glass walls of your office. I should pour liquid metal into it and save it as memorabilia, but I prefer thinking that it is there for a reason, slowly working its way to you.

11.20 and you are still nowhere to be seen.

The day of the ascent of Mt. Ventoux marks the anniversary of Francesco and Laura's first encounter in Avignon, on the 6th April 1326. Petrarca wants the event to be recorded for posterity as happening on the 26th of April 1336, ten years later, so he backdates the ascent with the infallible instinct of an autofiction writer. From this distance, all these figures 6 whispering Laura's name move me.

But some critics are annoyed, at best unsatisfied, with what they believe is an unjustified

intervention, feeling deceived by Petrarca's habit of manipulating the past, *his* past.

Yet, isn't this intervention more revealing than the actual day of the ascent? The fact, I mean, that he decides to transform the event into the celebration of a tenth anniversary. It responds to a need of pattern recognition. Equally trapped in my obsession, I fully relate to his need to reconfigure the past, because isn't *our* past a cognitive construction made of layers of knowledge and understanding, a continuous reconfiguration of what happened, a re-read of perspectives, a discovery of new symmetries, a re-adjustment of facts and data? The past, unlike the truth, is complex.

'I live forwards, understand backwards,' Kierkegaard once wrote.

'Second law of thermodynamics,' my husband, who never read Proust, knows the mechanisms of this law by heart, but naturally keeps its consequences and effects to the field of Gravitational Waves. 'The more we move away from one point in the past, the more knowledge we gain about the context of that moment.'

During the last ten years, the past never stopped to reconfigure into a continuous re-reading, re-adjusting of facts and data, pondering the pavement of this city, with lonesome, slow strides.

She cuts a bagel in half, leaving plenty of food for the ants which seem to struggle with the tantalizing task, and chuck the two halves into the toaster. I am not to interfere with her afterschool ravenousness.

‘You know?’ She dips the knife into the Nutella jar and works her mouth around the blade. I consider her familiarity with Nutella a decent mother achievement. As little children, my brother and I were never allowed Nutella. At her age, I would never allow Nutella to myself. ‘Ants are interesting.’

I am not to interfere with her afterschool moods either. I watch her hands holding the knife thinking that she didn’t wash them.

‘I did,’ she preempts me, spearing the two halves and flying them onto the melamine plate. I am not to say anything about the two holes in her tights. She smears the brown paste on the bagels with fierce determination.

‘So? What about the ants?’

I scrap the did-you-know intro, because it is the afternoon of a long day, and we both deserve some rest.

‘The ants walk longer in the same direction when they move uphill or downhill.’ This is said with no pause or hesitation. She gives me a daring look. ‘They are attracted by the incline.’

‘Mmm.’

I sense she will give me one more shot.

‘At turning points, they prefer the steeper gradient.’

She starts on the second half and looks at me munching.

‘Imagine. The ants continuously adapt their decision making about where to go, and how long to keep going in the same direction, depending on the incline.’

‘So,’ she presses a few crumbs into the Nutella smear and licks her finger, ‘not left or right but steep or steeper?’

‘Correct.’

‘Cool.’

We both look at the ants getting on with their day, each of us probably imagining the steeper gradient of a

different descent, until she stands and drops the plate in the sink.

Like the ants, some prefer the maximum declivity gradient. Gherardo on the Mt. Ventoux arrived when the sun was still high in the sky. The other half with Francesco would take time to wander about, looking for other possibilities, consciously rejecting the steepest access to the summit, [and in so doing also wasting the brightest hours].

For some, what determines their direction is the bare gradient of the task, and the time they are prepared to allocate to the activity. Straight to the point or messing around. Like a never-ending story or a marriage. Or an impossible love. Perhaps the hardest option for this marriage is to endure it.

I will love you, but against my will.

‘What’s for dinner?’ she asks leaving the kitchen.

One night I come home to find a fresh addition to the whiff of cooked food which lingers in the corridor. Something fruity, not unpleasant from the front door, but as I walk towards the kitchen, the fruitiness becomes harsher.

In the middle of the room, hands on his belt, my husband is staring at the floor with a worrying look.

‘Oh. Hi!’

He jerks his head backward, startled. His ‘surprise’ act when I return home is supremely annoying. But tonight, I am startled too.

‘Are you hungry?’

The kitchen lies scattered on the ground. Someone had rearranged its content according to a pattern.

‘No.’

A child with a wicked familiar method: big with big, small with small.

‘There is some cauliflower left,’ he says turning halfway to the baby blue bowl next to the kettle, the one I normally use for strawberries.

‘Ok.’

Tins and jars are assembled under the chairs. Clusters of bigger packets, cheerful in their bright reds and blues are lined on the outer perimeter under the table. Further out scattered on the kitchen floor lies the rest: towers of pots, pans, leads.

‘I bought some stuff,’ he explains pulling up his jeans, ‘that I think would get rid of the ants.’

I don’t know if I am more overwhelmed by the chaos or the thought of the ants. He notices my panic, pulls a cigarette from the packet and tip toes silently towards the door, ‘I think there is some out-of-date stuff that you want to check,’ he says leaving the kitchen.

After two mouthfuls of soggy cauliflower, I begin.

Constellations of crap of various size hide at the bottom of the emptied cabinets: recent grain of couscous, bulglar wheat or quinoa are the last layer of deeper incrustations. Shreds of dark chocolate, hips of dried raisins, undefined yellowish powder follow. Further down into the deep recesses of the cabinets, against the back of the white Ikea MDF, Time itself has concealed a feast of colors. Streaks of blue and green syrup lead to miniature tooth paste tubes: red, pink, blue, yellow, green. It is the icing sugar set my mother bought for the children in Harrods, the night the train back was full. Glued to those bright colours the sense of guilt for dragging her all the way to this country where no one stood up and gave her their seat. The dreaded silver sugar balls that everyone carefully avoided, too big and hard to bite. They are still almost shiny.

Watching the still life of the sugary sprinkles at the bottom of the cabinet is like being the voyeur of another woman who has once been myself. I observe the devastation from a safer place, the hillock of time. That woman was someone who would bake in the afternoon, but only to smell vanilla in their innocent breath, a mother who would endure the baking with an equal sense of duty and frustration [for the inadequate fairy cakes too hard or too raw, that no one really wanted to eat]. Didn't I send them all away to learn how to bake one distant Mother's Day? What mother would do that? Now my husband has taken over the baking, and the little one sometimes bakes a sticky toffy pudding, or a lemon drizzle for me.

The ants were happily feeding on the dry, exsiccated residues of my motherhood, the tunnels of Time along which I slowly dropped pieces of myself.

My husband left my mother's icing sugar set, useless and expensive like most of my mother's presents, at the bottom of the cabinet. I feel slightly embarrassed and offended on behalf of her. His family would never have bought something so equally impractical and beautiful for the children.

Kitchen deep cleaning is as good a way to celebrate a tenth anniversary of nothingness, the suitable equivalent of a celebratory ascent. In reverse. Descent into the tunnels and chambers of this kitchen cupboards through layers of the last ten years, enjoying the landscape. Amongst sugary crumbs and smears of paste, the ants' bodies float drowned in a whitish foamy substance, the poison my husband sprayed to exterminate them and get rid of the out-of-date stuff. The kitchen deep cleaning makes me see that this is the result of the poison that you, I, this drop by drop of our crazy dot-to-dot game have accumulated, killing everything on its way, this poison poured in the difficult channeling of our tunnels, until it burned everything out and turned my marriage, this life into useless memorabilia.

I wipe it all off and leave a scent of vinegar on the white clean MDF. Once I start, I want to get rid of everything. There is a form of integrity in empty spaces and bare walls. I save the pasta and throw the rest.

That night I dream that from the tunnels of the spring of Vaucluse a black squirming wave gurgles out, it moves down the valley, along the Sorgue bed. Millions of black dots scurry from underground in panic, carrying with them the noise of ruffling leaves, pushed to the surface by waves over waves of other ants pressing from the other side, escaping the horrible smell and noise propagating along the tunnels and chambers of their nest. Someone is pouring liquid metal in the inside of Mt. Ventoux. Someone is forcing liquid metal down the tubes of Mt. Ventoux. I wake up with the image of you on a blue background. A baseball hat lets out wisps of golden blond hair. With the usual smirk under dark sunglasses, you point at the tip of the memorabilia.

Pattern recognition is essential part of human cognitive behavior. The result of our need for reassurance against the chasm that lies underneath us, the Lethe's incessant flow, the smell and spectacle of decay hidden behind closed cabinets. We find comfort in seeing again what we already know. The beauty and consolation of the hideous we know so well.

I love but I wish I did
not, or rather, I wish I
hated her

Now in the morning, when I walk into the cold kitchen, I miss the ants. I have left crumbs on their favorite path, but there are no signs of their presence. It seems that my husband has been able to exterminate them. I wonder where they have gone, and if they will ever come back. According to ants' specialists, a mild infestation is generally proof of the existence of an ants' colony nearby the house. Even if temporarily defeated, the ants might return.

Spring

Margins

During the last weeks of term, the students practice the speaking test in class. The test consists in talking for two and a half minutes and answering unseen questions. To build up time awareness, I give out a sheet of fifty questions and set the alarm on my phone. Working in pairs, the students answer as many questions as possible, until the phone starts playing the 'sea song'.

They struggle. We discuss practical ways to improve their performance (and resilience): doing a simple puzzle or counting coins whilst they talk. In the final week I encourage facial expressions, natural pauses and hesitation. Pragmatics, I tell them, is an important part of the exam: the non-verbal form of communication.

We gradually build it up to two and a half minutes. A lot of content gets covered in those two minutes, or inversely, we realise how lives don't need to be complex to be understood, that complexity can be useless weight to carry around. On their last day, when the phone starts playing the 'sea song', they ignore it and keep talking.

When I finish at 8 there is still a residue of light. Over the Campus the sky is an expectant, vibrant blue, as if a projector has been left on, the intimation that a change is near. Over the winter, building works have transformed the landscape. Now, in place of a neglected carpark and the library, a large lawn called 'the green heart', criss-crossed by resinated paths, takes central stage. Along one side of the grassy field flows a new water feature the length of the old carpark. I want to take my shoes off and wade through the water.

Now that the semester is over, the day is made of two simple parts: morning at the library, afternoon at home.

I choose a desk overlooking the new fountain. As soundtrack, a gentle cascade tumbles down on marble steps the width of a car. In the still pools between the descending steps, reeds, moss, and other shorter, thicker plants have grown into the shallow waters.

The critics generally refer to songs 70, 71 and 72 as The Eyes' songs. *Le canzoni degli occhi*. The wintry atmosphere is lifting in the horizon of the *Canzoniere*. At the end of sestina 66 the dense stormy sky, and Laura's moody and distant behaviour, has softened to reveal the momentary gleam of a sun ray. Winter's browns and greys, earth and sky, are moving on, into a new palette of blues. Appropriate for the change of season.

The three songs, respectively 50, 108 and 78 lines long, are considered a virtuoso attempt to align the metaphysics of the beloved's eyes, medieval optical theories, and a sense of spiritual elevation. The theme of the beloved eyes is a major motif in the Troubadour tradition preceding Petrarca, but here the image seems to work deeper, suggesting a new radiancy.

The songs are also appreciated for the solidness of their construction: the 236 lines read as one piece. As such, it is the longer piece in the *Canzoniere*.

If 66 described a fugitive glance, sunbeams appearing through the dense texture of clouds, you gazing at my décolleté exhaling your *ma*, the Eyes' songs are about the quality of light rather than the feeble game of appearing and disappearing. Here Petrarca is gazing into Laura's eyes, the critics say, noticing something different.

Different from Indifference.
Can you tell?
No. And yes.

*pace tranquilla senza alcun affanno simile a quella ch'è nel ciel
eterna move dal loro innamorato riso*

the eternal peace of a blue sky is mirrored in the loving
smile of her eyes.

come raggio di sol traluce in vetro

like a sun ray shines through a glass of water

The new preoccupation with light feels like
enlightenment. To see and be seen. To be mirrored. To
understand.

Maybe the Eyes' songs are really about refraction, a
slight change of direction. The quality of Laura's eyes.
Not an essay on optical physics.

Every now and then I stop reading to observe fragile
sun rays piercing through the paste of dust that winter
left on the library windows. When, after a few moments
the sky returns overcast, nothing has changed on the
windows. The sunlight left no signs to ever have been
through the glass panels.

'Of course! Photons have no mass. LIGHT has
no mass!', my husband is always stunned that I keep
forgetting what he explained so many times, that light
is weightless, and has no substance.

come raggio di sol traluce in vetro

like a sun ray shines through a glass of water

Enlightenment might be useless, but the critics are
convinced. Here is a shift, a collection of signs that
shows the beginning of an adjustment in Francesco's
heart, a conversion, from lust to ecstasy. Love can be
sublimated into a spiritual state of mind, the eternal
peace. Laura as pure, untainted energy. Laura as light,
something with no mass, nor weight, which cannot be
measured yet *feels* different.

But Petrarca is recording what he saw, or rather the
effect that to be seen has on him. With detachment and
self-reflection, he records the signs as if he was indeed
studying Francesco and his reaction. Petrarca isn't

doubting what he saw, but Francesco, still in the middle of the storm, confused by the light, might do.

Francesco is the water in the glass, Petrarca is observing the physical phenomenon. I don't understand Optics, but I do recognise the distortion of light through water.

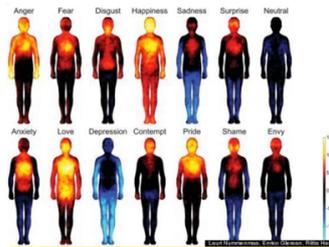
pur come io fusse un huom di ghiaccio al sole
like ice melting in the sun

the body has its own ways of responding to light.

On Saturdays, when the library is closed, I sit at a desk on the second floor of the empty Physics Department. Behind me six big posters narrate the breakthrough discoveries of the last century. I like looking at the pictures.

The colours of MRI scans are beautiful. I didn't realise that they are images of water flowing in the body. It is called haemodynamic response. Scientists used magnetics to align the water particles present in blood and map how it flows to different tissues according to experienced emotions.

MRI scans photograph emotions. In a way, MRI scans are images of light refracted in the water particles of the body. [Am I over interpreting?]



Love sits next to depression.

Photons might have no mass, but the effect they leave behind, can now be *seen*. Once the sunray meets the water in the glass, it is disturbed, its movement changes. Once Francesco sees Laura looking at him, something inside realigns.

Enlightenment is useless, but sometimes it reveals colours.

Enlightenment is useless but the colours are beautiful.

Enlightenment is useless but when the prism reveals the mauve next to the blue this is where my eyes feel at peace.

To challenge myself, before heading to the library sometimes I take a detour through the small park with a pond in the middle, where two swans share the water with the ducks. As I come closer to the bench, I slow down. Before sitting, I tick off the list of my minor aggressions through the years: peeled green paint, burnt wood, our initials softly engraved on the metal bin next to the bench.

Then I sit. The challenge consists in facing the small pond for two and a half minutes, the length of the speaking test, withstanding the pressure on my throat. A pressure like when the person you love enters the room you are in.

In September the sky mirrored on the surface of the pond, the real world of your life on the other side of that bench. I was pulling the strings of your hoodie close to my mouth, wondering if I could tell you that its mouldy tang reminded me of the clothes in the house by the sea. Did you fish your hoodie from under a pile of laundry? 'Personal reasons,' was what you said you told your secretary to justify the day off. So, your personal reasons lie at the bottom of the laundry pile. Then the chapped skin of your lips. The metallic taste of your mouth.

'Imagine if they saw us now,' you said.

Bankers are good at risks analysis. Teachers focus better on semantics. *They* filled up with my three and your four children, your wife, my husband, all standing in front of us, between us.

Imagine if you saw me now.

But every time I sit on the bench to face my challenge, the season is never the right one. The path is too exposed to students and passers-by to be really the same, the bench too familiar and ordinary, the bin too full of rubbish, to be *really* the same place, so after two minutes I stand and walk away.

My favourite spot for the morning sigarette is the lowest step of the fifty meters long fountain. From there the energy of the water flowing towards me seems to channel its pressure against my throat.

Here it is easy to imagine the *Canzoniere* as water contained by a structure. Water is forced into what is contained by, simultaneously threatening to elude its containment.

Sonnets, the pebbles, songs, the filtering, reflective reeds, madrigals the moss, and sestinas the steps, the structural feature which holds the pressure, all elements which contain and organise the matter, the elusive, flowing water frothing and flowing between Laura's thighs.

Critics say that the sestinas represent the stages towards the final *mea culpa* promised in the proemial sonnet. Like pillars, the load-bearing walls of the construction: fewer and further apart, they hold the whole architecture, a narrative device, to raise the building towards the final conversion from mundane to divine love. If the *Canzoniere* is the water in this fountain, the sestinas are the square steps through which the water tumbles down.

From where I sit, on the lowest step, I consider how the structure is built like a staircase going upwards, but the energy of the water flows in the opposite direction. Its scaffolding leading upwards to a spiritual elevation, but its energy flowing invariably against it. Sometimes enlightenment is a matter of perspective.

The wild vegetation works as filter, a gardener explains to me. A pump underneath the ground pushes the water uphill, in a continual circle.

'Is the rainwater connected?'

'They didn't think of it.'

Three ducks have appeared in the fountain: two males and one female.

On the radio this morning the news of a 62-year-old man found alive after three days spent *clinging* to the bow of his capsized boat, off the coast of Florida. *Miracle at sea*. As I listen to the details, my hip-flexor jerks.

The man was surprised during the night by water coming in. I imagine his arms clinging to the bow, the skin slowly losing elasticity in water, the cramps he must have endured, the sense of displacement floating alone in the darkness, the panic rising in waves.

The man, Stuart Bee, survived locking his arms around the bow of the boat and balancing upright on the rudder. After three days, a sailor from a container vessel, called the *Angels*, *saw* him waving a blue shirt at intervals. He was picked up by the crew of a passing container ship 86 miles from shore on Sunday morning.

A pocket of air trapped inside the boat kept it afloat.

‘I was afraid to move too much and release the bubble which kept me alive’, he said in an interview.



The twitching spasm on my hip flexor is the effect of an unexpected dose of happiness for this unwavering determination to live. Happiness for the rescued sailor, yes, and for the fact that, at 62, he is older than you.

There is a similar story in the *Canzoniere*. Another sestina. [Critics report at least one episode in Petrarca's life. Off the coast of Tuscany on his way to Rome. The party he was travelling with managed to dock after hours at the mercy of the sea.]

Sestina 80 is the account of a shipwreck and a palinode. Indeed, in the sestinas Francesco and Laura are always present, interacting, wrestling, hurting each other. Here Francesco is unable to steer away from dangerous rocks and cliffs. Laura, the capricious wind, is unpredictably rough.

chiuso gran tempo in questo cieco legno errai, senza levar occhio a la vela

in this boat for so long I wandered blindly ignoring the sail

Unpredictable winds are normal at sea, the mistake is the inability to lift the gaze beyond the sail. But the two central stanzas describe the moment when, surfing the waves, between the mess of sprays, gust of winds, sails flapping, boat rolling and swaying, Francesco's gaze, suddenly pushed upwards, acquires a new perspective and the harbour appears.

così di su da la gonfiata vela vid'io le insigne di quell'altra vita
from the blown sail, I saw the signs of that other life

That other life. That other possible, spiritual, elevated life. The harbour is not far. Lifting his head Stewart saw the Angel, the container that saved him. Lifting the head from the messy storm of my dots I too should be able to see the harbour, this life.

A palinode. Retracting that messy life for the safety of the harbour. Human feelings for Laura sublimate into a spiritual experience. Forget about the body's needs and turn his love for Laura into the love for God. It was wrong, wrong! to desire her body and despair over her refusal. [A mistake to notice this constant pressure against my throat.] Laura can be the final light vessel. Following her light, he will spiritually and morally elevate himself.

'It is unusual,' one critic says, 'to use the sestina with a palinodic function, to introduce a repentance,' because the sestinas are by definition in the meter of sensual discourse. Water is the element of sensual discourse in the Canzoniere. A shipwreck.

The space of the sestina is firmly in the boat. The harbour Francesco is trying to reach remains just that, *un porto*, a harbour. These waters don't feel as dangerous as the gushing, overflowing river, or the pestering, battering rain. Rhymes are not centred on water, but on the concrete objects around the element: rocks, sail, harbour, boat, like props on a stage. This tone of contrition feels rather a form of self-preservation. The eyes are on the solid forms around him

se non ch'io ardo come acceso legno,
my boat is on fire

I put off the stub and let it drop by my feet. The three ducks have a morning routine too. The female plunges briefly to puddle about, then rests on one of the steps of the fountain. The males, more thorough in their ablutions, seem to ignore her stillness. Yet as soon as she moves, they rush to her side, forgetting their punctiliousness.

Three. One too many.

Kept afloat by an air bubble. (1 cubic meter of air weights roughly 1.2 kg, my husband confirms). How tiny and insignificant are the figments of what is possible in the magnitude of the sea. The line between the possible and the impossible so marginally insignificant that anything that might happen is indeed miraculous. Was Stuart floating on the margins of the possible?

After reading about the *Miracle at sea*, I receive an email from the Barbican. It promotes a new exhibition called 'Another kind of Life,' a collection of photographs 'from the margins of society.' On the webpage a Latino man in a tight sequin lilac dress stares beautifully fierce and proud.



After the dishwasher is loaded, the sink rinsed, the leftovers wrapped in cling film, the bigger pans washed, dried and re-stacked into their cupboard, I walk upstairs and book the ticket for the Barbican.

It means London, getting close to the knot, another two minutes test. Will I withstand the pressure?

I promise to move as little as possible clinging to my mouldy air bubble. [what is your air bubble made of? your dots? your numbers?]

Inside the Barbican's courtyard, the noise of the traffic fades away and is replaced by a mute light reflected on the shallow pools at its centre where pigeons and ducks share the first seasonal dips in this urban angular pond.

On two levels, the exhibition is organised by cities where fringes, scraps, margins could blossom: cobblestone streets of Brooklyn, dark alleys in Shanghai, empty courtyards in Rio de Janeiro. In the Fifties and Sixties. On black walls are videos and photos in black and white. The bodies are lean and gnarled. Men in kinky clubbing outfits: minidresses, net tights, patent leather. Sequins. Feather boas. Some shots are more casual than others. There is pain, but of a joyful sort.

Perhaps there is calm in the margins. One hopes its stillness outweighs the rough journey.

I send you a text.

When one red dot appears on the green square of the App, the surreal normality of the word leaves me breathless.

Coffee in '20?

I stride along Bitch tunnel, repeating to myself to focus on the margins.

Indeed, London is magic. At the end of the tunnel parallel to the traffic light, a blue paletot has you in it. Your green tie matches your eyes. Vanity or chance? Did Laura wear green because of her eyes? Why am I wearing yellow then?

We sit at the back, by a window. Skimming the water's surface, life proceedings are stirred with cautious tea sipping.

'How is the exhibition?'

Chin on my palm, I nod, tightening the knot I made with my legs under the table. I play the elusive one, where in fact I follow the traffic behind your back, listening to your quiet voice.

You pick up your phone, 'Look.' Your finger points at a fragile blue line in your diary, 'This is you.' The line between 2 and 3 says Coffee.

This is becoming a lesson in feeling marginal, a floating, irrelevant object at the periphery of an elusive centre: enclosed high-tech rooms, where people stare at more important and longer numbers, different reds and greens. Buy or sell?

The table is small. It's easy to reach the tie, warm and soft on your chest. When my nail catches the silk fibre, it becomes irresistible. I pull the finger gently down along the silk, until the bad edge of my infected finger loses its grip on the delicate filament. I concentrate on that point, caressing it with the uneven blade of my claw. The cracked cartilage grates the smoothness at first softly, then harder, and again and again it scrapes the glossy fabric. Under the table, the blade of your shin

presses into mine. Not once, not occasionally. It stays there, pressing. It plucks, nips, picks, until the fluffiness has become the size of a coin. My nail bends and breaks. I let the tie slide through my hand, like a wet ribbon falls with a slap on your chest and kick your calf softly.

There could be better ways to explain what I am trying to explain. [What is there to explain? you would say anyway]. That this small table between us feels massive? The mute pain on my finger reminds me of you. Or perhaps it is a little pang of uneasiness for the tie, for the tea experiment, for people on the margins. On the surface you don't react. Under the table, a slight departure from the aloofness of your upper body: your shin presses into mine.

One by one I take off the four rings around my wedding ring and lay them on the table. You must think I am fidgeting with things. I rest the fake one on the surface of my tea.

'Look.'

'What?'

'It floats.'

Why does this not surprise me? You bend over to check the floating ring, but the sudden movement disturb the liquid and make it sink to the bottom.

'Sorry.'

In silence, we consider the cold liquid in my paper cup.

'Are you trying the other ones?'

'No.'

I finish my tea and dig up the ring from the bottom like a sorceress.

'We *are* lucky,' I say licking the ring clean.

What I mean is the delicate, marginal circumstance of being here. I could explain better, trying harder, or I could just lean forward and reach your mouth, but the screen of your phone lights up. Three o'clock.

'I need to go. Sorry.'

When I re-enter the tunnel under the Barbican, I realise that it is Beech Street and not Bitch Street, trees not dogs, but I don't turn back afraid of the punishment for those who do, who move too much and disturb the air bubble.

In a quiet room on the second floor, finally invisible against the black walls of the exhibition, I stare at the photo chosen for the brochure. It is called 'La manzana de Adan', Adam's Apple. A delicate place to survive a blow.

The make-up doesn't conceal his identity, rather it enhances his fierce determination to be exactly that, a man. The gold earrings, the dark lipstick, the lilac foulard hiding the protuberance of his Adam's apple are all contingent choices of a radiating wound, worn like a jewel on his face. The result is luminous.

The square pools of the Barbican courtyard radiate a surreal luminescence amongst all that concrete. What doesn't sink? What are the floating objects? Those light enough to resist the pull of the water, the rubbish pocking my psoas. What doesn't sink reveals the core of something unfathomable?

'The buoyant force is the upward force exerted by any fluid upon a body placed in it', I hear my husband's voice. I imagine loose sheets of sonnets floating around sestina 80, floating papers around the capsized boat. Like my metal ring, almost weightless.

Around the sestina, the meter of memory, Petrarca rearranges Francesco's story in the sonnets around it.

Io amai sempre et amo forte anchora
I've always loved and still love her

The air bubble seems to have finally found a way up to be released into his words. My stomach gurgles, the pelvic muscles tighten. What is recalled, I feel, has something to do with that day, *quell di*, when a sun ray pierced through the stubborn, thick, low sky.

era ben forte la nemica mia, et lei vid'io ferita in mezzo al core
she was strong, my enemy, but I saw the wound in her
heart

Well, sometimes enlightenment isn't useless.

come raggio di sol traluce in vetro
like a sun ray shines through a glass of water

When light enters water, the rays' trajectory changes. When sun rays shine through a glass of water their direction gets diffracted, fractured, broken. This is what it is all about. The effect of light on water. Light runs easily through water, but its trajectory is changed.

Suppose I am water, and you light. Where does this take you?

On the edge of the pool smeared with guano, I roll a cigarette, considering the red dot just appeared on WhatsApp. I can face the effect of light on water. I pull twice before tapping at the red dot and read your message.

Thanks for the tie :)

By now the speckle of blood must have oxidized on the green fluff. How does it feel wearing a wound of your own? I put off the stub and let it drop by my feet. When I stand, my legs are unsteady. The air bubble has popped. I am falling into the iridescent well of the sky above.

Flies

There have been obvious, abundant signs, which I tried to ignore. The air is still cold, when it is cold, but heavier, as if filling with sap. Soft buds perk from the perimeter of hedges and bushes. The fragrance of the Mahonia yellow flowers, obscenely sweet. The dark pink of a hidden hellebore. One Saturday at dawn the miracle is suddenly irrevocable.

La nova stagione, the new season, as Francesco calls it.

Primavera per me pur non è mai.

It's never going to be spring for me.

No. Spring is impossible, since spring *is* Laura. Or rather, spring is death. Laura is death. Death is looming in the background when Francesco sees her for the first time in Santa Chiara, on the Good Friday of 1327.

From the garden the chirping of house sparrows and goldfinches enters the bedroom with the first light, too loud to allow more sleeping. Asleep next to me, his arm bent behind him to support the head, my husband looks like someone considering the clouds at a picnic. My head is resting on his bicep. It is unusual to catch him, *us*, in such an inappropriate, intimate position. 'Sorry', he would say if he knew. The soft fluff of hairs under his armpit must have tickled me awake. I turn and press my forehead to his elbow, to renew the contact, as if a sort of safety and calm could be found between his elbow and my forehead.

I like it here for now, as long as he doesn't notice.

The sequence, once more. Trying to be as precise as possible. Your tie: warm on your chest. Sexy. My nail,

the bad one, rasping the silk threads. Digging, tearing until it is tangled in a fluff of green. Bleeding a little.

The wound. Even now, after two weeks, I am still thawing to its radiation. Here, my husband's arm under my forehead, alone and at a safe distance, I consider that I have allowed the figments of what I *think* I saw that day to light up even the contact with his skin. To make it seems almost possible again. Our skin touching possible, his heavy breathing possible, this scent possible, his body pressing into mine possible.

But I soon become restless.

Downstairs the house is already wide awake, bathed with light. In the kitchen, another reminder that spring is here, slant beams of sunshine cast a new light, a light I had forgotten about during winter, upon the fridge, over the little one's self-portrait we blue-tacked when she was in Year 2. Half a photograph of her face, half a pencilled drawing of her features, at the time when she still smiled at me so sweet. Instead of kissing she used to press her face into my belly to breath me in. The portrait is a single, delicate outline of her right eye, the hole of her nostril, the thin lips, the ear, mirroring the equally delicate features of the photograph's half face.

The phone is in the conservatory, where I leave it by the cigarettes. Its flat body fits the mouth of the ashtray. During the night, it turns into a lid that blocks the stench of my stubs, so that in the morning when I pick it up, I am reminded by its smell that it is toxic.

7.14. I imagine you still in bed, one foot crossed over the calf. A figure four with your legs.

Due to a spell of clear weather, the sky remains blue. Our walks are now less frequent. She is busy or lazy, I wouldn't know, or this weather is less conducive. Who would have thought that we would avoid the heat? For hours on end the sun shines fiercely over the panelled glass of the conservatory, it overheats the air, scorches the floor, discolours the mustard yellow bouclé of the armchairs, reveals what winter concealed: dust, spiderwebs, dirt. Even the grass in the garden radiates a stupefied light from underneath.

The heat softens the inside of the house. Intersections where beams meet bricks and plaster, loosen up like a pregnant woman. New cracks appear on the walls, putty cakes arounds windows, even the skirting boards retract from the walls. In the living room, a new, complex smell appears from nowhere.

April means the birthdays season: his, mine, of two of our children. What is building up is a vague but restless sense that expectation should be fulfilled, but it will be disappointed. The passive in the sentence is appropriate. It says that I am tired of feeling responsible for this expectation, which I have fought, inconsistently, most of my life.

I must have been twelve. I must have asked. My mother must have felt bad and said yes, *for this one time*. She wanted me to wear red: a stripy blouse and a skirt below the knees. Red leather shoes. The preoccupation, mine, that the children invited would be too many, that they would be loud, cheeky, drop food, ruin the Persian rugs or smear it on the pristine marble floor. That their behaviour would irritate her, that she would snap at any of them for no reason. Her mood through the afternoon, from nervousness to pity, until she disappeared into her bedroom and came back with a Polaroid, those cameras which instantly release a dreamy, discoloured reality in pastel tones. 'Take pictures', she said. For two hours, confined to the living room, no visits to my bedroom allowed, her supervising figure looming from the corner of the room, we took pictures. One has survived: all crammed together, sweaty and red-cheeked, we form a human pyramid with me at its bottom. She must have taken the shot.

In my husband's family, we are reminded, any fuss about someone's birthday ought to be avoided. More generally, any fuss about any celebration would fall under the same recommendations. He takes some pride in telling the children that Birthdays and Christmas consisted in opening the familiar square wrapping: Classics books which he *ought* to read, classical music he *ought* to learn to play. The parental intention must have been to make him well educated and unspoiled by life. But the effect on him has been so punitive that even today he doesn't tolerate presents. He and I have long stopped giving each other presents.

But the first year we were together, on my birthday he gave me a biography of Mozart. On the first page,

under the date, he quoted the author: 'My wife is a very sophisticated woman: she listens only to Mozart.'

A very sophisticated woman.

It took me a long time to understand the meaning of 'gaslighting'. There isn't an equivalent verb in Italian. That he thought I could become a sophisticated woman for him, a woman who would only listen to Mozart, felt a validation at the time. That he might choose me. That I could be worthy of him.

He had underlined the word *wife*. Made *his* intention clear. It is not his fault if part of me refused to consider *my* intention.

Later, birthdays became a motherhood test. A good mother would know what her children desire even before they know it. We had football parties in the parks, sleepovers in the garden, summer parties, bouncy castles, water hose. We had games, music, noise, and food smeared on every surface.

Birthdays are the sickening, wet layer of icing sugar on British birthday cakes. Ah, to be just the half-forgotten guest sipping lemonade from another room.

A foul smell is coming from underneath the floorboards. During the day we keep the door of the living room closed, but even when someone forgets and leaves it open, the stench doesn't spread through the house. It belongs to the living room only.

It is particularly bad during the warmer hours. Surprisingly, my husband has started to work in that room. He sits on the armchair and goes through telephone calls with his students for *hours*, seemingly unbothered by the rotting stench.

'It's like walking into a fishing harbour,' the little one said sounding a bit embarrassed. Even she has noticed the similarity. The reek of waste left on the quay resembles that of a woman. For a long time I had thought it was only my mother's, until I saw the episode of the fishermen in Altman's 'Short cuts'. Then I read Carver and became deeply self-aware.

My husband likes one but the other makes him gag. I can't reconcile the facts, but his behaviour proves it.

So perhaps it is not the smell *per se* to make him vomit, but the substance of the fish, the consistency of its flesh, its slimy skin, the pearly eye, the viscous blood.

To prove [to *whom?*] that it is not the passing of time which I find disturbing, not entirely at least, not as much as a recurrent thought can be, during the last ten years I have mapped other anniversaries. Anniversaries not set upon me, unrelated to the idea of a growing family. Anniversaries which no one knows about, and which I obstinately celebrate.

Petrarca did the same in the *Canzoniere*.

Benedetto sia il giorno il mese e l'anno e la stagione e il tempo e l'ora e il punto e il ben paese e il loco ov'io fui giunto da duo begli occhi che legato m'anno;

Blessed be the day, the month, the year, the season, the time, the hour, the point, the moment, the place where those eyes tied me to her

e Benedetto il primo dolce affanno e l'arco e le saette on'io fui punto e le piaghe che infin al cor mi vanno

and blessed be the first sweet pang, the bow and the arrows that wounded my heart.

Blessed be the day. Blessed be the wound. The day when Laura meets his eyes and lets him see the wound. Gli occhi me legaro, her eyes tied me to her.

Will I celebrate the day at the Barbican next year by pressing a nail into the bad one and let it bleed into a perfect red dot?

Was it a palinode or a turning point in the story?

Francesco's validation is obtained by the painful, obstinate attention to the years returning,

Or volge Signor mio, l'undecimo anno ch'io fui sommesso al dispietato giogo, che sopra i piu soggetti è piu feroce

It is the eleventh year, my Lord, that I fell captive to this yoke.

Every September, on the fifteenth (the day when you came to see me and I wanted to suck the strings of your hoodie) I have been drinking a glass of cranberry juice (what we had before walking to the park). To celebrate

that anniversary, I don't go anymore to the coffee shop on the small modern square in the city centre, as I did for years when I was still working for the language school nearby. The small modern square where the appointment was at twelve. Where I went, sure that you wouldn't turn up. The small modern square where you suddenly appeared behind me, bent over my bicycle. The small modern square where you squatted next to me. 'Hey.' The small modern square where my decade began.

Lately it has been a less ceremonious affair: I fill a full glass and swallow the juice standing by the fridge, like a medicine.

It is the eleventh year, my Lord, that I fell under this yoke

'Yoke':

1. a wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plough or cart that they are to pull.

One morning as I walk into the conservatory to pick up the phone. Your last seen is 00.02 [you went to bed thinking of us]. Around me an intense buzzing noise. In the intersection between the glass roof a cluster of fat, black flies materialised over the night-time and is now swarming, like obsessive thoughts. I open the sliding doors hoping that they will fly off.

By lunchtime the flies are still there, bigger and stronger, as though they have grown in the span of a few hours. I get the insecticide spray he used for the ants, climb on a stool and cloud the glass with the thick chemicals. One by one, they fall on the floor in a matter of minutes. I collect their iridescent blue bodies with the dustpan and throw them away. Some are still buzzing. I count seventeen flies.

According to his correspondences, every year, in spring, Petrarca travels back to Vaucluse. 'Travelling back,' it occurs to me, means returning to the Sorgue district, and later to the house he will buy in Vaucluse. But also retracing the map that constitutes the living, pulsing core of the *Canzoniere*.

*Quella finestra ove l'un sol si vede (Laura), quando a lui piace e
l'altro in su la nona (cioè il vero sole a mezzogiorno)
e il sasso, ove a gran di pensosa siede Madonna et sola seco si
ragiona
con quanti luoghi sua bella persona coprì mai d'ombra, o disegnò
col piede.
e la nove stagione che d'anno in anno mi rinfresca in quell di
l'antiche piaghe
e il volto e le parole che mi stanno confitte in mezzo al core*
that window where she appears at noon
that rock where she sits pondering
all the places where her foot pressed the grass, where
her body obscured the sunlight
the new season which refreshes the old wound
the face and the words which pierced my heart

A pilgrimage: the window, the rock, the grass, the new season, the face, the words.

Also, a negative map of unaccounted presence, full of unknown variables. For what is tracing a map, any map, that window, that rock, that grass, if not a way to express the preoccupation for what surrounds it, the obscure matter of time and space occupied by Laura and Laura alone? When in Vaucluse, Francesco enters a spell.

*'so come i dì, come i momenti e l'ore ne portan gli anni, e non
ricevo inganno ma forza assai maggiore che d'arti maghe.*
I know that years go by through days, moments and hours. [The spinning of] Time doesn't fool me, but here I feel its power more than any magical art.

Suppose one combined magical art and birthdays.

I make the call from the kitchen, pressing hard the pelvic bones against the worktop. 'Thursday at ten o'clock,' says the deep voice.

The driving, no longer than fifteen minutes, takes me to a part of the city I don't recognise. The brown brick council estate grows on a string of same-size, square shops. Electronics, groceries, off licence proceed on a single line. All you need. Uncomplicated. From the street, dark holes show dead plants, discoloured newspapers framed by yellow cello tape, grey lacy curtain. The drawing of a unicorn. The kind of place where I would like to hide.

Tilting the ice cream, he licks the sugary syrup melting along his hand.

'Come in.' He walks ahead of me, leaving behind a trail of fluid motion calling to be followed. Tall, lean, blue-jeans, barefoot. In the flat there is a faint, pleasant aroma of weed, sugar and dust.

On the right, the kitchen, and in its middle a chesterfield sofa, in sage green leather. We turn left down the corridor, but I want to touch the sofa.

The room we enter is darkened by a thick brown fabric.

'Have you got the money?'

I put the three banknotes folded in my pocket on his open palm.

'Sit.'

He shows me a round desk laid with a pink damask cloth. Sucking at the last bit of ice-cream, he points at the table with one finger.

'There are three decks in front of you. Take one at a time, focus, and shuffle the cards. Keep doing it until I am back.'

He leaves closing the door gently behind him. I imagine him going to wash his hands.

In front of me a complex, playful scene. Colours and lights exploding like popping candies. The layered

display of characters from a spurious spiritual world is put together for a child: wooden and chalk statuettes, plastic Madonnas in different sizes, Buddha's stones, Egyptian beetles, totems, cartoony postcards of saints lit by candles and fairy lights. I love the colours. I love the entropy and the movement within it.

Above the display, on the wall, a certificate from the West Midlands Police acknowledging his essential intervention in solving the case of the missing body of 23 years old Dexter Brian. Next to it the cut out of a newspaper article related to the story. The dead body found in the shallow waters of the canal.

The cards are greasy and catch at the edge. One falls on my lap, but I don't look at it.

When he walks back in, he sits to my right. Carefully, he takes the tallest deck, and starts laying the cards in front of me from left to right in rows of five, talking as if he is reading a script. The skin on his long, elegant fingers is dry. No trace of sticky sugar.

I grasp only words, short sentences. He is repeating himself. Not repeating. Insisting on using specific words, the same words, I start to notice, which *I* used during a telephone call with a friend the night before. The forty days of Lent, a thousand words, a page a day for a year, three hundred and sixty-five days, a book. Write. Write your book.

A card startles him. He looks at me, unsure if I can take the blow.

'A death. But it might not concern you,' it's the only thing he says.

More laying. This time a circular pattern.

'There are two men. One is very wealthy.' He raises his eyebrows. I don't remember the image on the cards.

'BUT' as if the two could be in contradiction, 'you'll be adored.'

With the third deck he makes two piles next to each other.

‘This is you.’ A plough. Then he lays the next one on top.

‘And this is in your way.’

A woman in a long, turquoise gown. Blond wavy hair. Her blue eyes stare coquettishly at me.

‘The last deck will also answer a question. Yes or no. Just think of the question.’

I let it surface, *what do you want?*

He lifts a card.

‘No.’

I nod, secretly relieved for thinking of the wrong question.

Well, enlightenment is useless.

It is over. I trail behind him to the front door. As we pass the kitchen, the sage green chesterfield sofa is waving mockingly at me. It is surrounded by cabinets, a sink, pans, mugs, plates, like rollers on a diva’s hair. Not supposed to be there and yet in some ways it works. A kitchen, functioning as such, even with the enormous chesterfield sofa in the middle. A bit like me.

By the threshold he stops, as if he suddenly remembered something else,

‘You lost a battle, but you will win the war.’

Then the door gently closes after me.

I look at the phone. 14.07. I have been in there for more than two hours.

In the car, by chance and yet so appropriately, Amy Winehouse is singing 'Love is a losing game', the final single released before she died, aged 27. Back to black, back to Blacke, Blacke's name tattooed on her chest, the pressure of the needle against her heart, the arrow piercing through: 'I died a hundred times'.

'Self-professed profound', I sing along, self-mockingly. Francesco. Amy. I had what I deserved: 'a losing hand'.

I consider how distant and yet close is Amy's final say to Petrarca's resigned conclusion? What is his proemial sonnet saying if not that love is a losing game, 'a game I wished I never played'?

The only thing I can remember now are images. The square, pugnacious stubbornness of the plough against the floaty, entitled grace of the blue dress. Your wife. I wonder why my card couldn't be as literal as hers. The sage green chesterfield sofa. The elegant bulk absurdly dominating the middle of the kitchen, the shiny leather I wanted to touch. I see Amy balancing a glass of scotch on its armrest, cross legged, smoking, head high.

The day I shredded your tie and you let me go ahead with that rage inside me, letting me believe that I was saying, *explaining* something important. That day I thought I saw something which I could recognise. I let it rest, and slowly, day by day I started to see a wound radiating light. But 'memories mar my mind/love is a faith resigned'.

A fool. What I saw, the alleged wound, had in fact nothing to do with me. What I saw was not *my* wound. That night I dream the smiling blond in her flattering blue dress, sitting on the sage green chesterfield sofa, smiling coquettishly at me.

The cluster of flies reforms every day. Now they have also appeared in the next room, around the bay window. One by one - they seem clueless and too fat to fly away – I suck them up with the Hoover. Some, still alive, keep buzzing amongst the dust in the transparent plastic cylinder. I hide the Hoover in the garage and come back to check on the flies every hour, until they are all dead.

Progressively, as the smell recedes from the living room, the clusters gain volume and, it seems with the continuous spell of warm weather, resilience. Twice a day now I spray the conservatory and Hoover behind the sofa.

On the internet I read that the flies' Latin name is *Calliphora vomitoria*. A characteristic blue metallic hue. Forensic entomologists have been using these insects to detect the presence of decomposing corpses, allowing them to establish the moment of death according to the size of the cluster and the degree of development in the fly's body.



‘Females can lay up to 500 eggs on decaying meat, or excrement. The white elongated eggs hatch in less than a day and liquefy their substrate by the excretion of proteolytic enzymes. They burrow deep into their food supply. Under favourable conditions they moult 3 times in a week. Pupae are considerably smaller than the maggot and are dark brown in colour. The adult fly emerges 2 weeks later.’

It all started two weeks ago, around the time I met you in London. What did we kill that day?

‘Flies are seen as harbingers of disaster, heralds of death. Seeing a swarm of flies might mean the need to kill the harmful irritations in life. The biblical meaning of flies swarming around you may also symbolize dullness in your life. No movement, no development in your life. It is similar to death.’

Metaphors are a curse.

Easter Sunday

Use it like a spell book, the sonnets like tarot cards.
Shuffle the cards, let the rhymes loose. Who, trapped in
the spell of spring, the ever-returning prison, wouldn't
give in to magic?

Ask the questions, pick a card.
Ask the question, pick a sonnet.
Ask the question, pick a word.

What do you want?
What do *you* want?
What do you *want*?

Nothing.

In his last years Petrarca never stopped working around
the order of sonnets. Not interested in chronology or
linearity. Life must have seemed to him a complicated
arrangement of clusters, scenes, interruptions, and
diversions: sounds and images distorted by water.

'Pervicacious,' the teacher said. I was translating
Tacitus. 'You are not simply wrong,' she continued,
'you are *persistent* in your mistake.'

But, alas, I have become too diligent to disregard
numbers, too obsessed by their power, too
conscientious to neglect the chosen order of a dying
man, his final edition.

Easter Sunday.

At 9.57 your 'last seen' is still frozen on an unspecific number from last night. Are you still in bed? Have you fucked your wife and are still so full of her that you can't open WhatsApp?

Not a day for magic.

I close the book with a thud trying not to look at Laura's nakedness, her pubis drawn with such a thick line, chiaroscuro even, the muslin that frames it, and her breasts. Laura, so secretive, stands naked on the cover of the *Canzoniere* pointing at the wound, almost caressing it, smiling slyly, enjoying the water running through her inner thighs, frothing between her legs.

Before going to bed, particularly if he is waiting with the light on, I sit on the toilet and let the water run, wasting time, and water, hoping that by the time I walk to bed he is already asleep. Listening to the water I stare at the tiles on the floor. Slowly as the pelvic muscles relax, the awareness shifts towards the margins, until a shape appears from the veins of the travertine. Since the day at the Barbican, what I see is variations of your face staring back. It is called *pareidolia*, the tendency to perceive a meaningful image in a random visual pattern. Your mirk on the travertine tiles, every time on a different spot.

Before the 'last seen', I used to rely mainly on magpies to keep this moronic communication between us going. Magpies helped me to fight the smothering sense that the afternoon in September never happened. For long, their presence has been all I could rely upon to fill the silence that followed.

'One for sorrow,' suck in, 'two for mirth,' blow off the smoke, said a friend staring at the two in my garden. Before WhatsApp their squawking, and their straight, perking tail, would follow me anywhere. I quickly learnt to recognise their silhouette on chimneys, treetops, fences, supermarket carparks. A code to decipher, a message from you.

One magpie, two magpies, three magpies, a small flock going for a dance. Soon, the position of their bodies became relevant, and the time of the day. Facing each other. Away from each other.

If their rat-tat-tat woke me in the morning, I would hear it throughout the day. If I heard an unusual nocturnal squawking, it meant you in bed next to your wife, awake. Very rarely two called from the garden at night: it meant you calling me from somewhere.

The sun shines obscenely on this Easter Sunday. By midday, under the built-up heat, it feels as something inside the house has started to swell. As if a tender self is pushing between the interstices of cracks and floorboards. Underneath the scorched exterior, something is unfurling, a new scent. But there are no more flies. Whatever is left of the decaying body is now baked.

Today my husband has persuaded the little one to go on a bike ride. ‘And *this time* on your mother’s bike,’ he points out, meaning, by that, a race bike, a proper bike, and not the toy-like-bike on which she feels safe. Breaks are checked. Tires are inflated. Saddle is lowered. Lights are positioned. Helmets are chosen. Gloves? No. His over-zealous preparation for the outing radiates irritation.

On different occasions I’ve been told that, on the road, I am too easily abusive and become unpleasant to be with. If I am not with them, he will be more forgiving, so it is agreed that I will meet them later.

The little one appears downstairs wearing a jeans mini skirt. My husband stops fussing about the bikes and looks at me, talking to her.

‘Are you comfortable?’

‘Why?’

‘Just wondering.’

She grabs the handlebar and mounts the bike. As she bends forward, testing the front pedal, her skirt lifts showing the white hem of her underwear.

Chin to chest, he stares at his boots. She intercepts the pulling of his lips.

‘What?!?’

‘Nothing.’

She loses grip and the bicycle slips clanking between her legs.

‘It’s called chafing,’ I say helping her to pick up the bike, ‘when tights rub against the saddle.’

‘No,’ he looks up, ‘it’s called having NO idea.’

‘Or WHAT.EVER.’ She hoists the bike, pushes fiercely on the pedals, and disappears behind the bend of the roundabout.

As if in contrition he whispers *ti amo* in my ears. I nod and smile looking at my feet. I can’t, can’t say it back to him.

Ama chi t'ama

Love those who love you.

On my map of the *Canzoniere*, I saved this saying. Song 105. At the time of the mapping, I must have taken the symmetry it suggests as an omen. My husband would be happy with the unequivocal symmetry it recommends, whilst you, by nature and trade suspicious of easy reciprocity, would be mostly annoyed by it.

Magpies mate for life. The pairs remain together from one breeding season to the next, occupying the same territory. I also read that they pass a cognitive experiment called 'the mirror test.'

'The experiment proves an organism's ability to recognize itself in a reflection. To perform this test, a coloured dot is placed in a place that they will be able to see only by looking into a mirror. Subjects pass if they can look at their reflection and recognize that the mark is on themselves and not another, often by attempting to reach and remove the dot, the stain.'

If I did the magpie test, would I be able to recognise the stain, that sinful part of me? but what if the stain is not sinful? What do you see when a red dot appears on your WhatsApp? me or yourself? When you write 'stop texting me', I feel sinful. Who am I betraying? My husband? You? Me?

Passing the mirror test is a feat of intelligence that only four other animal species can accomplish. 4 seems indeed a small number against the 8.7 million species of animal on Earth. The chance of all this magic to be true.

But symmetry is deceitful.

That day in London did you want to suggest symmetry when you pressed your calf against mine? Would I have noticed a 'reciprocal feeling' unfurling between your legs?

The problem, I see now, lies in the imperative mode of sayings, which is at odds with love.

Ama chi t'ama, I saved on the map.

Critics call the canzone 105 a joke, *una frottola*, refusing to read it as a serious composition. 'Written in a vague manner,' Leopardi comments pique, 'not to be understood.' Others say, 'The most obscure song in the *Canzoniere*: strange rhythm and weird internal rhymes.'

Symmetry hides unrest.

Magpies don't like water. Along the canal towards the city centre, there are no magpies perched on the low fences and dusty edges which run on and off along back gardens on one side and the railway on the other. Their curiosity elects desolate places where they can find a natural abundance of rubbish to collect. Not this murky mash for which I have put a black dress on.

Ornithologists have concluded that the magpie treasure nest is a myth. They are not allured *only* by shiny objects but as intelligent, inquisitive birds, they are attracted to anything that catches their attention.

I walk fast, hips first through the muggy air, sweating. That day in September as we walked along this canal to the bench in the park, we were holding hands. Would you hold my hand now? That day a neighbour saw us. It must have seemed obvious to her because afterwards, for years, she avoided looking at me, embarrassed perhaps. Lately she has been smiling again in an attempt to restore reciprocity, but I care more for the distance built during these years because her coldness is proof that you have been here.

On the water surface cracked leaves are trapped in a thick film of pollen. Muzzle of plastic bottles stick out, beer cans prop up, chips wrappings, an umbrella. I want to hold up my dress and lower myself in the shallow water, wade through pollen and rubbish, knee deep, let the murky liquid tickle my thighs.

Strutting on, I play with Canzone 105 in my head. Focusing on the rhythm of my steps I sway the hips, letting the black fabric of my dress flutter, its words loose, waiting for a shape to appear, for something to happen.

The song is a disarrayed mixture of images, objects and figures stacked in a wobbly pile of confused sensations, where the initial symmetry is lost:

a glass to quench his thirst
the Alps
Phaeton falling in the river Po
a blackbird
a rock emerging from the waves
a fig tree
woods
sheep
a fisherman's net too tight to catch anything
a key opening a chain lock
prisons
nocturnal violets
wild boars

Rhymes, harsh and scatty, clash into a frenzy: -anza, -ezza - erga - oppa. These are scratchy, coarse sounds, like the pebbles on this path crushing under my trainers. Their pointy noise pricks my hips, where the swirl of the dress begins.

Pareidolia helps to focus on marginal elements. Out of the crammed items only the black bird appears twice, his orange beak peeking out from the foliage of a fig tree.

*e già di là dal rio è passato il merlo,
venite a vederlo!*

the blackbird has crossed the river.
Hear, hear. Come to see it!

Sticking out of the fig tree of song 105 is a blackbird.

Perched on a branch, observing through the foliage of a fig tree. An orange beak in a bush rather than the splash of waters, that Phaeton falling.

Perhaps that's the joke. Petrarca's dick. Francesco's
flashing the blackbird beak.

'Unusual rhyme,' the critics say.

beak:dick
[not even a rhyme in English]

La frottola, the joke, has a darker side. Its energy
precipitates towards the end, where Laura appears,
saying actually something for once!

non foste così ardito
you weren't bold enough

Words which feel like thorns to Francesco, poking,
prodding, tormenting him.

lei che mi ha il fianco ferito
she who stabbed my flank

What's oozing out of its rhymes is thick relief, the
sweet taste of certain sex, like the deep, sappy smell of
the honeysuckle flowers along the canal.

If the order chosen by a dying man is not easy to
disregard and if 105 is a reprimand, what is 106?

A short madrigal, of which there are only a handful. As
only a handful must have been the occasions when he
moved on and let loose.

Nova angeletta sovra l'ale accorta
A new angel appeared by the river.
senza compagna, senza scorta
without company, or friends
mi vide
she saw me
un laccio tese tra l'erba
and pulled a trap in the grass
Allor fui preso
I was taken
et non mi spiaque poi
and didn't mind it afterwards

Ah! It was *her* trap. Retaliation leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. But it is clear now that the orange beak has sprayed some semen into the new angel who appeared on the other side of the river.

Some critics mention a few days unaccounted for in the summer or spring of 1337. Ten years after he saw Laura in Santa Chiara a son was born, Giovanni. The mother was probably a gipsy, a woman who read tarots.

One critic: 'Giovanni will become the torment and agony of Petrarca's life, according to his own words after his son died in the night of July the tenth 1361, age 25.'

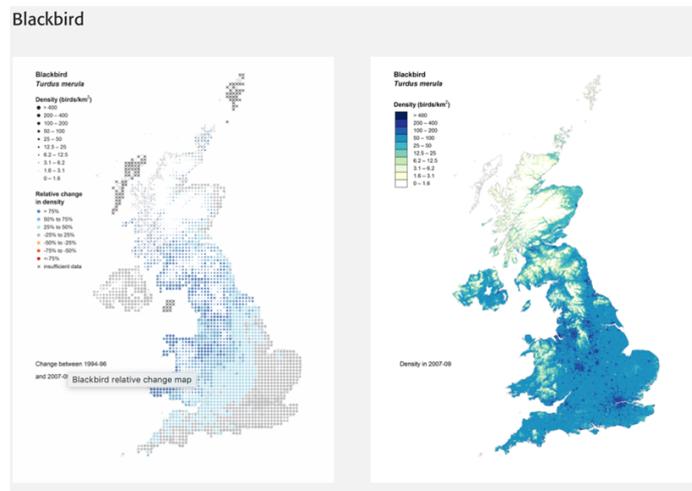
How can magic be other than a curse?

I send you this text, which could be considered a passive aggressive move from my side. I doubt you read it. Certainly, you didn't bother replying. You are the master of passive aggressiveness. because you kill people with you silence.

'A study on the population of blackbirds in urban area suggested that

'at least one of the reasons for the Blackbird being so successful in London is its ability to increase its productivity in that habitat. [...] Undoubtedly, London is a very suitable place for Blackbirds.'

The study suggests that London's blackbirds have a very heightened sexual drive. Yet, according to a more recent survey during the last ten years, the population of blackbirds has moved towards the west countries, progressively leaving the London area, where their magic started to fail.



A map of your magic starting to fail 😊.'

The appointment is on the small modern square by the fountain, [a few meters away from where you were sitting asking me what I wanted]. Today ice-creams are sold here even on Sundays. They are already there. He is holding her bicycle. His slender body and longish hair are still that of a boy. She is bending forward, flipping her long hair down to put it in a bun, like her sister does. From far away, they look like a couple of teenagers. They are beautiful. And would be fine without me.

I could turn around and walk away. Spare them my unrest, spare the little one my intrusion. But my husband is already waving at me.

In the small modern square, we sit by the edge of the water feature: a long, low stone basin where clear water flows lazily with the quality of Japanese stillness. While they lick their ice-creams sitting on the edge, I smoke watching the water licking the limestone. On and off my husband glances at my breasts.

‘This cut is too low,’ I say annoyed with myself for wearing this obscene black dress. For this narcissistic need that I still have to beguile him.

‘No. I like it.’

A solitary magpie land not far from us. This square is a perfect environment for magpies. I look around for its companion (not here) and glance mechanically at the time. 18.18. [miss me? Wasn't your family day of satisfaction?] We all follow its twitchy jumping, the jerky movements, the way it tilts its head high pretending to ignore the world around.

‘It looks like you,’ the little one says.

‘Uhm. Black and white you mean?’

‘No. Your nose. Pointy. Like a beak.’

But that's not what she means.

Looking up, she jerks her head to the sky, left, right, left, right, content to have found the analogy. If she had the words, she would say righteous, self-absorbed, striking, mean.

‘It's an elegant bird’, my husband concludes.

He carries me on his bike the way he used to when, students in Milan, we only had one bicycle. Sitting on the handlebars, I face backwards, my whole body tacked in a ball between his arms and chest. His muscles are tense for the effort of holding the weight of my body. Leaning on his shoulders feels safe. I turn into the girl who loved his starched shirts, the smell of his hair, the tense, strong arm under the rolled up sleeves. What kind of magic was that?

The little one is riding behind us, keeping her distance, the result of our magic. We pass joggers, people with dogs, small clusters of youngsters smoking pot. She will notice it too, has learnt that smell.

We pass a couple walking hand in hand. That blond curly head. The contrast of his tall body next to her, the swing of his long coat. He bends gently and smiles at something she is saying. My neighbour might have been just envious when she saw us that afternoon walking back along the canal.

It was bold, *ardito*, of you to come and ask what I wanted.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

A sudden jerk. The bike loses its balance and swerves left and right. He let go the handlebar to lift an arm to the sky.

‘Fuck! What was that?’

‘Salute.’

‘Who?’

‘The magpies. When we see two.’

He readjusts his body around mine and realigns the bike along the canal. The unbalance brought my knee to brush against his crotch, where something is bulging.

I could be more determined, *ardita*. I could leave. Of which am I more scared? to endure a life without you or to make *them* endure life if I left?

I lean heavier on my husband’s shoulder, breathe consciously into his neck. My knee is touching lightly his groin. Or does my courage consist in staying?

In the bathroom, all I can see in the travertine veins are eyes frowning at me. The light in the bedroom is still on.

Amore e gelosia mi hanno il cor tolto

Love and jealousy shredded my heart

Well, mine too.

And so, (hear, hear, how audacious of me! How *ardita!*) after ten years, I shredded your tie in return. Jealous of a woman on a card: a gipsy, your wife, in her blue flattering dress. A woman on a card who is happy and entitled. I shredded your tie because it was the only thing close enough to your heart. For all the hours of your days. For the nights you are spending next to her. For the presents you buy her. For the meals you share with her. For the texts and the phone calls. For the steps you walk next to her, or a little behind.

She is between us even in a deck of cards. I was the plough then. What magic does a plough suggest?

Yet, I would like to receive your semen.

I take off my clothes slowly, facing him. He lowers his glasses on the chin to absorb the scene. My line is nothing like Laura's. A child's quick, sharp dip. My husband loves it.

I want to hear two magpies calling from the garden now. But no.

How pathetic of me to even think that this consists of revenge.

Summer

Here. There.

Here. There.

Different and far apart but separated only by a letter. 'T' indeed feels the right shape for a dead end, or a sharp choice. Just a 'T' between opposite realities. March *here*, April *there*, May *here*, June *there*. And so on. Doesn't the capital T look taller than the H?

Here is hot. I turn the tap lever on and off, following the rhythm of the fan, feeling the pressure of the cold water on my wrists, or the lack of it.

Here. There.

Adverbs have lost their exclusive relation to the verb; they can modify adjective, or other adverb, expressing a relation of place, time, circumstance. In Italian, *qui* 'here' is adverb, but *ci* 'there' is pronoun. *here*, this kitchen in the village by the sea where I am turning the cold-water tap, could change into *there* for you, who are not here. For you *here* might become a pronoun, a place that fills up with my name. A contamination by proxy? What sort of proximity, or distance, to the speaker shifts an adverb into a pronoun?

In Japanese, there are three different words to describe space.

Koko: the space around me

Soko: the space around you

Asoko: the space away from both of us

When I read this, I thought that I would like a word to describe the space between me and you.

On the radio I heard that Northern Sami has four words to describe the space between the speaker and the listener, but when I looked for the words, I couldn't find them.

Outside, a cork pop. Laughter.

Behind me, the orange fan monitors the room. It completes the 180 degrees, and clicks. All it has ever done: humming and clicking summer away.

The fan which my grandmother, a woman I don't remember in this kitchen, had wanted above the cabinets, 'away from the hobs'.

The fan which my mother was never allowed to remove, despite its annoying lack of style.

The fan which hummed summer's afternoons away, until I was old enough to go to the beach alone.

sssssssummmmeerrrrr. here.
sssssssummmmeerrrrr. here.
sssssssummmmeerrrrr. here.

From the garden my husband's flip flops drag up the stairs and into the kitchen. He walks straight into the narrow corridor where dishwasher, stove and sink are aligned. Two tomatoes appear next to me.

'The table is clear', he says.

'Ok.'

'Where are you?' he asks alluding to my silence during lunch,

'I'm here.'

Slipping behind me, into the tight space between wall and sink, he pushes his body against mine.

'I miss you,' he whispers into my ears. His breath smells of vinegar.

I consider the pressure of his body. Like an adverb pushing its way into the verb, hoping to modify it. An analogy with implications.

'You are so beautiful.'

With one hand he is already searching into my swimming bra, whilst the other is reaching for my shorts.

He likes getting at me from behind when my hands are busy, like rinsing a salad bowl. The cold water has numbed my fingers and the rings feel looser. I have noticed it in the water. When I swim, I hold them with

the thumb, to avoid them slipping away. All, but one, would sink.

ssssssssuummmmmmmerrrrrr. here.

From the shady patio of the house next door, a prolonged guttural sound rises above the clinking. Your wife's laugh: flirty, deep but forced, a slightly obscene vibration against the vocal cords. Another cork pops. Almost three in the afternoon: your family is setting the table for lunch, and your wife's cooing laugh follows a pattern of its own.

Pulling my hair back, I wipe off the film of sweat he left on my neck, hoping that he won't notice. But he does.

'I disgust you...'

'Oh, stop.'

Swirls of water gurgle down the plug trapping remains of wilted salad leaves in the sink strainer. The leaves flap according to the water pressure, like gills gasping for air. Entwined around the steel, they are intricately difficult to get rid of.

My watch is still one hour behind, a pathetic trick to juxtapose 'here' and 'there': this village by the sea and the city of London, where I imagine you staring at red and green numbers under the humming of the air-conditioning. A self-inflicting trick. There are no reasons to think that 'feeling closer' would matter at all, or that it has any meaning to you.

Since the day in March, when you sent me a panoramic view of your office, zooming in on your shredded and blood-stained tie, that unassuming room has become *there*. A place where I hover on and off. The 8-second-long video shows a glass box overlooking an open floor carpeted with desks and hanging computers. Half of the room is taken by a sturdy, wooden dining table, your hideous conference desk, which I imagined more glamorous. Its scratched top baffles me. Six chairs upholstered in a washed, sad, sage green velvet wait patiently.

Every time I check the time, part of me floats in that glass box. My half consciousness, in lieu of any other present communication, is busy rearranging the six

chairs. Every time I want to get rid of the wilted blue balloon left on the floor. Every time it is still there.

The voices from next door are getting louder, fuller, her cooing gets deeper. I feel it scraping *my* vocal cords. A contamination by proxy. Today, like every day.

‘But you are.’

‘What?’

‘Disgusted.’

‘Oh, please. Stop saying that.’

Reaching deeper under my shorts, he easily slips two fingers inside me, pulling, bringing me back to the sink and the salad leaves.

I liked the roughness of his fingers, before.

Before what?

The first winter, in Milan, my body craved for it. Him.

Answer the question. Before what?

Before I stopped feeling it.

Even before we got married, we had stopped making *that* love.

His hand emerges, smeared in menstrual blood.

‘Sorry.’ What am I sorry about?

‘You know I like it anyway.’

He stretches his hand out under the faucet, and streaks of bright red blood mix with the delicate green of salad leaves.

In the last year, my periods have become unpredictable, and monstrous events. When I look, there is a bright red stain: the internal walls of my uterus silently melting away.

Last time I almost bled to death it was May. Paris with my mother. A weekend planned so far ahead that, by the time we were there, it felt already spent. Two exhausted women walking through Museums and shopping ventures barely talking to each other.

Paris in May.

What were the chances of a miracle?

You there for work, my mother falling asleep early, although I think part of her would have liked seeing me rush down six flights of stairs to cross Asoko, and find you waiting behind the glass door.

The soft rain had just given in to the warm night, and the lights on the small square repeated infinitely on windows, glasses, small puddles, and on every wet patch on the pavement. Tall, leafy trees surrounded the small square where we sat for a late drink. Their smooth bark exposed a strong, muscular trunk with little cracks and darker spots. Like your forearm under the white shirt. Were they Plane trees?

‘Stay with me tonight,’ you said quietly, looking away in the middle of the conversation. Plane trees were my only witnesses.

Once again, my trick of a word.

‘Impossible.’

By the time your taxi arrived, my legs were soft bark, peeling away from the pavement.

‘Good night,’ you said, kissing me lightly on the cheek, like a neighbour would. In the hotel room in Rue Notre Dame De Laurette the dark smelled of my mother’s body. Down the skin of my thighs ran rivulets of blood, instead of your fingers.

Miracles don't happen twice. And even if, by some absurd cosmical coincidence, we, just one more time, were to share a space away from me and you, for which there is no word, even if that happened one more time, by now you have had enough of floating rings, shredded ties, miracles, and other bullshit, I repeat to myself staring at the salad leaves.

My husband is still hovering around the kitchen.

'The dishwasher is full. Let me finish here if you need to..., you know?'

'No, that's fine.'

Or perhaps, I breathe deeply, peeling away the fibres from the strainer one by one, the fact that you are *not* here, under the shady patio with your beautiful, noisy family, has to do with that night in Paris. Perhaps, I think, pressing the last green mash through the strainer, you are not here because that night in May disturbed your system too?

I spray disinfectant and wipe it all off until the sink is left like my mother used to leave it after every meal.

Here. There.

Contiguity disturbs the system, affects the body, enters the brain, like the cooing laugh of your happy wife.

Two contiguous summer houses.
A warped plastic net between them.
Here is where, fifteen years ago, you bought the house next door.

How could I not be here?

Francesco too bought a summer house in Vaucluse to be close to her. The name means 'closed valley'; indeed, the village lies embedded at the bottom of a cliff which rises to close a long, straight valley. Imagine the dead end of a T. The conjunction between the valley and the cliff is a magical place: a perfectly round opening in the rocks, the shape of an open mouth frozen around the 'o' of impossible. Why not?

Indeed, Vaucluse, its lush green waters perfused with her presence, is a mythical place in the Canzoniere.

Qui tutta humile e qui la vidi altera
Here I saw her shy, and here proud

Qui cantò dolcemente, qui s'assise
Here she sang, here she stood

Qui si rivolse e qui rattenne il passo
Here she turned and here she delayed her step

Qui co begli occhi mi trafisse il core
Here she pierced my heart

Qui disse una parola e qui sorrise
Here she spoke and here she smiled

qui cangiò il viso.
Here her expression changed.

'Here', *qui*, is filled with Laura's movements. Eros is action.

Chiare, fresche e dolci acque
Clear, fresh, and sweet waters

Song 126 is set in Vaucluse. Its beginning, disyllable adjectives, is amongst the most quoted songs: a trademark. The rhythm flows, tumbling gently down in a soft, plain manner, like the waters of the Sorgue. There is no foreshadowing that here is where Francesco imagines his dead body. Indeed, mythical places can kill you.

He, dust, *terra in fra le pietre*, soil amongst stones, observes Laura standing by the riverbank.

gentil ramo ove piacque
a lei di fare al bel fianco colonna

the trunk where she rested
those lovely hips of hers

Those lovely hips of hers. It must be lovers' preference to delay expressions, fragmenting the plainer syntax. You did it, that night in Paris, talking about my knees. 'These bony knees of yours,' you said. Delicate. Fierce. Obliqueness helps to reach towards the impossible. Or perhaps it was just a banker's frill. I should stop reading too much into your words.

una pioggia di fior sopra il suo grembo scendea.
a light rain of flowers fell on her lap

The scene inspired the illustrator of the first incunabulo, now on the front cover of my edition. Despite the flowers, I can't help staring at her heavy pubic crescent mirroring the wound under her breast.

This song, the critics say, alludes to the *pastourelle* genre, (shepherdess happily available in woods) but, they add, the reference to the salacious genre fails to fulfil the erotic expectation. Laura is not available. Francesco is dead.

Given, perhaps Laura's fragmented body 'fails to fulfil the genre's erotic expectation',

membra, fiancho, gonna, seno, occhi, grembo, trecce, riso.
limbs, hips, skirt, breast, eyes, womb, plaits, smile

The unbridgeable, impossible distance between the lover and the beloved is filled in a sudden movement. Laura, not Francesco, becomes a verb. In Vacluse, I realise when I look back at the list, Laura shifts from adjective to verb.

She stands watching the water, the grass, the soil then her eyes move, turn around, her body follows,

cercandomi
looking for me

And when she becomes a verb, what happens to Francesco? Deliberately disruptive, confusing, head-spinning, a whirlwind dynamic: who is watching whom? Is it Francesco remembering Laura, is it Laura looking for Francesco or Petrarca observing both from a certain distance? How many people are in this scene? Two or three?

[on WhatsApp we play this scene using various combinations of the number 6: 12.06, 16.56, 22.46

They all mean: *ci sei?* where are you?]

When, fifteen years ago, I saw you for the first time walking a little behind your wife, so tall, and absurdly blond, you looked like a god. It must have been the day you decided to buy the white villa on sale next door. The pines above offered little shade for an Englishman and, I remember, your eyes squinted. I was on my way to the supermarket. We said hello.

The year after your family moved in, the children became friends, later I met your wife and eventually you. This place by the sea, in my Canzoniere, has become perfused with your intermitted, rare presence. But mostly with your absence. My Vaucluse.

I wish I could say why or how it happened. Why or how you have become a pronoun filled with my desire. I only know that *here* I can picture your blond head shimmering everywhere, just like the lights in the small square in Paris attaching themselves to every surface.

Here, afternoons are void places filled with the sound of your wife's cooing.

Scirocco

From the terrace overlooking the garden, the long curtains slash the trees, lapping their trunks in an idiotic manoeuvre of seduction. On the table laid for the guests, a gentle shower of cicadas falls like ornaments.

My husband doesn't touch the laced wings trapped in the wax of the flickering candles, but kicks carcasses off the chairs with his boot. 'This wind!', he mumbles. He gets out the water hose and sprays the patio clean, smoothing his groomed hair. I don't remember the wind at Ferragosto.

'Miaròs', my father used to say when scirocco left a film of sand on his chair, 'Alceo calls it 'miaròs': temperamental', he used to say smiling, pinching my cheek, 'like you.' 'Miaròs' also means lewd, lecherous.

When hot air from the North African desert crosses the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, particles of sand pick up molecules of water. The water burdens the hot, sandy air disturbing its trajectory. By the time the wind reaches this village by the sea it has become fickle and resentful. The little one saw you entering your house very late last night. You must have been on the last flight from London. I heard you closing the gate softly shortly after 1.30. Your last seen was 1.32.

Well, let water intercept the hot air. I am the heavy water molecule ready to swallow any dry, hot-air particle that would come too close to me.

From the morning, I have seen your gold crowned shadow appearing and disappearing behind the dark windows of the white villa, but it is your wife who after breakfast calls me to the warped net to hand over the fresh Coriander leaves. 'For your chicken!', she coos. For, from the last ten years, the night of the fourteenth of August dinner is at mine, and the menu is Thai Chicken.

I wonder if by now you have realised that my dish is a trap. Herbs are not easy to find in this village by the sea, and since you are the only one who can bring fresh Coriander from the UK, Thai chicken is another trick of mine to have you here.

'Close those windows!' my husband shouts from the garden.

Perhaps our asoko, our space between here and there is a large mass of water one needs to cross from there, your office with the six chairs to here, my kitchen with the whirring fan. I breathe in the warm wind. No wonder the Scirocco tonight.

A mythical place, by definition, can't change: its fixity is a guarantee of its own existence, its *raison d'être*. Like the *Canzoniere*, some detracting critics say. The same linen orange tablecloth, Laurel tree, same lime green melamine plates, the arrow, same paper napkins in different colours, tears, rain, ice, river. Same chicken. Laura.

The phone rings. My mother calls to wish us Buon Ferragosto. They are going out with some friends, fortunately she doesn't have to cook. Before hanging up she adds that, this year, I shouldn't get out the nice cutlery stored in the plastic boxes, since she is not here to sort it out.

Each year, the only variation to this mythical place are the ornaments I lay on the table: cast away things brought to the shore. Shells, tree branches, colourful pieces of glass. This year is a thick root coiled around a stone in a sensuous embrace. I place the centre piece and take out the plastic boxes of cutlery.

The little one steps into the kitchen ready for her first beach party. One of my little black dresses [I don't remember her asking] looks even more little on her.

'Do you like it?' She stands by the fridge, a mocking tilt of her head. She wears no make-up.

'It looks great on you.' Not only I do like the dress on her, but, unlike my mother, or because of her, I am at peace with her wearing it, and with me liking it. I lift my glass and take a sip of wine.

'Thanks.'

'Have a good time, but you know...'

'I know,' she kisses my cheek, 'You look good too, mum.'

Filleting the chicken. The filaments of fat stick to the fingers. Petrarca, like my husband, would peek behind my shoulders to check for the tiniest residue of fat. He was picky [a proto vegetarian], and obsessively observant of his digestive functions, like my husband.

Chopping vegetables. An essential but transitional stage. *chop chop*, you texted once. My legs chopped asphalt, tube, pavements. Chop, chop. They stopped only when they heard my name called from a gold crown in a sea of heads, and my heart skipped a beat. chop, chop. Two to three. chop, chop. A coffee. chop, chop. A meeting at half past two. chop, chop.

[once in a text you quoted Shakespeare's *Othello I have only five minutes for love*. Time was always against us, but mainly you.]

If the *Canzoniere* was a dish, it would be a salad: a savoury base, with a touch of sweetness. A green dish, rich of herbs, with a vinaigrette to build layers, where the sweetness of Thai basil (Laura) mixed with green apples and feta cheese would elusively appear and disappear, until it would be transubstantiated (on paper).

Will you savour this *Canzoniere* that I am writing for you or by the time it is ready, will its leaves have wilted and the whole thing be thrown into the bin?

As the guests arrive, they climb the few steps and peep into the kitchen to say hi. They pile parcels of ice-cream or bottles of wine on the counter and blow me kisses. When your wife appears, the last of course, she brings with her a swirl of turquoise silk and a frozen dessert. Not you.

I focus on building the layers of my dish with tonight's ingredients:

scattered voices
red peppers
laughter
grated lime
corks popping
coconut milk
her cooing
curtains flapping

Chopping the coriander releases a scent of you.

Salt. I need to remember salt. The Scirocco has gathered rivulets of sweat under my breasts, my armpits, my chin. My hair smells of garlic and jasmine rice. I am slowly turning into my dish of desire.

I hear my husband's voice sharing with the guests gathered in the garden his preoccupation for spiced food. I add some more chilli powder.

Whilst the sauce thickens, I roll a sigarette and observe the scene from the small balcony overlooking the garden. The guests are scattered in small groups around the orange table drinking spritz. Your blond head shines from the far corner of the garden by the warped net.

God. You *are* here.

You turn, look up at me and smile. The wind is ruffling your hair. I imagine a few golden hairs falling on the barren soil of my garden. Later, during the night maybe, the wind and the rain will mix it to the pine needles or the skeleton of the cicadas.

The Thai Chicken is served, savoured, chewed, and swallowed with plenty of wine. Now, grains of rice rest splattered on the tablecloth, mixed with gummy buttons of red sauce.

The conversation lingers on a recent accident involving the children, when your wife decides it is time to impart her lesson on cheekiness.

‘My method is rough but effective,’ she proclaims slowly. She readjusts her body on the edge of the chair and gains some height brushing a long curl away, waiting for the guests around her to become silent. Her hair looks lovely: shiny and thick.

‘It’s easy and it works,’ she says pondering in the rings on her fingers the effect of her confession, before commencing. ‘When our children were too cheeky,’ she lowers her eyes and tenses her neck as if the idea of insolent children still pained her, ‘I would drag them under the shower and run cold water over them, clothes and everything.’

There is a moment of silence. The cicadas chirr madly, the wind blows through paper napkins and curtains, someone shuffles a chair, waiting for what follows, a joke perhaps

‘It broke our children’s capriciousness!’
Her deep cooing ebbs over the silence, the silky ruffles of the summer dresses, the men’s linen shirts, over the congealed remnants of the Thai chicken, and it is on its way up the steps and into the house, when it stops.

My husband’s chair screeches. He sits up and starts refilling everyone’s glass. From the other side of the table he looks at me with that sneaky subtle smile of his. Then, raising his glass to her, he says,

‘To your motherhood achievements!’

She graciously accepts his toast, even bowing her head slightly whilst next to her, you drop and flick away the cork with which you have been playing for half of the evening, as if it burnt.

Poking my finger against the plate, I imagine her ringed hand opening the cold tap on the children's backs, the wet mess on the bathroom floor. But what makes me sick and vengeful is 'our'. She said, '*our* children'.

Carrying a pile of dirty plates, I wobble my way up the steps, trying not to trip on the hem of my stupidly long gown. In the kitchen, the ghost of the digested Thai chicken has multiplied on every surface. I will never get rid of this slaughtering.

I imagine folding the kitchen, the table, the garden, the guests into halves, then eighths, then sixteenths and shredding the lot into the wind. I wonder if Petrarca ever felt the urge to shred his scattered poems and sprinkle them over the waters of the Sorgue, dispersing them as a way of valediction. I resent the fact that you are here, sitting in my garden next to your wife. *Whatever*, the cabinet replies indifferently, reflecting the image of a frizzled-hair fool.

‘Chicken was nice.’ Your voice arrives from an indefinite place, as if coming from the inside of a cabinet.

I quickly unfold the kitchen, the table, the garden. Too quickly. In reprimand, the kitchen tiles give in under my clogs. The work top is slanted. The walls closing in.

‘Where shall I leave these?’

With steady strides, you walk easily, too easily in fact, through the narrow slit along the appliances and pile some plates on top of a pot on the stove.

‘Thank you.’

We are standing next to each other, facing the wall. If I turned 90 degrees to my right, I could look at you, not at your eyes perhaps, but at your shoulder, or even the upper arm. Instead, I am mesmerised by your hands smeared in red sauce, holding on to the pile of plates.

‘Never been here.’

‘Here?’

‘Your kitchen.’

With your word, my kitchen, this old, tiny, crammed, orange-fan-monitored slaughterhouse turns into a different place. Its presence and scent expand through its modest French-window to the garden, and from the garden, over the warped plastic net, to your white villa. Its image shimmers in the downstairs room facing my

house, where you stand like a ghost, pondering, perhaps hoping to catch my silhouette moving back and forth from fridge to cabinets and back. My long-coveted kitchen.

I feel a pressure on my hip bone. The pressure is warm, though tentative and continues even after the word kitchen is said and gone. Your hand lays on my hip bone. It presses gently, as if it were collecting the data of this kitchen *and* of my hipbone: its temperature, the hardness of the bone, the gradient of its curve, the thickness of the skin around it. Collecting the data to store them. Where, I wonder, will you store the data of your hand on my hip bone?

I hear your trainers screeching on the kitchen floor and your steps fading down into the garden or perhaps it is just the throbbing pain of my finger pressed into the edge of the sink. The kitchen spins like a whirlwind. I want to pour coconut milk on my breasts, fill the holes of my body with rice, braid the wilted coriander into my hair, get rid of this hideous dress and just lie on the floor.

‘Are you alright?’ My husband approaches from behind. ‘The chicken was exquisite,’ he kisses me on the neck, ‘and not too spicy,’ he adds, relieved.

‘Good.’

‘What are you doing with those plates?’

I run cold water and squeeze some washing liquid in a pot.

‘Shall I bring down the ice-cream, then?’

‘Yes, please.’

I am sick of all this: the smells of cooking, the mountains of pots, the chicken carcasses still in the garbage bin, the fat on my fingers, blackish herbs in my nails. From the garden my husband's voice is offering the biggest ice cream's scoop *ever*. Everyone laughs. Someone pops a bottle and your wife's coos. I could just rest here, or better, leave by the back door, and let them finish without me.

'Aren't you coming to get your ice cream??!!' my husband calls from the garden. He gets so excited by ice cream, that he makes me smile, for the second time tonight. I put off the cigarette and go to join them.

Your wife is resting a hand on your forearm, whispering something to you. The flicker of the candles bounces on the shiny silk of her vest, to the gems of her neckless, to her eyes. That same shade of blue that was on the clairvoyant card. Me, a plough. Next to her glittery body, mine is tree bark. The cicadas' exoskeleton. I feel as part of the scene as the cicadas are, the spendable audience of her show. How much more pathetic can I be? Behind you, still bent over her ear, the warped plastic net looks at me mockingly. What did you expect? it says. On the cuff of your shirt there is a tiny smear of red sauce.

'More ice-cream anyone?', my husband shouts.

Something like an ambrosial determination to finish all of this sets in me. Dragging on my clogs, holding the hem of my pitiful gown, I wobble around the square table, brushing a light touch over my guests' shoulders, playing dot-to-dot on their heads, dispensing good wishes and happiness to everyone.

The plastic hose lays coiled under the steps where my husband left it in good display. I reach for the garden faucet. The impatient water, filling the hose, gurgles. When the pressure reaches its full potential, I press my finger on its round, hard border and turn it upwards, standing still under my own cold shower, washed anew.

Someone applauds. Screams, laughter.

Then, because it is not just my own capriciousness that needs breaking, I turn the hose towards the table, adjusting the water trajectory to hit its centre. The jet splashes over the ice-cream bowls, turns the frozen dessert into a puddle. It extinguishes the candles with a hiss. It knocks down glasses, it lifts plates, it spills half empty bottles over the tablecloth, onto the guests' laps. Folding chairs jump back, screaming.

Only my ornament, used to water, isn't affected.

I splash cold water over the past years, on every surface still pulsing with an image of you, on every place on this mythical village by the sea where your radiance still glows,
then on the warped net,
the guests,
your wife,
you.

In a complete silence my husband helps me to rinse the plates and wash the pots. In fairness, he was the one who had to apologise to the guests for my behaviour and see them off, whilst I disappeared upstairs and change into shorts and t-shirt. Before leaving the kitchen to go to bed he turns around,

‘The moment that killed the party was when you washed her toupee away.’ He says toupee with an air of gravity. ‘Which fell on the floor. With the cicadas.’

Then, with a little cheeky light in his eyes, he turns the light off in the garden, ‘You should have seen that.’

For the third time he makes me laugh tonight.

Around me the garden is now finally silent. The Scirocco has dropped and even what is left of the cicadas is resting. The yellow hose lies abandoned to one side of the garden, coiled around a tree trunk, where my husband threw it when he pulled it away from me. Behind me, no lights shine from the white silent villa. By now you are lying in bed next to her, the figure four of your legs still there.

I light a sigarette, kick off my clogs and open the phone.

00.38

Miss *me*? I think you are supposed to be in bed next to your wife, instead than playing with your phone. But perhaps you are not in bed next to her. Or it might be the other way around. She might not be in bed next to you.

Sometimes, I talk to the WhatsApp icon as if you were listening from the other side. If you knew what I was talking about, I could tell you about Apollo and Dafne.

You were Apollo tonight, I would say, and I was Dafne. By the touch of your hand, you turned me into the Laurel tree and killed me. I don't know if I will ever be able to repeat this Thai chicken curry of mine. Perhaps I will just keep rearranging tonight's ingredients for ever in my head, like the six chairs in your office.

I google the image of Bernini's Apollo and Dafne. He froze the two lovers into eternity. Bernini must have used the detail of Ovid's story in the *Metamorphosis* to imagine the scene. 'Swiftly' is what he writes to describe Apollo's chasing. Reaching, not quite touching, never quite touching. When his hand brushes Dafne's hip, she comes to a halt, half woman half tree. Ovid stops their chase, and the narrative, the moment Apollo's hand feels Dafne's body still breathing under the bark of the tree she is turning into, and so does Bernini.



Apollo, admittedly, looks like a fool: not in disbelief yet, he is still fantasising about her hair, mesmerised by the flowing wild mass. 'Imagine if she combed it,' Ovid makes him think. I couldn't comb my sticky tangledness even if I wanted to.

But, after all, gods are capricious creatures, especially when in love. His touch is deadly: Dafne's nails have already started to grow long and curvy clasp the riverbank, her body is already twisting into a new shape, her hair into the foliage of that Laurel tree which

appears almost in every page of the Canzoniere, obsessively.

All that is left of Dafne is her radiance, Ovid says.

Is it so, that after tonight all that will be left of me will be radiance? Because that is what I must have been for you, an unescapable emittance of radiating light [the whiteness of my hair irritated you, ‘impossible not to notice you,’ you once said half-jokingly]. Yet you have been following that light from a distance. The sunglasses and the baseball hat were props not to hide yourself from me, but to defend yourself from my radiance.

But next to Apollo’s deadly touch, Google suggests another image. In the Galleria Borghese, where these two statues live, another couple of lovers take the centre stage. It is the statue of Pluto kidnapping Proserpina. He is dragging her into the darkness of his Underworld to live with him for six months a year, while on Earth her disappearance will turn the world into autumn and winter.



The hand I want on my psoas is that of Pluto pressing, digging into Proserpina’s thighs, his ardour, his tearing violence. I don’t want the timid hand which left a smear on my dress. Not the soft touch of Apollo, but the primitive grab of Pluto, determined to make her follow him into his darkness. I double-click to enlarge the image. The pressure of his hand scooping her up. I want that pressure and I want to feel your fingers digging into my flesh.

I know, I do, that even if I tried to wash out the glitter of you and extinguish the radiance of your light from every surface of this village by the sea, in the attempt to convince myself that a dark place to live would be more appropriate, I know that there would be other worlds, hidden in tiny details of each one of my every day, like 'last seen', magpies, ants, water features, from where your light will still radiate, like a firefly hidden under a leaf, it would shine for me from the other side, wherever that might be. Worlds where your hand rest on my psoas for longer, worlds where your hand slides between my thighs. Worlds where your hand wants me more.

I forward you the picture of Pluto's hand, with no text, hoping that the beep will wake you.

Split

After Ferragosto, summer gently turns her back, revealing a new scent, the secret scent of soil exuded by a turned rock. After Ferragosto you spent your days self-confined in the white villa. Around the swimming pool a ghostly blond head.

Rain has come and gone, and so have the holidaymakers. The shoreline, rid of bodies and inflatables, swept away like annoying midges from its forehead, reveals a new landscape. The swelling in the middle, the bending towards the canal at the end. The shore finally distends into the milder sun, its wrinkles run all the way to the abandoned waterslide, towering like a hideous hairclip at its end.

Far out in the deep sea, in the glittering light reflected by the waves, gnarled tree trunks carried by the recent storm float, following the current. From the shore they look like determined swimmers.

At midday, every day and in any weather, my husband and I swim east against the current. Two kilometres to the end of the beach.

I follow a shape, my husband, drifting along parallel to the beach, considering that his stroke is improving. I start counting (for he will want to know how much *slower* he has been), but it is too cold. Water brings out a primordial fear in him, which he confronts by bullying it: slapping, hitting, pushing. In water, his body moves a little like when he is inside me: with a form of

resentment. But today, though deliriously slow, he seems calmer.

‘Vaffanculo!’

A pair of goggles hit my feet. Then they disappear again in the backwash’s froth.

My husband emerges from the right, trudging through the shallow water, bent in two for drama, yet careful to pull in the abs, because now I am finally looking at him. He bends to pick up the goggles, but I am quicker.

‘I thought you were that’, I say, swinging his goggles at a tree trunk gliding softly forward. ‘I was considering how much better your stroke has become.’

He turns to look at the sea, ‘I wish.’

‘Well, you were faster than the tree trunk.’

The inevitable small drama at arrival about his uselessness in water. I know that, partly, this is his way to compliment my swimming, but he can’t help to turn it always into a competition. He spends the half hour it takes us to get to the other side of the bay checking the distance between us, following my yellow cap, alternately ruminating, and swearing at the element. Probably also annoyed that for me the whole idea of swimming together ends the moment we enter the water. In this mythical place of mine, when I start wading through this murky green, opaque waters, until the tip of the waves kiss my nipples and I plunge into the obtuse, stubborn sheet of cold, I am alone. Gliding ahead of my husband is not my revenge, but the best time of my day.

‘Vaffanculo!’ He kicks the wave coming in. ‘No, really, how was my stroke?’

‘I was looking at the tree. But you were clearly faster today. The head,’ I say quietly, jiggling his goggles, ‘helps with the buoyancy.’ Now I am cold, and this is revenge: to impart a lesson in English, to he who can’t control his frustration. ‘Imagine you are diving. Keep your head down.’

‘Fuck your buoyancy,’ he says in English, then turns around with a sharp movement to grab his googles but the elastic band catches on my finger, it pulls and slings back. The plastic lunettes hit the front of my bikini. It hurts. He didn’t mean to, but he doesn’t say sorry either. ‘Fuck off,’ he repeats in English and walks away.

I like his code-switching. I like this *fuck off*.

His strides become faster, bouncier. He seems suddenly reconciled with the sea. But he has just seen the little walking towards him. She walks with a mix of anger and awkwardness, fiercely, with long, out of time steps. The new soft curves of her body struggle to control the skipping child still in her. When they meet, he hoists her body up, like he did when she was younger, and pretends to walk into the water. My husband is the only one who can still make her laugh. They turn and walk ahead side by side kicking the gentle break.

At the end of the long bend the sight of the waterslide’s bulky massiveness is depressing. The parallel slides, one yellow one blue rise twisted and tangled, as if gasping for air, clipped at the top by the safety banisters. Tonight’s concert stage is under construction in the free beach next to the slide: lorries, flags, people have suddenly appeared like small insects after the rain.

A strange void grows inside, inwards and upwards, all the way to my throat. The sound towers loom grey over the sand, where the stage is being built. I feel a sudden despair for that hideous bulky mass at the end of the beach, for the utter, unforgivable ugliness of a dysfunctional object, too big to be dismantled.

[scivolo, slide, slip, slit, split]

Since Ferragosto, my husband’s swearing has sensibly increased: under the shower, at the sink, in the garden, mainly when he thinks he is alone and no one is listening, he releases his ‘vaffanculo’ to the air, that is at me. Lately even in bed, while I am still reading or early in the morning in between snoring, the emerging evidence of a deep disappointment, a discourse with the

unjust inadequacy of my love, finds a way through the satisfying sound of the four-syllable word: vaf-fan-cu-lo

‘Ma va!’ he says throwing a hand behind, slapping my insinuation off. True. Every time he says vaffanculo, it is like a slap, my neck jerks, something inside closes up. ‘Fuck off’ [his swearing at me in English today] is rather new, and what is new is the reaction of my body, that comes from a different place. His code switching found a spot, where a deeper level of his irritation touched a deeper point of me that perked up.

It is fascinating what language can do. It reminds me of that time he returned from a work trip to the U.S. That night he moved differently in me, as though he knew where to find the spot, as though *someone had told* him where to look. That knowing pressure never returned and I kept wondering why just that one time.

Managing the interference of two or more languages might reinforce the ability to compartmentalize spheres of oneself. But sometimes it doesn't work. As well as it might make the brain stronger, it can also expose cognitive and psychological mechanism in ways that are unpredictable. The code-switching is a defence mechanism, apt to weaken the control of the ego: the shifting to a language ontologically less rich, allows more freedom from the dominance of the ego.

Despite living in the UK for twenty years, English still feels like a foreign language to us. Being a non-native immersed in a second language environment does affect the body, jerks its movements. Like facing the open sea swelling: sometimes the breathing becomes difficult, the body responds abnormally, the head wrests in panic, the stroke is ineffective.

Sometimes bilingualism in adults is associated with abnormal reactions. Linguists call it 'environmentally induced schizophrenia'. The bilingual reality of our marriage has by now affected everything we say. When I speak English to him, my husband assumes that behind anything I say there is a meaning detrimental to his welfare. He is rightly suspicious and consequently defiant. Behind everything I say in English there is my secret, the shadow of you, the white noise of slushing water, and the brackish smell of the room I have been wading in the last ten years.

Standing on the firm holding of the shore it is easier to laugh off and slap away contradicting metacommunicative signals, but in water everything becomes necessarily fluid, any firm judgment becomes confused, at the mercy, as swimmers are, of the element.

And what about our code? Drowning in contradictive metacommunicative signals, yet a full range language: numbers, sparse words, photos, captures. Equally limitless and restrained. It doesn't take us anywhere, but languages are not supposed to go 'somewhere.' In

our world commanded by a numeric code on WhatsApp, there are no walls to touch, the day doesn't end. Just water: the deceptive element I am moving in: limited and limitless. The impression to command English, this second language I write in, is illusory, and transitory, as illusory, and transitory as the feeling that you do love me, somehow. Writing in English feels like holding water, the perfect medium to write this story.

If I imagine for a moment to just let go, swim deep, and let it all flow

e dire tutto quello che mi passa per la testa senza fermarmi un attimo nemmeno per respirare, come spingo bene e libera su questi tasti in Italiano tutto scivola così bene in Italiano, potrei continuare per sempre così, ma non riesco veramente a pensare a te quando scrivo in Italiano. In Italiano non riesco a scrivere di te, non ho mai scritto di te in Italiano [perché? che cosa diventi in Italiano? Diventi mio padre, il padre di mio marito, mio marito, diventi un'altra persona. Una persona di cui non sono innamorata

my stroke, in these warm Mediterranean waters, becomes so self-assured and comfortable that it loses effectiveness. I lose the composure I need to write this story: arms over cross, head too high, hips too low, backflips and splashes. English waters are cold, and even if my stroke gets clumsy, because I move in the matter of doubt, love and floating tree trunks, like when in the middle of the day, out of the blue, suddenly I feel a light pressure on my hip, your hand, and I miss you, like I have never missed anything more, I wouldn't change it for anything.

When the body enters chilly waters, the blood retreats, it leaves the limbs, and collects around the heart. There it is easier to find a pulsing spot, which is honest and raw, unfiltered, simplified, and unsophisticated. This might be the reason I am doing this in English, to access a place where being a love fool is more acceptable, where you don't feel your limbs anymore, and the editing censure is weaker. Where also the contrary is true: so much stronger is the control needed to express anything meaningful, stay alive, that the distillation possibly allows distance, and the process hurts less. The shifting to a language ontologically less rich, allows more freedom from the dominance of the ego.

This obsession is one thing with water, you are any form of water, or rather, any form of water is a representation of you. So, in this pathetic mythical place of mine, where the water slide is turning into a tentacled creature asphyxiating on the shore, every time I wade this murky green to my waist, and plunge into its sheet of cold, it is *you* I am moving into.

The *Canzoniere* too emerges from an elusive, fluid, shifting medium. To write in the Vulgar language must have felt like holding water in your hands.

In the *Secretum* Petrarca discusses his various sins at length. He starts working at it between 1342 and 1343. These are years of yearning and distance. Then, after Laura's death, moving between Vaucluse and Avignon, Parma and Milan, he returns to it as to a delving praxis.

'A searching self-analysis in dialogue form.' The dialogue with Augustine is, the critic says, 'a fascinating dialogue with-the-Self.'

It is called *Secretum* because the text was not intended for publication. In the dialogue Petrarca/Augustin examines, scrutinizes, sniffs at Franciscus' sinful conduct. Augustin and Franciscus, antithetic in their identities, dialogue: a schizophrenic enterprise, it would seem.

In the *Secretum* Petrarca offers a detailed account of his depressive state, what today would be diagnosed as bipolarism. But, like everything else, it is written in Latin. Everything, down to the most personal letter, is conceived using a language which Petrarca totally commands: its grammar, spelling, vocabulary, level of formality, its legacy, its classical tradition. Latin is squared, rational and controlled, poised. The place where secrets might be revealed in fact disallows it.

But in the *Canzoniere*, on the scattered *fogli bianchi*, Francesco emerges from a language which is new, unstable, uncertain, fluid, constantly moving, evasive, shifty like water. A language which grows with him, around him, in him. Ungrateful language, he calls it.

ingrata lingua.
ungrateful language
che quando piu' il tuo aiuto mi bisogna
when I most need its help,
per dimandar mercede, allor ti stai
it is cold and unresponsive
sempre piu' fredda, et se parole fai,

and when it forms words,
son imperfette, et quasi d'uom che sogna.
they are imperfect, like those of a dreaming man.

Franciscus, so eloquent in the *Secretum*, becomes Francesco, the mumbling creature of the *Canzoniere*. The tension between Petrarca the author and Francesco the lover feels like a residual surfacing from the analytical effort of the *Secretum*. A split voice. One measures his steps on the shoreline, trudges along the wet sand, looking at the water, where the other practices underwater backflips. One intently looking at the noumenon, the other drowning in the phenomenon. The vulgar is a language with the elusive quality of water. And yet a tentative distorted, mispronounced sound is perhaps the closest to what cannot be expressed, a middle ground of sense and reference, a vacuum, a space which can be filled or left empty.

In between the lines, within sonnets and in between sonnets, and songs, the medium through which the story of the *Canzoniere* is told, the space through which the arrow moves, allowing its constant recalibration, is elusive. A fluid element where the arrow is allowed to oscillate.

Vulgar. English. A place where one feels closer to an inner spot. The *Canzoniere*, and not the *Secretum*, is the place where eros is free to rise from a liquid by virtue of buoyancy. The vulgar language allows the waters to be murky.

It doesn't surprise me that you prefer the clear blue waters of more exclusive seas, where you can see all the way to the seabed, focusing on the noumenon, a solid referential net. Not seeing your feet treading water scares you.

Unlike the dead cicadas, the pigeons seem unperturbed by the cooler days of this tail of summer. They spend the day cooing on the pine trees, dropping guanos on the gardens below with poised naturalness. In the early evening, like tonight, when beams of lights touch the swimming pool of your white villa and the blue water glimmers like the precious stones your wife wears to match the colour of her eyes, the pigeons descend for their evening ablutions.

Their sense of entitlement annoys your wife. A commanding sound of clogs coming from the inside on the villa alerts the pigeons. Your wife, still in her bikini, walks towards the pool clapping her hands to scare them off. They fly away, annoyed, circle the house and arrange themselves along the tallest branches of the pine trees.

Satisfied, hands on hips, she surveys the edge of the pool, fanning her backside left and right. Knowingly her lower back arches into a soft curve to offer a better view, to you who are eating a bread roll under the pergola, observing the scene in silence. Catching two birds with a stone, she is.

As she walks back inside, silence returns to the gardens. Like droppings trickling down, one by one the pigeons reconfigure around the edge of the pool. As you return to your bread roll, the pigeons return to their evening ablution.

I light a sigarette, considering that there is a lesson to be learnt here, but I don't know what that is.

Tonight is going to be a special night because on the beach of this mostly forgotten mythical place, near, actually right under the gigantic abandoned slide, a very talented artist has decided to play in a concert.

Tonight is going to be a special night because somehow I managed to get hold of some tickets, so I am actually going to the concert. I gave one to the little one who is going with some friends and one to my husband who said thank you, but no thank you. He is not coming.

Tonight is going to be a special night because I am part of a trio of concert goers, comprising you and your wife, who bought the ticket from me and gave it to you. And now we are all ready to go, but she is still messing about with the pigeons.

Listening to the rhythmical churning of my chain, I observe your wife's tip toe pedalling. Tighs trapped in the jeans mini skirt, knees softly brushing, the pressure on the pedals is contained by the smooth movement between her ankle and the balls of her feet. From behind, you are missing this lovely movement, probably just comparing our assets/arses.

High above the waterslide, flags move in a mirage of wind that blows from the sea. The noise as we walk toward the stage changes quality and becomes something material, pressing at the throat, the chest, the shoulders like a constraining cape, that it makes you want to get rid of your clothes. A swarming mass of bodies in shorts and bikinis crammed in dense clouds of sand.

You keep your usual distance behind. There is a small opening not far from the beer kiosks, where I kick off my clogs and lay my beach towel. She kicks her flip flops next to my clogs and kneels on her heels. You stop by the edge of the beach towel behind her and stare straight at the stage where the concert is in full swing. For courtesies, I wait for a few minutes then I walk off to get drunk.

After many rum and pears shots, there is a man dancing next to me. With me. A beard and a straw hat. On and off, his hand lands on my hip, he grabs me and turns me around. On and off, I push him away. He lets go gently, but then he is at it again. I don't mind if it helps me dancing my way through this torture.

I do wish tonight could be different. I do wish *I* could be different, a better person, that is, honest, loyal, friendly but I can't. And now I have walked away.

For a moment your blond head emerges over a sea of black dots, turns my way, as if to look at me, then disappears again. Everything becomes suddenly still and humble, as if that everything, whatever that everything is between us, had been waiting for this simple, miraculous movement of your head to come to

a halt. Now your gaze will split this space in two and I
will find you.

But no. I have lost you again.

‘Grazie ragazzi! Buonanotte!’ the singer finally shouts, and with that, floodlights lift the cape of darkness and noise leaving us naked, like a stone lifted reveals ants scattering away. My feet are cold, the strong wind plasters sand on the skin, in my mouth, my eyes.

In this blinding brightness what felt another space, miles away from where I was dancing, is but a few meters away. When I turn around, you are there, not far at all, on the same spot next to the towel, arms crossed high on the chest. Your wife stands next to you holding the straps of her rucksack. You two look like at a bus stop.

‘Hey’, I pick up the towel and swing it towards you. ‘It was great.’ Your wife nods at me and pulls her straps lower, ready to go. You step backwards to gain some distance.

‘Vafa. Culo,’ you say quietly, in Italian, looking at the beach towel flapping in the wind. But your code-switching is interesting and oh, so sweet to me this broken Italian word on your lips. You stand there gazing ahead, arms crossed until I give the beach towel a final shake and fold it back into my bag. Then, choosing your timing, you say it again, louder this time, looking straight at me, tilting slightly forward, like someone repeating an information for clarity.

‘Vafa. Culo!’ Then you turn around and walk away. Your wife’s rucksack jerks up and down behind your long stride, her legs rasp the sand lifting little clouds of finer dust around her ankle. She is leaving a trail of ‘out’ and ‘mind’ behind, but I don’t care. I really don’t. Your second *vaffanculo* finds the spot. From there it grows, it thickens, its tip touches and hardens my tongue, it locks my throat and makes space for the last ten years to realign inside me.

Your linguistic switch surfaced from a depth I didn’t dare to think existed. A depth from which your hand had emerged to touch my hip, but still too much controlled then, too much an Apollo’s hand then.

Finally, this change of idiom retroactively makes your tentative Apollo's hand on my hip feel much more like the grabbing hand of Pluto, pulling me into a dark world where a side of you has always been, but mostly inaccessible to me. With the past ten years, also the form of us reassembles.

I turn in the other direction, and walk against the flow of people, along the abandoned waterslide, all around the rusty iron gate against which decennial amount of rubbish has gathered: plastic chairs, inflatables, tents. There is even a stove. Above, the turning and twisting of the yellow and blue parallel slides continue to roll into each other undisturbed by the seasons, through the scorching sun or fierce wind and rain. Their ugly, rusting, warping twisting is still solid, and the thought of their destruction possibly more painful. Along the black shore, tired concert goers are settling in for the night, spreading sleeping bags and drinks, little furling dots of noise in the darkness.

May I be with her
when the sun sets, the stars our only witnesses,
May I be with her just one night,
and never may be dawn again.

I take off my clothes and walk into the sea slowly, letting the water froth around my tights, letting you into my wound, because tonight I am Laura and you, my cold distant love, now I know, you are Francesco.

Autumn

Phantom Pain

Sitting on the kitchen worktop, waiting for the little one to come home, minutes are longer than hours.

Today when I press the hairpin into the skin, I don't feel anything. This room is cold, and Raynaud is cutting off the microcirculation in my limbs. Lately, my whole body has turned numb. When it enters the skin, I feel no pain, but my armpits start to smell acrid, *as if* in pain.

For most of us, whatever the mind is at, be it jealousy, anger, love, or pain, total control over it is out of the question. For most of us foolish lovers, the mind is a captured monkey, trapped in the net, hiding somewhere, exuding the smell of fear. It will tangle its limbs in the net, make embarrassing noises *vaffanculo* or *fuck off*. The monkey is always hiding somewhere, more specifically the baboon rump. Even this writing from month-to-month, season to season might be provoked by its movement, following the baboon's back jumping from sonnet to sestinas showing his bright colourful arse in the movement.

There is consolation in the traffic outside. No matter what happens in this kitchen, cars, buses, lorries, people will always take my eyes somewhere else. During the last two weeks I drew a line of small dots above the arch of my foot. No one will notice it. The slow, dark crimson liquid is easy to clear it off with spit. I am getting used to its tangy sweetness.

No reason to open WhatsApp. For weeks there have been no numbers. One finger, one touch, is enough to swipe me away, right to left. me. gone. Now on your WhatsApp profile there is a ghost. White as nothing has ever happened.

So, I go back to writing letters. I trace your name on the glass, my ink the greasy paste of dirt collected on the finger.

My love,
where are you?

Petrarca wrote letters incessantly, but none to Laura. [and sometimes I like to read the *Canzoniere* just like a lifelong love letter to Laura] He didn't write letters to her when she was alive, nor after she died, letters nonetheless were what he was really into.

Letter writing becomes rather obsessive particularly in his late forties, after he finds the forgotten manuscript of Cicero's letters to Atticus, and he himself receives a letter with the news of Laura's death, and, apparently unrelated, he witnesses a strong earthquake and writes about it in a letter.

[earthquake or *heartquake*? but you wouldn't find my spelling funny today]

In his late, after establishing a unique contact with Cicero, after Laura's death and the dramatic earthquake, Petrarca had a change of heart, a *heartquake*. He starts to become the person we know now. Something in him takes over. He turns his head, and starts looking at the future, like the two face Janus. The three events trigger a swift movement, from left to right, from past to future.

Janus, the god of beginnings and transitions. Endings and time. Left is young, right is old. Left is past, right is future. Left is on, right is off. Janus' movements would have helped me to understand every time you turned your head off, away, to the sea, the long stretch of the beach, your blond wife.

After finding Cicero's letters. After Laura's death. After the earthquake, Petrarca begins to build for the future: he divides all his letters into 24 books. He hires a helper, a *scrivano*. He starts compiling collections: *Familiars*, *Senili*, *Posteritate*. And he starts organising the scattered *nugae* into the *Canzoniere*.

A change of heart. How did it feel swiping me off, reorganising your past into a fresh future? Right to left. Delete.

'Eroicizzazione programmatica' programmatic heroization of himself, the critics call the change of heart. The enterprise involves adjusting the letters' dates, pre-dating, post-dating, re-shaping past events, adding moral lessons in between. The movement is self-celebratory. *Renascatur Homerus!* Homer reborn, he calls himself, not humbly.

Yeah. Sunglasses on, lift chin a little, turn around, look at her, her backside, then the sea ahead in an almost a heroic spite. Left to right.

What gets lost is the present: inconspicuous, unspectacular, dismissible. Me.

In his late forties, he also commences an ambitious enterprise in his house in Vaucluse: redirecting the waters of the Sorgue at the bottom of his garden to create an area of steppingstones, the Muses' Garden he calls it. The waters prove difficult to contain. For several years, and many inundations, the waters keep reclaiming the patch of land. Every time he starts again.

This is perhaps what I am doing here. Applying a direction to this story, forcing it into a shape that suits me, tweaking and bending the facts of what has been, whilst all the time you are reclaiming what is yours, your truth, the inevitable force of the waters taking you to what is more natural and just, your true love, your wife, and your children. I on the other hand keep making this story, [which story? you would interrupt here, there is no story] flowing free downstream over my stones, I keep making this story warped and distorted, just because I am so fucked up by this restless need of validating the past ten years, this absurd determination to not let go of you.

Eventually, the project of the Muses' Garden fails. He must give up and let the waters flow freely through his garden.

My love
Where are you?

'Not spontaneous!' the critics say. Petrarca compiled the same letter three times: one copy for the addressee, one for his records, one on which he would keep working and editing. 'A nursery flower', one critic says. Dry and wilting, a flower not destined for pollination. Meaning a useless abstraction. That obstinate, arrogant, narcissistic decision to redirect the water for his Muses' Garden, to look at Cicero, left, at the Future, right, and ignore the humble, ordinary present of the current of the Sorgue. Not spontaneous this Janus' movement.

Because of his dual form, Janus has dual personalities as well. His left head is generally a

pessimist, and the right head is an optimist. Because of this, they often disagree a lot. One head also tends to lie, while the other tells the truth most of the time.

But the sudden movement, the turning head, always releases a whiff of skin, the intimate smell of the body, the smell which perfume can't conceal, something truthful and unavoidable. I have known the smell of your skin. You smell of yeast. But I remember once, kissing you like friends do in the place by the sea, before, before all this madness started, your skin released a scent of sadness.

'How was school?'

'Yeah. Alright.' She opens the cabinet behind me

'So.rry.' and places butter and plate next to my foot. She looks at it.

'What is that?'

'Uh?'

'Your foot.'

'What?'

'You should put a plaster on it,' she says pointing the chin at my foot whilst spreading butter on her bagel.

The letters might not be spontaneous, but in the margins, yes, the margins! Petrarca returns to leave later observations, dates, places, records of the moment of the day. The critics call these *marginalia*.

Obsessively self-editing, the punctiliousness of what is written in the margins is bordering boredom. Geographical annotations, moral observations, spiritual teaching, and tweaking. Even if the editing is fundamental to the herocization's program, the present resists in the *marginalia*. They are indeed revelatory in terms of psychological truths: 'I am a different person when I write'. Duplicitous Janus indeed. 'No pleasure left for me in this world.' Writing becomes his only way of surviving death. So, turn right, look at the future, forget the past. Work on that obscenely moving matter, which is Time, regiment it with dots to form the silhouette of a man called Petrarca.

Time worries me too. The time left for us in this life. Should we ever find a way to be together, will it be too late or would you want to make love to me?

My love,
Where are you?

Outside the warm afternoons tricks into a memory of summer, but it never really happened. The passers-by are faint figurines moving into a direction, their bodies just an inclination gradient. I like when things get stripped back to their essence: shape and movement. Left to right. A ghost.

Next to me the little one proceeds with authoritative strokes: half a bagel with salted butter, half with Nutella.

‘It’s time’, she declares. ‘Turn the radio on.’

I turned my upright foetal position towards the radio, careful not to knock the oil bottle behind me. 16.20.

On the Radio, my husband will be interviewed on the first observation of Gravitational Waves. He is in Florida. He said he would take the call from the fire escape stairs of the motel.

‘The fire escape stairs?’

‘It is the safest place,’ he explained to me last night.

His voice is strong, full of energy, loud. She lifts her eyebrows and pouches her lips. Almost too loud.

‘The strong explosion was detected in a portion of the sky. It was observed in different part of the planet.’

‘What does it mean?’ the journalist tries to interrupt the flow, but he doesn’t acknowledge the question.

‘The strong explosion was detected... a luminous dot in a portion of the sky... a black hole confirming Eistein’s theory of Gravitational Waves.’

She looks at me slightly worried because his voice is now strung. I imagine him curled up on the fire escape stairs. I can smell the tang of his armpits. Proust once said that it is only when a voice is dissociated from a face that its true inflections is revealed.

‘The energy released was MAssive...’, he thrusts on the ‘ma’ of ‘massive’, then falls into silence.

‘But what does it mean for the scientific community?’

‘It means.’ I can see him turning his head down, leaning against the metal rail, away from the scientific community, ‘It means wearing a new pair of sunglasses.’

The little one drops the plate in the sink.

‘Gravitational waves are a new way to look at the universe,’ he repeats, just before the interview is ended. I hear his pattering steps down the staircase, running away from the imaginary or real community of other men, other scientists. The only community he ever wanted to deal with is me, my body. The rest is a dangerous cluster of antagonising bodies.

‘Imagine astronomers wearing fancy Ray-ban,’ the little one says leaving the kitchen.

That night she prepares pesto with her new Nutribullet. Basil and pine nuts. Pecorino. Garlic. The paste is a deep translucent green and the smell of basil and garlic fills the kitchen, and the house. I tell her about Dante's beggars.

'Why the stitches?'

'*Invidia*. From the Latin. Not being able to see.'

'See what?'

'What you already have, I guess.'

'Uhm,' she says unconvinced.

'Would you prefer Giotto?'

'What about him?'

'His envy is an old woman blinded by her own words. Two snakes slither from her mouth to poke her eyes.'

'I like it,' she says forking her trofie.

'Do you think you are envious?' she turns her chin at me. Clever, shiny eyes.

'No. Not really.'

I am much more than envious. I am covetous. Of the time, the obsessive attention, the consuming love I imagine you dispense over your wife and her happiness. I know, I do, that she will always be between us, the threads of her silky turquoise dress stitched to your eyes, and you will always turn your head away from me. Because, it is true, I would never choose a turquoise dress.

Back in the summer. A few days after the concert you were gone, disappeared once again. Her collarbone and the small breasts barely covered by the silky fabric.

‘A small accident,’ your wife said, lifting her eyes like English people would, to temper annoyance. I fixed a point just above her breasts, afraid that panic would betray me.

A fall.

Lucky.

Yes, he was very lucky.

The skin held well.

Whilst she spoke the dress moved down revealing the darker skin of one large nipple. She scoffed a little.

‘For five hours waiting in the emergency room he wondered if the foot was still attached to the leg.’

With a slow movement she pulled up the thin straps, just enough to cover the darker aureole.

‘Look.’ She came closer and opened her phone to show me the X-ray photo of a foot.

‘He was lucky that they didn’t have to amputate.’

Now, instead of your blank profile picture, I think of the image of the x-ray of your foot. On the black background, the bones are luminous, delicate strings kept together by a series of brighter dots, nails. And I feel the pain.

Since I saw the image of your foot, I have been rereading the story of Filip Verheyen, surgeon, anatomist, and taxidermist. One morning climbing down a ladder his leg caught a rusty nail. The limb got infected and had to be amputated. Filip stored his foot in a jar next to him for the rest of his life. He took the foot apart to study its anatomy, and draw pictures of every detail of his limb, for years, until nothing remained of it.

In *Flights*, Olga Tucarcuk reports some of the letters [letters!] he wrote to his amputated leg, trying to understand the origin of his pain, the pain he felt for a foot which stared at him from a jar.

‘How and from whence does pain arise? What is it that awakens me, since there is no such pain that can be logically justified and yet it exists? Now I look at it in the jar and simultaneously feel in it, in the toes, unbearably hot [...] I touch my bodily existing limb in the guise of a lump of preserved flesh and I don’t feel it. I feel meanwhile an empty place, there is nothing there that might give any sensation whatsoever. The thing that hurts does not exist. A phantom. Phantom pain.’

‘Despite believing in reason, he insisted that the highest sort of reason is intuitive, not logical.’ Tucarcuk concludes.

Intuitively then, I see that there is something simple, almost too simple, that joins these dots: Petrarca’s letters, my husband’s interview, your swiping hand, Filip’s amputated leg, but I am too weak thinking about your foot now to be able to find the way to connect them.

Since you blocked me, my stomach is stitched together.
My eyes too feel stitched together. I struggle to eat, to
wash, to complete a full breath, to look at the sky.

I keep seeing your hand left swiping me away. The
blind liberating violence of that movement. Let the
minutes, the hours flow free without thinking about
dots.

Yet you can't cut off, erase, deny, block pain.

It is late. The little one has gone to sleep. The house is finally silent. I smoke my last sigarette observing the reflection on the glass panels of the conservatory. A form cuddled up on a yellow armchair.

My love,
Where the fuck are you now?

Well, you left. Turned your head the other way. I pick up the phone. Glancing at the time on the phone screen is what I do lately, the surrogate gesture of a surrogate gesture: checking the time and imagine what figure we might have left only a few weeks ago. I open WhatsApp hoping to see the image of the x-ray of your foot. The black background, the luminous bones, kept together by bright dots, nails, but there is nothing more than the usual ghost. All these years, you have been observing me through WhatsApp the same way Filip has been observing his amputated foot in the jar. Go ahead, erase me. I am still your pain. I am your ghost pain, as much as you are mine.

There are 43 missed calls from my husband. Every three minutes for an hour and a half. I left swipe them, and they disappear.

Skin

Under my skin

1: to irritate or upset someone.

2: to affect someone positively even though he or she does not want or expect to be affected that way.

Laura is dead.

According to Giuseppe Ungaretti, the twentieth Century Italian poet, the highest moments of poetry in the *Canzoniere* emerges from darkness, when Laura appears in Francesco's dreams, more vivid than she ever was in real life. Laura is dead. From that moment memories acquire a surreal, razor-sharp clarity. Her words play a different sound. Laura is pure memory. She becomes light.

Now, imagine her finally speaking daringly, in dreams. Imagine Laura saying open, honest, loving, compassionate, understanding words. Words powerful enough to stop the sun in its course. Interrupt the flow of the world, the indefatigable running of the hours, the days, the years. What she says suspends reality.

*'Fedel mio caro, assai di te mi dole,
ma pur per nostro ben dura ti fui,'
dice, et cos'altre d'arrestare il sole*

'My love,' she says, 'I am worried for you. It was only for your sake, if I was harsh.' So she speaks, and says such things to pause the sun in its course.

When the sun stops in a stunned eternity, what time of day would it be for Francesco? It would be just after lunch for me, the time between two and three o'clock, my usual hell.

But on my map, I wrote *Arrestare il core* ‘to lose a heartbeat’, unintentionally. Now, I almost prefer the misquoted last line. ‘Pervicace,’ said my Latin teacher. Yet the arrhythmic sudden suspension rather than the cosmic stillness of an endless day is more in tune with my story. More in tune with an autumn day. There it is again, the baboon arse. Is this the way I have been reading the *Canzoniere*, and you, all along? Pervicaciously?

A suspended quality, atemporal, arresting moments when everything stops and the lark’s thrill is at its purest, no white noise. For instance, take that line, when he seems to suddenly realise with all his senses, physical, intellectual, and emotional, that she is dead

Il sol cadde dal cielo
the sun fell from the sky

The line arrives untouched to my contemporary world in its arresting beauty. Most weight is carried by the point of the arrow.

And what else is life if not an outbuilding, standing firmly on some miraculous moments of pure silence, distance, enlightenment. Moments buried in skilful technique, craftsmanship, research, time, erudition, mastery, education, academic achievement. As if Petrarca, the poet, had to first cross a tremendous quantity of other stuff building up in himself, the contemporaries’ opinion and judgement, the classics’ superiority in everything they ever did, envy, hubris, languages to finally touch the skin. As if he had to get rid of overcoat, jacket, dressing gown, vest to eventually, sometime reach the sickly skin.

Those lines pierce through layers of future *heartbreaks*, unrequited loves, fools, its wound becoming its vocabulary, to settle for ever under the skin of love.

dice cose d’arrestar il core

Once I wrote a poem about how I always *lose* a heartbeat when your name pops up in my everyday life: supermarket aisle, estate agent boards, plumber's van, local politics. It doesn't happen often. Then I sent it to you. That day you were about to leave for a six-week tour of the world with your family. It seemed like a good idea to send you the poem as a keepsake.

skip or miss you replied

and I did when I saw the fresh red dot on the screen of my phone, but after I read the message, the heart hid in its hole like a rat.

ma pur per nostro ben dura ti fui,
'It was for your sake if I was harsh.'

I am so very sorry for your pain.
If I have been harsh, it was only for our sake.
If I have been cruel, it was for our own good.
For our sake I hardly ever spoke to you, rarely looked
in your direction.

For our sake,
you hid under a veil
or a baseball hat
never replied to my letters
hardly ever spoke to me
turned your head away
wore sunglasses
ignored my messages
avoided looking at me.

For our sake, it was better making me believe that what
I felt was an insane, unrequited obsession, which you
didn't feed nor stir. A childish whim. Non-existent,
entirely self-fuelled by its impossible terms.

In life, Laura told Francesco what a fool he was. All
along.

And all along she knew what she was doing.

But just for the sake of it, I wonder, if you were to say
things to stop the sun in its course, what they would be.

Just a tapas place said the message.

Accordingly, today, I am wearing chequered trousers and burgundy lipstick. A pathetic rebellion. I know you don't like lipsticks.

After my train is late, and the exits of Waterloo station are too many to make sense, a red dot appears on the screen of my phone.

Here

At the tapas place, presumably. For a moment, just a flickering speckle of Time, I want to reverse the last weeks, my drunk email, like pressing a finger onto a bruise to release some pain, your immediate reply, the photos of your swollen foot, the bright, childish sock, the grey bulgy boot. In all honesty, the photos of your damaged foot didn't interest me very much, I was more taken by the background of those images. The clinical clean bathroom all glass and mirrors above the enormous white bath where you had your foot ablutions. The composition of beauty products carefully aligned on the shelves, all white and silver behind you. Hers. Yours. The beige cabinets of the kitchen. The throw of animal fur from which your bandaged foot emerged, propped on a peacock blue cushion. Her colour schemes. The rooms where you live your happy family life exuded her presence too literally. So different from the furious clashing of orange and blues in my house.

Now, I almost want to reverse time to find my way back to Euston, catch an early train home, where my husband is draining pasta for his parents, and would save some for me.

I almost miss it. The tapas place is wrapped in a messy scaffolding, torn pieces of blue tarpaulin flapping in the mild October wind. The inside is dark, rustic, and full of people. On the left, on a high footstool at a small square table against the wall, five meters away, you are looking towards the door. Typically, when you observe

me from a distance, your head is tilted, a pensive smile deflecting something about my presence.

‘Thank you for coming’, you say smiling at me as I stand opposite you. But it feels weird. As if you have ever been nice with me.

‘Thank you for asking.’ I smile back.

‘I didn’t ask.’

Oh, I see. You didn’t ask, no. In a transaction, you make sure to be clear of the difference between what you ask and what you want. True, you didn’t ask, but mostly you needed to tell me that.

Instead of walking off, I stand by the small table laid for two, with a basket of bread and a bottle of water. On the left, quite close to the edge of the table there is your phone. Black. Chunky. Disconcertedly close. You tap the screen, and a figure appears: 2.59. On your phone the time seems to have a different quality.

I blush. I have come all the way to this tapas place, lying to my family, catching an early train, wearing chequered trousers to end up by a sticky wooden table, to see you smirking at me. The reason I am here in this city, where no one seems to be bothered by hideous chequered trousers, is not because you asked me to come. And even if my presence here may be a pleasant distraction from the fact that your family is on holiday in Greece, whilst you recover from the second operation, it is an interlude.

‘No. You didn’t,’ I say hooking my bag to the chair, because your black t-shirt clashes with the pallor of your face. And I might be wearing hideous clown trousers, but the sage colour of the leather jacket makes you look sick.

‘Can we order? I’m hungry.’

Waiting for the food, you tell me the kitesurf story. The sound of your voice, incredibly close and quiet, is thin, almost raspy. The windy last day, the new instructor, the wrong sail, the sudden fall in shallow water. When you stretch your leg under the table, I notice the black leather basket ankle boots.

‘I lost consciousness. Woke up in a helicopter. That was cool!’ I smile at your semi-joke.

‘Your lips are the same colour of the wine,’ you say pointing a finger at the Riocha.

‘Then what happened?’ As you speak, I cross and uncross my legs around the leg of the stool, waiting for the moment when my foot will catch, touch, kick your ankle, foot, shin, knee, anything and hurt you a little.

‘Then five hours on a stretcher where I couldn’t see my foot. Attached by the skin of my teeth.’ That smug look again. Your way of playing with words to catch me out.

During those five hours you bought a flight back to the UK, arranged for your things to be delivered to the hospital, stopped at a pharmacy on the way to the airport to buy crutches, booked an appointment in London for the following day, fixed an operation with the best consultant, who told you that you could have lost your foot, and now here you are. As you speak, all I can see is the stretched skin of your ankle holding on, losing colour, becoming opaque then almost transparent, whilst the hand is working hard on the screen of your phone, arranging your life logically forward, to these hideous ankle boots,-which now I start to forgive.

‘And now?’

‘I don’t feel much.’

The roundness of your smile has thinned, the freckles on your cheekbones are larger, less defined, the green of the eyes darker, almost grey and although your hair is folding unnaturally on the forehead, that horrible parting that you like so much, which happens when you blow dry and straighten your natural curls, a parting I

most dislike, there is something about it that equally lenifies and placates me. I want to run my hand through it and mess it up.

As your fingers move around the telephone screen, I watch mesmerised the black object dancing in your hands: grabbed, held, clasped, swiped, scrolled, whilst your eyes followed its movements, up and down at speed, you don't want to miss a moment, every seconds count. So, this is it. This is what you look like when you grab your phone, open WhatsApp, perhaps to check on me and leave a last seen.

You handle the object with no deference. Watching you it occurs to me that it is possible. It is possible that my body has been condensed into the flat rectangular weight of the phone, that at times touching the screen of your phone to open the WhatsApp application, scrolling to look for my profile picture, a picture which makes me anxious because it is never as good as I would like it to be, it is possible that looking at my profile picture felt like holding me, controlling the movements of my symmetries. It must have felt like owning me, in the same way that you own your righteous world, check the plus or minus, the sell or buy of your working hours. It is also possible that all sort of rubbish, food, grease, spit fell on it. Yet I want to be your telephone screen, have your fingers searching me, swipe me right to left.

Frank Beck pioneered touchscreen technology to solve a problem scientists had at CERN. Too many buttons to press at the same time. To speed up the control of hundreds of computers, he came up with the idea in 1970.

These are pencil (!) notes from one of his colleagues

proposed outlay for a fast interactive computer display system.

1. General

Nearly [clearly?] all interactive display systems operate in a way where the answer to a given (and displayed) question takes place via a keyboard and from where all information is 'cocked' back to the computer system.

In most cases this involves following basic operations:

- 1.1 display of the question – open WhatsApp
- 1.2 searching for the displayed information – Find the wanted profile
- 1.3 thinking and decision solving – consider the 'last seen' figure
- ... skipping a heartbeat if 'on line'
- 1.4 searching the 'cursed' buttons to press on the keyboard – suspend the finger
- 1.5 arm and finger movement to press the search button – swipe application off
- 1.6 researching on the display to get information back on the effect of the 'succulent' executed order - open application once again to check 'last seen'

This idea was given by Mr Frank Beck, the author is only supporting a practical solution to the problem.

Did Frank Beck skip a heartbeat, or did he feel the sun stopping in its course, the first time he touched his touchscreen? He then went off to offer his miraculous solution for free to the world.

An average of 10 times a day, seven days a week during the last ten years of last seen. 55,650 times

You rub the screen against your jeans before turning it towards me.

‘Here.’

Blots of colours. Light and dark blues, browns, greens, lines, random geometrical shapes, landscapes, scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

‘What am I looking at?’

‘Touch one.’

Cautiously, I press my finger on a blue square in the margin. It is a video. Blue waters in the morning. The sun light flashes, flickers on the surface of the sea. The flickering slows down, the time dilates to reach almost a halt, then returns to its normal speed.

‘This is Australia.’

I touch another one. An intricate mass of dark brown, thick roots, like legs and arms of gigantic creatures lost in an inextricable embrace. The camera follows the embrace from left to right, then again it slows down for a few seconds, before returning to a normal speed. Like losing a heartbeat, I think.

‘The rain forest.’

There are more. Short videos of the sky, the jungle, sounds of exotic animals, fireworks shapes drawn on granular shores by the movement of waves.

‘They were all for you.’

‘You never sent them.’

You shrug your shoulders, as if to say, what for?

‘Normally I don’t like touching people,’ you say considering the screen of your phone left on the table. Then you lift your gaze, cocking your head slightly ‘but I always want to touch you.’

And with that your hands reach to my legs crossed under the table, gently slip beneath my hideous trousers to touch the skin above my calves.

I shake my head. No, for the rest of time.

It is late, the time when my husband is rinsing the dishes with hot water before putting them into the dishwasher, under the careful eyes of his mother, the smell of butter and parmesan cheese still thickening the kitchen air. I didn't call. In front of me you are limping. On the curb we wait for a taxi.

'Four times,' you say so quietly that it almost gets missed in the noise of traffic.

Next to me you are so tall that it needs considerable manoeuvring to reach my mouth and kiss me four times, tentatively. Your lips are chipped and soft, they smell of wine and something else, you.

'One for every hour we have been here.'
You can't stop counting, can you?

As you open the taxi door, and let me in, the fifty eight thousands, five hundreds and sixty dots of the last ten years reassemble into a path which has taken me to the curb of this pavement in London, to that point where a minute ago we were standing feet parallel to a street next to the river, the orange light of the sunset flickering the glass windows of the City behind you, reminiscence of another afternoon, and for once London, this enormous alienating city, is embracing me.

Through the evening traffic towards Euston, we find a form of us.

As for the most recent touchscreen technology, the mechanism is the same: the energy running through the body on the tip of the finger activates the electrodes behind the last layer of the phone's screen, which is glass. Your fingers running through my skin activate the last layer of my resistance.

Hip bones, thighs, neck.

The radiations are too weak to be harmful for the body.

Harmful however is the fact that the movement is so easy, reaching into me is so easy. Easier than any other addiction. The danger is in the fact that the touch is easy. It is so quick and deep. So easy and quick and deep, and dangerous.

‘Platform 8.’

No doubt it is only me transfixed by the coincidence: 8 in our alphabet means ‘I miss you’. I already do. The train tracks on platform 8 go around in loops, an infinite 3D image of our limbs intertwined.

‘8,’ you repeat with a nod of your head towards the left. ‘I’ll text *you*. Probably already tomorrow.’

When I lift onto my toes to reach your lips one more time, you push me gently down by the shoulders.

‘Too many people around.’

The taxi ride is over.

As a last farewell gesture, or to buy some time, you take out your phone and swipe it. You do it automatically, as someone would run a hand through their hair or rub their nose.

‘Off you go,’ you say pushing your chin forward. My heart skips a beat. You can’t possibly part from me without holding me one last time, for who knows when we will meet again. But you already have.

Before disappearing into the crowd, you turn around one last time,

‘Good kissing, by the way.’

That is the moment when the smirk on your face turns into something else: shyness?

There is nothing particularly romantic about the videos you made, just moments of simple beauty where you stood and saw something. Those arresting moments when the world stops. Like the yoga teacher the other day walked through the car park. He took his phone out and saw something that stopped him. He stopped in the middle of the car park, arrested on his feet. The arresting moment of the miraculous. The heart that misses a beat, the sun stops in its course. Your 10 seconds videos are poems. You, my Laura, have been writing sonnets for me all along.

With that, like the *Canzoniere*, you touched my skin irrevocably, irreparably, permanently, like a wound.

Today is the 15^h November. Our wedding anniversary. In the kitchen my husband is listening to Life Scientific. When the speaker makes a suspenseful pause after saying ‘brim water’, he looks out of the window, and I switch the kettle off to cut the noise.

The first battery was made by Alessandro Volta (‘voltages’ comes from Volta, my husband quietly clarifies to himself). He discovered that a battery needs a layer of brim water to activate the electric circuit and guarantee a constant flow (genius! he says, shaking his head at the treetops), while I, with a sudden realisation that makes my heart skip a beat, understand why the water in my low-ceilinged room is salty. Touchscreens are just a modern, fancier replica of batteries, where it is the body’s charge to activate the circuit.

When you touch the screen of your phone, you activate an electric circuit, which takes me to you.

When you touch the screen of your phone, it causes an electrostatic phenomenon, like touching the skin of the woman you love, Anne Carson said.

‘Made of water,’ my husband says. ‘We are good conductors of electricity because we are made of water,’ he pronounces walking out of the kitchen, ignoring the fact that today is our wedding anniversary.

s’acqueta l’alma sbigottita

a miracle.

In 1348, after Laura's death, those white sheets of paper, that Petrarca only ever calls his *rime sparse*, scattered sonnets, undergo the same systematic organization which is applied to the letters. They too seem to set into a form, a convincing shape.

As if the pareidolic effect that many time in the *Canzoniere* revealed to Francesco the features of Laura, (in a riverbed, in the waters of a brook, in the rocks along a mountain path, in the clouds of an overcast day); as if, after her death, that pareidolic effect can extend well beyond Laura's features, and by becoming untamed, it is also applied to his scattered *rime sparse*.

As if the *hearthquake* caused by Laura's death eventually set him free to find the shape he wanted but couldn't see. The convincing shape, the shape of a mourning pareidolia: Laura's death marks the before and after, what was *in vita* and what is *in morte*.

The grieving section moves slowly away from earthy preoccupations and physical encounters towards a determined spiritual ascension whose summit is represented by the *Canzone alla Vergine*, piece 356. In the certainty that love will subside, whither, quieten his troubled soul. The story will come naturally to an end, *morte*. Finirà, *it will end* I whispered that day into your ear, the time you came to the small modern square. The first and last.

The rhyming scheme follows accordingly. Words becomes bleaker: *morte*, death *notte*, night *pianto*, lament, *lacrime*, tears.

Sestina 332 is the last of the nine pillars holding the narrative arch of the *Canzoniere*, the only one after Laura's death.

*O voi che sospirate a miglior notti,
che ascoltate Amor o dite in rime
pregate non mi sia sorda morte
porto de le miserie et fin del pianto*

But despite the clear direction of the pillars, water proves difficult to contain. Despite the bleak acknowledgment and subsequential determination a word escapes a leak, like water. That *voi* closes the circle, only to reopen it again. It brings the story back to the beginning, to those fools who are still listening.

And so, like Francesco, Petrarca, I, perhaps you, we realise with a sort of lucid horror that it is not over, love doesn't whither, it doesn't fade away, it is on the contrary the only thing that keeps moving, like water. It is the force behind the last twenty years of his life. The reason for the ninth editions of the *Canzoniere*.

Little by little comes the realisation that what will come to an end is only his life.

The circle closes.

Are we too running in circles?

Red dots

One dark afternoon, I follow the red dots of the cars' back lights to the supermarket, my clogs brushing the ginger leaves on the pavement imagining it is my hand through your hair.

I am about to cross through the traffic, when a sudden gash of pain hits me from my feet, shooting to the abdomen, contracting the pelvic muscle, an orgasmic spasm that leaves me breathless. Acute and delightful, the pain spreads upwards in fits of cold sweat and dizziness.

I lean to the short wall of a driveway to regain vision When the heart beats start slowing and I can see again, I find there is nothing on the sock, in it or on the inside of the winter clogs. The skin is untouched except for the burning pain.

Parapraxes are minor anomalies which can cause the body to signal a repressed psychic event finding its way through the subconscious.

Is this pain my nemesis? Or is it you thinking of me?

I stagger to the supermarket, drenched in sweat. That night, before putting the untouched plate back into the cupboard, my husband says almost merrily,

‘You should have it checked.’

Somehow, the event marks a change in the daily routine. A turning point.

Now, the little one compiles a shopping list which she leaves on the kitchen table with a smiley face and the time she will be back. I only need to procure the food that is on the list and, on alternate evenings, cook it. When I kiss her after school, sometimes she smells of cheap aftershave and scuttles upstairs.

Now, my husband most nights falls asleep in other rooms, surrounded by books, worksheets, laptops, a little trick to suggest he fell asleep whilst working. Although I enjoy the freedom of my act in bed, as my mother would say, I also resent him for leaving a damp hole next to me. Most of all I resent my body still looking for yours.

Now, the faintest contact of an object with my skin releases the movement of a clam inside my body (starting from the pelvic floor, moving up towards my stomach).

Now when my mother calls, sometimes I let the phone ring until it dies out. Don't pick up.

Now the sight of the green cover makes me nauseous and so does the green App on my phone. Everything around me seems to radiate *maladie*, but in fact it is just me: I radiate *maladie*.

How is your life going?

Saying that you once again disappeared would be a much too strong proposition. A clean cut this time would only help to cauterise a wound. You have no wound which needs cauterising. So, it is rather a slow trickle of disinterest. Intermittent casual appearances.

Now I take a detour behind the petrol station where I gently peel away the thin scab on my hand. I am meek even in self harming.

How is your life going?

A friend says it must have been the bite of a Noble widow spider. Apparently, colonies of Noble, also known as false widows, have recently spread close to villages and cities due to a change in the climate.

Mainly females are dangerous to humans. Naturally nonaggressive, females only bite when attacked. She must have been foraging in the mushy leaves and swept away by my winter clogs. Who wouldn't bite if suddenly swiped off their feet, trapped in an unknown blackness?

The following day, as if the body had a language of its own and the skin was its vocabulary, two red dots appear on the inside of the foot.

Latrodectism: is the illness caused by the bite of Latrodectus spiders. Pain, muscle rigidity, vomiting and sweating are the symptoms.

The spider's bite looks like a semicolon: two vertical dots. The body explaining Latrodectism to the mind.

Lists and secret re-enactments are my current survival tools.

One Tuesday afternoon, in the middle of the autumn semester, when the low clouds of a November overcast sky are sponges sucking at the eye sockets, I walk into the classroom in a state of detachment, like the flyers on the wall.

‘Reciprocal pronouns,’ I announce to the disconcert of the students, who can hardly use plural articles. ‘They will be useful to you one day.’

The thrill of tracing those words on the board.

Ci siamo baciati. We kissed.

I say it out loud, miming the action of kissing, checking the movement in the students’ lips, feeling the madness of the clam closing in my pelvis.

There is a consistent lack of reciprocal pronouns in the Canzoniere, which is understandable. When Love is unrequited, there is no need for it. Reciprocity is the union of two bodies in grammatical terms, the reciprocal pronoun is two individuals coming together into one syllable, mirroring each other.

There is clearly no such thing in the Canzoniere, no fire of mirroring neurons, hence its rhythm. That binary, tormenting rhythm, the shaking head, the sound of impossible loves is a double syllable.

After the last student has left, I press my mouth on the white board next to the *i*, plural, two lips, plural in so many useless ways.

In the last twenty years of his life, we know from his letters, Petrarca was tormented by scabies.

Scabies is the result of parasites, mites, burrowing under the skin, where they lay eggs. Symptoms are intense itching and rash. The mites' progress shows in bright red dotty lines on the skin.

A quick handshake or a hug are not serious transmitting agents, but sexual partners are.



It is deliriously tempting to think of the subcutaneous condition in terms of parapraxis.

‘You’re under my skin,’ you said once. In the urban dictionary the expression oscillates between negative and positive. Indeed, geographically I am always at a very safe distance for infecting even with metaphorical scabies.

So what? What is your problem?

Somewhere I read that there is an ink test for scabies.

Take a dark washable wide-tip marker,
rub around the suspicious bumps or burrows.
Take an alcohol wipe
and wipe away the ink.
If there's a scabies burrow under the skin,
the ink often remains,
showing you a dark irregular line.
Occasionally
a tiny dark dot is visible
at the end of the burrow
- that's the mite.

Petrarca had no remedies for scabies.

He released itch and pain
with his inked feather.
He wrote his remedy in the *Canzoniere*.

You used to tap your phone.

One morning my husband is on the floor of the living room, the head hidden under the sofa, curled up like a dog. His feet stick out from the stripy blanket. The washed-out grey cotton of his socks, the big hole exposing the heel's skin, yellow and dry like stone, with deep cuts showing fresh tormented flesh.

Here we are, upon this comfortable rug woven with Berber wool in soft hues of blue and yellow, to complement the yellow Chesterfield armchairs, which are yellow only because
you once said, in passing,
 'That yellow bikini suits you.'

Since then, I dotted my house with yellow objects, scattered the colour of the impossible in my world with fierce determination.

mugs
 ashtrays
 toothbrushes
 socks
 lighters
 notebooks
 knickers
 pencils
 sofas
 armchairs
 lights

Crouching next to him, I pull the blanket to cover his feet, not because I am nice, but because I can't look at the failure they represent. I don't remember ever touching his feet, but I have vivid memories of his hands gently caressing mine. I would make love to yours. I would let you fill my holes with your feet.

Reciprocity never really works.

In the early Twentieth Century, times were ripe for one critic to square out the fundamental, irrevocable difference between Dante and Petrarca. What many before only gossiped/tattled about.

Dante is solid, compact, straight and sincere.

Petrarca is refined, mellow, imitative, and decorative.

The verb against the adjective.

The rock versus the honey.

Dante's art is masculine, Petrarca's feminine.

'And I, obviously, belong to the first,' concludes the critic. And so many others with him.

I can hardly read these words without projecting the two men into their opposite postures. Dante standing on two legs tracing his words with a stylus turgid and erect, Petrarca bent over, doodling away with the point of a feather.

The irrevocable difference is traced along the centuries in a straight line down the middle. The line cuts through generations of descendants and collaterals, all the way to us, here, today.

Dante the spider, Petrarca the mite.

One stands for the painful bite of the spider, licrodectism, the Italian language we still speak; the other a meek mite burrowing under the skin, the meek double adjectival phrase. The binary, tedious rhythm of his loneliness.

Binary explanations are deceptively simple but tempting.

Even though reality is not defined by a binary system, the entirety of its sense is eventually held by two opposites.

‘If you menstruate, you are a woman.’ My mother would cut through the argument, pushing the knife into the pheasant chest to open it in two with a twist of her wrist.

‘Don’t cry,’ my father reprimanded my eight-year-old son driving to the airport, staring at him in the rear mirror, ‘you don’t want to look like a girl, do you?’

‘I wouldn’t allow him,’ my brother advised the room when the same boy appeared dressed as Cinderella.

The space between the ‘you’ who loves me totally, fully, beyond yourself, (saying words that stop the sun in its course) and the ‘you’ who doesn’t love me at all (I didn’t ask you) is only created by the necessary fabrication of extreme propositions.

Truth hides somewhere in the not discrete space between two opposites, an insect hiding in the mushy leaves of the pavement, in the blank between the semicolon, in between the mite’s red dots.

Perhaps truth, whatever that is, lies along the discrete line of an oscillating arrow, like your dick oscillating between your wife and me.

Indeed, distance allows perspective; and even if today no one would dare to cut through ideas like my mother's wrist, comments are often illuminating.

'Petrarca's lyric poetry assumed for the moderns the image of a supreme example, of a typical "place" both unreachable and idolised, the place of nostalgia. Because if Italian lyric poetry lived over centuries trapped in the structures of petrarchism, drying other more spontaneous voices, once set free, it couldn't return to it. In Leopardi the echo of Petrarca is forever tainted with modern nostalgia.'

Once the longing of the *Canzoniere* is turned into nostalgia, the pivoting movement becomes irrevocable, there is no going back.

In 1826 Leopardi, by many considered the last Petrarchista, is asked by the editor Stella in Milan to annotate the edition of the *Canzoniere* 'for women and children'. Leopardi accepts the job for financial reasons but feels diminished by the task and embarrassed by his illiterate audience, women and children who need a 'translation' of Petrarca. The grammar of their own language explained to them.

'Translatio' is what he prefers calling his commentary. My paperback edition with the green cover is considered a 'goldmine' by the critics.

An act of exorcism

A ventriloquist experience of loss

Just melic quality, one critic suggests

Plagiarism! one replies

Eventually most critics agree to call it organic and spontaneous affinity, though mostly denied by Leopardi.

But what happens in the 'Translatio' is fascinating. Take for instance what happens to the impossible, follow the way the reference shifts and with it the underlying text, the emotional agenda.

In the *Canzoniere* Laura is the incarnation of everything impossible, and so, describing her beauty is impossible, like counting the stars one by one, or gathering all the water on hearth in one glass,

ad una ad una annoverar le stelle e in piccolo vetro chiuder tutte l'acque, 127

But under Leopardi's new sensibility, the same words acquire a new modulation where the impossibility connected to the female figure is transformed into a longing for a sidereal space where boredom and *spleen* might not exist, where one might be happier.

e noverar le stelle ad una ad una Canto di un pastore 'Forse s'avess'io l'ale /da volar su le nubi, /e noverar le stelle ad una ad una, /o come il tuono /errar di giogo in giogo,

/più felice sarei, dolce mia greggia, /più felice sarei,
candida luna.’

It is not deliriously tempting to see Leopardi, by nature a man of contrasting desires, shifting words and meanings, reconfiguring the Canzoniere, tracing his own dots according to his projection, his own unconscious need, his pareidolia? A selective attention which turns it into an idyllic nostalgic place, like a womb from which, once one is out, it is not possible to get back in.

In the process of *translatio* something gets moved to the other side of the line marking the distinction between masculine and feminine, turning love into yearning. Love for a woman becomes pure longing. Takes away the object and makes it absolute, sidereal. What Leopardi does is translating and delivering to the future an image of Petrarca doodling with his feather, a feminine art.

Petrarca through Leopardi worked into the subconscious of the Italian lyric tradition like a mite, caving his way under the skin, a fastidious itchiness: all the reading fools were affected by it, sexual partners, lovers of all times, his readers and imitators. The Canzoniere is echoed under the skin of the Italian lyric tradition like a mite burrowing to lay eggs.

And like scabies, it is passed on: the hallmark of Petrarchan-geminated adjectives, antithesis, polysyndeton. In the transition even when desire and yearning is at its purest, it becomes unhappiness and with that the vocabulary, the association, the myths. Unwanted, inadequate, unrequited, unfortunate, unhappy love.

We all have our nemesis: Petrarca, who would not admit owning a copy of Dante, has been used and reused, copied and recycled by so many that when reading the Canzoniere, to Leopardi, Petrarca appears himself an imitator.

There are rare, delirious moments, a sublime fuck-it-allness, a dreamlike sense of ecstatic reality, when distance allows indeed perspective, and I am just a dot in the margin of a complex composition.

When this ecstatic state of fuck-it-allness happens, it reveals the last ten years for what they might have been. From the distance, it reconfigures as the projection of an insufferable, self-obsessed, self-preoccupied fool, a monolithic Ego, doodling the feather around her unrequited love. Me.

Scabies got to you too, but only the phone is contagious. A free supply of sexual energy available from the screen of your phone. Every time you saw my 'online', me waiting for you, you felt the kick, the bulge growing between your legs.

I am the thumb in the asshole that helps the hard on.
Sorry for the candour, my love.

One lunch time in November, a red dot appears on the green logo. 'Weekend in Cornwall with family' is the capture for a short video taken on a long beach swept by the wind. From the distance of a group of people gathered by the shore, the camera zooms on the sand where someone, you, has written in big bold letters my name. Then it moves to a solitary limpet clenched to a nearby rock. End of the video.

The intended metaphor is straightforward: you the rock, I the limpet. But when I look for other possible meanings, it doesn't take me long to find something more appropriate, though I doubt it is what you meant.

Over a period of time the edges of the limpet shell wear a shallow hollow in the rock called a homescar. The homescar helps the limpet to stay attached to the rock and not to dry out during low tide periods.



'Lust,' you said once, 'it is just lust'. But you see, my love, I could never split lust and love, trace the line down the middle. I reek of both, the screen of my phone leaks that dense yellowy substance made of lust and love. And so, with each one of your words, the answer is carved in the rock: 'Lust. It is just lust'.

Reverse the metaphor. Maybe I am the rock, you the limpet because I am the one wearing the scar. What I like about the scar is the circular hole it leaves in the surface of the rock. Like a prehistoric dot.

On the 13th of December, Santa Lucia's day, my mother calls to speak to the little one, as she always does, but the little one has already turned the corner of the driveway and disappeared.

She asks me what day we are flying back for Christmas. I tell her that we haven't bought the tickets yet, but that we are going to do it soon, probably already tonight.

'Every year is the same,' she says.

'This year is different,' I start to explain, but she cuts me off, telling me about the morning fog instead. What I wanted to tell her is that I have not booked the flights yet because I will be going to London for two days. I have a two-day slot at the British Library to research optical theories in medieval time, completely missing the irony of that.

And medieval optical theories are what eventually bring us standing in a lift with full height mirrors one December night. The lift is taking us to my room on the sixth floor of this hotel by the river not far from the city. You, elegant in your smart corporate overcoat, are carrying the orange plastic bag with my shopping.

‘Come sei piccola,’ you say observing me in the lift’s mirror. This is whispered behind me, as if you were thinking aloud. The silver blond of my head barely reaches the raglan of your blue paletot. If you opened it, I could easily disappear inside your coat. I wish I could see what you see, understand me through you, reverse the flawed optical theory that tricked us into this lift.

Room 606. You can’t see the irony of this number, nor can you understand that when the door closes behind us with a toy-like sound, my throat tightens because I am in a room with the man I love. But there is the shopping in the orange bag to organise into bowls. You look into the plastic bag, as if inside me. Things which an hour ago, to the person browsing the aisles of a Sainsbury local, seemed adequate, now look despairingly cheap. A bottle of Bordeaux, crisps, single wrapped cheese, crackers,

‘Crackers, of course. And olives. Mmm.’
I just remember that you don’t like olives.

‘So, optical theories,’ you uncork the wine and sit opposite me on the other kitchen chair by the round coffee table. ‘What is this about?’ you ask with no interest at all, pouring the red wine.

‘Plato or Aristotle?’

I am hoping for a drop of wine to stain the acid green cover for ever.

‘That’s hard,’ you crunch a crisp, ‘for a banker like me.’

I drink staring into your stare and insist. I have got nothing to lose.

‘Do our eyes project light or receive it?’

‘Please. Can’t you just be normal?’

I push the *Canzoniere* towards your side, making space for my glass. You glance at the book, then you push it under the bag of crisps.

The room: a small kitchen with cream cabinets, a double bed with crisp white bedlinen, pink and green spotlights. It is a pleasant room, but the only thing I see is how white the skin of your wrist is under the pullover. The hem of your jeans crunched up around your sneakers, the empty triangle of the chair’s fabric between your tights, your finger pressing the edge of the table, perfectly curve. Lust or love?

It is when the sound of your voice changes quality, acquires weight and consistency, when it becomes liquid and starts filling the space between you and me, that I recognise the room I am in, my low-ceilinged room half full of water. And I finally understand that water and love are the same: impossible to contain.

You might be talking about Christmas while my fingers hold the paper and drop some tobacco into the fold. You might be talking about the presents you bought for your children. You might be talking about holidays but, you see, underwater words become blurred, and limbs move differently.

‘We don’t really do presents,’ I whisper, making bubbles underwater. My ankles swirl around your

wrists, my hips brush against yours, filaments of hair tangle around your neck, caressing your shoulder.

The way you say my name. With two zesty syllables, you pop the bubble releasing it, off it goes, my name.

‘I don’t want to hurt you,’ you say moving over me, delicately but firmly. We taste each other with small mouthfuls, our longing perfectly symmetrical, our lust perfectly reciprocal.

Perhaps your best sonnet is the one your mouth writes on my body, tracing the map of our desire, a map I never dared to dream. You reveal it to me. This room is the glass jar where all seas gather for our bodies to move in.

‘No going back now,’ you say, staring at the ceiling, then you turn and kiss me again.

Outside, the clear night has gathered the stars. A cold moon turns into flickering luminous dots on the river's black water. 'I was the lamb in the wolf's den,' you said with a soft smirk before the door's latch closed after you.

Now, sitting on the riverbank, still naked under my coat, I find the cigarette rolled hours before in the tobacco pouch, damp and soft, and smoke it to consume it slowly but definitely, as something irrevocably past. My body is moulding into a new shape, conforming to the irregular surface of the wet pebbles on the embankment. I drag the nicotine in as if still breathing through your mouth, feeling the weight of your chest on me.

What will I save?

My hair draped over your face?

Your mouth on the hipbone?

The pressure of your body?

Your head between my thighs?

Our entangled limbs?

No.

I will save the light.

I will save the light in the room.

The plain light of a hotel room where we stood mirroring each other.

The spectacle of our bodies in full light.

You turned me into the moon, and the moon is me:
naked and beautiful.

If Francesco and Laura could have had one night, it would have been like ours.

*Con lei foss'io da che si parte il sole,
Et non ci vedess'altri che le stelle
Sol una notte, et mai fosse alba;
Et non se trasformasse in verde selva
Per uscirmi di braccia, come il giorno
ch'Apollo la segui qua giù per terra.*

May I be with her at sunset
The stars our only witness
One infinite night,
never to be dawn again;
May she not turn into a green tree
To leave my arms, like the day
Apollo chased her on hearth.

The night when Laura doesn't turn into a laurel tree at his touch, like Dafne did. Reciprocal, not unrequited, after making love to you.

The next morning, I wake up and see a ginger hair trapped in the chain of my watch. There are soft bruises on my lips. A red dot on the green App.

*As I lie there, I am a sheet of steel.
Except for the points where our bodies touch
like blooms of fire.*

Do you mean last night or the last ten years of your life?

Even a fool like me wouldn't believe it if they weren't true. On the skin all over my body, on my legs, my arms, have appeared tiny red dots. Your blooms of fire. The mites borrowing under the skin.

Petrarca entered the Italian lyric tradition through the skin, the obsessiveness of his love transformed everything that followed. We are all somehow descendants of his foolishness, the biggest of all. But red dots are those lines, when the soul rest dumbfounded because from the distance of time something has reached us. Those arresting moments are carved forever on our skin.

I look at the red dots and think that if there is a moment after which everything changes and there is no going back, it must be this. And yes, we might not be entirely aware of it, but we are not blind either as to the direction in which we are proceeding.

On the table still lies the book. There is no red stain on it.

‘A 360-degree angle is called a complete angle, a full angle, or a full turn. It forms a circle around a point. A revolution.’

Some playlists have been off limits in the last year. To fill in the gaps of silence, a kind of silence deeper and denser than anything she has ever heard in this apartment, she puts on Opera arias from YouTube. A physical reaction, any old song in fact would make her feel the clamp inside. Whereas the arias, played on repeat, loud and dramatic as they are, are safely non referential.

‘Hi mum.’

‘Yep. Just arrived.’

‘Tons of snow.’

‘Not so much. We had unlimited Desert Island Disk and Life scientific.’

‘What are you listening to?’

‘Like Callas?’

‘Spaetzli, I think.’

‘But I prefer yours. Nonna uses too much butter.’

Does she? Does the little one (not little anymore!) really prefer the way she cooks spaetzli, sweat in milk with a touch of nutmeg, to the plain buttery brick her ‘nonna’ produces? Does she even remember her mother’s

cooking? From the screen of the phone exudes a new smell of udders, wet haybarns and digested cheese. In the kitchen in the Defereggenthal smelling of fermented cheese now busy with dinner it is the estranged mother-in-law, who was always so proud of her breastmilk, *thick and heavy*, she said, so *thick* and nutritious that her baby boy slept through the night. She even kept calling him with his baby's name, even after he got married.

Incredible that after thirty years her mother-in-law still remembered, no, had the sense of self-importance to talk about her breast milk. Over and over, well before dementia kicked in, every time her first grandchild started crying, she would remind everyone how hungry he must be, how nutritious *her* milk was, so much so that her baby was never hungry (her baby never cried).

Incredible the extent to which her mother-in-law's spaetzli still bother her. That woman's sense of possession over her estranged husband made her jealous once. Or at least she thought it was jealousy.

But now that the circle is closing, protective barriers are lowering, what she called jealousy was only the tip of a greater mass made of irritation, resentment, anger.

A more complicated feeling toward him, and his parents, their hardly disguised sense of cultural superiority and entitlement, their faultless old school education ironed on the linen handkerchiefs, all tangled to a Calvinistic need for repentance.

To her, they always reeked of undigested cheese, a smell coming from deep down their breath. It was not jealousy. She felt she had to protect her own mother from their silent judgment. She had to vindicate her powdery delicate scent coming from the folds of her generous body, a mixture of sage and amber.

Her lack of education and old school manners, her buoyancy and laughter, who made her feel inadequate and wrong in their presence. Breathing their undigested lactose breath on her, who inhaled it as it was the purest air.

How would the little one like the smell of this kitchen now? Stale fruit and dog's food. A fig candle to complete the bouquet.

Evenings, the thick fog sips into the apartment from the empty street like a blanket of smoke to kill the canary in its cage. The windows overlooking the mirroring old palazzo are as black. What was the game? They were what 6? 7? Her brother used to chase her around the sofa, his soft leathery slippers coming closer from behind. He always tried to down her by the coffee table, so he could pull the pillow from the sofa and press it over her face. He let go only when her body became too restless. To finish her off he would breathe onto her mouth. Perhaps he had other reasons to do it. Perhaps he just wanted to be close and didn't quite know how.

When the little one calls, she follows her voice like a thread in the dark and for as long as the phone call lasts, the apartment is a place where one can walk. She is able to retrieve an imaginary map of trajectories carved into her neurologic system, avoid the traps and catches, the corner of the steps, the pointy edge of the chest of drawers, and walk along the corridor to the tv room and back; when she brushes against objects it is with an indecent pleasure for trespassing. But her walking is forming a circle around the point where the corridor turns left and leads into the bedroom, where the medics tried to resuscitate the mother on the floor, cutting through her vest with a scissor, her motherly breasts spread out, wasted like disposable plastic bags.

'Hi, me again. How's the dog.'

'That's cute.'

'Did you go out?'

'How thick?'

'Do you want to Facetime?'

'Ok.'

'Sorry. Need to go. The spaetzli are ready.'

'Night mum.'

Before the heart attack killed her, the mother had *explicitly said* who was to look after the dog in case she passed. Not only to secure a future of love to the creature, but also because she liked telling other people how things should be done and because the son deeply disliked the dog. First and foremost, she *explicitly said she wanted her to have the dog*, it is quite clear now, in order to be part of her life even after, since the dog and the mother in the end did look alike and behave alike. She *wanted* her to have the dog to be a continuous reminder, to make her sensible and sedentary, a family mother, in fact she *gave her the dog* to rein her in. Ground her. No more travelling, unless with a bigger sense of guilt, *mea culpa*, for abandoning not only the family, but the dog, which is now snoring on the chair next to her. Sleeps through the most boisterous arias but wakes up at the click of the lighter.

People she doesn't know stop her on the pavements, cross the road to hold her hand. They tell her she looks like her mother. The greengrocer, people in bars, the baker, the postman. 'You are her daughter, aren't you?' Her estranged daughter, they almost want to say.

In a box under the coffee table, she finds photos albums never completed, barely started would be a more fitting description of those empty thick creamy pages where the mother started to archive her growing family, what it should have been her job. But eventually she too ran out of stamina. The dog sniffs through the letters, post cards, photos, tastes some.

Now her parents rest side by side at the top of the Eighteenth-Century drop-leaf desk, each behind their best picture in black and white, smiling, observing her performative, everyday profanation of the Lalique, the Venini, the Fontana lights, the Castiglioni's sofas. But all that bustle is just a pivoting movement around the definite dark green of their urns. Or the equivalent of selling the family's furniture to a brothel, like Proust did. But he performed his matricide economically. In one day.

She is no longer visible on WhatsApp. She had changed the setting, made her 'last seen' disappear. What used to be a number is now just a blank. *No longer* also applies to his wedding ring, as it appears clearly from his profile picture. The ring has disappeared from his finger.

What used to be, no longer is.

But absence is a posthumous validation.

The grey motorway moves forward into the fog like a warm blade in a pot of ricotta, the milky thickness parts easily, letting the blade disappear into that soft mute richness. For minutes on hand there is nothing but milky white and the car's hum.

Or fumana, the mother had replied with a frown, turning her attention to the screen, *if you prefer*. She had asked what she should call herself in case she wanted to change her name. The mother had said *caigo* first. You should *call yourself caigo*.

'It means fog.' The mother had said not looking at her.

Magically, towards Verona Monti, the blade comes out the other side, the tip of the knife emerges at the end of the Valle Padana, where the sun shines over the hills, and the world opens like a babyface coming detached from the smothering breast, gasping for air.

The hills are a giant's body covered by a blanket of slow green vegetation, the enormous body commands the folds, the creases and the deeps in the dark green fur. The feet sticking out, the round flatness of the abdomen. Hills like breasts, some big and sloping like her mother's or small and perky, becoming firm and round, like the little one's.

Caligine, haze, nebbia, bruma, mist, foschia, fumana, caigo. She is wondering now why the mother said that. Once she had asked her to translate one of her pieces. All along she listened lying on the bed watching the horizon through the bunions of her feet, and when at the end the mother said, 'I didn't realise it was so bad for you.' The words bounced against the wall and back onto her throat and she realised how reciprocal that feeling has always been.

In this period, in 1364, Francesco Petrarca came to know Arquà, while he was staying in Abano to undergo spa treatments to cure scabies, an illness that afflicted him for years. In 1369 he obtained some land in Arquà, where he decided to reside and spend the last years of his life, which ended in 1374, July 17th.

The house, of his own design, is a simple two-storey whitewashed square in the middle of a garden with tall trees, isolated from the centre of the village of Arquà, a village of four corners. Outside steps carved in stone take the visitor to the second floor, where Petrarca it is said to have shared the master quarters with his daughter Francesca and her family. It is a peaceful, proper place to die. No more travelling for the *peregrinus ubique*.

The small desk on which he worked until his last day is by one of the two windows in his studio, a square room with octagonal terracotta tiles, a four corners room where the windows on adjacent walls open on the green valley outside, allowing a panoramic view on the Euganean Hills, a rolling elegiac name for the bare 200mt. of that elevated place.

Who would have thought that the hillock of time was in fact a modest hill?

On the wall next to his desk, someone, the museum curator? devilishly hung a black and white picture of his other house, the one he bought at the other end of his life, in Vacluse, the mythical place where he saw Laura for the first time. The small abode clings to a massive rock abutting on to the frothing water of the Sorgue. Mist. Mysterious. A contemporary, elusive shot. She was in Vacluse, alone, the summer before last, the summer he made his last appearance to *their* mythical place. The memory is of a rainy day spent trudging in yearning.

The complete angle ... is canzone 360, which might have been written here, by this window, a reckoning, a full angle in the form of a trial. The trial is between Petrarca, the abused plaintiff, and Love, the assertive defendant. Laura is witness or judge, it is not clear.

‘You make me waste my life,’ Petrarca accuses Love, (not Laura). ‘I blew, depleted, threw away (his usual polysyndeton) my talent. A talent which I could have spent to higher accomplishments.’ [Higher?! Higher than *poeta laureato*?]. ‘Instead of running in circles around this torment, (he might have glanced at Laura now). *L’ostinata voglia*, he calls this torment, *voglia* is lust, physical lust. Physical, like scabies is. He is probably scratching here.

From the other corner of the room, Love, unbothered, arms folded on chest, acts all but guilty. One word settles the trial, a word that bounces around the room:

‘A *mormorador*. Without my teaching, you would have been just a whisperer of empty love poems. *A mormorador!*’

Laura is, guess? silent and aloof. From her corner, looking briefly at her feet, she has just the time to crack a smile, and request more time.

The three observe the gnawing question bouncing around the wall: was it worth it?

Only later, when she picked up the fluorescent pink pencil courtesy of the hotel, she noticed the name: Hotel Apollo, and she thought again about full angles.

The entrapment she felt was for the life her mother suggested she should be living, a life made of meals, children, afternoons, red lipstick. That low ceilinged room half full of water she built for herself, day by day, doing what she observed had been done before her, mumbling to herself that she was different only to quieten her demons, trying to escape from it by running away from the family and town that she pretended to erase from her life, that life has now erased from her.

360, a full angle. A full turn. Her finger finds the movement natural, like legs moving forward or eyes blinking open.

His new profile picture is a blurry moon over the sea. His last seen: 22.08. Still talking to her.

The door windows are blocked. She pulls at the hinges, lifts the heavy wooden panel, forces the handle mechanism until with a diabolic noise it finally opens wide. The smoke enters her lungs with deep, dedicated pulls until she becomes lightheaded, pressing the sitting bones against the dirty tiles of the balcony. The dog on her lap whimpers, sighs and moves her nuzzle between her knees only to restart her soft snoring on the notes of the familiar Casta Diva. In the garden the dark treetops move into the night air as if a hand is trying to brush the tip of their heads, Apollo's hand reaching to touch those beautiful blond hairs.

00.02. Not sleeping either.

Those scattered sheets, Petrarca's *fogli sparsi*, used, misused, and misunderstood as they might have been, like confetti thrown into the night sky, are the minutes, the hours, the days, her dots of those last ten years. Behind those dots was the silence, the in between space, the fourth corner, where his truth has always resided. He knew *from the beginning* how impossible their chance was. How unutterable the word 'us' would have been. The simple truth of a family man. Her space was confined in the mute dark backdrop of his phone, as dark and silent as the night opening in front of her, a silence where she can now swim. Easy to argue that it was nothing. Indeed, it is untraceable, unaccounted for, lost or disregarded, disappeared.

Mea culpa is not regret for what was done, or repentance for what was said.

Mea culpa means *me*.

Mea culpa means this is *my* shit.

She opens the phone again. He is still online so she types the question.

Anywhere

away

with you

Her Laura. He was her Laura all along.

From the *Canzoniere* to *Dots*

The pareidolic effect: unity in fragmentation and failure in unity

In this critical analysis, I will explore how fragmentation may be considered a function of autofiction. Thematic and visual fragmentation has become common in contemporary autofictional works, suggesting that broken and interrupted forms represent the pieces of a fragmented self. But the definition of autofiction is elusive and changes according to the literary tradition, culture and media it responds to. Its popularity depends also on its openness to interpretation and due to its unstable, anti-canonical and uncertain nature, its definition is a work in progress. Therefore, to frame the terminology of this discussion, I will refer to a recent and comprehensive collection of essays on autofiction, *The Autofictional* where the focus has changed from autofiction as genre to autofictional mode. According to Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, the shifting from noun to adjective helps to better identify the elusive nature of autofiction which consists of ‘the double pact -autobiographical and fictional- or a combination of, or oscillation between, reading modes.’¹ As Hywel Dix suggests, ‘whatever the socio-economic, literary, or cultural context, autofictional and serialized forms of self-writing present a discontinuous, non-linear, contingent, and multi-faceted sense of self – what we might, in other words, call an ‘autofictional’ sense of self.’² In contemporary fiction, this ‘multi-faceted sense of self’ described by Dix seems to have found its preferred formal correspondence in hybrid works where a mixture of personal, self-defined autobiographical material is juxtaposed and intertwined with other literary works as well as with metafictional strategies. This supports the idea that the autofictional writer is also a reader, in the sense that, by a strong use of direct quotes, they fictionalise themselves as they read. Yet, the purpose of these critical pages is to highlight tools, features, themes and practices which have contributed to the idealisation and the realisation of *Dots*. Here the dynamic between autofiction and fragmentation is exemplified by what I call the pareidolic effect, a cognitive phenomenon which makes the observer see a shape where there is none. As we will see, the fragmented narrative

¹ Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, *The Autofictional* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1.

² Hywel Dix, “Post-conflict Narratives, and New Memory Cultures”, *The Autofictional*, 186.

of *Dots* responds to an organizational system, the pareidolic effect, which provides a mechanism by which to illustrate unity in fragmentation and failure in unity. Pareidolia works as a curatorial mode, a third gaze, the third distanced angle of an ideal triangle made by the autofictional author who, as a writer, deals with autobiographical material on one side and as a reader, reads and interprets one text according to it.

Francesco Petrarca's *Canzoniere*, the collection of poems that tells of Francesco's love for Laura, also represents Petrarca's ultimate struggle to give the 366 lyrics, conceived over the course of 40 years, the trajectory of a story. Next to the *Canzoniere*, this critical essay will position three contemporary texts that have influenced the creative piece, insofar as the affinities they share with the original *Canzoniere* are related precisely to autofiction and fragmentation. The sample underscores the interpretation of self-writing as a discontinuous, non-linear attempt because it is construed as an ongoing dynamic between the autofictional writer, and the same writer acting as reader. Anne Carson's *The Glass Essay*, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, and Michele Mari's *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* influenced *Dots* for the unique way in which their gesture of fragmentation is led by the strong presence of a fictionalised reader and juxtaposes with the autobiographical impulse of their author.³ In *Dots* fragmentation is exemplified by a common visual and cognitive phenomenon called the pareidolic effect. *Pareidolia* is the tendency to impose a meaningful interpretation on a random, nebulous stimulus, usually visual, so that one sees an object, pattern, or meaning where there is none. In *Dots* the pareidolic effect, the centripetal force which counterbalances its centrifugal fragmentation, works as an organizational system, a system which is intermittent and only partially successful. In these critical pages I will explore to what extent the term autofiction applies to the *Canzoniere* and to what extent fragmentation is a fundamental part of Petrarca's autobiographical project. In the second part, through the short analysis of *The Glass Essay*, *Bluets* and *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* we will see how fragmentation is articulated idiosyncratically and by its own nature, doomed to be only partially successful. We will see that fragmentation is as much an effect of an authorial agenda to disrupt expectations and provoke the reader's attention, as a movement

³ Isolating these three texts feels unjust as it doesn't correspond to the way the creative project has been shaped and influenced by a multitude of other texts and authors. This selection is just a sample which aims to underscore the relevant and surprising affinities between the contemporary texts with the *Canzoniere* itself.

which originates from a deeper place in the authors' practice, and that this place is only intermittently available. Fragmentation rests on the representation of partial failure.

But first, what do I mean by autofiction and fragmentation? The word autofiction was first used in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky, about his novel *Fils*.⁴ It mostly pertains to the weight of the intentional use of autobiographical events and material in fictional narrative works. Its current definition is expanding and remains as fluid as it can possibly be (though interestingly critics mainly apply the notion of fictionalised autobiography to novels and not poetry). Recent autofiction has been considered by some critics a symptom of the declining cultural capital of the traditional figure of the author.⁵ By others is considered the symptom of the ascent of female authors, 'the result of cultural and socio-economics changes, with a relative increase in the status of women's writing', and also the result of 'the changing nature of the publishing industry – self-publishing and the saturation of the print broadcast media with so-called reality narratives.'⁶ Whatever the reason, autofiction's popularity and influence are rising. In these times of fragmented selves, multiple personas (thanks to the social media revolution) the presence of autofiction in literary and popular fiction is spiralling: 'the autofictional trope has become so common [...] that it almost seems a requirement for contemporary authors to engage with it.'⁷ Today's definitions of autofiction are as many as are those who critically engage with it and tend to multiply and grow.

What is interesting to consider is that it seems to be more and more difficult to engage with a reader without bringing to the page a very contemporary obsessive sense of self, and self-importance. The self-centred representation of a fragmented self has fierce detractors. Of this hybrid genre, often considered mainly feminine, what is most despised is the self-referential obsession for self-representation. In the living autobiography trilogy, a white middle-aged male character approaches the author at a party asking her the following question: 'Do you sometimes look in the mirror and think all this success came rather late in the day and so much

⁴ Serge, Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilée, 1977)

⁵ Marjorie Worthington, "The Story of "Me"" In *Contemporary American Autofiction*, (Lincoln, Ne: University Nebraska Press, 2018), 1.

⁶ Arnaud Schmitt, "The Pragmatics of Autofiction" In *The Autofictional*, 84.

⁷ Worthington, "The Story of "Me", 1.

exposure is rather vulgar, a total bore and awfully fatiguing?⁸ Autofictional writing has recently been defined as ‘giddy, free-range, punk-rock, first-person spews and cut-ups (spatula’d together equally from porno and the literary canon) [which] liberate quasi-multitudes.’⁹ “Quasi-multitudes’ represents a phenomenon which seems to go beyond gender.¹⁰

Either way, or gender, according to Effe and Lawlor, ‘a dominant, but by no means defining characteristic of autofictional writing is that it challenges conventions, resisting traditional autobiographical and novelistic modes but also constantly reinventing itself.’¹¹ Juxtaposition, gaps, interruptions, and lacunae are forms of fragmentation, which can be both thematic and formal. By fragmentation, therefore, I intend here to explore the practice of interruptions, the use of blanks, and gaps, images and marginalia, the interference with other texts and metafictional strategies that lend a text its sense of instability. Fragmentation today perhaps goes beyond the conscious and performative need for disruption and the refusal to adhere to a traditional sense of narrative order and progression. As Clare Pollard said during the presentation of her recent novel *Delphi*: ‘Fragmentation disturbs some commercial forces of narrative. I am a natural connector.’¹² Fragmentation and juxtaposition are textual features by which to mirror the multiplicity and contradiction of the selves and their personas. As much as fragmentation, with its sub or proto movements, is constitutive of the texts here considered, the purpose of these notes is to suggest that in autofictional texts, a more general principle, a natural cognitive behaviour is ultimately responsible for the movements of which the fragmented texts are a result. I argue that fragmentation in autofictional texts could be, as much as the result of an authorial formal choice, also the expression of a degree of self-censorship, and that the fragmented text is the result of a fragmented gesture at the origin of which there is a degree of resistance, particularly *because* the text is dealing with autobiographical material.

⁸ Deborah Levy, *Real Estate* (London: Penguin, 2022)

⁹ Jack Skelley, “The Descent of Autofiction”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 4, 2022.

¹⁰ For recent male autofictional writing, see for example Karl Knusgaard, Ben Lerner, Martin Amis, Jack Underwood, and Brian Dillon.

¹¹ Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, “Introduction: from Autofiction to the Autofictional” In *The Autofictional* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1.

¹² Clare Pollard, In Conversation with Clare Pollard for the book release of *Delphi*, University of Birmingham, February 2022.

Fragmentation invokes the need to resist linearity, consequentiality, and even chronology, and yet behind the need to break seems to lie a different, opposite force. Behind breakage lies at least an idea of unity and completeness. The disruptive force of fragmentation seems to work best in the presence of a lost sense of unity and wholeness. The impulse for a movement that disrupts linearity and continuity seems to embody the need for its opposite: making the gesture of fragmentation a response, a reaction, a retort. Indeed, sometimes fragmentation seems to be the consequence of a forceful and violent event, which is not only part of the narrative, but also the initiator of it. In recent autofictional works such by Nuar Alsadir, Jenny Offil, Max Porter, Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, Luke Kennard, Christina Machado, Claudia Rankine, fragmentation presents an organizational system which appears to be instinctual but explicit: it could be the alphabetical order in Sheila Heti's *Alphabetical Diaries*; the structure of a house, with its rooms in Machado's *Haunted House*; Shakespeare's sonnets in Luke Kennard's *Notes on the Sonnets*; a metatextual otherness, a recipient addressed in marginal texts as in Nuar Alsadir *Fourth Person Singular*. As already anticipated, the organizational system of *Dots* is the pareidolic effect. In the following pages, I will try to explain how the pareidolic effect can represent the oscillation when part of the narrator's agency is being both a writer and a reader.

Pareidolia, from the Greek παρά (παρά, "beside, alongside, instead [of]") and the noun εἰδῶλον (εἶδωλον, "image, form, shape") is a temporary cognitive effect created by an expanding and retracting movement of the eyes' focus upon an object, an oscillation, the movement of a lens between zooming in and zooming out when the focus upon an image shifts. If by looking at the moon or the stones on a riverbed one seems to observe the human features of a face, it is an optical illusion which happens thanks to a momentary disengagement of cognitive perception. The science writer and journalist Annie Murphy Paul suggests that pareidolia 'can tell us about the nature of creativity itself, and how we can use this innate ability to help us imagine and create new things.'¹³ In her article on pareidolia, she cites Paul Klee, Salvador Dali, and quotes Leonardo da Vinci. Creative individuals, she reports, seem to process external stimuli differently, tend to connect unrelated elements more easily, and show higher levels of 'perceptual instability'. Creativity is about tolerating and making use of ambiguity. 'When we are confronted with an indeterminate or incomplete stimulus, we supply the missing

¹³ Annie Murphy Paul, 'Do you experience Pareidolia? It could help you be creative', *Mind and Body*, April 26, 2023

parts, and those parts are drawn largely from our unconscious. Pareidolias lead us to project our own internal “stuff” into the world, making it visible to us and allowing us to work with it in a creative fashion.’¹⁴ Sometimes, the on-looker is prepared to invest a particular meaning to the image created by this shifting of referentiality. The face he sees on the rocks seems to be projected by his inner self, by what compulsively occupies his thoughts and inner attention. The experience of the pareidolic effect is momentary but repeatable. Repeatable because triggered by a thought. The oscillatory intermittent nature of this focus, its sudden interruption, I argue, is inspired by a form of self-censorship. The image retracts into its plain referentiality as self-defence from the emergence of autobiographical material too painful or disturbing. The oscillation, which creates the pareidolic effect, offers also an image for the contraction and distance of self-censorship which might take place with autobiographical material. It requires an alternating zooming into and from personal material; it functions as a sort of respite, a distance from the intimate content.

The structure of *Dots* and its fragmented form reflects the attention of the female narrator, a shifting, oscillating focus between her inner turmoil and the life which keeps moving around her in the form of family needs, external stimuli and random encounters. One of *Dots*’ defining characteristics is the way its fragmented pieces are interwoven, constantly moving between different levels, and intensities, of textual features: from sonnets to the family diary, from scientific texts to critical analysis, from radio programs to WhatsApp messages. On a textual level, juxtaposition allows to represent the oscillating movement between levels of attention of the female narrator and different fragments of her realities. What might seem unordered, accumulative and casual is the result of an approach to fragmentation which recognises the need for a ruling criterion to select and organise its random elements. An organizational system which is used to represent the fragmented reality of the female protagonist reading the *Canzoniere*. The pareidolic effect provides a system for the reader whilst also working as an organising tool for the writer. The textual fabric of *Dots*, with fragments, juxtapositions and interruptions reflects the narrator’s many personas (mother, wife, lover) in the way it performs her attempt to find a sense, giving a form to the uncertain, ebbing sense of her reality. The

¹⁴ Murphy Paul, “Do you experience Pareidolia?”

oscillatory emotional interference of her focus applies to the way she reads reality as much as to the way she approaches the *Canzoniere*.

For instance, *Dots* starts with the protagonist walking into the kitchen with her copy of the *Canzoniere*, and Laura's unerotic body on the cover. Her husband is folding the laundry on the breakfast table. She fails to recognise an order amongst the scattered underwear on the table; rather, she is aware that the order she is presented with belongs to her husband, who systematically matches breakfast leftovers with freshly washed underwear. The scene shows how idiosyncratic the idea of a system could be, and at the same time how revealing its shape could become. The narrator is annoyed but recognises the value in the image of the weirdly arranged underwear. She fails however to understand that it is a portrait of her husband, or more precisely of their marriage she is looking at. Strutting away, she considers that the kitchen table holds a meaning, but she is not quite ready to see it. The scene exemplifies a proto-*pareidolic* effect by introducing the idea of being able to find meaning where there is none. Further, failing to recognise the pattern and make the connection is as important as succeeding. The scene brings the reader's attention to the narrator's tendency to see patterns in scattered objects, and her need to re-order random stimuli into a form, but also to the possibility of failing. Looking for patterns in unrelated events becomes her way of managing the turmoil she is in. Patterns not only give her temporary respite but help her to face the resistance and unavailability of her object of love. Throughout the creative project, there are many moments during which the reader, next to the female narrator, observes patterns morphing into something else: the mud, the ants' memorabilia, the trash in the canal, the constellation of nails in the x-ray, often reveal as much about the object of love as of her interiority.

This oscillating movement mirrors the cognitive schemata activated when we read and when we write: for the creative practice of reading and writing is exemplified by the phenomenon of *pareidolia*. The *pareidolic* effect caters for a non-analytic, naïve, unsystematic but personal way to approach a text; it caters for a reader's preference to respond to a text in non-scholarly or uneducated fashion. The *pareidolic* effect is a way to describe an idiosyncratic, personal, obsessive approach to a text and the tendency to engage, look and reform its shape, to select and manipulate, to move around, to fill its blanks and create new blanks. Because a less systematic even *pervicacious* approach, might reveal as much about the reader as the text itself.

As already mentioned, autofictional modes are defined by ‘the presence of a combination, or oscillation, of reading modes: autobiographical and fictional.’¹⁵ Gibbson argues that autofiction defines ‘not only a literary genre but a reading strategy’ so that ‘there is a distinct mode of autofictional reading.’ Effe and Gibbons suggest that ‘readers approach autofictional texts employing two kinds of cognitive schemata: those for factual and those for fictional texts.’ The narrator’s reading approach to the *Canzoniere* is as much naïve as it is revelatory. For instance, this is exemplified by her mapping the collection on the A3 piece of paper. Appearing behind the sequence of sonnets she sees her own story. What she highlights with colours are what some would call just affinities, on which she decides to act. The pattern that she sees, the spinal cord she traces, is the story she follows as a dot-to-dot game.

Pareidolia represents a reading mode as well as a narrative strategy for the autofictional writer. The pareidolic effect is a facilitator, a performer and sometimes an executor of self-censorship, it mirrors the fluid unstable quality of autofictional works, the effect of a cognitive movement shifting between different levels of reality: the literary, fictional one and the real, autobiographical one. The pareidolic effect is used as organizational principle in the writing. To imitate the protagonist’s agitated and shifting attention, and resistance to the roles which nevertheless define and entrap her, the text is built through pieces which are juxtaposed and fragmented, but which find a final coherence only at the end of each section, when the gaze has acquired the distance needed to process the scattered elements in one unity.

‘Recent studies have linked pareidolia with creativity, which could also be a surviving strategy. Studies show that neurotic people, and people in negative moods, are more likely to experience pareidolia. The reason for this seems to be that these people are on higher alert for danger, so are more likely to spot something that isn’t there.’¹⁶ Indeed, there is a difference between what I refer to as the pareidolic effect and a more general principle of intertextuality, the fundamental interrelation between texts be it in the form of allusion, inspiration or influence. The difference is in the way one particular text is approached, pondered, ransacked, dismantled, worn and reinhabited through acts of repetition, of obsessive returning. And fragmentation is what ultimately allow these returns. But once the integrity of the whole is lost, the ‘original’ quality

¹⁵ A. Effe and H. Lawlor, *Autofictional*, 1.

¹⁶ Melissa Dhal, “Neurotic people see Faces in Things”, *The Cut*, July 17, 2015.

of the object itself is lost: its pieces, the minutest details, can expand, multiply, shrink, mutate, or fall into the cracks and disappear. This is to some extent true for all the texts analysed here. They all share a level of autofiction and fragmentation, they share the movement of returning, shifting, and moving perspective. They also share a debt to a book source of continuous generative energy because it is the depository of the writer's obsession. What sets apart the more general practice of intertextuality from the pareidolic effect is precisely the vocalized returning to one text. What brings attention to close into one text, like the *Canzoniere* for the narrator of *Dots*, are the immediate connections traceable along a story, which triggers a plunge into autobiographical material. If fragmentation is an expression of a fragmented sense of self, the pareidolic effect represents a very particular case of it, when the focus and refocus, the zooming in and out of referentiality happens not on pebbles or the clouds, but amongst the pages of one book. The autobiographical material is constantly interspersed and censored by the literary material in a mixture of emerged, and emerging, autobiographical material. Opposite forces are at work because fragmentation assumes its contrary, an opposite status to which it aspires or which it rejects. Subtraction or addition, an impulse to conceal, which runs parallel to the act of showing, reading selecting, writing and not writing is at the core of fragmentary movements. Ultimately it is what transfigures the *Canzoniere* for the protagonist of *Dots*: an active cognitive phenomenon which applies to the process of obsessive writing as much to that of obsessive reading.

Franciscu Petrarca laureati poetae Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta is the handwritten title on the code Vaticano 3195, the last edition of the *Canzoniere* and Petrarca's last autograph. It is 1374, and Petrarca is in Arquà still working on the collection that will define a genre for centuries. He has completed the ordering of the 366 sonnets but continues to work on linguistic variations. On the 19th of July of the same year, he dies. The title states his full name and profession, *laureate poetae*, his highest recognition. Petrarca's autofictional intention is openly stated on the first page of his last edition. Schmitt suggests that what identifies the domain and boundaries of autofiction, is that the 'I' shares the same name of the author. He also lists other tools which activate autofictional identification: age, socio-cultural backgrounds, profession,

and aspiration without which the simple onomastic identity remains empty.¹⁷ According to Schmitt, the *Canzoniere* is in all effects an autofictional text.

Ernst Wilkins, Petrarca's first biographer, writes in the preface to *The Life of Petrarch* that 'thanks to the corpus of his letters and the notes left on the margins of his poems, we know about his personal experiences with much more details than of any other human being who lived before him.' But ascribing to the *Canzoniere*, and its author, an autofictional intention means more than acknowledging the strong likeness between the lyric voice and its author, which in poetry is, at least naively and instinctively, almost taken for granted. Schmitt reminds us that, 'A reader can find in a name a strong hint of an autofictional intent. This onomastic nod to the author can be, and often is, supplemented with autobiographical data.' Indeed, what strikes the reader as new in a text of the Fourteenth Century, is the presence of precise autobiographical details: dates, places, people. The many anniversaries of his first encounter with Laura, with the complete date (day, month, year,) often accompanied by the time of the day; the many places where he spends long periods, the view from these places, sometimes his gardening attempts; the cities he travels to, the ones he hates, the routes he takes to get there by sea or land. Also, many people are mentioned by their names: his friends, his brother, the Colonna family, his benefactors, and sometimes his enemies. If the *Canzoniere* is not only about Laura, it certainly is about Francesco. Indeed, as Marco Santagata notes in his "Introduzione", almost nothing is known about Laura, except for the precise date of their first encounter in Santa Chiara, Avignon, on the 6th of Aprile 1326: the date upon which the system of anniversaries and the sense of time in the *Canzoniere* rotates.¹⁸

But ascribing autofictional intention means more than this. After all, the onomastic nod to the author, even when amplified by autobiographical data, is also a nod to the reader. Schmitt quotes the critic Philippe Gasparini, 'Honymity starts the autofictional game [...] In other words you [the author] start the autofictional game by projecting a narrator very similar to you, named after you, into a world that may otherwise be fictional.'¹⁹ By 'autofictional game'

¹⁷ Schmitt, "The Pragmatics," 86.

¹⁸ Marco Santagata, *Francesco Petrarca Canzoniere*, "Introduzione al Canzoniere", edited by Marco Santagata (Milano: Mondadori, 2014), XXXV

¹⁹ Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il Je?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004)

Schmitt, with Gasparini, refers to the mutual understanding of intention between author and reader, the contraction of a silent pact, which suggests that ‘right from the beginning the double movement of confession and denial has been constitutive of the autobiographical novel.’²⁰ Specific cognitive schemata are activated at the beginning of the autofictional game, the pact, or silent agreement with the reader. Autofiction is not only a literary genre, but also a reading strategy. ‘There is a distinct mode of autofictional reading which responds to a text’s invitations to be read as simultaneously fictional and factual.’²¹ As we will see, autofiction is not just intentional and programmatic but fundamentally inherent to the nature and conception of the *Canzoniere*. The inclusion of autobiographical material is even more relevant when considering that Petrarca, unlike most of his works, doesn’t provide insights about the conception of the *Canzoniere* anywhere except within the *Canzoniere* itself. Schmitt clarifies, ‘To create a sense of autofiction, that is to say to make the reader aware of a form of saturation of autobiographical references the author can rely on two types of elements: primary criteria and secondary ones.’²²

Primary criteria are onomastic correspondence and similar biographical background between author and narrator, the necessary signals. Secondary signals are called ‘enhancers’ and they contribute to the reader’s awareness of the game played. ‘Enhancers are unstable narrative centres and authorial intrusions. A secondary element or enhancer is openly addressing the reader.’²³ A metafictional awareness is precisely what the reader registers in the opening sonnet, written to frame the entire collection, where the autofictional intent assumes its programmatic value. As in *Dots*, I have decided to provide my translation of the lyrics, reflecting the naive and intimate approach that characterises this work. Here is the proemial sonnet.²⁴

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ A. Effe and A. Gibbson, “A cognitive perspective on autofictional writing” In *The Autofictional*, 63.

²² Schmitt, “Pragmatics”, 90.

²³ Schmitt, “Pragmatics”, 90.

²⁴ *Francesco Petrarca Canzoniere*, edited by Marco Santagata, 2. In these pages I will provide my own translation of all Italian texts since many critical works have not been translated in English. As for Petrarca’s lyrics, I believe that a free-styled translation is more in keeping with the intention of this project and the spirit of *Dots*.

‘Voi ch’ascoltate in rime sparse il suono,
di quei sospiri ond’io nudriva il core
in sul mio primo giovanile errore
quand’era in parte altr’uom da quell ch’io
sono,
del vario stile in ch’io piango e ragiono
fra le vane speranze e il van dolore
ove sia chi per prova intenda amore
spero trovar pietà, nonché perdono.’

To you who listen to the sound of
these scattered rhymes, of the sighs
that filled my heart during my
mistaken years, when I was young
and a different man from the one I
am today; please have mercy on
the broken style in which I weep
and ponder, suspended between
hope and loss, please have mercy
and forgiveness if you too know
what love is.

The first word ‘voi’, you, not only addresses the reader, that is us, calling for our attention, and forgiveness, but it also selects a specific audience, that is all the readers in Time, all those who have or will experience the tearing force of love. By addressing his audience Petrarca also creates it. The forever reverberating pronoun ‘voi’ is part of a metafictional strategy which, by summoning the reader, also projects the voice of Petrarca into the future, that is the present time of his future readers, suggesting those who have been broken by Love would recognise his ‘scattered’ rhymes and have pity and understanding. Schmitt also notices that ‘switching between tenses reinforces the perception of narrative complexity because autofiction is normally retrospective: an older self who is revisiting their past life.’²⁵ The retrospective intent of the first sonnet ‘when I was young and a different man from the one I am today’ depicts the old Petrarca who looks back from the hillock of time at the foolishness of Francesco’s life. The older self asks the reader for forgiveness, a form of *captatio benevolentiae* addressed by the old poet at the end of his journey.²⁶

²⁵ Schmitt, “Pragmatics”, 93.

²⁶ Another metafictional element of the *Canzoniere*, less evident to the unspecialised reader, but illustrative of its autofictional quality, is the continuous intervention through time on the corpus of the sonnets. Changes, additions, subtractions. Testimony of this obsessive return for changes and amendments are his marginalia which are diligently record each intervention with dates and times of the day. ‘18 febbraio, verso ora nona: placet, vide tamen adhuc’ 18th February, around noon, this is alright, but I’ll come back to this.’ The *Canzoniere* is the first autographic work: not only the original manuscripts are personally copied by Petrarca’s hand, but the manuscripts are also notated at the margins. The incredible availability of Petrarca linguistic meditation, its enormous literary memory and

But according to Marco Santagata, the proemial sonnet attests its singularity in other ways that are related to its programmatic intent. The sonnet, which opens a book about love, doesn't mention the beloved and hardly speaks of love at all. The aim is to establish the trajectory along which the book will develop, the life of Francesco and not Laura. The first sonnet affirms that this is not the story of two lovers, but rather the story of Francesco's error, and the *Canzoniere* will follow his vicissitudes, from his sinful beginnings to the final redemption. According to Santagata, who bases this interpretation on the influence of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine on Petrarca, the structural intent of the *Canzoniere* is a palinode: a formal retraction. The palinode vouches for the following: I used to love Laura, but I now realise that loving her was a mistake. Here I recount my madness. Please have mercy if you know what love does to you.

Furthermore, the programmatic sonnet achieves more than subtracting the figure of Laura from the story and making it all about Francesco's blunders. It creates a parallel between those blunders and the scattered rhymes, *rime sparse*. The rhymes are scattered because they represent a 'scattered' soul. What is interesting is that Petrarca suggests the coincidence, and interdependence, between the error [mistake], his wandering [errar] and the broken form of his style. The *Canzoniere's* fragmentation is the formal equivalent of the fragments of Francesco's soul, and his psychological instability. 'The rhymes are scattered for the same reason the

personal struggle indeed shaped for years a certain stylistic and linguistic approach of the critic to his work. For the first time more than one original manuscript survived.

Indeed, it is a poet who first recognises the importance of authorial, and vertical presence of Petrarca in the marginalia. Ugo Foscolo in 1823 recognises the importance of the gesture as macro intervention rather than its micro, purely linguistic scope and preoccupation. See "Essay on Petrarch" In *Francesco Petrarca Canzoniere*, edited by Ugo Dotti, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2013). Over forty years until the last day of his life, Petrarch collates his verses not only systematically recording his changes but recording the time and sequent impression of those changes. Editorial changes suggest the recording of something deeper. Perhaps the marginalia is not the recording of an ageing, wiser man, as some critics noticed, but something different. They are testimony of a new sense of a layered self, expressed through the human experience of the writer. The modernity of the collection lies also in its history, in the fact that it was a work in progress, unfinished because it was impossible to finish. The presence of autobiographical material in a Fourteenth Century text is highly relevant due to its autofictional features. Indeed, to recognise this fundamental and openly laid intent by Petrarca invites us to reconsider the ideas and prejudices attached to the collection: a virtuoso exercise on the theme of unrequited love, pieces to be read as one pleases, at worst a displeasing mournful and static exercise. Interpretations that are perhaps partly responsible for the canonisation which followed the immense fortune of the *Canzoniere*.

writer's mood is varied: dispersed and fragmented material is the equivalent of the dispersed and fragmented soul of someone who is in love but not in control, alien to himself.²⁷

But if the scattered rhymes are those of a young man in love, at the mercy of his passions, the project to assemble the pieces written in his youth and scattered on random white pages, *fogli bianchi*, belongs to an older man looking at life from a different perspective. In his mid-forties, Petrarca felt at a turning point in his life. The almost coincidence of two events causes a big emotional and spiritual shift which will change the impulse of his writing. The plague had killed many of his friends, and when the news of Laura's death in 1348 reached him in Verona, it marked a definite creative shift. The idea of compiling his rhymes into a book referred to as *libro-romanzo* by Santagata begins after the plague takes away so many of his close friends and patrons. The decision to tell the story of his unrequited love through his rhymes, compiled in a book, was motivated by the impact of these deaths.²⁸ The *libro-romanzo* will aim to look back at his life, and his mistakes, and to illustrate the transformation of Francesco's soul as he ultimately abandons his human, sensual feelings for Laura to fully embrace the love of God, following the book which is Petrarca's spiritual guide, the *Confessions* of St. Augustine.²⁹

The metafictional project is also inspired by a specific event, one of Petrarca's most extraordinary discoveries.³⁰ Around 1350, two years after the death of Laura, he discovers in a

²⁷ 'Le rime sono sparse per gli stessi motivi a causa dei quali è "vario" l'animo dello scrivente: la dispersione materiale dei testi rivela la frammentazione e la dispersione interiori di un innamorato schiavo di altri, alienato a se stesso.' Marco Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004) 4.

²⁸ 'It is only after Laura's death, that Petrarca conceives the idea of a canzoniere-romanzo.' [è solo dopo la morte di Laura che Petrarca concepisce l'idea del libro-romanzo.] Santagata, *Frammenti*, 24.

²⁹ Around the figure of Augustine in those same years Petrarca writes the *Secretum*, a confessional private book he compiles during the years of his autofictional resolution. The *Secretum*, a conversation between Franciscus and Augustinus on the seven capital sins, is a soul-searching enterprise dramatised by the dialogue between the pupil and the teacher, the sinner and the saint, merging the Classic culture with the Christian tradition; it also shows a split dynamic in Petrarca, who in turn talks in his defence and against himself, a split dynamic also active in the *Canzoniere*. In the *Secretum*, written around the years 42-53, Petrarca mentions the resolution which will change the perspective on his writing forever: 'I will be present to myself as much as I can: I will gather the scattered fragments of my soul and will dwell my conscience with attention.' Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum*, translated by J. G. Nichols, (London: Alma classic, 2015)

³⁰ Petrarca was a philologist, and a scholar, and is largely considered the father of Humanism: a pivotal figure who laid the basis and initiated the cultural revolution which later led to the Renaissance. 'With him, the humanist was born, the man who reflects and studies in its own intimacy.' [Con lui nacque l'umanista, l'uomo che riflette e studia nella propria intimità. [...] Si tratta però di un ritirarsi dal mondo per rientrare subito e giudicarlo nei suoi valori e disvalori.] Ugo Dotti, *La Vita di Petrarca*, (Bari: Laterza, 1987), 446.

library in Verona Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*. According to Roberta Antognini the project to gather his *rime sparse* into one book grows parallel to the idea of building an autobiography through the collection of his letters, the *Familiars*.³¹ Petrarca's resolution is strictly related to a multi-textual autofictional project comprising his large corpus of letters, the *Familiars* and the *Senili*.³² The collection, and collation of fragmented pieces about his life, letters, and sonnets, is part of the major project of building a lyric persona, rather than a real persona, perhaps the first lyric persona of modern times.

The autobiographical weight of the *Canzoniere* lies in the use of dates, real names of places and people, autobiographical details which are supported and validated by the great corpus of letters, known as the *Familiars*. Indeed, Santagata confirms this interpretation when he highlights that the autobiographical intent is part of a wider metatextual project which includes the systematic reordering and copying of Petrarca's correspondences. The suggestion that the *Familiars* and the *Canzoniere* are the result of the same change of heart reveals something important for this discussion. It indicates that the impulse to create unity from fragments is the gesture of an older man marking a turning point in his life; to reorder the scattered pieces of his life into a readable image demands the distance of looking at them from a new perspective. But the impulse also hides a need to turn those events into a model life, following the example of his beloved Augustine. And so, while collecting those scattered things, they get changed, things added or omitted, events predated or post-dated, facts twisted and manipulated to conform to the Augustinian idea of the *mutatio vitate*.

A quote from Augustine's *De Ordine* is surprisingly suggestive, if framed in terms of the pareidolic effect. 'The situation is akin to that of one who, confined to surveying a single section of a mosaic floor, looked at it too closely, and then blamed the artisan for being ignorant of the order and composition. In reality, it is he himself who, in concentrating on an apparently disordered variety

³¹ Roberta Antognini, *Il Progetto autobiografico delle "Familiars" di Petrarca – Studi e Ricerche* (Milano: LED, 2008) https://www.academia.edu/41984131/IL_PROGETTO_AUTOBIOGRAFICO DELLE_FAMILIARES_DI_PETRARCA_STUDI_E_RICERCHE?auto=download&email_work_card=download-paper

³² The 350 letters, known as *Familiars*, are divided in 24 books, and they have one hundred addressees. They record in detail Petrarca's life events: locations, dates, travels, names of patrons and friends, historic figures, detractors and friends, public letters and letters sent to friends. Petrarca was well aware of the uniqueness of his autobiographical project as Antognini suggests in her studies on the *Familiars*. She quotes a letter to Boccaccio where Petrarca, referring to the completeness of his human story told through the epistolary, says 'quod ante me, ut arbitror, fecit nemo.' Antognini, *Progetto Autobiografico*, 23.

of small, coloured cubes (*tesserae*) failed to notice the larger mosaic work. The apparent disorder of the elements really comes together into the unity of a beautiful portrait.’ (De Ordine, I, 2) In Augustine’s world, the beautiful portrait that lies unseen underneath the disorder of human actions is God’s design and infinite wisdom, mostly ungraspable to humans. But outside its eschatological frame, the image, with its references to sequence of order and disorder, composition, coloured cubes and larger mosaic, and most of all the presence of a larger angle a wider perspective through which the composition acquires sense and meaning, is suggestively close to the refocusing, the zooming in and zooming out familiar to the cognitive phenomenon of pareidolia. Suggestively, the image also caters for both the impression of perceiving a unitary image and the sense of losing it and failing to maintain that same image in focus.

But what about the *Canzoniere*? In song 129, one of the most quoted texts of the collection, it is possible to observe what has been discussed so far: the moving towards an order, a shape able to give sense to scattered tesserae but also perhaps the inability to do so. In 129, Francesco is walking through solitary lanes and mountain paths, pondering his love for Laura. Even though not written in Vaucluse, in Selvapiana, the song presents a familiar landscape of solitude and mountains. Ten years after meeting Laura for the first time, in 1336, Petrarca buys a small house in Fontaine-du-Vaucluse by the river Sorgue. Here he would spend long periods in solitude, writing and hoping to see Laura, who occasionally visited the famous spring in Vaucluse. It is in Fontaine-du-Vaucluse, this soon to become his mythical place, where he starts composing verses in Italian, on loose white sheets, *fogli bianchi*.³³ Francesco is often represented as walking in solitary high places and thinking. The first line of song 129 immediately suggests the restless nature of his wandering. ‘From thought to thought, from mountain to mountain, Love guides me’ [Di pensier in pensier, di monte in monte mi guida Amor] away from attended paths towards solitary valleys, rivers, or clearings where my soul finds sudden respite [s’acqueta l’alma sbigottita]. Following the ghost of Laura, chasing after her memory the unsettled, flickering mind is that of Francesco wondering: what if? what if she did love me? ‘Could it be true? But how? When?’ [Or potrebbe esser vero? or come? or quando?] The slanted, uncertain state of his confusion prepares for what follows; [talor m’arresto, et pur nel primo sasso *disegno co la mente* il suo bel viso]. He stops ‘in mid step because he sees the lovely features of her face on a rock’. The expression Petrarca chooses here, *disegno*

³³ Santagata, *Frammenti*, 87.

con la mente, literally means ‘my mind draws her image on a rock’. For a flickering moment he watches the pattern of Laura’s otherwise elusive features appearing on the uneven surface of a rock. But the momentary apparition doesn’t last and leads only to more despair, ‘look what you have come to, and how torn you are’ [dove sei giunto! e onde sei diviso!]. The mind soon returns to the hard reality: Laura’s stern indifference is that of the rock looking back at him. Yet the moment of disillusionment is soon overstricken by new images, fresher mistakes feeding the wondering soul. Here we are again a few lines down, with Francesco: ‘I have seen her so many times (who would believe this?) in fresh waters, or on green grass I saw her alive, in the bark of a tree or on a passing cloud’ [Io l’ho più volte (or chi fia che mi ‘l creda?) ne l’acqua chiara et sopra l’erba verde veduta viva, e nel trochon d’un faggio e ‘n bianca nube]. The landscape reflects the intermittent appearances of Laura’s features. Then when truth swipes away that sweet mistakes, I stand dumbfounded, breathing but inside dead like a stone, in the manner of a man who thinks, cries and writes [Poi quando il vero sgombra quel dolce error, pur lí medesimo assido me freddo, pietra morta in pietra viva, in guisa d’uom che pensi et pianga et scriva]. The whole song is about this movement: the zooming in and out, several times during the song, and probably the first time in modern lyric where the cognitive phenomenon of pareidolia is used not only to express a temporary loss of referentiality, but where the dynamic of the cognitive phenomenon becomes the generative force behind the text.

This dynamic however is not confined to song 129, it seems to be also present in the entire *Canzoniere*. Just after the introductory sonnet, in sonnet 2 Cupid, the god of Love, strikes his arrow at the unaware Francesco. This image is interesting for several reasons.³⁴ Its function is first and foremost to frame the whole vicissitude of Francesco’s foolish love into the episode of Apollo and Dafne from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, a text to which Petrarca continuously returns because it frames his obsession into the capricious necessity of divine agency. Apollo is stroked by Cupid’s arrow, his unrequited love for Daphne echoes Francesco’s impossible love for Laura. The episode of the young nymph running away from the God of poetry is torn apart,

³⁴ Indeed, one might argue that Cupid’s golden arrow in Sonnet 2, at the very beginning of the story, sets into motion the narrative scope of the *Canzoniere*. If one considers what is known as the arrow’s paradox, the argument for the collection’s lack of development might change. According to the physics of the arrow’s movement, what looks like a straight line is made of tiny oscillations left and right. The arrow’s paradox shows that, once stroked, the arrow doesn’t follow a linear trajectory, but its direction is fragmented, given by the constant, tiny oscillations of its shaft as happens in the narrative trajectory of *Dots*.

continually exploited, re-used and re-worked. The laurel tree, for instance, into which Daphne is transformed, finds many appearances not only as the tree itself, through multiple references to its trunk or its foliage, but thanks to its homophonic texture, laurel stands and comes to symbolize Laura. Petrarca dismantles the elements of Ovid's episode, and reshapes them into his poetic world, to substantiate the imaginative span of the *Canzoniere*. Following the same generative logic, Laura turns into another homophone *l'aura* (the air), breezy, cold, soft or warm, it is the medium of Francesco's yearning. Song 129 deploys and exemplifies a metafictional strategy/pareidolia is deployed also on a larger scale throughout the *Canzoniere*. Petrarca is not only aware of a cognitive mechanism very similar to what we call here the pareidolic effect when he describes his experience of seeing Laura's features in the stones of a riverbed. He is using this particular experience, and mechanism of parcellation and reshuffling also on to interpret this episode from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. If Vaucluse was Petrarca's geographical mythical place, where he obsessively returned to see Laura, the episode of the *Metamorphosis* was his literary mythical place where he obsessively returned to see the image of Francesco's failure both to love Laura and to learn how not to love her.

One might argue that 129 is as much about the yearning for Laura, and the outwardly reverberation of her 'ghost'³⁵ on the natural landscape as an intimate, inward scrutiny of Francesco's personal experience of her absence. But there is little doubt to me that next to Francesco longing for Laura, and experiencing perhaps an episode of pareidolia, there stands also Petrarca who through this text offers the reader, and himself, an image for the authorial struggle of composing the elusive and fragmented features of Laura, as well as the fragmented elusive corpus of the *Canzoniere*. A failed portrait of Laura becomes a portrait of the writer and a case for another of the metafictional elements of the collection. The sense of defeat and frustration, even impossibility, is pervasive on many layers in the collection. Its imaginary nucleus, the frustrated pursuit of Apollo in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, reverberates throughout the *Canzoniere* and with it the sense of emotional and physical unfulfillment. The sense of loss and yearning is spun throughout: the metaphor for Francesco's inability to ever reach Laura. But frustration is not only a matter of unrequited love. If the lover complains about the impossibility of capturing Laura in a portrait or even holding onto the memory of her features, as we have seen in song 129, the poet laments the strain of his enterprise. This includes the difficulty of

³⁵ Santagata, *Canzoniere*, XXXVII

finding the words in the Vulgar language ("Ingrata lingua") and the torment of his foolishness and inability to forget and let go of the love for Laura. Ultimately to follow Augustine's precepts and dismiss the love for Laura, proves impossible. The gathering, and accumulation, fail the superimposed order, that palinode becomes trajectory, or any trajectory will be considered of minor importance by the critics. The project of the *Canzoniere* fails because the love for Laura doesn't end after her death. On the contrary, her death feels irreparable. The passionate feeling for Laura is not something Petrarca can ever forget, nor something he can ever leave behind.³⁶

Marco Santagata notes that 'The complex architecture of the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* was unnoticed for centuries. The genre of the canzoniere born in the Fifteenth Century is based on a small selection of its tropes. What will become immensely popular is his lyric, what is known as 'petrarchismo'.³⁷ Indeed, before Marco Santagata's essential contribution on the *Canzoniere's* autofictional project, critics generally emphasized the stylistic and linguistic features rather than its autobiographical purpose.³⁸ The name *Canzoniere* was never used by Petrarca to refer to his collection of love poems. He always called it *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, which translates 'fragments of common things', or *rime sparse*, scattered rhymes, the more intimate and familiar name that Petrarca used in his letters to refer to the unordered growing corpus of poems. According to the philologist and critic Paola Vecchi Galli, the name *Canzoniere* is relatively recent, and it is linked to the personal preference of one of Petrarca's most acclaimed critics. In the 1950s the philologist and critic Gianfranco Contini

³⁶ The majority of critics resist reading the *Canzoniere* as a story due to the intrinsic failure of achieving the resolution of the libro-romanzo, therefore its autobiographical intent has been neglected, or set aside as less important compared to his lyrics.

³⁷ Santagata, *Frammenti*, 90.

³⁸ What most critics and some poets alike have in common however, opinion that has tempered and contributed to misrepresent the *Canzoniere*, is to read and describe Francesco's love as unrequited at best, and Laura as a literary invention at worst. Indeed, a phenomenological approach to its verses and contents, to the arch of the story, to Francesco's voice and struggle, to Laura's attentive silence might suggest that what has been considered unrequited was merely impossible. The *Canzoniere* is not a novel, but the modern complexity of its narrative scope has been largely dismissed. A resistance which preferred to focus the attention on its fragmented status, his stylistic and linguistic features, to pieces unrelated to each other. Perhaps because of its size the 366 poems of various lengths have been read and considered mostly in anthologies, as self-standing texts, failing to recognise that the autofictional features are an essential element that shapes its narrative arch. Fragmentation accommodates and expresses the innumerable, and never-final, representations of the two lovers: it portrays a fluid, oscillating, undefinable phenomenology of an impossible love.

publishes his celebrated work on Petrarca's language, "La Lingua di Petrarca".³⁹ In 1968, he becomes later on the curator of a new edition of the collection under the title of *Il Canzoniere di Francesco Petrarca*. If the title suggests a sense of unity, Contini's discourse suggests the opposite.⁴⁰ Contini notes that his lexicon is 'closed in an inevitable loop of eternal objects, unrelated and disconnected from history mutability.'⁴¹ He writes, 'The first impression is that of an absence of motion, so much so that the concentration of the most elementary movements/gestures, within the boundaries of the rhythm, delivers merely their dichotomic measure; and when you say dichotomy in actuality, you say antithesis in potentiality.'⁴² Antithesis, despite its inner, inevitable fragmentation seems to be perceived by Contini as a motionless effort.

For most twentieth century's critics the fragmented nature of the *Canzoniere* is less a result of a modus operandi and more the effect of a personality trait, often offered in dichotomic, and antithetical terms with Dante. One feminine, the latter is masculine. One teary, the other fierce.⁴³ Fragmentation is depicted as the result of an unresolved, indecisive, hesitant, irresolute gesture, which turned into a static exercise. 'The truth is that we cannot see a development, a trajectory, not only in the *Canzoniere*, but in Petrarca's entire body of works. He lacks history, if one considers, as one should, the entirety of his production.'⁴⁴ *Senza storia* means for Bosco a fundamental failure, a lack of development, a static exercise well exemplified by the looping movement of the 366 poems where the new, changed spirit of that 'other man' who looks back at his foolish love as promised in the framing first sonnet 'in the time when I was a different

³⁹ Gianfranco Contini, *Varianti e altra linguistica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970)

⁴⁰ Paola Vecchi Galli, "Onomastica petrarchesca, per il Canzoniere," *Italique*, VIII, 2005. 27-44.

⁴¹ Contini, *Varianti*, 113. [chiuso in un giro di inevitabili oggetti eterni, sottratti alla mutabilità della storia.]

⁴² Contini, *Varianti*, 115. 'L'impressione prima è d'una assenza di moto, per modo che la concentrazione dei movimenti più elementari, entro il confine del ritmo, porta per solito alla dicotomia del verso; e chi dice dicotomia dice antitesi in potenza.'

⁴³ Francesco De Sanctis, *Saggio critico sul Petrarca* (Milano: Marzorati, 1971)

⁴⁴ 'Il vero è che non possiamo ravvisare una linea di sviluppo, uno svolgimento, non solo nel Canzoniere, ma in tutto il Petrarca. Egli è senza storia, se lo si considera, come si deve, in tutta la sua opera. Di quasi tutte le sue opere si sono scoperte e si vanno scoprendo duplice, in qualche caso triplici redazioni. Sembrerebbe dunque di essere nelle migliori condizioni per determinare la storia intima di lui. Invece, le redazioni e varianti anteriori ci giovano poco o nulla per questo.' Umberto Bosco, *Francesco Petrarca* (Bari: Laterza, 1961)

man from what I am now' [nel tempo in cui io fui altr'uomo da quell ch'io sono] never fully materialised.

If, as we have seen, for Santagata at the core of the project is the effort to gather his fragmented pieces into an intelligible image, for Giuseppe Mazzotta what is left is just the pieces, 'on the macrotextual level broken or fragmented language is also at the heart of his poetic enterprise.' In the words of Mazzotta, 'the title, *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* recognises the irreducible, fragmentary structure of the poetic sequence, whereby the parts composing it remain unrelated, broken pieces beginning forever anew.'⁴⁵ And yet, 'the fragmentary structure of the poetic sequence' doesn't necessarily coincide with the 'broken pieces beginning forever anew.' Indeed, recognising the *Canzoniere's* fragmented nature doesn't endorse the lack of development supported by Mazzotta, nor the unchanged nature of his lyrical voice.

If, until recently, most critics resisted reading it as a story, poets have shown a fundamentally different instinct from the beginning, an observation which may be marginal for the exegesis of the *Canzoniere* but essential for *Dots*. Over the centuries, poets like Boiardo, Bembo, Vellutello and Foscolo have intuitively understood its autobiographical weight and intent, where antithesis expresses of the irresolvable contradictions of a man whose love has been denied. Critics have often neglected the simple, immediate true of the *Canzoniere*, the fact that it tells a love story. The narrative arch is recognised by poets, and editors, who read it indeed as a love story.⁴⁶ The protagonist of *Dots* approaches the *Canzoniere* like a love story, intuitively feeling that the yearning of Francesco is her own, but even more importantly, intuitively perceiving, thanks to the pareidolic effect, a sense of order and resolution, intermittent perhaps, but active.

Scholar Jennifer Rushford interprets Petrarca's fragmentation through the frame of Kristeva's essay 'Black Sun', 'according to which melancholic language is fragmented, disrupted, and monotonous, but also potentially creative.'⁴⁷ Melancholia according to Kristeva is as much inhibiting as it is inspiring: 'creative melancholia stems from the melancholic's heightened

⁴⁵ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The worlds of Petrarch*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 79.

⁴⁶ Simone Albonico, 'Struttura autobiografica e fortuna nella tradizione del petrarchismo.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGqjf2ngDI0>

⁴⁷ Jennifer Rushford, 'Petrarch's fraught poetics of Melancholia' In *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford scholarship, 2016)

awareness and intermittent tendencies. A cognitive hyper lucidity and hyperactivity with signifiers.’ If fragmentation is an expression of melancholia, the process hides a creative force. Kristeva recognises the *creative associative power and originality* of the depressed, which consists in tearing apart, breaking down, dismembering to reform, and to recreate. Kristeva calls this ‘cannibalisme melancholique’: dismember the beloved to ingurgitate and ultimately possess its body. Rushford reminds us, ‘the representation of Laura’s body is offered in the *Canzoniere* only through parts, and never as a whole.’ ‘The writing of fiction,’ Rushford quotes Kristeva, ‘is resistant and vibrant, if it isn’t an antidepressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection.’

Classical *aegritudo* or Medieval *acedia*, the depressive mood is so described by Petrarca in the *Secretum*: ‘I endure a period, not of light and life, but infernal night and the semblance of bitter death. And (what is worst of all miseries) I feed on my tears and grief, with a sort of dark pleasure, so that it is only with great reluctance that I can tear myself away from them.’⁴⁸ This honest personal description of depression is ‘unlike any medieval precedent in that it is acknowledged in this passage to be paradoxically a source of *atra voluptate*, a dark, self-inflicted pleasure.’⁴⁹ Anger, dark pleasure, and depressive mood, all suggest obsessive recurring thoughts, a returning movement which re-enacts the pain and releases it at the same time, a depressive mood that is mostly associated with the phenomenon of *pareidolia*.

Fragmentation is therefore more than a textual feature, it is a *modus operandi*, a survival strategy in so far that it allows one to distance oneself from the self, from the obsessive recurring thoughts of the self. Breaking into pieces creates interruptions within the narrative self. It generates respites and cushions the painful central knot with the interventions of other stories, random facts and commentaries. Fragmentation in the *Canzoniere* manifests itself in its building, as a process of accumulation, subtraction, change, movement, but also as creative and generative gesture. A portrait of the authorial struggle, and the lover’s duplicity. Fragmentation becomes also a way to defy Laura’s death, to dwell, revisit, consider, ponder, change. Ultimately fragmentation as a creative way to deceive loss and yearning. Petrarca’s *fragmenta* are also an attempt to defy time.

⁴⁸ Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum*, 74.

⁴⁹ Rushford, *Melancholia*, 6.

If autofiction calls for fragmentation in its many declinations, as subtractions, or accumulation, rapture or excerpts, so it seems to happen in the *Canzoniere* where the two modes are alternately active. However duplicitous or intentional, general or particular, visual, impressionistic or systematic, the act of fragmentation alludes to and implies its opposite: a whole which is aspired to, but not accessible. Once detected, the pareidolic effect might represent that initial shifting movement, which reoccurs in a compulsive, consuming aspiration to a whole which must be constantly reinvented. Whilst reflecting on the nature of fragmentation in the *Canzoniere*, and during the writing of *Dots*, I sometimes wondered if his scattered rhymes could also be a portrait of Laura, in the sense that their fragmented nature might also respond to the elusive nature of Laura, the woman he loved but whose features he always failed to describe in their entirety, as well as the contradictive nature of Francesco. By that I mean that fragmentation might come from the subject, Francesco the lover, but it is also imputable somehow to the beloved, the object of his obsession. She is inaccessible, her behaviour, and attitude are ambiguous, and often contradictory. As if the *Canzoniere* fragmented nature might also represents the granular obscure image of Laura, her intermittent appearances, her distant gaze, her few, yet poignant words. An image of Laura whose quality is given by tempering with the intensity of her speckled details. A complex portrait of her inner ambiguity. Breaking down one part of Laura's body, or gesture, allows Francesco to respond differently to Laura's obliqueness, and duplicity.

In *Dots* the autofictional is reorganised through the narrator's approach to the *Canzoniere*. The interrupted sequences and juxtapositions record how the narrator's focus jumps from stimulus to stimulus, whilst her attention is dominated by the 'last seen' left on WhatsApp by the love interest. The pareidolic effect requires shifting movements of attention. Indeed, the narrative reflects her inability to 'keep still', as she tries to teach herself by drawing the map of the *Canzoniere* next to the little one. But stillness and contemplation reveal the lover's distance, his silence and absence. Ultimately, the protagonist is saved by her ability to oscillate her focus, allowing her to alternate between truth and illusion. The pareidolic effect offers an image for the cognitive, organizational movement which involves the obsessive returns of the reader and the writer on the same image, be it a piece of reality or a text. An image that suggests unstable, changing levels of referentiality seems the most adequate to describe the continuous trespassing between ontological and fictional levels, the trespassing between digital and real, between optical illusion and reality, between delusion and truth. The images formed through these moving, kaleidoscopic shapes are for the protagonist of *Dots* the nature of love.

This shifting mechanism between an image and the dispersion of that same image, with its momentary sense of unity and the subsequential loss of it, is what links the *Canzoniere*, *Dots* and the three texts I will go on to discuss here is partly the presence of a similar underlying premise: a compulsion, Petrarca's self-torturing pleasure, to return to the object of our pain. The gestures of fragmentation have at their centre a contradicting force, intermittently centrifugal and centripetal. An intermittent sense of self-torturing pleasure surrounds the creation of the *Canzoniere*, the same feeling that guided the three texts used to illustrate the elaboration of *Dots*. The protagonist of *Dots* who breaks the story of Francesco and Laura to disperse it in her own story is mirrored by Francesco who does the same with the episode of Apollo and Daphne in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Indeed, in autofictional texts, there is the duplicity and tension between the act of reading and that of writing. This shows an affinity with the protagonist of *The Glass Essay*, who walks through the cracks of ice on the moor fearing she is turning into Emily Brontë. It happens to the female narrator of *Bluets*, who obsessively returns and collects specimens of the colour blue assembling her findings as Wittgenstein would. It happens to the male protagonist of *Cento poesie d'amore a Ladyhawke* who rearranges the dots of his unrequited love in the urban grid of the street of Milan, imagining his lover as LadyHawke.

On Anne Carson, Maggie Nelson, and Michele Mari

In this section, the analysis will highlight the affinities between *Dots* and three contemporary texts that have been particularly inspirational for the creative project. All three offer different gestures of fragmentation which have influenced the writing of *Dots* as much as the nature of the reading of the *Canzoniere*. We will see how rupture, subtraction, and accretion are specific movements rooted in the authors' praxis which are responsible for the success of the texts as much as for their possible failure.

In *The Glass Essay*, Anne Carson's use of fragmentation appears to have a performative quality. Her juxtapositions break forms and genres, creating texts that reflect the fragmented nature of her thoughts and giving the reader a sense of participation in her narrator's reading and writing process. The present tense of the narration offers an equal sense of urgency and inevitability. However, the sudden, displacing direction of her fragmentation runs sometimes the risk of landing the narrative into a space almost too personal for the reader to follow.

In *Bluets* Maggie Nelson uses fragments, or rather the 240 numbered propositions on the colour blue, to echo the inadequacy of language, as theorised in Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colours*. Within this sense of inexpressibility, Nelson finds a freedom of movement which encourages growth and accumulation, physical, human deviation, and philosophical, and metaphysical exploration. The same sense of inadequacy of language that the protagonists of *Dots* experience in their bilingual, virtual exchange.

Finally, in Michele Mari's novelistic production, the collection of poems *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* with its intrinsic fragmentary form represents a unique lyric endeavour. The fragment for Mari is far more than a formal occasion. Fragments are the selected remains of a literary tradition or intimate past, kept alive by the compulsive, necessary and transforming returning of his obsessive attention. Selection might be perceived as failure, for its inability to keep everything, and juxtaposition might be vulgar for its mixing high with low but vandalise and disfigure the classics is for Mari the only way to save them and their legacy.

What sets these texts apart from other contemporary examples of autofiction is that their narrators as readers: in each, the writer and narrator are also fascinated readers of a particular text, whose excerpts become part of the text. In *The Glass Essay* as well as in *Bluets* and *Cento*

poesie d'amore a LadyHawke the presence of the narrator as a reader as well as a writer is explicit and essential to the story told. The creative practice of reading and writing is exposed and observed in its movement. The writer observes the reader who is also the protagonist, and the reader ponders the writer who is also the protagonist, in a three-way traffic.

Finally, juxtaposing these contemporary texts brings into focus their similarities with the *Canzoniere*. They are all, somehow, a result of that initial impulse of Petrarca's autobiographical project of mixing what is true and what is less true, the classics with the present, 'a literary obsession which becomes a human portrait'.⁵⁰ A movement between fiction and self, which in its continuous re-focusing creates gaps, breaks, and interruptions where the autobiographical becomes fictional and vice versa, the fictional expands and inhabits autobiographical material. These fragmented pieces are in a sense a portrait of their authors' obsessions, a portrait that hides behind the fragments and keeps eluding the observer poised between success and failure, as much as the *Canzoniere* is the portrait of Petrarca's and *Dots* of the female narrator's.

⁵⁰ Santagata, *I Frammenti*, 33.

The Glass Essay by Anne Carson

This analysis of *The Glass Essay* by Anne Carson will focus on her use of ‘extreme’ juxtapositions, where quotes from classic texts are simultaneously in dialogue with the present narrative, the landscape and the protagonist internal discourse. We will see how her fragmentation interrupts the linearity of the narrative, stops its logical flow, and creates a blank space in which meaning wavers. Juxtapositions create a sense of detachment and allow for a third perspective, offering distance and respite from autobiographical material. But fragmentation also encourages the experience of simultaneous movements and synergies on the page where past present and future are all squeezed into the only present moment. When by her own admission, the movement of juxtaposition becomes too contracted, there is an uncanny sense that ‘life’ might escape the page. The idea of a third observer watching this dynamic from an unengaged position is suggestively similar to the cognitive process of pareidolia. The presence, and effect, of a third gaze in Carson’s *Essay* introduces a sense of oscillation and shifting of referentiality which felt important to the elaboration of *Dots*, instrumental in establishing the form and dynamic of the material and finally underscoring an affinity with the pareidolic effect.

Anne Carson [b. 1955] is a contemporary poet, essayist, translator, art performer, and writer (and reader) who defies easy description and categorization. She is as mystifying as she is inspiring, at the same time obscure, and illuminating, a true example of razor-sharp clarity and wittiness. Carson is controversial, and famously difficult to read for her relentless challenge to, and reinvention of, forms and genres by way of clashing together the classical civilization with the contemporary world, the ‘old’ with the ‘new’. In all her work, the hyperbolic metaphorical squeeze has either bedazzled or puzzled readers and critics alike. The intensity of her voice is haunting, as it is the precision of her thought process. In her introduction to the first monographic work on Carson, the scholar Elisabeth Sarah Coles reminds us that all this is also the performance of a way of thinking and making connections. Carson’s works ‘splay out a reading in which the facts of a source text move among and exchange valency with other facts, textual or auto-biographical. [...] The zoom in on Carson in these texts, the fact that it is so clearly Carson who is speaking, puts in shot an errant reflective through-line [connective theme]— a *person-* whose effect as a reader addressing herself to readers is the “pathos of certain

agency”.⁵¹ Her reading moves us because it is as though the thought is caught up at the scene of composition. More performative than random or accidental. Coles writes, “The self-reading into her writing is so exposed that this apparatus of commentary becomes the focus and foreground.”⁵² However performative, Anne Carson’s ‘personal’ stance and use of autofictional elements is difficult to ignore. It is difficult not to hear Anne Carson’s voice in *Nox* for instance, about the death of her late, long-estranged brother, or in *The Beauty of the Husband* about the ‘story of *her* marriage’.⁵³ ‘The interweaving of textual fact, critical discourse, and autobiography/autofiction in both *The Glass Essay* and *The Beauty of the Husband* produces a distinctive lyric style that skews, as it speaks directly to, our expectations of what an essay and a reading should be.’⁵⁴ Her first, full-length publication in Great Britain, *The Glass Essay* ‘deals with the end of a contemporary love affair but is haunted by Emily Brönte’s life.’⁵⁵ So read the blurb of the first English edition. After thirty years, it is still commonly described as ‘a complex structure holding two disparate elements together: a meditation on a romantic break up, and a critical reading of the life of Emily Brönte.’⁵⁶ Here, as with the *Canzoniere*, I will consider a few excerpts to elaborate on elements which affected the writing of *Dots*. As with the first sonnet, the first stanza offers a good observation point.

I can hear little clicks inside/my dream.

Night drips its silver tap
down the back.
At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking

of the man who
left in September.
His name was Law.

My face in the bathroom mirror

⁵¹ Elisabeth Sarah Coles, *Anne Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023)

⁵² Coles, *Anne Carson*, 2.

⁵³ Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010) and *The beauty of the Husband* (New York: Vintage Canada, 2002)

⁵⁴ Coles, *Anne Carson*, 4.

⁵⁵ Anne Carson, *Glass and God* (London: Cape Poetry, 1998)

⁵⁶ Sarah Chinaya, “A Glass Essay, Reading Anne Carson post-breakup”, *The Yale Review*, June 1, 2022.

as white streaks down it.
I rinse the face and return to bed.

Tomorrow I am going to/visit my mother.

The mirror in the scene and the action of mirroring seems to suggest that this story is about finding correspondences, doubles. And indeed, Anne Carson in the *Essay* sees her 'possible' reflection into the life of Emily Brontë. Anne Carson, or the female narrator who sounds like her, does feel like turning into Emily, and so the essay she is writing under our eyes suggests a transformation. But the mirror in the first stanza is also the initiator of a movement that is not simply reciprocal. 'My face in the bathroom mirror' for instance becomes a more general, universal expression two lines down 'I rinse *the* face'. The shift starts a movement that is essential in Carson's autofictional writing: a personal experience turns into a universal one. 'My' to 'the' offers a sense of oscillation, an attempt to distance oneself for a moment from the personal, an external observational point unbalances the composition. *This* is indeed the aftermath of a love story, what is left after 'the man who left in September', but it is also, equally, the story of a visit to her mother, and a reading of Emily Brontë. Carson, mother, Emily Brontë. A reader who explores connections. Time, the 'prismatic present tense' with its three movements of past, present and future is crammed in the few lines of the first stanza: it's 4 A.M. when the mirroring scene happens; it was September when the man, Law, left and it is tomorrow when the narrator is going to visit her mother. A short (Augustinian) lesson on the perception of time. Carson's approach to the concept of Time and the performative quality of her work finds its roots in St. Augustine's explanation of Time. 'All time is now. Everything lives in the present, it is the only time it can live.'

The scene hints at a different 'spin': not just mirroring, but multiple surfaces, multiple perspectives. This complex system of reference is exposed as if the text depended on fixing the dots of its complexity, and three-dimensional depth and texture. The autofictional import is not just the end of a love affair stated in the first stanza, but the relation with Emily Brontë, and the mother that also is centred in the way Time is described. The figure of the mother opens the possibilities of the mirroring action, it complicates things, expanding the experience of pain. Not a simple reflection is happening here but a multiplication of possibilities. The *Essay* is about the end of a love affair and the life of Emily Brontë, as much as it is about the narrator's relationship with her mother, the third bitter figure of a triangulation whose gaze expresses anger but hides fear. Her character offers bitter, disillusioned comments. In a very economical way, just 60 words, fragmentation and juxtaposition allow these elements to coexist and

interact. Life unfolds in the present tense of a narrative where spring is wintry, 'The bare blue trees and bleached wooden sky of April carve into me like knives of light.' The mother is lonely and bitter, her Love left in September. 'It is as we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass. Now and then a remark trails through the glass.'

'Carson says she's not trying to show off; it's just the way her mind works: "It is a basket of stuff that eventually looks like it has some informing idea. Then I grope around in it to see what that is, try different orderings and different concepts and then fix on one."⁵⁷ When asked about her praxis, Carson seems unwilling to offer insights on the procedures of her elaboration process. 'I don't know that we really think any thoughts; we think connections between thoughts. That's where the mind moves, that's what's new, and the thoughts themselves have probably been there in my head or lots of other people's heads for a long time. But the jumps between them are entirely at that moment. It's magical.'⁵⁸ Behind the magical experience lies an instinctual, intuitive, certainly associative ability to fearlessly follow a line of connections between thoughts, break, work and rework images until something askew and therefore fresh and interesting, in Carson's sense, appears. In a similar way, *Dots*'s narrative proceeds in an unfolding present tense, giving to its trajectory an uncertain sense of development. The narrative arrangement is inspired by the *Essay*'s dynamic of clashing and contrasting segments of texts and images. The present tense of the narrative is disturbed by quotes from the *Canzoniere* as well as from the domestic everyday, the urban, or mythical landscape, and marginal creatures that offer interruptions and respite. However, the organizational principle has a clear origin: pareidolia operates on the assumption that there may be a potential image revealed by shifting its fragmentation into a different focus.

Many readers have elected *The Glass Essay* as 'the greatest break-up poem ever written' perhaps because of the clinical precision in which pain, a mixture of anger, fear, and grief is declined in the *Essay*. But narrowing the scope of it to extrapolate only the love affair theme mirrored into Emily Brönte's life would be perhaps a mistake as it would prevent to recognise the larger angle of the poem, the shifting from 'my' face to 'the' face in the first stanza. The same transitional quality of pain is registered in the last line: 'It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the

⁵⁷ Emma Brockes, "Magical Thinking", *The Guardian*, December 30, 2006.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

body of us all.’ And so, the third stanza opens with three women, Carson, her mother and Emily Brontë, in the kitchen. *The Glass Essay* is a conversation at three, because three mirrors multiply the image between the three women inside, the dark space of the kitchen and outside, into the landscape. Observe what happens to the landscape in the stanza below, there are signs that the ice is softening and there might be something trapped in, waiting to be released.

In THREE the gaze moves from first person to third, and from third person to a multi-gaze, starting a sense of movement and uncertainty happening under the reader’s eyes.⁵⁹ Three women sit at the kitchen table, there is someone else hovering above mother and Carson, a third presence, whilst outside ‘the moor is paralysed with ice.’ But it soon turns out that the ice is not frozen, beneath the surface ‘the ice has begun to unclench’, and with the ice, so the Essay. ‘Black open water comes curdling up like anger. My mother speaks suddenly.’ Here the full stop in mid-line works two ways: it juxtaposes *and* links the image of the water with that of her mother, whose voice breaks the silence curdling up like anger. The collocation and sudden interruption delivered by the full stop opens into the silence of a third presence, opening blanks to what remains unsaid: the breakup (this happens throughout the Essay between mother/Carson, the brönte sisters, Carson/the man who left, Carson/the psychiatrist and so on) because ‘it is a two-way traffic, the language of the unsaid’.

The personal, or autofictional, in *The Glass Essay* means not only creating a surface where the connections of thoughts and their trajectories are visible but also trying to free that third transparent thing, which lies between body and mind. ‘It is really important, Carson says, to get somehow into the mind and make it move somewhere it has never moved before. That happens partly because the material is mysterious or unknown but mostly because of the way you push the material around from word to word in a sentence.’⁶⁰ Through images of the moors’ frozen landscape melting, the reader is slowly entering into the essay, whose movements mirror the reluctant release of the thawing white sheet of frozen glass. The reader moves with

⁵⁹ ‘Whenever I visit my mother/I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë,/my lonely life around me like a moor,/my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of transformation that dies when I come in the kitchen door.’ *The Glass Essay*.

⁶⁰ Sam Anderson, “The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson”, *The New York Times Magazine*, March 14, 2013.

Carson in this broken space, following with the eye the cracks on the surface of her representation of life ‘thousands of hair-thin cracks catching the white of light/like a jailed face/catching grins through the bars.’ The metaphorical squeeze in Carson is a contraction, the result of omitted, or askew passages in her chain of thoughts which are often difficult to trace back, sometimes, too idiosyncratic to be traced back. Her extreme juxtapositions are in quick succession, and create a mixture, of images, thoughts, and external stimuli. She, with the reader, is also the third gaze who moves freely in the texture and folds of her text, as though she commands the lines of her representation from her ‘angle of repose’ to borrow an expression from Wallace Stegner. Similarly in *Dots*, there is scene in ‘Scirocco’ where the kitchen where the Thai curry is prepared gets swept away and morphs into the woods where Daphne is chased by Apollo; the unstable gaze of the narrator moves between self-analysis and external observations, flashbacks and minute details, the episode appears several times in the whole chapter, depicting the protagonist unstable sense of reality.

When the image of a broken sheet of ice appears in the *Essay*, the lines running through the surface are commanded by a centrifugal, and centripetal force. Dark water seeps through the frozen surface, sometimes in the form of misty vapour escaping from the cracks. The reader doesn’t see yet the gesture responsible for the cracks; it is simply left with its consequences, the aftermath, the broken pieces, the shattered glass, the veins drawn on the surface of the film of ice by a violent blow. But as if there could be something trapped behind glass and ice, Carson moves, and the reader with her in this broken, fragmented space, in between the cracks. Autofiction is not bi-dimensional, not a matter of simple identification because if Carson is peering into Brönte, the mother peers into her and the reader peers into Carson. Pain is everywhere, is what we humans share and see reflected on each other faces, if we watch. These three ways movement is important if we are ‘to watch the poor core of the world, wide open’, which happens in the fourth stanza.

‘Whacher, Emily’s habitual spelling of the world, has caused confusion. But whacher is what she wrote. Whacher is what she was.’ The anomaly of the word ‘whatch’, registered by Carson could have been a possible way to spell the word in Brönte’s era. However, Carson’s attention might have the aim of defamiliarising the word ‘whatch’ in order to consider how information is assimilated, formed and perhaps reshaped in the imagination. The reshuffling seems to release in Carson’s imagination and on the text something which detects a movement, where ‘Soul is the place’, a space lingering in between, intermittently appearing in the movement

between the correct spelling and Brönte's spelling of the word, here and there, body and mind. The act of whaching suggests a paradox of location, 'outside, inside', the physical world 'moor wind and open night' and the conceptual one 'God and humans', 'the bars of time', near and far. Observing the word 'to whach', with the temporary disorientation caused by its misspelling, and the spontaneous reaction of trying to rearrange the letters of the word, like the rocks in a riverbed resist to conform to a given shape, performs at a morphemic level a third presence, breaking with its movement the bi-dimensional and linear shape of the word, a third elusive angle of observation. The idea of 'whaching' as moving focus introduces the scene where a sort of self-voyeuristic act takes place. It is a flashback, the night in September, when Law delivers his line to end 'our five years of love, 'Not enough spin on it'. This is the blow at the origin of the cracking, in the ice, the violent shattering gesture.

The bitter irony lies in the fact that what 'has not enough spin' is indeed responsible for spinning everything. Spinning as in whirl, reel and tell. 'The blow snaps the heart in two pieces, which floated apart.' 'Whilst trusting my little back burning side like a baboon, 'there was no area of my mind not appalled by this action, no part of my body that could have done otherwise.' In this scene, a person, a third observational point, is floating in between the bodies, between mind and body. Distancing into this third gaze does seem a personal way to apply censorship, a self-censorship to what shatters and spins around. 'Until at last I was floating high up near the ceiling looking down.' Between mind and body there is a third angle, 'Soul is the place.' 'Soul is what I kept watch all night: I was floating high up near the ceiling looking down on the two souls clasped there on the bed.' Here again, the in-between is the place where the mind can gaze, into the unsaid, unfocused, in the space 'where the little raw soul slips through' is transparent, it has no name. Perhaps 'whaching' is gazing into the unsaid. If *The Glass Essay* might be taken as an exercise in whaching, then fragmentation is its way of achieving it. Fragmentation is interruptions, 'a blank line filling the interval. But blank lines do not say/nothing.' In *The Glass Essay* it seems to me that fragmentation is acted upon the text as a form of censorship. The gesture is always a subtraction, paring back, taking away, the gesture is a sharp cut performed by any means possible. As a form of censorship that kicks in to stop a dangerous, too-painful train of thought.

When fragmentation is concerned, and so are difficult, sudden juxtapositions, the question arises: why? Why complicate things? What are the risks? By Carson's own admission, the process is so personal and idiosyncratic that sometimes it can get out of hand. 'It does fall apart

a lot. It gets just too weird for anyone to care about reading, or else it gets diluted into a sort of parody of itself.' She admits, 'Intuition is the only way to keep on the line between them.'⁶¹

In 2004, the interviewer Will Aitken begins his interview with a quote from 'Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions', where Carson writes, "my personal poetry is a failure."⁶² Aitken asked, 'When you look back at "The Glass Essay" do you consider it a personal poem? Do you consider it a failure?' Carson's answer is revelatory, 'I see it as a messing around on an upper level with things that I wanted to make sense of at a deeper level. I do think that I have an ability to record sensual and emotional facts – to construct a convincing surface of what life feels like, both physical life and emotional life. But when I wrote "The Glass Essay" I also wanted to do something that I call understanding what life feels like, and I don't believe I did.'⁶³ The reader of Carson's interviews is quite familiar with her self-criticism. Nonetheless, these words of failure are strong, particularly for a text loved and revered by critics, poets, writers and the public alike.

Autofiction, or 'personal', when successful, seems to indicate for Carson the capability to construct a text that can provide a form of understanding, rather than a portrayal of what life feels like. Feeling life, rather than seeing it. A text in which the reader could immerse herself, rather than a surface to look at, an object with a vertical depth. Later, in the same interview, Carson talks about the 'scent of life' in the texts of George Eliot or Virginia Woolf which, she says, is lacking in hers. In the *Essay*, the 'convincing surface of life' is constructed through the sequencing of apparently random images: the moors, Emily's diaries, her mother's words, white food, nightmares, flashbacks, a looming visit to her father and landscape. And so, everything, memories, dialogues, nature, Emily's words, dreams, the lover's last words, Charlotte's notes, and the sessions with the psychiatrist are broken into smaller pieces, interrupted, mixed and juxtaposed with descriptions of a landscape where everything is also on verge of breaking, 'spring opens like a blade here.' However, according to Carson, the idiosyncratic arrangement of these images eventually fails to offer an understanding of what life feels like. But what is an understanding? In *Men in the off hours* there is a poem called 'First Chaldaic oracle' where Carson

⁶¹ Brokes, "Magical Thinking".

⁶² Anne Carson, "Stanzas, Sex, Seductions," *New Yorker*, November 25, 2001.

⁶³ Will Aitken, "The Art of Poetry", *The Paris Review*. n.88 (Fall 2004)

engages with the experience and effort of *understanding*, ‘keep chiselled [...] the eye of your soul and reach-mind empty [...] Because it is out there (orchid) outside your *and*, it is.’⁶⁴ Understanding is stop looking straight into the thing itself and let instead the thing move under our eyes, ‘outside your *and*’ where the routes between thoughts are traced. ‘but blank lines do not say nothing.’ When Carson says that she is operating at two levels, ‘an upper level with things that I wanted to make sense of at a deeper level’, as we have seen, there is also always a third gaze lingering in between the lines, moving amongst the blanks created by her fragmentation. Indeed, it was while reading the *Essay* that I became aware of the pareidolic effect.

One day in November, I went by train to see a friend. On the outer journey, as soon as I unclipped the loose sheets on which I had printed *The Glass Essay*, it felt as though I lost track of the page’s order. I grappled with unrelated images: the protagonist’s ‘ungainly body’ stumping the mud, something with white food in the fridge, icy puddles cracking open, wind, a lot of wind, sulking, a baboon arse and a scorpion, scorpion!?, on the sofa in the Bronte’s living room. On the return journey, after food and drinks, I tried the loose sheets again. It was then, with the changing light of a late autumn afternoon, and the changing alignment of my synapses perhaps, that the piece started to move, to reconfigure into a strange clarity. The ‘moments’ which during the outer journey remained unconnected, (the landscape, white food in the fridge, mother, the Bronte’s sisters, the baboon arse, the scorpion) started to ‘talk’ to each other. I could see the dots aligning, the different threads of the story disentangling, the correspondence, the mirroring, and most importantly how sudden juxtapositions were performative of a way of telling a story. I followed the movement outwards and inwards until I saw a shape, which is, I imagine, the shape of what the *Essay* tells me. A pareidolic effect happened *with* and *on* the pages of *The Glass Essay*. What, on the outer journey, felt beautiful but wacky juxtapositions, on the back journey turned into a shape. The image of a sheet of ice cracked open by Law’s blow. What remains are the lines left in the ice, all equally running away from its centre and running back to its centre. The protagonist of *Dots* is also a watcher, she collects and organises all these pieces of her shattered, fragmented attention, and moves them around until she finds the connections which she reads as a map. A map that will eventually take her to the man hidden in the *Canzoniere*. Indeed, as much as it is possible to perceive *The*

⁶⁴ Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Vintage, 2001)

Glass Essay as a representation of the surface of the glass, or ice, after the blow broke it, *Dots* is built with a similar dynamic in mind, where the organisational system is construed every time around a 'movement' or mood of the lovers. The sequence of fragments offers a portrait of the lovers, and a projection of the unfolding of the love story, at least according to the narrator's reading. So, the title for each sequence or episode offers the focus around which the narrator's obsessive attention keeps reshuffling her fragmented thoughts.

It is possible to observe this dynamic in every chapter of *Dots*. For example, in Winter 'mapping' oscillates between the literal mapping of the *Canzoniere* and the physical mapping of the suburb where the protagonist lives, and the mapping, as in reading the expression of the elusive man. She maps the lines of his disillusioned smirk; to the narrator, and the reader perhaps, the cognitive trick of pareidolia shows his face behind the map she is tracing where images are selected around a specific theme. The moment the female narrator of *Dots* sees the connection between Francesco's walking, stumping muddy lanes *solo e pensoso*, and the stubborn advancing of ants in her kitchen, the love sonnets start to intercept her reality, as much as she begins inhabiting the sonnets and their atmosphere. For the idiosyncratic and obsessive eye of the female narrator finding a contact between the distant love affairs becomes a game of survival, where rules are bent, participants change, and cards get re-shuffled. 'Perhaps the hardest thing about losing a lover is to watch the year repeat its days.' The *Essay* has many affinities with the *Canzoniere*, a contemporary one set 'in a moor in the North' where, the grieving lover is not Francesco but a woman, 'travelling all day on trains.' And she is called Anne Carson. Not asking for forgiveness, God forbid, no, but summoning grieving lovers, asking us to 'whach' her. The female narrator squelching mud in *Dots* carries something of the image of Carson stumping through the moors, and Petrarca's wandering in Vaucluse.

Bluets by Maggie Nelson

“We mainly suppose the experiential quality to be an intrinsic quality of the physical object” - this is the so-called systematic illusion of colour. Perhaps it is also that of love. But I’m not willing to go there – not just yet. I believed in you.⁶⁵

The focus of this analysis of Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* will be guided by the same themes which led the approach to Anne Carson’s *The Glass Essay*, autofiction and fragmentation. Similarly, the analysis of *Bluets* will be geared towards, and framed by, the elements and features of Nelson’s text which have been instrumental to the writing of *Dots*. In summary, these are three. The first is the argumentative nature of *Bluets*, a specific characteristic of the text able to accommodate both a creative and an inquisitive line and allow them to move freely and fluidly, intersecting each other without causing the flow to stop. A freedom of movement that encourages growth and accumulation. This is an important point because it is where the gesture of Nelson’s fragmentation differs from Carson: her use of fragments is by accretion, rather than fracture. A second element, strongly related to the first, is the use of narrative features more likely to be seen in a novel rather than within the frame of a speculative text (such as returning characters, a narrative arc, and a strong storytelling momentum). The novelistic imports, as well as exemplifying the genre-bending nature of *Bluets*, it lends the collection a strong sense of unity. Finally, a third element which is perhaps the least obvious is the fact that *Bluets* is, in my opinion, *also* a love letter which addresses its speculative and personal thoughts to the man who left.⁶⁶ The import of autofiction and fragmentation in Maggie Nelson’s work, particularly in *Bluets*, its genre-bending quality, its narrative features, and the sense of a silent addressee who is the ultimate recipient of her digressions are the points around which I intend to organise this short analysis, because ultimately these are the features which influenced *Dots*.

Maggie Nelson [b.1973] is an American writer, poet and essayist who has engaged with themes of our contemporaneity, from autobiography to queerness to feminism, from philosophy to murder. Autofiction is a trademark of her work, part of her DNA as a writer. Autofiction, the fact that it is Maggie Nelson’s life discussed and revealed in her writing is open and

⁶⁵ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Washington: Wave Books, 2009)

constitutional of her stance as author. In her best-known book, *The Argonauts*, Nelson writes about the transformation of her life during her surrogate pregnancy, and later delivery of her baby parallel to the physical, and psychological transformation of her transgender partner, the artist Harry Dodge.⁶⁷ She says that she deliberately ‘violates her privacy’ in her writing.⁶⁸ Indeed, in 2005, still at the beginning of her writing career, she published *Jane: a murder*. It is the story of the brutal killing of her aunt Jane in 1969, one year before Nelson was born. An autobiographical, fragmented elegiac murder mystery which is composed by a collage of prose, poems and legal documents, *Jane, a murder* not only expands the boundaries of what poetry can do, but it also challenges the idea of genre.⁶⁹ Indeed, Nelson defies the attempt to classify *Bluets* into a specific genre but identifies ‘major categories under which each section had to fall if it wants to appear in *Bluets*, these include love, language, sex, divinity, alcohol, pain, death and problems with veracity/perception.’⁷⁰ In the same interview she also suggests that, rather than falling into a genre, or being cross-gendered, a book could simply be a *condition*. A book could just represent a condition, and obsession is a serious one.

Bluets is set into motion by the narrator’s near-compulsive collections of blue objects and her equally consuming considerations on the nature of the colour blue is a lyric essay, memoir, philosophical excavation, or exploration. The book rotates around the main axis of depression, and the aftermath of a love affair, but from it spin out other parallel, subtle narratives, such as the life-threatening accident of a friend, alcoholism, teaching, memories of the man who left, small stories which contribute to articulate Nelson’s exploration of pain and grief. The autofictional quality of the text is so exposed, I argue, because it becomes instrumental to make the reader feel part not only of Nelson’s most intimate dreams, and desires, but also of her speculative journey along the meaning of love and the colour blue. The reader is with her before teaching a class on prosody, ‘I look down at my notes: Heartbreak is a *spondee*’, and again at faculty meetings or driving through Los Angeles, her landscape, or thrown into deep

⁶⁷ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016)

⁶⁸ Paul Laity, ‘Maggie Nelson interview: people write to me to let me know that, in case I missed it, there are only two genders’, *The Guardian*, April 2, 2016

⁶⁹ Maggie Nelson, *Jane: a murder* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005)

⁷⁰ Ben Segal, ‘The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition: An Introduction’, *continent*. (January 2011): 158-170.

memories, snapshots of intimate encounters with the man she loved. But intertwined with these highly intimate and heart-breaking accounts, there stand quotes of writers, essayists, artists, philosophers all pondered and challenged by Nelson's voice, and all offered on the same plate to the reader. By that I mean here that there is no difference for Nelson between quoting her best friend or Wittgenstein, there is no hierarchy in the matter of love. *Bluets* is a collection of 240 short texts, paragraphs, or propositions (Nelson doesn't like to call them fragments, though many critics do, perhaps because fragments imply the idea of unfinished, and subtraction, where Nelson's propositions generously move towards a sense of unity).

The collection, which defies genre and definition, through the lens of an obsession for the colour blue, explores the end of a love story, depression, and grief. It has been defined alternatively as, 'a book about language', a book which 'focuses on tracing the relationship with and search for the colour bleu both physically and emotionally, a book about love 'pressed into the hands of new lovers and passed to those of the heartbroken.' What is fragmented in *Bluets* is not only its nature as it appears on the page, the white blanks between paragraphs. To add to a sense of formal fragmentation is the numbered sequence of the propositions (from 1 to 240). Behind it, it is possible to recognise the gesture of breaking up what would have been longer texts into shorter fragments. Indeed, some propositions belong together, whilst others don't. But fragmented is also the line of thinking, and of building an argument. True, to contain all the stories, and quotes, and memories and dreams, and voices, and objects and desires and citations is not a simple task, and yet, what becomes clear from the beginning is that the 240 paragraphs create a text which is hybrid in its genre and fluid in its quest, unique and strongly compact, but fiercely narrative. Although their aphoristic appearance, sometimes one line long, the 240 paragraphs suggest a strong sense of unity from the beginning.

The strong sense of unity delivered in *Bluets* lies also in some of its characteristics which are of interest for this discussion. One is the narrative, novelistic 'intention' of the text: '*Bluets* always had a set of dramatic personae and a narrative arc,' Nelson says stressing its prosaic nature, hinting also at the overarching line of the plot, subtle but essential to give a sense that the reader is reading a story rather than a philosophical speculation on the colour blue. When Nelson published *Bluets*, she already had behind several publications of poetry collections. Asked what she thinks of the narrative features of *Bluets* she says that, 'if someone wants to call it poetry, I wouldn't go to the mat about it. But I've written enough poetry to have a lot of respect for its particular tools. I have a lot of issues, for lack of better word, with narrative, but I also have no

problem with trying to structure a work so that it is a page-turner. *Bluets* thinks in prose.⁷¹ There is however another element which gives the fragmented nature of *Bluets* with a deep sense of unity. What makes the 240 short texts interrupted by as many breaks or *cesurae* a highly cohesive text has to do with the kind of fragmentation activated by Nelson. The gesture lying behind her fragmentation is not a result of a subtractive movement but rather its opposite. It is a generous, inclusive, accommodating, feminine gesture: the sections are the result of accumulation. Nelson admits to something very similar, ‘While writing *Bluets*, I thought of Joseph Cornell as the ultimate teacher in this respect: he collected enormous amounts of junk, he “hunted” for treasures all over the city, but each box or collage or even film ...feels as if it’s been distilled. [...] In other words, the composition emanates from the pile of junk left in its wake, but in itself becomes perfect.’⁷²

As it happened for *The Glass Essay*, the opening of a text often offers some coordinates to follow, if one is about to move across a ‘thorny’ territory. To some extent, the first proposition of *Bluets* is no exception: it gives the reader the frame necessary to navigate the text.

This is how the book begins,

1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a colour. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkins as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious. Then (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrements coiled into the shape of a sea horse) it became somehow personal.*

A lot happens in this first proposition. Its function, I argue, is to start a movement which performs at the same time the need of fragmentation and that of unity. It embraces the two hundred and forty pieces and will return to close them at the end of the book.

According to Nelson, the opening line, ‘places the book in the realm of the novelistic, or at least in the speculative. That freedom was important to me whilst writing.’⁷³ The triple repetition of ‘suppose I’ with the subjunctive mode of the second verb has the rhythmical effect of an oath,

⁷¹ Segal, “The Fragment”, 158-170.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ *ibid.*

which alludes to the autobiographical truth previously discussed, but at the same time it opens the discourse of *Bluets* into the hypothetical. The freedom mentioned by Nelson, the strange, enchanting assertiveness of the verb ‘suppose’, and the consequent, repeated, subjunctive mode, is what allows her to organise the discourse of *Bluets* into an open, free space: a very personal speculation. Indeed, it sets her free not from autobiographical truth, but it frees the way in which she is going to organise, give form and shape her obsession for the colour blue. Because after all this is the intimate discussion about an obsession, and obsession doesn’t follow a rigorous, logical path. The repetition of the verb ‘suppose’ is not only an effective rhythmical way to affirm the entrance into the realm of the speculative, but also to establish the coordinates of her text. ‘Suppose’ is repeated three times because each time it is addressed to a different recipient.

The first scene of *Bluets* finds Nelson sitting at a table shredding her paper napkin, a clear allusion to her gesture of fragmentation. At that same table there sit other interlocutors: one is the man who left her heartbroken, and one is the reader (but many more will come and go, stop briefly at the table to contribute to the dialogue). Nelson might be addressing her readers, or her lover: in English the imperative mode is ambiguous: ‘you’, the recipient, can be singular or plural (in the *Canzoniere* Petrarca addresses the readers, ‘Voi’, plural). Who is the ‘you’ she is addressing to through her first proposition, and the entirety of *Bluets*? ‘you’ has a multiple function. It is a collective us, the readers, and Nelson with us, it is you, the autofictional split of the writer catching herself in the action of collecting her junk, the one who shreds pieces of the napkin and sets off to reorganise them, but it is also you, the man who left her heartbroken. This change of reference in the pronouns’ scope is an important feature in *Bluets*. A fluid ambiguity of references inhabits the text from the first lines. The shifting referentiality within the same paragraph says that ultimately *Bluets* is a quotational, collaborative piece of writing as much as a love letter, where the even the fonts change. The use of Italics seems to allude to another level of the text, other from Nelson’s writing voice, the speculative voice which is delivered in a standard font. The approximations, ‘*an appreciation, an affinity, then something more serious*’ sign this open letter to the man she used to love. The italics stops just before the word ‘personal’. What follows *is* personal.

‘Suppose’ also liberates her formally by giving her argument the space it needs to wander, swerve, recoil, pierce in and out of her dramatic persona and narrative arc. What we are going to read is a mental experiment, a speculation, it does not offer final answers on the matter of

love, because the only experience of love that one can offer is through ourselves, is *personal*. This is personal not because articulating a love for a colour is an idiosyncratic experiment, but because the articulation itself is a personal issue for Nelson: the intrinsic inadequacy of the language to describe something like a colour, is parallel to an equal intrinsic inadequacy to talk about love, hence the adjustment, the rephrasing, the slight movement, ‘*an appreciation, an affinity, then something more serious.*’

13. ‘*Why blue?* People asked me this question often. I never know how to respond. We don’t get to choose what or whom we love, I want to say. We just don’t get to choose.’

In fact, should one substitute the word ‘blue’ with ‘love’, most of the time the sense of the paragraph would not change. This also proves an important point which Nelson is making: if language is inadequate to describe a colour, as Wittgenstein suggests in *Remarks on colours*, it is likely that the same applies to love.⁷⁴ She writes, ‘I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein’s idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly – in the expressed. Its paradox is, quite literally, why I write.’ If language will always be disappointing because it is never precise enough, it can’t satisfy the perfect description of feelings. The answer Nelson suggests is to keep working, and moving, with the language.

It could be argued that fragmentation in *Bluets* is also a matter of survival, in so far that by organising its material, adding, and diverting, by accumulating a constellation of thoughts, and quotes around its truth, in proceeding by approximations, adding diversions and inversions to best organise it, Nelson finds eventually ways to process her pain. According to Christopher Gandolfo-Lucia ‘Nelson’s prose is speckled by a desire that language, in certain ways, may be able to do more than simply name colours, losses, and illnesses – may actually come to make and unmake these categories.’⁷⁵ Her linguistic and speculative ‘dance’, to use a word dear to her, around themes like love, pain and loss shows the believe that ‘language can alter and repair various losses simultaneously articulating theories of language and colours and also performing these capacities. *Bluets* is a text which uses language to distract itself, corner itself, cleanse

⁷⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on colour* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977)

⁷⁵ Christopher Gandolfo-Lucia, “The Language Stump: Language and Loss in Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*” (PhD diss., Haverford College Department of English, 2019), 29.

itself.⁷⁶ Accumulation, which happens through Time, also means lingering, delaying, returning. Ultimately accommodating the need of not letting go, not yet. Nelson's nature of fragmentation is of a different nature to what we have seen in Carson. If Carson has the tendency to crack the language open, to challenge its potential meaning to the limit of no communication by a use of juxtaposition so crafted, edited and pared back that it sometimes ebbs on the edge of the incomprehensible, Nelson talks about the kaleidoscopic effect that Wittgenstein's philosophical approach to language had on her, and her thinking about writing: as if she is suggesting indeed a continuous reorganising, like a kaleidoscope, of her material, trying to arrange it around an elusive centre. Nelson uses gaps between paragraphs to let the language breathe, and other voices next to hers, to 'dance around the truth', in an attempt to express the inexpressible while also gesturing towards this impossibility. The gesture is the result of a pondered, accumulating movement. Fragmentation for Nelson, I argue, is a more feminine need to occupy the space around the void left by the man who left, by filling the holes. Occupying this space means physically and mentally, adding blue *tessera* to blue *tessera*, breaking the thought's flow perhaps, by moving them around, readjusting them, creating a sort of kaleidoscopic dancing fluid image. So, fragmentation mirrors the ebbing, ever doubting, performative self, and it is more expression of deviation, than control. Even the numbered sequence seems to suggest a formal order inside which one can feel, and write, more freely.

It might be useful at this point, before starting a short, close text's analysis to illustrate what has been discussed above, to pause for a moment to take into account t a group of texts whose system of fragmentation might have influenced the fragmented nature, and numbered sequence, of *Bluets*. The aim here is to suggest a possible parallel between *Bluets* and the *Canzoniere*. By collecting fragments, Nelson shows her branching interests into Philosophy of Language, History of Art, Aesthetic and Theology while hinting at antecedents that influenced the writing of *Bluets*. According to Christopher Gandolfo-Lucia *Bluets* refers, represents, and alludes to Augustine's 'Confessions', Ludwig Wittgenstein 'Remarks on Colours', and Roland Barthes' 'A Lovers' Discourse' to create a book that is at once philosophical, linguistic, lyrical and theological.⁷⁷ Next to this fundamental lineage of texts, it is worth mentioning two more

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Gandolfo-Lucia, "The Language Stump", 31

which are important for this discussion on the accumulating nature of Nelson's fragmentation. Though she has not referenced Petrarca in her interviews about her writing of *Bluets*, there exist clear parallels between *Bluets* and the *Canzoniere*. They share not only strong allusions to Augustine's Confessions, an intimate excavation of the experience of love, and depression (Petrarca's *agre voluptate*) but also a formal preoccupation with numbered progression, and the very nature of their fragmented gesture. Addition, and addiction, is the driving force behind the *Canzoniere* as much as *Bluets*. There is a similar sense of accumulation, the idea of collecting, and later collating, pieces. Not only the gesture of accumulation, but the reason behind it, which I interpret as an unwillingness to let go, is what I argue makes the nature of their fragmentation similar.

The second text worth mentioning is Pascal's *Pensées*. Nelson uses one of his aphorisms as an epigraph at the opening of *Bluets*. 'And were it true, we do not think all philosophy is worth one hour of pain.' We might assume that pain, and the corollary sentiments related to it, such as loss, yearning, depression, obsessive thoughts, the aftermath of love, or the impossibility of love, is the force from which the movement of fragmentation is started for Nelson, as it had for Petrarca. Grief is represented by the hand 'collecting the junk', returning to the same thought, the blue objects, in Nelson's case, the colour depository of her obsession. Returns to a text, a colour or an idea, is the undercurrent energy of the texts here discussed which initiates the gesture of fragmentation. This applies to *The Glass Essay*, *Bluets*, the *Canzoniere* as much as it does to *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke*, as we will see. In Nelson fragmentation it is not a matter of subtracting, but of organising thoughts, philosophical quotes, next to raw, most intimate material.

In an interview, Nelson says something illuminating about the way she thought of *Bluets* during the time she wrote it. 'I also liked the fact that the word [bluets] means a kind of flower, as it allowed each proposition, or whatever you might call each numbered section, to be thought of as a single flower in a bouquet.'⁷⁸ The image of the bouquet is very suggestive as it offers the idea of diversity and singularity held together by a singular gesture, the hand collecting, adding, shifting, readjusting the flowers in a bouquet. The different, individual flowers in a bouquet are

⁷⁸ Segal, "The Fragment", 158-170.

the different individual voices whose shifting, contrast and movement eventually create a harmonic unity, a choral effort, her ‘a dance around the truth’. ‘The language is moving. The structure of *Bluets* ‘facilitates distinct movements from thought to thought in a way that it suggests that their intersections, overlaps and contrasts become the substrate on which Nelson stages her interventions and performs her experiments.’⁷⁹

The closing sections of *Bluets* is similar to its beginning. Here, as there, the reference of the singular pronoun opens up to include a collective, general ‘us’. The reference of Pascal’s pensée ‘And were it true, we do not think all philosophy worth an hour of pain’ returns and with it a similar shifting of the scope of the pronoun ‘you’.

238. I want you to know, if you ever read this, there was a time when I would rather have had you by my side than any of these words; I would rather have had you by my side than all the blue in the world.

The proposition 238 offers a fundamental angle of the text, the fact, I argue, that *Bluets* is addressed to a ‘you’ who may, or may not, read this. *Bluets* is a love letter to the man who left. True, the presence of the addressee dimmers amongst the various deroutes that the reader takes following Nelson wandering – so very similar to Petrarca’s wandering- but the whole two hundred and forty propositions are framed as a love letter, as much as the *Canzoniere* is framed as a text addressed to us readers, those fooled by lov. The reference here to the man who left is strong enough to give retroactively a special tone to the entirety of *Bluets*. Yet, after the starting declaration that any of these words would be of little worth compared to his presence in her life, the following proposition is again moving away, shifting the reference of the pronoun ‘you’, creating space to ‘try’, by approximations, to explain, add another layer to her discourse and the nature of this obsession, move away, divert.

239. But now you are talking as if love were a consolation. Simone Weil warned otherwise. “Love is not consolation,” she wrote. “It is light.”

⁷⁹ Segal, “The Fragment”, 158-170.

Then, the last proposition,

240. All right then, let me try to rephrase. When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light.

These three final paragraphs, particularly if put in relation with the beginning of the collection and its epigraph, represent a *tessera*, a micro component and building block of *Bluets*, where it is possible to observe closely some of the elements that allow and perform the movement which permeates and sets in motion the whole collection. These elements are the quick succession of references of the pronoun ‘you’, often combined with Nelson’s double voice, which pierces in and zooms out of her dramatic persona and sometimes double up with a voice which addresses the reader, and the intervention of other interlocutors, voices in the form of quotations, extracts, passages, snippets, clips coming from a huge bibliographical and personal ‘data base’, who sometimes deepen her discourse, other time takes it away, here represented by the voice of Simone Weil. At the table with Nelson while she shreds her napping, the first image of fragmentation that the reader encounters in the opening of *Bluets*, trying to articulate this obsession for the colour blue, and love, are all these voices, a corality of interventions tuned on the same low note which is the colour blue. It seems to me that throughout the whole collection of sections, the pronoun ‘you’ is one of the strongest elements that promote this constant, ebbing, uncertain, recoiling movement. It can refer, as we have seen, to different personae: the man who left, the reader, or Nelson as reader, the writer, or Nelson as writer. This shifting reference of the pronoun ‘you’ happens as often within the limit of one paragraph, as much as beyond it, vibrating through immediate adjacent texts, creating a dialogue with the surrounding sections, a contradicting, confusing yet embracing tension. The open scope of the pronoun ‘you’, working by juxtapositions with a plethora of quoted texts, is what eventually holds the narrative of *Bluets* together. Nelson says, ‘I wanted there to be a lot of momentum in this book, as well as plenty of opportunities for eddying out into cul-de-sacs. That was the tension – how to make some chains of propositions that pull you forward, and then allow for some to bring you so far afield that you might find yourself wondering “why are we talking about this here?”’⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Segal, “The Fragment”, 158-170.

In *Bluets*, the gaps between propositions, the very fragmented nature of the text, is a constitutional part of this movement. Acting as silent pause, ‘an encouragement to slow down, an absorbing space to think’, but also offering the space to divert, move away, adding twists and additions. Nelson says that ‘to express is to dance around the truth. But in dancing, you get closer. You learn the texture of the space around a point.’⁸¹

The struggle of *Bluets* is not to control autobiographical insurgences, but a reflection more intrinsic to language itself, its intrinsic limit. *Bluets*, or rather Nelson in *Bluets*, performs, and challenges at the same time Wittgenstein’s discursive limits of the language. Fragmentation, and approximation, is set in movement; and it is through this movement, a light ‘dance around the truth’, that one might get closer to it, see a passing shimmering light, or feel simply irradiated by it, even though the feeling is elusive as much as the radiating light. Her moving fragmentation is based on a gesture that reaches out over to the next fragment after the blank as we saw at the beginning, and at the end. Sometimes these corollary-like sets form blocks, small unities moving within the accumulating, increasing number of propositions. Fragmentation is movement but ‘to detect the motion, one has to already be in the car’, says Nelson commenting on the fact that fragments don’t need to be fragmentary and stressing the risk of isolating her propositions out of context. ‘The language is moving. The structure of *Bluets* ‘facilitates distinct movements from thought to thought in a way that it suggests that their intersections, overlaps and contrasts become the substrate on which Nelson stages her interventions and performs her experiments.’⁸² It might be possible to argue that the movement is necessary because of, or it simply responds to the overwhelmingly presence of ‘blue’. ‘If blue is anything on this earth, it is *abundant*.’ So abundant that it cannot be contained by a progression of numbers or letters like in a paint store. Blue is ever-changing, like love. Within the complex reality of this abundant, fluid and ever-changing ‘blue’ matter there are elements which, I argue, work against its fragmentation, the continuous diversions. After all, digressions happen only if there are contrasting elements which guarantee a sense of unity. *Bluets* is a love letter, and every time we hear the heartbroken voice of Nelson addressing ‘you’, the man she loved, we are reminded of what it is.

⁸¹ Segal, “The Fragment”, 158-170.

⁸² Gandolfo-Lucia, “The Language Stump”, 33.

The sheer honesty of the voice, the ever-present, returning dialogue/conversation with ‘you’, the sense that it is written FOR ‘you’, and that her words, *her voice*, arrives to us from a place of pain is what eventually hold *Bluets* together. We know little about the lover, his absence is filled with the voice of other lovers, of blue and love alike. A void which is a centre that can only be filled with others, extras. *Bluets*’ obsession and loss is explored through the many declinations of the colour blue, a synesthetic expansion on the feeling of grief and unavailable love. The addictively accumulating gesture behind *Bluets*’ fragments is controlled and mastered by the genre-bending quality of its story-telling features, and the presence of a silent addressee. Nelson’s bouquet of flowers is not only an homage to all the authors she ‘leans on’, quoting them during the writing of *Bluets*, but it seems to me also a very effective image that represents her kaleidoscopic approach to language, and truth, her preoccupation with ‘veracity and perception.’ The reality of the bouquet is composite, made of many small approximations, flower after flower, to its final form, final, but not ultimate. These ‘bluettes’, small blue flowers as Nelson liked to think of her propositions on blue in the initial phase of the writing by changing kaleidoscopically their position also change their relational meaning, allow shifting and reconfiguration, but also obsessive returning to the same preoccupation.⁸³

It might be very personal, but I can’t imagine the one hand adding flowers after flowers, shade after shade to her bouquet of bluets without also seeing the other hand holding it together, homage, love letter in the form of a constellation of thoughts to the man who left. Contrary to *Bluets*, but similarly to *The Glass Essay*, the story of *Dots* unfolds in the present tense. This was a fundamental choice during its writing, since the immediacy of the present moment leaves little space to the protagonist to evaluate it and equally gives to the reader the sensation of participating to her ebbing borders of her reality, both reader and writer trapped between veracity and perception. This last reflection brings into the picture another possible consideration. ‘By writing in the same form as Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Colour*, Nelson extends the linguistic ambiguities which Wittgenstein wants to exemplify with colours: the potential miscommunication when one talks about colours is ‘the discursive limits of language.’⁸⁴ The same limit of the language one encounters when one talks about love. Language is limited and

⁸³ Segal, “The Fragment”, 158-170.

⁸⁴ Alexandra Parson, “A Meditation on Colour and the Body in Derek Jarman’s *Chroma* and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*”, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 33:2, 375-393.

insufficient not per se, but in relation to what it tries to describe. Linguistic ambiguity refers to colours as much as love. Of love is difficult to talk about. *Dots* is a multi-layered text which consists of sections of fragmented writing, images, ancillary texts, and side texts. It shares the elemental components of impossible love: the chasing of a lover, an elusive beloved, a mythical place, and an obsession with time. 'You', the man she is in love with, is a proper Laura: a secretive, elusive and emotionally unavailable beloved. *Dots* plays with numbers, images, creatures from the natural world, characters from books and other media, twisting delusion into possibilities and possibilities into delusion. Using the numeric code that contemporary lovers trace day in and day out on the WhatsApp application, *Dots* challenges the ontological level of our reality, the many possibilities within what we are prepared to consider real: the ephemeral digital space and the ordinary mundane reality mirror the perception of the ever-changing, unstable forms of love.

Impossible loves share similar patterns. Place the *Canzoniere* on the desk next to WhatsApp, and connections might appear. Indeed, WhatsApp is a perfect space to hold a *Canzoniere*. Spotify list, videos, pictures, vocal message, deleted messages, last seen, block: all end-to-end encrypted. Perfect that is to express the inexpressible. There is indeed a relation, a common ground between the elusive sense of language which emerges from the reading of *Bluets* and the ever ambiguous, duplicitous code that the lovers develop through the 'last seen' on WhatsApp. It is the sense of the constant possibility of miscommunication and misrepresentation, deepened in *Dots* by the bilingual nature of both the writing and its protagonists. Grasping meaning only partially, or not trusting the process of fully understanding something is part of being bilingual. The limits of language in *Dots* are also the silence and *lacunae* between the lovers. The language they chose to speak to each other, WhatsApp instead of telephone calls or emails or letters perhaps represents in its elusive because untraceable quality, their language of love. This realisation, without pretending to have been too conscious about it at the time, is the lens through which I allowed myself access to the *Canzoniere*. What I mean is that I approached the *Canzoniere* with the same tentative uncertainty, ambiguity, often out-of-context-spirit with which the protagonist of *Dots* reaches to WhatsApp which represented the only communication available, by necessity doomed to be misunderstood. Only later I realised that the protagonist was reading the *Canzoniere* as messages on WhatsApp. It is clear to me now that the female narrator reads the sonnets as a message from the 'you', as a substitute for a message of 'you', because 'you' would most likely remain silent.

Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke by Michele Mari

'Falsifying myself as a means of a confession is my literary *ubi consistam*.'
[Falsificarsi in funzione di una confessione è il mio *ubi consistam* letterario.]⁸⁵

Michele Mari [b.1955] is a novelist, poet, translator, critic, and Professor of Italian Literature at the University of Milan. He is one of, if not *the*, finest novelist active in Italy today, one who is *already* considered equal to the like of Cesare Pavese and Carlo Emilio Gadda.⁸⁶ He is a philologist and leading expert in 18th century Italian literature, as well as a passionate connoisseur of Science Fiction and Fantasy literature. *Cento poesie d'amore a Ladyhawke* his poetic debut, is a book full of contradiction: highly resonant of the Italian poetic tradition but equally easy to read, full of literary quotes but colloquial, intellectual but romantic, autobiographical, and true in its intimate contents but sardonic and cynical.⁸⁷ To talk about love, *amore*, as it appears in the title of his collection, the over-spent, misused, almost unpronounceable word, was his challenge, and to do so through one of the most clichéd form, the *canzoniere*, was his heroic test.

The success of the book (it is the Italian book of poetry with the highest number of copies sold since the Nineteenth hundred. It has today reached the 60.000 copies, a number unknown for Italian poems collections) is a clear testimony of the immediateness of his love poems, and his ability to speak the 'truth' of love. But the reason for its success could also be a response to Mari's poetic, which is more visible and immediately palpable in his poetry, an exhilarating quotational system matched with wacky juxtapositions which opens the door of the secluded room of Italian literary tradition and allow in clowns, cowboys, poker faces and vampires to

⁸⁵ The translation of Mari's poems, and of the critical material cited here is my own and purely functional to the understanding of this critical work and does not intend to be in any way other than that.

⁸⁶ Carlo Mazza Galanti, "Tutti gli Scrittori di Michele Mari", *Il Tascabile*, December 14, 2016

⁸⁷ Michele Mari, *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007)

revitalise that elegant but dusty ambient space. *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* is a love declaration, the honest confession of a quasi-compulsive disorder as well as a rescue effort.

The declination of his obsessions is the real theme of Mari's work. The word 'ossessione', he reminds us in *I demoni e la pasta sfoglia* derives from the Latin 'absedium', siege.⁸⁸ The obsessed person's mind is occupied, sieged, by a dominant thought. However, the scientific term for obsession, and obsessive recurring thoughts is Anankastic Personality Disorder. Ananke, in Greek mythology, is the mother of the fates. She is the orphic goddess of compulsion, necessity, and inevitability. Obsession is being ruled by a dominant thought as much as the feeling that this compulsion is necessary. Obsession is never a matter of choice. It is, as Mari suggests, necessity. Indeed, as we will see, autofiction coincides with his obsession, and fragmentation is a tool to delve into it. In the short story collection *Tu sanguinosa infanzia*, minor details of his childhood like the cover of a magazine, the green pieces of a jigsaw puzzles, a park in Milan, a birthday present, minor details from his childhood, rescued from the inevitable nullification of Time, recalled, and kept alive by Mari's undivided, compulsive attention and scrutiny.⁸⁹ Small details, fragments of memory become the catalyst for a continuous expanding, self-fuelling internal anguish. Since obsession is not escapable, it becomes one thing with his writing. But writing has a very important function, which is *not* to escape obsession.

'I am convinced that writing is not therapeutic per se (or rather it is only in the sense that when I write I feel better than when I don't write; during the period I mean in which I write and feel performative I feel better and healthier). On the contrary, writing refines one's own obsessions.'⁹⁰ His career as novelist began in 1989 with the novel *Di bestia in bestia*. Mari considers his first novel a sort of poetic declaration and literary portrait. The book is a fantasy novel where two twin brothers Osmoc, a faculty professor and Osac, the uncultured but physically superior brother get constantly and dangerously mixed up until Osac, the brother

⁸⁸ Michele Mari, *I Demoni e La Pasta Sfoglia* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2017)

⁸⁹ Michele Mari, *Tu Sanguinosa Infanzia* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009)

⁹⁰ 'Sono convinto che scrivere non sia un atto terapeutico in se, (o lo è solo nel senso che mentre scrivo sto meglio che mentre non sto scrivendo, il periodo in cui scrivo e sono performante mi fa vivere meglio). Al contrario scrivere perfeziona le proprie ossessioni.' In Carlo Mazza Galanti, *Scuola di Demoni, Conversazioni con Michele Mari e Walter Siti* (Milano: Minimum Fax, 2019)

whose strong body is more adapted to live kills Osmoc, his educated but inept twin. *Di bestia in bestia* explores one of Mari's main preoccupations as a writer: the dichotomy between Literature and Life, between the world of words and the world of the body.⁹¹ The problematic unresolved story of a young self who sought refuge amongst the great classics of literature can only be told through them and thanks to them. It showcases his preference as a writer to hide his overwhelming autobiographical themes, and material, behind masks. Populated by fantastic, modern gothic characters, his works often performs the parody of other genres (the eighteenth-century novel, the fantastic novel, the *buildungsroman*, etc.). The dichotomy between mind and body, their very different desires and needs, represent a constant disturbance, an affliction which Mari overcomes precisely through the deployment of autofiction.

As we have seen, autofiction is a necessity for Mari, since one can only truly write about his own obsessions. Autofiction however is also used to tackle, overcome, never quite resolve the tension between literature and life: 'In order to confess oneself, one needs a mask: the more (autobiographical) true is the material, the more artificial and culturally mediated becomes the style, full of literary and cultural reminiscence.'⁹² But the opposite is equally relevant here: in order to wear a mask, one must have a confession to make. Mari's autofiction is therefore possible only through a mask, and his selected place to hide himself is the literary tradition. The delving around the same knots, the obsessive return to the same themes is achieved and can happen only through the borrowed voice of other authors (Carlo Emilio Gadda, Ferdinand Celine, Joseph Conrad). In his prose confession and self-censorship is overcome by literary mesh, which gives his autobiographical themes the power of articulation. His style, a *pastiche* prose which reinvents itself and the genres it comes from, is a fundamental part of his poetic. Most of his works, eighteen in total, are novels where the literary pastiche allows to return in new forms and ways to Mari's obsession and main themes: figures from the past, his infancy, his love for a schoolmate. These are his demons. 'Autofiction is not only necessary, but

⁹¹ Michele Mari, *Di Bestia in Bestia* (Milano: Longanesi, 1989)

⁹² 'Per confessarsi si ha bisogno di una maschera: tanto più vera è la materia, tanto più artificiale e culturalmente mediato e pieno di reminiscenze culturali è lo stile.' Mazza Galanti, *Scuola di Demoni*, 28.

unavoidable,' Mari says in the same interview so much so that 'the impression is to have always written the same book, with eighteen variables rather than eighteen books.'⁹³

His compulsive delving into the same themes is nothing new in literature. After all Mari feels only the last perhaps recipient of a long tradition, 'A transfer of *pieces of obsession* is passed over from authors to authors.'⁹⁴ His prose, elegant, virtuosic, and chameleonic, echoes authors perhaps distant in time and cultural origin, but close to Mari's sensibility and his tendency to delve, examine, probe his most intimate preoccupations. Daniel Defoe, Herman Melville, Jack London, Edgar Allan Poe, John Steinbeck. 'I have a very biopsychic (involving both psychic and biological phenomena) and deterministic concept of literary creation. I do believe that, as much as a writer can and try to mediate, stylize, crystalize, he will always end up with himself on the page, his life, his primary pulsion and desires, the trauma, the wounds, the losses, frustrations, and aspirations. And yet, and proportionally I think, the more the themes of my writing revolve around the same knots (infancy, double, parents, sex, or non-sex, nature versus culture), I believe that I have always tried to write new books, by that I mean new in structural, formal and stylistic way.'⁹⁵

Obsession is the fuel to allow the writing to reach its true objective, which is grafting into the past to rescue from the oblivion of Time events, people, places, books, an entire literary system perhaps, parts of an unsolvable autobiographical knot. But by rescuing his past *in that way* Mari is also injecting new life into a tradition which feel tired and spent, and even more interestingly the profanation comes from someone who is part of that tradition, the contemporary academic

⁹³ *ibid.* 28.

⁹⁴ 'Molti scrittori (cita romanzieri e non poeti) hanno dato alle loro ossessioni e ai loro furori una forma e hanno continuato a dialogare con le loro ossessioni fornendole di antenne, hanno cioè permeato la loro vita biologica della letteratura e delle ossessioni che quella vita ha sempre onorato.' Mazza Galanti, *Scuola di Demoni*, 28.

⁹⁵ 'Ho una visione molto biopsichica e deterministica della creazione letteraria. Penso che ognuno per quanto possa mediare, stilizzare, cristallizzare, di fatto metta se stesso sulla pagina, metta la sua vita, le sue pulsioni primarie, i suoi traumi, le sue ferite, i suoi lutti, le sue frustrazioni, le sue aspirazioni. [...] E tuttavia, per un principio di proporzionalità inversa credo di aver sempre scritto libri nuovi sul piano strutturale, formale, stilistico. quattro o cinque grumi tematici: infanzia, doppio, rapporta tra natura (bestiale) e cultura, genitori, del sesso e del non sesso, dell'amore, dell'atto mancato.' Mazza Galanti, *Scuola di Demoni*, 27.

community.⁹⁶ *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* is a collection of one hundred short poems dedicated to LadyHawke, the nickname which hides the true identity of Mari's dedicatee, a classmate. The poems tell the vicissitudes of this love: from the unreciprocated school years, during which it rested pulsing but undeclared, to the discover, thirty years after, that his feelings were returned, to the end of the affair, when the possibility of that love is simply destined to rest outside the grid of reality.

The blurb of the book describes it as 'a canzoniere of an impossible and tormented love, with the neurosis of the contemporary world, and the singular exemplarity of a story beyond time and space.'⁹⁷ Petrarca's *Canzoniere* represents the main model for *Cento poesie d'amore*, not only, I argue, because of the inevitable weight, the *sine qua non* that Petrarca's precedent constitutes within the Italian literary tradition, but for the constitutional elements of the impossible, if not unrequited, love story told in the contemporary canzoniere. In an interview Mari says that for the lyrical space of *Cento poesie*, he has adopted a different voice. A choice which is reminiscent of the decision that Petrarca made for the *Canzoniere*: the challenge to write in an unfamiliar, elusive language, the Vulgar language, in the relatively short form of the sonnets. Prose, the place of autobiographical expression, represents the background from which poetry is distilled for both Petrarca and Mari. Autofiction is in Mari as constitutional as it is in Petrarca because the intentional autobiographical import is what gives the story its emotional honesty. She, the contemporary Laura, is as tormented, elusive, and unavailable as the original one. He, the Milanese Francesco is obsessively returning to the same events, and places, compulsively rephrasing the impossibility of that love. Yet, despite the clear reference, and deference to his model, Mari's desecrating intention is clear from the title.

LadyHawke is a B-movie, a medieval fantasy set in Italy telling the story of two lovers cursed by a malefice: she is hawk in the day and woman at night, while he is knight in the day, and wolf at night. The gothic atmosphere of the movie is far from the map of contemporary Milan where the poems are set, but the strong background reference of the *Canzoniere* projected onto the

⁹⁶ This seemingly long, and yet insufficient, introduction is necessary to present a writer of Mari's calibre. Despite his stature, so far only one of his books has been translated in English. Michele Mari, *You, Bleeding Childhood*, (Sheffield: And Other stories, 2023).

⁹⁷ Carlo Mazza Galanti, "Michele Mari, *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke*" (Torino: Einaudi, 2007)

props of a b-movie, the mixture of high and low cultural objects, is precisely what also summarises Mari's poetics. The delving into his undeclared love for a schoolmate who for years ignored him, sits next to wide, idiosyncratic literary, and non-literary citations. The juxtaposition works in both ways with the result of injecting new life into overspent and overheard literary quotes and at the same time invest his obsessive ordinary love of literary status. But this can only be achieved through a process of fragmentation. To be rescued the literary tradition must be torn apart and broken. Only selected pieces can be salvaged from the time oblivion, in the same way in which personal memory is obsessive as much as is selective. What Mari achieves through *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* is to rescue *at the same time* a personal story, the impossible, agonised love for a classmate, and the story of the canzoniere, a dilapidated and agonizing genre. See for instance what he does with the most famous line of the Italian literary tradition: Paolo e Francesca, the damned lovers in Dante's V Canto.⁹⁸

Amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona
sempre suonommi assioma nauseabondo

Love, which spares no beloved to love in return
always sounded sickening axiom to me

Or s'è avverato
ma tale è il suo ritardo
ch'è come se nel punto di mia morte
dopo una vita di identiche giocate
venissero a informarmi
ch'è uscito finalmente il 10 000
sulla ruota
di Alpha Centauri

Now it happened
but so late
that it is as if on the verge of dying
after for ever betting on the same number
one came to tell me
that finally
I won the 10 000
on the roulette wheel
of Alpha Centauri

Fragment in *Cento poesie* is a cut and paste line transferred into another space, a world populated by b-movie characters, card sharps. The words of the lyric tradition are matched to the fantastic, the fantasy, the pulp.⁹⁹ If the import of autobiographical material is so fundamental to Mari's poetics, so part of his obsessive mind frame that there would be indeed no writing without it, fragmentation is the only way to reach into his autobiographical material. It can also

⁹⁸ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia* edited by Bosco-Reggio, (Milano: Mondadori, 2014)

⁹⁹ See what happens to the famous first line of a poem by Giovanni Pascoli: 'O cavallina cavallina storna/che appartenesti a un tempo che non ritorna/che appartenesti a tanti/e appartieni a un altro. Pascoli: 'O cavallina cavallina storna che portasti colui che non ritorna [sul padre assassinato]. Mari, *Cento Poesie*, 56.

be argued that, because of its uniqueness, poetry becomes the catalyst event able to unlock a new and different side of his autofictional strategies, one where there is no mask. The poetic form represents in Mari's universe, a universe written in prose, a new autofictional strategy where the form itself acts partly as camouflage. His short and colloquial 'free verse' style is deceptive. Often the first lines begin with the metric of the tradition, the hendecasyllable or the septenary, respectively the eleven and seven syllables line, to then break free into a free verse. For example: 'amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona' hendecasyllable [Dante]/ sempre suonommi assioma nauseabondo' hendecasyllable [Mari], the experimental ironic and equally self-mockingly pompous couplet opens the poem, but its rhythm is immediately abandoned 'Or che s'è avverato', as if Mari himself could not stand his own grandiloquent effort.

Visually, the poems barely occupy the top half of a page, the majority are between five and ten lines long. A level of blankness which is quite unique in Mari's prose production. Not only versification, but the violent unnatural selection of its material, the cut outs of a lyric tradition are Mari's disguise. The homage to the long literary tradition of love poems is mixed, and brought back to life thanks to the contemporary, idiosyncratic sensibility of a lover's cinematic culture. The impossible encounter between the wolf, Mari's dramatis persona and one of Mari's masks, and the hawk is an artifice that is at once symbol of the antithetic nature of the lover, trapped in the mind-bending, vexing impossibility of fulfilling his desire, and a self-portrait full of sarcasm and disenchantment.

Il nostro fidanzamento extramondano
ha avuto l'incredibile bellezza delle fiabe

Io ti ho affidato
un anello
con l'occhio azzurro del lupo argentato
tu mi hai messo al dito
un anello
con l'occhio marrone del falco Pellegrino
così amarsi
sarebbe stato guardarsi

Quando mi hai reso l'anello
l'ho aggiunto all'altro
come le vedove
che sposano vera con vera
e adesso la mia mano sinistra sembra
la faccia schizofrenica di un husky

Our ultramundane engagement
was beautiful as a fairy-tale

I gave you
a ring
with the blue eye of the Silver wolf
you put on my finger
a ring
with the brown eye of the Peregrine falcon
so loving each other
could have been just watching

When you returned the ring
I put it next to the other
like widows do
ring next to ring
and now my left hand
seems the schizophrenic stare of a husky

The contemporary story is set in Milan, where Mari grew up, lived, and worked. The schoolmate, obsessively loved from the times of the Liceo Berchet, one of Milan's renowned Licee, suddenly, after thirty years, reappears and unveils her mutual feeling, but this revelation remains unacted upon (she is married and not willing to change the course of her life). The contemporary *canzoniere* shares with the original one a clearly defined temporal arch (thirty years), a precise setting (Milan), a narrative aspiration (the love story development before, during and after), and an attention to numbers, which suggests indeed necessity and destiny. Petrarca builds the entire vicissitude, and necessity, of his unrequited love story on one event, the morning in Santa Chiara where he sees Laura for the first time, using the date of this day, the 6th of April 1327, as a symbolic number which frames the whole *Canzoniere* thanks to a returning, circular mention of anniversaries of that day. Equally in Mari one hundred is a very personal number. *Cento*, one hundred are the poems because 'cento' are the days during which the spell of their love took place, ten and its multiples is the number upon which the grid of his obsession, and his destiny, is drawn.

Centoundici
giorni
sono passati dalla tua nascita alla mia
cento
perchè si lambicasse il maleficio
dieci
per organizzare il nostro incontro
uno
perchè ti amassi

One hundred and eleven
days
between your birth and mine
one hundred
for the curse to distil
ten
to set up our meeting
one
to love you

Mari uses numbers, dates, places to design an autobiographical net that is very similar to the autobiographical intent that we showed happening in Petrarca's *Canzoniere*. Here for, instance the reader finds not only the address of the Liceo Berchet, Milano but clear directions through floors and corridors to find the classroom where the two lovers sat next to each other and where it is perhaps still possible to see the glimmering blue light of his soul.

Se i fantasmi si aggirano implacati
sul luogo dell'offesa
dopo la mia morte
cercate
 nell'operosa città di Milano
 in via della Commenda
 al numero civico 28
 corrispondente al ginnasio-liceo

If ghosts run wild
where they died
after my death
look for/you'll find
 in the industrious city of Milan
 in via della Commenda
 civic number 28
 relative to Licee gymnasium
 dedicated to Giovanni Berchet
 poet and patriot
 on the third floor of the back building
 in the last classroom on the right
 left row
 third desk
a pale blue shimmer
at midnight

Mari often refers to the collection as one of his minor books.¹⁰⁰ ‘Minor’ perhaps because building the mask in this case required much less artifice and effort compared to the novels, and the short stories; minor because of its shortness, its distillation, and perhaps ‘minor’ also because Mari, novelist and prose writer, expert in Eighteenth-century literature might feel an instinctive need to undermine his poetry production. Yet in an interview for RAI (RadioTelevisone Italiana) he says something important about this collection: ‘*Cento poesie* is my most autobiographic book. It is about an impossible, solipsistic, unilateral love, virtual and literary. To be able to write to her, since any other word would have been too violent and invasive, I used the tradition to disguise myself, another language, different and oblique. To be able to ‘tell’ that love, I used poetry.’¹⁰¹

Indeed, the story of his unrequited love for a school friend has already appeared, or at least part of it, in other of his books. As stressed before, Mari’s writing is not about new material, but how the same material is obsessively retold with different voices, how his prose is often a ventriloquist enterprise. In every book and novel, it is possible to recognise a clear model whose pastiche they attempt: the eighteenth-century adventure novel, the fantasy novel, the science fiction novel, and the supernatural. For the poems collection, however, that seems to work inversely. The level of sophisticated mannerisms of the prose is inversely proportional in his poems. What some critics called the colloquialism style of the collection is, I argue, not simply colloquial but intentionally self-effacing. Mari’s lyric voice becomes almost sarcastic in his use of citations, caustic, and corrosive. High literary citations (Dante, Petrarca, Pavese) are used here only to swerved into the too human condition of the man in love. Literary quotes appear next to the beating flesh, and energy, of his desire. The gesture of Mari’s fragmentation is a way in his autofiction, as violent as much as self-defacing. Here’s what he says for instance about writing, ‘so it happens that the act of writing becomes the act of cutting into life like butchers and hold on to those strips of flesh, those events belonging to the past, as if to a raft.’¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Mazza Galanti, *Tutti gli scrittori*, 6.

¹⁰¹ ‘Il mio libro più autobiografico parla di un amore impossibile, solipsistico, unilaterale; un amore virtuale e letterario. Per continuare a scriverle perché qualsiasi altra parola sarebbe stata troppo violenta e invasive, ho usato la tradizione, una lingua altra e obliqua per poter ‘dire’ quell’amore ho fatto ricorso alla poeticità.’ <https://www.raicultura.it/letteratura/articoli/2018/12/Michele-Mari-627ca374-71c6-4853-9029-14ead3026a15.html>

¹⁰² ‘Capita allora che scrivere diventi sezionare la vita come macellai e aggrapparsi a quei lembi di passato come a una zattera.’ Mazza Galanti, *Tutti gli scrittori*, 7.

He also talks about ‘vampirizzare la vita’, vampirizing life by injecting literature into those dead skin flaps in order to keep them alive.

La vita ti ha lobotomizzata
e io sono l’inserviente
che porta a casa i resti
gettati nel secchio dal chirurgo.

Life lobotomised you
and I am the orderly
who takes home the remains
left in the bucket by the surgeon.

As the poem suggests, an extreme image able to summarise the act of fragmentation in Mari’s autobiographical strategies, would be a vase of formaldehyde containing the remnants of body parts and skin flaps. Mari’s writing is the work of a taxidermist storing props and flesh left by the surgeon, ‘I am the orderly who takes home the remains left in the bucket by the surgeon.’ The long tradition of classic, medieval and modern love poems, the cliché of a tired and overspent literary genre from which this contemporary canzoniere is also a result, gets rescued by Mari’s educated eye for high and low cultural stimuli. ‘Vampirizzare la vita’ works also in reverse as in ‘vampirizzare la letteratura’. Occupying the stilted spaces of Literature with material taken from contemporary, popular culture helped to revive its space. But also the opposite can be argued: positing B-movies and other low cultural objects and a transient personal love story next to quotes from Dante’s *Inferno* has the purpose to protect all that is human and otherwise lost. At once ironic and tender, sarcastic and bitter, he clashes and mixes the troubadours’ tradition with Fantasy’s cinematography to create a contemporary portrait of two lovers, whose union is intrinsically impossible, but not unrequited.

Towards the end of another interview, in an *en passant* observation, Mari says that the original material of the collection comes from a bunch of emails left on his computer, ‘I had all these emails,’ he says, ‘and texts...’ As if the poetic form, the largely blank page with its lineation and ambiguity, more fragmented and emptier compared to the full page of the prose, could be formally the best way to express the solipsistic nature of that love, ‘prophylaxis guided my hand, so that every meaning rested in between the blanks and nonetheless I felt obscene.’ A more naturally censorious place, where the effort to restrain himself and be as invasive as possible is

transferred on a sparse and distilled discourse, becomes the only place where that self-censoring, emasculated, unlived love could be expressed.

It is quite suggestive to imagine the first core of the collection as a bundle of scattered pages with printed emails, Mari's marginalia next to it, working with images and language. A bundle so very similar to Petrarca's *fogli sparsi*, the scattered white sheets on which he noted the first sonnets, years before knowing what to do with them, almost a decade before Petrarca finally knew that he was writing the *Canzoniere*. The *fogli sparsi* are at the core, the origin of the *Canzoniere* as much as Mari's emails and texts are at the origin of this contemporary *canzoniere*, rescued from oblivion, I would add, by injecting into them the serum of literature, juxtaposing, and infiltrating the remnants of his virtual correspondence with LadyHawke with a personal and idiosyncratic selection of cultural stimuli, high and low, starting from the medieval reference of the movie which appears in the title and represents the background of the entire story through several references to the wolf and the hawk, the forest, the symbols they exchange. This last observation perhaps reinforces what was said before about Mari's choice to use poetry and not prose to tell *the full arc* of this love story.

The word 'story' to describe *Cento poesie* is perhaps part of the same idiosyncratic eye which insists on looking for a narrative development and intention, a story, in the *Canzoniere*. Indeed, the story telling quality of the collection, its fierce narrative generosity is what, in my opinion, sets it apart from other contemporary *canzoniere*. As much as the narrative trajectory has been often neglected by critics who commented Petrarca's *Canzoniere*, equally the narrative construction of *Cento poesie* has been described at best thin, when not considered at all.¹⁰³ Yet Michele of *Cento poesie* is a powerful interlocutor who wants to tell his story with fierce determination. In this ability to combine lyrical, quotational at times absurd moments to the driving need to tell a story, I argue, *Cento poesie* is very similar to *The Glass Essay* and *Bluets*, and at least in the intention, to *Dots*. The poems are so short and their tone so informal that it is tempting to read the whole book in one session. Brevity, and lightness are here important features which allow readers to appreciate the narrative propulsion of the collection. Like a page-turner, it is impossible to put down, like a collection of poems, its meaning and scope keeps reverberating at every read. The more pared-back the language, the more direct and

¹⁰³ Giorgio, Simone. "Il passato è tutto, e siamo suoi." Poesia e Tempo nell'opera di Michele Mari," *Pens Papers*, Salento University Press, 3/2020, 43-60.

abrasive in its immediate availability, the more self-deprecating it is, and the more fitting it becomes to accommodate the entirety of that story. The appeal of his verse lies in a poetry intrinsically ambiguous and lacunose, where words have a higher specific weight than those of prose. Mari achieves this by injecting the mundane reference of a defeated eroticism into the sounds of a consumed literary tradition, or brief, luminous accents into the flesh of a frustrated desire.

But *Cento poesie* does not delve into a handful of episodes of Mari's obsession, like his short stories or novels do, which revolve exponentially around the same theme. Here there is the trajectory of a story to tell, from the beginning, through the middle, to the end and what is important it is not the single event, but the entire miraculous trajectory of that love story. Fragmentation, I argue, allows also that, to draw the story and follow the dots more clearly, and for what they are, just dots, events which precipitate the story to its conclusion. As if the poetic form, formally more elusive and ambiguous could best represent in its totality that love, hardly expressed and unfulfilled. An emasculated love lived mainly through email exchanges. The bare nudity of an intimate desire is reorganised every time around the remnants of literature, and culture, be it high or low is of little importance. Mari uses literature as a mask to reinvent himself, and starts to inhabit these voices of the past, to speak *in* them, through them, if not *for* them. This is, I argue, what he means by 'vampirizzare la letteratura.' It is always possible to recognise the model, the classic, which Mari's voice is mimicking Defoe, London, or Gadda. The narrator transposes his autobiographical material into those worlds and moves along those spaces. In his poetry however the reader finds a multitude of fragments, cut outs, pieces from an entire literary system. As in this three-line fragment towards the end of *Cento poesie*. To express the end of the love affair, Mari uses the first line of a poem by Cesare Pavese, which give the title to one of the most famous Italian collections of love poems of the Twentieth Century *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi*.¹⁰⁴

Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi
ma dentro
ci troverà i miei

Death shall come and it shall have your eyes
but inside
she will find mine

Behind Mari's quotational system lies the entirety of the Italian lyric tradition: Dante, Petracca, Leopardi, Pascoli, Pavese. All to be used, and perhaps rescued, by mixing their words with the

¹⁰⁴ Cesare Pavese, *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1951)

trash, and vital pulse, of life. But thanks to this ventriloquist operation, this also becomes a way of reusing, reinventing, recycling and even if only apparently, keeping the fragments alive. It would be imprecise to talk about irreverence and disrespect towards the classics. As we have seen, at the beginning of all the texts studied here obsession is a form of necessity and not choice. What might be considered an irreverent approach to the Classics is nothing else than the ultimate homage. The permission to talk, speak, and write is only granted *through* them.

The beginning of *Dots* happened on the slim, white book, elegant in its bare simplicity, of Mari's *Cento poesie*. Next to his poems, I scribbled mine: working on a personal episode, a detail, the line of dialogue. *Cento poesie* describes an impossible contemporary love which is lived mostly through emails and text messages, in the ether, a love story where the lovers' encounters, brief and rare, are mostly spent agonising in a cerebral space. But this is also a description of *Dots*. The voices brought back to life by Mari have something in common, that specific, dark groan of obsessive creatures, the smell of impossibility, *tertium non datur*. There is another reason, closer to home, why this book was important for the writing of *Dots*. Its influence lies not so much in specific techniques of fragmentation, or considerations about genre-binding strategies, but rather in Mari's unique approach to Italian literary tradition. An approach that is not *per se* unique in mixing material of high and low cultural provenance, but it is contextually unique *for me* in so far that he manages to combine his most private obsessions *with* the Italian classics, quoting directly from the most revered poems, amongst which is, of course, Francesco Petrarca's *Canzoniere*. As much as a hyper-stimulated autofictional mood is central to both *Cento poesie* and *Dots*, what constituted the real input for me was the fresh, ironic and at times irreverent attitude towards the Italian literary tradition of love poems.

According to the novelist and critic Alessandro Baricco, the recent transition from an analogic configuration of the world to a digital one radically changed the movements through which we experience reality. According to his recent *The Game*, this had the effect of transforming the way we approach knowledge, and the way knowledge is offered to us.¹⁰⁵ The change of settings and movements that a digital reconfiguration entices means for Baricco also a change of direction

¹⁰⁵ 'The passage from analogic to digital reconfigure our way to experience the word. The digital revolution is a mental insurrection: the result of a counterculture movement which refused the rigid values and representations of nineteenth century with its obsession for boundaries, idolatry for limits and demarcations, the instinct to order the world according to non-communicating and protected zones.' Alessandro Baricco, *The Game* (Torino: Einaudi, 2018), 28.

in our cognitive schemata, and the way we structured the experience of reality. *Dots* is affected to a certain extent by this cognitive frame. The way we read is also a way of experiencing the world, so much so that the act of reading is transformed by this reconfiguration. The idea of a horizontal, levelled landscape, where the experience of the world resists the hierarchical structure of knowledge, and truth, are the premises upon which the narrator approaches the *Canzoniere*, with little vertical knowledge, but also little preconcepts about it. Once granted access, it is this horizontal landscape of sense and possible connections which holds *Dots*'s shifting sense of reality.

The way the protagonist of *Dots* reads the *Canzoniere*, aligning its sonnets to the story she is telling, moving it around, reshaping it to incorporate in a meaningful way the 'last seen' of the App, and the minor, lateral unseen accidents of the everyday reflects the horizontal, democratic, liberating approach to knowledge: connections might be hidden everywhere. Positioning the *Canzoniere* next to WhatsApp becomes not only possible but meaningful. Mari's collection represented the physical starting point of this reconfiguration. Indeed, the first experiments of *Dots*, its initial core, are a bunch of poems written on the margins of *Cento poesie*. These behavioural traits of the person obsessed are very much at the centre of the writing of *Dots*. The female protagonist is sieged, her mind occupied by the thought of the man she loves, and although she at times recognises the absurdity of the situation, there is nothing else she can do because it is not a matter of choice. Reading *Cento poesie d'amore a LadyHawke* perhaps even more because written in Italian, that is within a tradition generally hostile to mixing the high with the low, marked a validating moment. Through the exploration of the many folds of obsession, it is possible to open dialogue with texts that belong to the highest tradition but are distant in time and sensibility. Mari's approach and use of the classics represent yet another liberating gesture and support the freedom that *Dots* needed to tell a contemporary, autofictional story using Petrarca's *Canzoniere*. When the protagonist of *Dots* opens her copy of the *Canzoniere*, she recognises the brackish smell of impossible love. She too will tell her story by inhabiting the words of the *Canzoniere*. After all, Petrarca's approach to the Classics was with veneration and deference, but also freshly reckless. He gives this advice to Posterity: 'Read it, ponder it, tear it apart, savour it and reuse it.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Francesco Petrarca, 'Posteritati', in *Senilium rerum libri*, VIII, 1

Conclusions

These critical pages, in exploring the motivations for and methods behind *Dots*, have explored the relationship between autofiction and fragmentation. We have seen that the autofictional texts selected, though different in their literary and cultural context, show affinities in the ways their fragmentation is managed. This is the result of a synergy between the author's divergent personas, the writer and the reader: texts where the autobiographical import of the writer is mixed and intertwined with one 'book' catalyst of the fictionalised experience of reading. In this context, we have seen how what we called the pareidolic effect acts as curatorial assistant/aid in the dynamic between the different personas. The pareidolic effect manages the dynamic between the fictionalised writer grappling with autobiographical material, and the fictionalised reader's agitation towards a text symbol of her intimate preoccupation. Throughout these pages, we have also suggested that each idiosyncratic approach to fragmentation and juxtaposition, by breaking, accumulating, or salvaging might also be seen as the intervention of self-censorship. In *Dots* the pareidolic effect, thanks to its intermittent referentiality, allows the narrator a screened access to autobiographical material, through alternating the reading of the *Canzoniere* with the 'reading' of her own story. Through her dot-to-dot game, she traces the shape of her story, and the portrait of an elusive love.

This analysis, by following the convergence/dynamics between autofiction and fragmentation, has also unveiled a fascinating familiarity between the contemporary texts and the *Canzoniere*. Though distant, they share gestures of fragmentation that are characterised by an underlying tension towards unity. Suggestively, the oscillating shapes the texts trace become also an intermittent, elusive portrait of their authors. We support the idea that the contemporary texts all constitute, in their own, idiosyncratic way, the realisation of a possible 'canzoniere', as much as *Dots* does. Their autofictional intent entertains a dialogue with Petrarca's project by playing with the idea of fragmentation, unity, and failure.

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