

Inside a Horizon of Hills

New Prose by Franca Mancinelli
Translated from the Italian by John Taylor



We're excited to share with you today an excerpt from the autobiographical writings of the award-winning poet and writer, Franca Mancinelli, translated from the Italian by John Taylor. *Inside the Horizon of Hills* evokes her hometown of Fano, on the Adriatic coast, where she was born in 1981, and its immediate hinterland.

Her poetic prose will transport you into the world of her childhood behind the sea of hills that hide family secrets: "It is precisely here that the madness begins, all the deeper and more radical as the distance from the sea increases." Tell us what you think using [@TranslateMonth](#) and [#TranslationMonth](#)!

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

Inside a Horizon of Hills
by Franca Mancinelli
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We have this saying, dissolved in the saliva of generations: those who do not see the sea go crazy. It must have been born not among the sailors who know the madness and the vagaries of the sea, but rather among the peasants of the coast and the immediate hinterland. Those who in a few hours of walking could reach the Adriatic shore, on Sundays or on holidays, preferring salt water to that of the river and the ditches. From the hills, while working, they could have a high overview of the sea, like seagulls called back inland by gales. If it wasn't the whole blue ribbon that opened out, it was at least a short segment between one ridge and another. During the day, as they gazed down at their fields, they knew that from that hill, from that curve of the road, from that tree on the ridge, the sea would reappear bluer than the sky, like a prize that could not be deserved but only received, until their eyes moistened. From village to village, from farmhouse to farmhouse, this part of the horizon, this daily portion of beauty, was cared for without saying or showing anything: no scenic overlook, no seaview hotel or panoramic restaurant, only a glow of blue and green and its dissolution in everyday gestures, in a tune sung to oneself. Then, at some point, it is not possible to say exactly at which field or circle of houses, the curtain closes. Another population begins, another stock of people, those of the hinterland excluded from the sea, those who get up and fall asleep inside a horizon of hills. A sea of land into which you can dive, descending into small valleys covered by a little scrubland. At the most sunken point runs a narrow ditch hidden by poplars and brambles. There you can sense how the land beckons to you to listen to its breath, while yours opens up, is strengthened. These are places where you can vanish from the sight of every human being and even from yourself. They are open wells. You can go down, as if under water, while your eyes are freed and finally see things suspended in all their limpidity. You come to a halt in this cradle of time until something like the humidity infiltrating your bones, or the darkness, brings you back to reason and puts you back on your feet, to face the ascent. In these hollows, like half-shut fissures in the ground and then openings in the landscape, your gaze can go from ridge to ridge, from plowed land to scrubland, from an abandoned farmhouse to a village. No goal that could satisfy desire

for a while, like a refuge, a peak. The sea of the hills continues to cradle your gaze from one side to the other. On this open ground you find yourself when you descend into a few hollows that close off the horizon. Otherwise there is always a shore, a border: the Adriatic, or the dark profile of the Apennines that starts to ripple the hills until their own slopes become indistinguishable. It is precisely here that the madness begins, all the deeper and more radical as the distance from the sea increases.

The land of my childhood is crossed by a gravel road with a dead end. There, at a short distance from each other, emerge two farmhouses that belonged to my grandfather. It is a countryside lying a few kilometers from the coast, a plain from which the two lines of hills that delimit the Metauro Valley can be clearly distinguished: to the north, the one guided by Monte Giove with its hermitage which, as one heads up the motorway towards Fano, appears like a house sign; to the south, the Ferriano line, clearly recognizable by a stretch of steep eroded hillsides. The latter line remains partially covered by an overpass and the warehouses of the industrial area. The other line, however, stands out distinctly above the level of the fields as the beginning of a world inscribed in other geographies. Each time my eyes would be drawn to that line of hills, which I would gaze at in the different shades of light. How had they surged forth from the earth, what had made them grow or brought them there, docile like overturned shells? Did they belong to the sea, which had abandoned them by letting the sand mix with the clay and be covered with green, or were they the last, very gentle, edge of our mountains? I could have walked straight ahead, crossed my uncle's field and a couple of other fields to reach the place where the land started to rise, the point that I was unable to fathom. It did not allow itself to be embraced by reason; it kept eluding me like things traversed by the shock of beauty, like the greatest loves. The object of love is known by reducing it to more understandable and controllable parts; the ruinous flood of passion is held in check by channeling it towards fragments, details. This is why I often isolated trees from that line of hills: those that stood out, alone, on the last ridge, holding the sky between their branches; those that appeared at the edges of the fields or gathered together in the steepest areas; those that you could make out in rows in the center of a terrain: they once supported vines that had since then disappeared, replaced by cultures requiring less human presence. Through these survivors the ancient face of the land emerges: the twisted vinestocks; the large leaves that hide wasps, grasshoppers, bunches of grapes; the bent-over backs; the voices calling to each other from one side of the row to the other; the shears that cut, the buckets that fill, the tractor that drives by to collect them.

From that line of hills that delimited my horizon, my gaze often carved out the image of a disarmingly gentle hill, perfectly designed like a turned-over bowl or a heap of sand smoothed by the breeze. At the summit the crown of a tree, probably an oak, opened out. To be on that ridge, next to that tree, at sunset, would be the acme of a joy that was possible yet constantly postponed. Up there, looking at the valley, one would be filled with light like a basket of fruit. A supply that would last for days. Perhaps it was a place so engraved in space that it could not tolerate a human profile. A place for the eyes, an intact place: what remained of a space that I could never have reached. I didn't know which road led there. Perhaps, if I had approached that place, it would have disappeared, become invisible, lost in the air, like rainbows. In

fact, no man ever appeared next to that oak, no matter how many evenings I watched over it, and I had never glimpsed, during countless expeditions over the hills, a path or a gravel road that could lead to that mild wave of land. Was it a mirage created by distance? I am sure that at dusk the animals, indistinguishable to my eyes, which came out of the woods would pass across it, pausing for more than a moment to sniff the valley, our weak constellations of light.

My whole childhood was attracted to this unmarked limit between the plain and the hills. My imagination gravitated around this point where two worlds joined. But I never made the journey that could have been resolved in one morning's adventure by cutting across the short stretch of plain, going up through the fields or one of the narrow winding roads and coming back down without anyone shouting my name. Only in my early adolescence, on one of my brief escapes, did I arrive at the top of Monte Giove. Along one of the tuff edges of the road I discovered a hole with a muzzle shape in it. I dug around this den to make it emerge: it was a hibernating toad. I took it away with me, out of adolescent selfishness, keeping it apart in a corner of the garden until that interest took on other forms and directions. Here, my memory is blank. It lets in a part of darkness. (Perhaps these are the places which, through our acts, are penetrated by absurdity, its cruelty.) I hope that I had freed it in the cool grass, far from the roadside.

Into my experience of the hills, between childhood and adolescence, Pavese's voice was blended. In his words there was something naked and ever in movement, advancing and digging into my chest all the way to a truth that would surface in blood. From the prison of the Count of Montecristo and from the jungle of the tigers of Mompracem, it was he who brought me to books that no longer contained illustrations. My eyes would have to follow the sentences, one after the other, and open up all around the landscape, draw faces, acts. His first book was *The Moon and the Bonfires*. It was my father who guided me through the words, reading to me before I fell asleep, and now choosing from his library a book that would speak to me. There was a message addressed to me that I would understand by reading. I rushed into it immediately: a few lines, the first page, but the words remained inert. I told him and again he read with his voice. Immediately I recognized that almost hypnotic cadence that cannot not be followed, letting it resonate inside, Pavese's wonderful way of narrating with the pace of one who has decided not to hide anything, nor from himself. One after the other his sentences poured into me, all his books.

From that moment on, my eyes would also carry, as they gazed at the hills, his own eyes, dark and elusive like those of the adolescent adult staring seriously at me, behind his eyeglasses, from the cover of his collected poems. Faced with my horizon of hills, I wondered each time who had the privilege of really living in those small houses that appeared to be burrows in the earth, between a plowed field and scrubland; especially at night, when from that darker mass emerged points of light immersed in compact darkness.

In those years, without being aware of it, I had slipped inside trousers that I had to tighten, turning back the waistline several times, while my angular shoulders and countable ribs seemed to protect me from any outside attack, as if they were my hardest and most indestructible part, the armor that was granted to me. In the pangs of an obscure pain I would bash between the rooms like an insect that has no escape.

One winter evening, when darkness had already fallen, I drove my moped into the hills of a more inland area. It was a place that I had just begun to explore, losing my way on some gravel roads that branched off from the provincial highway that rises towards Mombaroccio. There, power lines are still supported by slightly slanting wooden utility poles that run across the fields. Those hills seemed vaster to me, more open to the sky than the gentle ones preserved in my eyes. I left my moped on the edge of the gravel road and continued walking over a large plowed field. I was heading for the thickest darkness, moving forward among the dirt clods, in the heart of the land. I walked until the road vanished from sight. The owner's farmhouse had already faded away behind me.

Only the land was tilting, losing all boundaries, entering more and more into the night. A land so dark and devastated that my eyes had to follow every footstep: every moment seemed to surge forth beneath my feet, emerge and withdraw. I was at the beginning of the world. A strange grace kept my hands raised and open, like a scarecrow lingering in the now deserted field. A few minutes of pure emptiness went by. Then I was surprised by the howl of a dog.

Translator's Note

After translating Franca Mancinelli's prose poems (*The Little Book of Passage*, The Bitter Oleander Press, 2018) and her verse poetry (*At an Hour's Sleep from Here*, The Bitter Oleander Press, 2019), I am currently working on her autobiographical prose writings, which the author is simultaneously revising for a future volume in Italy. Initially published in journals and anthologies a few years ago, these writings often evoke her hometown of Fano, on the Adriatic coast, where she was born in 1981, and its immediate hinterland (as in "Inside a Horizon of Hills"). Franca Mancinelli and I work closely together on my translations. As with her poetry and prose poetry, the translator must pay attention, when rendering her prose writings, to the semantic resonance of key words (which in English might tend to a greater factuality), to her psychological subtlety (with which personal references remain discreet yet probe deeply and speak to others' experience), and to the underlying movement of her texts from negativity towards a viewpoint that affirms, from an initial closure or blocked horizon that becomes an opening.

This text is included in Franca Mancinelli's *Dentro un orizzonte di colline e altre prose*, a series of prose texts comprised in the anthology *Femminile plurale: Le donne scrivono le Marche*, edited by C. Babino, Macerata: Vydia Editore, 2014, pp. 31-54.

—John Taylor, translator

About the author



Franca Mancinelli was born in Fano, Italy, in 1981. Her first two collections of verse poetry, *Mala kruna* (2007) and *Pasta madre* (2013), were awarded several prizes in Italy and later republished together as *A un'ora di sonno da qui* (2018)—a book now available in John Taylor's English translation as *At an Hour's Sleep from Here* (Bitter Oleander Press, 2019). In 2018 also appeared her collection of prose poems, *Libretto di transito*, also published by the Bitter Oleander Press as *The Little Book of Passage*. She has participated in international projects such as the *Chair Poet in Residence* (Kolkata, India, 2019) and *Refest: Images and Words on Refugee Routes*. From this latter experience was born her *Taccuino croato* (*Croatian Notebook*), now published in *Come tradurre la neve* (*How to Translate the Snow*, 2019). Photo by Chiara De Luca.

About the translator



John Taylor is an American writer, critic, and translator who lives in France. Among his many translations of French and Italian poetry are books by Philippe Jaccottet, Jacques Dupin, Pierre Chappuis, Pierre-Albert Jourdan, José-Flore Tappy, Pierre Voélin, Georges Perros, Lorenzo Calogero, and Alfredo de Palchi. His translations have been awarded grants and prizes from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Academy of American Poets, Pro Helvetia, and the Sonia Raiziss Charitable Foundation. He is the author of several volumes of short prose and poetry, most recently *The Dark Brightness*, *Grassy Stairways*, *Remembrance of Water & Twenty-Five Trees*, and a “double book” co-authored with Pierre Chappuis, *A Notebook of Clouds & A Notebook of Ridges*. Learn more at <http://johntaylor-author.com/>. Photo by Françoise Daviet-Taylor.