

Diego Gualandris

*Escape from Regina Coeli*

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It is one in the morning. It is pouring and the rain sounds like a torrent on the pavement of a small street, in the south of Trastevere. The sewer cover slowly slides on the floor, heavily resonating between narrow walls. Two silhouettes emerge, and stand there a few seconds, before slowly walking away. One is short with a hat, the other is tall and bald. Everything remains silent around the sewer hole. Over the roofs, the searchlight on a tower goes on spinning, unbothered, like a lighthouse. The two men light a cigarette and go up via di San Michele. They stop under a gigantic cactus-tree to protect themselves from the rain. There, they whisper something to each other and stick their heads on the pavement, like if they were trying to listen to the life underground. They suddenly rise and walk away.

The streets are empty. It is a Tuesday. The only people they come across are flower vendors, observing them as if they were spies, and two odd persons carrying paintings, depicting what seems to be doors or portals. Funny, one thinks as they pass by the two smiling young men, politely smiling back, then avoiding eye contact, pulling up their coats, looking down at their shoes beating on the shiny black pavement. Suddenly, they notice two policemen at the other end of the street, moving towards them. Panicked, they open the first door they can grab, run up the dilapidated staircase and enter an apartment to hide and wait.

There is a strong smell of turpentine. Everything is silent, except a heavy mechanical breathing. The place is barely lighted by a candle. As their eyes get used to the darkness, they distinguish an old man, rather a sort of creature. The place looks more like a cave, full of piled up objects, tools, clothes, dirty dishes, paintings. It seems to have been an artist studio, a long, long time ago. The walls are covered of graffiti, mostly names and phone numbers. «So I don't forget to call them back» says the creature starring at them, as they look at the walls. At the center lies a brand-new streamlined respirator. The gusset goes up and down, feeding air to the creature. «I don't mind company. You can hide here as long as you need if you read me my mail and feed me milk and biscuits. My home assistant couldn't make it tonight and I lost my glasses. I'm almost blind anyways! How are you supposed to find your glasses when you're almost blind?». One man proceeds to feed him but can't put his hands on a spoon, so he uses a painting knife instead. The other reads the mail in the manner of a town crier to the old, almost deaf man. Soon after They fall asleep until late the next day.

They walk up Via della Lungaretta until they arrive at Santa Maria di Trastevere. There, people are already sitting on the fountain, enjoying Spritz-Campari from San Callisto. The rain has stopped. The smell of jasmine fills the air. It is may. They join the crowd with their two red drinks and wonder why the flower vendors never close at night. Big round objects, looking like marine bombs are lying in the streets, something strange is happening in the city. A very muscular, bald man with small round sunglasses passes by on a motorcycle. They don't know him, but fear him, and feel like he is Looking for them. They decide to discretely hide under the patio of Santa Maria di Trastevere, out of precaution. The man turns around the fountain, looking at everyone, and slowly drives away. They turn around and look at the graffiti imbedded in the wall of the basilica. Among them, a small bird seems to be looking back at them.

They walk up Via di San Cosimato until they reach the market. At the terrace of Café Picchiotto, they notice the two painting-carrying men sharing breakfast, laughing together. A very elegant woman passes by, walking a basset with white lashes, starring at them. At the other end of piazza San Cosimato, Cops pass again.

They engage in a game of hide and seek with them, until they end up into a strange arcade all made of marble on Via Agostino Bertani, that seem to be a hybrid between butcher shop and a cabaret. At the entrance, a parrot with a missing foot greets them yelling « ti voglio bene! ». A man with sunglasses in a pajama tuxedo is playing old roman classics on a piano.

People are drunk, hugging and kissing, everyone seems to know and love each other. The two men feel a certain melancholy while witnessing such love, strangely echoing their miserable condition.

They are cold, tired and hungry. They slalom between the empty tables and go downstairs hiding in the bathroom. There, one notices a strange collection: cut-off shirt collars of various sizes and colors, like a sort of weird hunt-trophy. They stay there until the cabaret closes. They go back on Piazza San Cosimato. The cops are gone, everybody's gone. The rain has stopped, the city is empty, dry and silent. As they lie down on the pavement again in silence, one can hear a strange voice, emerging from the deep gut of the city, muffled and creaky like the sound of an old toad. It seems almost as this sound was providing them a sort of guidance. They stop at Ivo to buy a pizza and run back down Via Lungaretta to Piazza dei Ponziani. In a courtyard underneath, a bunch of hippies are melting metal. The heavy black smoke is making the whole building cough. The cook of Trattoria Da Teo watches the scene, while throwing sardines at the seagulls and smoking a cigarette.

They move on and turn right on Via dei Genovesi, not far from where the walk had all started. The rain pours again, washing away smell of jasmine. There they notice an intriguing door with an odd handle: An antique representation of what seems to be a frog. The door is opened. They enter with no hesitation, as if they had been told to. The door slams heavily behind them. Seconds after that, two cops pass in the street. They briefly look at the strange handle and stop. They start looking inside, pointing their flashlights. There are paintings of what seems to be doors, or portals, a very realistic sculpture of a sofa with two men sitting, who seem to be conversing. One is short with a hat, the other one is tall and bald. The agents turn off their lamps, look at each other in silence and go on walking. The street is empty again. Only the sound of rain on the pavement.

Text by Basile Dinbergs, based on a collection of true stories.

All artworks by Diego Gualandris with an intervention by Basile Dinbergs.

Diego Gualandris (Bergamo, IT, 1993) lives and works in Rome, IT. He graduated in Painting in 2018 at the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo.

Recent exhibitions include: 2022 - ADA, Rome (upcoming); Mai 36 Galerie, curated by Antonio Grulli, Zurich (upcoming); Istituto Italiano de Cultura Ciudad de México, curated by Matteo Binci, Mexico City; Proyecto Nasal, curated by Matteo Binci, Mexico City. 2021 - Fondazione Giuliani, curated by A. Drake, I. Gianni, D. Vitali, Rome; Pazzo Palazzo, Palazzo Monti, Brescia; Fondazione Imago Mundi, curated by Mattia Solari, Elisa Carollo, Treviso; Sonnenstube, Lugano. 2020 – Quadriennale d'arte 2020, curated by Sara Cosulich and Stefano Collicelli, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome; ADA, Rome. 2019 - Galerie Rolando Anselmi, Berlin. 2018 - Tile Project Space, with Riccardo Sala, Milan; Fondazione Baruchello, curated by Caterina Molteni, Rome; ADA, curated by Caterina Molteni, Rome. 2017 - Altalena, Maccagno, Varese.

Residency projects include: 2022 - Istituto Italiano de Cultura, Mexico City. 2021 - Palazzo Monti, Brescia. 2019 - Castro, Rome; Painting Workshop, Nuoro, Quadriennale di Roma. 2018 - Residenza la Fornace / Autunno, Spino d'Adda. 2016 - VIR, Viafarini in residence, Milano. He has been awarded the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, NY, in 2020.