I Got to the Point of Thinking That I'm Not All There

Ermanna Montanari

1. I was born in a town near Ravenna, Campiano. In the house that is now my parents', the peasants used to keep a chained stud bull in the threshing floor, for everyone to see. When I would come home from church, sometimes I would stop on the road to look at his sex. Other children would do the same and they made him snort. Thrilled, we would then go kiss in the "sacred woods" of the Corradini villa, in front of the elementary school building. In the winter, in those woods, which seemed so wild to me, the calycanthus would bloom, and their perfume purified our acts. One street, Via Petrosa, crossed through all of these places, and at the end of it was the house in which I was born. A few meters from my house, in front of the small village, there stood another one with green windows that were always closed. Two sisters lived there, both of them betrayed by the same man, a foreigner whom the Campianesi had never seen, but whose fame of beauty was passed down from generation to generation. Marisa and Giorgina, these were the names of the sisters with the stridulent voices, were the guardians of the center for hunting dogs, owned by the town's veterinarian with the receding hairline.

One day in May, when I was little more than ten years old, a helicopter landed in the church-square. It was carrying the small statue of the Madonna of Fatima, in white and blue ceramic, with two doves under her feet, like a Venus come from heaven. At that time, the priest of the old parish was Father Enzo Tramontini. He was a very learned heretic, kicked out by the church because he had told about his love for a young woman from the East. Father Enzo taught me to love ancient stones and to throw out the new ones, to map out unusual routes in the fields. The last time that I saw him, in the waiting room of a shiatsu masseur, he was standing

leaned up against a yellow velvet chair, in a dark suit like a priest's habit. We were there to be cured, a year ago.

2. When I enrolled in a Classical Prep High School I was fourteen years old, I wore thick high white socks, a skirt down to my knees, and a striped shirt. My classmates instead wore clear stockings and miniskirts. All of the students came from the junior high schools in the city and they knew each other. When they called my name during roll (and my name itself sounded strange) I said out loud where I came from: "Scuola Vittorino da Feltre di San Pietro in Campiano," and everyone laughed. To tell the truth, I don't know if my classmates really laughed, but it is certain that I heard them laugh very hard. From there I learned how awkward I was, and those high school years were a nightmare for me.

I would take the bus every morning at seven, and arrive at school early, together with the school-caretaker. My classmates, on the other hand, would calmly arrive late. They were at home in that place, while I was like a stranger. I did not have their language. Until I was six I only spoke dialect. I had learned Italian at school like a foreign language, the way one learns English or German. The fact that I came from the countryside, that dialect was everywhere in my language, that I was definitely awkward, made me feel different, and this difference made me feel proud and uncomfortable at the same time. At twenty, I decided to leave the country, to abandon my family. I abandoned Campiano to do theatre, I abandoned the great patriarchal family, my childhood as a daughter with a boy's name. I abandoned their idea of beauty. I thought that I had abandoned it. Compiano gripped me, every time that I breathed a word, that I made a gesture, and with this thorn in my side my work began.

Via Cella connects Campiano to Ravenna. I traveled this road for years with the bus to go to school, with the car to go to the movies or to the theatre, by bike to visit my grandparents in Santo Stefano. The street flows like a river through a black soiled countryside, through sugar beet fields, orchards of peaches, vineyards, typical Romagna farms, just like

the ones you draw in elementary school, with a slanted roof, small windows, and a door. The street cuts through Carraie, Santo Stefano, San Bortolo, Madonna dell'Albero, little dark towns, at night. That's the way it was, but it has undergone a decline.

One night in 1976, M. set out down Via Cella toward Campiano, and he arrived at my house at dawn. At that time my grandfather would get up, like all mornings, to take care of the animals. He welcomed M. in the kitchen, made him lie down on the sofa, covered him with his cape, and told him to wait for me to wake up. My mom, who would get up every morning at six to prepare breakfast, saw M. sleeping in the kitchen and she ran to call me, very agitated, certain that my father wouldn't have appreciated M.'s presence. Dad was convinced that M. was on drugs because he was too thin and he didn't have his licence. I, on the other hand, was happy that he had come to look for me, and we closed ourselves off in the room for receiving guests.

We decided to tell my family that we were together, we took each other by the hand and went into the kitchen where grandfather, grandmother, dad, mom, and my brothers and sisters were having breakfast. My father punched the table hard, the milk spilled out of the bowl, something broke. He swore in dialect and went out into the yard. The others didn't say a word, eyes on the table. Then we too went outside. M. loaded me onto the handlebars of grandfather's bike, and taking Via Cella, we arrived in Ravenna.

A sense of dishonor accompanied my father for a long time after my departure from Campiano. He told me that he wouldn't be able to frequent the political circle in town anymore, to see people. If someone were to have asked him about his daughter, what was he supposed to answer? The actress? He never said it. Even now he does not say it: "And your daughter, what does she do?" "She's always traveling around the world."

3. The thing that I wanted the most was to leave Campiano. I couldn't stand the smell of manure of my house anymore.

"She's a gypsy," my grandfather would say. When I say grandfather I always speak of my father's father, who died in September 1992 after a painful illness. I washed and dressed him, with my mom's help, the day he died. I kept watch beside his dead body with my dad in the room for receiving guests. There was a pungent sour sweetish smell, it was grandfather's smell mixed with the flowers. The day of the funeral, the house and the yard were full of people. A few months earlier, while in the field, he lost a gold watch of which he was very fond. When I was told that he lost it I thought to myself: now he's going to die. In fact, it was the end for him.

My paternal grandfather was the great patriarch of my peasant family. Today I know that for me he was father, teacher, and role model. I followed, studied, and adored him like an obedient lamb. He had an obsession for words: they had to be the right words, and nothing more. He would articulate them distinctly and pronounce them slowly, when they came out they were stones; when he spoke he created a sacred void. At the table he was always the first to talk and he would address only my father, who would answer after a moment of reflection, almost as if he were afraid to make a mistake. The women and we children could speak, but only if we had something important to say. We weren't allowed to laugh, at the table you don't laugh. And to throw a word out, just for the sake of it, that too was prohibited.

I learned then to distinguish between heavy and light words, the words that wound and the words that pass, and the silence of chatter. I would spend whole afternoons with my grandfather, under a burning sun, while he hoed the earth or gathered peaches or drove the tractor. In silence, I would wait for him to say: "Come here." On that sound I have fashioned my voice. Like a voiceless lover I desired his look with a feeling charged with love and violence. "Study, study," he would repeat untiringly to me, and I certainly did not disappoint him. But he never accepted my life choice of the theatre.

4. On a kitchen bench, between the window and the radiator, we used to keep a Geloso radio that we rarely listened to. At night dad and grandfather would go to the political circle to play cards, they didn't stay home with us. In 1965 my parents bought a television and a small piece of furniture, and put the radio underneath the television. In the evening the kitchen would fill up with neighbors who would gather to look at the programs. There was a bunch of confusion, people would talk at the same time about other things, they would repeat the lines that came off the screen. Someone would ask what they had said, and sometimes I would translate, because few knew Italian.

Dialect was the language of the family. In dialect orders were given, decisions made, facts recounted. Dialect was spoken with the neighbors and relatives. Grandfather spoke a laboured Italian with those who came from outside, brokers, lawyers, doctors. We children, from the moment we began to go to school, would speak Italian among ourselves. At twenty I wanted to forget my dialect because I identified too much with it, but when I started to do theatre I didn't have the words and was looking for them.

In this way I returned to my point of departure, to my grandfather, to the countryside. After many readings and rehearsals, I needed to depart from that which I knew well. The only words I had were entangled, and I knew well my own muteness. I am often lacking in words. A few years ago in Jerusalem I followed around the Jewish women who hid amidst the bricks of Solon's Temple little pieces of paper with their prayers written on them. It made me think about the little ball of words that I was chewing and of the secretness of a language that had trouble coming out.

5. I have often tried to emulate men, to imitate them. I wanted to be like them, I felt a strong attraction for them. First and foremost, I wanted to be like my grandfather, a great patriarch, strong, indestructible, courageous. I always tried not to disappoint him, to compare myself to him, even physically, at the cost of umentionable fatigue to my sickly

health. When I started to act I realized, not right away, but from then ever after, that on stage my two grandmothers came to me as models, these two grandmothers whom I had never before considered.

I had my maternal grandmother in mind, a furious and passionate woman. Small and frail with a big nose and dark hair and eyes, illiterate. She didn't speak Italian, she taught me how to swear. Absorbed by the terror of death and with the organization of her funeral, she would make fetishes and recite the rosary. In the summer when I was at her house, she would sleep holding me, and she would tell me scary stories. She used to love to look inside wells and to go around with her hair wet.

I went back for the funerals of all my grandparents. The one of the grandmother of the wells was the most theatrical, and I chose my nicest outfit to accompany her. There was a band, but not the six white horses that she would have liked. We followed the coffin for a little more than a kilometer of dug up road until Cella, and we accompanied it into the church. I don't think that she had ever gone to mass, but for her last voyage she let it be known that she wanted to be protected by the words of Christ. The relatives in church were silent in the pews, with their arms crossed.

This was Grandmother Nora who would look inside the wells. But what was she looking for in the wells? When I was a child more than once my mother pulled me away from the wells in which I wanted to throw my little sister. She didn't want to look in, she was afraid, and to make her climb it I tried convincing her how beautiful it was to listen to the splash of the pails in the water. One day I was successful, I must have been five years old, my sister four, and we were finally both seated on the rim of the well that was in the yard of my grandparents' house in Santo Stefano. Right away I heard my mom scream my name worriedly, running across the field toward us. She got to us just in time.

Who had told her that? I then learned that mothers are that way, they feel something before it is going to happen, and they save us. That's how they explained it to me. But when I began to listen to nocturnal visions that made me see what was going to happen, the people who were going to die, I knew that it was a matter of something else. This had to do with my grandmother of the wells. A well is a magnet, the center of the earth; it is natural to be attracted to it. From these premonitions my theatre is infected.

6. I began to do theatre. I didn't have, then, a precise idea of what it meant to do theatre. I only knew the so-called traditional theatre, the one that goes on in the main theaters of the cities. It elated me to see the actors and actresses on stage, people in flesh and blood who would move, act, and perform in front of the public. But how did they perform? Here my enthusiasm diminished. I had the impression that they were doing their homework, like at school, without energy, without profound pleasure, they were speaking with the words of others instead of with their own words. They were all frighteningly the same. *Hamlet* was no different from *La Locandiera*, Othello's face was only a bit darker than Ophelia's, but they all acted in the same way, with no innovation.

You could see that they had all come out of the same schools, thery were all just like my high school classmates who used to dress in the same way with clear stockings and miniskirts. Those actors seemed to me to be without drama, superfluous — maybe they had never felt like outsiders, like toads. Grotowski one day told us that if we cannot feel deeply our being toads, we will never become princes, we will never be kissed. There, in the so-called traditional theatre I didn't see either toads or princes, only civil servants, people who do their duty.

When I made my debut, in the small parochial theatre of San Rocco, on a stage that was three meters by four, we put on a play by Harold Pinter. I played the part of Meg, an old woman with weak nerves, who would always ask: "Am I pretty? Am I pretty?" I wore my wedding dress and I would spray my hair gray with a little can. The next day I would go to class at the university without washing my hair. Meg was

like a tooth abscess you want to get rid of. I didn't want to look like her, and yet the external appearence didn't count. The image that I've had of myself at times is mendacious and when it comes out I have to cleanse it with extreme meticulousness. This is what I did to be ready for Bêlda.

7. Many years later, Nevio Spadoni, the Romagnolo poet, had me read *Luṣ*, and I immediately accepted to perform it on stage. *Luṣ* is a long, acrid malediction, spit out of the mouth of Bêlda, the witch-healer. Bêlda really existed; she lived in San Pancrazio at the turn of the century. I saw Bêlda, furious and imperturbable, similar to the figures of certain rulers who live in our countryside. Motionless, only her voice vibrates. There is no drama, no action in *Luṣ*, everything lies in Bêlda's voice: the voice of a monkey, of a crow, of a wolf.

> I got to the point of thinking
> that I'm not all there,
> more than once I saw myself
> here and there at the same time:
>
> I am Bêlda,
> I am Bêlda,
>
> do you all understand? Yes, Bêlda,
> daughter of the late Armida, the priest's housekeeper,
> and don't pretend that you don't understand.

I studied Bêlda's text in a small theatre on the outskirts of Ravenna, in a center for disabled people, under the light of a reflector. I was there from afternoon until late at night. When I sing *Luṣ* (because it is after all a song) at times I'm not there. The words come out by themselves, and yet I am lucid, I am suspended on a small saddle, with bare legs hanging, inside of a deambulator.

I too am like Bêlda, I'm never all there. A piece is always missing. I never see myself on stage, the only image that I have of myself is in pieces. The pieces can be anybody's: a neck, a foot, a kidney. The whole is somewhere else: it is a spiritual architecture. It is like finding the center of myself outside myself.

In Senegal, sorcerers and healers would stop me on the street. They would tell me to make sacrifices with little soaps, white shirts, candles, and to give them to beggars. They saw my shadow, my center outside of myself. At times, traveling by train, some of them would talk to me, maybe they were sensitive healers. They would set out to tell me about myself, even though I had never seen them before. They had perceived my image outside of myself.

8. I'm always looking for a center. One great element that is central and heavy. I am pulled by the center, as if there were a magnet that is pulling me. I have a personality with a predilection toward enclosures and that is predisposed to being closed, toward black, pulled by a center, by theatre. To hide oneself in order to show oneself. On the one hand lethargy, on the other *plus vita*. They live together and they embrace only on stage, never before, never after, only for that brief life that doesn't last for long. It is the duration of the mother tongue. The tongue behind which I learned to hide myself without desiring other knowledge.

The Romagnolo dialect — so hard, old, dark, incomprehensible — expresses the force of actions without separating them from the words. I could define it as wind, the breath that precedes the language of communication, Italian. Then there are the images that go together with the dialect, most of all the curtains on the straw-stacks, the curtains that would protect the harvest, the same curtains that covered the tanks during the war, the thick dark curtains that did not let the water pass through. The hangars were full of them, in the countryside they multiplied in the winter, emanating a smell of mold and of earth.

The theatre is no longer in the center, there is nothing in the center. If I think of the stage, I see it empty and the pit full of people who are waiting. Something is going to happen. That something will not happen in the center. I see myself hung by the left ankle to the wood of the proscenium, upside-down, with my neck under the sole of shoes of spectators in the first row.