

CLAUDIO DAMIANI

Poems translated by John Satriano

(from Contemporary Italian Poets, *Modern Poetry in translation* no. 15, 1999)

Elegia

The charming hippos that in the water were completely submerged (you could see the tips of their backs, just barely) do you remember them, my love? How deliciously charming they were! And you said: "Where are they? If you can't see them, how can you say they're lovely?" Oh, my love, they were in the water, and maybe you knew not the Italian word when I said: "Darling! Hippos there are that, having seen the world, return to the water, quite rightly, with the other mammals emancipated from the sea." And when of the two one emerged, the delicious warmth of the water and the kisses of his mate abandoning, to breathe and bite a bit of mire on the bank (how disgusting! we thought, and I said: "What a foul mouth he must have!") and suddenly his mouth he opened in yawning, as far as it would go. How white and rosy were his fangs! And how surprised you were, what a precious start you gave! And with how many kisses would I have showered you, but I must needs drive on, for the other cars had amassed behind us and were a menacing and stupid herd.

(from *Fraterno*, 1987)

Albio

Albio is the little walnut tree at the left of the road climbing from the house to the gate. This morning passing by I looked at him and saw he had made little walnuts, in pairs, biggish already, bright green, a bit sparse, not a lot but oh so lovely and I thought that last year he hadn't made any

yet, and this year was the first time
he was making them, and I also looked at
his leaves, clear and perfect and oval,
without a blemish, without a single spot
or hole, nothing, and at his high little
branches too, down to his smooth and slender white
trunk and at the perfect and graceful form
of the whole little tree, standing straight
in the light, and I thought: Everywhere I look,
the apple trees, the pear and plum trees, the two
little cypresses bent by the snow,
the roses, even the weeds!
are sick, but, Albio, you are so healthy
and bright, beautiful and neat
and you're standing in your lovely corner
in the light; and I thought (and it was as if
he were waiting for someone
or something), I thought: they're all sick
in some way or other, there isn't one without
something, and it was up to me to cure them,
that's right, give them poisons, prune their
branches, and instead I haven't done a thing,
and before long I'll have to leave home too
and all this, the pair of little cypresses
and Antenor the first to bloom in the
apple grove, and the fig and pine trees, both dead,
and the roses and the weeds growing
without respite and the garden of the one I love,
all will I have to leave, all, and
Albio, you are so lovely, oh why,
why are you so healthy and lovely, Albio?
Who for? I thought, who for?... and I could almost
hear his quiet breath and already I was
chasing a crooked shadow away and
a sparkle in the light and already I wanted to
see him no more, and down the street I returned
and I knew not your glory, no,
I knew it not, I knew nothing at all,
and my eyes were filling with tears.

(from *Fraterno*, 1987)

A luminous dawn was arriving at the windowpanes

A luminous dawn was arriving at the windowpanes
I'd woken up, I know not how
but as if I were still asleep

or as if no passage had taken place,
I saw the dawn on the glass, and it seemed to me,
now as I look back on it in my memory,
seeing my boyhood room
with its desk, its books
and its white window curtains,
it seemed to me that it turned,
as if suspended, that it went off
without stopping in the wind...
But I still see the room, there's light,
the birdsong outside is astounding,
and the metal net of the roses
and Marsilio's vegetable garden, and in what tree
the little birds? Now awakened
in the pale light, in what tree are they?
On what branches do they hop? The light
I see, them I hear, but I see them not.
And the dawn goes off with the wind, the room recedes
into bluer and deeper space...
And you see them one by one and take them
in your luminous, golden hands.

(from *La mia casa*, 1994)

Walking along your way

Walking along your way,
path, or maybe it's you walking inside me,
maybe you are the creature
and I a road, a way.
Because, how whole you are,
how well made you are, and shapely
in all your parts.
And when I meet you, you seem alive to me
for you come to meet me, happy,
or when the rain is beating down, and you stand motionless
as the cows, without seeking shelter,
already the water is chattering
and you become a stream.

(from *La mia casa*, 1994)

Sweet little duckling

Sweet little duckling
it's night now, you've fallen asleep,

you've lain down in water or on land close to shore, I know not which,
maybe hidden in the rushes, in the dry leaves.
You've closed your eyes, you little darling,
you saw the evening come,
the rosy twilight and then the dark,
a gust of wind blew up, did you feel it?
and lo and behold everything turned black,
you felt the stones, tepid by the shore,
you were afraid of something, I don't know what,
but then you played with a leaf,
you tried to sink it in the water with your beak.
The hands of my love were far from your feathers,
my love could not see you, she was unable to kiss you,
but a sweet slumber came over your eyes
and you fell asleep,
in water or on land close to shore, I know not which.

(from *La mia casa*, 1994)

How lovely that this time

How lovely that this time
is like all other times,
that I write poems
the way poems have always been written,
that this cat before me is washing herself
and her time is passing
despite the fact she's alone, almost always alone in the house,
yet she does all that she does and forgets nothing
-- now for instance she is lying down and looking around --
and her time is passing.
How lovely that this time, like every time, will end,
how lovely that we are not eternal,
that we are not different
from anyone else who has lived and died,
who has calmly gone to death
as if on a path that seemed hard and steep at first,
but instead was easy.

(from *La mia casa*, 1994)

What is your name?

What is your name?
What is your name.
What is the name of that little bird

that has just landed on the sidewalk
and is pecking at the ground?
And now at school, while the girls are writing,
I look on the class list at their names,
names I hadn't seen yet.
And for a few, they seem strange,
as if things apart from them,
and I think: Girls, I would have given you other names,
but I don't utter these words.
And I look at their unrestrained joy,
like a dazzling waterfall
scattering through time,
like seeds separating
and then all of them coming together again.

(from *La mia casa*, 1994)

Biography

Claudio Damiani was born in San Giovanni Rotondo in the province of Foggia in 1957, though at an early age he moved to Rome, where he still lives. In the first half of the '80s he was among the founders of the magazine *Braci*. His first volume of poetry, *Fraterno* (1987), and the following, *La mia casa* (1994), have been collected in *La miniera* (Fazi, 1997), the title taken from the new section that closes the book. Other volumes of poetry are *Eroi* (Fazi, 2000), *Attorno al fuoco* (Avagliano, 2006), *Sognando Li Po* (Marietti, 2008) and *Poesie* (Fazi, 2010). A passionate scholar of poetry, especially the poetic works of Horace, he has also written *Il rapimento di Proserpina* for the theatre.

"The reference to a defined and circumscribed place in which alone his poems seem to find the intimacy and emotional stability necessary to their existence is characteristic of Damiani. But if the Horatian scenes of Sabina (the Bandusian spring, Lake Fraterno, a house, a few trees and animals) refer to a type of modern Arcadia, their specific quality is above all to approach a voice that is internal and literally poetic, refund and guarded like an unexpected and precious gift. Between the poet and the presences of his chosen place, which are, not coincidentally, anthropomorphic figures, a type of loving dialogue develops, without hierarchy, which only friendship and mutual solicitude can justify and guarantee. This leads to an extreme simplification of expression, distancing the poetical discourse from any kind of intellectual or reflective complexity, as well as from literary references. The result is a simple language, playing on child-like innocence and surprise, underlining the authenticity of the few, but vital, feelings and situations".

(Roberto Galaverni, *Contemporary Italian Poets, Modern Poetry in translation no. 15, 1999*)

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"He is a poet of very exclusive places, following in Saba's footsteps, that third way, after the grand style and the avant-garde, which in the second half of the twentieth century was at the center of scholarly dialectics. Gargano's native poet at the beginning of his career struck readers with his sense of privacy in the way he presented his verses, without any detachment between writing verse

and being, between the world of the territory and the representation of man in a solid, durable cohesion.

Damiani is the poet of enchantment and youthful authenticity, at an age pure and uncontaminated. The immaculate grace of the author is efficacious as is the grace of loving fed by nature and inanimate things: trees, nuts, gardens, cats.

In Damiani's work there are no privileges and no hierarchies: man, things and spaces are under the same light. The poet seems to consume itself over that which does not speak but feel life through its own existence ("How lovely that this time / is like all the other times, / that I write poems / as they have always been written, - / that cat in front of me is cleaning itself / and passes its time..."):

Melancholy feeds thoughts, hope, affections: all begins with infancy and is protracted. It's the age that determines life, the first years, when the soul is shaped like the body's features. Claudio

Damiani is one of the very few Italian poets who can create clear atmosphere and charming prayers in a Franciscan speech between scents and scenery".

(Alessandro Moscè, New Italian Poetry, An Anthology, Gradiva Publications – Stony Brook, New York, 2007)