

The Shape of Silence (*La forma del silenzio*)

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Translation from the Italian by Brian Robert Moore

On a Saturday in mid-April, Leo had drawn a daisy on the living room wall. He had climbed up on the aluminum stepladder taken from the storage closet, and started to give life to an image so luminous it had appeared before his eyes as soon as he'd woken up. He held a piece of chalk between his fingers, and he stretched his arm to trace the wide curving lines which from his lap rose to open toward the sky. The dream had been as clear as day: the flower towered over him, taller than the trees, taller than the buildings, and it looked at him, talked to him. Leo remembered the colors, the shades, everything was vivid in his imagination. Balancing on the ladder, he drew on the wall and smiled. Anna didn't notice because she was in her room, studying for her final year of middle school exam. Then, that night, all of them planted themselves in front of the wall to admire the flower head and the large white petals that overflowed up to the ceiling. Anna had come into the living room and found herself in front of the large flower, lit by the light of the sunset entering diagonally from the window. "Mom," she had said under her breath, amazed, like when she'd see the white cloak of the Milky Way in the summer nights. Her mother left the stove, had come to where she was standing in the center of the living room and rested her hands on her daughter's shoulders, her eyes on that corolla, lost in the intense yellow of pollen. She thought she could even smell it, her eyes growing watery. Even her father had appeared in the hallway, dragging his slippers on the floor. He kept his gaze on the drawing, and the closer he moved to the wall, the more he felt small and naked in front of it. It felt like that flower wanted to hug them and tell them how much Leo loved them.

He didn't think about the words; Leo would see them before they came out. No sound could reveal them to him—he had never heard his mother's voice, never heard Anna call after him by name. Since he was little, he had learned to study the expression in people's eyes, decipher the imperceptible movements of the body, interpret every little sign that might conceal a hidden intention. Ropes Leo tried to cling onto in order to avoid slipping into another kind of silence, a darker and bleaker one in which his solitude would have become unbearable. He lived behind a wall of crystal that kept him far from others and kept others far from him. All he had to do was reach out a hand and his fingers would have grazed the cold surface of that unbreakable wall, feeling it as it vibrated, his desires hitting against it while they were born and died in the space of a breath.

If he needed to say something, he'd squint his eyes and start to trace signs in the air, never removing his gaze from whoever was in front of him—a prayer that he recited with his body, mute words that flowed forth from a wounded angel.

His world was a ceaseless flowing of images. A child was running down a street and disappeared behind the corner, and Leo followed that silent trajectory, as he would have done if he'd seen a migratory bird cut through the autumn sky. Then he'd love that child for the

heart-breaking beauty of his movements, and then he'd hate him because he would have wanted to hear his steps hitting the pavement. He'd hate him because he would have wanted to go run with him, getting lost together somewhere, roaming among people who didn't know his secret. Instead, he'd always come home holding his mother's hand. He'd wake up in the middle of the night, and he'd go onto the balcony. With slow movements he'd raise his hands to the sky, adjust the rotation of the Earth, accompanying its orbit around the sun, and in a moment outside of time, embracing the universe.

During the day, Anna was his key to accessing the world. If she'd happen to show uncertainty in front of what he was trying to tell her, Leo would shut himself in his room and curl up on the bed, or lower his eyes and cut himself off like an exile. That's what had happened that Saturday afternoon in early spring, when he had asked her to draw him the field of daisies they could see from the living room window and she didn't understand. Leo kept standing there, looking at her, unable to hold back the tears, and, in that silence, he had seen the biggest flower of all.

One morning he had woken up a little before dawn, and he left the house while everyone slept. It was raining heavily, night's darkness prolonged by a thick layer of black clouds covering the sky. When his mother went into their bedroom, she found his bed empty, and immediately thought that Leo had hid underneath Anna's covers. They searched for him in every corner of the room, then on the stairs and in the yard. In the end, they found him in the cellar, sitting on the ground, his back resting against a metal door. He was flipping through one of those books with paperboard pages full of drawings and words written in giant letters. The beam of light coming from the flashlight he'd rested on the ground drew a diagonal line in the dark, lighting a part of his face. He looked like a sentinel keeping watch over his own solitude. When his mother came back into the house, holding him by the hand, Vittorio, his father, came out of his room and took him in his arms, squeezing him tight. But Leo did not show any emotions, like a stuffed doll with thin eyes, his surrendering limbs stitched to his body.

Then he turned seven years old and started to go to the Tarra Institute, in Milan, a school for deaf people which rose up beside Viale Zara at a point where the street still cut through the open countryside. The first part had been built in March of 1925, and four years later there had been the inauguration with the city mayor in attendance. Leo started to go to the elementary school in 1964. In those days the institute had nearly three hundred students hailing from all over Italy, a considerable number facilitated by the additions made to the structure in the late 1950s. The building stood tall in a wide, undeveloped area that the municipality of Milan had bought at the beginning of the century from a family of fallen nobles; it was rectangularly shaped, and one side was built with a double row of stone columns holding up round arches which let the light into the large internal space where the children had recess twice a day. The big lecture halls, with tall windows looking out onto the courtyard, measured dozens of square meters of grit floors on which rows of Formica desks were aligned, where the children learned to read the words on people's lips and to count in order to solve simple math problems. At Tarra they also used the basement, a wide, dark space strewn with cement pillars which was used for recess when the weather was bad. On the first floor were the long rooms where the children slept in iron bunkbeds; there too a wing of the building had been created for all the practical workshops for each academic level—elementary, middle, and the technical institutes.

Leo stayed at Tarra from Monday to Friday, the day when Elsa, Vittorio and Anna would come to pick him up and take him back home to spend the weekend together.

The first Sunday in November, two months after the start of school, Leo was focused on his drawing, sitting at the living room table, when one of his aunts touched him on the shoulder to get his attention. He had been startled, and jumped to his feet, knocking the chair back. He started to whirl his arms around, wide-eyed, the veins in his neck looking ready to burst, then he had shut himself in his room while the rain soaked the windowpanes. In the evening, Elsa heard the door open, followed immediately by determined steps coming from the hallway. Leo came into the living room in a white undershirt and red shorts. He was barefoot, and all of his displeasure was concentrated in the tenseness of his lips. His eyes were red, and in his hands he held out a piece of paper before him, his head high, his expression decisive. *Dont toch Leo.* It was written in faltering block letters, and the words took up the entire white space. He came close to his mother, lifted up the paper and waited for her to nod. In that moment, Anna appeared in the doorway, and when Leo noticed her, he tossed the paper in the air and threw himself into her arms.

Anna

It's not sound, not light. It's not the present, nor the past. It's an intangible time, a perpetual stillness, the place where everything happens and nothing is possible. She was there, where she'd find comfort, her refuge; then she'd feel her skin grow cold, she'd breathe out slowly, her body becoming light, opening her eyes as the world would take her back with it.

Elsa was behind the counter and was wrapping a bouquet of yellow roses for the man in a jacket and tie in front of her, while Anna wandered around the vases of flowers, squeezing an amaryllis with two hands. She went into a corner of the store and watched her out of the corner of her eyes. She knew that, with time, she'd become like her: wide hips, slumped shoulders, hair that veered from brown to silver, slow in her movements, with that noble way of carrying what was on the outside the body of a simple country woman. She recognized in herself the same determination that was in her mother, who could spot a flower in a field overrun with brambles. It was a question of will, you just needed to know where to look.

The man in jacket and tie went out of the store, walking by Anna and leaving a nice smell behind him. Now Elsa was in the back, rinsing her hands. Anna looked around, everything was in order, perfect as always. The light flooded the entrance, refracting on the surface of the vases and making them shimmer.

“What do yellow roses mean?” she asked, seeing her reappear in the door.

“They mean whatever someone wants them to mean. A rose is a rose. What are they to you?” Elsa replied as she gathered the cut stems and threw them away in the bin behind her. Anna looked at the vases; the water was clear, and the petals gave off an intense perfume. She realized she did not have an answer. Her mother took a sponge and wiped it across the counter.

That's the way Elsa was, pragmatic and easy-going at the same time. Life had thickened her skin, and she had reacted by doing the only thing that had come to her naturally since she was a child: she let herself be shaped by events, like a glove around a large, knobby hand. Like the day in which her husband had told her that he was going to leave while standing in front of the door, his shoulders narrow, his black hair falling over his forehead. Anna had always thought that her mother had come to terms with it for some time, maybe she had always known that it would end that way, long before little Leo disappeared, long before that tragedy turned their lives upside down. The flower shop came three months after his disappearance, when everyone already thought that Leo would never be found. Anna still remembered the sleepless nights and the nightmares during the hours when she wouldn't allow herself to be overtaken by sleep, her brother's bed empty next to hers. When she was at home alone, she would lie down and hug his pillow just to find his smell again, pulling at the pillowcase with her teeth, smothering her tears because she imagined that Leo, somewhere out there, would have heard her. Elsa, in the meantime, went on saying that they'd find him, that nothing had happened to Leo.

And, instead, time went by without him—days and weeks, and then months, until the years themselves were their only consolation for waiting. Elsa would say that one day the director of the institute was going to call because Leo had knocked on the large door of inlaid wood, and now he would be there, sitting in front of her, and he would be waiting for them.

Maybe he had been carried away by one of his thoughts, the ones that would creep up in a furtive look, when he'd notice the difference separating him from others. Suddenly it would be like a veil had fallen over him, turning him invisible. Or maybe he just had a different destiny than everyone else: Leo was an angel, and angels didn't have rules to follow. And if, on the other hand, he didn't come back, she would know that her son was somewhere, out in the world, happy to be what he was, a man of silence capable of illuminating the life of anyone he happened to meet.

But it hadn't been the light to illuminate their home in the days after they found out that Leo suffered from bilateral deafness. The day of the diagnosis they had come home late in the evening while the sky was growing dark, full of the clouds which Anna watched from the car window as Leo slept with his head resting on her legs. Then that night, the cold bursts of air from the storm opened the half-closed windows and the curtains transformed into long arms stretching out to her, ready to wake her before she fell into a deep sleep. Anna had opened her eyes, gotten up and closed the window, and in that moment she heard the heavy, regular breathing of her brother as he slept in the small bed against the wall. She moved to its side, and reached out a hand to stroke his head. Leo moved an arm with sudden jerks, and Anna tried to imagine what dream he had fallen into. Then she heard her parents' muffled voices coming from the hallways, and when she found herself facing the nearly shut door in the hall, she rested her cheek against the door frame, straining her ears to listen in front of that draft of light cutting her face in half. She tilted her head and managed to see through the crack. She could still remember her father's face and the elusive inflection in his tone of voice—uncertain words, cut off as if he'd forget them as soon as he uttered the first syllable: Vittorio had already started to give up. Elsa was sitting on the edge of her chair at the other end of the table, her chest jutting out toward her husband, her elbows resting on the tablecloth. Anna saw her from behind, her shoulders covered by her wool shawl, she heard her reassuring tone of voice, and imagined clearly what kind of expression was on her face, a smiling mask in which he could find refuge.

That same day they had been at the hospital, and, after running a few tests, a doctor in a white coat had them sit down in front of his desk. Leo was just over a year old, he was in Elsa's arms and kept reaching out his hand toward a leather penholder. The doctor had described the situation, and Vittorio immediately put his hand on Elsa's. Anna was standing next to them and was trying to distract her brother with a teddy bear so that he wouldn't grab the pens and throw them on the ground. Leo could learn sign language through private instruction, the doctor proposed, but Vittorio shook his head. "I'm a taxi driver, we can't afford a teacher," he said, feeling ashamed. The doctor added that they didn't need to worry, it wasn't a necessary step to take. What they needed to do, all together, was invent an intimate, secret language, a visual lexicon capable of giving a shape to their daily lives. Every object needed to be redrawn through signs, and they would have added pages to their imaginary vocabulary over time. The doctor looked at Anna and pointed to the teddy bear she was holding. "Let's play a game," he said to her with a friendly expression, his firm tone of voice suggesting to her to take the request seriously. "Tell Leo what that is. Find signs to describe it. Just two, no more." Anna felt intimidated by that man in a white coat, who was now talking to no one but her. That very second, Leo stretched an arm out, trying to grab the bear, but Anna took a step back and rested the toy on the desktop, far out of his reach. Leo made a frown and stared at her: he didn't understand. For a few seconds she didn't move, until she lifted her hands and

crossed her index fingers, imprinting two seals in the air, the eyes of the teddy bear, two X's that Elsa had sewn with brown thread, and, immediately after that, she lowered her arms and wrapped her shoulders in them tightly, gently rocking, a tender expression on her face as she bent her head to the side. Leo's face opened up in a smile, one that Anna had never seen him make before. Teddy had appeared before his eyes in a new form, he had seen it like an entire landscape lit by a flash of lightning. "Now you can give it to him," the doctor said. "It's the greatest gift that you can give him."

Two days after the night when Anna had listened to her parents behind the door in the hallway, Elsa took her aside and told her that she didn't need to worry, that even if Leo couldn't distinguish sounds, and, thereby, could never speak, they would know how to be there for him. She was untroubled as she said it, holding the girl's hand and stroking her head. "Your brother will learn to speak with his body, and his soul will have a special voice. He'll need time, but we'll be there with him and we'll learn to listen to it. You'll see—there'll be a day when we'll hear it, that voice of his, and it will be a beautiful day." Anna had taken her hand back and slid a lock of hair behind her ear. "You have to think of it as a game," her mother concluded. "Let Leo try on his own too, let him imagine. That's his strength."

And that's what Anna did. From that night on, she started to look at Leo with different eyes. Slowly she transformed into the taciturn sister who, sitting on the floor in front of him, waited to see an idea pop up, a new way of representing the Neuschwanstein Castle which hung on their wall in a large print, or the carnival merry-go-round on the flyer Leo kept on his desk, or again the nightstand where Leo hid candies, or Elsa's sewing basket, the little wooden train that she had given him for Christmas. Sometimes Anna would be the one to take the initiative, and Leo would lower his arms and follow her with his gaze, rotating his head, observing her with his big eyes while she invented the unexplored shape of a feeling. 'You and I are brother and sister, and I love you. Anna loves Leo.' Her hands spoke from her undeveloped chest and moved toward him, while she wondered in the meantime if she would ever be able to get all the way to his little heart.

The same night that her mother spoke to her, Anna stopped in front of Leo's bed in their dark room. She stood watching the shadow of that small body which in its breathing motion seemed to want to speak, and she prayed for him, because she knew that he would have to fight; she prayed that he might always have the strength to smile as her mother did, that he might also be able to have that undying smile. Her heart beginning to beat fast, Anna again reached out her hand, holding it over him, and swore that they would always be together. She never would abandon him. These words grazed her lips in a whisper, but not silently. She wanted it to be a clear seal, and she felt a new energy begin to take root within her. Then she realized she was afraid, but it was only for a second.

Until the time came when he went to school, five days of the week in which Leo stayed at the institute—and, finally, after a few months, the night when he disappeared. It was December 18, 1964. Anna was fourteen years old.

Right after leaving her mother's store, Anna walked toward the center of the city to the café where she'd always get a coffee and buy cigarettes. Savoring the taste of nicotine after drinking an espresso was a habit she had a hard time going without, especially on the days when she went to the school. At that time in the morning, lines of cars clogged the main road, emitting

unhealthy bluish fumes from their exhaust pipes, cutting through the center of Lodi before scattering out in the countryside, into areas threatened by the advances of buildings and shopping centers covered by multicolored tiles and overgrown signs. The piazza with the town hall, next to which stood the Duomo, was swarming with people. Elderly people with their dogs on leashes walked hunched over along sidewalks and streets that had seen them first become teenagers, then adults, up through that condition of indolent waiting for a new day. Under the porticos of Palazzo Vistarini and between the columns, which surrounded the piazza and held up the houses with ivory-colored facades, sat wrought-iron chairs for the city's historical cafes, where at mid-morning the city-center regulars sipped coffee and tasted cookies prepared according to old local traditions. On the walls hung turn-of-the-century photos with the town in black and white, when the low houses were satellites of the church and corn fields endless, giving the impression that the Middle Ages had ended only a few decades before those shots were taken.

Anna left the café with a cigarette between her lips, opened her bag and checked that she had her house keys. She took a look at her watch and turned into the street that ran adjacent to the train tracks. The sky hung pale over the leafy poplar branches, and the clouds moved by slowly, fraying in the morning air, pushed by the high-altitude winds that cut them into thin strips. In ten minutes, she arrived in the neighborhood where she had lived since leaving her mother's house. She had decided to go live by herself after opening her private practice, and, from that morning, the bedroom in which she had played and slept with Leo had been plunged into darkness.

Working with sign language was an idea that had taken shape underneath her conscious thoughts, a faint yet insistent voice that from the first days of Leo's absence had grown stronger and stronger, following her up through her adolescence. It was the inheritance that Leo had left her, and she had accepted it as the only possible way to continue to speak with his absence, and to give voice to his love.

From that period, time had started to go by at a different speed, Anna had become a woman and that voice had taken on the shape of a decision. She had understood that her present reality had to be tied back to her memory. So, during her years spent at university, in the full swing of student rebelliousness, she combined her psychology studies with first, second and third level courses in Italian Sign Language, supplementing them later with an internship in a multipurpose center for children. Now she was thirty-three years old, and nineteen years had passed since the December night when Leo had disappeared. At present she worked as a substitute teacher in one of the city's elementary schools, and she had a private practice where, once a week, she worked with patients as a psychologist.

She went up the stairs, walked into her two-room apartment on the second floor and closed the windows. She was supposed to meet Stella at 10 o'clock in the library. After taking a shower, she dried her head and looked at herself in the mirror. Her long, brown hair framed her face, and her light skin made her black eyes stand out in a face marked by a slightly squared jaw and deep red lips with sharp upper angles. She finished drying off in her bedroom and after putting on her underwear went over to the window, lit a cigarette and, with lips shut tight, breathed in a puff of smoke. The telephone rang and Anna waited for the beep of the answering machine. Without moving away from the window, she listened to her mother ask her if she could come give her a hand with the new bookshelves. She put out her cigarette, squashing it

into the granite windowsill, and threw it into the air above the shared yard. She checked that there weren't other messages left in the answering machine before leaving the house, then she put on her gray cotton hat, put her glasses back into place, slipped on her coat, closed the door and went down the stairs at an easy pace.

Stella was sitting at the table in the area for reading newspapers. She was sitting cross-legged, bouncing one foot. Anna saw her from far away, bent over the newspaper while she nibbled on the nail of her index finger, as per usual. Small in stature, Stella had amber skin and malicious eyes that could cast anyone under their spell—blue and intense, constantly quivering, a glossy film covering the iris. She folded the newspaper back up and uncrossed her legs. Anna was standing on the other side of the table, her coat still closed and her hands sunk into her pockets. “Should we take a walk?” Stella smiled and stood up from her seat. “Yeah, I already checked out the book for Marco anyway. Let's go, this place depresses me.”

The railroad underpass, which led to the pedestrian walkway, was a short tunnel eternally lit by a neon light protected by a thin net of rusted iron. The cement walls had been decorated with graffiti which were permeated by a stifling sense of Apocalypse—skeletons of buildings and rubble around which wandered multicolored, one-eyed human creatures, while angels with large wings looked over the desolate landscape. When they exited the underpass the sun wrapped them in a tepid warmth.

“You don't feel the slightest desire to go, do you?” Anna said, undoing a coat button.

“What can I say... only an idiot could have the chance to go to Paris and want to stay here.”

“True,” Anna replied, smiling, while she looked at the bell tower of the abbey. A flock of swallows crossed the sky. “I'd go without worrying about it too much. I mean, when will you have the chance again?”

Stella looked up, following the sinuous and liquid forms that the swallows undid and recomposed while they regrouped at varying heights, ready to migrate to the south.

“You and Marco work well together.”

Stella repositioned her bag on her shoulder and watched the leaves lying on the ground. “Do you think working is all that important? I don't know... I don't know if it is.”

“This might sound cynical to you, but it isn't.”

“And so what is important then?”

Anna took a few seconds, she knew that Stella was going through a difficult period and she didn't want it to seem like she was distant or that she couldn't understand her. “It's just that you need to give things time, that's all. And there are other things in life besides love.” She immediately realized that she had sounded harsh, perhaps more than she had intended, but she kept on walking, knowing that Stella was one step behind her.

The abbey was encircled by a well-kept green area, with low outer walls and a wrought-iron gate that went back to the last century. They sat down on a stone bench next to an old well closed by a heavy iron grate, clutching themselves in their light coats, their chins tucked into their collars.

“Anyway, look at it this way, you'll have a lot of time while Marco's busy with the photoshoots,” Anna commented, looking at her in profile.

“Right... And I've never seen Paris, after all.”

Anna kept her eyes on her. She knew perfectly well how she felt. The fact that Marco photographed half-naked models wasn't something that exactly made Stella jump for joy, but, deep down, she trusted him. They had been fighting often recently, and because of Stella's jealousy no less, but Marco always managed his way out of it with ease. The week before, Stella had told her that Marco had woken her up early one morning, asking her to put on her nicest outfit. "Today you're coming with me," he had told her as he put his equipment in order inside a large bag. Then, in the car, while stopped at a red light, he had taken her hand.

"I could have all the women I want, but there comes a time in life when you understand that you want *that* woman and no one else. And now is that time. Do you understand?"

Stella had nodded without looking him in the face, keeping her eyes fixed straight ahead beyond the windshield. She hadn't been able to believe him, nor had she managed even to look at him in the eyes and say to him: tell me that you love me.

"The Orangerie, you absolutely have to see the Orangerie. It's like being in the middle of a big garden, with waterlilies and suspended bridges over the water. And then..."

Stella was looking at the bell tower and breathing through her half-opened mouth.

"Hey, you in there?"

Stella turned, she had an absent expression on her face. "The waterlilies, yeah, of course, the garden and all of that."

"You'll see, it'll be wonderful," Anna said, standing up from the bench. She took a few steps and directed her gaze toward the fields stretching to the south cut by train tracks along which a freight train went chugging toward the city.

"And how about you, how is work going?" Stella asked, not moving from where she was.

"Everything is good at school. I'm going to work with a deaf boy this year. My private practice is going well too. I don't have any free hours left, unless I decide to work on Saturday too."

"Do you need to?"

"Probably not," and Anna sat back down. "Just yesterday I agreed to take on a patient, a guy who wrote me a letter to make the appointment. I think he'll be the last one."

"A letter?"

"Clearly he's someone old-fashioned," Anna replied, shrugging her shoulders. Then she threw her head back. "I never would have thought I'd work this much if I opened my own practice... I don't know, it seems like people manage to make themselves unhappy so easily. Maybe it's the thing that comes to us most easily."

They went back to the tree-lined walkway, the sky growing darker. A moderate yet insistent breeze was moving the branches of the plane trees and lifting the ends of their coats. Exiting the underpass, they walked toward the parking lot where Stella had left the car. They hugged each other tight, then Anna headed to her house, thinking back on the words she had said to her just before: "There are other things in life besides love." She wondered if she had lied. 'There is no truth out there,' she thought while she looked for the keys in her bag, 'there's only what's missing. We don't see the rest.'

Michele

It is the breath of the sky he hears when he searches for the world's voice. He opens out his arms, enveloping the rough expanse, his bare feet inside the damp earth, the sweat between his hair. Shut your eyes and you'll be tree, the memory of time, and everything you pass, like an elegy of the eternal fall.

He lays out the letter, stays sitting at the kitchen table and looks outside the window. The farmyard is deserted, the mailman looks around as he walks away, mesmerized by the large barn with the tiled roof and wooden beams. He stopped by the tractor shed and stood looking at the large black wheels, taller than him.

Michele Grossi moves over to the fireplace and arranges the wood, the embers flicker, and the fire picks up. On the small marble surface there are still what's left from the chestnuts he ate yesterday evening. He stays crouched on the ground, reaches out his hands toward the flame. He will meet Anna in her office Friday evening at six. He will go there on his bicycle, repeating along the way the words he wants to say. He will look at the ploughed fields demarcated by irrigation channels and farmhouses with their silos pointing to the sky, a landscape that he knows by heart because Ivano sometimes asks him to go bring some tools to the guys at Cascinazza or to help him in keeping up the maintenance of the canals. Michele has lived in Roverbella for many years, he's walked over every corner of dirt, in the daytime and at night, learned to work the fields, milk the cows, operate the machinery to bale the hay. Michele is sturdy, he has strong arms, and he never says no to anything that's asked of him. He loves his father Ivano.

Two other houses look out onto the backyard, in addition to his and the one where his father now lives alone. Mr. and Mrs. Sala are elderly, they spend their days sitting on wooden chairs in front of the door, or right by the fire, when it's too cold for their tired bones. She knits a sweater or peels potatoes, he mostly peers at the sky, spits on the ground and every now and then stands up and goes to the iron gate, his gaze lost in the fields. On the other side of the yard, aligned with Michele's house, lives a young couple. They have two children, six and seven years old; she gave birth at a very young age. She works as a shop girl in a clothing store, while he works as a mechanic in a repair shop just a few kilometers away. All of them are part of Michele's family. All of them but Olga, because Olga isn't there anymore.

When he lies down at night on his wool mattress, he feels all of them close to him, especially the little children. They often play in the farmyard, and sometimes they even involve them in some endeavor of theirs. Yesterday all three of them climbed up on a tractor, they opened their arms and the tractor lifted itself from the ground as they started to fly over the fields, their hair blowing in the wind, their faces happy in the glimmering light of the sun coming ever closer, while the earth underneath them moved farther away and the farmhouse shrank to a dot. For some time now, he's been waking up in the middle of the night. Then he sits on the edge of the mattress, reaches out a hand in the dark and takes the lighter that he keeps on the shelf next to the bed, he lights the candle and concentrates on the flame. He half closes his eyes, lowers his shoulders. With a finger he caresses the small flame as it contorts itself, and a fleeting shadow crosses the ceiling, like a spirit in exile, then he removes his hand

and opens the nightstand drawer. The newspaper clipping is always there, on the walnut bottom, but he doesn't touch it. He takes the candle and lights the inside of the drawer. The little boy's face in the image next to the article seems to move in the flickering light; it's as if he wants to speak. It's a faded, yellowed image with worn edges, the paper enduring as it can through time. He found it a month ago in a corner of Olga's wardrobe. She was a precise and orderly woman, extremely attentive in cleaning the house. Ivano always worked in the fields and never gave much thought to these things, but now Olga isn't there anymore and he wants the house to speak of her still. For this reason he thought that his wife would have been angry if she saw the layer of dust that had settled on the furniture. "If she saw what kind of state this room has fallen into, she'd come back here and she'd whip both of us back into shape," Ivano said to him a month before, while he pushed the dresser from the wall in order to mop the floor with a rag. Michele opened the wardrobe and moved his mother's heavy skirts and sweaters, laying them on the bed. The clipping stuck out from the shelf, and he pulled it out from underneath a satin foulard. In that moment, Ivano had gone down to the floor below while Michele stayed there holding the newspaper clipping. The boy's face stared at him, and he looked into those small eyes. He had enough time to read the article twice, then he put it in his pocket with an instinctive, rapid motion, as if the paper was burning hot, and then he went back to wiping the rag soaked in alcohol on the side of the wardrobe. And while he ran his hand along the wood grain he saw that face. Maybe he should have put the clipping back where it was, or maybe he should have gone down to the floor below to ask Ivano who that child was and why Olga kept that piece of paper in her closet. Maybe it had ended up in there by mistake, maybe it had been in there for who knows how long and Olga had never noticed. Michele had gone on staring at Leo's grainy face and suddenly he had remembered him, a vague memory that disappeared as soon as he put the clipping in his pocket. Then he went back to cleaning the inside of the wardrobe, the shelves, the woodworm-eaten back. When Ivano came back into the room he walked over to Michele, scanned the inside of the wardrobe and threw a hand on his shoulder.

Now Michele shuts the drawer, rests the candle on the dresser, stands up and goes to the window; he wants to be sure that Ivano hasn't forgotten to close the gate and that the lights are turned off. The stalls also have to be shut and the front gate has to be secured with a padlock because in the last two months thieves have stolen equipment and the two chainsaws. He tries to think of what he will do tomorrow. He has to put the hayloft in order, oil the equipment, help Ivano with that problem concerning the tractor's gears; and then there are the two blown neon lights which he'll have to replace, and before it gets dark he'll have to go to the irrigation canal to check the sluice. He'll spend the night reading one of the books taken off the shelf of the large bookcase he has in his bedroom, until he'll eventually go downstairs to the kitchen to warm some milk, because sometimes with a full stomach he manages to fall back asleep more easily, even if only for a few hours. The fireplace will illuminate the room with its yellow light and he'll stay by the window, watching at the sky turn pink.

Tomorrow morning he'll knock on the young married couple's window and the girl will greet him with a wave of the hand, then he'll go find the Salas and they'll drink a coffee together, he'll check that they have wood next to the fireplace and, finally, he'll wait for Ivano in the middle of the farmyard, ready for a new day of work.

There are so many things to do. Ivano is beginning to lose strength in his arms, most of the time he isn't able to maneuver the tractor because the wheels sink into the ground and the steering wheel won't move. But he tries every time, until he shakes his head and signals to Michael to take over for him. The motor calms down, Ivano moves to the side and Michele takes his place. He looks at the furrows scatter up to the edge of the woods, he squeezes the wheel and the ploughshare begins again to thrash the earth: old roots like hairs of the dead, dark hidden rocks, the shiny face of dirt clods, life continually returning.

Anna

It's the naked body, more than the silence. Sometimes she empties her lungs and lets herself be dragged down, freefalling in the dense air of a strange world. She lies on the blue bottom and looks up toward the surface. The bubbles of air flutter as they break from her lips, they lose themselves in that cold space before dissolving above where the light shines, caressing the border of another time.

If she had been older, if she hadn't been only fourteen, she would have been able to find Leo. And, instead, the only thing that she had been able to do was to sit on the sidewalk in front of the institute for entire afternoons. She prayed that her brother would appear out from behind the corner and would start running over to hug her. Then she would have stood up, she would have run to him and lifted him into the air, squeezing him in her arms and never letting him go again.

The Tarra director moved the window curtain aside and looked at the street. Anna was always there, sitting with her forehead on her arms, staring at the pavement, or standing on her feet, leaning against the wall. It snowed a lot in that December of 1964, and Anna spent the days leading up to Christmas in front of the Tarra front gate. When it grew dark, she would walk away with her hands sunk into her pockets and would head to the bus stop to go home. On the ground, on the sidewalk or in the gardens by the entrance, the dark and dry mark of her body would be left after those hours spent waiting. Sometimes she would lose all sense of time and it would become night without her realizing it. When Elsa wouldn't see her come home, she knew that Anna was in front of the school. Vittorio would then drive his Fiat 1100 D the thirty kilometers separating Lodi from Tarra and bring her home.

Sometimes the director would call their house, she was worried about Anna, but Elsa would reply that they needed to let her be, because she and Leo were like one and the same. She needed time, time would work everything out.

On an afternoon in the beginning of spring, drops of rain had started to wet the pane, splattered by a suddenly chilled wind. The director stood up from the desk and went to the window: Anna was still there, in front of the gate. She put on her coat, went down the stairs with her umbrella in hand, and she called out her name as she walked up to her.

"Come inside. You're getting soaked," she told her under the rain. Anna looked at her and shook her head while her hair turned dark.

If she had been older, she wouldn't have stood there looking at her mother while she waited for the call from the police, and at her father as he unraveled without putting up a fight. When she'd think about it, she would feel pressure against her temples. He didn't blame him for it, she had understood that her father was made of an unstable substance, something that circumstances had the power to change without giving him any say in the matter. And her mother? She simply hadn't managed to instill strength and trust in her husband, she had merely hoped he'd be able to react, bolstered by her unshakable and blind optimism, searching for any little spark that could lead one to think of a rebirth inside of him, watching and waiting, not realizing that he was slowly extinguishing. After Leo disappeared, Vittorio had been the one

to fall apart, already partially hallowed out by his depressive tendencies, inspiring rage and confusion in Anna, who was left speechless in front of those two sudden absences. It was nothing short of a revelation, what had come upon her when she'd looked at a photograph of her family on the Ferris wheel at the carnival: her father was the breakable nucleus of their microcosm. He looked like he was smiling—an arm resting on Leo's shoulder, his body distant from his son's—but in truth his fate was already stamped in his eyes' thinly veiled sadness. And then there was Leo, squeezed between them, so real, understanding everything, knowing everything. And yet he stayed quiet.

In the months immediately preceding his disappearance, Anna had been the one to take care of Leo during the weekends, as if she were the woman who had brought him into the world, forgetting that she was, before all else, a daughter, one frightened by the emptiness in her father's eyes.

In the morning Vittorio would get into his Fiat 1100 D and drive down the highway toward Milan. He'd stay sitting in the car, in the waiting area for taxis, and look through the windshield at the swarms of people animating the streets of the city. Sometimes he wouldn't even hear the client knocking on the glass of the window, sometimes he'd ignore it. He feared losing his sense of direction and his ability to do his own job. The maze of streets that he crossed every day became as indecipherable as his own suffering, and, as he drove, he felt ashamed of his face, which he'd try to hide by adjusting the angle of the rearview mirror. And then, when he'd get out of the car, load the suitcases into the trunk and set the meter, he'd start driving again and have the sensation that once he dropped the client off at his destination he could have gone on aimlessly, until the car simply ran out of fuel. One evening, after coming home from work, he told Elsa that he had seen Leo while driving on Corso Sempione. He was walking with his chest jutting out, fighting the strong wind that pushed the branches of the plane trees to stroke the stone walls of the houses. He was walking toward the Arco della Pace, and he kept his head low, as if he needed to break through the invisible wall that was trying to force him back. Vittorio said that he had parked his car in the middle of the street, and he had started running to catch up with his son. He was shouting his name and asking the passersby if they had seen a boy with a dark blue jacket, but everyone shook their head, and so he started running faster now, and kept on yelling "Leo! Leo!" turning into the side streets and peering over the lines of parked cars along the sidewalk. In the end, he gave up, letting himself go, his back against a wall in Via Gherardini, sliding down to the ground as if his soul was exiting his body and his heartbeat was no longer his.

And so, slowly, he let himself drift away. He planned everything without saying a thing to anyone, he sold his taxi medallion and the car, and, after two days spent out of the house, he appeared at the door on a windy afternoon. He said that he was tired of fighting, he couldn't live anymore with the idea that Leo would never come back. He cried, asked for forgiveness. He had never been able to listen to his son, maybe that was why he had gone, he said. Then the light in his eyes went out, and with a monotone voice he confessed that he was nothing but a shadow. Elsa slid her hands along her apron and took a step toward him, she tried to comfort him. They could get through this, everything would work itself out: Leo would come back, nothing bad had happened to him; and, above all, he was not to blame for anything. Then she tried to catch his gaze, and she understood that Vittorio was nothing but an empty body. She hugged him, and he rested his lips on her hair. "I see him, Elsa, I see Leo everywhere. I see

him now, sitting at the table behind you, I see him at night in his bed, when I wake up in a pool of sweat and go into the bedroom with the hope of finding him there, under the covers, and I find his ghost.” Elsa wasn’t able to say a word. “I’m going to go away for a while, I can’t stay here anymore, I feel like I’m going crazy. I already called Paolo, he said it’s okay, Oriana agrees too.”

A week after, the new economical car he had bought crashed into a plane tree next to a country road outside of Monferrato. The autopsy revealed a high alcohol level, according to the medical report. Anna managed to cry only once, on the day of the funeral, while the casket was being lowered into the hole in the naked earth. In the following days, she found herself thinking of her father in a future that would never take place: she would have wanted to have him by her side as she grew into a woman, when she looked into the mirror before going out on her first date, she would have wanted to take a picture of him while he held her son in his arms.

Anna crossed the street, looking at the watch she wore on her wrist. She had scheduled to have lunch with her mother, then she would run to school. Her tiredness allowed her to think more clearly, she could sharpen her point of view, it forced her to her breathe, feeling her shoulders rise and then relax; it was like her body now took the initiative, making her believe that there was some direction to her life.

Elsa arrived in a long floral skirt, ballet flats on her feet. She always wore her light blue cardigan sweater open, and a necklace with vibrant colored stones on a golden thread around her neck. She smiled as she walked into the café, and when she sat down in front of her, she tidied her hair over her shoulders. It was the local neighborhood fair, the farewell to the summer which rambled through ever shorter afternoons. On the streets closed to traffic, the vendors set up their booths and canopies for the evening, when children would swarm the streets with the taught strings of their balloons tied to their wrists and their smiles turned to the sky. Women and men would gather underneath the porticos and then would go to the area in front of the stage where they’d dance to the notes of the mazurka or a waltz, revitalizing the piazza of the town hall which Elsa’s store faced.

They ate two pieces of focaccia with prosciutto, which they washed down with an orange juice. Elsa said to Anna that earlier that morning she had heard from Stella’s mother, a friend from when their daughters went to elementary school together. Stella had called from Paris, she was enthused, bewitched by the slow flowing of the Seine. Anna smiled and imagined her walking alone along the banks, her gaze on the boats sliding slowly on the water before they disappeared underneath the bridges, or sitting on a bench in front of the Orangierie and then walking up the steps that led up to the towers of Notre-Dame Cathedral.

Anna ate dinner late that evening. Sitting at the kitchen table, she thought back on the schoolboard meeting from that afternoon, and then the meeting with Riccardo’s parents. In the background played the notes of a tango, a CD that Stella had given her for her birthday. The boy’s father had reminded her of her father, the same somewhat absent air, in addition to his unease in listening to topics that apparently had nothing to do with him or his son. Riccardo was hard of hearing, he only perceived sounds in the distance, and things were much simpler than with children who had profound bilateral deafness—not to mention that sign language was now permitted in schools and the words could fly in the air like paper airplanes. The first

two weeks of school had been important, and Anna's only concern was to reassure the parents with the fact that the other students had welcomed Riccardo with open arms. After the meeting, they had said goodbye in front of the school, and while they walked away Anna had looked at the boy holding his mother's hand in his. She had thought of Leo, when they were still all together, she had reached out her arm in their direction and through her tightened eyelashes she watched Riccardo walk on the palm of her hand, stroking his hair with a finger. Then she had gone into a supermarket to buy a frozen pizza and two bottles of beer. She walked to the parking lot with the bag knocking against her leg and reached the red Fiat Ritmo.

After dinner she stayed seated on the couch as she smoked with the glass of beer in her hands. She slowly breathed out the smoke, and watched it dissipate toward the ceiling. When she was done smoking, she reached out and grabbed the phone, she called the hotel where Stella and Marco were staying and asked to speak with room 103. Following a brief pause, which broke up the tune of *Les Vieux* by Jacques Brel, a kind female voice told her that the people she was looking for still had not come in. Anna left a message. After she hung up, she sat staring at the ceiling. She took a deep breath and put her arms behind her head, sinking down between the couch cushions. *Au revoir.*

One

The secret was to hear their voice, each one of them had their own. Anna had learned this from Leo. His voice had been clear, its timbre slight. She had heard it for the first time the night of his fourth birthday, right as he unwrapped her gift: a little man made of wire with tufts of cotton instead of feet and hands. Anna was twelve years old, and while Leo said thank you, moving his hand from his mouth towards her, that voice came to her like a feather resting on her soul.

When Michele Grossi walked into her office on the last Friday of September, Anna felt suddenly short of breath, because when she looked up at him, what she saw was a big, tall man greeting her in sign language. It seemed like a giant had suddenly entered the room. In that fraction of a second, Anna would not have been able to say if he was indeed that gargantuan in stature, or if the walls had started closing in on them. She forced herself to look down, and the man moved his lips, a “good morning” that expanded in the air with a slow, circular movement of the arms. Anna swallowed, stood up from her chair and replied with a muted smile, trying to hide how disoriented she suddenly felt. Then she greeted him with a direct sign of her hands, as if she needed to shoo a fly. She sat back down and signaled at him to do the same. The new patient had arrived more than half an hour late, and Anna was almost about to leave. However, when she was already lowering the blinds, she finally heard the buzzer ring. The man hinted at a bow of the head and sat down on the small velvet armchair, which creaked as if it might give in under his weight. He was wearing rectangular-lensed glasses with a metallic frame, and his messy, slightly graying hair fell over his forehead and the sides of his face, covering his ears. He had pronounced cheekbones which protruded from his tan skin, while a scar cut his raised left eyebrow in two. The taught tendons in his neck stuck out from his sweatshirt and disappeared under a jawbone covered by a dark beard. Every now and then he’d move his legs, dragging the soles of his shoes on the floor. Through the glass table top, Anna could see his shoes; they were an old model with the top part in leather, worn stitching and thick soles indented with deep grooves containing earth and strands of grass. The man raised his arms, his chest still and his eyes fixed on her, and Anna started to see words.

“I’m Michele. I’m sorry I’m late. I came on my bicycle.”

He paused for a second and rested his hands on his knees. His face showed no sign of emotion, and Anna was struck by this. Normally deaf people compensated for the lack of sounds with a facial language, their instinct was to move the body more. Not Michele Grossi. He was stoic, his chest held straight out, his eyes cold. Anna tried to keep her eyes on him, grabbed her pen and started to tap it against her notebook. Then the man’s arms suddenly came back to life and lifted themselves along with the dark sweatshirt which was closed up to his mid-chest by an old copper-colored zipper. His face was tense, his arms and hands moving as if the air in that room had suddenly thickened.

“It was a snowy night. Leo and I were in front of the school. Then a man came and took him away.”

Anna turned pale, her mouth dropped open, but no sound came out. She threw her hands on the desk, making the glass tremble. She felt a sharp pain in her ribs, as if a crack had started to open, cutting its way towards her heart. She pushed back so forcefully that her chair hit

against the radiator behind her. Her heart was pounding hard enough to make her arms shake, while her face became unrecognizable. She stood up and rushed to the window, then she stood still, looking at the nothingness below her. Her rapid breathing drew a white ring on the glass which expanded and retracted like a jellyfish in the water, and when she rested her forehead on the cold surface, a powerful chill ran through her entire body. Then, suddenly, she turned around, and that chill shifted into fire.

“But who are you?” she signed in the air, as if it were a scream. Her eyes were red from terror and rage, the veins in her neck swelling out as her arms drew a circle as large as the room. She said it so violently, exploding with such unexpected energy, that after asking this question she stood still, exhausted. She looked like a statue. It wasn’t fear. It was the unknown. Anna was looking at Michele, she was looking at him and did not understand. Because there was something she had noticed right away, as soon as that man had walked into the office: Michele Grossi did not have a voice. All deaf people had one. But he didn’t.

“Where is Leo?” This time her question was asked with a slow motion of the hands, controlled, almost whispered, while she went back to her desk; it was the antidote that her body had started circulating to neutralize the toxic effect of all of those emotions flowing through her. She sat down, placing her hands on the armrests of the chair, and leaned all of her weight onto the metal support. Now she was afraid. She wouldn’t have wanted to ask, because whatever the answer was, she wouldn’t be ready for it. But, most of all, asking hadn’t been the right thing to do, because the man looked at her square in the eye, raised his hand, and pointed his finger to his temple, then moved it in front of his face, his finger still taut as it crossed the air in a rapid sign.

“No – Know.”

Michele Grossi didn’t know. Anna forced herself to take a deep breath and shook her head. She couldn’t believe it, she felt like she was having a nightmare. She was about to lose control. If he hadn’t started moving his arms again, and his small eyes hadn’t been fixed on her, Anna would have walked around the desk, she would have taken him by the jacket and she would have shouted all of her rage right into his face.

“Leo and I were friends. Tarra was our home. Leo didn’t like it. You know that, right? I was always with him. Don’t move your hands, Leo. Everyone said: don’t move your hands. They said it to me too. It wasn’t nice, not at all.”

Anna made the effort to stay still. She was following Michele Grossi with her eyes through every sign, holding her breath, but at certain points instinct forced her to turn her head to the side and take in some air. It was a sensation she had never experienced before, it was like going from a crystal clear state of vigilance to a deep slumber, and when she started to drift, when her mind would cloud up, overwhelmed by that man’s signs, he stopped, Michele Grossi stopped the stream of words and waited for her to come back. Anna was nearly about to break out into tears, the image of Leo stamped clearly right in front of her eyes. Wherever she looked, she saw his round face and the bangs over his forehead, his big, dark eyes, his faded freckles on the sides of his nose. She saw everything, she saw it everywhere.

“You have no idea where my brother is! What did you come here for?” she asked him with a fierce look, slamming her fist on the table.

Michele closed his lips tight and suddenly made a sad expression. “I’m sorry.” Then he lowered his eyes to the floor. “Maybe you can find him again, no?”

Anna took her head in her hands. “You are completely crazy.” She said it without making a single sign, as if she was talking to herself. She kept her eyes on the glass table top and realized that her legs were trembling. Michele remained seated, waiting for her to look up, and when Anna did, he saw her wipe a hand over her forehead, pulling back her hair.

“It was nineteen years ago. Nineteen,” she drew through the air, her eyes burning. Then she took a pause, studying the man’s face. She was exhausted. “Do you understand me? Nineteen years. Where have you been all this time? Why have you come to tell me this now?”

The impact those signs had was equal to the effect a wave hitting a rocky shore: Michele didn’t move, he blinked his eyes a few times and wet his lips, then he slid his palms to his pants and slipped his right hand along his leg to the pocket. At that point he stopped again. Inside was the folded newspaper cutout. Michele’s fingers simply grazed it, then he slowly drew his hand out. Anna thought he was about to take out a tissue, but, for a second, she was scared once again. She looked at the door of her office and calculated how much time it would ideally take to get to the door and run down the stairs. Now she was staring at him, and suddenly understood that her question had taken him off guard. “Nineteen years. Where have you been all this time?” Michele Grossi simply hadn’t expected she would ask for explanation for something so obvious, and this terrified her more than his silence. Her thoughts were bouncing between two opposite poles: that man had no idea what had happened to Leo, or else he was lying and now he was hiding something from her, revealing only the faintest shred. Anna tried to get out of the short circuit he’d thrown her into by standing up and walking back to the window. She looked at the rooftops outside, the women on the balcony, the children on the street. She managed to empty her mind for a second, then turned around.

“Who took him away? Do you know him? Who was that man?”

“Giordano Ripoli,” Michele signed in the air, and to Anna it seemed that with his raised arms he mostly wanted to shield himself from Anna’s gaze.

Now Michele’s expression was different, his facial features seemed to quiver. She was backlit, the light coming into his eyes. “He’s an artist, has a workshop. He lives in Contino. He taught at Tarra.” He opened his sweatshirt and pulled a strip of paper out of its pocket, placed it on the desk and pushed it towards her. “You’ll find him here,” he signed with one hand. Anna took the strip of paper in her fingers. “He taught at Tarra,” he repeated. “Colors, clay, brushes. He was a painter. Giordano seemed like a good person. He and Leo were friends. Yes. We molded the clay and he would watch us and say yes—no. Giordano taught us to use colors. He’d take the clay and would make beautiful things.”

Michele’s hands remained suspended in the air for an instant, as if he now had clay between his fingers. Then his face suddenly turned grim, and he moved his arms with a different rhythm.

“There was snow. The night of the party there was snow. Leo wanted to get out of the school. Take me away, he said. You can’t go outside, Leo. You can’t. But he wanted to go away, he wanted to go home. Leo doesn’t want to stay here, he said. Leo runs away, Leo goes back to Anna.”

Anna brought a hand to her mouth and started to cry. Tears streamed down and wet her hands, dispersing on the glass pane of the desk.

“We were on the sidewalk.” Michele was moving his arms frenetically. “Then Giordano showed up. You come with me. I ran behind him. You let go of him. Let him go!”

Then Michele clenched his elbow with his hand and closed his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut. And he saw Giordano's face in the dark of the night.