



*Photo credit: Alessandra Capodacqua*

The earth in the vase was shrunken and cracked, the leaves of the geranium were turning yellow. It really needed water. Federica picked up the plastic watering can and filled it under the kitchen faucet. As she was pouring the water into the vase she could hear the dry earth gurgling, making bubbles rather like when you have a drink of water after an afternoon of exercise outdoors. “It’s drinking with gusto,” she thought, and felt a sudden yen for a coke. A few ants, a woodworm and an earthworm were climbing up the edge to escape the flood, while a motionless lizard lay enjoying it on the bottom. Federica pulled back a leaf to see it better: two lateral holes, just behind the eyes, opened and closed like aquatic membranes or gills. The creature’s skin was even shinier and more iridescent than usual, with particles of green and blue floating on its back. “It’s having a bath,” and, overcoming her atavistic repulsion for reptiles, she thought how beautiful it was. While these thoughts passed through her mind, her sister’s hand grabbed the creature and lifted it high up in the air, holding it by the tail. She whirled the creature around one and a half times, enough to break off its tail. “Look.” Her sister was holding the broken tail in her fingers and Federica was afraid she would throw it in her face. Instead, she let it drop onto the gray concrete. The tail kept on moving,

making commas to the left and the right. It was horrible to watch.

Federica turned round to look for the rest of the animal. The severed body was on its stomach next to the geranium - immobile, with its reptile eyes dilated and its abdomen moving in a way that seemed human.

"Anyway, its tail will grow back," said her sister, with a shrug of the shoulders.

Federica bent down to the ground, bringing her flat palm close to the lizard. If she avoided looking at it maybe she would feel less revolted and could put it back in its house in the vase. Her sister was quicker. She reached the lizard with her foot and gave it a kick, then she picked it up, brought it close to her eyes to examine it, then disappeared into the kitchen holding it in her hand. Two minutes later she came out carrying a small, smoking pot. She lowered it to show the contents to her sister. Inside the lizard was floating, its stomach white and its legs stretched out to form a star, amputated and cooked in the boiling water.

Federica remembered the tail - where could it have got to? Moving across the concrete it might have reached the grass and maybe there it would change into a lizard again, growing a little bit every day. She looked around on the ground but the tail stump had disappeared. All of a sudden she didn't want to be outside any more. It would be better to go inside, find a cookie and watch some cartoons on TV. She saw her mother come through the kitchen door and observe her sister and the pan with the dead lizard, looking at first sad and then only angry. With a sharp movement she disarmed her sister, threw the contents of the pan onto the lawn and said, "In the house, right now, and no TV today."

Federica wondered if the tail might have gone to look for the rest of the lizard and what it would do if ever they met up. In the days that followed she looked for both of them, unsuccessfully. From her desk at school she watched the lizards lying on the windowsill, greedy for heat. Many of them did seem to have a segment of tail cut off and then grown back - there was a sort of scar at the point where it had happened, a slight irregularity in the greenish pigmentation. She hoped to be assigned the lizard as the subject of her science project but she got the horse instead. Still, she didn't protest to her teacher or her classmates. Back then she was known to be a reasonable, patient child, especially compared to her sister.

The world was in continual transformation and steady in the secluded region of childhood. Things broke, and often it was the action of humans that made them break. But Federica was confident that

they would be adjusted or find a way to grow back, like the grass on the lawn her father was always tired of mowing because it was continually growing back. Someone had had an ear cut off and later it was sent back inside a plastic bag – they’d heard about it in the TV news before dinner. In bed, in the darkness of the room they shared, Federica said she was sure it would reattach itself, but her sister didn’t agree.

“What about lizards, then?”

Her sister had given a scornful laugh, “So you really believe everything they tell you?”

Years later, Federica would frequently tell these stories to her close friends and boyfriends. She always had the impression that they explained her relationship to her sister well and, in a certain sense, her attitude towards life. Paolo, who’d been living with her for five years, knew them by heart in all possible versions.

The day the transfer of the branch of the company she worked for was announced, which meant that Federica was sure to be laid off, after trying to cheer up a colleague who was the sole support of two children she called Paolo to say she’d be home late because she had some errands to do.

Paolo’s voice on the phone was a bit uncertain, “You didn’t say anything this morning....”

“You start getting dinner ready,” Federica reassured him, knowing that the pleasure of cooking together every day after getting home from work was a cornerstone of their sentimental routine, guaranteeing the smooth functioning of their domestic life as much as sex, at least.

In point of fact, Federica had no idea where to go after she left work. When the administrator had finished his speech – the same old blend of falsehoods – she’d had a fit of giggles. The company she worked for made boxes and packaging materials. The sector had suffered a sharp decline, caused by the economic crisis and the preoccupations of environmentalists. They had to downsize. The press office where Federica worked was going to be reabsorbed. She’d had to cross and uncross her legs several times in order to fight off a nervous little laugh on the point of exploding into downright laughter in the face of the administrator, who she noticed for the first time had white-polished nails. She managed to get a grip on herself, hating him in silence and deciding it was useless trying to counterattack. It would be an unequal match: she would talk about reality, personal commitment and results achieved, possible alternative solutions, and he’d respond with rhetorical manipulations

of the same arguments, apocalyptic scenarios, things that weren't real. Every human being is reminded every day of belonging to a species that can destroy the planet or be the victim of a collective catastrophe, and despite this everyone goes on behaving as always, for better or for worse. She let him finish the speech while she thought about the mortgage on the house, about how they had no children and that under these circumstances she wasn't sure if it wasn't for the best. Anyway, loads of people lost their jobs without having done anything to deserve it. She could stay on another month, but she decided it was better to avoid a long-drawn-out agony. She went to clear out her desk, without losing her calm. Last of all the locker. It was right next to the administrator's and more than once she'd noticed words scrawled in black at the bottom — stinking faggot. An intolerable offense, she'd always thought, probably done by some vulgar, envious colleague. Well, now she had some reasons to think it was true. He deserved it.

From her locker she took out a bag she didn't even remember bringing. Inside there was a bathing suit, a bathrobe, swimming goggles and cap, a tube of after-shower lotion and one of shampoo.

Driving on the bypass that led back to the city, she listened to the radio. They were interviewing a writer who was talking about animism. He was saying that the tradition of central Africa wasn't so different, in its philosophical essence, from ancient western panpsychism or from the Renaissance anima mundi: things, places and objects, every material being was imbued with spirit and every spirit was to be respected, divinity was found everywhere, the important thing was not to lose touch. That was just what Federica thought. She felt perfectly in tune with the idea the author was explaining rather phlegmatically, at times pedantically, like a doctor showing the advantages for the health of getting exercise. Not losing touch was an old conviction of hers, a familiar and comforting thought, something soft and elastic to lean on. How had it come about that she hadn't thought about it for such a long time? Oh, she shouldn't get discouraged, she'd manage, she'd get a better job. She dug into her bag to find a bottle of water, jamming her foot on the brakes with a reflex that kept her from crashing into the back of a car. The plastic swimming goggles slid out of the backpack that had bounced onto the dashboard. She decided to go to the pool.

In the changing rooms there is a filtered bluish light, liquid shadows spread and glide down the walls, it feels like you're in an incubator. It's restful compared to the blades of light that cut the late summer afternoon outside. Federica undresses, hangs her bra on a hook and realizes almost with relief that the inside of one shoulder strap is a little greasy – dirty underwear is less of a temptation for thieves. Last time they even stole her tights. She moves towards the pool and notices on the

black graphite floor parallel tracks made by two wheels, which she follows until they finish in the puddle of chlorinated water you have to cross to get into the pool area. Federica looks behind her and then towards the pool. Two lanes are occupied by scuba divers practicing free-diving. The rest is for free swimming. In water bodies undergo an upwards thrust proportional to the weight of the mass of fluid with form and volume equal to that of the immersed part. So there are swimmers as powerful as tunas who move ten times the amount of water with a few arm strokes, but what draws Federica's attention is the small continuous wave cutting through the lane closest to the pool's edge. It looks like only the arms and trunk are moving, as if the legs were an undeveloped appendix, a minnow. Then, looking more closely, she realizes there are no legs. What emerges and disappears is a half-trunk with the limbs amputated more or less at the height of the knees. When she leans on the edge of the pool to turn round, she sees it is a woman, a young one, too.

Federica decides to let herself down into the same lane. The water sticks to her body like a sheath. As soon as she's under water she opens her eyes and feels the last small bubbles of air that were caught in the gap between her bathing suit and her skin free themselves; then she pushes forward with the first arm stroke and starts the struggle to gain oxygen. She crosses the blue liquid that smells of chlorine and flakes of epidermis, breathing every four arm strokes. Then she tries to settle into a more relaxed rhythm, but it feels as though, stung by the cold, her muscles need to free themselves, to absorb oxygen through every pore — the element they burn inside and now feel pushing on them from outside but in an elemental form, prisoner of two hydrogen molecules, useless for breathing. The struggle continues stroke after stroke. The noise of water and voices - a lifeguard, the scuba instructor - comes and goes, disappearing when her head is under water and then echoing against the high ceilings. Oh, if only she could keep her head under, always. Beside her the legless woman passes in the opposite direction, advancing with the face of a fish and the breast of a figurehead. Federica envies her constant rhythm, the pact established between the quantity of air and water that have to be exchanged every time she emerges. She remembers what she heard on the radio, but now it seems far away and unreachable — if it is so hard to let go and enter into communion with water without losing yourself, imagine with the spirit of the world.

On the tenth stroke she stops at the end of the pool to wait for her. The woman approaches like a float, smiles and asks, "Who goes first?" Federica dives back under and almost feels ashamed of catching her attention and revealing her own curiosity. While she's swimming she counts the blue tiles on the bottom, boring rectangles, one after another. The only diversion comes from the light that sifts in through the skylights high above and varies along the lane. At certain points where it is almost completely lacking the water turns dark and thick, and Federica feels she could fall asleep

and forget. But the relay with the legless woman keeps her going — she's afraid of offending her if she stops to show her wonder and admiration. She's afraid there's something mean-spirited underneath it.

Federica sees the legless swimmer pass under the floats that separate the lanes and move towards a swivel chair that rises from the water to the edge to lift her up to the wheelchair that must be hers. She would like to get out of the pool, too, but she forces herself to do one last lap. She's at the stage when her breath comes short and some endorphin has been liberated. Her nose is full of chlorine, her head is empty, and she feels a bit euphoric, the typical chemical euphoria that takes humans back to the simple animal level. With a swivel of her hips she pulls herself up onto the edge and jumps out, dripping. Walking towards the changing rooms, she both hopes and fears to see the woman again. She follows the path of the wheels on the black floor, then steps into the open showers that allow for no intimacy. The smell of chlorine mingles with the sweet scent of fruity bath foam and hair cream.

"Would you mind picking up my shampoo?"

The legless woman is sitting on a folding stool attached to the wall, holding on to the rail that runs along the wall with one hand and washing herself with the other.

Federica bends down to pick up the tube that has rolled a few yards from the seat, hands it to her and says, "You're a great swimmer."

The woman smiles, "Considering that I do nothing else, every day. And you, do you come often?" She watches her passing the bar of soap under her armpits. "I don't think we've ever seen each other before."

Federica shakes her head, "To tell the truth, I haven't come swimming for ages. But today is different. I needed to free my head, to concentrate on my body."

"And have you managed?" The question makes her feel embarrassed because, to tell the truth, in her own body she'd felt only reluctance and loss of familiarity with fatigue and satisfaction. In fact, she'd done nothing but concentrate on the other woman's body, that legless trunk propelled horizontally by the power of the arms, moving back and forth from one resting place to the other. From close-up she could see the scars where the skin had changed color and texture, scaly and severed, like lizards, but without any new growth. Federica forces herself not to look, but actually she'd like to touch them.

"I thought I had, that I'd freed myself of certain thoughts. But I don't know, now I feel more confused than ever," she says in the end. Now it's her turn to soap herself as she takes off her bathing suit with unusual modesty. The legless woman seems to be much more at her ease.

"You ought to come every day, too. It's a matter of habit and the time you dedicate to it. For me that's the way it works. Of course, you have to like swimming, and I have to admit that swimming in a pool is a bit boring."

Federica rubs the foam into her hair and answers, "Today I wouldn't even have been up to the dumb tame sea at a beach resort. At least the pool contains you."

"Let me guess - it's an affair of the heart," says the legless woman while she moves from the folding stool to her wheelchair and covers her shoulders with a terrycloth towel.

"No, it's only that I lost my job."

"I am sorry," the legless woman comments in a sincere voice.

"Actually, it's not that I was crazy about that job, a company that made boxes and packaging. I'm sure I'll find something better. The fact is that you get used to thinking according to habit - the desk you work at, the salary you get every month and that you base how much you spend on, for example. They're things you take for granted, like walking and breathing."

"Of course," agrees the legless woman, knotting her long brown hair into a braid gathered at the nape of her neck. But now Federica is struck by the enormous blunder she's just made. She wasn't wrong to be afraid of herself, she was right, sooner or later something mean and offensive would slip out. Your legs, the ground you're used to stepping on, the place you deserve in the world. And what if you haven't got it any more? She'd like to bite her tongue, but instead she keeps staring at the two reddened stumps at the extremities of the woman who is now hugging herself in the towel with sturdy, tanned arms.

The woman understands, "When I lost my legs I thought I'd lose my mind. It was the little everyday things that drove me really crazy - the clothes I couldn't wear any longer, how I'd do the shopping, how to take the children to school. And they still bother me, don't imagine it's any different. When I'm swimming, though, I manage not to think about them.

"But it's not possible to swim all day long," Federica says, a bit stupidly.

“An hour is enough for me, as soon as I can, an hour that becomes the whole day.” She looks at her watch and says, “Sorry, but I have to go now. Maybe we’ll see each other here, my name is Giovanna.”

When Federica arrives home Paolo is watching TV, the table is set and the smell of the lasagna in the oven floats out to the hallway. Federica crouches down next to him on the sofa, letting her handbag and backpack fall to the floor. He passes a hand through her hair, “You smell of chlorine. Have you been to the pool?”

“I hadn’t gone for ages.”

“Do you want to watch the news? Because I’ve had enough for today. I imagine you must be hungry, everything’s ready.”

Federica doesn’t answer right away, but she doesn’t look at the TV either. Instead, she seems absorbed in her thoughts.

Then she gets up and says, “I’m going to hang up my bathing suit in the bathroom and then I’ll be right back.”

Leaning on the edge of the tub, she thinks that this wasn’t how she’d imagined it. While she was driving home she’d decided to tell Paolo about the job first of all, but when she came in and saw everything in its place, everything all ready and welcoming, she wasn’t so certain, she couldn’t find the courage to talk about the change. It was a question of trust, saying things to one another, of course. But also to accept the fact that things got broken and there were consequences. There would be a before and an after, that was sure. Yet for the moment the time of their lives continued, intact.

Hanging up the bathing suit after rinsing it out, Federica notices that the crouch is a bit worn at the edge and she remembers Giovanna’s bathing suit, cut low at the hip and with briefs that arrived halfway down the thigh in the fashion of the fifties, a style that was quite becoming on her. Then she realized that it was Giovanna she wanted to talk to him about, this woman cut in half, a cripple who swims through the water as clear and certain as if she were moving inside her purified conscience.

Whereas she, Federica, fought and struggled, desiring at all costs to empty her heavy head but filling herself with chlorine instead, while the sense of what she was doing was lost as though her



vision was blurred in a vapor.

“What are you doing?”

Seeing that she didn't return, after serving the pasta and pouring the wine Paolo had gone into the bathroom to make sure she was well.

Naked except for her panties and undershirt, Federica was moving from the toilet to the edge of the tub with her legs straight and held high in front of her, pushing on her hands with rigid arms.

“I'm trying out how it is to move without legs.”

“What in the world has got into you?”

Federica stops for an instant, still leaning on her forearms, “We never think about the possibility that from one minute to the next everything can change. You find yourself without legs, for example, or without a job,” she stands up and puts on a pair of lightweight pajama bottoms, “then you realize that your former life, which was nothing special, really nothing out of the ordinary, was still coherent after all, there was some harmony and maybe even a sense. You understand afterwards, when something breaks, when you lose a thing you thought you had.

Federica is talking fast, as if the words inside had made her swell up out of all proportion and now she wanted to get rid of them, at the same time as she studied herself sporadically in the wall mirror.

Paolo steps back, takes a stool and sits down, “Can you please tell me what we're talking about?”

Paolo's use of the first person plural disarms her, defusing the mechanism separating her from the world that had been triggered by the administrator's speech that afternoon, “*The Company is being restructured, the press office sector will be reabsorbed by the structure of the purchasing Company. The Company has been forced by the general economic recession to take this decision. The Company thanks its employees, especially those to whom it cannot offer a future path together...*”

“I've been fired,” Federica says at last, stretching out a hand to Paolo to invite him to get up, “but let's go eat now, otherwise it'll be disgusting.”

Paolo listens and reassures her. They laugh together when Federica tells him about the note she'd found at the bottom of the locker, no doubt he is a faggot, the way he goes around with those stupid polished nails.

It's true, it's not the best time to be looking for work, but with the severance check and their savings they can get by decently for a while. Meanwhile, something will show up. Anyway, hadn't Federica always said it was an office that didn't offer much room for growth?

When she gets up from the table, Federica feels her head manipulated and readjusted, like after a shiatsu massage, so long as she avoids looking at things too closely, the sofa, the blank TV screen, the backpack on a chair, the laptop she'd left in a corner. If she pays them too much attention, things suck her in and want a name and an explanation in order to return to their everyday order, to what she's afraid she's left behind her.

"You'll see, it'll work out," she hears as she slides between the sheets.

She'd almost convinced herself of that, too, but those words reawaken her uncertainty. She twists and turns in bed without managing to fall asleep. The night is warm and breezy with the smell of jasmine floating in through the half-closed window. After massaging her hip, Paolo seems to have dropped into a deep, regular sleep. Federica thinks she'd like to go back to the pool the next day, but she doesn't know how to act towards Giovanna if she meets her again. She doesn't know why, but she feels a mixture of shame and embarrassment. She sits up in bed. Paolo turns round and switches on the bedside light. He finds her in an absurd position with her fists pushing into the mattress and her legs straight up in the air.

"There was a woman with no legs at the pool," she tells him, looking directly in front of her and holding the same position.

"I understand, but it's not that now you have to prove yourself about that, too."

"She makes swimming an hour a day be enough for her. Do you understand? She's content with that and probably with her life. I don't know if I'd be up to it."

Paolo gropes around the bedside table for his glasses, finds them and puts them on, as if they could help him understand what Federica is saying. He pulls his legs up to his chest and sighs.

"She'll have found a way to adjust."

Federica gives him look that seems to mean he hasn't understood a word of what she's just said, crosses her legs and puts her hands on her knees.

"I'd have liked to touch the scars. It's stupid, I know. Now you'll say I'm being morbid, but I'd have liked to touch them to get an idea of what was there before, of her legs."

"Maybe she would rather not think about it at all, I mean about what they were before."

"But how can an hour a day of swimming be enough for her?"

Paolo gets out of bed and opens the window. The street below is far away, dark and patterned with the roofs of parked cars.

"Can you smell the jasmine? The flowering is at its peak now, it won't last more than a week."

He leans on the balcony railing and thinks about how little room is taken up in life by things like smelling a flower, yet you remember it and think about it, sometimes your mood even changes because of things like that, for nothing. You lose your legs and everything's against you, so you swim and you survive. He wants to explain this to Federica, but he's afraid he can't, that it would sound like empty consolation.

Federica comes up to him and puts her arms around him from behind, saying softly, "If she can make it without legs, I can do it without work, too. Right?"

"Sure."

Paolo frees himself from her embrace, almost breathless. Without saying anything to Federica he takes a step back and moves towards the kitchen, "I'm going to get something to drink."

In the dark above the stovetop the refrigerator display spreads a blue sheen. Paolo thinks about the story of the lizards he'd heard Federica tell so often. Who knows if it was really true, if it had really gone that way. Maybe Federica had broken off some tails, too, but now, as an adult, it bothered her to admit it. He watches the milk flow white into the glass and wonders why other people's suffering so often becomes the measure and the limit of our own, the opaque veil that protects us from life and from ourselves.

