Elisa Ruotolo, *I am Super Legend (Io sono Molto leggenda)*

I Stole the Rain (Ho rubato la pioggia)

nottetempo 2010

English sample translation by Lisa McCreadie

(pp. 11-16)

I couldn't believe it. God was pulling my leg.
John Fante, *My Dog Stupid*

When my father came home with his thumb wrapped in a handkerchief, we turned to look. It wasn't time for him to come home yet, and even though the bandage was bulging and bloodied in places, my mother wiped her fingers on her apron and, with her eye on the alarm clock, asked only, "What are you doing here?"
He answered by showing her his thumb and, since this tactic didn't work with my mother, started to explain that he had almost crushed it in the machinery up at the plant, not half an hour before. Then he went to rummage around in the medicine that we kept in a shoebox in the cabinet above the television. He took out the bottle of antiseptic and held it to his chest with his good hand while he moved into the light which bathed the books, my sister, and me. I saw him squinting at the smoked glass of the bottle, shaking it to see better. Eventually, he let out a sharp curse, which he repeated three times to be sure that we had heard, threw the empty bottle in the bin, and went and shut himself in the bathroom. I knew he would stay in there until he heard my mother putting the plates on the table, and sure enough, that was when he came to sit down, his face all lit-up like someone who has a whole speech in mind. He started to eat without commenting on the meal and paid no attention to my mother's mutterings. He stared fixedly at the piece of paper on the wall, the kind they use to wrap up the day's bread at the deli. That paper had been there for weeks, on the nail that held the calendar. One evening, my father had drawn a rectangle on it, divided it in two, and covered it in so many x's and arrows that God knows what they meant. Every morning, my mother lifted the piece of paper to check the date, but never in a month of Sundays would she ask about it. As for me, I didn't need to ask because I knew.
By then, if someone asked me my age, I didn't have enough fingers on two hands to attempt an answer, and I felt big and strong enough to understand

that in just over a week, there on that badly drawn football pitch, my father and I would be staking all that we had.
"This'll be the one where we destroy them, eh?" they would shout from the distance and the balconies as they saw us pass by.
We didn't answer. My father barely moved his head. He just looked at the crease in his trousers because he had neither the will nor the ability to even begin to explain what the hell had been happening over the last few months, after all those terrible years. He felt obligated to keep silent because maybe if he stopped to talk about it, everything would start to go wrong again. So he barely acknowledged them, and to those who asked him about players, substitutions, the starting line-up, or the training diet that I was on, he answered with a vague hand gesture which could mean anything. Naturally, most people went away nodding, without the faintest idea of what he meant.
That evening, my father informed us all that after the serious misfortune that had befallen his thumb, he was due a minimum of a week off, and so —he said this with his eyes fixed on my mother— from the next day, he would be obliged to rest and take proper care of himself, because no one else was going to do it. He spoke with a serious look that I had never seen before—the look of someone who was due those damned seven days of sick leave, days which could now make all the difference. They might be enough for the Black Eagles. No, they had to be. I felt it in my bones that this time it was the perfect situation. But I didn't say anything because it suited me. I kept eating quietly, almost as if the whole story had nothing to do with me, of all people, and the second I raised my eyes, I couldn't keep them away from my father's bandaged thumb. And I looked at it as you might look at something useful, finally. A thing of respect.
The Black Eagles had already been around in my grandfather's day, and he had coached them and handed them straight over—bereft of glory—to my father. There were those who swore they'd been formed at least a hundred years before, and old Carmelo once put his hand on his heart and held the other in the air, like in court, and said, "The Black Eagles have always existed!"
But since he had been hearing voices from the walls of his house and from the tap in the sink, everyone agreed with him, just to make him happy.
The Black Eagles were a football team. Our team.
Except it wasn't signed up for any kind of tournament, it didn't follow rules on transfers, first and second legs. As far as it was concerned, there were no friendlies, half-times, or league tables. There was no
nothing. Only a dirt pitch—nobody knew where it started and where it ended, it was all bumps and gravel, and if you fell on it, your knees would never be the same again—and two posts without a net that were put back up by a carpenter every time they fell down. These were two poles secured in the ground a rough distance apart, determined by counting Peppino Quaglia's steps—he was short and stocky, and for as long as he lived, he always gave us goals that were too narrow to easily shoot into—and a bar nailed on to hold them up. We kids were always under orders not to play around them and especially not to hang

from the bar, although there were always those who didn't listen. I kept my distance because I was with my father once when the carpenter was called to do the repair, and I knew what it involved.
That's where we played every Sunday at around three o'clock in the afternoon, weather permitting. People arrived loaded with beer and cigarettes, with the intention of getting through it all before five
o'clock, when the referee would blow the final whistle and they'd go home covered in smoke and dirt to the complaints of their mothers or wives.
There were also Sundays when, after a few too many, they ended up getting into fights. The cops would break it up, but they arrived so quickly that it didn't take us long to realize that they must have been there all along, in plain clothes, to cheer on the Black Eagles. But none of our lot, not even those throwing the punches, had anything to complain about there.
Every Sunday, we played the Blind Falcons, who came from a nearby area where they didn't have the land to squander on such things. I always saw them arrive on the school bus, a sheet metal affair, all rusty and dented, which, between September and June, left twice a day for the primary schools. They sat packed tightly together, like a bellows at rest, their legs squashed into the seats, wearing the dark expressions of men who were accustomed to hard work and who, rather than relax, look forward to the opportunity to let off steam on Sunday. Compared to our lot, they were as big as Roman soldiers and quick as African antelope. They wore yellow jerseys, tight against their chests, buttoned up to the neck, to hide the Blessed Virgin medallions which they kissed with their eyes closed before their heavy boots even touched the pitch.
I was struck by them. Maybe because they never spoke from the moment they got off the bus to the moment they got back on, or because they were constantly chewing tobacco or licorice root and had the fixed, stubborn eyes of someone with glory in their sights, whatever the cost.

Elisa Ruotolo, *The child comes home (Il bambino è tornato a casa)*

I Stole the Rain (Ho rubato la pioggia),
nottetempo 2010

English sample translation by Lisa McCreadie
(pp. 53-58)

What do I know? What am I looking for? What do I feel? What would I ask, if I had to ask?
Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

She stopped, waved at him from the other side of the street, and looked for her key in her bag. She was a bit displeased that somebody had seen her coming home at that time, with the shops shut on the streets and day not yet dawned. Only as she turned away did she realize that she was mistaken, and she pushed her glasses back up her nose. She had to change them, those glasses. It occurred to her every time that she stumbled on the steps, whenever she had to deal with the money tucked away in her purse, or the few customers who still came to buy gold from her. Now she had even started to confuse faces on the street, and cars had become identical metal boxes—though she had never been able to tell them apart even when her eyes were in better shape. She went by color and approximate shape—more and more often, she would wave at someone who, out of politeness, would respond with a beep of the horn and then go on, staring at her in the rear-view mirror and wondering who the hell that old lady was.
That's what happened this time too. She had given a man who was sitting in his car with the engine running a familiar greeting. Perhaps she was just concerned about giving him a hint of a smile because Giovanni, the neighbors' son, was a proper man—he always helped her with her shopping bags, and since he had gotten married, a birthday never went by without him buying a brooch, a pair of earrings, or a coral bracelet from her for his wife. He deserved that smile, even if he had caught her sneaking in; even if every time he chose tastelessly and raised her blood pressure a few points, haggling over the price.
When she had realized that the car wasn't Giovanni's, she'd felt stupid. She had dug around in her bag, moving all the bits and pieces she had accumulated from side to side, and finally breathed easier when her fingers closed around the bunch of keys, recognizing the long, dark one for the front door. As she

opened it, she had heard the engine of the car go off and the door on the driver's side open. The panicked breathing of a woman alone, without a husband, had come over her, and when she had closet the main door behind her, double locking it and pulling the chain over, she'd stayed for a while in the half-light with her bag pulled tightly to her stomach. Then she had gone over to the window, which she always kept open to conceal her absence, and with her face between the folds of the curtain, she had peered out.
She had felt even more stupid when she saw that the street was empty, but she felt a bit calmer. She'd started to slip out of her brown woolen overcoat, which she had then hung carefully on the coat hook, before moving on to her dress—she had unbuttoned it down the front, down to her stomach, and stopped for a few moments to finger the little hand stitched pockets on her pink girdle. She noticed that they were marked by damp from the cupboard they had been shut up in over the winter. That girdle had done its job this time too—not supporting her back but hiding the chains, rings, bracelets, and brooches that she bought to order whenever she went up to Naples.
She pulled them out one by one, holding them between her thumb and her index finger, and stopped to examine them under the dim light seeping through the curtains. It was then that she saw him again—the man was right outside the front door, arms folded across his stomach, looking fixedly at the window. Instinctively, she drew back from it and, as the doorbell started to ring, removed the elastic band from the girdle, freeing the rusty hooks with a steady hand. She put everything in the most secure drawer and locked it, placing the key between her breasts, in a girlish gesture. She thought that the cold metal might bring her face out in goosebumps and brought her hand up to it, as if to remind herself that nobody would notice them now in that labyrinth of wrinkles. Only then, as her breathing became irregular, she grew certain that something was about to happen to her and that this last-minute gesture would be for nothing. Because at her age, nobody would feel embarrassed or ashamed at sticking a hand into her bra to search—perhaps a little disgusted, like when you touch a dirty rag, a grubby handrail, or a sick animal.
She walked along the hallway with her heart rising higher and higher in her mouth. She placed a hand against the door, and it felt cold, like the key pressed against her skin. There was no point standing there silently behind a door, now that the man had taken advantage of her hurry, and the lightness of a gate without a lock, to knock from right outside.
"Who are you looking for? What do you want from me?" she asked and immediately regretted having shown suspicion and fear.
"It's me. . . " replied the voice on the other side.
"Me," he repeated, but she couldn't remember.

For years, day after day, she had thought of nothing but that: the heat of the

early afternoon, the waves of steam which rose from the uneven basalt and the deserted street at that time of day, from which Matteo did not return. Other times, fear caught her by the throat, and it was a feeling she knew well, because she had felt it as a child when she would arrive in Forcella, the jewelers' district, with her grandmother to buy gold to sell from home, without a license, with no other right except poverty.

It always happened in summer when there was no school, and her father would worry and make a fuss, which didn't last long because, even he had to admit, that gold was profitable and an elderly person hand in hand with a little girl always caused less suspicion on the street. In the end, because work was in short supply and there was no hope from the unemployment office, he had stopped complaining. His solution was to stay in bed until his mother-in-law and daughter had left and make quite sure he wasn't around on their return.

They always left early in the morning, on the first train, and had a habit of stopping at the station café once in a while, to be served like ladies, her grandmother said. They would order two cups of hot chocolate, even though it made them want to pee again and start sweating as soon as they got out on to the narrow alleyways and the shortcuts. Before leaving, they would go to the public toilet and her grandmother would unbutton her dress down the front and wrap a girdle around her stomach, which made her even warmer than the hot chocolate and the steep streets. She would help to tidy her grandmother up, to put the buttons in the right holes, and when her grandmother asked her, "Can you see anything, Marí?", she would take a step back to assess the situation with great care and assure her that no, you couldn't see anything.

On the streets, her grandmother went by memory, and she knew the shops, the narrow alleys and where they ended up, without even knowing the names which were written up high on the marble plaques. Only when a new sign appeared and the shop windows didn't help her out would she give the girl's hand a tug.

"Marí, you've got good eyes," she would say, stopping under the signs. "What does that one up there say?"

Because, in her day, she hadn't been interested in school and, even though now she watched Professor Manzi's elementary lessons on the television and never missed one, she never had the real patience to start trying words. She only knew numbers and not even the devil himself could have duped her when she went into the jewelers'. She had a brisk, light step on low heels which provoked silente and respect around her. Before turning the corner, she would stop to spray cologne behind her ears, because she said that if they got a whiff of hardship and poverty, it was over, and they'd probably try to sell you tin as pure gold.

Elisa Ruotolo, *Look at me (Guardami)*

I Stole the Rain (Ho rubato la pioggia),
nottetempo 2010

English sample translation by Lisa McCreadie
(pp. 87-92)

One of the things I learned is that I had to bend or else break. And I also learned that it is possible to bend and break at the same time.
Raymond Carver, *Fires*

The first time it happened I hadn't thought much of it. Silvia had come and tapped me on the shoulder at three o'clock in the morning to convince me that it was something important and serious, but I, still getting to sleep, pretended not to have understood. I just told her to calm down and go back to sleep. She had stayed sitting there, in an armchair at the foot of the bed, with a woolen blanket over her shoulders, until the telephone rang. Then she had slowly gotten up and gone downstairs to answer it. It took so long that when she came back I had already realized that I could turn onto my good side and sleep there until tomorrow. Instead, I felt her hand on me again, heavier and more resolute than before. This time, I got out from under the blankets and turned before I had even stuck a toe out into the draught.
Silvia stuck a piece of paper under my nose and placed my clothes on the bed. "They called," she said calmly, indicating the address on the paper. "You need to go and get your father."

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Now I've lost count of the number of times we've been wrenched from sleep and the places I've collected him from (barracks, stations, hospitals) and apologized with my eyes lowered in embarrassment. They would advise me to be careful and become more and more insistent with me; meanwhile, I would end up picking out tiny spots on the walls and staring down at my wrists and making promises like an idiot just to get out of there as quickly as possible. Sometimes, I've even had people who joked about it, finding themselves faced with this brainless old man, who would leave the house at any hour of the day

or night, go to the nearest railway station, get on the first train, and stop it wherever he fancied by pulling on the emergency brake.
Since it started, I've always been told different versions of this story: the story of my father and who drove him to this. They come into this bar, pull up a chair, make themselves comfortable, and after ordering whatever liquor from me, they start to tell it with the air of someone who has placed themselves on intimate terms right from the first sip.
My father, whenever he recovers a trace of awareness, complains that they will have to sort it out with God, and I agree, even though I've grown up without too much in the way of religion. I just think that it's good to anticipate it and that at the end of the day, apart from us, nobody has the right to dig up his and Cesare's story. I think it, but I keep it to myself because even though this bar is almost mine (one more year of payments and that'll be it), I know that I'm dependent on people and always will be. I listen, passing the wet cloth across the wooden counter as I stare at the clock on the wall, and it always seems like a thousand years before the time comes when I can pull the bolt, turn the chairs upside down, and go home to bed.
At a certain time, my job is done.
The deerskin cloth is marinating in the disinfectant and water mix until tomorrow. I've already switched off the lights at the back. Then if they ask me for five minutes to finish off a conversation, I snort without answering. I don't know what my hurry is, seeing as the minute I get home, I go to bed as I am, without washing my face or hands. Seeing as, until it starts to get light outside, nobody will see me and I'll only use my hands to go to the toilet.
I have a wife too, and it's pretty much a legal thing: papers signed and that's it. Erika and I got married three years ago but only to be polite, for the sake of a clear conscience. She'd asked me while I was making an espresso, in the tone of someone who's asking for a half-day off work, and I hadn't known what to say to get out of it. To me, it seemed awful to work together until lunchtime and then right through until bedtime yet still say no. So it happened that we were united by law one Thursday morning, with her brother two steps away, watching me with eyes that left nothing to the imagination. Then they had stood there, insisting that they wanted to give me the money they had put aside specially for the matter of citizenship, and they were on the point of gettino offended when they saw me avoiding them, with my hands plunged deep into my pockets.
That was how I took a wife, a girl of not even twenty with painted nails, a stranger to the point that I can only say a few words to her each day. I also have a stamped piece of paper to prove it (I keep it folded in two and hidden in the drawer where Silvia puts the
freshly washed shirts and pants), but it doesn't ch’ange anything for me: at night, I still go home alone while she, my wife, leaves a bit earlier and goes a different way altogether.
I tell her to go home while I stay there, to encourage those conversations as long as they last. I do this partly because my customers are all elderly and, at

that point, there's absolutely no point fighting it and partly because I also have thicker skin; I've already seen my lot and I can't think of a good reason to give for throwing them out onto the street.
I wait those damned five minutes, arranging the cups and glasses bottoms up, then cross my arms and start to listen.
Here at the bar, there are still evenings that end with talk about Cesare.
Cesare was my father's only friend. They had only been in the first year of school together, and this, for the little that it was, was enough to keep them closeknit, not only before but also during and after my mother. For as long as I can remember, I have always seen Cesare on a Saturday. At a certain time, I would hear his big shoes dragging on the doormat, always polished to a shine, always clashing with the clothes he wore. He would ring the bell, and as soon as I opened the door, there he was once again. He would pass under the jamb of the door, by a hair's breadth, without actually saying anything: he greeted me with a nod, then stood staring at me, his eyes wide-open like a dead fish, and would hand me the usual bottle of sweetened lemonade, wrapped in the drugstore paper.
Cesare never talked, but I wouldn't believe anyone who tried to tell me he was mute. Not because my father had assured me that he wasn't or because I had found myself in conversation with him, but because I knew old Serafino. He was two houses down from us and his tongue had been tied from birth, and when he went out on his bike, he turned everyone's heads by letting out coarse cries which nobody understood. In the end, I'd got this noisy idea of mutes; I don't know how accurate it was, but it certainly didn't apply to Cesare. He wasn't seen and he wasn't heard. He only opened his mouth to eat, and he did this clumsily, handling the cutlery as if he was using it for the first time, with a great fear of seeing it end up on the floor. This was something which happened to him often, and as I helped her dish out the food in the kitchen, Silvia would assure me that it was natural, given how Cesare's mind had gone and he had hands made of ricotta.
Now that time has passed, I suppose that one of us should have bent down to try to retrieve that cutlery for him. To deal with it together, to dig our heels in at least that little bit—more for hygiene purposes than out of politeness. Instead, nobody at the table moved a muscle. Silvia and I were under orders to leave him be, so as not to make him feel uncomfortable. We stayed seated, as stiff as mummies, while Cesare blushed red as a tomato, pulled out his napkin from his collar, and started to clean the prongs and blades as thoroughly as Silvia when she was giving the silver a polish.