

Giorgio Fontana
PRIMA DI NOI
Before Us

Excerpt translated by Howard Curtis

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Hoisting himself onto the tank for a moment, Infantryman Maurizio Sartori looked at the mass of men advancing along the road. A wounded man next to him spat and pulled his helmet down over his face, while a dog barked at the tank, running with its tongue dangling. Abandoned cannons lay in the grey light. Three fellow soldiers returned to the column blind drunk, waving sacks of flour and salami stolen from the farmhouses and lumps of cheese on the tips of their bayonets, crying “Look at this feast!” Further on, as far as the eye could see, the plain was endless and blurred in the rain, and smoke whirled up from burned-out storehouses rose.

Every kilometre they went, groups of civilians tried to join them and were thrown back to the sides of the road or along the sodden fields. The women had jute sacks over their shoulders and packages under their arms, while thin, dirty children threw balls of earth, excited to have left home. People latched on to them, elbowing each other and cursing, together with their oxen, sheep and hens.

Maurizio jumped down and Ballarin grabbed him by the arm.

“Are you in, then?” he whispered. “As soon as we can, with the Calabrian?”

The copper cross was dangling outside his uniform and his eyes glistened, as if stunned, two pebbles in a stream. He was drunk too. Maurizio nodded.

Soon afterwards, they crossed the Tagliamento. The column had thinned down to fit the narrow path, and the tanks and horses made marching difficult. Everyone pushed, urging each other to hurry, because very soon the sappers would be blowing up the bridge. The mass was impenetrable now, and Maurizio felt suddenly short of breath: he leaned over the parapet to look for a moment at the dark, turbulent, overflowing water of the river that would protect them. He was thinking, unwittingly, of the dead. Almost immediately, the dead stop resembling us. He had seen so many of them and none looked like the living; they were as dumb and inscrutable as wild animals or stones. He felt the breath go out of him.

When at last he got to the other side, he wiped the sweat from his forehead and Ballarin kissed his copper cross. "Good," he said. "This time it's really over."

Within a few minutes, the explosions started. Maurizio turned, along with thousands of others, and saw a central section of the bridge bend, crumble and end up in the river. The men who were still on the structure bustled about and a cloud of dark dust spread into the distance. After a moment's silence, everyone yelled for joy.

They escaped towards dawn, he and Ballarin and the Calabrian. They had stayed on the edge of the wood, and the lieutenant was so drunk he didn't notice a thing. Maurizio took a last look at the bodies lying sprawled on the grass, the sentries

waving branches of burning wood that sizzled in the light rain. Even if anyone saw them, nobody tried to stop them.

There was no path, the earth was rotten, and the wood seethed with noises and cracking. The Calabrian kept muttering that his stomach hurt and asked them to slow down. Maurizio said there was no time, but in any case, it was hard to keep up the pace with all this mud.

They continued like this for an hour, not daring to tell each other the truth: they were lost; or rather, they had never had a direction. Maurizio had got ahead of the others, but when he broke through the mass of trees and came out into a clearing, he suddenly felt his legs give way, and he collapsed face down on the ground. The outlines of the undergrowth were starting to emerge from the dawn, still blurred by the fog.

Better to have done with it, at this point. He just had to wait for the carabinieri to find them, put them against a trunk and shoot them. He almost felt relief at the thought of the end, as had happened to him so many other times: for twenty years now, he had been imploring Christ to free him forever of hunger or toil or fear. But behind him there was that idiot Ballarin who had started crying: “Either we bury him or we’re bastards.”

Maurizio pressed his face into the mud as if wanting to choke himself; it didn’t work. He rolled onto his side and Ballarin appeared, laboriously dragging the Calabrian’s limp body. He came towards him like an image in a fresco, one of those threatening figures of saints he had stared at in fear, as a child, in the

church of his village on the Piave. The Calabrian must have been not long dead: the cut on his belly, which he had hidden, saying he was ready to escape, had drained him of blood.

“Either we bury him or we’re bastards,” Ballarin repeated.

“Are you crazy? We have to run.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“Catching my breath.”

“Well, now that you’re rested, give me a hand.” The Calabrian slipped off his shoulder and he tried to load him on again. It was all so absurd, Maurizio started to laugh. Ballarin was furious.

“He’s one of us, Sartori.”

“And what do you want to do, drag him to the first cemetery we find?”

“No. We bury him here and I put my cross on his grave.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“And you’re a bastard. You deserve to die a worse death than him, you know that? Snake! Judas!” Then he panted and looked around in confusion, while the light slowly brought colour to the world. “How did we end up like this, Sartori? How did it happen?”

Maurizio crouched and looked at him with something like curiosity. Ballarin’s face was contorted, mud on his teeth and in his eyes: he let the Calabrian’s body – one more stone, one more wild animal – slide off him and

ended up on his knees in the fog. “Oh, *mamma*,” he started moaning. “*Mamma*, why? Why?”

Maurizio counted to ten, then stood up and strode resolutely past his companion and the corpse. After a few steps he heard the scream: “Don’t run away! Judas!”

One step, then another.

“I’ll shoot you, Sartori. I swear it on the Madonna, I’ll kill you.”

“Go on, shoot me,” Maurizio cried, withing turning round.

But Ballarin didn’t shoot. Maurizio waited for the pain to tear his back; instead of which, he was still alive, inexorably alive. Ballarin was sobbing softly in the distance. Maurizio put his hands over his ears so as not to hear him and, keeping them there, set off along the path on the other side of the clearing.

He kept moving forward, thinking over the past few months. A way not to go crazy like Ballarin, he told himself. Smile, Sartori. Concentrate on the things you left behind you and won’t see again. The chilblains and the frozen shit and the explosions rending the night. The inspections to check their beards and moustaches were the right length while people were dying of cholera, may God curse Cadorna and the whole of Italy. A grenade that had missed him by a whisker, followed by two bodies flying up into the air. The phosphorescent glitter of the watch faces, the shacks with the rotten beams, the little boy who bit his mess tin, crying for his mother. And the evenings when his fellow soldiers asked

him to sing, because they knew he had a good voice: sometimes he said no and sometimes he cleared his throat and slapped his chest with his open hand and launched into a tune.

And running between the barbed wire, striking at random with their bayonets in the middle of the smoke, crying “Savoy, Savoy!” although they could hardly breathe and didn’t know what was going on, and some of them took their rifles by the barrel and broke the butt over the heads of those who were facing them – “Savoy, Savoy!” they all croaked – with the bullets whistling around, and others were stuck in the mud, the blood running down over their eyes, and one morning everything turned upside down and everywhere was full of limp arms and legs and Maurizio was tired, very tired, he was screaming, he was alive.

And the tunnels. The green artillery flares. The stench. The wooden crosses on the ridge of the hill like a patch of wild plants. And the depots, the trenches, the digging, the positions taken and lost, the sun on your temples in July, the wounds filled with pus, a letter never sent, the new priest who was a spy, the carabinieri with their rifles aimed at the backs of those who were slow on the attack.

And the German he had passed during a truce, when he had gone down to recover bodies. He was much taller than him, with a grey moustache; like him, he was carrying away lifeless bodies with the help of his comrades. Those dead who were so dumb, like wild animals or stones. They had stared at each other for a moment, the German had said something, and for some reason, because

Maurizio didn't know the language, the words had sounded like a prayer or an insult; he had shaken his head and left.

He threw the uniform and cap away and kept on only his shirt and cape. He took off his boots and saw that the blisters on his toes had now burst and blood and pus were pouring out. He put his boots back on and continued on his way.

To get home he would have to go north, but he was afraid it was too risky, so he decided to stay on the plain. It was a good plan, or maybe not. The right decision, or a decision like any other – at this point it didn't matter. One day he would tell his children, if he survived, if he ever had any: *Whatever you choose, the world screws you anyway.*

He slept fitfully for an hour and was woken by an attack of diarrhoea. Later, he glimpsed the outline of a town through the rain and bypassed it, keeping his distance. Every now and again, explosions would rend the silence. Maurizio passed peasants who were running away or groups of soldiers who'd been cut off like him; but nobody asked him any questions, almost as if he were a plague victim or a ghost, or the survivor of a disaster that was nobody's business but his own.

In the evening, limping through yet another deserted field, he gazed at the sunset: the clouds had thinned out and the light split the sky into purple and pale blue streaks. Not far away, the mountains rose. Maurizio thought about Ballarin:

had they taken him? Had he buried the Calabrian? Was he coming after him with his rifle cocked?

Afflicted by sudden shivering, hunger and fever gnawing at him, he quickened the pace. Night fell. The plain rose. Maurizio climbed the side of a low, grassy hill. More lights swayed in the distance; he kept going until he saw to his right a light like the others, in no way different, only more isolated. There he stopped.