

# Il canto della rosa e dell'angelo (The Song of the Rose and The Angel )

ANGELA MARCHIONNI,  
EXCERPTS TRANSLATED BY  
ELENA BASILE

*Est-ce que la passion pour la vie qui s'en va demande de la mort, une attention particulière? Est-ce que la maladie peut devenir une sorte de valeur? Et que dire du geste indifférent mais affectueux sur votre bras, d'une infirmière qui vous donne une injection? "Le Chant de la rose et de l'ange" est un texte tissé à même les fils de la maladie. Il erre à travers les dédales de l'histoire et du mythe afin de sauvegarder un témoignage très personnel sur l'obligation de s'appropriier la douleur, la peur, une mère que vous rencontrez en rêve, une fille qui s'offre elle-même au destin, une soeur qui vous renvoie aux prémisses de votre enfance. C'est un texte à la pointe de la beauté qui vous retourne à l'essentialité des choses, à la fusion avec l'air, l'eau, la lumière et les fleurs et au temps ajourné.*

## THIRD FRAME

Quinzano, January 30, 2001

Dear Nanni,

The scar flatly crosses my right breast right through to the armpit. Letizia just sent me a postcard of the Amazon warriors, to offer me consolation maybe, but I know that I fell short of fighting to keep as precious what's mine. This empty space on my body, no prosthesis can ever delude me into thinking that I did not traverse. The tumor is a slow and inexorable transformation leading to the individual's death, but I feel it is also an anxiety for love, the surplus of a quest for survival that lacks the order of generation. Both art and science would know how to make the miracle of humbleness that consists in staying true to the laws of nurture. For the time being, however, the price of my non-death, if not recovery, is this infidelity to the cosmic law of mutation that requires that black holes stay black. I have accepted a medicine that wrecks my entrails and what remains hidden under the skin for a statistical reckoning with probability—a simple correlation between risks and benefits in order to continue to live.

To return to civilization means also to accept its historical limitations. Do you remember? "What doesn't kill you



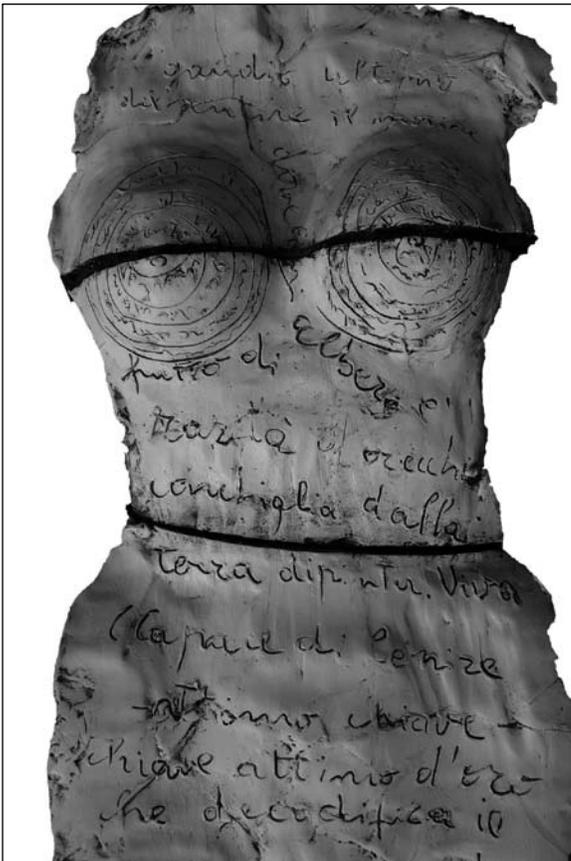
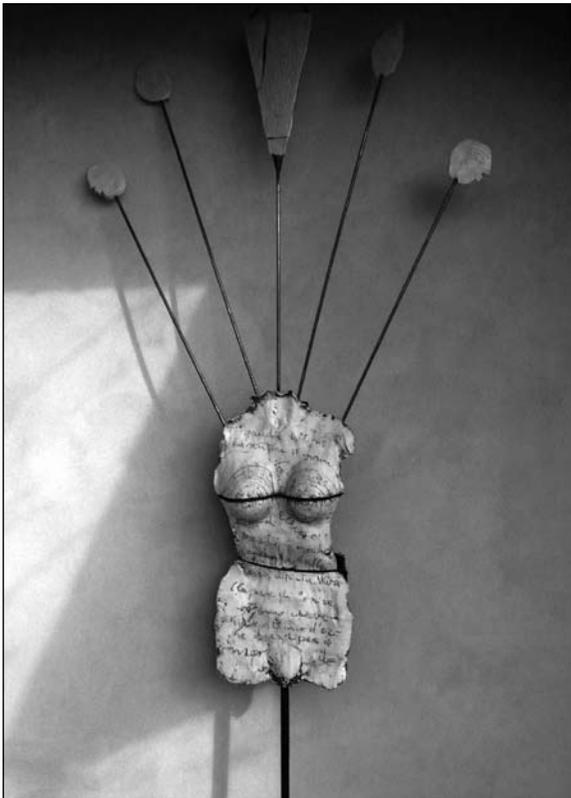
Angela Marchionni, "Canto della rosa e dell'angelo"  
(Song of the Rose and the Angel ), 2005,  
clay on wood, 76 x 45 x 7 cm. Photo: Roberta Ferrara

fattens you" our grandmother used to say when we just didn't want to eat something (but then she cooked each of us her favourite dish...)

Beneath what passes as calculated certainty there is in essence a highly subjective answer to the toxins which our life is subjected to. That's why I am so grateful for your support in helping me buy the piece of land on which we will build the new house for Ludo...

I

I feel the weight of our substance between the trafficking



Angela Marchionni, "Chiave-attimo d'oro" (Key-golden moment), 2005, clay iron and writing, 210 x 40 x 20 cm. Bottom (detail). Photos: Roberta Ferrara

of banks that explode the consistency of the sacred in weapons provoking marrow-burning deaths.<sup>1</sup>

"True, the tide no longer raises its wall of water to protect the earth: with a last flash it looks at the sun that fucks with greed by fire and abandons it to the adventure of plagues."

Nonetheless the tide still welcomes the floating excess in its space and reclines it to the relic of earth, refracting in fronts of sense the slate that no longer bears any sign. Simple how big everything is. "You can lay here your kiss that lightens up the Miserere with passion."

[...]

#### CHORUS

Rodeo of fissures, from the lament I extract such poignant accents of folly that suddenly that empty space of wisdom where the sweet flesh is inscribed with the lamb's seal falls silent: it is thus that history pushes on its own pledge and sinks into the day ruled by iron: artful slaughter of flesh.

"But art, phoenix and sun's senescence, is just a new star that flirts with crazy wisdom dilated into delirium. Reddened it sprouts from the bush of hair into cordons of pedestals."<sup>2</sup>

Fragile like doves the laws of mutation shade off into a free dreaming of the oblivion that comes each night from the border zone to dress in veiling and covers with fits and starts the brain that knows how to betray.

"Permeated by variation time decants with greater exactitude upon to the rubble spotted in the confluence of catastrophes and cuts in and advances with slowness more just."<sup>3</sup>

The hurricane's passage thus weaves its thread of air in the ear that re-balances the seer, and it rapidly chooses the meaning of the unsaid while I park my tears between the glare of what is seen. Transparency fades off in a thousand rounds of signs and among colors: but here is the green sea, and here's life rolling by and always the same, indifferent to the millennia of sacrifice.

#### RIDER AT THE HANDLING

Hospital interior. A nurse comes through the door with a trolley and changes each patient's drip. She dances while doing this and the black hair under her cap dances with her. Exterior: sky, clouds. There's a feeling as if of something that did not take place, the body constantly prepares for death without a limit or a threshold or any reassurance. Interior of a cave or a grotto, a few musicians walk backward in slow motion. View from below of a house with a balcony and a small gate. Quick shot from below of a naked tree, the image then fades into white as a way to underline the affinity of an experience that tumultuously sharpens one's sensitivity towards that which fades away. The little girl returns to the scene with her father and they quickly hop together along the patterns in the

corridor's floor. Everything is silent: you can only hear the sound of their footsteps. The nurse comes out again, she looks out and then in and then turns back and stops at the door to listen. A light spreads between the eyes and the ears of the first man sitting in the armchair. With a suspension meant to sustain certitude he turns his gaze to the father who is just about to sit on a small chair with a sullen face. To live seems like a good thing, but dying can be good too if you can find value in a state of pause. (Being sometimes can appear as a conceived evolutionary potential without evolution.)

uterus) as it refers to a capacity to be in the world in relation to becoming and alterity. They are passions (from the latin "patior," in the sense of "suffering a departure") that pertain to one's own relation to the self, beginning from the exit from a matrix to the closure of an ending that has no discounts of resurrection.<sup>5</sup> The first three belong to a purely physical plane of existence, the last one to a mental one. In all, there remain signs of attachment, of that tension between love and detachment, of freedom; in all of them, the path towards evolving into a different (de)parting\* is signaled by a dance of crossing of the void.

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**Our own life fades away through the diminishing of our capacity to explore and express, while we project upon objects the disturbed feelings we have.... We let others tell us what to do: we are still alive... But I don't know if I want to be alive at all costs.**  
*Life is a whim we sooner or later have to affirm/exit.*

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#### RECIPE FOR ONE OF US HEALTHY

Falsity of mimetic behaviour. Our behavioural models frequently throw us into an unreal world where we risk reactions of avoidance, flight or a reduced capacity to tolerate what's new. Frequently our own life fades away through the diminishing of our capacity to explore and express, while we project upon persecutory objects the disturbed feelings we have when we take shelter from the pressures of reality. We let others tell us what to do: we are still alive...

But I don't know if I want to be alive at all costs.  
*Life is a whim we sooner or later have to affirm/exit.*

#### NOTES

The girl who enters a place of pain throws a few coins on the floor to play. The nurse silences her, but the father tells her that the coin she's using is the one coined by her mother and her friends to pay the unpayable<sup>4</sup> and it represents the toll to authorize the passage to life through two cycles of earthly existence.

First Cycle:

The Rose: generation as the link to, or passion for, Earth.

*The Horse: acceleration as the passion for the Other.*

*The Bird: flight as freedom or passion for Air.*

Second Cycle:

The Angel represents the announcing of change or passion for Return.

These symbols correspond to different passages towards physical ways of ex-isting (literally ex-hystere, outside the

The dance does not follow a rigid scheme and one can accede each cycle from any one of these four passions.

[...]

This work (an outline for a dramatization which includes music, dance and video) was inspired by a research that is on a continuum with preceding work, although it originates in the experience of having a tumor, seen, felt and perceived as Alterity itself inhabiting us. With the tumor all of a sudden death—this enigma questioned in every era—becomes a concrete and unavoidable housemate: no longer mere possibility, death acquires the weight of a reality marked by a shortened and immanent timeframe.

But if eternity was death itself becoming life, and if alterity had the aspect of the foreigner (my mother, Julia or Clytemnestra—mythical or real women) whom a thought sufficed to bring back to life—present to the loving work of memory performed by a woman who re-traverses and re-adapts history in order to inhabit the present moment together again—now the foreigner, she who always lives elsewhere, coincides with the self: it is my own death the enigma I am now traversing.

It wasn't easy to elaborate this intimate and secret drama of a woman who talks to a part of herself so that it won't stay quiet and will say without confusion and without fear that she is dying and why. Since the surgery, and with the chemo and radiotherapy, my perception of the traffic and the city has radically changed. I can't tolerate living downtown anymore, with the red lights forcing me to breathe bad air. I want to move to the country. It's this internal death that dictates and establishes new perspectives on my time and quality of life. It is the same time as before, if I think about it: but now it has become urgent intimate and close, because revealed in the certitude of its own end...

I should have looked at my life and asked what changes to make from the very first sign, eight years ago: when one night something like a switch goes off in my brain and I am startled awake by these words from my dream: “system manager crashed”. For five days and five nights I stop sleeping entirely: clearly my excess of life was not bound to find its own organization in repetition.

A project for music, theatre, and poetry, I don't know if I will ever manage to set this book to stage. Nonetheless, there's the text, which a voice has recited for me night after night during the months of my illness, while I knitted relentlessly for two grandchildren. All of a sudden I stop knitting and the computer, long unused under the bed, returns on the small portable desk above the blankets. And voilà, the mechanics of the unanticipated: the text is soon together and it will be ready by October, just when I will be set free from the imprisonment of therapy.

Hence, I return to the question of why society has found its own economy in an organizational form that privileges repetition to the point that the “compulsion to repeat” has become a grammar and feature of behaviour, even when everything in the body speaks about the advance of the new in new forms. This question accompanies me since adolescence because of the discrepancy I felt between my sexuality and the silent imposition of behaviours that allow you to adapt to a variety of situations only to restore an appropriate balance, so as to make sure that even if everything changes nothing really does. Accordingly, I started paying attention to the organization of the social sphere, and I looked at the window of language that blends and makes use of myths and symbols. Now, however, it is to the organism itself, to my own body, that I turn the question. In my presumption of being able to distinguish between the appearance of movement and the reality of change, I did not notice that I was myself living within a process that sucks me in and kills me while I neglect, by procrastinating, the need to live today, now, immediately. Although failed, my whole existence is still a capital with credits and creditors: even if just in the form of a couple of children, grandchildren, some friends. And seeing that it is from myths and from history that one learns what someone else has taken pains to tell us, I reconnect my research to a thread/name (Ariadne) in order to bind a book that will bend to history and to this need I have to betray between the lines.” Betray a civilization that has betrayed itself.

I always thought that men were afraid of changes, and that it was less important for them to negate such evidence than to make it irrelevant, useless, in one word, empty. “Nothing is created and nothing is destroyed,” consequently they began to find ways to interrupt real movement and give origin to the thought of calculus, and hence to that kind of work that can project its own meaning to infinity and transform it into power because capable of creating a link between thought and its practical application within the mechanics of mechanisms. Even



Angela Marchionni, “Spinto al limite il canto”  
(Pushed to the limit the song), (detail), 2005, clay, iron and  
lights, 270 x 45 x 35cm. Photo: Roberta Ferrara

what we know today as relative is still absolute because still barred from being applied in the direction of a real and thus formal change.

Science, on the other hand, just like art and politics, in its contemporary organization still has the ancient lack of social consistency typical of the parasite, with no power over the economy and *its* politics. What remains is their structure ordered like a fugue, comfortable pedestal necessary to perpetrate abuses and digest the vitality that no longer orders the direction of growth. This latter has that complexity from which our capacity to communicate arises, and it gives us a strong if delicate balance that survives the daily bombardment of information which comes from everywhere, and which the body adapts to according to the changes in situation.

The structure of what lives as a super-organism imitates that aspect of change that is about adapting in sequences, either linear or analogical, but it paralyzes it by subtracting some variables so that a foundation can be given to the process of proceeding (as the very root of the word shows). And yet a simple brilliant thought would be enough to demolish the entire edifice... Just like a signal in the body comes to light as soon as the threshold value relative to its survival is crossed, in the same way that signal disappears and loses its own identity once it reaches its destination. Because a signal (just like the sign) has no awareness, and as soon as it can collaborate it dissolves. In this way, the

babel of languages has acquired the capacity to destroy the value of what's new, removing it as a signal that also has a return value. And nothing will happen ever again that can possibly be defined as truly new. Just like the ants during the Cretaceous period, in the same way humans have modeled with similar tenacity their social control into a global organism.<sup>6</sup>

## EVOCATIONS

I referred to the myth of Ariadne for more than one reason: the most important one is that Arianna\*\*\* being the name imposed on my grandchild, it was of good omen for both of us to discover the links it has with the past and to use it as a thread for a work in becoming—a good omen for her growth in her mother's belly (a growth that has accompanied and lightened up my long calvary of radio and chemotherapy) and for my own adventure of death.

[...]

ACTION!

[...]

Like the aconitum that blooms on the naked rock, this project for theatre wants to return death to a space of life, "sail that takes off dipped in the red sauce of a cochineal's body," without hate, without fear. Internal to existence, which reclaims death's necessity, but not its sacrifice. And in that form, although painful, it is not violent, which is what instead frequently happens with the obstinate persistency of all kinds of therapy. In this sense Cancer is the Angel announcing a coming as important as the beginning of life itself: "you cry of librations, syzygy of the new moon detached at the time of the great tide from mother earth that pushed you in the sky with no atmosphere."

The silent accelerator of time reconciles itself, without pharmakos, without substitutes, to the violence of nature because she understands its inevitability, its trajectory and history. Give to earth what belongs to earth and to heaven what belongs to heaven: it might sound obvious, but Caesar is not the earth and the heavens are not what the many different Caesars have said of the heavens.

Identification and opposition wander aimlessly here, absolved of their grave sin of thinking themselves small gods.\*\*\*\* I purposefully avoided dividing the rhythm in lines because these verses need freedom as they contend with the lack of measure and chaos that threatens to extinguish us all in this terrible Iron Age that seems to have no end. For this reason they are not hendecasyllables, exameters, quatrains or tercets, but neither they are completely blank verses because they are "voices that wander freely untied one to the other with love." They are voices of gratitude for the existence of others and of the self, exactly like my experience in the day hospital. These voices leave room and are

in wait of other voices and echoes. Voices of encounter within a structure that is simultaneously strong and open, ordered but not binding, and such that it offers a judgment without however believing it to be absolute: in that it lacks the omnipotence of an absolution, though it still maintains the promise of a return that belongs—in the etymological sense of the word—to for/giving.

*Angela Marchionni is a poet and visual artist, art director and artist book editor. She has been an active experimenter in Bologna, Italy, since the 1970s. In the 1980s, together with Cristina Casanova, Marchionni coined the "coin to pay the unpayable" with the idea of returning to the matrix of intelligibility that state of being that has a kinship with becoming. In the 1990s she founded Beatrix V.T. Editions, which has served as an important space of expression for more than 30 Italian artists for the past 20 years. She started writing the long poem Il canto della rosa e dell'angelo (The Song of the Rose and the Angel) when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001. The book was published in 2007, in conjunction with a DVD of two artist book catalogues by 20 artists, Coccinelle di Pace (Ladybugs of Peace) and Art Disc. Among her latest collaborative works are three composite installation projects/poetry, artist books and DVD catalogues Dafne o del Guadagno (Daphne or About Profit), 2009; Teknè: Ius Vitae Necisque, 2010 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ih4WmUaG-A&feature=related>); and Indomita verba in calco labile: I, Quartetto delle Virtù Indomestiche; II Sul filo: Ensemble (this last project also includes a musical score), 2010 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugu7DT3KSSU&feature=related>). She works and lives in Quinzano (Bologna), Italy.*

*Elena Basile, translator, was born in Italy and came to Canada to study in 1996. She is still studying, and teaching and translating. She has been teaching at York University and at the University of Toronto since 2006. Her areas of research include contemporary feminist experimental poetics in Canada and in Italy, psychoanalysis and sexuality studies, and translation studies. She has been collaborating with Angela Marchionni since the mid-1990s and has contributed to Beatrix V.T. Editions with visual poetry, critical essays, and translations. In 2000, she co-authored with Marchionni a book of prose poetry, La macchina e il maquillage (The Machine and the Make-up). Her latest work includes the Italian translation of Nicole Brossard's Mauve Desert (Il deserto malva, Bari, WIP Edizioni, 2011).*

<sup>1</sup>Leukemias produced by weapons. "Depleted Uranium weapons: where and when were they used? Only in Iraq and Kosovo, or also in Somalia and Bosnia? And together with what other kinds of weapons or protective vaccines?" (Vito Totire "The Health of Immigrant Workers", Presentation at the Hospital Bellaria, Bologna, 23 November 1995).

<sup>2</sup>According to the legend, the phoenix, a peerless mythical animal, when close to death builds a nest of small sticks,

on which it eventually consumes itself burning in its own heat. [...] On the riverbanks of the Nile the legend is associated to the cycle of the sun, which dies at night to return in the morning [...] For the ancient Egyptians death was only a passage towards another existence, a return to the primordial light and to eternal life. Here, however, it is death itself that bestows sense and reality to existence.

<sup>3</sup>From Chernobyl, the Gulf War, Kosovo, and Palestine...to what we eat and breathe. The list is synthetic but not random.

<sup>4</sup>A coin was produced in 1987 for the exhibit *Le Donne Ridono* (*Women Laugh*) in Ferrara (Church of San Romano). The project, however, didn't stop at the object: "Fusionality is the alchemy of every exchange where mediation is exactly the part that each one of us cedes to go to the other and hence to transform/be transformed. Convenient relation between thing and *woman* that embodies the exemplary model for all exchange because living interrelation between object and bodies that in reciprocity find the specific form of each own and each other's sense. (That is to say that surplus-work and surplus-value are *gifts* and as such they should be launched into the social as the *form of value due to woman* and the authority of this "should" would have to be formally socialized so as to signify the mechanism without which there is no blossoming of the self). The structure of language contains an authentic process of exchange: the social structure that takes advantage of this process is inherited from maternal speech, it lives of relations between the concrete and the abstract, capable of adaptation and constant creation. In the early learning processes of childhood, things, between subjects, become animated because the mother herself becomes *thing* for the other with the goodness of being born mortal through the loan of earth, air, stone, hands themselves become part of transformational play: this is something that remains on this side of all appearance because each death lives on if loved." (See Marchionni, "L'immagine, il dono, il vivente" in *Reddito e mutilazioni. Iniziativa a sostegno di Emergency*, Teatro del Guerriero, Bologna May 5, 1995. Beatrix Archive)

<sup>5</sup>The mystery texts of the goddesses that pertained to resurrection were buried between a yew and a myrtle as these two trees represented respectively the last vowel and the last consonant of the arboreal alphabet and were sacred to the Goddess of Death. In this alphabet, the pine was the tree of life, whereas the myrtle was the tree of death. (See Graves, *Greek Myths*, 50; 52.5)

<sup>6</sup>In the metaphor of the sacred body there is the sacrifice of the woman who nurtures, the first nurturing body: the predatory orality of the child becomes the predatory orality of domination. This happens every time one removes the place where the event of a life that nurtures for "free" takes place. When there is no material counterpart to "pay" for such nurture, it is inevitable that natural categories of exploitation start to take hold. Because the "void" of this

place of apparent "free" nurture becomes permeable to a multitude of virtuosos capable of manipulating trust, thanks to the simplicity of communication codes, which are of a chemical nature in ants, but in humans belong to the realm of advertising. On one level it was easy to intercept those codes, because they rely on the sequencing of simple stimuli. On another, however, it was also a source of weakness. The organism has lost its own instinct for survival and has adapted to the modifications imposed by the environment without a counterpart of resistance.

\*In Italian Marchionni plays with the signifier "partire" ("to depart") inserting a bracket around the "r": "pa(r)tire". The word can be read thus also as "patire" ("to suffer"). [Translator's note]

\*\*Marchionni writes: "tra/dire", which can mean both "to betray" and to "speak between the lines". There is also an echo of the famous Italian pun on the work of translation: "Traduttore/traditore" (translator/betrayer). An apt pun in this context, where the silent work of translation speaks between the lines of the text of the other. [Translator's note]

\*\*\*Italian version of Ariadne. [Translator's note]

\*\*\*The word for "god" in Italian is "dio," which contains the word "io" ("I") in it. Marchionni highlights the presence of the "I" within the word for "god" by putting a slash in the middle: "d/io." [Translator's note]

## FARIDEH DE BOSSET

### The Accent

The accent is the cadence  
of syllables in the voice  
like a blemish or a wart,  
a birthmark,  
acquired through life.  
Or, inherited like an heirloom  
to wear  
or bear  
like a second skin.

*Farideh de Bosset's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*