

Melassa



Look at you! Melassa is constant and is all around you. Somehow you are always in its center. A diffused center. There is no capital in Melassa. All towns look alike, they are all equal and pretty much the same, just as charming, just as quaint—like the daughters of an insecure king. That’s why they couldn’t settle. They had to use an acronym to make them all happy. V.C.O. Verbano-Cusio-Ossola. It looks, well... silly. It looks like an intelligence agency. It does have many eyes, and a worrying wish for control. Sometimes even a partiality to firearms. All of its corners look like its center. The lakes, the mountains, the woods. They look like decorations waiting for the model train to brush past them. Whoever decided their positioning was a fan of symmetry, monotony, repetition. Melassa looks still. It gently swindles, coagulating and dissolving at its borders, but keeping itself firm, maybe a bit jiggly. Stuck in a wobbly immobility. It looks like gelatin forgotten inside a tupperware container. The traditions they so fervently remind themselves of, they serve a purpose. They are the binding agent of this viscous substance. You know what to do because you do as your grandma did. You look like your grandma because you do like your grandma. No part of you is left un-looked at. She revealed it all to them a long time ago, before you were born. Before your mother was born. They looked at the body and hands and face that looked like yours. They already saw it all. They know what they do. You know what to do. Melassa looks like you. It looks like the oldest parts of you. Your tissues renew themselves periodically—you are not the same body you were seven years ago—but Melassa’s tissues, they don’t change. They have never been anything else. Isn’t that reassuring? Are you not soothed by the static? The lulling buzz of insects in your television set? Look at it, let it look at you. I think it’s starting to look up.

DECEMBER

NOVEMBER

OCTOBER

Labouring under delusion

Why is it acknowledged, told, repeated, accepted with such nonchalant-ness? When his grandson asked her “What do you mean a monkey used to work in one of the mills?” she simply answered “She was a proper hard worker. Things ran pretty well while she worked there” No trace of irony, no doubt, no hesitation. It’s not easy to find information about the monkey: where it came from, who brought her to the mill—that’s how factories are called in the Valley, even now that all the machinery is electrically operated. Just another one of the absolute truths seemingly appearing from the void in between the mountains. A valley is a lack of mountains—and in this absence there is enough boredom to construct the most improbable tales. That’s why a monkey working in a mill—moving boxes, hammering nails, fixing broken tools—will never be out of place in a place like this. The story is not a secret because it doesn’t need to be. No one would be blamed nor judged for bringing a monkey in the Valley and employing her in their place of work. Nobody seems to be concerned with the ethical repercussions of such a choice. And maybe we shouldn’t marvel too much at the apathy surrounding the topic. After all, she wouldn’t be the first monkey to work for their meals. We know of a Chacma baboon named Jack being the assistant to James Wide, a disabled railway signalman in XIX century South Africa. What is still surprising, though, is her origin. There are no monkeys anywhere near the Valley. She had to be born far away, the closest might be a zoo travelling through the province, though that’s already a far-fetched hypothesis no one seems to confirm nor deny. Things settle and become the norm with a supersonic ease in these places. Everything is revealed with a bored stupor. “How come you don’t know who that house belongs to?... Yes, of course the monkey slept in the mill.... The market is only open on Thursdays, as it always has been...” The moment something happens, that’s when the new reality sets in. You must accept it and speak about it only if strictly necessary, and absolutely not to question or wonder. Only to transmit. To make sure your words accompany it through its existence and inevitability. Words to confirm, celebrate, justify. This is how language is used in the Valley.



It's time for...

Looking up to the side of the mountain at night, when the chill sits on the leaves of the chestnuts and the fog won't let your gaze through, you might spot it. The plague that ravaged our villages in the 17th century, or the much more recent Spanish flu. Who knows what time these echoes belong to? All we know is that, if you are lucky—or lost in the right direction—you just might spot it. Crossing the Luetto bridge, coming in and out of darkness, not held nor hanging, just floating. A light, maybe a small candle, coming and going where the lazzaretto used to be. They say it is what is left of the nurses taking the ill to isolation. Candles, it seems, are a favorite of ghosts. A man was coming home from the woods when darkness started to creep up on him. Seeing a procession approaching, he decided to borrow a candle from one of the faithful. The next day, looking for the candle in his pocket, he found a severed finger in its place. On November 2nd, la festa dei morti, we remember our dear departed. And sometimes we wonder if they are really gone.

DID YOU KNOW?

If you happen upon a wooden Pinocchio in some toy shop, turn it around and inspect the label. Wherever you are, I can guarantee you that you'll find that it was made in Valle Strona, in the Italian Alps. Pinocchio Piana makes them all. Collodi himself, the author who invented Pinocchio, wasn't from there. He was a Tuscan man who might have been in the province once, maybe on holiday. There is no connection to the Valley, but for some reason—sometime in the last century—many of the artisans specializing in wood started sculpting large volumes of Pinochios to be exported globally. There is no connection between Pinocchio and the valley, if not the unusual concentration of Geppetti in the area. Carlo Collodi's estate seems pleased with the connection and even issues certificates of authenticity through the National Foundation Carlo Collodi. But what does that even mean? Isn't it just a way to make money with wood? Why does it feel dishonest? Why does it irk me this way? It is one the few reliable sources of income for the artisans and the community. But isn't this Pinocchio even less of a real boy?



a recipe from grandma's pantry



Ingredients

- 150 gr of chestnut flour
- 150 gr of breadcrumbs
- 1 kg of potatoes
- 60 gr of yellow pumpkin
- 2 egg yolks
- 300 gr of wheat flour

For the sauce:

- 50 gr of mountain cheese
- 20 gr of butter
- pepper, and salt to taste
- sage leaves

In Ossola chestnuts were used for everything since forever ago. They ground them into flour to make bread, they used the wood for furniture and the leaves for pallets, they fed them to farm animals. They even used them to make gnocchi, mixing them with mashed potatoes. There wasn't much else in the mountains, especially in winter. These trees and fruits were easy to find and harvest, making the chestnut a practically symbiotic plant for the people of Ossola. And then in 1984 gnocchi ossolani became a famous dish thanks to a chef working in Milan. Milan is where things become important. They added cheese and butter and sage and pumpkin, even out of season. The old recipe called for far less—and costed a tenth of its price. Chestnuts are prickly and uncomfortable, even their leaves are only partially tolerable. The most treasured and indispensable of the gifts of nature in this special place is itself a nuisance. Have you ever opened a bur with your feet? To reveal at times plump, shiny nuggets, or (just as frequently) disappointing rotten husks. I did it many times when I was little, and then more and more rarely. To me it is literally child's play, not something I ever do as an adult. When you turn around and open your next bur, I hope you'll find two fat fruits, the ones that haven't become concave to accommodate each other.