

January - March 2025

Melassa

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Melassa is... a product of the last two centuries, but it acts like it is timeless. Melassa is a place that feels like home and the most remote location at the same time. It's an impenetrable fluid wall that keeps you warm and comfortable enough for you not to question your forced presence in it. Its thickness makes your every movement painfully slow. Immersed in it, you run like in your dreams. A different temporality reigns in Melassa: everything around you seems to have always been there, lacking any preserved origin. Melassa is a village where people speak with an accent that not many strangers can place. It sounds, for example, generically "northern," but "I couldn't tell you exactly from where". Around Melassa you could find places with thick, evident accents, and cities in which a certain cadence resonates. But no such language is available to you here. Melassa's culture has been carefully constructed like a homogenous compound, but it's actually made up of many distant elements: some genuinely native, and many brought by globalization, in a confusing amalgamation of pagan, Roman, and Catholic rites, beliefs, and mores. The Melassa we come from might not be the same Melassa you come from, and yet, it can feel so familiar, so like home. Italian identity is entangled in our local Melassa in such an artificial way that its performativeness is almost palpable. It looks like a mask, or thick make-up slathered on a vacant gaze. Melassa is a blob. Can anyone feel like they belong to a blob? Melassa is molasses. It's a polluted lake in whose depths you burrow. Depending on how wide you go in considering the area, you could end up including completely different ecosystems and landscapes, all confusingly grouped under the same geographical name. Valleys, mountains, lakes, towns, villages. Melassa is the name of one of these villages too, perhaps. It's a province, and that's an important denomination. It means it's periphery, and that it had to be conceived as "Italy" from a specific moment forward (the Unification of 1861). Even when it wasn't and even if in certain ways it still isn't. It's identity is shifting and incorporating or refusing propositions at will. Its vagueness breeds a pretend universality that conceals a specific, exclusive, and exclusionary way of being: what we could call the white-male-Western-Christian-cis-ethero-patriarcal-"Italian" way of being. This sometimes does collide with "real" traditions, creating a dissonance from which it's hard to free yourself. Melassa's relative calm, if you are privileged enough, deludes you. Can you spot the authentically traditional aspects of the culture you are immersed in? Can you form your identity? You are part of one of the many generations that inhabited this area: what reached you? What did you inherit? A fluid, weird identity that seems to communally agree on attaching itself to whatever seems popular, to what is mandated by whoever in power. You can stay and try to change it or move away from it, hoping its stickiness allows you to. Do you come from Melassa too?

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MARCH

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FEBRUARY

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JANUARY

Rites

The snow brushing her ankles stings, like a multitude of tiny frozen needles. She accelerates her pace, trying to close the distance from the cozy fireplace of her own home. The air is colder now than when she got to the woman's house that morning. She was excited then, to have been invited to witness the strange ritual. Some of the women in the village decided that the "fisica", a sort of exorcism, was needed to help a young woman afflicted by some mysterious ailment. Not that she believed it was real. She always thought it sounded like a fantastical, deluded attempt, probably guided by grief rather than faith. Certainly, it is not something the village priest would have approved of. Fisica was far from a Mass; it was closer to one of those die-hard rites performed long before any priest had set foot in the area. Long before any of the many churches and tiny chapels - which seem to pop to life like mushrooms through the meadows - were built by the women and men shouldering rocks and mortar in their pack baskets. Sometimes during the strange practice, they made her feel like she wasn't welcome anymore. They accused her of compromising the ritual. They were afraid that her palpable skepticism would weaken its efficacy. Politely but firmly, they had pushed her out into the bitter, pungent mountain climate. "We don't know what it is about you that makes it harder than usual... Nothing personal, but maybe you should leave? We'll let you know how it goes. I'm sure you're glad you can go home and have dinner ready on time, no? In this cold, wouldn't you rather be sitting by your fireplace?". Maybe. But she is still curious about the rite, the poor girl's moans, the mysterious phrases mumbled in the candlelight, and, above all, her inadequacy. What was so disturbing about her doubts? Gaining speed while briskly walking down the hill and through the village, she can't help but look forward to the upcoming Mass at church.



It's time for...



Carcavegia is the event you don't want to miss this season! It's a custom of very ancient origins, perhaps of Celtic origin. It has mysterious meanings and it is celebrated in Premosello Chiovenda, Colloro, and other villages in Val d'Ossola (in Eastern Piedmont, almost Lombardy, not quite Switzerland). According to tradition, the village boys gather three days in advance, guided by their leader brandishing a horn. Each boy has a cowbell of a particular type and size, called *ciòcc*, fastened to his waist. They ring the cow bells in the streets and go from house to house asking for wood to feed the fire. A great pyre is then made, on which two puppets with human features (*al vècc* and *la vegia* - the old man and the old woman) stand tall, to be ultimately set on fire on the evening of January 5, the eve of Epiphany. The puppets carry two signs with the names and the year of birth of the two oldest inhabitants in the village, as a wish for a long life. Rituals involving fire in these transitional times are far from unusual but the longevity of this practice in this area is curious and puzzling.



DID YOU KNOW?

Melassa has a depth to it. With its tricks it misleads you into believing that all you see is all there is, that appearances correspond to reality, that "as above so below". But that's not quite the whole truth. In the belly of this land flows a highly priced material that for a very long time has justified its gutting. Marble, granite, and gneiss have been harvested for the most diverse purposes, leaving barren layers of raw rock behind. The Duomo of Milan was partially made with materials coming from the caves of these mountains, which are still used today by many international sculptors. When tourists photograph it, what they are taking a snapshot of is the terrain on which our ancestors walked. What is left, the gnawed quarries, are as famous as what has been extracted. They are the - quite literal - theater of musical experiences, shows, and performances, all collected in a world-renowned festival taking place every summer. You most likely have been witness, in one way or another, to the very insides of our land, spread out in the open, with no name or stated provenance. When Melassa goes global, it is not any less indecipherable.

Ingredients

- Stale bread left to soak in (more or less 500ml of) milk
- Pine nuts
- 200g of sugar
- A pinch of salt
- Cocoa powder
- 2 eggs
- Sultanas in liqueur
- Seasonal fruit
- Butter flakes and breadcrumbs



a recipe from grandma's pantry

Torta del pane, or bread cake, is one of the most common desserts in the Eastern half of Piedmont, in particular, the areas that border Switzerland. It's made by soaking stale bread in milk for at least one night and adding a few ingredients. It's hardly a recipe and more of the result of putting together what you had lying around your pantry as a poor peasant around the XVIII-XIX century.

As a diligent housewife of one or two hundred years ago, you would take the stale bread that you had left soaked in milk (that you had milked yourself, or maybe traded with your farmer neighbor) for hours, add sultanas (which could also have soaked beforehand, this time in liquor, maybe grappa), two eggs (from your own hens, of course), cocoa powder (although if you could afford it you would probably make another dessert altogether), pine nuts, sugar (expensive, you'd be parsimonious), a bit of salt, and dried or fresh fruit, depending on the season. Maybe in times of prosperity, and absolutely not during Lent, you could have added some chocolate chips. Before baking in the oven (a compartment of your constantly roaring stove, not a separate appliance, you're not wasteful, and every degree above 0 counts during winter) you would add a couple of curls of butter and some breadcrumbs for the crunch. Smelling the cake and checking on it every now and then while it turns deliciously brown, you would be proud of your dessert and of your resourcefulness.