

Towards Rust

Prisca Agustoni

Novel

Italian



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Verso la ruggine

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Verso la ruggine, the latest poetical work by Prisca Agustoni, draws inspiration from the terrible environmental disasters which, between 2015 and 2019, struck Minas Gerais, the state in South East Brazil where the author - originally from Lugano in Switzerland - has lived and worked for some years. The texts, divided into two sections (Colpi di scure - Axe-blows and I sopravvissuti - The Survivors), drop the reader into a tragedy that becomes a metaphor and symbol for a catastrophe that includes everyone.

*"if roots have memory
Like underground mines*

*one day
at the first movement
at the first wrong step*

*there will be rust-coloured buds
that burst
threatening and indecent*

flowers opening on to the precipice"

Author

Prisca Agustoni was born in Lugano, Switzerland and has lived for many years between Italian Switzerland and Brazil, where she works as a translator and as a teacher of Italian literature. She writes and self-translates in Italian, French and Portuguese and makes this journey between languages her creative and reflective engine. She has published several collections of poems in the three languages.

Photo: Julien Chavaille

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Excerpt translated by Shaun Whiteside

The Season of Mud

in the beginning was the mud.

Then a horse's leg, fetlock
unreined

or mane

like a branchless trunk
bare roll

of cartilage

emerging from the marsh
and slipping like a stone

smooth bone buried already
in the loose-formed layers of fern
and clods

lichen tangled all around
hidden hands touching

and yet the sea is far away
and yet water is in short supply

and yet

growing in topsoil and torrent
root or stilt
rare risen flower
this spur

tar advances on the river
digs from below with blades
of shadow of splinters
and iron, to the bottom.
until it swallows it

the bitter taste of metal

why unearth fossils
why dig in memory to find
earth upon earth
bone upon bone
a history planting roots in the mouth

those scythe-smiles, moon-smiles,
so white in the darkness.
imitate piercing cries
or the movements of a doll
guarding its secret
of one who sees all but is voiceless

then there are those forest-
damp hands

abandoned ferns protruding from the mud

- cursed memory
murderous invader -

The damp centre of man

the village fell upon us
at evening.

Lava and ash rained down.
Beneath the earth more earth grew
like a slowly flaking nail

primordial ferns
woven with the tangle of turf

but no one knew yet
no one saw them
the houses that had switched bank
and colour, from brown to red to burnt
to ochre to mud

to black.

have crossed the watercourse.
returned along the frog coast,
barges floating rudderless

The residents of the district of Mariana
women, brothers, dogs,
single men

are all mothers waiting,
holding hands and waiting
for their children to return

in their mouths mixing night with sand
and taking care for the word to be
a light that brings peace once more

into the darkness of the village
comes the spasm of noise,
a dull, harsh roar
congealing sleep.

While everyone slumbers,
the sleepwalking child
looks for the puppy lost
between sheet and pillow,

open-eyed and barefoot
makes for the door
and without seeing it
gets the night full face
a violent impact,

the mute fist of the universe

explodes in a hidden point
the first crack
then grows the slender web
that frames the earth

the stray flaws
marking tributaries,
a cartography of catastrophe
that network of rivers
of blue pulsing veins
spreading
in the open palm
until they vanish
in long fingers of black swamp
on the valley floor
where loops of mud
rush out of time

gradually the banks
yield within us.
and with them
the whole village slowly
collapses into the water
and disappears

the people are still in the street
the stalls set out
the children with footballs in their hands

but the desperate dogs
look us straight in the eye,
with their human truth

detritus of iron and mud
beneath the mud, shifting gently
making moss on stones
like soft cushions

for the bodies in the valley floor

then eyes close also
clear as fireflies illuminate
the night, slowly as the stars
fade at dawn

in a circle depositing grains of rice
bean-seeds

little rocks

in a circle hugging around the fire
to say to the earth, *you are ours,*
here is where we were born
where roots will grow from bones
like sprouts on potatoes

then, with a voice already dark,
intone the chant invoking
the damp centre of man.

We, mute as insects

the folds of air are different
on a day moving towards a massacre:

in the dig on the bank
on the deserted football pitch
the eviscerated goal, no net.
is a bow stretched towards the void
and it resists and stands inflexibly,

with what is left of joy.
as if rowing
in the middle of the meadow,
testimony to the ruinous night

in which yesterday I ran
amidst the dust and the cheerful
shouts, the boy behind the ball

that rolls even today
between the empty joists, spinning
its invisible grief

our children
will one day count the rings of the trunk
the pages of the unwritten book

to discover their age
and their foreign syntax;

with a thirst for justice
they will investigate
the perpetual life of wood
after the rift

The alphabet of rubber and resin

Our grandchildren will build from nothing
the village around the shores of the river

they will have to return to the opening
to the fallen dyke, the machete
the black tongue
the biopsy of water and sky

and wait

the turtles of the Watu
retreated into their shells
at the first sign of danger

they went down to the rocks
for months
for years

and today they are still withdrawn

what remains of the disaster
are decals
sharp stalactites

they look like fixed spinning
carousels, visions of a calcified world

everything is motionless and far away
but there are long shadows,
haloes of hawks or harpy eagles
flying over the zone

they might be toxic clouds
of incinerated asbestos
those wings open over the desert

incandescent spectres
of the resin spilt on the cobblestones

and we, crushed against one another,
wait, perplexed and unharmed.

like insects trapped in amber

mute observing the gridlock of people
speaking but saying nothing
so that words may be a flame
that lights, in us, the thought
or at least round and fleshy words
of pressing from them a meaning,
any meaning, but a sincere one,
to resume the journey
and set off fearlessly along a path

these are rootless things
the remnants of a duration
short-lived
the lost objects, gone

into free fall
towards a depth that may be
endless

to remind us who we are.

We cling to one another
like objects in angle
for fear that this new balance
may dissolve.

until the coming of the next season.

At last the landscape will return
to gesture, to hand, to body

to the forgotten clock
to flowers, to seeds, to gardens

vision of a green as rare
as forgiveness.

Agripina (from "The Survivors")

I was in the garden picking mallow

after the crash I ran into the house
and looked for my daughter

she was still there, in her bed

she had rivers of earth
coming down from her eyes

her cheeks like limestone
rocks eroded by time

she was five and had a persistent fever

I brought her hot tea
with dark water from the well

I stroked her forehead
but my fingers left prints like
rocky paintings on stone

her breath smelt of mallow
she was five and her body still warm