

Peirene

CLAUDIO MORANDINI

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN
BY J OCKENDEN


Neve, cane,
piede

**AUTHOR**

Claudio Morandini lives in Aosta, where he balances his career as a writer with his work as a teacher. *Neve, cane, piede*, first published in 2015, has been a literary phenomenon: a top-five Italian bestseller, the novel won the Procida – Isola di Arturo – Elsa Morante Prize in 2016 and has been translated into French, Spanish and Turkish. It appears here for the first time in English.

TRANSLATOR

J Ockenden is a translator, journalist, broadcaster, poet and winner of the 2019 Peirene Stevns Translation Prize. After entering the prize with an impeccable translation of the first chapter of *Snow, Dog, Foot*, J was awarded a writer's retreat in the Pyrenees, where the work was completed. This is J's first full-length literary translation.



MEIKE ZIERVOGEL
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This strange little book stayed with me. Images slipped from the pages and lodged themselves in my mind: the beautiful but hostile mountain, the isolated cabin, the grumpy old man who refuses to be helped and the stray dog in need of a friend. It is a book full of humour, grit and empathy that made me laugh and cry in equal measure.

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Snow, Dog,
Foot



1

The first signs of the approaching autumn send Adelmo Farandola down to the village to fetch supplies. Leaving his cabin in the morning, he sees that the grass in the surrounding meadows is rimed with frost that stubbornly refuses to melt. Relentless icy winds blow through the valley and slip between cracks in the cabin walls, seeming to hammer on the door day and night. The clouds swell and bear down oppressively, no longer distinguishable from the valley's rock walls.

Down to the village, then, before it's too late and a sudden fall of snow makes the path treacherous. Adelmo Farandola walks, his rucksack on his back. He needs dried meat, dried sausages, wine and butter. The potatoes he has put aside will see him through the whole winter. They're lying in the stable now, in the dark, next to some old farm tools: wooden pails, bridles, butter churns, chains and brushes. They reach out with their pale sprouts as though to tickle someone. There are plenty of potatoes – and apples too, crates of apples, which the cold weather will sour but leave edible. Adelmo Farandola loves the taste of those ugly apples, a taste that coats his teeth and clings to the hairs lining his nostrils, an almost meaty taste, like

well-hung game left over after a successful hunt. There are apples too, enough for winter. He still needs sausages, and wine. Wine and butter. Butter and salt.

He is bent double by a crosswind as he makes his way down to the village. The going is surprisingly difficult and he almost laughs thinking how he will struggle on the return, coming back uphill in this wind. The path slithers down through gullies and across plateaus, occasionally losing itself between old rotting tree stumps, long grasses and the ever-shifting scree, but the man knows how to find his way.

Here, halfway down, the autumn weather has turned the larches a wan yellow. This isn't the cheerful, brazen autumn you find at the bottom of the valley, where the vineyards and forests of alder and chestnut add colour to the landscape. Here, the leaves die quickly, drying out on the branches even before they fall.

Adelmo Farandola used to go down to the village more often, to hear the band play on high days and holidays. He would lurk behind the walls of the houses and let the music reach him in a confused swirl of notes. But he soon stopped that, because someone had seen him and come up to him, hand outstretched, and tried to engage him in conversation. Now he stops when he reaches the line of beech trees and listens to the band play from there, well hidden among the leaves and trunks. The music rises up indistinctly, a mess of drumbeats, tubas and shrill clarinets quavering on the breeze, but that's enough for him. From time to time he finds himself recognizing some tune or other and even feels moved to sing it to himself – and so he does, but very quietly, because he doesn't want to be overheard

by anyone wandering nearby, ready to come up to him and shake his hand and not let go and ask him about things that he doesn't know or doesn't remember, doesn't care about or doesn't want to talk about.

After a few minutes, however, even the band makes him feel nauseous. There are too many people, he thinks, too tightly packed, too noisy, too cheerful. So he spits on the ground, turns away and starts back homewards up the steep slope, telling himself that the band really does play badly, that the villagers are all stupid and that music is useless anyway.

But sometimes he dreams about the band, and in his dream he hears melodies of extraordinary beauty performed by musicians playing perfectly in tune. Fearlessly, he joins them, following behind and singing along in full voice with the music, which would perhaps bring back distant memories of his youth, if he had managed to keep those memories intact. Memories of dancing with girls and, in particular, scrapping and fighting with other suitors, and of long conversations with girls, consisting mostly of silences and sighs and drunken hiccups.

A vague feeling steals over Adelmo Farandola as he reaches the first houses of the village. He looks around and everything seems less strange than it usually does when he comes to stock up after months of solitude on the mountain. He starts confidently down the main street (the only one you could call a street) and finds his way to the shop (the only one worthy of the name) with astonishing ease. The shop faces out onto the square in front of the church (the only

square you could call a square) and its window is cluttered with dusty tools and gifts that have become almost colourless from long exposure to the sun. They sell all sorts of things here: food and farming tools, linen and newspapers, even a few trinkets for ladies.

Adelmo Farandola enters, automatically bowing his head at the door – as people do in reverence when they go into church, or as he always does to avoid smacking his head on the low lintel of his cabin. The lady behind the counter looks at him in surprise and smiles.

‘Good morning,’ she says. ‘Leave the door open, thanks.’

‘Good morning,’ Adelmo Farandola replies slowly. It’s been so long since he’s spoken to anyone that he struggles to get the words out, and each one feels as difficult as a tongue-twister. In his confusion, he shuts the door behind him.

‘Forgotten something?’

‘No, I... I need to get things.’

‘That’s what I mean. Things you forgot last time.’

‘Last time,’ he murmurs.

‘Yes, last week. When was it, Tuesday? Wednesday? Perhaps you remember.’

‘I... I’ve come to get supplies.’

‘Yes, I can see that. But since you came by last week with that same face on to stock up for the winter, I’m wondering whether perhaps you forgot something, and if so, what you could have forgotten last time that’s so terribly important, since it’s not exactly a walk in the park getting down here and then going all the way back up to... wherever it is that you go – I’ve actually never really understood where that is.’

The lady's tongue is well versed in conversation. Adelmo Farandola, meanwhile, accustomed to months of silence, is as incapable of listening as he is of expressing himself.

'And given that last time – on Tuesday or Wednesday last week – you loaded yourself up with a fair bit of stuff, I was wondering what on earth you could have forgotten. Or did you come by just to see me?' The lady laughs, a nice long cackle that makes poor Adelmo Farandola tremble and long to flee the shop without buying anything.

Instead he makes a colossal effort and stammers, 'I... I haven't come down since last April –'

'But I'm telling you, I saw you here! On Tuesday or Wednesday! Are you teasing me?'

'No, I...'

Another customer enters, an old man from the village who used to repair tools. The jingle of the bell makes Adelmo Farandola jump and take a step backwards into a dark corner.

The old man sniffs the air and laughs.

'Something the matter?' he asks the lady.

'Benito!' she calls to the new arrival, laughing. 'Mr Adelmo here is having me on. He's pretending he doesn't remember coming by last week and cleaning out my shop for the winter. Leave the door open, thanks.'

The old man laughs again and passes a finger over his grey moustache, saying nothing.

'I... I haven't come down since April,' Adelmo Farandola stammers again.

The old man laughs but doesn't say anything.

'Benito, you tell Mr Adelmo that he was here on Tuesday or Wednesday and ransacked my whole shop.'

‘Mm, that’s right. I saw you too,’ the old man laughs.

‘But where?’

‘Right out there, in the street. All loaded up like a mule.’

‘There, what did I say?’ the woman concludes triumphantly. ‘But Mr Adelmo always has to have his little joke, pretending not to remember.’

It’s Adelmo Farandola’s turn to say nothing. He never jokes. He doesn’t know how. He doesn’t even know what joking is and, if it ever occurred to him to make a joke, no one would realize because he doesn’t know how and, if anything, they would take him for an idiot, which is what is happening now.

‘So, what would you like?’ asks the lady, her manner more brisk now that she has another customer waiting.

‘Well, I... I...’

‘Yes, you...’

‘I don’t remember exactly what I got last time.’

‘What do you mean you don’t remember?’

The old man laughs to himself, amused by this forgetful mountain dweller.

‘I don’t remember what I bought... but I need some salt –’

‘But I’ve already given you three bags!’

‘And butter –’

‘Three kilos! What exactly are you going to do with all that butter?’

‘And wine –’

‘Ah, you can never have enough of that,’ laughs the old man.

‘Five litres wasn’t enough for you? When I saw you leave carrying all that stuff, I thought you’d never make it back

up! How did you manage it, anyway?’ Then, with a wink: ‘Don’t tell me you’ve already polished off the lot!’

The old man laughs and laughs.

‘Wine always runs out too soon!’ he laughs.

Enough. In the end, to avoid leaving empty-handed, Adelmo Farandola buys two bottles of red wine and three pairs of woollen knee socks. He pays with large, grimy, crumpled banknotes, which the lady accepts with a sigh, and goes out into the already wintry wind.

‘Leave the door open,’ the lady shouts after him.

A memory, albeit a rather vague one, has begun to coalesce in his mind. These houses and these stones really do seem more familiar than they ought to. He has been to the shop recently, he has already bought supplies – the lady was right. He begins to remember climbing back up to his valley, weighed down by the five-litre bottle and his other purchases. He remembers the sweat, the pain in his arms and back, and the sound of his own ragged breathing, which he, in his confusion, thought was coming from someone beside him, so that he stopped more than once to ask, ‘Who’s there?’ Or is that just the memory of the other times he’s followed the same path, weighed down by the same things, in previous years? He shakes his head slowly as he starts up the road leading out of the village, which narrows to a cart track that winds between fields and vegetable patches, full of the stink of food scraps and rows of rotting cabbages, before shrinking down to a footpath, which grows steep as it reaches the first larches and starts climbing towards the Alpine pastures above.