

Extracts from *Geology of a Father* by Valerio Magrelli

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
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1.

My father was pouring out coffee for guests. I was a child and I didn't drink coffee at the time but today this scene comes back to mind because my father had hurt himself. He didn't seem to be making much of it that day, as he chatted and joked, teaspoons stirring, chiming and whirling like musical merry-go-rounds in the afternoon light. And yet his little finger was wrapped in an outsized bandage, a dressing to protect his nail after slamming it in a car door a few days before.

I am fascinated by the enormous white finger circling and watch it as it dips dangerously into the smoking liquid without my distracted father even noticing. I am sitting there, hypnotized, in the midst of this postprandial torpor, the smell of food mingling with that of tobacco, and I say nothing. I do not warn him that the dark liquor is seeping up the bandage, slowly but surely making its way to the source of pain. Up it goes, further and further, and still he doesn't notice. Now, though, the whole dressing has gone as black as shiny tar. My childhood comes to a halt at that moment, pierced by an unexpected howl, the dropped coffee pot, the shards of a broken cup, spilt coffee on the tablecloth. This is how I see family ties: as a "calling of the blood", the sharp stab of a voice from within, calling out until somebody finally deigns to take notice. . . and the aroma of coffee wafting in the air.

2.

He always liked coffee, and that's why I wasn't surprised to find that coffee is what he would turn into in the end. In the family tomb. I could

hardly remember what it looked like; I had only the vaguest of memories from some funeral years before. On his death, however, I was forced to come to terms with the place and with its protocols. The bureaucracy of cemeteries. Having been neglected for decades, the vault had fallen into a state of abandon. I made an appointment with the person in charge to find out what needed to be done. In short order I was informed that owing to a combination of the corpses' liquefaction and the dampness of the site, the tomb was not only flooded but also crumbling to bits.

[...]

I would need to hire an expert to supervise the spring cleaning. The task entailed clearing, digging, drying, restructuring and aerating the subterranean world populated by corpses. This was when I first learned about 'leftovers'. That is, what is left after death of what you paid with your life. What is left of the leftover, a relic of the self. Every leftover corresponds to a body, or rather, to what remains of a body after twenty years. The tomb, in short, is a slot machine that gives back change, even after a very long wait.

[...]

14.

As I write this, I can see the box I filled with his diaries from the last twenty years on my desk. I found them a couple of weeks ago while I was moving house, leafed through a couple of them, and then put them in a box to store in my attic. Why aren't I curious to read them? I'm amazed by my lack of interest, but there is nothing I can do about it. I have no interest in archives and documents make me feel sick. The only important document is myself: I'm a flypaper of memory. One thing, however, I must confess. Going through the notes he wrote in his last month I discovered he was obsessed with defecation.

I suppose it is understandable as old age creeps up on you and your organism progressively gets more cautious. Like a general who feels it necessary to line up his troops between battles or during a siege in order to count how many soldiers are wounded or missing. Old age is like being besieged, you need to prepare to surrender without a 21-gun salute. But there is something else. His insistence on the process of defecation retroactively revealed the meaning of his death—or rather of Death in general—to me.

15.

[...]

It's the opposite of birth. The difference is that there's no mother and the person who is dying has to play both roles: the one giving birth and the new-born, the one who expels and the one who is expelled. It's a matter of getting to the other side; the alley way is narrow, and nobody can help you. That's the point. You have to do the whole thing by yourself, negotiating a topological dilation of space during which your sea cucumber-conscience extrojects its body wall to squeeze through the gap.

There are no screams or contractions. Rather the patient has to extract himself from himself, a Klein bottle in which the container is one with the contained. It's all there in the despondency of the faeces, in the constancy of their discharge about which my father took notes with such devastating precision. Every last bit of his life had been expelled; it slipped away slowly right to the bitter end. [...] I saw him vanish in front of my eyes. Has he popped out on the other side, I wonder?

16.

A son is a thread that must go through the eye of the needle of his own growth. A father is a stitch that needs to be unpicked.

17.

My father was a practising pessimist. Perhaps that is why I've always detested other more fashionable forms of pessimism. For me it was no joke when, every Sunday, the black angel of Boredom darkened our door. No syllogisms or paradoxes here. Up until lunchtime we were all merry. It was the Sixties, and as soon as we had eaten we used to gather around the radio. There were riddles to solve, and my father was unrivalled in his brilliance, much to the amazement of the others in that small auditorium. Why didn't he go in for some of the competitions? He would have won hands down! He flushed with joy for so little – little things have the power to inebriate – and yet he insisted it was nothing and modestly rejected any praise. Bright afternoon light warmed the scene, but the shadow was already looming. Sunday afternoon was about to hook its talons into us like a wild beast, tearing apart the remains of lunch and sinking its teeth into our flesh. *Tedium Vitae* had come to call.

Boredom in my experience is not a sensation. It is material. It's a kind of velvet, felt or moleskin. It's cloth, it's cooked wool, it's my dead life. My father would drown in it. He moaned and groaned, gripped by boredom, and used to go around the room picking something up then dropping it immediately. A book, a newspaper. Nothing held his attention. We would leave the room every now and then, only to return and be even more unsettled by his impatience. And all the while the radio would broadcast a dull do-re-mi of football results; a Gregorian chant I have always associated with the lowest point in my weekly cycle. Still today if I happen to hear the litany of soccer scores I sink into depression. My father would go stir-crazy, he just didn't know how to make time pass more quickly. A lost soul, they say, and it was terrible to behold.

The only thing that seemed to cure him of his Sunday ennui was Monday, when he went back to work—though he was well aware the shadow would return one week hence. A logical consequence of his behaviour was that it made me think about werewolves. Partly because he himself used to tell a terrible story that he'd heard from his own father.

18.

The story took place in a small village in southern Latium at the beginning of the last century. The village cobbler, it seemed, was afflicted with lycanthropy. Every month the whole village prepared for the day the delusion would strike. As soon as the sun went down that day, the inhabitants locked themselves into their houses and left the poor cobbler, who agreed to the treatment, outside until the terrible howls started. My father told me that my grandfather had claimed that one of those ritual nights he had climbed up onto a cornice and slashed the back of the cobbler's neck with a knife tied onto a long stick. Just as in the legend, a drop of his own blood was enough to cure him of his ailment and he went right back to normal.

This is what took place in the village, but not in our house in Rome. What was I supposed to do? Climb up onto the wardrobe? Harpoon my father from above (like Ahab!), and thus vaccinate him against the disease of tedium? I did nothing of the kind, and my werewolf continued to howl

through the house every Sunday, and I was never able to do a thing to alleviate his suffering.

What was the nature of his suffering anyway? Perhaps his incapacity to deal with those empty hours was the same as the one that he met with during his decline. It was his awareness of time that tormented him so. I spent my childhood close to a Monster of Nature. Although I was not contaminated by his disease (but who can guarantee that I was not?), his presence seriously altered my perception of reality. The problem was having a father poisoned by Time. Not even poisoned, really – more like possessed. Possessed by anger and boredom. A metamorphic father, in short.

Like some vowels and certain particles, he was fundamentally ‘unstable’. I would watch him mutate, absent himself, migrate and literally become another, revealing his true nature which was changeable, unsettled, and mercurial. My father wandered, he managed to exit his body like those naked philosophers, holy men or sadhus. The difference between him and these figures, however, lay in the fact that he was totally unaware of it. He had no idea he possessed shamanic powers, but he did. There is no doubt about that.

He was already an old man, when one night he was running a high fever. I got there when he was already in a trance. He was smiling, calm and totally absent. Where had he gone? His eyes were far away as he nodded at me, soaked in sweat. I was alarmed by his temperature – by then more than 40° – and tried in vain to strip him of the bright red woollen pullover he always insisted on wearing on top of his pyjamas. Exasperated, in the end I decided to cut the thing off him. As I hacked at the sweater, as I cut that scarlet ribbon, I felt as if I were officiating at an enigmatic and incongruous inauguration ceremony. As a matter of fact there was an inauguration: it was the Cape Canaveral of his demise, the launching pad that was to send him off into the galaxy of the mind.

My father went on nodding, and I went on slicing the wool with the big scissors, snip snip snip, liberating him from his poisoned cocoon. Nessus’s bloody tunic, a giant pupa, a pod, a silkworm. Before me lay the very image of old age. A body wrapped and inert, surrendered to the care of others, with a contented air of detachment.

And it is about this detachment that I need to talk; detachment that became disease, invading his body in the space of a few months.

The scissor episode was just a phase. Preparations were already underway for the next expedition: my father was getting ready to travel to the Land of Parkinson's.

[...]

20.

There's a poetic image: an old father is like shed skin. The old skin dries and drops off, like bark sloughed off a tree. But I prefer the image of a demagnetized credit card. You want to use it to pay but the card doesn't work anymore. It should work: there's money in the bank, the plastic card is in one piece, the expiry date well in the future. But it still doesn't work.

[...]

22.

'Ictus', Latin fourth declension noun, short second vowel. Meaning: a strike, a blow, a shock. It's the word you would use for an ineluctable event, the dictionaries explain. The gladiator's final blow against his adversary, a bolt of lightning striking a tree top, or the impact of oars on water. But it is also the boar's attack on its prey, or the deadly bite of a snake. It describes something violent, unexpected, often irreversible – and that is how doctors use it.

23.

Summer holidays in the Apennines, almost three months every year at my uncle's house. My father only came to see us for a couple of days over the whole period, and these days were bewitched. One of these evenings after dinner, we were on our way to our bedrooms when suddenly he stopped and stared at the front door. "What's wrong?" I asked him. "Nobody's come in for at least twenty minutes", he answered, "but the key is still swinging". We went back and forth to check on the key until it finally stopped moving. For years afterwards we wondered what family portent was hidden behind the miracle of abolishing attrition and establishing the enchanted kingdom of perpetual motion.

At least forty years have gone by since that strange event, and I had never thought about it until this afternoon when I went into my room and saw a clothes hanger swinging on its hook. I was on my own in the house and

had left the room twenty minutes before. I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in keys and clothes hangers.

What did he want to tell me? Maybe he was just saying hello, a little wave from beyond.

[...]

28.

While I am writing on the train, two kids are whiling away the time by projecting the reflection of the sun on their watches onto the walls. Two white dots chase each other, two fireflies dancing. Could these sun spots be the memory of me and my father? Ghosts are flashes of light, but on my own I can only make one spot and the single spot will always be me. The other will always be missing.

29.

Why do I keep wanting to talk about him? Maybe I miss myself. It's as if I'm mourning my own death. In fact, in his eyes, I'm the one who's dead. I have lost him just as he has lost me. It's as if I had lost a part of myself in a mirror image of my mourning him. Thus I miss myself more than I miss him. I look at myself through his eyes: we are dead to each other in the same measure. With his death our being a twosome has died. We are definitively unpaired. That is why, when I talk about him, I go over to his side. I stand behind him and look at his hand of cards. I see myself on the other side of the card table and realize that from his view point I no longer exist. By dying he has lost his son. The knot is so tangled I don't know which end of the string I am on.

[...]

32.

At what age do you stop being an orphan? A man who loses his father at, say, 60 can't really call himself an orphan. It would be ridiculous. When you're ten, yes. When you're 30? Or 47? I'm the right age: dead man speaking, semi-orphan trying to speak.

A friend told me he was 14 when his father died. "I was broken in two, like a breadstick." Many years later the image still haunts me. Nothing

could be more domestic than a bread-bone cracked into two pieces. As for me, let's say I'm an honorary orphan.

[...]

62.

He only slapped me once in his lifetime. It was summer, in the countryside I loved so much, a tiny village in the Apennines. With a gang of boys we had a wild time, riding our bikes, playing football and walking in the woods. (Once, after walking for hours in the sun we found a trough full of water. We dipped our arms in to cool down, and when we pulled them out they were black, literally covered in leeches. Boundless horror.)

I was quite young, and really happy the few times my father came to see me. That day, who knows why (or rather, it's obvious why), I decided to hide. To start with, I wanted to play a joke on him, but as time passed I hid out of fear because my father had sounded the alarm and called for search parties, involving even the police. By the time they found me it was nearly dark, and I saw him hurtling towards me and—slap. I can't imagine how scared he must have been. Maybe I would have done the same. You strike the object of your love to punish it for leaving you; you strike the object of your love to thank it for coming back to you.

[...]

64.

There was great complicity, on the other hand, when, a few years later, he gave me a special and highly secret mission: to destroy a massive ceramic flowerpot from Capodimonte that someone had given my mother. The task filled me with joy: I brushed against the impossibly hideous vase and slowly pushed with my elbow until the thing crashed to the ground.

Months later, if you looked closely, you could still find shards of little turquoise flowers that had survived the decimation.

65

After my father died I had the brilliant idea of giving my son his electric razor. I thought of it as a handover from one generation to another, along the male blood line. But I had not taken into consideration the time factor.

The machine, like an hour glass, had held within it the grains of every day that had passed, and, shave after shave, it had filled up with white sand. When my son came and asked me why the thing didn't work, I took it apart and found the hidden treasure: living face powder, a memento, a fire that had been consumed – ashes to ashes.

[...]

83.

But I don't want to say goodbye to him this way. There's another Giacinto I can see smiling, silhouetted against the sun on the threshold of a door to some unknown church. "Go in!" he says. "Go in!" This is what he always taught me: "just because a door is closed it doesn't mean you shouldn't go in. Don't let it stop you, open it. Let others, if they want, carry the burden of forbidding you entry. Never stop if nobody is making you stop."

How many gatekeepers and sacristans have I got past by following his advice! How many courtyards and cloisters have I seen that I would never have seen otherwise! This is how I would like to say goodbye to him, with the lump in my throat that always comes when I remember him standing tall and beaming, cheerfully gesturing to me to keep going, not to be afraid, to follow him, to be like him "at least in this respect".

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