

From *Anima Motrix*



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translated from French by Anne-Laure Tissut

01

The car was spacious—a brouhaha of garbled words inside that made my ear laugh, burnt sentences like cartridges missing their targets. One clause out of two engulfed in the shadows coming at me entering the many tunnels marking my way beyond the border. Where I had caught sight of a huge plaque in my rear-view mirror, like a cornice in the rock: *Confino dello stato*. The border. Mapmakers' *finis terrae* ... The many tunnels that almost swallowed me... "State radio." This was all but a joke at home. Its reporters were so obsequious that we called them cafeteria boys, good for nothing more than feeding us soup. Night and day, whatever the ruling government. Yet today, despite how little anything they said could matter to us, I spent all day looking for that network's frequency, to keep some kind of link with my country, for we avoid, Arté and I—scrupulously avoid broaching current issues on the phone. Hills and tunnels. When we come out of one and the speaker's voice can be heard again, I have missed twenty seconds of the program and they have changed the subject. The report is made of fragments, bits of sentences dropped into the muted interior of the car, a caisson, a game of *cadavre exquis* I set up in place of the corpse. To which I gave

names, in a continuing dialogue with the companion of my flight, *my* misfortunes. To cover the noise of the air-conditioning. Stopping only to answer the phone. Which I in fact took out of my pocket because I thought I had heard it ring—but no. And once again I couldn't help but see that the cell phone quickly becomes the phantom limb of an amputee continuing to experience sensations. One thinks one felt it against one's skin like a muscle-tremor, though it did not vibrate. One thinks one heard its little tune, though it did not ring.

Market day in the village I'm coming into. Hubbub. Muddle. A car is covered with fruit trays; a guy tries to clear it but the vendor shouts him down; he won't move his produce before noon, before two.

I sit down outside at a café, the waitress brings me a cup of coffee. She had just turned her back to me and was walking away between the tables when she suddenly put her right hand on her buttocks—magnificent ones—so as to drive my eyes away from them—she must have merely sensed, not really felt them—it was less than feeling. Just like Jesus and the woman with piles, who said to herself *Just to touch that man's coat should be enough to cure me*—I know my catechism. Through the pressing crowd she timidly put out one hand and Jesus, though turning away from her, must have felt that someone had touched his coat *for immediately*, it is written, *he felt that a force had sprung out of him*. So with my eyes on her buttocks.

Then my phone again, vibrating against my thigh this time. Without looking at the woman who is helping me with produce I take it out feverishly. The reception has changed: it is better here, on the hillside, than by the water or on the road. My wife. For three days I haven't answered her calls; in less than ten minutes I am about to get into the car again and drive all day. Once more they will spot me—what does it matter? So far they don't seem eager to have me sent to jail. Otherwise I'd be there.

The screen lights up; it is the first time that she has used the video when calling me.

02

What immediately struck me was that weariness lurking in the depths of the words she uttered. Which we would have to face some day as it became more evident all the time, as if we were in the run-up to a duel in the open street. Which hadn't changed even after such difficulty reaching me over the past three days. Hadn't given way to irritation or worry. But not today—I have neither the inclination nor the courage to speak of it, to start a fight by asking why she keeps calling me when it is so nice out. That disarming thing I hear inside organizes the panic in my head (the possibility of being loved no longer, even being abandoned) when the weather is so nice. To understand why love or passion might be about to give up. She forces herself and I cannot imagine myself sending her packing by asking her not to any more, for a while you have felt like a heavy load, you force yourself and it weighs me down, I have been carrying both of us, keeping our heads above water and I am getting tired. Run as I may your weariness feels like a weight, a snare, or a block of cast iron hobbling my legs in their sprinting stride. Your body which I know only in blind groping. I am reinventing tenderness between us to get rid of the taste of what I hear when you talk, which wrings my heart and makes me feel like vomiting everything that I haven't eaten since I left. For a while I have been merely identifying the number and mutely watching the lights flashing across the inside of the car like butterflies.

'How was your day?'

Her voice devoid of curiosity.

'I went to see your sister.'

I don't give a damn.

Tries to change topics.

'I miss you—'

My voice also speaks without passion, muttering mortifying *well*, *wells* while my exhaustion demands mental anchorage. Some special fervor.

'The negotiations with that new client are going smoothly.'

That is what I say but I do not give a damn. No way to get her interested with sentences like 'The interpreter who works as my guide is a curious man'. Actually she fails to respond to any word, fails to ask any question about those weird traveling salesmen stories which make

up the stupid fiction I have been feeding her since I left. Sentence fragments are being thrown out like useless ropes, I cannot get my feet on the ground—Arté's voice was a strip of land where all my anxieties were wiped away. But now it is almost identical to that of the computer—bloodless. Leaves me rolling and pitching. Stranded. Leaves me wandering, completing the work of separation. The tenderness she shows by continuing to call me when she too must have measured how bloodless it has all become should move me. But mistrust has taken the upper hand. Another woman would have answered "Cut the prattle". He was astonished that in three months she should never have interrupted him thus; that she should never once have slipped in "I know everything. They came to see me, even the TV people"—though it was difficult to imagine her being spared by the media frenzy. That she should never have reproached me with our name being dragged in the mud by those men of the 8th *bolgia* of the VIIIth circle—the perfidious counsellors—who no doubt have profited by my absence to train their cameras at our house and tell her anything and everything about me, trying to loosen the bonds that they knew were strong, and that had had them champing at the bit for so long. But no, not she. She agreed to call in their presence, pretending to collaborate but not giving the kind of speech they would have liked. "You are not pushing him enough, they must have said, you have to drive him into a corner, get him to betray himself." And for all of that he should have seen her as a new Penelope, settled in to weave a shroud of words in telephone wires, in impalpable waves. Her way of keeping them at arm's length without their protesting. Letting them believe that, hope for, count on. Yet there was that weariness in her voice, which led me to surmise that the surveillance and the pressures to which she was subjected were but incidental. There was that weariness leading him to believe that love was dead, the same love that had been fabulous and joyful.

03

At the beginning of the short movie the picture was very white and blurred in places. It was crossed by some kind of piping, a lining of embroidery or the hem of a sheet. I could not tell at first. Then it changed drastically: a hand moves across the top of the screen and sweeps what I assume to be a mattress; a tattooed shoulder, I believe, a held out arm meeting it, a woman's forearm, she is on top of him, riding him. Then swiftly the hand and tattooed shoulder come off-screen while the camera is blinded by the sheet being turned over. Activity is still visible: the creasing of material, the curving of the mattress under the bodies' weight are recorded by the mike. The word "mike" makes me talk, talk to her, but she cannot hear, busy as she is with something else and she cannot hear, Arté, her first name that I repeat like the beads of a rosary, she cannot hear that I am doing what anybody does who believes that they need to shout for their voice to cover the distance. Take your phone back, switch it off, hang up, I am not supposed to see this. Why send me this? I say Arté, I say Xénia, using all her names, all possible nicknames, those that I can remember.

A weird little scream and the message is over. It will have lasted for twenty-four seconds. A scream of pleasure or of pain, it is impossible to tell—what kind of tears actually come with it? Imagining the sweating body but what kind of sweat? The disorder of the sheets due to urgent desire or defense and struggling to escape ... I set the movie back to reading so as to listen to the little scream again, and try to see things more clearly. But even though my ear is pressed to the earpiece the noise from the market still interferes, people talking and street vendors yelling out their swiftly crumbling down prices because the display next to theirs—

In the middle of the turmoil, watching those twenty-four movieed seconds over and over in a loop.

Stunned by surprise. Open-mouthed, like a pierced balloon emptying itself.

Moaning somewhere on the market and people throw out something that looks like a wounded animal scurrying away. A woman started chasing me. She was screaming and waving her arms about, yelling "My veggies! My veggies!"

The phone broadcasts this little scream in a loop,

the wounded beast bells down the road coming down from the village,

the vegetables are flying so that the market gardener may stop bawling out, and the contents of pockets is sent flying too, and the sunglasses on which I am stepping, probably the phone as well—all sent into the sky like an instant or a shattered windshield.

Some hundreds yards further down I look back and find her, a cumbersome, hard-worked woman, grabbing three vegetables scattered in the burnt, already yellowed landscape, taking her property back right from the patched asphalt—blue-back and almost mauve—while the message is played over and over, although one cannot see anything, not even nakedness, if she is completely naked—but I have never known her real body naked. If it is she or someone else. If the other body with her is a man's or a woman's body, that either. But this is no rape. The woman is not sitting on the man when she is being raped. Or she has decided to give him an orgasm to get rid of him sooner and shorten her suffering.

A few miles away sitting on the back seat after having hurtled down the narrow road, staring in the emptiness, munching a walnut but they are out of season—munching stones. Poor Ulysses. She will not have woven for long, your Penelope won't.

04

When I came back to myself, if one may say so, I was sitting on the shoulder of a road and an old man was shaking me. His heavy hand upon my shoulder. I did not hear him come, this man. No more than I guessed his presence afterwards, standing only a few inches from me.

With glazed eyes and bent back, sitting down on the embankment of a rest area, in the dust that has been stuck to the ground by the morning dew, with wet bottom and shirt too. I may have spent the night thus, though I fail to ask him. When does the market scene date back to? Only yesterday? Day before yesterday?

He offered something to me but I failed to understand. Which he understood. He went back to his van and came back a few seconds later with a glass of white wine that must have come out of an icebox because it was frozen. He gestures to me and makes faces and I understand that this is meant to buck me up.

The sound of this man's footsteps as he drags his espadrilles along in the dust. The little whiplash of the wine in my stomach, a blindworm, the end of a lizard's tail. For two days I have eaten but colors, body and mind in a tailspin, a wet piece of cloth that needs spin-drying.

Feeling slightly foolish, I must have watched him long without helping as he was setting up trestles and boards where he would place the crates of watermelons, of zucchini, of tomatoes and fruit—below a notice board showing GENOVA, and I do not know whether this is Genoa or Geneva... Only once he had finished did I come closer and ask for two oranges. He chose and cleaned them, and meanwhile, during the while taken by those careful moves, twice shall he hear the little scream let out by the woman on the message. A twenty-four-second-movie had been playing in a loop for hours until it became the real measure of time. As an old fellow who has had his share of fun he started laughing in his moustache, or maybe just smile. His body is full of memories, he smiles, so the ambiguity I thought I heard in the scream may not have been there after all—pleasure or pain.

What am I doing with this thing? I don't know, old man, I don't know.

He must believe that I am making fun of him, and being provocative but no. The movie has been playing in a loop on my phone

or in my head, a refrain or a soliloquy for the grey matter/the dead matter. Which clears space by conquering.