

Dora Albanese

Purple sea

I wish I were the wind
that knocks you over and embraces you,
and whispers words as he touches you lightly on the face.

I wish I were the sea, that laps your ankles,
and then receives the whole of you.

Who can love you more than he?

P. A. Quarantotti Gambini, *To the sun and the wind*

I was alone when I met Josephine and I didn't know what else to do but hide myself away in the Salento sea and blot out my memories of Marçela. I put on my cap and running shoes and left the house early to see the dawn, a thick lather of sea above me, a strip of white that for a few seconds permeated the sky. I breathed in its smell and all the smells available to me: the rotting seaweed on the beach, the remains the high tide had handed out over the night, open clams, shells, bits of wood. And the smell of other people's sleep, the sand-covered trainers of the youths sleeping on the sun beds at the Delfino lido, their beach towels pulled right up over their heads. One girl, trying to throw up, was kneeling at the water's edge, holding her forehead and digging her feet into the ground like a sprinter at the starting block. She might have been Josephine's age. It occurred to me that she could have been my daughter. I felt like slapping her but instead I started jogging along, the red dragonflies beside me. The girl, twisted around on herself, was like a blot of ink on

the final draft of a love letter. The black clothes, fishnet tights ripped at the calves and the hair tortured by its disco style fuchsia tint disturbed the harmony of my landscape.

After another bout of her retching, I turned round again and she turned to look too, her eyes watery and unfocussed, squashed down by an extremely low and wrinkled forehead. She shouted at me to mind my own business, otherwise she would wake her dog Bruto who would bite my ass. "Bruto, what a fucking name", as I said it I noticed the dragonflies had disappeared.

I took off my shoes, tied a couple of knots and hung them around my neck. Barefoot I would run faster and leave behind that desolation.

Under the sun umbrella a Chinese peddler was preparing concoctions of essential oils for massages and stuff to sell to the tourists. The smell of freshly baked brioches from La Pineta bar seemed to annihilate any other smell. I could see the people taking their numbers and joining the queue.

I carried on running – barefoot I could feel the cold wet sand under my toenails – heading beyond the water's edge and into the sea.

Slowing my pace I trod on the damp backs of the black stones. I kicked them far away and looked elsewhere, towards the real sea, purple as a bruise. The sea that scares children and their mothers, the sea with its mouth gaping open ready to suck everything in. The sea cold and still that seems like a piece of death.

Then, anxiety tightening my lungs, I lowered my head, breathed in deeply and out through my mouth to oxygenate my lungs and die later than expected. I stretched the muscles of my neck, knotted from sleepless nights and stared at the stones once again, stared at what was near me, what comforted me. I watched my feet lose their shape, the hairs on my

legs waver in the water, the immense, worn out sole of the sea, the black abyss into which I would have liked to drop and which instead continued to hold me up; I watched the chains of water that held my ankles down more and more as I continued my walk, my reflection distorted on every wave, the sun opaque like a plastic bottle that has slipped out of the rubbish bin dirtying my skin.

Without explanation Marçela had left me two months earlier and I couldn't find a friend to share my sufferance. Everyone was out of town and all I was left with were the sea and its holidaymakers, over-relaxed and over-cheery, with their dinghy-shaped mules and creams and oils of all different smells. Every time I went down to the sea the tourists watched me, baffled – Josephine would have too – and I could hear their questioning voices: Who was I? What did I want from them, quiet employees in holiday mode, motionless lizards under the late August sun? What did I want from their pure and clean cut lives? What would I want from Josephine? I didn't know but meanwhile I carried on floating. The last time I'd embraced Marçela I thought I was going to die; the first time, I'd taken refuge in her and never stopped calling her *amore*.

I brought her on holiday to this beach after I'd been courting her for a few months, to make love in silence, far away from the town and its snares, from the ambulance sirens and hysteria of the traffic. From the start I couldn't work out whether I was bringing a story of quick sex with me or the last woman in my life. While I was driving on the deserted, sundrenched motorway she stroked my legs and caressed my hair. I would have liked to ask her what she wanted to do when she grew up, whether she had any dreams, any plans, her taste in music, a favourite dish, but I didn't because I would have seemed like an old pain in the

ass. Our breaths were warm and odourless like new things: we smelt of shampoo, hot baths, smiles and polite gestures.

She was at my side and she was wearing a knee-length dress, a 'respectable' girl's dress, violet red linen with crocheted embroidery around its wide skirt. She smoked American tobacco, careful not to burn her long black shiny hair that sometimes ended up on her lips, framing her high cheekbones, in perfect harmony with her full and calm breasts. Marçela proved to be an attentive woman, willing to love me seriously and gracefully despite all my physical weaknesses, my boredom, bad moods and the cynicism of one who expects nothing from life.

Our trip to the seaside felt more like a rediscovery than an escape from the city. We seemed like two people wanting to get used to cohabitation again, to being considerate to one another. How could I go to bed with Marçela without thinking I would be getting on top of a wife and not just any woman? How would I be able to let myself go if all she was waiting for was to rescue me, be useful to me, save my life, cook for me? Sex between married couples is different from sex between strangers: with a wife you have to forget the shouting, the reproaching, the scenes of jealousy, the curlers, face masks, varicose veins and the insults, as with a husband you have to overlook the snoring, the untidiness, the stinking socks, the outings with childless friends, the drinking and burping. Let's face it, it's always been completely different between strangers and I could not get it out of my head that written in Marçela's eyes was the exact moment when she would adjust my tie and dark suit before the procession.

Once at the beach we decided to go for a swim in the sea despite the cold water and the fish corpses floating on the surface. The pebbly sand

was clean. Two boys were getting enjoyment out of dangling the fish from their lines and not throwing them back into the sea until they were at death's door. "That's why there are dead fish floating about. It's those delinquents" said Marçela. "I'm going to go and tell them: And what if I kept you under water till you choked? Right. I'm going to go and say it". I took her by the hand and pulled her close. I yelled at the two boys to stop, and go away, and one of them, the older and bonier one replied: "What d'you want grandpa... you go home, more like...". The smaller one followed on with a raspberry and before I could answer, they had already skipped off, laughing.

"There, at least they're gone and they'll leave those poor fish in peace... happy now?" "Yes, but I'm sorry they offended you, thanks anyway" she said seriously before diving into the water and swimming towards the purple sea that, young and beautiful as she was, would never harm her. It crossed my mind that only brave people knew how to swim out to sea, ordinary ones stayed close to the shore.

"Come here, Diego... come on, come over to me" she shouted hiding between one wave and the next.

I didn't take any notice and sat on the shore, where the water billowed my Hawaiian trunks: I was an ordinary man and I knew it.

My house wasn't far from the sea, I could make it out distinctly: the shutters blanched like the door by the salty air, the feet of the rocking sofa on the veranda drowned in rust.

Marçela soon joined me. She sat at my side trembling like a child, the skin on her arms wrinkled by the wind. She gave me a long, lingering kiss. I abandoned myself to her love during that kiss. We walked home with our arms round each other. The door was jammed, its wood swollen

by all the storms, and we pushed so hard together that we broke the lock. A tiny mouse greeted us before fleeing through the doorway as fast as it could. Marçela smiled.

We threw open the window to let the stuffiness out, then Marçela went off for a shower. The water fell coppery onto her body and when she called me over to show me I shouted at her to let it run a bit but she didn't listen. We were already a couple on holiday. She washed in silence as I got the lumps of sand out of my shorts and put the water on for some pasta.

After the shower she joined me in the bedroom where I was changing the sheets and sweeping up the grey balls of dust that had gathered under the bed. She threw the door half open and, both serious and sad, positioned herself in front of me and stared me in the eyes. Her wet hair was like willow branches sprouting from the bones over a skin marked with bruises and scratches and small shapely dents of cellulite along her legs.

"What is it, *amore*? Can I do anything for you?" I said offering her my open hand.

"Come here. Let's lie down a bit, you're tired." I thought I could protect her, but she was too young to understand that to carry on living you had to forget. Marçela forgot nothing: her old schoolmates' birthdays, the good smells, the streets; with those big eyes black as the seabed I'm now treading, she was blackmail for anyone, blackmailing you with the memory of things that should never fade into oblivion.

She came over and caressed my face and hair, seeking warmth with her feet between my feet, sneaking in between my legs, and I let her do it because I liked her so gloomy and quiet, so elusive, as if I only recognized her at certain times, going back to loving her for the first time,

amazed and astounded. She was a dignified woman. I knew it was my duty to protect her. She had left everything: her land, her family and her friends. At the beginning out of envy for her origins I invented a Spanish past too: my grandfather's father had emigrated to Spain at the end of the 19th century, a cousin from Valencia, an aunt still in Madrid. None of it was true. Just a few lies to get her into bed; and when she laughed at my stories I was left alone in the awkwardness of my adulthood, a miserable fifty year-old trying to shuffle the cards of his life.

I think I have always looked like a man waiting for something. That is what I had become, and that is what I still am now. I keep on waiting for life to get me out of trouble, to save me from these irritating sun rashes, from the vertigo I get because my ears are plugged up from the water, from the dirt in certain spots of abandoned sea, from the view of a couple making love hidden beneath a boat.

First she kissed my eyes then slipped in between the sheets and entered me forcefully, almost arrogantly, covering my face with her fine branches of wet willow and raising herself up now and then, distributing the weight of her slender body on outstretched arms positioned either side of the bed, as I would have done had I been on top of her. I looked at her as I am now looking at the sole of the sea, lost and still. I couldn't understand what she was seeking with that solitary, raging race inside me; what she thought she was going to find. Perhaps the women I had been in love with in the past, the ones I had gone to bed with, their sullen expressions after making love, my thoughtfulness as I blew a goodbye kiss into their ears as I accompanied them to the door. My entire life was to be hers. I was giving myself to her like a woman submitting to her man. The tighter her small sweaty hands pulled me to her, as if she was ripping off the skins of

my other affairs, her shadowy face, her eyes staring wide at my chest, the more I saw the other women, the ones I'd married, Giuliana and Monica, and the ones I'd dumped at the airport after a one-night stand and who were now coming back for the reckoning. I decided to close my eyes and let myself be run through by that body of a woman that had become all the bodies of my life and it was then that I started to feel really afraid of dying, when I realized that my life could be perfectly summarized. The race over, her fury appeased, I went off towards the sea, diving naked with my eyes closed, confused and tired. I was cold, it was June, the beach was deserted and the sea low.

Marçela stayed at the water's edge with her bathrobe open over her naked body, her arms crossed, one leg behind the other. I watched her through the waves and she was opaque. Two seagulls were flying low and watching me as I was made to submit to a woman. Their cries sounded like mockery.

We returned to Rome in silence that same evening. I hoped she would speak to me, fondle my hair, say it had just been an attack of jealousy; I wanted to keep her on top of me, sleepy and placid, and tell her I was in love, confess that I wanted her at my side every morning and every evening. Instead she turned her head and went to sleep.

When we arrived at her house, I parked near the front door, pulled the hand brake and switched off the lights. A cat ran off along the road and hid in a tree. I turned to Marçela and caressed her hair.

She woke up and asked me if we had arrived. I said we were at her house and that I would come up with her for a glass of water. She didn't reply.

She hugged me hard, kissed me on the forehead, hugged me again and held the lobe of my ear between her fingers for a second, fondling it. That

was how she left me forever, and I thought I was going to die.

I stayed outside her house in a daze. She had abandoned me for no reason and Rome was so quiet on a Sunday evening.

As the lights of Marçela's flat were going on, I started to cry like a baby.