

## 7.

## A Nosegay of Culled Flowers

**A spaghetti version of Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book*,  
Book 1, Chapter 1**

A lullaby emerges in my memory in the shape and sounds of a staggering procession of words in a dialect from Southern Italy, whose sense for me is almost entirely lost. On a plaintive melody it tells the story of a wolf eating a sheep and it then precipitates into a tangle of words and expressions obscure to me, but that have been returning in the circular space of my inner singing throughout the years. Why did my grandmother sing that lullaby and put my brother and myself to sleep, her story leaving us utterly terrified although captivated by its melody? I begin to sense an older history unfolding, a voice calling from a past more remote than my lifespan, not understood but heard and felt, and passed on to me through the voice of my grandmother. No longer just private or personal, that lullaby belongs to a dissolving yet collective culture. Made present and alive in my experience of hearing them read aloud, all the words and sounds kept in the archives of memory and its silenced collections dissolve, unless I voice them or allow their voices to pulsate in me, when I listen and read and write.

Those words in the lullaby reached me although I could not read their text. I try and recall them again, hearing in the connective space of singing a subtle persistent echo that I could not otherwise hear in myself detached, or in the words detached. That lullaby, and later on many more words and sounds and songs, pointed at another way of listening, different from the prescribed one found at school. To paraphrase Robert Duncan's encounter with the poetry of H.D. narrated in the first chapter of *The H.D. Book*, those sung words did not belong to public estab-

ishments that a well-educated person should know, to measure and value their worth in the marketplace of cultural industries. To listen to that song, and many others to follow, belonged to the inner life or, as W. G. Sebald once wrote, to *the dark inner lining* of reality. They did not call for a crystal-clear system of analysis, or for deciphering. Still today, those voices want to be heard, not to be deconstructed; they want me to say, *I want to be here with you* — and then, I want to write: an act of volition that brings all those voices together: a leap of faith. In listening I see the shades before this leap of faith, generating precarious alluring constructions. In writing I hear the echo of doubt in each beginning, from which my words—and I with them—cannot be healed. Although drenched in music, art, poetry, those words and voices have visited places and touched people who stray from what's commonly regarded as 'art'. They do not have much to do with the reassurance of knowledge or skills: they point at the resonance heard, early in life, in certain sounds, in a strong sense of kinship across time. I want to reveal this kinship, even in the apparently most-known of sounds, and songs: to voice the inner lining of what might be taken for granted. To keep alive the voice of that poem and that lullaby and many others; their sense of necessity, their presence. When I heard my grandmother's voice channel words whose sense was lost but whose sound spoke, I heard them in a place constructed in proximity through an aesthetic experience. Today I know that those verses and songs were not there to be summed up: I was to construct them again and again every time I wrote about them. What I got through listening did not pertain to ideas of permanent, awe-inspiring public heritage: it belonged to a history of sensing and understanding, private in its making and public every time I reached out through writing.

When I play that lullaby back in my recollections, it crumbles into the time of now. It is not attached to a specific place or state of mind: it shapes my state of mind and place today, not as an

immutable record: it sheds a different light on what is around it and around me every time I hear across it, in change, woven across the mutable connective tissue of experience: not as a still presence but a mutable entity that allows me to slide into the space of fictions, changes, questions.

I'm interested in the shift from real to fiction and the sliding back from fiction to real that occurs every time we are confronted with aural memories as escapes out of fixity: the fixity of the edge of the ear, the illusionary fixity of a support. What is around them, life, erodes them and transforms them. They prompt rather than document, they prompt not to classify, but to interpolate. No aural memory can coincide with the event of each experience of hearing. They are not time-capsules-on-demand. We live and listen with them, not because of them.

Again I go back to that lullaby, it was sung to me by my grandmother, in Italian *nonna*, it went *nonna nonna nonnarella*, it was sung by nonna-nonsense, nonna-sense, and lullaby is *ninna-nanna*, nonna-nanna, nonna-nenia, *nenia* is dirge, incantation. Nonna-norna norn. The norns, in Greek mythology, are the *spinners of the thread from which life is woven, they measured each person's lifespan and cut the cord to deliver them into their death, as once they had cut the first cord or chord: when the thread began when sound began*. In tune a thread unravels in life, measured by its pace within a recalled lullaby. And the thread of a life is also the thread of an argument. Duncan reports how in 1891, a month before her death, Madame Blavatsky closed her last essay with a quote from Montaigne: *I have here made only a nosegay of culled flowers, and have brought nothing of my own but the string that ties them*. Duncan writes of this string as *the thread of her argument, a wish that she, and mankind with her, might be released from the contradictions of dream and fact, creative idea and actuality, that tortured her spirit. But the string was also the quest for the end of dream, creative idea, volition—if only they could be proved to be their opposites...* So I think back of my attraction to my grandmother's voice in that

lullaby, as I weave the thread of my voice and my words and many more into its words and into Duncan's words, and begin to see the string of my argument at an early time. As a child my search for meanings was informed by repeated encounters with the Italian folk tales collected by Italo Calvino (1956), where old witches lived on trees, plants spoke, children were chopped up and yet kept living. The thread of my understanding was being woven. Listening and writing keep to date that sense of weaving by assonance and association, by metaphor, by reasoning through frenzy in listening—scattered items tied together, a nosegay of culled flowers kept together by the thread of my history. And the question is no longer who I am, but *whom* my words are woven into, and how.

As I write, I recall some verses from a favourite song by Arthur Russell called *Home Away From Home*, they seem to prompt me further, they say: *The birth of the moment is never ending, The rest is in the centre*. I think of this writing as the never-ending birth of a moment against the rest in the centre, its cry outstretched beyond its edge. Where is the edge of the tapestry of my I, woven in writing and eroded in listening, reading and recalling? In the 1950 foreword to his ethnographical and autobiographical and truly visionary journey *L'Afrique Fantôme*, Michel Leiris writes: *Truly a human measure, my horizon*. Sixteen years before, he'd closed the book saying: *There's nothing left for me to do ... but dream*. The time of each recorded memory is spanned by and spun around the horizon of now and the edge of dream. In the thread of every record I hear what wasn't there and I make what is gone, actual. An escape out of fixity. In what might be yet another horizon, I end here with another possible beginning:

## Chapter One

Grandmother did not go to school, she could not read. She did sing. Out of the cave at the back of the house in the mountains, that herself and my grandfather used as a cellar for bread, meat,

cheese, firewood, I can recall her lullabies.

A few years ago I encountered similar tunes and strident voices in the ethnomusicology section of the archive at Santa Cecilia Music School in Rome: the lullabies of my youth were turned inside out into the dark undertones of funeral lamentations, recorded by ethnographer Ernesto De Martino in the 1950s in Southern Italy. Both De Martino, and Alan Lomax a few years later, wrote of how in those lullabies you hear acute voices, mournful melodies that mirror those of lamentations, as patterns repeated at different points in life. These songs in birth and death do not voice absolute meanings: they are shaped by the time when they emerge, new in every new voicing. As I read along these voices and between their gaps, I begin to hear new disturbances, I respond to their speech even when I'm not quite sure what they say. Like my grandmother, who could not read and sang not because she was quite sure of what certain words meant, but because she had the urge to let her voice arise out of those strange words nonetheless—because either she would resist language, or break it with her song.