

EXCERPT FROM
HORCYNUS ORCA
BY STEFANO D'ARRIGO

His sleep was so long overdue and the urge so strong, that as soon as he let his guard down a little, his mind was quickly eclipsed, as by a black swirling cloud. All it took at that point, lying there on the black sand that gave off a volcanic whiff like an intoxicating must, was for him to rest his head on an elbow: then, when he had just about settled down, the luster of bones in the black ripples of sand on the beach must have dazed him. Beguiled by those deceptive lights, the sand swelled like a great black bubble of air, and little by little his eyes, both drawn and repelled, began to close, drowsy.

It was as if sleep had stolen only half his mind, yet he could not take possession of the remaining half; and it was as if with half a mind he were dreaming and with the other half he were awake, so that, though doing both, he was not really doing either, neither altogether dreaming nor altogether awake; rather he was doing just one thing with both halves, one more and one less: he was dreaming with his eyes open, daydreaming as they say.

With his eyes open, he was dreaming that he had discovered the cemetery of the dolphins, the *ferè*, an infernal, hidden place, where, foreseeing their approaching end, the old *ferè* went off to die in solitude. He discovered it due to a certain volcanic whiff that drew him there.

It was as if he were still a young boy, a *sbarbatello* all alone on a fully rigged *palamitara*, except for the *pellisquadre*, rowing among the Islands, contrary to the fishermen's usual custom when they went up the Golfo dell'Aria, which was to skirt them.

He must be at Stromboli, because he could feel the blasts of lava breathing on his face, eruptions from the volcano's fire: he would certainly have fled, had he not thought he sensed, intermingled with those fiery vapors, the presence of something unknown which he knew he was obscurely in search of, and which he would only recognize once he found it.

As if propelled by inspiration, he rowed toward that surge of hot blasts, of fiery black glints spewing from Stromboli's lava flows: the crater was no longer erupting, but the lava still showed no signs of cooling, and the molten black scoria flowed precipitously down to the sea, the garnet-red of the fire snaking beneath it. In his mouth the tongues of flame filling the air had the same dry taste as the sirocco when it blows in from Africa,

laden with gleaming sand as fine as dust: if he opened his mouth, the particles seemed to incinerate his breath, leaving a caustic, distasteful aftertaste.

Unafraid, he went on rowing and looking around: as he drew nearer, he came to where the sea was a simmering froth of bubbles, a churning fermentation, as if it were seething from the depths. Not just there but all around the island, doubtless caused by lava flows that had opened a myriad of fumaroles at the surface. The volcanic rain had blackened the shores, and the ash was still smoldering on the water, its vaporous trails rising in the air. Island and sea intermittently gave off the odor of a forge where iron plates had been heated, and that of the water where those red-hot plates had been plunged to cool, crackling and smoking. The air now reeked entirely of something caustic and distasteful, of something volcanic venting, conveying a cold, nauseating sensation all around. He could have sworn that the unknown something he was seeking had the same odor: given that, he thought he was already beginning to recognize it.

He came ashore on a deserted beach covered everywhere with that black volcanic ash, and stones hollowed out by fire, made porous, perforated and light as pumice, so light that the ones he picked up, clenching them in his fist, crumbled into black powder, and those his foot struck sprang into the air as if rising in flight.

At the first step, the *sbarbatello* sank knee-deep into the black dunes: he would start to walk through them and would sink even further; up and down he went amid the pumice stones, lapilli and charcoal, pumping his knees and grasping at handfuls of the soft piles of ash, which settled back around him as dust, as though once disturbed, the debris and volcanic particles were sifted out, their oppressively thick dust left suspended in the air. Though for a moment or two the dust hung like a transparent veil against the sun, the dense black reflection of the beach promptly floated up through that transparency, and through that velarium, the sun, high in the sky above the volcano, was transformed into a clouded moon. The dazzling glare that until then had been an array of black sunbursts flashing from the lava's murky gleam, at that moment abruptly broke off; there was a minute or two of sunset, then night seemed to fall precipitously.

The *sbarbatello* felt like crying. Trudging his way among those black, cold ash dunes, he felt a great weariness come over him, as if floundering futilely through the ash had left him bone-tired; and he was despondent at having failed his purpose, which was to find that unknown something. He was then racked by sobs, but the ash powdering the air dried the tears that streaked his face, as if they were words written in ink on paper.

Unexpectedly however, the exhaustion and sobbing, seemed to give way to a sense of well-being and vigor, of bravado and exuberance, a sense of exaltation throughout his body, which, if the *sbarbatello* were to describe it, was as if he were becoming a giant. He

had the impression that someone had climbed onto his shoulders with his legs around his neck; he felt this happening inside him, under his skin, and it was he himself, the *sbarbatello*, who, cocooned and protected by that volcanic ash, felt his body growing and the boy he'd been fully maturing into what he was at present, with his, days-old shaggy beard, wearing the uniform of a former helmsman. What was happening to him, to the *sbarbatello*, was that he was rising like bread, the dough mounting and swelling from flour mixed with brewer's yeast before being set to bake in a heated oven, tempered by finely scattered ash.

Parabola significa tarantola ballerina, he repeated the old adage to himself at that point, now transformed into a grown man. In other words, he told himself that he had to take it all as a parable with meaning, with assurance, and by assurance he meant the *tarantola ballerina*, the dancing tarantula; that is, he had to view the present circumstances as if they were a parable, to be elucidated and expounded. Specifically, that mute oracle meant that the *sbarbatello* he once was could not succeed in that quest, given what it was, and that the years had to go by first, he had to grow a beard, make a man of himself, go to war, and upon returning from war ...

And in fact it's at this very moment, as he took his first look around as a grown man, peering through the black dust, that he caught sight of a long procession of elderly *ferè*, male and female, who veering just then from the southeast, skimming first Strombolicchio and then Stromboli, filed before him heading south, roughly in the direction of the Volcano. They swam with no theatrical displays of leaping and flipping over the water, no spouting bursts of air, no show of wailing waa-waa-waa, or being dispirited. A funereal air, unspoken, hung over the entire group, and strangest of all, they actually seemed to be going to a funeral, that procession of grandmotherly *nonnave ferè* trundling along Stromboli's churning waters, their brown backs showered with the volcanic ash that blackened the sea through which they plowed.

Without a second thought, as if still prompted by inspiration, he dove in and swam to the end of the line: his heart told him that if he kept up with them—and it should not be an impossible feat, given that by now they seemed to be struggling to make their way through the sea ahead of them—the mystery of the thirty-year-old *nonnave* disappearing without a trace would be revealed: that was the unknown something he was searching for, which had a volcanic hint, a caustic, distasteful quality. So now he had discovered its name, and that in itself was a little like discovering it in actual fact.

When they left Stromboli's ash-strewn waters and entered the clear blue depths of the sea, he noticed that the old *ferè* left behind them a foamy wake that lingered long after their passage; it was not saline froth, but something like the thick slime trail of snails.

Ahead of him, in front of the line of *ferè*, appeared the Volcano: the immense, black mouth of the extinguished crater, the fearsome cone that dominated the island's apocalyptic landscape and its cataclysmic eruptions, their folds and upthrust formations shaped like sea giants, as if colossal pods of baleen and sperm whales had been beached on the island, turned to stone, and over time taken on the purplish brown color of that rock, glazed by the crater's slow, intense fire.

Of course they were approaching the Volcano from the west, the side that compares to the rest of the island like the Inferno compares to Paradiso: a sea seething with boiling fumaroles; rocks and cliffs entirely of sulfur stone, their walls a stark, dazzling yellow that, like colossal mirrors, reflected the sun toward the sea and against the black conical mountain; and lastly the coast, perilous and unapproachable, let alone from the sea, perforated with sulfurous hot springs emitting unbreathable vapors.

Half-blinded by the glittering sparks of the sulfur displays, he saw the procession of *ferè* heading there rather than rounding the island and continuing on; he thought he must be mistaken because of the glare in his eyes. Were those *nonnane* perhaps going to take the cure for their rheumatic and arthritic pains? To take a steam bath in the bubbling salt-springs and sulfurous hot pools on the shore? The line had shortened quite a bit when he realized that the *ferè* were entering a narrow inlet where the yellow rockfaces were reflected, steeper and more dazzling, and there, amid the roiling mouths of the fumaroles, one after the other they submerged and disappeared from his view.

He then dove in after them, swam deeper and deeper into the dense underwater darkness, and was barely in time to catch a glimpse of the white bellies of the last ones as they disappeared inside a kind of immense circular grotto of black, mossy stone, rising up, hollow and somber: it was the root of the volcanic cone.

He followed them in there as well, slipping under the rocky ledge into dark, dense waters, as if myriads of squid had emptied their sac there. He swam blindly for a while, running out of breath, and by now losing hope of finding his way out, when a glow appeared above him: a pale, veiled light filtered down from the water's surface, one ripple after another, as if swayed by a faint draft; instead it was the old *ferè* who, leaping into the crater of the volcano, caused those reflections of light, their white bellies creating a kind of luminous undulation. He swam a little farther up and resurfaced in a great ring of funereal black waters, a gleaming purple color, in the underwater cavern of the Volcano. Once there, he found himself ipso facto in the otherworld of the *ferè*, and from what he ipso facto saw, he ipso facto knew that no one would ever believe him.

As soon as he emerged from the water, he looked up at the source of that undulating light and saw the last of the line of *ferè* still flying through the air, their flight culminating

in a leap, astounding even for them, which understandably departed from life and ended in death. They then aligned themselves in rows, on a kind of fiery spume that covered the volcanic cavern. Upon contact, the white-hot fire flared all around them, covering them and almost instantaneously devouring and incinerating the flesh, without, however, violating the carcass: stripped of the last shred of flesh and drained of the last drop of blood, the skeleton emerged from the pyre cleansed and pure, white as chalk, at once taking on an archaic air, as of solemnity.

The crater of the volcano emanated a stench that was at once repellent and magnetic, the stench of something no longer alive yet not entirely dead: it could be the stench of the extinct volcano itself, which, however, was still stirring and simmering in its ashes, or it could be this neither-living-nor-dead stench, along with that of the *ferre*, of their ashes mixed with the ashes of the volcano.

At that point, shadows blotted the light that descended from the mouth of the crater high above; peering intently, he could make out some of the Islands' familiar falcons, wheeling around up there: they must have followed the *ferre* heading for their graveyard, as if they had mysteriously smelled their deaths, not from the scents or spours that the procession of *ferre* spread through the air as they traveled, but maybe from the trails of drool oozing from the *nonnave's* mouths, or even from the hidden intent in the *ferre's* minds. Now, however, from that tiny cupola of blue sky over the volcano's mouth, the clacking of the falcons' beaks echoed in the cavern; they plummeted like stones, then soared a little, screeching furiously, *kak kak kak*, certainly furious to see the line of *ferre*, one moment tasty meat, the next white, lustrous carcasses, reduced to bone.

He was struck, then, by an aspect of that death by fire, an aspect that nonetheless might be its motivation, the crux of the entire mystery: what struck him, specifically, was the fact that the fire spared them from passing through the vile, abominable stage of putrefaction, transforming them at once from death to the skeleton state where nothing remains of life's outer shell to inspire revulsion. Should he be astounded and astoundingly conclude that they had chosen fire for that reason, for this purifying objective?

He began looking around to explore the mysterious place: he wanted to take a good look, to engrave everything in his mind and remember it, to remember everything about that otherworld, so he would be able to describe it to the *pellisquadre* with a wealth of details, so he could show those fishermen how worthy the *ferre* were. The feeling he'd had initially came over him again, namely, that they would not believe him: which is why he wanted to imprint everything firmly in his mind, to demonstrate to them via particulars of time and place that the astounding act of the *ferre* had actually happened, he had seen it with his own eyes, he had not dreamed it, as one might at first think.

The great conical cavern, resembling the interior of a shell, spiraled upward, its walls continuing to narrow until they reached the crater's jagged mouth; the walls, a kind of lava stone that gleamed like carbon coke, were strangely lush with bougainvillea, shrub after shrub hanging in the void, casting funereal purplish glints all around.

Within this setting the scene was exactly arranged, ringed all the way up with *fera* carcasses. The crypt ascended in a spiral along the turns of the conical cavern's hissing embers, and the skeletons, all identical in size and rank as if death had leveled them in this as well as age, were lined up one after another along the spiral, as if hopeful of circling around and ascending to heaven. Revolving side by side, they were arranged in such a way that it seemed the calculation of a mind were behind the order and attention, the work of a hand manifest in that host of hooked profiles and crowded teeth, those S-shaped silhouettes, as if they were a single carcass revolving through the cavern, as if numerous upper-case S's formed a single upper-case S, similar to a long, bony serpentine figure.

Head tipped back, his eyes traveled up the sepulchral crater: his gaze turned right and left, admiring and taking it all in, as if trying to unravel that long, skein of knitted carcasses, through which a fluid seemed to circulate, seemingly holding them spellbound; and at the same time it was as if his gaze were joining together, fiber by fiber, the threads of his wonder at the new species of *fera* he had discovered: courageous and dignified, with the creed of living virtuously, and if not, of dying virtuously. And the wonder of his gaze lingered on the carcass-lined crater, and each time it was as if the silence and solitude of the cavern intensified under his gaze, instead of diminishing as would have been natural, and it seemed to him, at a certain point, that the silence and solitude came alive, as if a fluid truly flowed from the hooked skull to the crescent-shaped tail of the long serpentine row of skeletons: revolving and circling, the carcasses seemed to be rising up the cone, amid the velvety, vivid purple bougainvillea, above the cold, hot embers of the subterranean fire which crackled in the air, edging the skeletons with violet-bluish foam, as if they were already ascending into the clouds. He then had the curious impression that the secret nature of the place and the astonishing act of the *fera* taking place there, was nourishing his wonder, and this, he supposed, was the mark of every mystery, the trick, as simple as Columbus' egg, to keeping the secret.

He returned brimming with admiration for the *fera* who, dying, reversed themselves like a glove, and among the many Janus-faces they showed in life, afterward showed yet another face, one of purity and sacrifice. And his feeling toward them was truly that of a faithful disciple. There was something beautiful and solemn in their voluntary, solitary death, something human, something heroic.

The *fera* had revealed itself to him: it had shed its former way of life, cast off any cunning mental ruses, its seductive, fraudulent exterior, and allowed him to see its innermost self, bared to the bone. Look into my heart, it seemed to be saying to one who had thought it incapable of having a heart.

The *fera* is evil at heart, monstrous, he had always been told. But who can know the innermost heart of a *fera*? Who had ever intimately known the heart of a *fera* who goes and hides with its death when it decides it is no longer fit for life, something that not even the finest of human beings do? This *fera* who, when it thinks its time has come, courageous and unseen, without whimpering or whining, sets off and steals away to its graveyard where it leaps into the fire to be incinerated, thereby sparing us the sight of its body's putrefying flesh? That *fera* who shows you that its fear is not of dying, but of being dead, of becoming carrion, which is the only thing it is concerned about and shows fear of? This *fera* who, needless to say, is heroic over something it stands to gain nothing from simply because it is an exemplary act? This *fera* who does everything that in life it scorned: acting the hero and being exemplary, this *fera* who can't stand the thought of the sight it might present when it is dead, the idea that its body would go on putrefying at the mercy of the sea? This *fera*, a *fera* of such delicate sensitivity, that it would deal with that tremendous, strictly personal matter on its own, going off to its hidden graveyard, to die beforehand for the sake of modesty and decency towards itself and others, could anyone honestly say they had ever intimately known the heart of such a *fera*? That was the point.

But that was also the point at which he again felt rising within him the strange, disheartening impression he always had when he thought about the extraordinary scene at the Volcano, namely, that the *pellisquadre* would not believe him.

There was a flaw in that daydream of his.

The more he purified and extolled that *fera*, that miracle of the otherworld, the more his words rang false; the more exalting his praises grew, the more he realized that *that fera* no longer bore any resemblance to a *fera* but for its name. And that's where the flaw lay, in "*fera*," in the name *fera*, feral. That exceptional death that he had seen did not tally with the *fera*'s loathsomeness in life, its name did not fit that creature of the otherworld, name and thing, in short, did not correspond, were not convincing, persuasive.

So, at that point, the proper name, the true name of *that fera*, the one that perfectly suited that creature and its otherworld death, emerged virtually unprompted, consistent with its nature, and letter by letter unseated the *fera*-beast: *d-e, d-e-l, d-e-l-f, d-e-l-f-i, d-e-l-f-i*

n-o, that is to say, dolphin, the name of the good version of the *fera* habitué of the Scylla and Charybdis, the name of the continental *fera*, the *fera* that speaks with its tongue between its teeth, that speaks Italian, the *fera* of the high seas, the prevailing *fera*.

When all was said and done, then, he discovered the graveyard of the dolphins, and the dolphins' death captivated him: in other words, he discovered nothing, because even in life the dolphin is captivating, it is a creature of the otherworld while still in this one.

It was all very clear, now, his great wonder at witnessing a marvel, the revelation of the *fera*, of that toothy-minded scum who with a leap elevated itself from all the deceits and grisly destruction of a thirty-year life and soared into death, reclining in glory, eyes turned upward, aspiring to heaven, beautiful, virtuous and dishonest. With the name dolphin, everything returned to normal again, there was no cause for his wonder. There was nothing extraordinary about that death, it could not be said to be heroic or anything, nor was it a revelation either, given that even in life the dolphin is a revelation when compared to the *fera*, outwardly his equal and inwardly his opposite. Much less could it be said to be a dream vision, dreamed up the way you dream of impossible things that you would like to see fulfilled, because then the dolphin's life itself would be a waking dream if you consider that of its equal and opposite, the *fera*. And finally, it could not be called a fairy tale either, because when the transgressions of its equal and opposite, the *fera*, are considered, then everything that passes as facts occurring in the dolphin's life are fairy tales.

He told himself this, and at the same time he realized why he had sensed from the first moment that the *pellisquadre* would not believe him. No wonder, the fishermen were familiar with the *fera*, and because they knew it well, they did not believe in the dolphin. Not only did they not believe in it; the *pellisquadre* couldn't even conceive of a dolphin-like *fera*, baptized, and confirmed, a type of *fera* like that, for them, did not exist, neither in the sea nor on land nor in heaven. An otherworld *fera*, that was precisely what it was for them. That's why, in their eyes, its name wasn't the only flaw in his waking dream; for them, that custom-made dream was entirely flawed, because if you eliminated the graveyard of the dolphins, if you excluded the dolphin's carcass, it died, and the dolphin survived, for them it was all one and the same: who had ever known or seen such a dolphin? In a word: as far as they were concerned, he hadn't discovered a thing, nothing that pertained to their old nemesis, the *fera*; the mystery that its disappearance represented to them when it completed its thirty-years of vile acts had nothing to do with the mystery that he revealed to them, which meant nothing to them, rather it went in one ear and out the other.

Imagine him showing up with that dolphin of the otherworld in his hand, with that never-never land of a dream, just think if they wouldn't shoot down his whole sandcastle:

the volcanic cone, the serpentine graveyard, the white dolphin carcasses laid out in an S, for Sanctity, like the *ossidimorto* biscuits reminiscent of dead bones in bakery shops on November second. Not even with his eyes wide open could he ever dream that the *pellisquadre* would swallow that otherworld *fera*. Oh, sure, a great gift that was, really great, that he fancied presenting to the illustrious *pellisquadre*.... For starters, the idea that he would compare himself to Astolfo who ascended to the moon to retrieve Orlando's mind, that he went to an otherworld of the *fera*, passing through water and fire, to bring them the carcass of the *fera*, proof positive that the thirty-year-old *fera*, when they vanished, did so because they were headed toward their mysterious volcanic graveyard, that he went, in short, to bring them the revelation of that enigma, the mystery, namely, that even if the *fera* did not wait for their time to come, and even if they themselves decided the time and place and manner, they too died of old age, and in this respect there was nothing special and phenomenal about them compared to humans: that he set out for that reason and went to discover the otherworld of the dolphins, that he was returning and bringing them a dolphin carcass that looked like a consecrated host, a hallowed, holy skeleton, a relic. And was he saying that it died? Was he saying that there was nothing special or phenomenal about the *fera* compared to them as human beings? Was he saying that, and masquerading the *fera* as a dolphin? Was he giving this deceitful gift, wrapped in words, to those fishermen who never believed that the thieving, infamous, bloodthirsty habitué of their waters, once it leaves the Scylla and Charybdis, breathes the air of the continent and becomes civilized, changing its name and way of life? To those men who did not believe and do not believe in the dolphin because a leopard doesn't change its spots? Was that how he would unveil the mystery of the thirty-year-old *fera* to them? By resorting to the dolphin? By drawing upon the dolphin who never died, because from what he saw during his waking dream, for the dolphin aspiring to heaven, as for everyone, it cannot be said that this life is a passage, but rather that it is a passage to eternal life and celestial reward. What was he trying to do? Pull their leg, the *pellisquadre*? Was he being serious or clowning around? At that moment, he really didn't know, but he did know why his daydream had proceeded smoothly up to the point where he dreamed of revealing it to the *pellisquadre*, at whom it was directed; it was just at that point that he hit a rock.

He found himself, at that point, in the deep darkness of night, where it seemed his eyes were still closed even when they were wide open; as if bent in front of a tripod with his face under the black cloth of the camera box, he found himself in the act of framing the *pellisquadre*, eleven of them arranged in a group at their small port, against the whitish background of the houses, sitting before him in a half-length portrait pose, on three rows of seats, from the first row, the shortest, to the third, the longest.

To his eyes they were all identical, in face and body, as if each had those of every other, each the characteristics of all the others and none of his own, identical to the point that while his eyes took them in as a whole, as a group, looking at them one by one, on the other hand, he couldn't even recognize his father.

All identical and all, apparently, elevated to the rank of admiral. As for their uniforms, however, there was hardly anything left of them: one would have said that they too were returning from Naples, that motley crew of *pellisquadre* admirals, and there, in Naples, they must have torn the insignia and ranks and identifying badges off their uniforms. They had, however, kept the hat, and that alone was worth the full-scale uniform: because it was the parade hat, that imposing absurdity that is meant to be a felucca, and looks just like one, if not actually like the felucca in the center of the stick they plant in the swordfish, an upside-down paper boat with an exaggeratedly pointy hull. It seemed they had kept the hat as a trophy, and at that moment they were displaying it, resting on their knees. On display for him, he knew: to notify him at once of the great authority they held over him, the authority both of *pellisquadre* towards a *scagnozzo* in time of peace, and of admirals towards sailors in time of war.

Could there be any doubt then that he had hit a rock in his dream? With no mention of the dolphin, they sat looking at him as if they were carved in the rock of 'Ricchia. Those oracles' mouths in fact remained mute, as if they were actually made of stone; they had no need to speak their thoughts in words, they bore them written on their faces. That mysterious complicity of admirals spoke for them: don't pass it off to us as a *fera*, that dolphin of yours. That's what he read on their faces in plain letters. They were eloquent, very eloquent, in that mute pose: a tableau, a statement.

But still, what was that? That was the least of it. They had yet to tell him what they thought of him returning from war and coming back as a dolphinophile. And as if the admiral pose weren't enough, they performed a special pantomime for him, although at first, in their pantomime, he read everything backwards: just imagine, he read it as if, they, too, the *pellisquadre*, were transforming into dolphins. How does that saying go? Hope springs eternal.

Unexpectedly then, they came alive and performed a strange silent scene with a double meaning, the type of scene you only see in real dreams, the ones you have with your eyes closed. He too had a role in this silent scene, however, in some way speaking in it.

With their toes, as if they were having a good time, the *pellisquadre* began shifting the sand in front of each of them, looking up and watching his lips. He quickly saw that they were writing a word with their feet, and the word they were writing was dolphin; it

seemed, seeing them, that he was dictating the word dolphin to them. He could scarcely believe his eyes: the *pellisquadre*, like pupils at school, all intently absorbed in copying the word dolphin that he was dictating to them by merely moving his lips, as if he and they were all deaf mutes.

Now and then they would look up as if to see how this or that letter was formed, staring at his lips as though at a blackboard on which dolphin was written. They were good, very good, at simultaneously taking the dictation, dolphin, and transcribing it, with their feet moreover, accepting the class assignment he had given them without a protest, with no fuss and bother. He watched as those admirals, still ramrod straight and formal, grappled with that thorny, difficult word for the first time, the very one they had always persisted in ignoring, and he embraced them with his eyes, thinking it was a pity he could not recognize them individually, which of them was Luigi Orioles and which Jano Scarfi, which one was his father, Caitanello Cambria. Could he ever know that it was all a pantomime?

Still, that sight of the *pellisquadre* tracing around the *e* or tying a nice knot at the *f* of *d-e-l-f-i-n-o* with their big toe, did not seem too credibly realistic to him. Little by little he began to suspect that the *pellisquadre* were performing a previous scene, the representation of a well-known incident, a pantomime that made no sense only he, apart from the alluding and deluding effect it had on him, did not grasp the absurdity of the scene. But they made sure to also give him the solution to the riddle, even spoon-feeding it to him.

In fact, once they had written it, the word dolphin, they went over it all again with their big toe, as if to touch it up, and you have to admit that although they were not educated people, and wrote with their feet, still, to call their writing beautiful wasn't enough, magical is what it was, because the word actually seemed figurative, with its graceful outline of loops and whorls; it was as if it were literally the flesh-and-blood form of the dolphin, as if by going over it with their big toe they had given it, the word, body and a feeling of life.

And when by doing that they had formed it so well that it looked like a dolphin slapped on the sand, its contours hollowed deep enough to meet the water below, then, abruptly, they all rose to their feet. The feluccas, as if forgotten, rolled off their knees onto the shore and from there into the sea; launching themselves toward the receding breaker like little boats, they began to drift, rocking in the waves. The *pellisquadre*, however, did not so much as glance at them, as if to say they were not there to play with boats, not even impressive boats, the feluccas of admirals.

Appel

As soon as they stood up, they spat at their feet, that is, they spat on the word they had written there, and it was as if a sea of spit originated in front of them, causing the creature, finding itself in this sea, to awake from the word written on the sand: At that moment it seemed to recompose, comma-shaped from head to tail so as not to spill out of that sea of spit. It was white, the color of a good little virgin, and it immediately started wailing waa-waa-waa, all innocent-eyed, as though in the cradle.

By accident, but only deceptively, the *pellisquadre's* feet bumped into it, as if the dolphin were in their way, then all together they kicked it. Again they looked at him, and as if they were reading this too on his lips, still moving only their own lips like deaf mutes, they started singing the virtues of the dolphin to him, its glory, in chorus, firing a pistol at it at every inglorious villainy.

It is pure, first and foremost, they glorified it.

It is virginal, they glorified it next.

It is a martyr, they glorified it to conclude, ending their glorification on a truly winning note.

Then they seemed to read something else on his lips. Into the sea with it! Toss that dolphin into the sea immediately! They sibilated it on his face, and in his ear, and in his eyes, and to him that sibilance, echoing present past present, resounding in memory's eareye, had something petulant, vile and despotic about it, in a word, it had the sound of an order.

They repeated that order to one another, as if clenching it between their teeth, and at the same time each fired a pistol at his dolphin, at its rear end, making the dolphins fly through the air into the sea, toward him, as if the admirals were tossing them back in his face. The dolphins seemed like projectiles hurled from the *pellisquadre's* feet, like torpedoes, depth bombs, launched from the catapults of a corvette, or like clay pigeons, the black discs made of pitch that are used as targets for passengers on ocean liners when, at sea, they get that strange urge to aim and shoot. One after another, the dolphins flew past him, and he found himself closing one eye and squinting the other, as if his eye were following them through the sights of a musket or a camera: at that moment, he, too, felt that strange urge, that impulse completely new to him, to aim and shoot, but he thought he knew why.

By this time the *pellisquadre's* pantomime, that whole silent scene with its double meaning was clear to him, glaringly obvious. It was now blatantly clear that they were performing a scene that dated back to 1935, no less, and the scene was the infamous

casus belli *fera*-dolphin they'd had that year with a Fascist Excellency sailing for Abyssinia. It was glaringly obvious that this was the incident they were enacting for him, obvious that they were portraying him in it, obvious, in short, that in their eyes, with that dolphin of his, he seemed like a monkey mimicking that Excellency, since unaware but convinced, he was parroting that vile son-of-a-bitch word for word, move for move. That's how they were portraying him, that's what they were performing for him, not for laughs either, because taking an infamous specimen like that Excellency as a model was hardly a laughing matter.

It is pure... It is virginal... It is a martyr... Whose fine inglorious words had he used to extol the praises of his volcanic dolphin? Had he not taken them from *his* mouth, word for word, from the mouth of that exemplary Excellency? Or did he presume to have invented it himself, that fine phraseology, that dolphinophile phraseology par excellence? This, tacitly, is what the *pellisquadre* were reminding him of, this and only this: did he remember? If so then he, degenerate *scagnozzzo*, should be ashamed to mimic the Fascist Excellency to them, he should be embarrassed to speak to the *pellisquadre* about dolphins: was he, by chance, rebelling against his admirals? Against his mother, as it were?

The *pellisquadre* looked at him with contemptuous, infinite indifference, their gaze skimming over him as if he were a blot on the landscape, and he felt himself swell inside, spill over, forced by those looks: until he imagined that word dolphin oozing out of his lips, his closed mouth, like a bubble, a trickle of drool from all the slobbering praise he had earlier bestowed on them. It left a slimy prickle on his lips, a repulsive bittersweet taste, as if it were a small viscous creature, with as many little feet as letters have, and it clawed with these serifs so as not to slip and fall from his lips. The *pellisquadre*, however, made sure to attach it firmly to his lips: squinting at the tiny eye of a needle, stitch by stitch, letter by letter, *d* and *l*..., they sewed the dolphin onto his mouth with the thread of his drool, dotted with bright red blood, as if his had mixed with that of the dolphin.

Now, he imagined he must appear somewhat womanish to the *pellisquadre* because, to his mind, that name drooling like caramel on his lips must be painting his mouth like lipstick, giving him a brash, femme-boy look. A *scagnozzzo*, who far away, at war, became perverted in every way, that's how he must appear to the *pellisquadre*, as if in their eyes, that dolphin on his lips erased his manliness as a *pellisquadre scagnozzzo*.

He could almost taste it, that caramelly hint of blood lipstick on his lips. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, to rub that repulsive slime off his lips, straightened up, and slapped his head in disgust; racked with worries, he stopped daydreaming, and came fully back to his senses, as if emerging from a nightmare. He came to with his cheek resting on the carcass-littered seashore, his mouth pressed against the black sand:

in the grains of sand stuck to the saliva on his lips, he perceived that volcanic trace of hot must and cold forged metal, bittersweet and primitive.

He had the impression that he'd been dreaming, first with his eyes open and then with his eyes closed: up to the point where he emerged from the crater of the Volcano his eyes had been open, then, from there on, up to the contemptuous, mocking pantomime that the *pellisquadre* had performed for him, his eyes had been closed. Though he hadn't been the least bit aware of it, he must have caught a few winks of sleep, a second or two, otherwise what was he to think? That even the *pellisquadre* decorated as admirals and seated in Court Martial to judge him, even the pantomime, with him the little monkey aping the dolphinophile Excellency, even the name written in lipstick on his lips and the sense of effeminacy it gave him, that even that nightmare, in a word, from which he seemed to then return to reality as if from a deep sleep dream, was he fantasizing about this too, because he wished it would happen?

The fact was that he and sleep were playing cops and robbers, given that no sooner did he realize something, just when a kind of vision appeared before his eyes, sleep, very quietly, would instantly scatter its soporific pixie dust over his eyes: maybe only a pinch, a sprinkling, just enough to make him lose consciousness, but enough to hold him more or less spellbound by those visions that drifted in and out of his mind as if by chance, inspired by a distant time and the suggestion of a nearby place, by a whiff of volcanic sand, and aroused by causes both within himself and external. A dream, but maybe not, he might have told himself. A dream, but maybe not, aptly expressed the idea of that dream of his, dreamed with one eye open and the other closed.

But how to read it? How to interpret a dream that was not really a dream? What system of cabala was he to use to grasp its meaning, its implications? The inference that he was a degenerate *scagnozzo*, for example, being seen more as the *scagnozzo* of the dolphinophile Excellency than of the *pellisquadre*, the contempt the Charybdean admirals stamped on his lips as if to brand him, the abasement, what kind of dream was that, what was he supposed to make of it? Here, too, even in this, there must be a flaw, a different one, or the same one that must have been there when he set out in search of the dead *fera* and returned with the immortal dolphin. He did not consider the fact that the dream was his, and that the defect could also be in him, since it was he himself who, dreaming with eyes open, dreamed about the dolphin and imagined parading it before the *pellisquadre* who in their eyes, to shame him, recast him in the execrable mold of the Excellency, on that dolphinophile figure with his bullying, Camorrist-like Fascist shield, whom they kept in mind as if he were a byword.

In short, it had not yet crystallized in his mind that his waking dream, that dream of wanting, originated within him; and that it was he, consequently, who wished that

abasement upon himself, that disgrace, he who wished to accept that discredit, as if deep down he felt guilt, remorse and a desire for atonement.

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