

# Francesca Melandri

## Higher than the Sea

*Più alto del mare* (2012)

Translators: Clarissa Botsford and Lucy Rand

**Publisher:** Rizzoli, Milan

**Agent:** Claire Sabatie-Garat, The Italian Literary Agency

**Rights already sold:** French, German, Dutch, Croatian, Ukrainian, Arabic.

**Pages:** 240

**ISBN:** 978-8817063159



***“Because if you want to keep someone truly separate from the rest of the world, there is no wall higher than the sea.”***

**Francesca Melandri** is a highly acclaimed novelist and screenwriter from Rome. Melandri’s books explore some of Italy’s darkest and less explored historical events through captivating portraits of human lives. *Higher than the Sea* won the Premio Rapallo (2012), the Premio Letterario Elba (2012), the Premio Stresa di Narrativa (2012) and was shortlisted for the highly prestigious Premio Campiello (2012).

*Higher than the Sea* opens with the transfer of political terrorists – enemies of the state during the tempestuous Years of Lead – to a maximum security prison in the dead of night. The prison is on Asinara, a small island off the coast of Sardinia, otherwise inhabited by wild horses, albino donkeys, goats and the aroma of ‘salt, figs, and curry plant.’ It is the end of the 1970s and Italy, assailed by bombs, kidnappings and murders, is under a regime of zero tolerance.

Two strangers, Paolo and Luisa, are on the deck of the boat from the main island to Asinara for visiting hours. Luisa, a farmer and mother of five from the mountains of north eastern Italy, dutifully visiting the violent husband she has been out of love with for years, has never seen the sea before. For Paolo, on the other hand, an ex-philosophy teacher and widower, the smell of the island prompts memories of summers by the sea with his young son who is now locked up for his involvement in the far-left terrorist group, the Red Brigades. Paolo is tormented by guilt, having brought his son up to fight strongly for his beliefs, and still mourning his wife who couldn’t live with the pain.

A mistral wind approaches, obstructing the boat’s return journey and forcing the pair to spend the night on the island. The pain that cripples each of their lives becomes intertwined in an almost unspoken understanding that is at once intangible and deeply

penetrating. Luisa and Paolo spend the night in a draughty room above the prison guard’s house, and the connection they form, tenderly, slowly, deeply, binds them for the rest of their lives.

After a long period when Covid has separated us all from the rest of the world, we feel this novel’s exploration of imprisonment as a state of mind and its impact on others is particularly relevant today.

**Reviews:** 'The true value of this novel, as Calvino would say, is in its lightness, the way it floats like a soap bubble between past and present, a rippling suspension between memory and grief, guilt and the courageous acceptance of destiny ... [Melandri’s] quiet, fluid style and tendency towards descriptions that often verge on the lyrical, attenuate and render more tolerable the tensions buried between the lines.' Silvia Mazzucchelli, [Doppiozero](#)

'A linear novel of remarkable intensity, that moves us through moments that burn with modesty. This story won’t leave anybody cold.' Stefano Trabucchi, [Solo Libri](#)

### The Translators

**Clarissa Botsford’s** acclaimed translation of Elvira Dones’s long-selling *Sworn Virgin (And Other Stories)*, 2014, later made into a film (dir. Laura Bispuri), launched her new career. She has since worked for Europa Editions, Harper Collins, McSweeney’s and other publishers translating, among others, Alessandro Baricco, Viola Ardone, Sasha Naspini, Valerio Magrelli, and Lia Levi. With Lucy Rand, she translated Mariangela Gualtieri’s poem on Covid-19, *The Ninth of March*, which was featured on Lithub.

**Lucy Rand** is the translator of the international bestseller *The Phone Box at the Edge of the World* by Laura Imai Messina, published by Manilla Press (Zaffre) in June 2020. She also runs a blog where she reviews Italian books that are not yet translated into English. [www.lucyrand.com](http://www.lucyrand.com)

# **Higher than the Sea**

By Francesca Melandri

Translated by Clarissa Botsford and Lucy Rand

[...] All the union leaders are saying it,  
terrorism is, objectively, the most  
devious ally of the ruling class. If it is  
not defeated, it could set the work of the  
labour movement back by decades.  
*From an article in the "Corriere della  
Sera" by Walter Tobagi, killed on 28  
May 1980 by the XXVIII March Brigade*

There's no empathy in Utopia.  
*Jeremy Rifkin*

The sea washes away all the ills of men  
*Euripide, Iphigenia in Tauris 1193*

## One year earlier

The spice in the air, no; they weren't expecting that.

They had, however, always imagined that they would come at night and they did: they were plucked from prisons all over Italy when the sky was as black as a rotten tooth. They arrived in chinooks, ta-ta ta-ta ta-ta, as if the choppers were flying in direct from Vietnam, not Praia a Mare or Viterbo. There were soldiers yelling and blond grunts with crew cuts, as silent as stones, supervising the action. Americans, they found out later. And that didn't surprise them either.

They were afraid of dying, and yet all of them, as they climbed into the belly of the helicopter, had raised their eyes to the sky. It was dark with the new moon. They had taken that into account, too, when planning the operation, so there would be no shimmer on the sea to reveal the shape of the coastline from above. But not even the secret agents of imperialism and capital could extinguish the stars; they were there, as always, pulsating and precise. Some of them hadn't seen the stars for months, others years. Who knew when, or if, they would ever see them again.

A good while after take-off, a soldier in fatigues turned to them and, with a look of glee, announced: "Now we're gonna open the hatch and teach y'all to fly," as if he wanted to prove right those who claimed Italy was turning into South America. But no one was tossed out.

After landing, they were kicked and beaten along the few metres of road between the helicopters and the whitewashed maximum security prison so they had no time to see where they were. But they already had an idea that this would happen, too. The prison grapevine had been reporting for some weeks on the comings and goings of labourers to and from that low building at the other end of the Island, far from the cells of the regular prisoners, from the administrative offices, from the jetty, from the village with the guards' houses, the school and the church, even from the remote lighthouse on its cliff-top – in short, far from men, from God,

from the world. Besides, certain members of parliament, the ones who had been sleeping in a different place every night for months with their money and passports ready on the bedside table, had received the tip-off a while back: if there were a military coup, the adversaries would be deported – or rather concentrated – here.

They were crammed into a single room. To begin with, they were given nothing to eat, just a little water. On the third day they were doubled over; their limbs felt weak and their heads heavy but they knew that if they were still alive after three nights in that place it was no bad thing. Before their transfer, or rather, forced transport, survival wasn't something they took for granted. On the fourth day they were fed. One much envied prisoner had a bowel movement. The stench made it hard to breathe, but they were consoled by the thought it would hit the guards when they checked in on them through the spy hole. After a week they were taken to shower. The water was cold and came in fits and starts but it gave them unmitigated pleasure. Numbers, uniforms, cells were distributed. Daily life in the maximum security prison was underway. Everything, essentially, had gone more or less as they had expected.

The smell, however, was unexpected. Not even the most visionary terrorist column leader or the most experienced of lifers could have imagined it. As they were pushed out of the chopper with all the yelling and kicking, the aroma of the Island hit them hard. Their hearts skipped a beat, as if remembering a long-lost love. Their bodies, impoverished by jail, were replenished with desire. Many stood still near the helicopter, immobile, taking punches and beatings just to breathe in the Island again and again.

It smelled of salt, figs and curry plant.



## Visits

The Island was not far out at sea but it may as well have been. It was separated from the mainland, which was not the mainland but one of the larger islands, by a strait that looked easy to swim across. The winds swept the gas, smoke and smog from the air, even the coal-black clouds from the petrochemical plant. The effect was that the Island looked so close you could almost touch it – but it was an illusion. It was the strong winds of the Mediterranean, which stretched wide open from there all the way to Gibraltar, that gave such clarity to the Island's outline. The lethal currents in the strait would thwart even the strongest of swimmers.

Navigating that strip of water the colour of vine leaves sprayed with Verdigris was hard for boats, too. Punctuated with underwater rocks, sailors risked scraping a keel every time they rode the hollow of a wave. And the sandbanks shifted constantly with the south-westerly *libeccio*, making them impossible to gauge without a plumb line. To get from the industrial port to the Island you had to point the bow in the opposite direction and sail towards the open sea. Only after a few miles could the wheel be turned back towards the two camel humps of the Island's hills. And by that point you could hardly see the refinery anymore, with its red and white chimney stacks like giant sticks of rock candy.

The Island was not far out at sea, but it may as well have been. Just like me, thought Paolo. He could hear Emilia's voice: *Stop finding symbols in everything. Things are what they are.* Her quietly stubborn voice when she was a girl; when, as a young bride, she had taken his head in her hands and rested it on her breast. Before the pain had broken her and taken her away.

Paolo leaned over the railing. He looked at the white foam where the grey iron met the midnight-blue water. The wake made a V in the almost oily surface. Standing on the jetty, after getting off the ferry and before boarding this motor boat, Paolo had heard a man in his thirties say that a dead calm like this didn't bode well. He was wearing the grey-green prison guard uniform but had the fine facial features of a seminarist or actor. Hand on his holster, he watched

the gangway being drawn up, as if making sure nobody could sneak on board. Paolo wondered who on earth would want to stowaway on a boat heading out *to* the Island.

*Accessories to a prison escape.*

“Last night there was a ring around the moon.”

The fine-featured guard was speaking to a sailor pulling the last hawser up from the dock. He sucked the air through his teeth, keeping his worries to himself. In a dialect, or perhaps a language that Paolo understood a little but mostly had to guess, he told him that the captain would be certain to get the boat back in time. His son was arriving today from America so there was no way he'd let the Force-11 winds strand him on the Island.

Paolo looked at the sea. For a moment he forgot who he was, where he was going and, most importantly, why. His gaze rested on the water around him. It was as calm as before but darker now that the sun was veiled.

*Smooth as precious cloth, like silk.*

The image brought Paolo back to himself – thoughts do that – and that brief moment of blessed oblivion came to an end. He looked up. This wasn't a public ferry. You needed a valid reason to gain access to the Island. And there was only one valid reason.

Whenever he came back to himself, his consciousness pressed down on his chest like a tomb stone. Paolo breathed out heavily, his mouth open, as if expelling a great weight. For how many years had he been letting out these loud, involuntary sighs that were not quite moans but something more than just exhalations? Even when he was in the middle of a crowd, standing at a market stall, in line at the post office, having lunch with his sister. The answer was easy: three years, six months and a handful of days.

An African woman was sitting on a rusty white iron bench on the foredeck. She was staring straight ahead, her profile like a carving. Her clothes looked like they'd been pulled out of a box at random, perhaps from a clothing bank. Yet, even in the shapeless overcoat, too heavy for the mild temperature, which she held closed with her long fingers and perfect pink nails, she was a true beauty. He wondered if she knew it.

Most of the other passengers were women. There was just a handful of men, almost all inside, in the large seating area lined with hard wooden benches. The women each carried a

package, wrapped in cardboard or jute fabric or in large plastic bags; they never had a suitcase. From where they were headed, nothing would come back with them.

The African woman, Paolo, and a blond woman he thought he'd seen before were the only ones out on deck. She could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty. One of those women you can imagine already looking after her younger siblings at the age of twelve, making soup, doing the ironing, who at twenty already embodies the calm efficiency of middle age. Not that she was heavy or plump; on the contrary, her body had a robustness that showed she used it a lot. Perhaps she'd been an athlete when she was young. The dress she was wearing looked like her Sunday best, though crumpled after a journey that had probably begun long before they set out on this last stretch of water. Paolo remembered where he had seen her: the evening before, boarding the ferry that brought them to the main island. He hadn't seen her again after that. He'd gone into his cabin and not come out until they docked at dawn at the port near the refinery.

Now the woman was standing at the bow, her hands on the railing, lips parted. She gazed out at the sea, her eyes wide and almost childlike.

Paolo was sure of it: *Until yesterday, she had never seen the sea.*

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There were six benches on the deck of the boat, three on each side.

Each railing had seven thin iron supports holding up two horizontal bars and a handrail.

The cells for transporting the prisoners – there were eight of them – were on the lower deck, invisible to Luisa who, not knowing of their existence, didn't count them.

Things weren't going badly, Luisa told herself often. Or at least, they could be going much worse. She'd heard stories. Like the one about the poor woman whom management had turned away, claiming that she'd already used up all of her visits for the quarter: that was how she found out that her husband was passing off another woman as his wife while she, the real one, raised his five children alone. Or like the woman at Voghera, sitting right next to Luisa at the long table in the visiting room, who had knitted her husband a pair of indoor shoes, which he threw back in her face shouting: "I don't need slippers, I need to get out of here!"

Things happened on prison visits. The wives of inmates cried a lot on the return journey, much more than on the way out, and it wasn't just nostalgia, for sure. But nothing bad had ever happened to Luisa, in all these years (nine years and ten months), and she often repeated to

herself: *I'm lucky*. Her husband received her packages with a nod of the head and sometimes even uttered a thank you.

There were times when, from the other side of the table, Luisa caught glimpses of the face she had fallen in love with the night he had first asked her to dance. That face had disappeared promptly after their wedding and only came back when she visited him with one of the children years later.

He had just received his definitive sentence when Irene, their second youngest daughter, came home on her first day of school and told her she had learned one thing that day: her father was dead. The teacher had said to her, "Your dad's not around anymore."

From then on, whenever she could, Luisa had tried to bring the children with her to the visits. It wasn't possible to bring all five of them together, but at least one or two at a time. It was before the nasty business at Volterra. Her husband was not yet in one of the special prisons with the glass and the intercoms and he could even have the kids on his lap.

The presence of small children in the visiting room made people kinder, less bitter. Including the other inmates and visitors, and even the guards: everyone smiled every so often if there was a child in his father's arms. Once, one of her husband's cellmates had taught their youngest son, Luca, how to make little boomerangs out of paper. The imposing man, hands like ironing boards, had showed him how to launch them in the air with a gentle flick. The little paper shapes spun across the room like helicopter blades, high above the heads gathered together in conversation, in front of the barred windows, over the long wooden tables, returning like a dog to its owner.

Luca was five years old. For days, back home, he talked of nothing other than the boomerangs and the man who made them. At the next visit he insisted on going back with Luisa, even though it was Ciriano's turn, and spent the whole time throwing pieces of paper with that inmate. His father didn't get involved in the game; he just watched in silence, his lips curled into a hint of a smile, his pupils dilated as if absorbing as much of the image of his little boy as possible. Luisa caught a glimpse of the look he had given her during that first dance, before the wedding, before she started accidentally bumping her face on the corner of the dresser, before everything else.

When she was about to leave with Luca, the inmate turned to her: "Don't worry. I wouldn't do anything to harm my friends' kids."

Luisa didn't know what he meant. She asked her husband later on and he told her: That man had been arrested for doing bad things to children. Here in the visiting room, though, no one had ever seen him do anything bad; in fact, the children who visited always asked after him.

After the events of Volterra and the second arrest, Luisa's husband had been in prisons that were too far away and too hard to bring the children to. And she never saw him with that calm, steadfast, tender face again.

She had been travelling for almost twenty-four hours now but she wasn't tired. She'd slept in the seating area on the ferry, her head resting on the package she held on her lap for her husband. She had got up at two in the morning to milk the cows; she wanted to save the three older children some work so that the two little ones would make it to school without any problems. This was another reason she was lucky: her children were grown up. They were no longer the little kids they were in the early days, when Anna, the eldest, was only eleven, Luca two, and the other three in between. Now the youngest was the same age the oldest had been back then, and the oldest was twenty. Twenty! Two years older than Luisa had been when she got married . . .

There she was again, making calculations. Counting, always counting. She couldn't help it. She counted all the time, especially before going to sleep. She counted the litres of milk delivered to the dairy; the weeks left until one of the cows gave birth; the age of each of her children the night the *Carabinieri* took their father away. She counted the numbers on the meter to see where she could save, even if the children knew they mustn't switch the light on until it was so dark they were bumping into the walls. She counted the washing machine payments and any money she received again and again. Like that time a butcher was buying a calf from her and she realised straight away that he had given her fewer notes than he should have. And she also knew why: people think a woman without a husband is easier to dupe. But she had counted, counted again, then coolly and calmly asked him for what was missing, or else she wouldn't load the calf onto his truck. The man pretended it was a mistake, that he'd messed up the calculation. Go figure. He would've thought twice if he'd known that Luisa even counted the wooden rods on the benches in the church yard (eight) and the steps between the backdoor and the barn (twenty six).

Every so often, in the middle of the night, all these numbers would crowd into her head and keep her awake. In order to chase them off, Luisa would imagine the hot breath of the cows, their white velvety udders, the smell of rennet, manure, hay and wood that would welcome her into the barn. And she'd tell herself that soon she'd be able to get up, tie her apron, put on her rubber boots and finally go and milk. Eyes wide open in the dark, she waited impatiently for the time to come, as if she were meeting a lover.

There was only one thing Luisa never counted: the number of years her husband still had to serve in prison. Partly because the lawyer had told her that the mindboggling number pronounced by the judge in Florence, and then confirmed in court, didn't mean all that much. It was already evident, after what her husband had done in the prison at Volterra, that the number was as slippery as a wet slope: they could add years, decades, entire lifetimes onto it in the blink of an eye. No, counting the length of his sentence would have been nothing but a waste of time. And Luisa didn't have time to waste.

Not even now that the children were grown up and even Luca had started helping out; he would be the one to collect the eggs from the chicken coop and feed grass to the rabbits. And the two eldest, Anna and Ciriano, could run the house and the barn by themselves, if needed.

Yes, Luisa was lucky and she told herself so. Often. Five fine children well brought up, good kids who were used to making themselves useful. There were women in the village with husbands at home who envied her this. The day Ciriano got his tractor license, she cried with joy. For almost ten years she'd had to drive it herself, the noisy contraption that stank of gas. When you were at the wheel there was nothing to do but count: the furrows already ploughed, those that still needed going over, how far until the next turn. After a whole day of going up and down the field, up and down, up and down, like a hamster in a cage, Luisa would climb down with her back aching from the vibrations, her head emptied by the racket and the boredom, her face black from the exhaust fumes blown up by the wind. And dinner still to cook, laundry to sort, clothes to mend. That was when she felt her husband's absence. More than at lunchtime when the table was laid with one plate less, more than at night in the half-empty bed which – and this she would never, ever say out loud – was actually a relief. It was on the tractor that Luisa missed her husband. And so, when her son Ciriano got his licence, she cried with joy.

She had asked the prison management for a Tuesday visit: knowing that her children would be at school in her absence gave her less to worry about. Yesterday was Monday and she'd promised Anna she'd be back by Wednesday evening.

She had spent the previous Saturday cooking. The two younger ones, Irene and Luca, had helped her and together they made ravioli. They made plenty so that her husband could share them with the other inmates. He had never found it easy to make friends, even as a child, even when he was free, certainly not now. Perhaps being able to share some food with the other men in his cell would help him.

One hundred and fifty-three. They had laid all of the ravioli, generously stuffed, out on the table to dry. After a few hours Luisa placed them one by one into a cardboard box, dusting them with semolina flour and separating the layers with waxed paper to stop them from sticking together. Luca watched sadly as they disappeared into the box and she snapped it shut.

"It's not fair," Irene had said.

Luisa looked up. She was the one that worried her most, always chatting with her friends and not at all interested in the twelfth-grade exams she'd have to take this year. She had her father's dark hair and eyes that always looked as though she was searching for something. She helped at home but only when asked, while Anna and Maddalena knew what had to be done without being told.

"You know they're for your father," Luisa replied.

"Lucky him." And Irene marched out of the kitchen with the perfect manners of a fourteen year old.

Luisa was left with the box in her hand and the slap she hadn't dealt prickling the tips of her fingers.

The day before, after milking the cows before dawn, she had made breakfast for everyone and loaded the washing machine (instalments still to pay off: nineteen). She had sealed the package for her husband in prison the night before, and packed her bag with the few things she needed for the trip. She had left the house when the sky was still black and no cockerel had yet sung, not even the neighbours' impatient one that always announced dawn at least an hour early. She had pushed the metal churn full of still-warm milk to the side of the road, ready for the morning collection by the tanker from the dairy. Then, package in her arms

and bag over her shoulder, she started off on foot towards the village piazza where, at 5:03 on weekday mornings, the bus going into town stopped. From there she would catch the first of many trains, just like all the other times. First to follow the trials, and later for the visits, Luisa had been to cities that she'd studied in geography at primary school (Florence, Milan) and to others she'd never even heard of (Fossombrone, Voghera). This time, however, she had to go further.

They had put her husband in a different type of prison. A special one. They had established several of them because in Italy, so she heard, there was a kind of civil war going on, and political prisoners were considered the enemies. Luisa didn't know this, but the very boat she now found herself on carried the name of a victim of this armed conflict: a guard killed during a revolt in a prison some years earlier. And ever since an important politician was kidnapped and killed the year before, life inside these prisons had become harder and harder.

Her husband had had nothing to do with this war that filled the pages of the newspapers, but he too had killed a prison guard. With punches and kicks. When his colleagues had pulled the man out from under him, they hadn't been able to work out how he had been beaten to a pulp with bare hands in such a short time.

The guard had died three days later. That's why Luisa's husband had been sent to an island. Because if you want to keep someone truly separate from the rest of the world, there is no wall higher than the sea.

In addition to the worry, the uncertainty, the jumble of emotions that always accompanied her preparations for the long journeys that took her to her husband – emotions that she was careful not to pay too much heed to – Luisa had noticed a new sensation on her departure, one that she wouldn't be able to confess. A kind of anticipation: excitement.

She had never seen the sea.

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There had been a ring around the moon the night before. The prison guard Nitti Pierfrancesco had noticed it when, like every evening that he wasn't on call, after finishing dinner and putting the children to bed, he went for a walk on the coast with his wife. In fact, she had been the one to point it out. Walking along the silver-white beach that hugged the outline of the bay, he tended to look not at the sky but at the lights on the other side of the strait.

How he had stared at them, those lights, when he was a young guard, single and not yet twenty, sent to an island he didn't even know existed until then. Thinking about it now made him laugh. Back then, he'd missed the mainland so much — the girls, driving around with his colleagues after work, the bars, in other words, the youth he felt inside him despite the uniform — that when he'd looked at the faraway lights on the other coast he had been sure they were the lights of a nightclub. He would sit on the beach, which sparkled like snow, the lights of the small prison he had been dispatched to hidden behind the promontory, and yearn for those brightly-lit promises. The sounds around him had unsettled him. The undertow of the sea, the hoot of an owl, the grunt of a wild boar in the scrub: it depressed him, all this nature. Some evenings he would convince himself that the echoes of dance music were carried over from the other coast on the breeze. The sadness Pierfrancesco felt in those moments was so painful he cried.

After just a few weeks of living on the Island, returning to the mainland on the boat for his first leave, he realized that the lights that had fuelled so much desire weren't from a nightclub: they were from the refinery.

He had never told his wife any of this. Since that first evening when she had gotten off the boat, newlywed Maria Caterina had had no question that those lights came from the petrochemical plant at the port where she had boarded the boat. Pierfrancesco didn't regale her with stories of his solitary sobs on the beach years before. There were others later, secret, and not so innocent. Who wants to look a fool in front of their new young wife?

When they left the house, Maria Caterina had intended to ask him her question. It wasn't a complicated question; not long or hard to understand.

*What's happening to you?*

That was all she wanted to ask her husband Nitti Pierfrancesco, the prison guard.

For months she hadn't been able to. And each time she had it ready, in her mouth, but didn't say it, the question became a little tougher, a little heavier, pushing down harder on her chest. This time too, the sickly light weakened her determination. Instead of asking, she pointed her finger towards the sky and said, "Look."

The crooked three-quarter oval was surrounded by a milky halo that radiated through the night in almost rainbow-like reflections. The beach, so white it shone even under a new moon, was now opalescent.

The two of them had become quiet, instinctively searching for the hand of the other. Their walk was shorter than usual. They didn't say it, but both of them felt relieved when a man-made roof came once again between them and that strange sky.

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Paolo realised the woman was looking at his face.

“Are you a teacher?” Luisa asked.

Paolo raised his eyebrows. His forehead filled with wrinkles like a bedsheet that hasn't been pulled tight.

“Is it so obvious?”

“That you have studied? Yes.”

“And how can you tell?”

Luisa looked at him with the expression of a painter studying her canvas. Paolo wouldn't have been surprised if she had stood up and walked towards him to get a closer look at his features. But they were sitting on the benches of a prison guard jeep and behind her, beyond the open panel, all they could see was the Island, lashed by the *mistral* wind. She remained seated.

“I don't know. But you can tell.”

“I was a high school history and philosophy teacher.”

“Philosophy... That's hard!”

His bottom lip jutted out.

“Well... it depends. Anyway, I prefer *\*history philosophy\**.”

“Why?”

“You make history with weapons. Philosophy with ideas.”

“And now?”

“I’ve stopped. I stay at home.”

“Are you retired?”

“No.”

She planted her blue eyes on his face again. Paolo thought: *Whether they’re looking at me or the horses or the sea, her eyes won’t change, and anyway, she’s going to ask me to explain any minute.*

But she didn’t.

“I thought you were too young to be a pensioner. What do you do during the day?”

Paolo looked out of the back door. The wind drove the rain diagonally. He had to almost shout to be heard *over the din of the rain on the roof of the jeep (so many prepositions....)\*.*

“I read. I walk. My sister gave me a dog. That’s it: I walk the dog. When they let me, I come and see my son.”

“And where is he now?”

“Well, you know where he is.”

“What?”

That firmness clouded over the woman’s gaze again. Yet Paolo was sure that it wasn’t a lack of intellect or a distaste for the conversation.

“I mean, the only thing you know about me is where my son is.”

“No. Not your son. The dog.”

“Oh... at home.”

“Who’ll feed him today?”

“Whenever I go away, I leave him with my sister. Luckily I only have one animal, not thirty-seven.” And he smiled.

She did not return the smile. “Yes, just one is easier.”

That’s what it was, Paolo thought: a sort of deafness to irony, to hyperbole, to nuance. And also to those tiny gaps of misunderstanding, like the one about his dog.

“Look...!” Luisa suddenly cried out. She pointed outside so suddenly that it looked like she was trying to toss her finger out.

Just outside the jeep, a few metres away, there was a wild boar. He’d already grown his winter underwool, which, soaked with rain, stuck to his skin. His coarse, erect bristles thickened his neck so much that you couldn’t separate it from his barrel-like torso. Trickle of rain dripped from the tip of his upper canines like two stalactites. His snout was turned towards the inside of the jeep and he stared at them with tiny but unexpectedly sweet, almost dog-like eyes.

Paolo and Luisa held their breath. There was a pungent odour of wet hair, mud and rotten breath in the air. The boar was framed by the sides of the back door like an ancestor portrait in its frame. He stood there for a long moment sniffing the air, his snout high, curious about the smell of humans. Then, after a while, he turned around and with incomprehensible grace on his short legs, presented them his hunched derriere and trotted out of sight.

Luisa and Paolo looked at one another. Both took a deep breath as if they had just come up from underwater. The rain got heavier and heavier, hammering noisily on the jeep. A few minutes passed in which neither of them spoke. The silence wasn’t that of two strangers who have nothing more to say. It was the relaxed, almost intimate silence of two people who have shared an emotion.

Which was, however, interrupted by a violent blow to the side of the jeep. Luisa and Paolo started.

“He’s back...” Luisa whispered.

Paolo brought a finger to his lips. Another powerful strike made them jump. Luisa brought a hand up to her chest, frightened. Had the boar thought it over and decided to attack them? There was another bang, then another and another.

Luisa was nervous and dived to the front of the vehicle. Paolo leaned out to close the door as quickly as he could. But before he managed to pull it shut, a man appeared, shouting.

“Come along! Quickly!”

Standing in the rain, the driver of the van looked like the boar’s human twin: he too was stocky, almost neckless, with water dripping from his nose as it had from the tusks of the boar. Even the wet wool of his uniform gave out an equally feral odour. Luisa and Paolo shared a look of relief.

“So? What’s up?” the van driver said impatiently. “Let’s go.”

The roar of the rain on the tin roof was so loud that they hadn’t heard the van, now next to them, coming. Officer Nitti, standing under the deluge in front of the driver’s seat of the jeep, was beating on the side and shouting insults.

Paolo and Luisa ran through the rain and climbed on board. A puddle formed on the floor around their feet. Nitti jumped in himself and slammed the door behind him. He took off his sodden cap and dried his forehead.

“Let’s go!” he said.

The van started up and moved away. The dented jeep was left there. Sooner or later someone from the Central Branch would come and pick it up with a tow truck. At least one hoped so.