



*Eva*¹

by Nicoletta Vallorani
translated by Mark Chu

Epigraph

The eyes because they have watched too much, without seeing.
The legs because they have walked in pointless places.
The brain because it failed to understand.
The guts because, unwinding them, you can draw a landscape.
The feet because they are wearing luxury shoes.
The arms because they have held women who didn't want to
be embraced.
The rest. Because there is a place for everything.
In order.

And the hands. Because they speak.

(p. 3)

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¹ The following sections of the novel were included in a reading at University College Cork, during the conference "Con(tra)vention: Crime and the Boundaries of Genre" (26-27 June 2009). A partial recording of the event is available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBKVsx30gEA&feature=related>> and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNRuEHWinyw>>.



From Chapter 1, Malpensa, 28 June 2023, 23:30.

My name's Nigredo. Just Nigredo: with a name like that, you don't need a surname.

I began calling myself that during the *glupan* war. I did things which made my family prefer to forget about me and to forget that they had given me their blood, love, money and name. I didn't go off to fight: I was too young. But I knew how to make bombs, a real talent, and it was the reason I began playing the superhero, at the service of whoever offered the best conditions to my natural gift. I even ended up in jail, but after a bit they had to let me out: I've always done a clean job, so no evidence. Then the time for bombs ended and I found myself with just one good eye and lots of scars. Some evenings I like to look at myself in the mirror and imagine that there's a story written on my skin. There is one written there, in effect: an enigma to solve.

I have no friends. No woman, no family, no home. Just a bed at the Gaol. A cell like all the others. A shared kitchen. No money. A job every now and then, precisely, with the Investigative Divisions.

I always find the guilty party. They arrest him. When I allow it. The last time, I let him get away. I still need to understand why.

My name is Nigredo and no one believes it, but I don't care. I like the night. I love water. I don't want to be touched. I've discovered a taste for art. I'm learning sign language. One day I'll be able to communicate with deaf-mutes, if there's any point. I like to look at hands moving in the air and drawing words. As long as they don't get so close as to brush against me.

Is that enough for you, missus?

I look at the African sadness unmoving in the tram, under the rain. And she looks at me, through a screen of glass and water. And she doesn't pull away.

So I begin again.

My name is Nigredo. Her name is Eva. And try as I might to prevent it, she is a part of my life.

(pp. 11–12)

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From Chapter 5, Piazza Sant'Alessandro, 10 February 2023

You can't find radishes any more. The earth is no good for growing them. My mother used to say: 'Vegetables ended up beneath the Twin Towers', even if the truth is that under the Towers, today still, there are only the remains of people, and others



are under the rubble of Kabul and of Jerusalem. Even Milan is rubble, aged in just a few years, but incapable of dying.

If I close my eyes now, the only detail I remember clearly about that first meeting is the explosion of red in the big glass recipient sitting on Eva's desk. Inside, perfect spheres, all the same colour and the same size. They had the effect of blood in a world of faded grey and woody brown.

Dessa sat in silence, stiff, a little behind me. As for me, I don't know how I was sitting. And, to tell the truth, I don't even know if I was on a chair or standing.

But I remember Eva. White coat, black clothes beneath. Covered up to her wrists and her chin. White hands swimming in the air, immediately before the little mute maid went out.

And us, unmoving, waiting.

– Do you know what they are?

– Billiard balls?

– Radishes. Fake, naturally. They remind me of my country. Many years ago. At the beginning of the century, when they said that the war was over, people had begun to grow them again. They came out as big as these.

– A good harvest.

– It depends on your point of view. It took us time to understand that they were no good, but even afterwards they were still sold. Like the potatoes, the chard, the new onions. And the flowers. Beautiful like they had never been before.

– I don't understand...

– You've never been here before, is that right?

I shook my head, trying to focus on something else in the room, something that wasn't Eva's face or the carafe of fake radishes.

– For the most part, our guests come from the places I come from. And they're a bit American, too. The bastard children of General Robertson –. She said it without anger and without smiling, like a chemical formula. Or a cabalistic suggestion. – I suppose it's because of the bombs. Do you know the effect of eleven weeks of bombing with thirty-one thousand missiles with varying uranium content? You must know it: after my war, History got us used to these things.

She said it like that: my war. She slipped the *glupan* war on with an elegance I envied her.

I would have liked to nod, to pull out my best political speech, to reveal my past as a war-mongering agitator. Instead I said nothing.

(pp. 46-47)

* * *



Two voices

[Male]

*And I can't even say I believed in it.
Dry-eyed, I prepared my toys. The rabid beast growing inside me. I felt it scraping
against the walls of my brain. And I had to do what I did, otherwise the claws of the beast
would have killed me.
It was simple, crystal clear.
It was pure vendetta, without any imperfections. Just because I was born.*

[Female]

*I was born in Srebrenica, in a ditch, with the mud and the rain. The rain is sweet, like
mamma's blood, only dirtier. The mud makes me cold. I see the strong light and I hear
myself screaming and I understand that I have come into the world. But it doesn't seem like
such a good thing. I am crying and mamma's crying and the others are crying and
laughing at the same time and it continues to rain and the rain washes everything away. I
see only light and dark. I understand cold and warmth and hunger. The noise screams all
around me. Loud.
I am alive.*

[Male]

*I live. Alone. Closed in a shell case. Ready to explode.
I used to make my bombs alone. The others carried them, for a bit. It worked. I felt
alive. I let no one touch me. I wasn't responsible. I didn't see what really happened. In the
newspapers, the colour of blood is grey, and responsibilities are words.
At night, even then, I would listen to the furious scraping of the beast trying to get
out. From inside, it told me what I had to do, and how.
With time, I became curious. I wanted to see what my bombs did.
I saw.*

[Female]

*In the hospital, before the bombs, you can't see the sky. I like the sky, but here I can't
see it. I can smell strange smells all the time. Like flesh and blood, like when I was born.
When the doors open, new voices arrive, too. They complain all the time. I understand a
few words, I feel their thoughts. At night, I hear the sirens. I feel the doctor's fear. He's called
Doctormesplède and he has a clinging fear glued to his voice. He always speaks in a
strange way because he's not from here, The bombs fall and frighten him. If he's close to
me I laugh, I think that will make his fear pass. But it doesn't. The bombs fall all the time.
Doctormesplède is frightened and tells me not to worry, the Americans won't hit us. It's a
hospital. The Americans won't hit us. They won't hit us. They won't hit us.
One day they hit us. You can see the sky.
Doctormesplède isn't there. I wanted to tell him that he'd been wrong.*



[Male]

*I thought it was easy.
To go to do to come back.
Never to look back.
Then comes the time that you stop. You see a person you know. You see a life that
you'd like for yourself. You see what you've become. And the beast leaps out of you, it faces
you and says to you: take this life and the others.
Afterwards, you'll be happy.*

[Female]

*I was the eldest so I took care of everyone.
There were so many babies in the jeep. All born in the last three weeks. I was two
months old. So it was up to me to take care of them.
When the bomb fell on the bridge, Mitchkin was the first to scream. Afterwards, I
heard him no more.*

[Male]

*Kyrgyz-eyes was there. Her face inundated by the sun, the same as I remembered
her as a child. She only needed one glance to understand what I had become, or at least
that was what I thought.
She hadn't changed. I had.
She was, perhaps, what I would have liked to be.
I could have stopped.
I could have gone back, given up, run away, chosen.
I would have.
But no. Impossible.
Time for revenge.*

[Female]

*I still think of Mitchkin and of the bombs and of the beautiful beautiful aeroplanes
passing over our heads. Shiny black fast you almost couldn't keep your eyes on them. A life
with so many deaths inside. I think of them. Of mamma, less. There's so much time to think
when you see no one. Truly so much.*

[Male]

*The beast sharpens its teeth. It's always done it, so I'm used to the sound and the
fear. I've been alone so, so long.
Alone in the blackness.
Alone.*

[Female]



It's difficult because you know that it is you alone that must do it. No one will save you, no one will come to help you. From the bottom of the ditch, you wait for a face to come.

*Now it's coming. Now it's coming...
Instead you remain there, with your brothers and sisters who are younger than you and weaker and unable to manage.
And you alone will save them.
But who will come and save you?*

[Male]

*I'd been waiting for you for I don't know how long. Don't go now. I won't do anything to you.
Help me. I'm not capable of asking, but help me.
I can love you like no one has ever loved you, because no one has been alone like me. Alone with the gaze of a dead girl on me.*

[Female]

*And if I could truly get out of the bottom here? And if you truly were able to save me?
And if it weren't too late for all this?
I am the strong sister, the big sister, the healthy sister of the deformed children, the pitiless avenger, the mother without children.
I
I
I am tired of being alone.*

[Male]

*I want your hands. I want your eyes. I want your heart. I want you, the whole of you.
To cure my solitude.*

[Female]

*I want your rancour, your rage, your pain, what you could have been and what you are.
To cure my solitude.*

(pp. 208-211)

Nicoletta Vallorani is Professor of English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Milan. Her specialisations include media studies, gender studies and queer studies. She has also worked the cultural and ideological implications of



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Her current research focuses on body politics and cultural ideology, the body and the city, body language, cultural representation and disease. Her work on Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells, Angela Carter, Will Self and Martin Amis is more grounded in the field of literary studies, while more recent approaches to Iain Sinclair, Derek Jarman, Orson Welles, Tony Harrison, Michael Winterbottom reveal a more specific reference to cultural studies' theories and methods.

She has recently published on formula fiction, cinema and literature, urban topographies, the representation of the body, the representation of war in contemporary British and American cultures.

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