

Excerpt from

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*Wintry*

(*Invernale*, La nave di Teseo, 2024)

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Wintry

1.

On Saturdays especially, the market is stormed by a horde of people. They crowd in the aisles, no one can get through. Men and women push and shove in front of every counter, talking loudly, like an insurrectional mob at the Wall Street Stock Exchange. The merchants behind their counters rush around in a frenzy, trying to serve everyone as quickly as possible.

The customers are practically shrieking, mouths wide open, shouting, “I was first! Me, I’m next!” They could be the soundtrack for a film clip of baby birds in the nest demanding the worm, hunger comes first, flying maybe later. Or the voracious carp in the pond that are constantly eating, like in a nightmare, instinctively, their gaping mouths forming an O.

Before you know it the merchandise is snapped up, the cuts of meat about to run out. So they get together and one of them goes around the marble corner, opens a door and enters the refrigerator where the animal carcasses are waiting to be portioned into cuts. Sold retail, as they say. Which means reducing whole bodies into parts and those into other parts.

He emerges from the refrigerator with an animal on his back and shoves the door closed with his hip. The animal no longer has a skin or entrails. It's a lamb fattened up by castration, it weighs nearly ninety pounds. The extremities of the legs are gone; the two thighs end before the hoof, chopped off. The front limbs, dangling down, seem to be jumping an obstacle; they too are hoofless.

The body is then hung from a hook. The blows of the large knife strike at the center first, between the thighs, and vertically slash open the animal's spinal column, from the sacrum to the back of the neck. Each blow, like the rest, must enter the furrow made by the blow just before it. The suspended carcass spreads apart almost gently, splitting open as if cleaved. It is severed in two. As soon as it separates a little, one of the thighs is removed from the hook and hung from a one a distance away, to affirm this divarication from which there is no going back.

And so, with cadenced sounds like that of a faulty fan, blow after blow, with the left hand gripping the thigh and the left flank of the animal ready to split off again, the butcher reaches the body's neck. There he stops and decapitates it. Freed from the head, the body finally drapes apart like a stage curtain into two half-bodies hanging side by side, mirroring one another.

One half begins to be dismembered. The shoulder, gone. The rib cage scored with a different knife, one with a long sharp blade, then split along the incision using the pressure of the hands; it produces the hollow sound a güiro makes. Next the thigh is enucleated from the stump that is meanwhile being created, and the ribs ripped from their tissue, again with the force of the hands.

The second half is dismembered.

He moves half of the carcass a few more hooks, aims a knife blow, a few more, and then decapitates the animal. The dance behind the counter gets jammed up: someone going from the stump to the scale bumps into someone straightening up from the basins with entrails and kidneys in his hands, makes a move not to lose his balance in that space between the sales counter and the wall. The movement knocks into him as he is aiming the knife and it swerves to the left. It does not plunge into the furrow he is tracing in the spinal column, but lands on his thumb that is holding the half-body to spread it apart and split it better. Though the deflection impacts the trajectory of the butcher knife, it also unsteadies it, so that it falls on the thumb not with a slash, but a little dully. Even so, the finger comes off the hand, albeit not completely. It would have flown off, falling into the crush of customers. Instead it stays on the hand thanks to some tissue that has not been completely hacked off, not cleanly sliced. His blood mingles with the cold fluid of the animal. For a moment his scream overpowers the voices of the crowd. Then he silences his scream, and the pain as always remains inside him.

A race to the emergency room, his hand and half a forearm in a plastic bag wrapped in butcher paper; holding his thumb close to his palm, the bag is pulled up to his wrist and almost up to his elbow.

A phone call from the wife to her parents. Her mother has sliced the white onions, blanched them, and is putting them in a jar of water with salt and vinegar to preserve them; they will be an appetizer. Her father is melting a scrap of lead pipe in a saucepan over the burner. Once the lead is liquefied, it will be poured into cold water and will harden, with a creak, into the shape of a neuron, a branch, a coral twig. The grandson, who was listlessly reading, “A Day I’ll Never Forget” in an issue of *Reader’s Digest*, walks over to the sink to witness the lead’s metamorphosis. The phone rings. Her mother picks up the receiver. “Oh, no! No! Gino!”

It is the latter half of the 1970s. Gino is my father. I watch the lead hardening. Its smell mixes with that of the cloves.

2.

In the hospital they reattach the tissue and save the finger. For days the outcome remains doubtful. The finger swells up, gets inflamed, oozes pus. The skin becomes taut, stiffens, changes color. The surface is stretched tight, the skin looks like a mirror. Every contraction of his heart that travel through his arteries ends up throbbing in the finger, producing stabbing pain.

A decision has to be made: where the butcher’s knife, its blade rife with animal tissue, dried blood, viruses, marrows, bacteria and other life forms, has not finished the job, it may well be that the inanimate scalpel of science will do so.

The finger seems about to burst.

Then little by little the inflammation recedes, some elasticity returns to the skin. The finger remains deformed, but lives. The muscles, tendons, blood vessels, bone and cartilage begin the job of reconstruction, stirred by their intelligences that see nothing, but that hold us together in the organism that we are.

The finger is saved from the scalpel and continues along with the body that it has always been a part of, but its ability to articulate barely exists anymore.

He, not being a pianist, goes back to work. He does so earlier than warranted by the prognoses, the experts’ advice and common sense. The uproar in the market greets him, but maybe it’s a few decibel bits lower, who knows? Maybe it’s a trick of perception. But maybe not. In the space around him he commands the center and does so with a nuance that was not there before. Sure enough, as if nothing had happened, he hooks the lamb – overly fattened by the absence of hormones – to the hanging rack as always. He splits it lengthwise with the usual knife blows. He spreads it open with the hand in which the articulation does not interfere with his movement, he can do it. The strikes of the blade are unwavering, as before. Fearless.

Yet a new aspect has slipped into the operation. The slaughtering process now has something that cannot be seen but that nonetheless is there: an increase in the sanctity and respect that had always been there. This makes the market’s uproar, in that space of a few yards with him at its center, seem or even be, less noise-generating.

3.

The section of the market where he works, unlike the other three sections, is built of metal and glass. Early twentieth century aesthetic. He does not live far from there.

Given his work schedule, however, he always drives there and never walks. Time at home and time at work are kept separated by those minutes of the drive, which he has reduced as much as possible.

Little by little after the accident the strength returns to his body which scoffs at rest. The finger is now the way it is, but it isn't painful. All the earlier energy returns.

Nearly all.

There remains a touch of fatigue that he doesn't worry about, which persists for months and months. Other than that, everything is almost the same as it was before.

However, having reached the peak of recovery, just a fraction of an inch from the previous standard, that fatigue calls for attention. Moreover something reverses course, albeit slowly, and almost imperceptibly that standard, having been there in front of him within arm's reach (one more millimeter!), begins to recede.

The sense of fatigue, which he can manage but from which he can no longer look away, grows and inescapably invades him.

Just as groundwater finds its way to rise to the surface of a field, so an inner stratum of his begins to emerge. His field is made up of work, a passion for and knowledge of soccer, every now and then a hunting joke, often other funny jokes, an unfiltered *Nazionale* or two. Meanwhile, these resurgences from his depths actually intrigue him. They continue to bubble up, to appear here or there. The earlier ones do not dry out and new ones appear. It is a process that initially allows him time to get used to the novelty of it. Then the proportion of wet areas on his field increases as it accelerates.

What watertight bulkheads were at work earlier? What force was he using to keep that groundwater under the surface? Which ones are emerging now? Is this emergence the cause or effect of his fatigue?

Blood tests need to be done.

8.

It is a process with rhythms of its own, it seems to slow down though maintaining constancy; it also seems to quickly start again, and with syncopation, so it seems. We only measure the surface waves of the ocean's motion, that's what it is.

His behavior doesn't seem to have changed, nor does his disposition. But his family's voices recede to the background and don't reach him. When he enters the parking lot at the market he looks around, assesses the situation, takes a more focused aim to settle on a parking spot; which is to say when he parks he takes aim the same way he does when he focuses on the job at hand. When he calls the wholesaler to order more bins of tripe or more crates of chickens, part of his mind pictures the person who is answering the phone: maybe that young man with the beard whom he glimpsed one day while passing by there? Maybe a new employee? Since all other parts of his brain are functioning as usual, no one is aware of this subtle difference. Is he aware of it?

Yes, certainly, at one and the same moment, as in a flash, he sees one thing.

The loin is on the block, it's that of a lamb that hasn't been castrated, so it's a cut that has not lost its leanness or pliancy though the slaughtering, because pliancy and leanness were in the little animal and in its wool, in its docile look of trust and curiosity. Those are qualities that were not lost in the slaughtering, from the first slash of the throat

to the flaying, the skin detached from the body by inserting the nozzle of a compressor into a cut made in a hind leg and blowing in a jet of compressed air. No sectioning and no organ removal has erased those qualities, and now that this part of its back is on the wooden block, positioning upwards the rib bones that start from the vertebrae, the cutting is truly excellent. He lowers the blade rhythmically into that tender loin, into the crunchy small bones, chop chop two cutlets, then on and on nonstop chop chop chop chop another four, almost finished, but... Here he hesitates and the cutting process is interrupted. Then it starts again almost immediately, and soon enough the entire loin is packaged and sold in the form of chops that didn't even have to be pounded with a steel meat mallet.

All day long, however, he thinks about that hesitation. More accurately: all day long he dwells in the time that hesitation occurred. He isn't thinking in questions and answers – Why did he hesitate? What distracted him? What thought or image or memory came to him? – None of that, he simply has a moment in time that remains there, drifting around among all the other moments. He has gone within it. He doesn't reflect, he doesn't try to understand, he's inside that moment, and he still lives it, even though it has already flown away.

11.

He takes drives through the city that he has never taken before, but always careful to avoid being delayed either at work or at home. On Monday, probably, when the market is closed. Returning from Sunday hunting trips, some Sundays, maybe.

These excursions are stored in “the cloud” which is located who knows where, but at least some images are retained and preserved. In fact, many years later these images will visit other people's dreams and whoever dreams them will not be able to distinguish between dream and fantasy or hallucination. Whoever dreams them will see a vehicle, a Lancia, driven by him, in certain neighborhoods of the center where he had no reason to go for work, but whoever dreams of them will know the reason. It's the dreamer who works there, not the one dreamed about. But could it really have been him I saw pass by? Clearly not, after so many years of his being absent, after so many cold years in succession, one after the other, with no buffers between them. The dreamer deduces that it is a hallucination, since the image, there at the intersection, leaves the license plate in its wake as the car turns and disappears. It's his license plate, one might say, but no one remembers what his license plate number was anymore.

Even the most mysterious creations of phantasmagoria in the mind require materials of which they are composed. And so he, in his journeys, produces them, stores up materials in the cloud, which future individuals will draw on to contrive their own hallucinations in the illusion of dreams.

On the contrary, some of his remarks tossed out there casually like statements spoken purely as a service belong to history and to memory, although those too are things without fixity. Yet they settle in places that have solidity and permanence, in the lives of those who have heard them. By its nature, talk about football has a jocular aspect that levels people, whether it's the bar patron who has never worn a cleated boot, or the coach of the national team interviewed on the sidelines after a league match.

By contrast, in front of a monitor which is not yet in color, as if commenting on something that he and no one else has seen, he comes out with a distinction that a linguist

describing the age of Hellenism or a philosopher living in it might have drawn, for example the difference between “class” and “style.”

There are soccer players, athletes in general and, even more generally, people, whom nature has endowed with style. Not to be confused with class, an attribute that few possess. No explanations follow this.

The words remain tossed in a drawer, along with bill stubs and old receipts. Then one day Gerd Müller appears on the screen. Tons of class, zero style. Gigi Riva appears. Plenty of both. Years later Van Basten appears, tons of both. Those who are merely stylists almost all slip into amnesia and oblivion.

He comments similarly on a criminal assault by the defender on the attacker which was not seen on the TV screen. After a while, however, the judge stops the proceedings and the camera focuses on the attacker on the ground with a suspected fracture of the tibia and fibula. But him, where did he see that assault? The video didn't show it. Perhaps in his mind he made a calculation of the trajectories of the bodies starting from an initial position that was filmed and then cut, and could only lead there? And, if so, how come he is able to do that calculation while others can't?

It's because in training he met Sívori in person. This is the theory that still persists, of all the others. Having been in contact with something transcendent and having carried it with him from that moment on in the very structure of his perception.

Having learned certain technical moves, having tried to reproduce them and sometimes succeeding: he chases the ball that is about to go out of bounds, followed half-heartedly by the opponent's marker who jogs along just to be there for the throw-in which will soon be called; but then he passes the ball and with a jerk of his legs whirls around and looks directly at the marker's astonished face; continuing the play and sidestepping the throw-in, he pivots on his heel and flips the ball, like a pinball paddle does, towards some part of the field – towards a free area behind the marker where he will then recover it, and then it's a dribble, or towards a teammate who is expecting it, and then it's a pass. If the marker runs with his legs far apart (without style), passing or dribbling requires that the rapid move also produce the mockery of the tunnel walk-out.

Someone who knows the whole sees it as such even if only a fragment of it, no matter which one, enters his pupil.

Does he, in his car in those neighborhoods he doesn't usually drive through or perhaps has never driven through, visit fragments of a whole that he already completely knows? Or is it something else? A whole or perhaps the whole itself that seeks an audience with him?