

Cesarina Vighy

The last summer

*The most stupid thing you can say to a sick person is that they're looking good, that they should stop obsessing about it, that everyone's got their bad moments, etc.*

*The saddest thing is when they stop telling you these things, and actually don't know what to say at all.*

*Only doctors can find the right words to deceive you, that's why they went to university, and you leave the studio with a smile on your face, but as soon as you reach the lift you realize they're all illusions you paid to hear, and you make the same face as Bob Hope when he discovers a skeleton in the closet: he closes it as if nothing happened, and screams like mad two minutes later.*

*Ok, Z. is at the second stage, the sad one. She often cries uncontrollably, to the embarrassment of her and those around her, especially the angry angel she lives with.*

Why was this humiliation bestowed upon me?

I've always been fine and have always been very proud of my good health: I haven't had a fever in decades, flu's never been a problem, I look good for my age. My age, right. I looked ten years younger and now the illness has gifted me with ten more than the ones I have.

I'm in that age where you're still the target of marketing campaigns offering you creams "for mature skins", while they wait to pass on to denture powders and invisible pads. All to continue playing a game that doesn't mean anything to you anymore, with men who are supposed to have regained their long lost turgor thanks to antioxidants and blue pills.

And it's hot, too hot, and Rome's summer nightlife is about to begin with its racket that's especially intolerable for those who can't take part in it.

The fifth Gospel - TV - says that this is the warmest summer in 50, 100, 150 years. It says so with an almost joyous nervousness, as if Rome was close to winning some "warmest city" cup.

I'm not going out anyway. We tried trailing by car around those places where I'd happily scuttled along for years, but you can't enter the city centre by car: too many steps, too few parking spaces... Too hell with it! Luckily I know Rome like my own pockets.

What I didn't know were the huge, white hospitals which tower over the outskirts of town, in the middle of deserts which stretch for a little too long, where at some point they may have planned to plant a little wood, but then forgot. Citadels whose only transit pass is pain; the sun, for some reason, always shines above them at its zenith, and you can't help looking for refuge inside, in the areas where people wait with their eyes wide open, more for fear of the sentence than for the TV screens littered here and there. And they'd happily wait forever.

Sometimes they bring you to more hospitable places. Gardens with kiosks, birds-filled trees, meadows with fat cats lounging around. And a big plastic structure where everyone sings karaoke. In wheelchairs.

One you understand that “rehabilitation” is an alibi for the parents and a fraud for the patients, the spell’s broken. Gone the Garden of Armida, all that’s left is avid old people desperately clinging on to life or kids with cloudy eyes who ask themselves if their life has stopped.

*Struck by the love that only naturalized Romans, especially those coming from up north, can feel for their city, Z. had always lived more outside than inside. Returning home always made her slightly melancholic, as if she was submitting her to house arrest. Now that she never leaves her house and her horizon has dramatically shrunked, she discovers how beautiful her house is. Large untidy rooms, books knick-knacks papers piled up everywhere, windows that let in the trees from the Gianicolo and from where you can see the peak of the Vittoriano. The best thing, though, is the corridor: a long, dark, thirties-style corridor, which has become a perfect walking gym.*

*Think of the horseman whom, having vowed to go to Jerusalem but not being able to stay away for too long, did his pilgrimage in his home garden, walking the entire distance that separated him from the holy destination.*

Walking erect and talking, two faculties that have turned apes into men: I’m losing them both. I still have my opposable thumbs and my unbearable self-consciousness.

*The fifth Gospel has said that it’ll get even hotter. To sweeten the pill, it then started listing all the great events Rome offers during the summer. Z. shrugs: she’s done them all already. There’s only one thing that stings her heart: when a party, a show, an exhibition is described as “unmissable”, even though she knows it’s just a fashionable adjective. Reluctantly, she has to admit that there’s not even any noise this year. Has she turned deaf? Or have the cries of those not able to take part in the summer life finally been heard?*

An unexpected finding: the kitchen window. Until now I had only ever used it to smoke a cigarette while waiting for the pasta to boil, to see if a family member was leaving or returning, saluting him or her in a militaresque pose.

Now I cried (it doesn’t take much) when the pruners arrived, with great delay. They decapitated the nice platans: the branches, that had already sprung the first leaves, went crashing to the ground. I thought they would have stayed that way – naked, ashamed and birdless – until next year.

Next year for them, obviously.

But they made it. In a few days they were covered with gems and promised a quick return of the birds. And the trees always stick to their promises.

*Z. has discovered, in the trunk close to the window, a long and thin crack. A male blackbird has come to inspect it, with his polished black feathers, his regulation yellow beak and his ruby eye framed in a golden circle. He briefly looked in and then flew away. Seen and approved. Then the female arrived, and the real work began.*

*Strange family. The male was never to be seen again. The female is aided by another female (the maid?) that alternates with her brief but frequent visits to what is now clearly a nest. At fixed hours they call each other and one or the other arrives (I know they're two, even though they're identical, because sometimes they bump into each other at the entrance).*

*You could wait hours for the little ceremony. And Z. does, pausing her dark thoughts and admiring the dance like the travellers that stare at the baby dancers in Bali.*

I confess: not even when I was pregnant did I await a birth with such trepidation. The moment must be close, because the two mothers now come and go at a frenetic rhythm.

How many will they be? Will I get to see those perennially-open beaks and pink throats, ready to gulp down the food the mother will bring them? And their first clumsy flights towards their element, air, leaving the earth to us?

Apparently not. Uncerimoniously, one morning a single blackbird exits the crack, shrugs its wings and takes off. Also animals give birth to only children nowadays. Ungrateful and well-fed.

*Z., humbly, has fallen back on the pigeons. Excepts for the tourists in Venice, they're not liked by anyone. They eat, dirty and coo. They mayors catch them to deport them, the people stick long nails between the shutters to stop them from nesting on the windowsills.*

*She, on the other hand, when it turns dark, prepares a banquet of treats: crackers, nuts, crumbs, raisins. She likes to think it's a single pigeon, always the same, which eats everything up each day at dawn. So the two don't know each other. Like Tchaikovsky and his benefactor. She sent him money and he wrote music with the agreement to never meet. And they never did.*

Everyone's waiting for the White Night, when all the shops and museums will stay open all night long. More like the night of the living dead. Zombies that wouldn't enter a museum if you paid them, haven't read a book since elementary school and whom you can't drag out of the house at night because they prefer to fall asleep in front of the TV, that night, as if awakened by a mysterious signal, queue up for hours to stare at obscure drawings of a future restoration of a mosaic, to see a show that's been on for months or to listen to Provençal songs («But where is Provençalia? It must be one of those new Eastern countries»).

Mine are real white nights: I fall asleep at five, six, even seven in the morning. When I try to turn off the light, as soon as I flick the switch, the stage behind my eyelids lights up: crystal chandeliers, T-bone stakes, searchlights.

My head seeths as if filled with worms. What a brainstorm.

*The daughter of a gentle gnostic who used to say that he simply lacked the organ responsible for the production of faith and the wife of an angry atheist that would like to meet God to give him a good beating, Z. looks more like her father. That can sometimes make things easier for her, sometimes more melanconic.*

I've read something interesting. When Matteo Ricci, the jesuit who tried to evangelize China, started rewriting the catechism for the presumed new believers, he was immediately confronted with a dilemma: how to express God's name. Neither Confucianism nor Buddhism nor Taoism had anything like that. In the end he resorted to a modest «Tian zhu» ("Lord of the skies"). Personally, I would have given up: after all, you're talking of the oldest civilization in the world and it had gotten along fine for centuries simply finding the sacred in everything or in nothing.

No one cares for weathermen anymore. They've pretty much been banned by TV, having gotten it wrong one time too many. Now we stare at the sky, hoping truckloads of water will pour down. Except during the White Night, obviously.

My great and only friend is The Cat: the round, shy talking tiger loves me even more since I got sick. Not, like my fellow humans, "despite" my illness but "because" of it, since I'm always at home, and often in bed. When we sleep, I can't tell anymore if her paw is above my hand or if my hand is above her paw. When she's got stuff to do, she always turns around before running away, as if to reassure me: «I'll be right back».

Even Stendhal, amongst the curious and childish "privileges" that he asked for himself, listed as article 7: «Miracle. Four times a year he will be able to transform into the animal he wishes, and then turn human again».

Yes. Nature really is a temple, etc. etc. even if its pillars can sometimes be the legs of a cat or even - miracle! - those of a spider.

What luck, what a miracle (it's the third miracle in just one page). It won't rain on the White Night.

The zombies, the events, the lights, the instruments, the actors, the dancers, the shopkeepers, the bars, even the sciamans that credit themselves for staving off the rain in a summer that hasn't seen a single drop of rain, are safe.

And so we got here. As I thought it over, when this morning I saw the sun's shining light as usual, I knew what I had to do. Enough snobbery; just little, dutiful eccentricities. Also I will have my White Night, and with my pace I'll be the queen of the zombies. I'll proudly wear my hard-earned crown of thorns.

I know mine will be a White Day. I want to see clearly and I want others to see me. The others, whom I'm so scared of. The others, whom I've ran away from for months, locking myself up inside my house, the ones that look at you remembering how you used to be, an instant of compassion, a prayer to their god that he spares them this fate. The neighbours.

I'll go out. My angry angel (I've learned that not all angels are friendly and talkative) will help me; he'll take my arm and we'll try not to tumble both to the ground; it has to be a triumphant walk.

Here come the neighbours. I know everything about them: through the window I've spoken with the trees, the dust, the shadows.

There's the eighty-year old who "still drives" and who's waiting to die a young man's death in a crash; there's the ex cutie, who believes that time has stopped just for her; there's the general that has never seen a drop of true blood in a real battlefield; there's the couple that believes they have the copyright on love; there's the obese kid who can often be seen being taken for a walk by his dog; there are the kids over whose clean eyes you glide like a ghost over glass; there's the cripple who acts like there's nothing she can do about it; there's the crazy queen of cats that meets her protégés every morning at 2am; there's her wreck of a husband who follows her, hiding behind corners so she won't notice him. All guilty, all innocent and, yes, all brothers: how can I be scared of them? I greet them, smile, walk unsteadily around the building, and head back in.

I feel better: just a few troubling thoughts, just a few worms in my brain.

How much can a pigeon remember? How sad can a cat get? How far is Jerusalem?