

however, it may have played out more successfully over 48, as I found its layout slightly cramped, the effect of which was to make its information-rich sections feel occasionally overlaid. Of course, the economies of the small press are such that white space, generous margins and ample guttering come at a premium: however, as illustrated text it would have benefited from a more spacious layout.

The journey shifts, back and forth through time: literally from dusk, when the traveller first enters the wood, till dawn, when he emerges into a 'final scene' that blurs between vision, reality and waking dream yet 'looks for all the world like Cambridge, limes in leaf in the colleges, along the backs and in fenny corners blackthorn (or may?) flowering, the air full of pollen'. The modern moment is interrupted by Ferrar, whose final apparition is followed by a closing dialogue between a silver birch and a yew, who remind us, as does the journey itself, that time (and trees) are not always linear:

'Forwards and backwards are the same', says Yew, 'He's yet to realise that's the case.'

## FEDERICO ITALIANO

### *Body of Water*

#### I *The Sweep of Rice*

In the paddies, when  
the sweep of rice  
in late July seems made of emerald,  
  
the black-billed egrets again  
ask the same, unanswerable question  
to the person watching from the train  
  
who's been away for a week,  
a few hours or all his life, and confuses  
what rises with what glides  
  
—while on snow white wings  
they move from bank  
to bank, over their fresh-water  
  
holdings, necks forming a Z,  
heads drawn back into their shoulders,  
a question mark on the screen

## Poetry Birmingham

of dusk—: *you, where are you going,*  
*now that even the last black locusts are burning,*  
*now that everything is being consumed?*

### II *Small Net*

We hunted frogs  
in the labyrinth of the banks  
with the drone of the highway as a compass.

A small fishing net in one hand,  
in the other a flashlight  
pointed at the margins

of the rice paddy, near the road,  
at the weir downstream that lets water  
flow from one chamber into the next.

All at once, you would see them hop out,  
croaking, tens of them,  
unaware, intoxicated

by the light breaking into the green  
shadows of the culms, inside the black  
swarming of mosquitoes.

At times, on the opposite bank  
you could make out the slender silhouette  
of a little egret

the long tuft of a lapwing,  
or the tail-coat of a night heron.  
Less common then to come upon

the grey heron, majestic,  
haughty, its beak turned always  
beyond your world, perhaps

offended by the mud on your hands,  
your reddened knees, by the rubber  
boots and the horsefly weals

## Poetry Birmingham

swelling like buboes,  
until you pulled up the net, full  
of green stirring—and for a moment

you hoped he would look on you as a peer,  
his equal, from hunter to hunter,  
but he was already flying,

silently, in the last glow  
of the day, towards the tributes of another  
body of water, another submerged kingdom.

### III *Egrets*

A clear, blue, athletic morning  
in the emerald reaches  
of their watery reign.

A fleet of dragonflies, helicopters  
in miniature, were escorting us  
when two baby hares

jumped out of the furthest field  
of corn, on a secret mission  
between couch grass and elderberries

between the reeds and the ferns,  
along the grassy banks  
of rice. From the light pole

a kite swooped down  
behind them and with wings  
that seemed to sound out *oof*

an entire colony of egrets  
flew to the other side of the water  
just above our heads.

Translated from Italian into English by Brenda Porster.

## NATURE'S TEXTURES

Brenda Porster on *Federico Italiano's blending of the human and non-human*

---

AMONG THE MOST ORIGINAL and surprising voices in Italian poetry in the last twenty years, Federico Italiano (Novara, 1976) is a poet constantly engaged with the environment that surrounds him, the toxic waste our species has disseminated over our planet and our collective memory, the traces we leave behind, signs of life and of resilience, of love but also of consumption, violence and death. This ecological tension, already present in Italiano's preceding collections, *L'invasione dei granchi giganti* (Marietti, 2010) and *L'impronta* (Aragno, 2014), forcefully returns in his new book, *Habitat* (Elliot, 2020).

And this is the humus that nourishes the poem 'Body of Water', born of a constantly deepening reflection on the ecological dimension of existence, on the concept of home (underlying the idea of eco-logy is that of inhabiting, of home, from the Greek *oikos*, 'house'), on the extremely fragile co-existence of human with non-human, of organic with inorganic.

The bodies of water we find in Federico's poetry are first of all the rice fields of eastern Piedmont, which cross the Lomellina region and the towns of Vercelli and Novara, the poet's childhood places. These rice fields, made famous by the 1949 neo-realist film *Bitter Rice*, represent an emblematic cultural landscape in northern Italy. It is a landscape still alive and recognizable today, though little known to the tourists who speed by without taking notice, more interested as they are in the spectacular beauties all around it—the Alps, the hills of Monferrato—and in the art towns. It is a landscape like few others, marked horizontally by human intervention in the form of a geometrical subdivision of the plots of land, a complicated catchment system that permits the immersion of the rice paddies, the rows of trees lining the embankments.

Bodies of water are also the wild birds, the herons, the little egrets, the sacred ibises, as well as all the rare, timid little creatures that dwell in these divided waters, these water squares, negotiating their very existence. But a body of water is also the lyric 'I' itself, immersed in the fluidity of memory, an aquatic being like the others in the materiality of childhood memory.

As the critic Riccardo Donati has written, with 'Body of Water' Federico designs a 'cartography of the emotions' that maps the strategies of survival and resistance of the living, even in their weakest and most easily ignored forms. But perhaps what makes this poetry so fascinating and necessary is not as much its post-Romantic, eco-poetic bent, its clearly 'environmental' nature: rather, its singularity is found in the capacity to create a texture of non-anthropocentric sound and image, where the human blends into the non-human, and the lyric 'I' does not dominate but merges with its habitat to become part of a vaster, irreducible ecosystem.