

V E R S O P O
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T W E N T Y T W E N T Y

Before words become hot wax:
selected poems

*Prima che parole siano cera calda:
poesie scelte*

Franca Mancinelli

Translated by John Taylor

F L E M I S
H G E O R
G I A N I C E
L A N D I C I
T A L I A N

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VERSOPOLIS FOUR

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Translated from the Italian by John Taylor

Versopolis at Ledbury Poetry Festival

2020

FRANCA MANCINELLI was born in Fano, Italy, in 1981. She is the author of three books of poetry: *Mala kruna* (2007), *Pasta madre* (with a postface by Milo De Angelis, 2013), and *Libretto di transito* (2018), translated into English by John Taylor and published as *The Little Book of Passage* (The Bitter Oleander Press, Fayetteville, New York, 2018). Her poems are featured in several anthologies, including *Nuovi poeti italiani 6*, edited by Giovanna Rosadini (Einaudi, 2012), and, with an introduction by Antonella Anedda, *XIII Quaderno italiano di poesia contemporanea*, edited by Franco Buffoni (Marcos y Marcos, 2017). Her writing has been translated into several languages and published in journals and anthologies. She has participated in international projects such as the Chair Poet in Residence (Kolkata, India, 2019) and Refest: Images and Words on Refugee Routes. From this latter experience was born her *Taccuino croato* (Croatian Notebook), now published in *Come tradurre la neve* (How to Translate the Snow, 2019). In 2019 John Taylor's English translation of her two first books, along with some unpublished poems, *At an Hour's Sleep from Here: Poems (2007-2019)*, was published by The Bitter Oleander Press. The Autumn 2019 issue of the journal *The Bitter Oleander* includes a special feature on Mancinelli, with much previously untranslated writing and an in-depth interview. Her poems and prose poems have also appeared, in English translation, in *Trafika Europa*, *Asymptote*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Osiris*, and several other periodicals and online websites. Her new collection, *Tutti gli occhi che ho aperto* (*All the Eyes that I have Opened*), will be published by Marcos y Marcos in 2020.

Her blog-website: <https://www.francamancinelli.com/>

REVIEW EXCERPTS

THE LITTLE BOOK OF PASSAGE

Mancinelli explores the fault lines (*faglie*) across which religions attempt to build bridges that philosophers would remove, using the third way, of poetry. Deploying the uncertainties and ambiguities of language, she attempts to construct bridges of meaning that might at any time prove illusory. [...] For a true poet, which

Mancinelli undoubtedly is, the quest goes beyond simple philosophical questioning. It is an existential struggle.

Mark Glanville, *The Times Literary Supplement*

One of Mancinelli's two epigraphs is by Emily Dickinson: 'To fill a Gap / Insert the Thing that caused it.' 'Gaps' inspire several prose poems: the distance between two places or two human beings; a breach in a continuity that must be sealed, perhaps by the 'clay' that a human being applies to the 'broken, empty places' of another human being; an abyss, modest or more dramatic, that suddenly gapes open [...]. Mancinelli confronts other disunities as well: mankind and nature, the inner world of sensibility and the outer world of brute facts. [...] all the pieces in this book, taken one after another, seemingly sketch out a single movement, through writing, towards a kind of healing or renewal.

John Taylor, *The Times Literary Supplement*

The Little Book of Passage [...] exemplifies the best possibilities of the prose-poem form. [...] Mancinelli makes excellent use of this legacy, rooted in Baudelaire and the symbolists, to create a captivating account of consciousness moving back and forth across the borders of the self. [...] Throughout the book, images of water and of motion suggest a decentering of selfhood, a fluid consciousness. [...] Mancinelli writes movingly of loss and its effect on one's sense of self. That each poem is brief but engrossing and that the book itself is attractive and compact make *The Little Book of Passage* an ideal travelling companion.

Benjamin Myers, *World Literature Today*

AT AN HOUR'S SLEEP FROM HERE

[...] much could be said about how within this slight frame so much is made to happen, how she will again and again present us with an intimate moment or act which is then effortlessly woven into a much more reverberant tableau. During the poem, or sometimes prior to it, acts of affection and desire are transformed intact into scenes of metamorphosis so delicately and justly that you hardly notice it happening.

Peter Riley, *The Fortnightly Review*

Indosso e calzo ogni mattina forzando, come avessi sempre un altro numero, un'altra taglia. Cresco ancora nel buio, come una pianta che beve dal nero della terra. Per vestirsi bisogna perdere i rami allungati nel sonno, le foglie più tenere aperte. Puoi sentirle cadere a un tratto come per un inverno improvviso. Nello stesso istante perdi anche la coda e le ali che avevi. Da qualche parte del corpo lo senti. Non sanguini, è una privazione a cui ti hanno abituato. Non resta che cercare il tuo abito. Scivolare come un raggio, fino al calare della luce.



Le frasi non compiute restano ruderi. C'è un intero paese in pericolo di crollo che stai sostenendo in te. Sai il dolore di ogni tegola, di ogni mattone. Un tonfo sordo nella radura del petto. Ci vorrebbe l'amore costante di qualcuno, un lavorare quieto che risuona nelle profondità del bosco. Tu che disfi la valigia, ti scordi di partire.

As if I always had another number, another size, every morning I force myself to put on clothes, shoes. I still grow in the darkness, like a plant drinking from black soil. Getting dressed demands losing the branches extending into sleep, their most tender leaves open. You can suddenly feel them falling like an unexpected winter. At the same time you also lose the tail and the wings you had. You feel it happening somewhere in your body. You're not bleeding, this is a deprivation to which they have accustomed you. Now you only need to look for your clothes. To glide like a sunray, until the light dims.



Unfinished sentences remain ruins. You're supporting inside yourself an entire village in danger of collapsing. You know the pain of every tile, every brick. A dull thud in the clearing of your chest. Perhaps it's someone's constant love, a calm chore resounding in the depths of the woods. You who are unpacking your suitcase, you forget to leave.

Mi porti in salvo come sollevando la parte più fragile di te. Resisti nel tumulto. Ed eccoti al varco, attraversato da scariche di luce chiara. Non hai più viso, sei fuori da ogni contorno. Soltanto luce chiara. Vorrei raccoglierti con le mani, contenerti mentre nasci, ma ti sprigioni: sei la corrente prima che non si può toccare.



Nel tuo petto c'è una piccola faglia. Quando lo stringo o vi poso la testa c'è questo soffio d'aria. Ha l'umidità dei boschi e l'odore della terra. Le montagne vicine con i loro torrenti gelati. Da quando l'ho sentito non posso fare a meno di riconoscerlo. Anche quando, uno dopo l'altro, nella tua voce passano uccelli d'alta quota, segnando una rotta nel cielo limpido. La faglia è in te, si allarga. Un soffio di freddo ti attraversa le costole e ti sta scomponendo. Non hai più un orecchio. Il tuo collo è svanito. Tra una spalla e l'altra si apre un buio popolato di fremiti, di richiami da ramo a ramo, su un pendio scosceso a dirotto, non attraversato da passi umani.

You bear me to safety by raising the most fragile part of yourself. You resist amidst the tumult. And here you are at the threshold, clear light flashing through you. You no longer have a face, you're beyond all contours. Only clear light. I'd like to gather you up in my hands, take you in while you are born, but you gush forth: you are the primal current that cannot be touched.



There is a small fault line in your chest. When I hug your chest or place my head on it there is this puff of air. It has a woody moistness and an earthy smell to it. The nearby mountains with their frozen torrents. Ever since I have heard it, I cannot help but recognize it. Even when high-soaring birds fly one after the other through your voice, marking out a route in the clear sky. The fault line is inside you, it is widening. A chilly gust of wind blows through your ribs and is decomposing you. You no longer have an ear. Your neck has vanished. Between one shoulder and the other one opens a darkness peopled with shivers, with voices calling out from branch to branch, on a sheer slope uncrossed by human steps.

Piove dalle travi del tetto. Tutta la notte spilli sottili fino al sangue.
Le cose mi chiamano – vestirsi, annodarsi le scarpe.

Liberata dal corpo, accarezzata dal buio. Come si cammina lo
sai. Per farlo ancora, dimentica, torna a pesare sui piedi.



Sei stanca. Stai facendo spuntare le gemme. Le scorze si frangono,
non resistono più. Con gli occhi chiusi continui a lottare. La terra
è una roccia, si sbriciola in ghiaia sottile. È una parete e una porta.
Continua a dormire. Le foglie si parlano fraterne. Dal cuore alla
cima della chioma, stanno iniziando una frase per te.

It's raining through the roof beams. All night long, thin needles
until they reach the blood. Things call out to me— get dressed,
tie your shoes.

Freed from the body, caressed by the darkness. You know how to
walk. To do so again, forget, go back to weighing down on your
feet.



You're tired. You're making the buds break out. The bark is
splitting apart, no longer resisting. With closed eyes, you keep
fighting. The earth is a rock, crumbling into tiny pieces of gravel.
It is a wall and a door. Keep sleeping. The leaves are speaking to
each other like brothers. From the heart to the crown of the tree,
the leaves are thinking up a sentence for you.

da AT AN HOUR'S SLEEP FROM HERE:
POEMS (2007-2019)

da Mala Kruna

prima che parole siano cera calda
sono le mani a chiamarsi:
una lingua preistorica
come la pietra sorda come lo scroscio.
Domando e un'altra cosa rispondi
tanto è vicino il palmo
saldo, sul precipizio

poi il mento sulla tua spalla, le orecchie
una sull'altra, i nasi opposti.



se avessimo la febbre insieme
staremmo come due cucchiari riposti
asciutti nel cassetto.
I piedi avanti e indietro come stracci
per fare le carezze ai pavimenti

o resteremmo nudi come chiodi
dimenticati in mezzo alla parete.

from AT AN HOUR'S SLEEP FROM HERE:
POEMS (2007-2019)

from Mala Kruna

before words become hot wax
hands beckon to each other:
a prehistoric language
deaf like a stone, a downpour.
I ask and something else you answer,
so close is your steady palm
to the cliff

then my chin on your shoulder, my ear
against yours, our noses pointing away.



if we were feverish together
we'd be like two spoons
put back dry in the drawer.
Our feet to and fro like rags
to caress the floors

or we'd stay naked like nails
forgotten in the middle of the wall.

però ho sempre un amore che mi porta
come fossi il suo cane,
strattona se mi fermo ad annusare
queste mie gocce cupe
prima del temporale.



Leggo stesa, il libro sul torace
è il mio terzo polmone
che s'apre e si richiude.

Come un anfibio stavo sulla sponda.

but I always have a love that walks me
as if I were its dog,
yanking if I stop to sniff
these dark drops of mine
before the storm.



I read lying down, the book on my chest
is my third lung
opening, closing again.

Like an amphibian I was on the shore.

da PASTA MADRE

cucchiaino nel sonno, il corpo
raccolge la notte. Si alzano sciame
sepolti nel petto, stendono
ali. Quanti animali migrano in noi
passandoci il cuore, sostando
nella piega dell'anca, tra i rami
delle costole, quanti
vorrebbero non essere noi,
non restare impigliati tra i nostri
contorni di umani.

from MOTHER DOUGH

a spoon in sleep, the body
gathers the night. Swarms buried
in our chests arise, spread
their wings. How many animals
migrate within us,
passing through our heart, halting
on the curve of a hip, among the branches
of the ribs, how many
would rather not be us,
not be ensnared
between our human contours.

un colpo di fucile
e torni a respirare. Muso a terra,
senza sangue sparso.
Cose guardate con la coda
di un occhio che frana
mentre l'altro è già sommerso, e tutto
si allontana. Gli alberi
si piegano su un fianco
perdono la voce in ogni foglia
che impara dagli uccelli
e per pochi istanti vola.

a rifle shot and again
you breathe. Snout to the ground,
no shed blood.
Things watched out of the corner
of an eye collapsing
while the other one is already sunk,
and it all moves away. The trees
bend to one side, losing
their voices in every leaf
that learns from the birds
and for a few moments flies.

con la costanza degli insetti
torniamo contro questa
luce che non si apre, che ci spezza

quanto ancora busseremo
al vetro che divide
l'ossigeno dal cuore?



ho smesso di reggere i muri
donandomi ai crolli

ricomincio, abbreviata
torno a quello che sono:
una lucertola che si divide
a metà con la morte.

like stubborn insects
we keep flying back against this
light that will not open, that smashes us

how much longer will we beat
on the windowpane separating
oxygen from the heart?



I've stopped holding up walls,
give myself over to the ruins

I'm starting up again, reduced
I return to what I am:
a lizard that halves itself
with death.

non distingui un nido
da un intreccio di gesti,
non distingui uno sguardo da un pozzo
non distingui le braccia
dall'edera che stringe in una rete.

A un'ora di sonno da qui
ti svegli fiutando le tracce
dell'uomo che ieri abitava
i tuoi stessi vestiti.



darò semplici baci di sutura
verserò saliva a ogni giuntura
sarò sbucciata e dolce ai denti.
Ogni mattino ti coglierò un pugno
di fiori dal selciato.

Per te avrò aghi sempreverdi
e sboccerò ogni inverno per bruciarmi.

you can't tell a nest
from a tangle of gestures,
can't tell a glance from a well,
can't tell arms
from ivy strangling in a fence.

At an hour's sleep from here
you awake sniffing the scent
of the man who lived yesterday
in your very clothes.



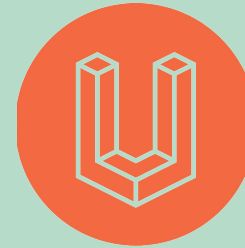
I'll stitch up with simple kisses,
pour saliva into every joint,
be peeled and sweet to teeth.
Every morning I'll pick you a fistful
of flowers from the cobblestones.

For you I'll have evergreen needles
and bloom every winter to burn myself up.

con passi che vorrebbero piantare
semi in una cadenza
vado a rendere alle foglie
l'albero che hanno perso,
alle piume cadute l'animale.
Poi incrocio le braccia
e il cuore torna in gabbia.



with footsteps that would like to plant
stones and seeds in cadence
I'm going to give back to the leaves
the tree they have lost,
to the fallen feathers the bird.
Then I cross my arms
and my heart returns to its cage.



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