

Ginevra Lamberti, *Actually, the issue is (La questione più che altro)*

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English sample translation by Adriano Romano
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For Tiziana and Carlo, my parents

But I watched the world crying,

Because I was happy,

Because I was happy,

Because I was happy!

"Sulfur dioxide", Lucio Dalla

Part one

The valley where I live

1. The valley

Today I got up out of bed, opened the door, and left the house. Outside my house there is a valley where I live. The valley where I live has some really inherent flaws, it is the kind of place that could bring one to a death-inducing boredom, but other than that it truly is an aesthetically pleasing place. Then I had a long panoramic look at my surroundings, and decided that I need to regain concentration, to study, to re-evaluate my plans and priorities and finally that I need to pout arbitrarily at the world, in the hope that the world will rush to buy me some candy. The current state of affairs is, we miss nineteen days at Christmas, and twenty-five at New Year, something more and still unknown to the last exam, that college exam lying there incomplete, looking at me since two and a half very comfortable years over the norm. The issue that troubles me more than anything else is that being plonked in the valley where I live is so terribly boring.

All in all, however, I'm actually fine, except that this kind of isolation in a hypochondriac naturally means that I have come up with all kinds of medical problems for myself. Yesterday I wrote in my diary that when I die I wish to be cremated, and I noted down my username and password, in case of some kind of tragedy, so that it could be useful to loved ones and relatives when it comes to

arranging my things. I will list some other posthumous requests here, so that I will no longer need to repeat them:

At my funeral I want everyone dressed colorfully.

Nobody is to come wearing pastel shades.

If you publish my diaries (after all, who wouldn't want to?) without any skillful editing work aimed at making me look far more intelligent than I actually am, I promise I will return to haunt you and do terrible things to your body.

On the subject of my death and my subsequent funeral, it's worth saying that the other day, I was watching a special on late night TV on RAI-3, from which I discovered that there is now an alternative burial system. This new system means that you are buried in a fetal position inside a biodegradable egg and this process provides the nutrients to feed the growth of a tree. After that I also discovered that there is another alternative system that turns you into diamond. I saw it on yet another late night special on RAI-3, if I remember correctly it immediately followed a German documentary about volcanoes. In this late night special, there was a man who had a ring with part of his grandmother embedded on it, a woman who in life had been very glamorous lady and therefore would have appreciated being made into a jewel. Then the man also said he wanted to bequeath to his daughter a necklace adorned with all her relatives, so that she was always connected to those below her.

Yesterday was a beautiful day, in fact I got up out of bed try and make myself study, but instead I went to see Vanda. Vanda is the woman who gives old bread to the swans on the lake (we talk about the swans and the lake a lot at the moment). I'm always willing to go and find Vanda, in part because she usually wears synthetic leopard print clothing, also because has a Madonna of Lourdes carved in stone which she is very proud of, but mainly because she makes me pudding. After having the pudding from Vanda, I came home and stared at the wall. It was already evening, so I sat down with some Amaretto from Saronno and watched twelve episodes of Lost. Today is also another beautiful day, but I've completely forgotten where I was. I was in the valley where I live, so I got out of bed, I opened the door, I left the house, and I had a long look around me.

The valley where I live is located north of the province of Treviso. There is an artificial lake there that is used to power the hydroelectric plant, there is a lot of surrounding forest and in the forest there are many trees and amongst the trees there are many pylons and on the pylons there are many vines growing. There used to be people who would look at the lake and say that once upon a time all of this was countryside. Now these people are all dying, albeit slowly, but with some consistency, and everything seems to suggest that sooner or later they will be replaced by new generation of old people who will watch the main road and say that once everything was hitchhiking here. There is a viaduct that they built in the early nineties, and a medieval tower that naturally was built in the Middle Ages. The dead are laid to rest on the hill, we've had a decent selection of suicides, some throw themselves into the lake, and others jump from the viaduct. In the lake, in addition to the occasional dead body, there is a pair of swans. We've always had a difficult time with male swans. One was shot, another one was decapitated. Then, they brought a third one, a bit more stupid and with a broken wing. It is still there in the lake with the female swan they have mated a lot. There's generally a lot of atmosphere.

I was saying before that today was a beautiful day, and it was actually very nice, although it was cold. It is always cold here. I should explain that in my house there is no heating, no one ever installed it and no one seems to have ever felt the need to. Besides, at the behest of my grandmother we have had only ice-cold water in our kitchen for as long as anybody can remember. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think the fact that I possess the genes in my body of somebody who one day decided to call up the plumber and ask him to come and cut the hot water pipe purely so that nobody would waste it is going to cause me problems someday.

My Grandmother, who for geographical reasons we will call my grandmother from up-north, beyond the moral rigidity and the frost that she has cursed us with for ever and ever, has a great position in our family memories because of a phrase, which has helped shape the optimism of this family in times of trouble; my Grandmother's memory immediately suggest: *Strength and courage / that life is passing / and after April is May*. To which, immediately follows a synthetic version: *Life is short / death they should*. And if you please, a playful version as a space dedicated to little ones: *jumping much higher / I break my neck / I break my face /and I jump in Paradise*.

Around here the old people say that the place was with feeling. If you ask, they'll tell you that it was the work of an entire country, but it is not really a country, we just say that about a plot of land with houses scattered over it and some people living in them. It is made of large rocks and sand, the walls are one meter thick making them immovable. In addition, they don't let heat in but often let in moisture that, in every season, comes in the form of black rose garden in the corners of the rooms.

In the village there are rituals, inherent to the lives of the inhabitants, such as the decorative panels that are present in every dining room and are engraved with symbols of the four seasons. In spring, everyone goes to the fields to pick herbs that you can eat or use to cook with, in the summer people cut the grass. The grandfather in this case (who for geographical reasons we will call grandfather from the south), grandfather from the south, I said, used to cut the grass with a scythe, and was very good at it.

He had an Indian myna bird that he loved and that loved him back. It seems that the bird waited for him every night when he came home from work carrying the worms in his pocket for the myna, which somehow sensed his impending presence and began to sing just before he appeared on the horizon. Apparently, grandfather was greatly distressed when the bird died. I didn't see any of this happen, we never crossed paths, but I saw the Indian myna stuffed in a place of honor in the living room for years. At a guess it has lasted at least forty years, staring at us from above with crossed eyes. No one has ever dared to remove it, hide it, or do him an injustice. Until one day it fell apart, creating a collective sense of relief.

In the autumn people go into the woods to pick mushrooms and cyclamen, yet this seemingly monotonous part of everyday life has become somewhat of a fierce competition. With regard to the mushrooms, it is very important to mislead the other competitors by hiding the small colonies of growing fungus with leaves and brushwood, hoping that nobody finds them when they are fully matured and takes them for their own. As for the cyclamen, the winner is usually the one whose home has the most and the biggest bouquets packed into small vases.

Autumn is the season when the smell of sweet damp undergrowth and of the cemetery invades people's living rooms. In winter people stay indoors loading wood onto the fire and waiting for the

cold to pass. At some point you have to leave and go to the fields to pick snowdrops, which follow the same kind of rules as cyclamen, but are odorless, just white and cold. Grandfather and grandmother died anyway. In the house that we live I stare at the wall, looking for inspiration for my last exam, like a mother who through work cares for the old, and Puccio (but of Puccio and our complicated relationship will talk more extensively below).

It is often said that the old are too numerous, and the fact that we have to pay too many pensions and retirement homes is one of the causes of our downfall. I do not understand anything, but sometimes I think that if one morning all the old people disappear, leaving behind only their old blankets, solitary dentures and piles of soiled diapers, then a good half of the women who live in the valley would suddenly be unemployed.

That being said, one of the things I used to do with my grandmother, apart from the issue of going to Mass every day, was walk on summer evenings with her other old friends. The old went out in hot and humid evenings, and with them came the slacaj, those hideous big red snails without shells that eat garden plants. The old crept round in groups of three or four, dragging their sticks along with them. The most powerful of them was an almost hundred year old that had two sticks, which were essential to crush slacaj and to clear the street of yellow pus.

I think in general the old liked to find someone who was crawling more slowly than them and inflict the revenge for the difficulties of their daily lives. Over the years I have lost interest in these hunts and grandmother started to find the most comfortable place to sit in the fields. Her other friends followed slowly, with a row of slugs merrily in front of and them behind. I've got to say, among the slacaj, compared to those gutted at dusk, those collected during work in the allotments and in the garden suffer an even worse fate, namely they are put in a jar and dissolved with salt. And among the old, a less powerful friend, but more evil, with only one walking stick, once called me aside and pushing aside the underbrush told me to look at how big one of the slugs was, it was pregnant. Then it was completely yellow.

As I said we miss nineteen days at Christmas, and twenty-five at New Year, something more and still unknown to the last exam. Now I need to go back inside to study, because I'm fine, do not know if I've already said, the problem is as I've said that I get very bored having to live in this valley.

2. Sweat Pants, love to you and five other friends

In order to increase my concentration and my studying, I decided I had to take a break from the internet. Strictly speaking it is the fifteenth day of the break; it's ten until Christmas, New Year's is sixteen days away, and then something more until my last examination.

I'm not known for my originality, I have a blog, a Facebook profile, and a Twitter. I used to also have Friendfeed, but I stopped because on Friendfeed if you are under thirty-five years and haven't been running a blog since at least 2002 then they tend not to consider you. In 2002 I was using the internet but only to go on unofficial fan forums for Punkreas. I used to have MySpace as well, a very old site that used to inspire some kind of personality (in the form of decorating one's page with silly objects), but then fell into irremediable misfortune.

Sometimes I thought about the possibility of opening a profile on those sites made for sharing images like Flickr, or to steal the proceeds of the evening pizzeria where I work (and which will be

discussed more extensively below), by using a smartphone and signing up on Instagram . Then I realized that taking this step would have delegitimized fifty percent of my public communications via the Internet, which are to criticize about those who post photos of themselves. It seems obvious that these words will remain carved in the centuries to come as a precious warning to be handed down, and are summarized by the following concepts:

No pictures from above.

No pics from the bottom.

No pictures of shoes.

No pictures of hands.

No pictures of eyes winking / sleepy / frowning.

No photo embedded in the sand on a sunny August day in Bibbione Pineda.

No pictures.

At the moment I have frozen everything and live in a bubble of even more ancient antiquity than even the valley that I live in, where the mandatory practice is to connect using a 56k, and I must say that using the Internet seems effects my studying less than my relationship with the family cat, who I will now discuss at length. The house cat is called Puccio and the problem is that I am ashamed of his name. I did not name him myself. Puccio was already large and convinced that he was a person when he came to live here. This is a fairly widespread attitude among cats. To say, my friend that if she were dead in Bangkok it would have been complicated to write the obituary (and we will talk about her more later), she has a white cat, and it is the case that this white cat has at all times its own personal sink containing 3 fingers of water from which it can drink at any time. Ice (the name of the cat) can tap into it and quench the thirst. My friend, who is afraid of ping-pong balls (for reasons that I will explain later) found this rule in effect the last time she came back from a trip to Japan. It shows that, with each new move away, our parents go a step further to replace their children with a pet.

Going back to the subject of my cat, my cat was given to us by a colleague of my mother's(still known as Puccio's Mum), who could no longer keep him, she could no longer give him the right attention and could no longer endure the way he destroyed all the skirting boards. He was born in a psychiatric clinic from a cat used for pet therapy, my mother's colleague took it because it seemed stupid and, therefore, friendly. Instead it is actually quite clever, and when they delivered him to us he displayed his dissatisfaction by shitting into a bidet.

Puccio has a surprising communicative verve, using his meows as speech; he expresses opinions, and insists on confirming our harassment. As a result having to deal with him is like having to deal with a very talkative person, but with the undeniable advantage of not being able to understand what he says. His old owner occasionally comes to visit, wrapped in puffs of fur; she marches on the granite up to him, crouches, raises him onto the front legs and yowls at him. Puccio looks at me with an intense desire for tinned tuna.

My mother's colleague is a socio-health worker. It makes sense that my mother is a socio-health worker. The socio-health workers are a multi-ethnic working group, mostly female, and increasingly work with older people. As well as that of the funeral business, caring for older people will never really hit a crisis given the amount of work it gets. But it is also true that, at the expense of the gossips who shout the decay of morals, it seems that roughly from 2008 onwards there has been a considerable increase in the rediscovery of family values. For some years now, in fact, faced with the expensive fees, many Italian families are experiencing the thrill of home care of their elderly relatives, giving rise to the so-called phenomenon of 'leti vodi', namely empty beds, and wreaking panic among the operators of the sector.

My mother currently has a fixed-term contract of one year, but he says we should not worry and that we should not be afraid. I tell her it's okay, because I trust her. My mother is a private person, but sometimes she tells me of her glimpses of youth, only that they seem like flowing rivers and streams, but to her they seem like hydraulic fluid. Then it just so happens that my mother came of age and ran away from the valley to a large northern Italian city to follow a tall fellow with a very bad name and an even worse surname.

It ended and she went for nine months to Germany to sell ice cream and suffer a daily exposure to the best of ABBA, then she returned fatter by nine pounds and with a Saint Bernard named Freedom. This suggests that the story did not end so well. Even my grandmother, when he saw Freedom get off the train, did not feel so well. I was interested in this guy with the bad name and used the internet to try and find him for personal reasons of curiosity, but have not found anything illuminating or certain. In principle, it should be someone who works with Biagio Antonacci or someone involved in an investigation of a broad review of corruption of nurses related to the business of the morgues.

It is my seventeenth day without the internet, there are eight until Christmas, New Year's Day is in fourteen days, then there a few more until my last exam. The other morning my mother started to pull out the boxes of Christmas decorations, but to me Christmas does not seem to be a healthy habit, and then I went to the library.

One nice feature of libraries is when people are tired and rest their heads on the table, and I think that if you've never rested your head on a table in a library, you do not have a soul. In the library of the city in the valley where I live there are always the same people. This is also the case in Venice, which is the city where I study, but in Venice there are a lot of libraries and, if you're sick of seeing the same people, you can move around and see the other same old people and you're sick of seeing the other same old people, you can move around and see even more of the other same old people. In my city, among the same old people there is always one that in the morning comes and pulls out a tissue and starts to clean the chair, then the table and at this point I am always afraid that in a burst of enthusiasm he will try and clean me too. My friend, the one you should try to have with you in case of a moon landing (but she will also be discussed at length shortly), says I'm his type of person.

However, after years of careful observation, I think I can say that in libraries for a fair chunk of time the average student is invested in adopting static poses mainly to attract the attention of others. The systems to create talking points designed to prevent the study are various, including putting up a display of quirky and closed books. In second place the need to choose coffee and / or cigarette breaks with timing, mapping the passage between the tables with measured nonchalance and going

down the stairs waving your hair with a bizarre book under your arm. Usually the whole process ends up throwing you off balance and you fall on the last step.

The other day, for example, the problem did not arise; because where I live in the valley there is no real desire to attract anybody's attention. So I was just staring at the wall, because as already mentioned, as I've got older I've found that the cracks in the walls have all the more charm. Then my cosmonaut friend came and sat by me, and there was rare case of having subject more interesting to watch than a crack, I could listen to her as well. So I asked my friend how the job interview she had been to had gone.

And she, who in turn had a lot of desire to study things related to Korean language, said 'Gaia', because my name is Gaia, 'the conversation went more or less that I went to the agency temporarily, and from there I was sent to a pre-interview then eventually given access to an interview. Then the officials came into the office, with the candidates who were all sitting in a circle and asked us to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked: What prompted you to study what you study / have you studied? What is your dream? Who inspires you? Three adjectives to define you.'

'As for the adjectives that define me, at first I wanted to write nice, simple and cheerful, but then I thought maybe they would not understand that I was joking. As for the character, I was torn between Leni Riefenstahl and Raffaella Carrà. I chose Leni Riefenstahl although I preferred Carrà. Once the phase of the questionnaire was over, it was followed by the problem-solving phase. Problem solving means the ability to solve everyday problems within the working environment. We had to divide into groups and put in order of importance a series of more or less useful objects to handle an emergency on a spatial basis.'

The story is practical. They tell you 'girls your ship is damaged and you have made an emergency landing on the illuminated half of the Moon, and you have to reach the space station that will allow you to repair the problem by putting in order of importance the ten following items : fire extinguisher / gun / rocket launcher / matches / powdered milk / water / Range / torch / oxygen / radio.

It is marked that if you accidentally put in first place the matches as on the Moon there is no oxygen, it is clear that you cannot do the job.'

'I, and I do not say this out of boastfulness but purely to inform you, I drove my group to success. Then when it was over we were reproached because a guy wrote in the questionnaire that his dream was to sell his shoes. But I am also happy, I think I will take it, but above all, do not know if you knew, I wanted to tell you that in Korean in-between-the-field is said as padan.'

However, one can stay for hours in the library to spend time with all these activities, then when he comes out it's Christmas, and to me Christmas has always seemed an inconvenient practice. Even my mother does not like it that much, but she likes the odd jobs. As a result upon my return, the house had already been covered with golden pinecones and fir branches; it had turned into a mountain hut for polystyrene elves. Then I thought about this habit of chores I thought about it and I am convinced that it works that in practice you grow and, while you're still in the womb, will seize you, they take you to attend a secret during the CIA for moms. In this secret during the CIA, they teach you to fold the sheets properly when you make the beds.

Then they implanted a machine in the brain that is like a small bomb that explodes when you turn fifty. That day, or at most the day after the celebration, you'll get up and go to retrieve a book about a gardening course and a book containing a course of decoupage. From there on, it does not end, you turn into a fanatic of botany and home DIY. For example, my mother now sanded down furniture and wall tints with a certain professionalism. The only tragedy is that the wall tints themselves are in light green, yellow or orange paint. And I tremble at the idea that one day she might discover the concept of a stencil.