



On Rice, Frogs and the Subsoil of Experience

Emanuele Nicolotti, May 2022

Imagine leaving your home, your workshop or school to find the air of your hometown thickened into a dark fog emanating from underground. This is what occurred in the village of Trecate, northern Italy, when in 1994 a SARPOM oil well exploded, covering the town with crude oil for days. Emanuele Nicolotti recounts his experience of the event as a young resident, reflecting on how the explosion has come to permeate the identity of a place otherwise shaped by the quiet anonymity of rice fields and daily routines.

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There are countless documents in my Google Drive that contain just a few lines, perhaps a couple of paragraphs, nothing more. Some of the documents show a naive attempt at a title as well, as if for a moment I was fooling myself that a piece of literature is ever written starting from the beginning. These chaotic fragments that are left unfinished address apparently diverse topics, but at this point it has become impossible for me not to see in this disorder the trace, if not the extent, of my intentions. Childhood memories are likewise chaotic, fragmented, flickering as if the memory at the time of the event was still in break-in mode, rehearsing itself and its potential, while forgetting debris along the way. They're fickle too: they demand to be surprised, they require the unexpected to burst into the scene in order for them to crystallise for years to come. Some might also think that those memories are the most unreliable, but we all know that reliability isn't really a childhood goal.

It's clear to me now that these scattered and fragmented documents are the expression of the very same features of

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my memory as a child: disorder and unreliability. And somehow, now they all seem to converge by affinity into a more vast topic, which happens to be a place: my hometown. To be clear, by hometown I mean a place of the mind rather than a mere geographical location. As a matter of fact, all the geography you'll get from this is a vague point on the map – a map that if you're not familiar with, it wouldn't be a problem anyway. I'm talking about an area that lies in the North of Italy, at the border between the regions of Piedmont and Lombardy, with everything which that implies: high humidity all year around and vast rice fields that, from the peripheries, dominate the countryside; sultriness and fleets of mosquitoes during the summer; smelly bugs hiding in your trousers; and thick fog banks that appear out of nowhere, surprising you when driving home during the colder months.

When you think of my hometown, you should picture enough housing to host roughly twenty thousand people; grey paved roads with dark patches of newer asphalt that most likely end up in an odd roundabout; gloomy coffee places selling croissants from the day before; shops exhibiting tacky or out of fashion articles of clothing; teenagers speeding on their scooters in narrow streets (but where are they speeding to?); train rails overgrown with weeds and rubbish; and the parish church bell tolling every hour. This is my birthplace, Trecate, in the province of Novara,



where I spent the first twenty years of my existence; a place that unwittingly offered the backdrop to my earliest memories.

What I want to stress here is that you should not picture the stereotypical Italian town you might have seen in films and tv shows. Here it's hard to find something picturesque or remotely instagrammable. No exposed brickwork, no cattle surprising you at the side of the road, no old lady greeting you, a stranger, with a big smile from her window; no nearby lakes, no breathtaking views, and definitely no postcard-like greenery fading into hilly horizons. As a matter of fact, forget expanses of green or hills: there's none of that in this part of the Po Valley. History too seems

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to have skipped this place, as if it deliberately forgot to leave traces, like the usual fortress, a poet's birthplace, some Roman or Mediaeval ruins. Nothing of the sort. Well, actually, the parish church hosts the bones of saints Cassiano and Clemente, but we know that these sorts of relics may have little or nothing to do with history.

The town as it is known today developed around the industrial production of one company, SARPOM, an oil refinery that from the 1950s promoted substantial economic growth that led other chemical and pharmaceutical companies to settle here. The money that these companies brought into the territory – in the case of SARPOM, a staggering 260 million euros over the course of twenty years at the turn of the century – attracted workers not only from the south of the country, but from all over the Mediterranean sea. And much like the sea, they came in waves: during the 60s and 70s mostly from the southern Italian region of Calabria, and between the 80s and 90s generally from Albania. One of the most evident effects of this industrial inclination, besides the pollution levels and contamination of the subsoil that still today leaves many open questions, is the loss of the rural culture, which was the only feeble attempt of history to leave its mark.

With modernity dawning where modernity slumbered, dialect and seasonal traditions were silently devalued, regarded as almost something to be ashamed of. As a kid, I already felt that way when hearing someone speaking the local vernacular or mentioning anything related to rural life. During the time of my dad's generation, my hometown dialect became something you would use sporadically only with family and close friends, mainly because secrets, gossip, and jokes don't work the same way in Italian. The third industrial revolution in my region wiped out everything my dad's generation had known growing up, replacing it with a far-fetched, at times ridiculous, idea of a modern town.

And that's when Trecate dared to dream big, desiring to rise to the status of a city, perhaps taking as an example the biggest one nearby, Milan, with its well-known role in the history of art, architecture and its fashionable approach. Hence the renovation of the town hall and the bell tower with plain, monochrome pastel colour variations of pink, yellow, grey; the installation of bright neon lights in ball-shaped lamps at the side of the streets leading to the main square; security cameras everywhere; and the occasional fancy retractable bollards. Perhaps inevitably, these almost exotic stylistic choices ended up seeming more influenced by the aesthetics of the suburbs of Milan rather than Milan itself, as if Trecate knew it didn't really have the guts, let alone the capacity, to dare fully.

And yet, today as it was back then, I wonder for whom are all these changes and apparent improvements. Because in reality, you don't even go for a stroll if you live there. People drive everywhere, even if most destinations are within walking distance. This says a great deal about how even locals don't particularly like those streets and where they lead to. They prefer to drive so they don't have to deal with the nothingness of the town. Let alone that sometimes this tendency takes a rather racist turn, when you hear people asking – they often ask me, now used to living in a big city and easily walking an average five-point-three kilometres a day, according to my Health app – if I'm sure I want to walk there, because it could be dangerous. So walking as an activity in its own right is frowned upon by the locals, to say the least.

The closest natural escape would be the rice fields in the countryside, but once you get there, you soon realise that that is not a real destination. Rice fields, stripped of their economic and cultural relevance, over the decades have become just a time-filling interlude while commuting between towns. When driving through them on a particularly clear day, you can spot Monte Rosa through the windshield – a glorious mountain massif of the Alps. It is beautiful, but so distant and barely visible that it appears as a mirage, an optical illusion. Unfortunately for Trecate, it's too far away to gain the same significance that mountains usually provide for those towns on their slopes. As a kid, I don't remember seeing it at all when my dad was taking me and my siblings on bike rides in the countryside.

We would bike outside the town to forage all sorts of wild berries from bushes alongside the road. Occasionally, the reason was to catch frogs, by fishing them directly from the rice fields. Catching frogs is one of the rural traditions

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that my town has lost. Though I find it pretty cruel now, I still have good memories about what it came with. It was a momentous moment in the summertime, involving relatives and a bunch of close friends, where everyone had a precise role in what appeared to be a family-building moment. Everything would start with us kids going to the street in the morning with a wet towel to catch flies that we would need as bait. After collecting as many flies as we could, in the afternoon the men and the boys, armed with bamboo canes, fishing lines and a bucket, would head to the rice fields in search of frogs. A flick of your fingers to their head was enough to knock them out and keep them quiet in the bucket during the trip back home. Later on, the women and girls would skin, flour and fry them for dinner. We would prepare a table in the courtyard to host all the invitees, usually around ten people and we would spend that summer evening eating fried frogs and other typical dishes while telling stories and catching up.

Biking in the countryside was probably the only way to escape the greyness and boredom of the town, but I'm not sure it's something people still do. When I visit Trecate today, I don't see many bikes around anymore. People would think you simply can't afford a car, if they were to see you on a bike. But setting aside this unfortunate bias, it's precisely the sweet memory of me and my dad biking in the countryside to catch berries and frogs that triggered me to embark on this account, almost an ethnographic study by heart. I've lived for over twelve years away, away from my town, away from Italy, visiting just once a year for Christmas and always for less than a week. I recently realised that the distance I built over the years has helped me gain the point of view of the outsider, while retaining the knowledge of the local. It's not something everyone has the privilege to experience in life. It's like the dream of the anthropologist, to be able to achieve both perspectives – why waste it, I thought.

I mentioned a chemical company and an event comes to mind, precisely another one of those events that burst into the scene crystallising memories. I was ten years old, attending fifth grade, and one afternoon I was leaving school as usual around 16:30. It was raining and on the way back home I remember noticing that the drops of rain, on my skin as well as on the cars parked right outside the school, seemed kind of oily. As I got home, I found everyone concerned because of something that was happening in the countryside. My mum was on the phone with an uncle who decided right there and then to take my aunt and cousins and go stay at my great-grandmother's place, in an even smaller



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town on lake Como, a couple of hours drive away. My dad was stuck in his car at the border between the two regions while driving back home from work because the police weren't letting anyone in. It took me a while to figure out that what my mum and my older siblings were talking about was an oil well, a couple more years to understand what oil wells are for and how odd it was that we had one just right outside my town on this anonymous piece of land in the north of Italy, and that it had just exploded.

The culprit was *Trecate 24*, and I thought: well, that probably means that it's not the only one; there must be at least twenty-three other oil wells. That seemed a lot, even as a kid. I knew there was an oil refinery, the already mentioned SARPOM, and I knew it existed only because my grandfather used to work there. He joined it after he had sold the family coffee place, long before I was born; the coffee place where my dad also worked as a kid helping his father brew with his little hands, accounts say, it was the best coffee in town. When my grandfather grew tired of his activity at the cafe, the natural thing for him was to sell it and look for a job at the refinery. That's how I knew about SARPOM even before I knew about Monte Rosa. But the oil wells were introduced later, in the 80s, when an oil reserve was discovered over 5000 metres underground: one of the deepest reserves in the world, they say. Its depths, hardly reachable, is what made *Trecate 24* particularly tough to shut down when things went south.



After the explosion, we lived for a week or so in an enforced lockdown. Schools were closed, shops were closed, offices were closed. And we were waiting. Some of the rumoured information that I had access to during that time is still imprinted in my memory. Fragmented and in no particular order, to stay true to my promises, the rumours were as follows. First, everyone was worried that we wouldn't be able to eat rice for who knows how many years. To be fair, this made sense; but no one really stopped eating it. I know from a childhood friend whose family owned rice fields, that they were obliged not to sell anything for months right after the incident, but they were eventually contacted by a major Italian brand who bought entire rice yields from them, asserting that they knew how to clean

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the rice before putting it on the market. Secondly, American engineers were immediately flown to Trecate to try and stop the well shooting oil out of the ground. This sounded special: America was acknowledging Trecate's existence and we were all thrilled about the news. Thirdly, the fact that it was raining at the time of the event was a good thing, so the oil didn't remain in the atmosphere. I'm not sure about the science behind this, but there're people who still report it as of today. And lastly, but most importantly, after two full days of oil dispersion on people, houses and fields, the news came that the Holy Mary finally intervened and made it stop.

My grandmother on my mother's side, an amateur painter, promptly painted a picture of the Holy Mary levitating above the parish church and donated it to the community. I'm pretty sure it's still being exhibited somewhere. I have a clear memory of spotting it in the pastor's office when I was an altar boy. There was no doubt in my family that it was solely because of this divine intervention that *Trecate 24* had stopped pouring oil onto the town. Years later, though, it didn't occur to anyone that the Holy Mary completely overlooked the long term effects of such an ecological disaster that altered the chemical composition of the subsoil, polluted the aquifers, compromised the biological equilibrium of the ecosystem and over the years has caused harm to the health of the locals, in ways that won't be possible to fully measure, nor even grasp.

It is a catastrophe that has accompanied the town since. Ten years later, in 2003, I was nineteen years old and working as a waiter in a local restaurant. At the end of a shift another waiter, slightly older than me, who happened to be enrolled in a masters' degree in Environmental Engineering in Milan, told me about his internship at a local laboratory. He had the chance to participate in studies of the subsoil conditions, years after the explosion. Working on soil coring projects, the engineers were surprised and saddened to find that just a couple of metres under the surface there were still traces of crude oil. It is indeed heartbreaking that this incredible amount of oil, precisely in the range of 15,000 m³, dispersed all over the territory and its fields, not only didn't vanish with the closing of *Trecate 24* but it was still so damn near the surface.

The consequences of this environmental disaster to some extent will remain a mystery for the residents, almost like a religious or perhaps mythological event that required its *deus ex machina* to be interrupted, whether that was the Holy Mary or the engineers from America. In the future, it will become increasingly hard to get answers, especially since all extraction activities were shut down in 2016 due to exhaustion of the oil reserve, plus those responsible for the disaster have probably already retired. Case closed. I don't personally believe in the divine nor in magic, but I do believe in allegories, which is the lens I use sometimes to retrace and order my memories. And I can't help but see an allegory, or even two, universal in scope, in this contingent event.

In the winter of 1994, a massive amount of crude oil emerged powerfully from the ground and covered my hometown with a dark veneer for days. It did so only to then penetrate back into the land, in a process that lasted for years and decades, slowly reaching the subsoil, finally infiltrating the aquifers. Almost as if to make a point, to maybe teach us something, the oil seemed to reclaim its true place: the underground, its very own hometown. Which, come to think of it, is probably not that different from what I'm now attempting by letting these memories emerge. Memories that for one reason or another are never easy to face, whether because they have personal implications long overlooked or even because they too have their own level of toxicity that can spread in an uncontrollable way. But just as for the oil at that time, for memories too the urgency to be acknowledged may arise. And when that happens, they would find their own way to spill chaotically onto our present self, if only for a moment, before returning to their own underground: that random collection of events, stashed in the subsoil of experience, that out of habit, or convenience, we are used to referring to as *the past*.

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About the author

Emanuele Nicolotti is an Italian playwright, writer, and design researcher, based in Berlin. He wrote plays and audio performances for institutions like Fondazione TeatroDue in Parma (Italy) and the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels (Belgium). His current narrative work focuses on creative nonfiction stories that deal with the relationship between individuals and the social environment in which they exist.