A selection of excerpts from novels by Italian authors
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ISTITUTO italiano DI CULTURA SAN FRANCISCO

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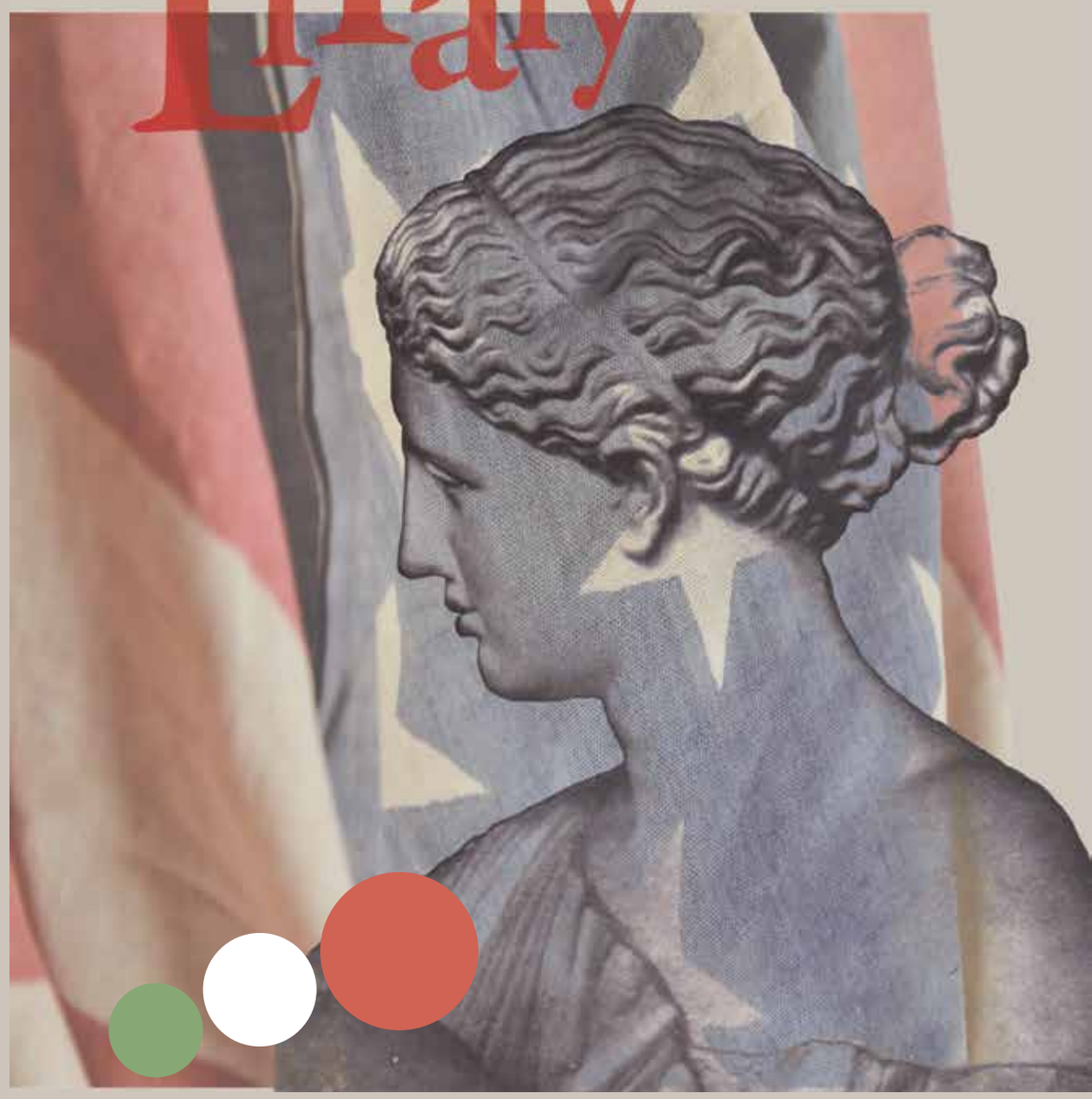
Volume I

LITaly



LITaly

A Sampler of New Italian Writing in Translation

ISTITUTO italiano DI CULTURA SAN FRANCISCO

THE DISTANT LIFE

by Paolo Pecere

translated by Olivia E. Sears

from

LA VITA LONTANA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hormones, I imagined surrealistic details drifting by: Greek athletes, metaphysical bronzes, towers in the void.

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

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

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

imminent catastrophe, which Elio brought sharply back around to his convictions.

"Everyone knows, but they don't react: what a miserable end!"

"Nonsense. Besides, what do you know?"

"I can't predict the future. But I know it's bad."

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

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

§

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

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

In the shower I tried to focus on the pain of contractions, to awaken consciousness of my muscles. We ate something and wasted

more time sitting on the edge of the bed until Elio looked at the clock, and then at me, with the slightly pained smile he'd get when he had to implore me to hurry. "Labor should be over by now!" I exaggerated, with a laugh that revealed my fatigue. There was no traffic along the Tiber. We slowly crossed the bridge of Isola Tiberina, the white coats appeared.

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

I was a little agitated when they laid me down in the operating room; apparently I said some illogical things: I invoked Orsa Maggiore, the blue stone, the sea. Elio comforted me, his father barked out an order. I fell asleep feeling myself sinking in the water, I woke up again.

§

I saw Marzio first, his face round with slits. Then the jet-black eyes of Livio, observing me with his penetrating gaze, and my breath caught. They'd been arranged in a plastic crib near the bed. Marzio opened his moist mouth wide. Livio watched him with the whites of his eyes shining on his gray skin. Still sedated, I gazed at him, contemplating without regret how painfully different he was from his twin.

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

§

I looked around that strange room where everyone seemed lifeless, waiting for a real beginning. The nurse cleared away a dinner tray no one had touched. I went back to watching Livio, who was staring at me with a miniature version of Elio's gaze. I was already afraid he might be able to catch my thoughts, repelled by his mask: pale and gaunt, with pointed ears and a long hooked nose that skimmed the sad cut of his mouth, emitting a grim wheeze without crying, giving off a bad smell. In his eyes, sunken into bulging

orbits—though I initially avoided his gaze—I imagined a bitter and sorry creature in retreat. The word "ugly" came to mind, which deflects from the unpleasant object, but it didn't suit him at all: he was the bearer of a temporal paradox—a newborn with a scrawny body and the sweet thoughtful eyes of a mature intelligence—that captured one's attention, transforming it into love, disorienting and irresistible.

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

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

§

Even now, in another house, I sometimes wake up and find I'm not tired. I get up, go drink a glass of water. And there you are, Elio,

standing by the window. You act like nothing's happening, afraid I might question you, might ask about your inappropriate presence: I still have this vice.

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

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

"People leave," you say. "Ideas remain."

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

You agree: you disappear.

§

PART ONE: An Education

I

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

I went in the house and put my shopping bags and keys on the table. From that periscopic position I inspected the living room: the children next to Giuliana, the friend who'd replace me during absences; in the background the floor lamp which illuminated the post-Cubist lithograph with the Indian raising the head of Columbus like a monstrance, the ochre fabric sofa, and other fragments of a bourgeois living room reproduced in miniature, a microcosm where the most obvious threat is boredom. Then I would take action, and I could repeat the gestures here wearing a blindfold. With a little effort I can even smell the milky scent again, when they weighed warm in my arms. But I can no longer see them in detail, Livio and Marzio toothless, when uncovering their eyes brought everything into focus, myself included. And of the hours we were together at home, with Elio, I remember few conversations, artifacts with an uncertain meaning. Even if I were to watch some of the old videos I have stashed somewhere in Rome, I'd no longer know what we thought back then. In the seismography of the body that remembers, only clues remain.

§

When I wasn't busy I'd go sit on the sofa, to keep watch like a primitive mother. Due to a banal social mechanism that was gradually revealed over time, like the load-bearing walls of a building in ruins, Elio went to work while I stayed at home. All the explanations we constructed to tell ourselves about the evolution of our relationship today appear inconsistent with the fact that he was the young entrepreneur, engaged in the business of waste disposal, and I the professor without students. For years my name had foundered deep in a pit of schoolteacher waiting lists, hoping to be fished out in some possible future. And so I waited, and only in the evening did I receive their papa's physical help. He played with the kids a lot, and was keen to cook, in a slow, ritual process: he divided the ingredients on the table, weighed them, arranged them in a system of containers around the stove, combined them, contemplated the result, and after dinner washed the dishes, dried them slowly, lined them up, and watched them shine.

I told myself the story of his day in parallel to mine, like a tale from a children's book, sparse and interspersed with dots, pastel-colored figures, and white spaces: as I progressed through the sleep-wake cycles of an existence reduced to biology, I imagined him arriving in his office, greeting Mangili and the guys at the firm, remaining motionless for hours at his desk, going to a business lunch, explaining the phases of biomass disposal, then withdrawing to sip a coffee by

himself, leafing through a newspaper to catch up on the world, which I barely followed at all. So when he came home, I didn't ask him to tell me what he'd done—I already knew that—but anything else he had news about.

Actually, I was fine with it, this arrangement that went on for years. In fact, I preferred to go out only when necessary, and when I did I walked around with no interest in the pantomime of the street. Bumping into the old folks explaining the world to the barista who feigns interest, dodging the guy on the moped who briefly fixes me with his cold stare, observing the misery and boredom of the merchants who stand looking out the doors of their shops: all this brought me down. The malfunctioning machinery of the city that every day swallowed and spit out lines of cars and mountains of trash, and the hard-nosed responses that the Roman people always had at the ready, their loneliness in the life machinery, I experienced these as an error that couldn't be remedied, an outrage. Like me, I thought, it must terrify other young people, whose material and spiritual poverty not only wasn't cured but was rendered chronic by the city of Rome. But these, as I understand better today, were Elio's antisystemic ideas, which crept over me and pulled the strings of my puppet fists into a gesture of protest, taking advantage of my naïve disillusionment as an emigrant. I had believed that studying would get me somewhere, and I'd dedicated myself to the cause with missionary zeal. When I was majoring in German literature, I spoke five languages (mostly to myself), I painted, I wrote free verse: an

assortment of skills that society considered about as useful as false eyelashes. But I was still convinced I'd meet someone at the finish line, who would welcome my Renaissance talents, as I called them, and invite me up to the podium. There was the summa cum laude and then the buzzing of a fly in the empty classroom. While the glorious mirage of an academic career faded like a bruise, I had turned to the presumed security of teaching school where at least, I told myself, I'd be doing something useful. But in five years I'd been assigned only one week of substitute teaching, and the only comment came from Elio, who began: "In a *just* society, you'd already be…," and away he went with the flogging of the World of Today. So regret for my nonexistent work was mixed up with the protest against all that for me was Rome: infinite beauty=sadness, false friendships, disrespect for rules, the mockery of honking horns.

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

Elio was the axis of my mental wandering, the eyeglasses for my

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

For example, that morning on the Sabaudia waterfront, the sermon on the apocalyptic dream of citizens in Western countries. Which perhaps, at least in part, he had invented himself: I was well aware of his fixation on the villainous destruction of planet Earth, a fixation cultivated from heterogeneous sources: essays on economics and ecology, but also journals of dubious scientific authority, volumes of classics in political thought in the white-red-and-black uniform of the Editori Riuniti but also pamphlets with effervescent rainbows on which an egg-yellow sun dispersed the darkness of skeptics; I was well versed in his taste for pointing out the destructive blindness of the human species, the reckless draining of natural resources, the torment of pigs and geese in crowded farm pens, and the failure to

heed the warning signs of economic crisis by the slavish consumers of Capital. In the stratigraphy of books on his bedside table I had seen his political passions rise and fall. Recently, the Revolution had been mysteriously displaced by the East, which concerned me. But deep down, despite the objections I raised, I believed there must be something solid in his analysis—after all, he was the expert in reality and I the eternal student who'd continued to spend days reading her favorite novels. That unwavering gaze, which up close could seem shallow and manic, if not downright confused, hid the secret of a far-sighted method. But above all, while I didn't decide if he was really right (or wrong), I was seduced by his call to *instinct*—which officially I considered evidence of weakness. I contemplated him like one admires a big cat for its dense fur and its readiness to pounce.