

chapter the sixth

*In which, because of his hatred for plastic,
and his love for ecology,
the life of Augustus the Second
enters yet more dire straits.*

Thrush and redwing, blackbirds and finches, ravens and starlings, bunting, skylarks, wagtails and pipits, tree-creepers and Bohemian waxwings, grackles and magpies, titmice and shrike, flycatchers, whitethroats, swallows and wrens and alpine accentors, wheatear and robins, all passerines and sprightly singers of songs, continued to gladden the days of Augustus the Second. His nights, on the other hand, were gladdened by his spouse, or better, by her body, since she, understood as a sentient and reasoning entity, did not participate in her husband's banquets of the senses. "You're a lurid, disgusting pig," she sometimes said to him.

"Yes, yes," he answered, happy as could be.

"If you don't stop I'm going to vomit."

"Yes, yes." In his masochistic fervor, it seemed to him that everything was going just fine.

And she took offence. She denied him her breast, or her tummy, or some other part of herself that in that moment was exciting his oral cupidity.

"Let me go on," he implored her.

And she, "Why don't you put the factory in my name?" Or, "Why don't you appoint my brother as vice-president?"

“Never.”

“We’ll see. He conquers who endures.”

“I’ll be the one who endures.”

She never granted him a mutual orgasm. Sooner or later, however, he got to where he wanted to go, then he slid over to his side of the bed and, falling back effortlessly into his little boy self, drifted off to sleep listening to hoopoes and owls, and naturally, to sublime nightingales.

She, who slept during the day, had trouble getting to sleep at night, and since she took no pleasure in birdsongs, she kept her mind occupied with hate. But she was also prone to fear of God and she prayed to the Lord not to induce her into the temptation of killing her husband.

By way of compensation, however, she cheated on him, with her personal physician Doctor Colbiati, and with the mayor, Attorney Matiussi, and not only because she thought it wise to keep those powerful men on her side, but because she instinctively felt that that was another way to elevate her position on the social scale.

Bookkeeper Cusetti, on the other hand, she kept on the back burner. She never lost a chance, with sultry looks and moves, to make him fall even harder for her, but she gave him nothing, or almost nothing, convinced that it was a good way to stimulate his efficiency.

And indeed it worked. What she wanted from him was not only a detailed account of what went on in Administration, but also a plan for the expansion of the factory and constant psychological pressure on the boss, as a complement to the pressure that she herself applied in other settings, since that fathead wouldn’t let her set foot in the factory.

For his part, Bookkeeper Cusetti was utterly convinced that it was a fool’s errand to keep on making buttons out of bone and mother-of-pearl, as in the nineteenth century, when in this day and age plastic was everywhere. “Plastic buttons, that’s where the money is,” he told the boss.

“No plastic. Humanity is going to die buried under a mountain of plastic,” Augustus the Second declared.

“So then,” Cusetti cleverly insisted, “why don’t we change our whole operation? Anything would earn more than buttons, even wheelbarrows. Look at Carlo Vigeva”

Carlo Vigeva was the one name the boss could not abide. “Nobody dare mention that name around here!” he shouted, and furiously rushed out to the gardens to console himself with the passerines.

“Utterly mad!” Cusetti commented, honestly unable to understand the reason for such fury, because Signora Palmira hadn’t let him in on all her secrets.

“You’re the one who’s mad!” Signorina Rosa scolded him. “A man who respects tradition and venerates his grandfather is not mad, but wise.”

“I bet he finds money revolting.”

“Because he obeys the Lord’s commandments.”

Bookkeeper Cusetti hadn’t the least desire to get involved in a theological debate with that senile old lady and he went into the kitchen, to Signora Palmira, to ask her for a glass of cold water. “He’ll never give in,” he said, devouring her with his eyes.

“He’ll give in, alright,” she replied, more out of anger than conviction. She didn’t leave any openings, however, for the desires of the bookkeeper, who, his glass now empty, sighed and headed for the door. That woman drove him wild, and he would gladly have thrown himself into the fire for her, but he would even more gladly have thrown himself on top of her to make love, and his heart told him that it would happen, but when, when?

But when, but when, was what Signora Palmira was asking herself as well, as she went over to the window to watch her husband talking to the birds. He was harmless, everybody said, but he was harming her. And that child who instead of Patrizio was named Giuseppe was crying in the other room, and she couldn’t bring herself to love him much, him having been the cause and the instrument of that marriage that had given her such little satisfaction up to now. Anyway, she was going to keep fighting until she won.

One night at bedtime, she was sitting on the side of the bed, and Augustus the Second, already

overcome with lust and kneeling in front of her, was taking off her shoes. She chewed her gum, in meditation. After her shoes, he took off her stockings, and started kissing her feet, ravenously.

"I cheated on you today," she announced.

"Oh yeah," he said, without letting himself be distracted.

"I betrayed you with the mayor," she specified.

This time he didn't even utter the laconic oh yeah, and she took offense. "Stop licking my feet. Besides, they're dirty. Listen to me," she said sharply.

Reluctantly, he took his lips off her feet and tilted his head to listen.

"I don't like getting fucked by the mayor," she said.

"Why did you do it?"

"For you," she declared. "You don't deserve it, but I did it for you."

"Thank you," he said, and she took offence again.

"Who do you think you are?" she shouted. "Sure, you're the owner of the factory, but I don't work there anymore. I'm an owner too." She calmed down a little, and continued. "I went to bed with the mayor because if I didn't, the Christian Democrats would have expropriated your gardens, They were going to approve an amendment to the zoning plan and make them into a public park.

"The mayor is a Christian Democrat too," Augustus the Second pointed out.

"But, in order to have me, he voted with the opposition, and now the gardens are an industrial zone." Signora Palmira seemed very happy about that, and finished her thought like this, "Industrial zone means it's worth millions. Since it's all my doing, now I'm the one who decides what to do with it."

“What to do with it?” asked Augustus the Second, flabbergasted.

“Don’t ask me questions with that dumb look on your face,” she reprimanded him. “There are two alternatives: either sell the gardens and use the money to renovate the factory to make plastic buttons, plastic belt buckles, maybe even plastic tubs, like Montedison . . .”

“That I’ll never do!” Augustus the Second couldn’t contain himself from screaming.

“Or,” she went on, paying no heed to the interruption, even though it had annoyed her, “or we sell the gardens and use the money to buy an apartment in a skyscraper in Piazza della Repubblica in Milan, and we move there to live the life of the rich.”

“I’ll never do that either,” Augustus the Second said.

He said it firmly but not aggressively, and he was already calmly preparing to go back to kissing her feet, but this time she wouldn’t have it. “The gardens are yours and you won’t sell them. But my body is mine and for you it’s now off limits. I’m not going to let you touch me ever again, not even a finger.”

She too had spoken firmly but not aggressively, and Augustus the Second realized that one phase of his life was coming to an end and another was beginning, in which his birds would be his only consolation. Without objection, he took his pillow and a blanket that was on the bed, and he started off, with a bearing that was certainly more decorous than might be expected, toward the adjacent room.

The adjacent room was the bedroom of little Giuseppe who, on his father’s entrance, woke up and started crying. Augustus the Second did not change his demeanor. He walked over to a couch-bed, arranged his pillow and blanket on it, and lay down, pulling the blanket up over his head, pretending not to hear the baby’s crying, or at least not to feel any responsibility for it, seeing as he wasn’t the one who had brought him into the world.

Translator's Note

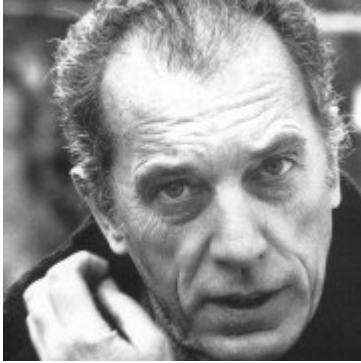
Augustus the Second Valle, the protagonist of *Oh Serafina* (1973), has become stuck in time. Ill at ease in Italy's post-war boom, he prefers the time of his grandfather Augustus Valle, founder of the family-owned button factory in the region of Lombardy. Like Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Augustus the Second feels alienated by the materialistic, cynical pursuit of self-interest shared by his mother, his wife Palmira, and his brother-in-law Romeo, the factory foreman. Augustus would rather spend his time talking to the birds in the gardens surrounding the factory. Palmira takes advantage of her husband's devotion to the birds to have him committed to the mental hospital, where he meets and is saved by the angelic if promiscuous Serafina, with whom he escapes to the idyllic farm she inherits from her mother.

In addition to their thematic similarities, *Oh Serafina!* shares with *Slaughterhouse Five* a narrative strategy and voice that exemplify what Italo Calvino identified as one of the qualities or values of literature that had a special place in his heart: lightness. In his fable for adults, Berto constructs his narrative as a parody of a fairytale, where the burdensome, painful aspects of life in economic-boom Italy are seen as they are reflected in Augustus the Second's and Serafina's innocent lunacy.

Berto's uses this backward glance at Italian culture and literature to address, lightly but presciently, a then current and still enduring problem of the developed world: its assault on the natural and agricultural environment and the threat to the spiritual and emotional ecology of human society. Augustus the Second's uncanny ability to speak with his songbird friend Leopoldo links him, of course, with Saint Francis of Assisi and makes *Oh Serafina!* an extremely timely book for the new millennium.

Gregory Conti

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Giuseppe Berto

Giuseppe Berto (1914-1978) started writing novels when he was a prisoner of war in Hereford, Texas from 1943 to 1946. He went on to write some seven novels, some plays, and many screenplays, including several based on his own novels. He won all of Italy's major literary awards, two of them in the same year for his masterpiece *Il male oscuro* (1964). All of his novels except *La gloria* (1978) and *Oh, Serafina* (1973) have also been published in English.