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Rombo

Novel

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pp. 9 – 26

‘One phenomenon, which almost always accompanies an earthquake and often briefly announces its arrival ahead of time, consists of a curious subterranean noise, seemingly of the same nature wherever it is given mention. This noise consists of the rolling tones of a row of successive explosions, and is often compared with the rolling of thunder, when it occurs with less intensity, with the rattling of many carts, travelling hastily over bumpy cobblestones.... In Peru the intensity of this curious sound appears to correlate directly with that of the quake that follows; the same is said in Calabria, where this dreaded phenomenon is called *il rombo*.’

— Friedrich Hoffmann, *A History of Geognosy and an Account of Volcanic Phenomena* (1838)

Landscape

All around: a dwindling moraine landscape. Soft hills, fields, peat moss bogs in outlying depressions, karst protuberances with oak groves, chestnut trees, blades of grass sharp and thin, growing on ridges less mountainous than they appear, which nevertheless offer a view: over the downs, the hillcrests dotted with churches and villages, here and there castle-like ruins – in reality the mouldering vestiges of the First World War. For its mellifluousness the landscape has a tremendous material shift to thank; glaciers, rocks, matter that was carried all the way here, with an inevitable clamour that far exceeded the rumble of a *rombo*. Not a *preluding roar*, as it was referred to, two hundred years ago, but rather an ongoing torrent, with which no human ear could cope.

To the south the hills surrender to flatland, to the magnitude of the sky, the openness of the sea. Giant cornfields, industrial strips, highway, gravel quarries along the rivers, which empty into the Adriatic Sea. Piave, Tagliamento, Isonzo, each stream carrying off its part of the Alps, dolomite metamorphic rocks, pre-alpine conglomeration, the karstic limestone in the Isonzo – to this day people attribute its loud white colour to the many bones of the soldiers who fell in the Battles of Isonzo. On clear days one can see from the hillcrests all the way to the sea, the Grado Lagoon dabbed by island bushes, the boxy hotels of resort towns protruding sharply into the horizon, like uneven teeth.

The river defining this hill country is the Tagliamento. A wild river, as they say. Yet aside from the few weeks of high water after the snow melts, and the torrential downpours, the wild thing about it is rather the emptiness, the vastness of the irregular stone bed at the mercy of sparse rivulets, always searching for new paths and courses. At the point where it descends from the mountains and enters the moraine landscape, the river changes course, veering to the south and incorporating the Fella from the north – hesitantly, both wavering, turquoise and white; this wavering produced a giant triangular field of pebbles and scree, which now separates the Carnic Alps from the Julian Alps, a bright plane like a wound, a space of procrastination before a backdrop of mountain valleys, secluded zones with their own languages, dulled from waning use, their own shrill, helpless songs and tricky dances.

The cemeteries belonging to the villages in the hill country have their own small, secluded cupolas with small churches and a view to the north, to the mountains, the trench of the Tagliamento valley, the narrow passage of the Fella valley, which the Romans passed through, heading north, and the Celts, heading south. To the northwest lie the Carnic Alps, cleft peaks behind pre-Alpine mountain chains, a picture book of vastness, which came into being with the formation of these mountains. The picture book is located precisely at the tenuous point where two continental plates overlap, uneasy about their position. Their discontent

radiates eastward, into the mountain valleys of Italia Slava and the soft hill country north of the coastal strip.

To the northeast one's gaze is met by the Julian Alps and the Alps, the framework for Monte Musi, which appears grey, blue, violet or orange, depending on the light and clarity. But the cliffs are always sheer, no matter the light, a dark barrier, unclimbable, unsurmountable, vaulted at the eastern end by the peak of a mountain, Monte Canin, white from limestone or snow, the dull eye tooth, the border tooth belonging to the valley behind.

In front of the mountains, two zones meet: continental and Mediterranean climates, the winds, precipitations and temperatures of two migratory fields on land and at sea. Thunderstorms, gales, deluges, earthquakes, which all tirelessly abrade the traces of human migration that run through this region and, no matter how worn down they might become, never allow themselves to be erased. The sky falls into a dark mood, the *rombo* is never far away.

Quake

The earthquake is everywhere. In the rubble of collapsed houses overgrown by ivy at number thirteen on the state road, in the cracks and scars of the large buildings, the burst gravestones, the crookedness of reconstructed cathedrals, the empty lanes in the old villages, interconnected like honeycomb, the ugly new houses and settlements oriented on the version of suburbia found in American television series, a dream location. Outside on the field the new houses, built at a distance from the shaken places, often have only a single story: here the main point being that there is a minimum of material to fall on one's head, in case, there is once again...as there was *that* year, the earthquake year of 1976. Now it's half a lifetime away, or longer, but the writing it inscribed in everyone's memory has not faded: it is forever being notched anew by the act of recollection, from speaking of all the wheres and hows, the search for shelter and the fear, the act of listening out for further rumblings – in garages, in the open air, pressed against the family Fiat, buried beneath rubble, amongst the dead, a cat below one's arm. All the images that it

evokes would stretch from here – the cemetery with a view to the north – all the way to the harshly hatched chain of Monte Musi, purple-blue in the distance, more a peak of muzzle-and-snout than a mountain of muses, jags surrounding the muzzle for the eye tooth Monte Canin. Everything is spelled in the language of the mountains. Perhaps at the end there is an unexpected path, leading up to its ridge, from where one would look down onto the valley at the foot of Monte Canin, a small river valley, which would form a right angle with the path of memory images of the earthquake. One would hope for doldrums on such a day, for a celebratory calm, in which to walk along the path of images.

But today it is windy. Directly on the wall with a view to the mountains, appearing as if folded together in this light without shadow, on a grave sealed by a layer of cement, smooth and white with a wreath of faded plastic flowers, stands a small man with white hair and bad teeth; he is speaking into a telephone. He is describing the grave, emphasizing that it is clean and orderly, and slowly pronounces the name on it, even mentioning the wreath; on the fadedness of the flowers, however, he does not comment, and in conclusion, as if responding to the voice at the other end of the line, he says: Memory is an animal, it barks with many muzzles.

Anselmo

The short man with white hair and bad teeth is named Anselmo. He is a council worker who always requests to work at the cemetery. There is a lot to do there, the layer of dirt covering the mound of rock is thin, and the number of graves limited. The columbaria have to be expanded, graves need to be levelled, remains brought into the ossuary, trees pruned and cut down, the stability of the grave plaques and stones tested. Anselmo knows his way around. He is familiar with the locations where the graves are sinking, knows what kind of damage can occur to gravestones and which cemetery plot would be safest in case of an earthquake. He advises against mausoleums, pointing out the cracks in the walls of the showy family burial plots. He

banters with grave visitors and offers himself up as a confidant to bereaved persons visiting from out of town.

The cemetery is a recommended stop for hikers and cyclists passing through: on the northwest side of the wall is a long panorama board, detailing the name of every peak. There the half-round formed by the peaks and crests, which surround the moraine landscape on the west, north, and east as if holding it in a rescuing embrace, stretches out like a straight chain before the beholder, who first has to get used to the distortion of the landscape, letting their gaze wander back and forth between the image and the mountain range, while they graze with their fingertips the peaks on the panorama board, as if they could thus feel their constitution. Anselmo is wont to approach these day-trippers, as well, and tell them about the landscape. He always directs their gaze to Monte Canin and its summit, covered in snow until spring, and mentions that he grew up in the shadow of this mountain. When the peak is hidden behind clouds, Anselmo says: Today the mountain doesn't want to show itself. A moody one, that Canin.

6 May

On the morning of 6 May a rosy light falls on the snow clinging to Monte Canin's peak. It soon fades, the sun lies low. On this morning in early May, the slopes around the valley are quiet, limestone white and green from beeches and hazelnut bushes, metallic grey from silverberry on the riverbanks. Beneath thin clouds the heat disperses.

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Olga leaves the house early, heading down the road to the bus. When asked later, she will say: That morning as I walked down the steps to the road I saw a whip snake, a *carbon*, the kind you usually find down below along the river, and not up in the village. It lay on a piece of the

wall, as if to sun itself, a black stick, yet the sun wasn't shining, although it was warm. The cuckoo was calling ceaselessly, already in the morning. The cuckoo and this snake and all the stories I'd ever heard about this kind of snake came to my mind then, all this I can remember very well.

In the afternoon Anselmo helps scythe. It is still early in the year to be cutting. He will remember that Thursday. I still remember it exactly, he will say. We got out of school early on Thursdays. I can still remember that it was hot out, and after lunch my sister and I had to help down below, in the valley on the hillside, with the first mowing. The grass was already high.

The sun is a lurid hole in the clouds that day, it burns the children's necks until they hurt. The crickets chat thinly, hastily, as if they have somewhere to be. Their grandmother cuts the grass with a scythe. The grass is heavy, she sweats, and the scythe becomes dull again and again, more often than usual, and the blade has to be whetted. The children hurry with their raking and piling. Get it done already! One can hear the grandmother calling out again and again, Do it faster!

Anselmo will remember that she was angry at the children being slow, but she is also angry at the grass, which appears so dry and bristly and yet dulls the scythe, as if it were wet. The whetting stone strikes the blade, without an echo, as if the air had swallowed the sound. That whole time, Anselmo will later report, we heard our neighbor's greenfinch all the way down in the meadow.

It's screaming as if there were a fire, says the man mowing the meadow lot next to theirs. He swings his scythe back broadly and drives it into the blades, and the sweet grass sinks down onto the earth. Still he has to pause and whet the blade just as often as Anselmo's grandmother.

On 6 May snow on the peak shimmers into the shadowless morning light. The smallest mechanical reaction would be enough to cause the snow fields to slide into the valley. An imprudent hiker, falling rocks, that would already be enough. But this time of year there is no one out in the mountains.

The snake that Olga sees on the wall in the morning is black as coal. It loves dampness. It lives in water and on land and is not poisonous. In the spring when they mate the male and the female snakes entwine, as if to form a coiled rope. If they fear they will be interrupted, they close themselves off, thus coiled, forming a ring; if touched from the outside the ring can transfer an electric shock. After mating, the two carbon snakes remain together until death do them part.

Lina is nervous this morning. The siskin calls out wretchedly. Her brother is looking for a job, and she knows he won't find one. But something else remained in her memory.

What I still remember about 6 May, she later begins one day, as if writing an essay for school: Because it had been so warm, on that day we had already mounded up the soil on the potato plants, that I remember for certain. We heard sparrowhawks, their brief, tight tones, calling out to one another, we talked about it. There were three of us in the field. My brother was back from living abroad. He always liked to tell us scary stories. On that day it was a snake that someone had driven over, by the village entrance. He saw it. If it was a female snake and had not yet laid its eggs, it will bring bad luck, he said. Then the male snakes will slither through the village, searching for the guilty person. Must have been the bus driver, he said. I know the

bus driver now, I also knew him then. He didn't live in our village. After his afternoon drive he always parked outside the cemetery, where he enjoyed his lunch. As my brother told his story, I wondered if a snake would be able to find the bus driver. While we worked, a sudden gust of cold wind came, very brief. The wind comes from the snow, still lying up there, my brother said. The snow and this heat, they don't go together.

On 6 May a thin white layer of clouds blankets the sky, causing the beams of sunlight to become particularly sharp, broken frequently as they are by tiny drops of steam. In the afternoon a peculiar phenomenon occurs. In a doubled reflection, two pale suns briefly grace the sky directly above the snowy peak of Canin, standing eye to eye with the sun, which glides misty over the valley. The double sun soon dissipates.

In the meadows there are already spurge, bluets, campions, on the waysides are blue bugleweeds. And pale pink silene. Here they call it *sclopit*. The blossom consists mainly of a balloon in two parts. Children pick the blossoms and crush them in their balled-up fists, letting them explode with two brief cracks. It sounds like *scllo-pit*. The flower is named after the tone made by the blooms bursting. The leaves of *sclopit* are harvested before the flowers. They are pointy and narrow and are of a pale, somewhat dull green colour. Everyone has their own *sclopit* spot. Some people divulge theirs, others keep it for themselves.

Mara gathers *sclopit* on 6 May. Before she goes out, she has to lock in her mother, who has already half-forgotten the world. She always acquiesced calmly, but that morning she cries out from behind the locked door, as if it were a matter of life and death. Mara walks uphill,

away from the cries. When later the conversation turns to 6 May, she does not mention the shouting: I reached a meadow at the edge of the forest above a steep slope, where everything was full of *sclopit*, not a bloom yet in sight, she says. Jays called out amongst the pines. I filled my cloth, until I could hardly tie it shut. When I arrived home, the *sclopit* was wilted and droopy, as if someone had sat on it. It smelled like cut grass. I heard a child cry out and was startled. Thus came the evening.

In the afternoon on 6 May the sky above the mountain ridge turns grey-blue and dark in the southwest, as if a storm were coming from that direction, as rarely occurs. This pseudo wall of clouds remains motionless for a while, then dissipates, and the sun rests white and lurid and large in the sky. Below it the snow plane facing the valley lies as if submerged in a stormy yellow.

At night in front of their doors some people place hollowed out slabs of wood filled with milk for the black snakes. In the morning the bowl is always empty, so they say. It brings luck. The *carbon* is a clever snake. One story goes like this: Once a sparrow hawk snatched up a *carbon*. In its clutches the bird carried it back to its nest. Before the bird knew what had happened, the young snake had devoured all the eggs in the nest. I'll return them to you if you bring me back, the snake said. The sparrow hawk promised, and the snake spewed out the eggs. Then the sparrow hawk brought back the snake, and since then in the valley sparrow hawks no longer snatch up snakes.

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In the valley some people keep goats, while other people, who have more money, keep a cow or two. The stalls are not large. Gigi's family had always kept goats. I only know about two things, Gigi says. Wood and goats. I know how to fell timber. I know how to milk a goat.

On 6 May in the afternoon he comes home from his work in the forest. The sun burns, without shining. He passes by the cemetery, where there is not a shadow, and sweats. On the street he sees a runover snake. It lies there, black in a spot of blood. Flies rest on the blood. From the edge of the forest the cuckoo calls. Gigi still remembers that the goats were stubborn. Their fur felt sticky. It was hot. On days like this, one wondered when Canin would finally shed its snow. When I was finished with the first goat, the second one didn't want to come, he remembers. That had never happened before. It stood crookedly behind the push cart. Behind the cart, its head and legs seemed mismatched. Nearby a bird in a cage whistled so loudly, the milk might have turned sour. All the dogs in the village were barking. When I finished milking, both goats wanted to stand behind the pushcart. They stood there, incredibly still. It was already turning dark. The milk smelled bitter.

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In the late afternoon on 6 May a dark shadow falls over Canin's peak and the remaining snowfields, resting on them, like a hand. A short burst of cold wind, and the shadow disappears, as if the hand were pulled away.

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Why should I remember? Toni says. Why not forget it all instead? Come on, Toni, tell us something, the people say, we all know something about 6 May. All right, Toni says:

On Fridays my mother smoked cheese. The evening before I always had to gather wood, so that in the morning everything would be ready in the smokehouse. That evening I didn't want to gather wood. I can't remember why. I sat on the veranda and carved something. Go get wood, my father said, but I remained there, seated. Below on the street, people were headed home. Someone whistled a tune, I think. All the dogs in the neighbourhood were howling. My father smacked me on the back of my head. I took the basket and went down to the woodshed. It wasn't a proper shed, more like a few posts and shelves with a roof overhead. The back wall was the side of a hill. Dirt and stone. It wasn't late. Still light out. I took a log from the pile, and a snake shot out of the crack, between the woodpile and the hillside. It was black and long and must have been as thick as my arm. After all, I was practically still a child. The grass rustled under the snake, which disappeared towards the river. I ran back up into the house and yelled, I just saw a huge snake. I don't believe you, my father said. I had to go back down alone for the wood and carry up the basket, all the while listening out for every sound. Everything was eerie to me, even the voices from below on the street, the yowling of the dogs, the bird calls.

Before dusk falls on 6 May the bare cliff on the south side of the peak lies bathed in an orange-red hue, as if reflecting the light of a sun, setting on the invisible western horizon. Briefly this glow reflects onto the snow planes, which are already in the process of sinking into the evening shadows.

The birds in the trees are restless. Silvia stands at the village exit, waiting for her father. She strains to hear the sound of a motor. But she hears only the brief, excited, flat trills of the birds in the trees. Like a rattling. The birds rattled so, she will say.

The sky is heavy. The mountains to the west are indistinct. Like shadows.

My father had promised to come home on a moped, Silvia says. He peddled off on the cutler's bicycle, with the neighbour. That was weeks ago already. Then he wrote a letter, I'll be back on 6 May. I still remember it exactly. He had gotten a job in the factory and would buy himself the moped, he wrote. I listened into the valley, again and again. Then I saw him coming. He looked so small, and I could see that he was hobbling, pushing the moped. I walked towards him, crossing over a crack in the street. Not until I was jumping did I realize it was a snake. Run over. Not a snake any more, not really. Snake mush. I walked over to my father, I was so happy he had arrived. It was spooky out there, all alone in front of the village, it was already turning evening.

Silvia's father is very tired. He lifts her up in the air and sets her down on the moped. The fuel ran out. Someone had a bad day, he says, as they pass by the flattened snake. At least that's how Silvia will tell of it later.

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The *carbon* is occasionally seized by fury; it then bites its own tail and stiffens into a ring, charged with electricity. In this form it throws itself into motion, the rolling ring quickly picks up speed and races forward with a high-pitched buzzing and hissing, until it's derailed by some obstacle, at which point the electricity discharges and the head releases the tip of the tail. The snake lies weary, as if from an incredible exertion, and is hardly able to take cover and seek shelter. In this weary state after the race the snake is open to attack.

Anselmo has to go to bed early, school is in session. It's not dark out yet, a yellow gloaming. There are no swifts to be heard; at dusk they usually overtake the roofs and the church tower. But in some courtyard a dog is wailing, as if someone were kicking it. The musicians are arriving at Anselmo's neighbour's house, to rehearse. This is what Anselmo remembers: They tuned and tuned before playing a few bars, then cursed and tuned their instruments again, but before long the bass was once again out of tune, or one of the violins, and the musicians cursed and argued, and then a bow glided over the strings of the bass, and then over the strings of the first and then the second violin, and again the bass, in a circle and back in forth, the canary in the cage at the house below by the path whistled and whistled as if it were a matter of life and death, so loud that the musicians complained, and from time to time it was utterly silent, it was near dark and silent like never before, and then came a deep drone, and a rumbling and a trembling and a grinding coursed through everything, and I jumped up and looked out the window, where I saw, in the last light of dusk, the dark snow come loose from Canin.

Sisma

On the evening of 6 May an earthquake shakes the region. The ground opens up, houses collapse, people and animals are buried beneath the rubble, the clocks on the church towers stand still, it is nine o'clock, black snakes are fleeing into the river, beneath the peak of Monte Canin a cloud of snow travels through the evening into the valley.

The earthquake is the result of tectonic plates shifting. There are countless words to explain what transpired at the end of a day of three suns, yowling dogs, restless black whip snakes, screaming birds. Words like break junction, spreading zone, lithosphere. Beautiful words that you can hold in your hand like small foreign petrified life forms: Focal mechanism.

Fissure formation. Earthquake light. Propagation velocity of the quake. Impact lines. The earthquake brings about surface modification, it is said. It can be measured. The magnitude of the earthquake on 6 May was not even that great, on the man-made scale. 'The assessment relates to the physical body and overlooks the fact that the planet may well be measured by man, but not in relation to him,' is written in a book. In any case: The world is not the same.

Tremors seized parts of the Earth's crust, rattling everything far and wide. *Dislocations* occurred, and all the frightened survivors were invariably reminded that they live in an *area of disruption*, and without going so far as to scan the landscape for hinge lines and fractures, fault lines and radial cracks, without knowingly sitting on a slag heap landscape at the edge of a depression area, they nevertheless understand, even if only by the streaks of mortar and mites of stone in their hair, that what they have just experienced cannot be erased or redeemed, because it is beyond the categories of good and evil.

[...]