

Silvia Ballestra

## The New Season

Translated by Stanley Luczkiw

The summer my cousins sold the land was a particularly dry summer. It was the year with the least rainfall in the last two centuries.

To make up for it, in July there was a terrible hailstorm on the coast. A couple of towns in the southern part of the Marche got barraged by ice stones as big as lemons. The beach, after that fury had passed through, was whitewashed like not even at Christmas. All the shutters in the windows facing north looked like they had been strafed by machine-gun fire. Facades of houses had to be redone, roofs and hoods of cars dented with little craters, leaves torn lengthwise, ripped curtains, shattered window panes. It lasted a short time but it was astounding, and afterwards, inhabitants and tourists wandered around the streets as if they had been scourged, smacked around by the sky. Months earlier, other exceptional events had wounded those places. Strong earthquakes hit inland causing hundreds of victims and terrible damage to dozens of villages. It happened in August, then again in October, then in January.

With the winter earthquakes a severe blizzard had also hit, which caused a large avalanche: tons of ice and stones and trees and snow hit an Abruzzo hotel, burying it and killing twenty-nine people.

That part of Italy, the center of the country that many indicated with images such as the heart, or the spine, and therefore not only a central and internal place but also an undeniably strong and vital nucleus, capable of watering and giving relief to everything else, was under shock ever since that August night of the previous year. And it struggled to recover.

It was as if those places, which had always been softly domestic, welcoming and benign, had turned dark and harsh. Places gone bad. Unpredictable. Sybilline, like the name of one of their mountain ranges.

The quiet hills moved. In the mountains, the normally passable gorges collapsed. The beautiful town squares turned hostile. The beloved villages seemed to want to get rid of the inhabitants, to empty themselves. The ancient stone houses, perhaps softened by beautiful lines and decorations, shrugged off their walls and roofs and balconies, having had the foresight to drive everyone away with a warning tremor that had prevented other casualties.

The earth bucked.

It had always bucked, over the centuries, but not for a while in that brutal and frightening manner. The oldest had been taken away, some families and certain tenacious young people tried to resist, but many had moved elsewhere, driven off by the collapses and continuous tension from the tremors that wouldn't stop, even though by now they rumbled at a low intensity, a subdued growl.

Not too far from those places, by pure coincidence, it was during those very months that my cousins Olga and Nadia Gentili severed themselves from the lands their family had owned more or less since after the unification of Italy. Unlike those who saw the world collapsing on them, with that sale they put an end to a minor story forever and took leave of a remote past and family places, *by choice*. Or at least that's what they thought.

It was a strange summer. Hanging in the air, just passing by.

I happened to accompany them on a couple of occasions (going to the technical office of the Municipality of Altodono, a foray looking for a wood chipper in Servino), and we took the opportunity to enter and leave the churches, walk around the streets, admire the walls of villages as if we were seeing them for the first time. After what had happened, a new affection bound us to those places. A desire to care, protect and know.

Because, Olga had told me among other things, she hadn't lived there for a long time, it was true: she damned those places, often cursed them, but she had never loved them like in those terrible months.

Those places caused her worry, aroused thoughts and sometimes even sorrows, but she couldn't do without them.

And she, who came from a family of landowners – figures who dated back to a past they had freed themselves of in a gradual and bloodless way, unlike elsewhere, and not long ago – suddenly had to deal not only with the

materiality of her possessions, but also with the memories of her childhood, with the lives of so many people who had worked together for a long time, and with the alternation of the seasons, some florid others less, some denser than others, people who had ruled those places like a kingdom. But who did those places belong to? Those who took care of them or those who were born and raised there?

In the moment when Olga, her sister Nadia and her mother Liliana had to take a step back, entrusting to others what had been their ancient heritage, all the efforts and human smallness of the events on that land came back to mind in the form of a bequest and legacy, a submerged and common history coming out into the open.