L’inedito
“Cosmos: a Nocturne”:
A Poem By Rachel Blau DuPlessis

“Cosmos: A Nocturne” is marked by the interplay between the singular and the manifold, the minor incident and the massive event, the infra-ordinary and the striking. Readers familiar with DuPlessis’s poetry will recognize this tension: the long-poem *Drafts*, published in several books, started in 1985 and written across thirty years, brings together an inexhaustible drive to question the systems of signification the subject is imbued in (including poetic tradition), the material conditions, accidents and gestures animating one’s life, and the political need to confront major socio-cultural issues, such as global wars and the conundrums of US politics, gender and women’s agency, Jewishness and the dangers of identity, mass destruction and the work of memory. Structured on a rectangular grid numbering 114 poems (with unnumbered poems, collage poems and poems of the interstices to disrupt this apparently fixed architecture), *Drafts*, as the title suggests, is built on “the provisional and the contingent” (Pritchett n. pag.), openly challenging the universalism of Pound’s *Cantos* and sharing H.D.’s palimpsestic strategy, where writing is both rewriting of what was erased and endless glossing at its margins. The status of work-in-progress allows a mode of inquiry which is never oblivious of the historical context of its production and “dare[s] compare the little with the large” (“Draft 72: Nanifesto,” in DuPlessis, *Torques* 97). Full of references, quotations and allusions, not only to literary tradition, but also to newspapers headlines, art exhibitions, scientific research, pop culture, casual conversations, languages such as Esperanto, Latin, Yiddish, German, French, and Italian, DuPlessis’s work cannot be easily reduced to a school or a poetic movement. In fact, her poetic signature signals a daring complexity: mixing the argumentative logic of the essay, the density and the mechanism of poetry, the construction and length one associates to
narrative, her writing insists on saying that poetry matters, right here in the messy and murky world, as an instrument of knowledge and awareness.

*Drafts* has been a massive accomplishment and an on-going generator of poetry, each poem resonating of another poem, each sequence of poems folding on another sequence, each interstice leaving space for another page. “Cosmos” inherits and mirrors the richness of this writing process, reaching out to the heart of DuPlessis’s poetics, which never loses sight of “the mite, the mote, the mute” (95), striving to give account of what is silenced and unspeakable. As the title suggests the time is the night, with its offer of a deep space and a deep time, a scenery that invites a meditation on individual vulnerability as well as facing the challenge of collective responsibility. In it the subject provides a contemplation of the limitless immanence always on the verge of submerging humanity, not in any transcendental sense but in the shape of litter and poison. The meditative mode soon becomes an interrogation of our position in a world literally overwhelmed by our own waste. DuPlessis’s midrashic writing dwells on every single fissure, every single fragment: nothing is dismissed as an object of investigation, no matter how microscopic or apparently insignificant. Refusing the pastoral device of framing a coherent and inspiring view, a traditional setting for the poetic subject to start interrogating the universe, here the subject is found in a space-time “saturated / with pitiless derangements.” The distance necessary to trigger meditation is not given by Nature (an ideal charged with contradictions), but by the dangerous, noisy, darkened space of conflict and confusion typical of existence in the globalized West, with its empty slogans, its constant state of emergency, its “political failure.” Thus, the poem confronts the material and discursive rubbish produced by flawed politics and rhetoric, the results of “natural” disasters (mostly caused by human neglect), as well as the very human disaster of pretending to cope with the global and the cosmic without awareness of our local, unstable, provisional status. The subject’s exploration of “reality” becomes a questioning of our ethical choices and a way to open poetry to critical thinking: “What is to be done? / What could or should we do?” The concern with the ephemeral we find in Rilke’s “Ninth Elegy” is here alluded to in a recurring list of simple words, “house, bread, pitcher, night, door,” so general and common and yet so charged with one’s own experience and
perceptions, in such a way that they end up asking us whether we can take care of all this, or at least dare to accept it: “it’s an unfixed archive, / neither all omnivorous / nor all complete.”

DuPlessis’s work is an elegy full of hermeneutical tension and a linguistic experiment immersed in historical consciousness. Translating DuPlessis into Italian means facing this complexity, but also coming to terms with the dizzying compounds, the wordplays and the coinages, the fibrillating alliterations and rhymes and all the rich soundbox DuPlessis employs. To do this the translator has tried to dialogue with Italian poetry, the one most in love with an experimental and resonant word, from the late twentieth century to today: Zanzotto, Sanguineti, Caproni, Insana, Lo Russo and Giovenale have left their marks in DuPlessis’s Italian version (see DuPlessis, Dieci bozze). DuPlessis’s language, direct and layered at the same time, colloquial but dense with its unsettling extra-systoles, intertwining the high and the low, mixing academic and informal registers, diverts the target language, rerouting and amusing it. The (not too secret) hope of the translator of poetry, after all, is that of challenging linguistic numbness while contributing to the interpretation and the dissemination of her work.

Works cited

Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Cosmos: A Nocturne

1.

I began this far away
down-where
before dawn
in a night saturated
with pitiless derangements –
part dreamed, part head-blood,
part galloping times,
capital letter concepts
arranged in categories
then scrambled, intercut
spilling counterpart ides.
ILLJUSTNESS
ECO-EATH
DISUST
NOXXUS
ASTERAGE
ONWRECK.

Every abstract noun
an inchoate block
that, struck like a rock,
gushed
a water choke,
ready at any odd cell-small
no-sleep-image-anger
to cover the world
with mud.
Not dreams, not nightmares:
It’s sludge of political failure.
Systemic ruptures, looms of dooms on earth.

Yet the quiet gate stayed open,
the slide into sleep had seemed assured.
It was no help being
rebar-rigid with rage,
no particular sense to pit
extreme heat
caged children
bottled water litter’s microbits
against sleep.
Yet these things burst,
flooded over, further embittering
other unstoppable tides.

2.

It seems I have no skin,
am hungry ghost to haunt the stormed-on streets,
wading in elements so engulfing and poisonous
I am about to die again.

3.

The merger of two black holes forms
one binary black hole – is this really a thing?
did I say it right?
The person lying flat in awe and fear is
not quite sure
what this entails
except black holes are rare,
and somewhere there.

Implosive anti-matter stuff?
The inside out of cosmos outside in?
A heavy dot with which to rebegin?
Galactic collision between long-zone
bi-fold double swooshing light-year slough?
Although the person seems secure
that she is / I am here
implacable as astrophysics,
though not so impressive
nor as long-term,
withal the double question
does this count?
Does it matter being here?

4.

Can this cosmos be trusted
with a list of words,
daily simples,
nothing abstract
like WILL or JUSTICE, can it
be trusted to accept that
nouns (like “home” or “night”)
are invested with our feelings?
Say: the touch
of that particular door,
its key to jiggle in a certain way,
then a little kick; you’re home.
The light flickers
the leaves get shadowy luminous
endarkened colors shine.

The moon is up.
The door is shut.
The night is full.
The world is clear.

Can the cosmos bear
my pitcher in the shape of a rooster –
flowery, charming, and (it turned out)
impractical; can it dare
the word “mother”
without evoking
something mendable;
can it share our bread.

Does the cosmos
care to understand
house, bread, pitcher, night, door?

5.

Yet ferocious mis-management ensues

(a series of if-then clauses follows
involving plastics
and electronic waste, generating
profit, disordering the drinkable, fracking
plasma fields of cosmic blood)
from which a flood
of moral suffering rises above
last night’s crest.

What is to be done?
What could or should we do?
To live in our world, is what I mean.
And is it relief or infinite sadness to think that this will be destroyed, whether we (insomniac mites) do it, or approve, or not? Will be absorbed and be transformed in the long-term normal course of things no matter whether we wake tomorrow or stay awake till light, to say “pitcher, door, house, bread, night.”

6.

Glints of cosmic greenglass pierce our rocks (blackglass! azure arrivals! jewels of song!) all from drifts of dust.

It’s cosmic dust.
These matter-swirling beauties generate our astonished empathy, considering that all this is innumerable grasps and gasps of cells and minerals hooked into each other’s processes where chancy atoms frisk and frost setting night and day in motion where we can see their turns. Does it matter that we can? We see them now.

This place, these multiples, this time barely countable, barely accountable with the numbers we possess – it’s an unfixed archive, neither all omnivorous nor all complete
but present as colors, mixed
and metamorphic,
just like that.

Crystals of small light fall from a compromised sky.
And once you know what you must face,
you try to wake.

April-November 2018
“Cosmo: Un Notturno”

Traduzione italiana di Renata Morresi

1.

Ho cominciato da così lontano
là-dove
prima del sole
in una notte satura
di spietati eccessi
in parte sognati, in parte pulsanti,
tempi in parte sfrenati,
concetti con la maiuscola
allestiti in categorie
poi rimescolati, interposti
riversando idi equivalenti.
MALGIUSNIDO
ECO-MORTE
DISUSTO
NOXXUS
ASTRERA
NOWFRAGIO.

Ogni nome astratto
un blocco amorfo
che, picchiato come roccia,
ha fiottato
acqua che strozza,
pronta ad ogni strambio micro-sbocco
d’odio concreto
a coprire il mondo
di fango.
Né sogni né incubi:
è poltiglia di fallimento politico.
Fratture sistemiche, telai di tragedie sulla terra.

Tuttavia il passaggio quieto rimase aperto,
scivolare nel sonno era parso garantito.
Serviva a poco starsene
barre rigide di rabbia,
non sembrava importante porre
il caldo estremo
i bambini nelle gabbie
i microbit di scorie nell’acqua in plastica
contro il sonno.
Eppure queste cose esplodono,
inondate, inasprendo
altri implacabili maree.

2.
Sembra che io non abbia pelle
sia lo spettro affamato che infesta le strade devastate,
guadando tra elementi avvelenati soverchianti così tanto che
sto per morire di nuovo.

3.
La fusione di due buchi neri forma
un buco nero binario. Ma davvero è una cosa questa?
E l’ho detta nel modo giusto?
La persona che striscia sgomenta e spaurita è
non tanto certa
delle implicazioni
salvo che i buchi neri sono rari,
che stanno là da qualche parte.  
Implosiva anti-materia?  
Il rovescio del cosmo rivoltato in fuori?  
Un punto denso da cui ricominciare?  
Collisonne galattica tra lunghe mute bine  
raddoppiate sguscianti da anni luce?  
Sebbene la persona sembri sicura  
di essere qui / che io sia qui  
implacabile come l’astrofisica,  
anche se non altrettanto formidabile  
né duratura,  
nondimeno la doppia domanda:  
questo conta?  
Conta qualcosa stare qui?

4.

Possiamo affidare a questo cosmo  
una lista di parole?  
le semplici quotidiane,  
niente di astratto  
come VOLONTÀ o GIUSTIZIA, possiamo  
fargli accettare che  
i nomi (come “casa” o “notte”)  
siano investiti del nostro sentirli?  
Esempio: la foggia  
di una certa porta  
la chiave da scrollare a quel modo,  
poi un colpetto, sei entrata in casa.  
Balugina la luce  
le foglie prendono un chiarore nell’ombra  
i colori spenti tornano a splendere.  

La luna è alta.
La porta è chiusa.
La notte è fonda.
Il mondo è limpdo.

Il cosmo può sopportare
la mia brocca a forma di gallo?
a fiori, incantevole, e (venne fuori)
inservibile; può osare
la parola “madre”
senza alludere
a qualcosa da aggiustare;
può condividere il nostro pane?

Al cosmo importa
di capire
casa, pane, brocca, notte, porta?

5.

Tuttavia un feroce malgoverno ne risulta
(segue serie frastica di se-allora,
che implica rifiuti elettronici
e in plastica, genera
profitto, intorbida il potabile, frattura
campi plasmatici di sangue cosmico)
da cui un’alluvione
di travaglio morale risale
la cresta della notte scorsa.

Cosa va fatto?
Cosa potremmo o dovremmo fare?
Per vivere in questo mondo, intendo.

Ed è sollievo o infinita tristezza pensare
che questo sarà distrutto,  
on importa quel che noi (acari insonni)  
facciamo o vorremmo?  
Sarà assorbito e trasformato  
nell’infinito e normale corso delle cose,  
che noi si dorma fino a domani  
o si rimanga in piedi fino all’alba, a dire  
“Ibrocca, porta, casa, pane, notte”.

6.

Laser di vetro cosmico perforano le nostre rocce  
(vetri scuri! arrivi azzurri! gioielli di canzoni!)  
tutti da derive di detriti.

È polvere cosmica.  
Queste perle di materia vorticante generano  
la nostra sbalordita empatia, considerando  
che tutto questo  
è fatto di innumerevoli scosse e soffi di cellule  
e minerali agganciati in processi reciproci  
dove atomi aleatori girano e gelano  
mettendo in moto il giorno e la notte  
dove li vediamo vagare.  
Importa che possiamo farlo?  
Li vediamo, adesso.

Questo posto, questi multipli, questo tempo  
possiamo a malapena contarlo, darne conto  
coi numeri che possediamo.  
È un archivio nomade  
né del tutto onnivoro  
né del tutto completo  
ma presente come i colori, mescolati
e metamorfici,
proprio come loro.

Cristalli di luce minima cadono da un cielo compromesso.
E una volta che sai cosa devi affrontare,
provii a svegliarti.

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