

the "BANNING" . . . Qiviq undertakes a long search for his lost love, but his success is bitter, for she is queen in the land of birds and she angrily orders an attack on him when he plans to announce that all creatures belong together. Orwell would have given that notion due gravitas, but it is jocularly underplayed in Calvino.

The later cosmicomic tales deal with days nearer our own times, and with people who live in such places as New Jersey and drive cars, rather than plod over uncharted areas of the cosmos. It is possible to detect a darker tone in the last stories. In "The Daughters of the Moon", the moon falls to the earth, as in one of Leopardi's poems, but this time it is in New York, and the moon ends up in a scrapyard with abandoned cars, to be greeted by a group of naked New York maidens, all called Diana. The scrapyard is as central as the burnt-out moon, and the tale is a protest against futile consumerism as well as a work of fantasy.

Whatever the changes of tone, at every turn this is a collection to relish, written by a master of transparent prose who unites thought and imagination and shows an expansive generosity of mind and heart. He is well served by all three translators, who display remarkable uniformity in their ability to reproduce the brio of the original.

THANKSGIVING FOR LIFE

POEMS BY

RANDIE MANWARING

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it is the entirely gratuitous and senseless suffering to which History has damned innocent people. His hell is mainly populated by intellectuals, artists and poets, though there are also politicians, "common people", espe-

A people's prison

IAN THOMSON

Giorgio Vasta

IL TEMPO MATERIALE

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During the 1970s, Italy was convulsed by acts of left-wing terrorism. On March 16, 1978, the Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro was kidnapped in Rome by members of the Red Brigades. Two months after his disappearance, on May 9, his body was found in the boot of a car parked midway between the headquarters of the Italian Communist Party and the Christian Democrat Party in Rome. It is difficult now to appreciate the gravity of what the Red Brigades did: the kidnap and murder of Margaret Thatcher by the IRA might have been a comparable crime.

During the forty-five days that Moro lay blindfolded in his "people's prison", Italian intellectuals agonized publicly over the inadequacies of state institutions and the police failure to find where Moro was being held. Primo Levi spoke for many: "The Moro affair was felt by us to be a sort of disease, superimposed on countless other diseases that infect this country". Levi's despair was echoed by Leonardo Sciascia, the Sicilian novelist, in his book *L'affaire Moro* (1978), published just three months after the news of Moro's murder. Why, asked Sciascia, did the Vatican and the Christian Democrats, the Italian newspapers, radio and television all refuse to negotiate with the Red Brigades over the release of thirteen Communist prisoners? Most telling, Sciascia believed, was the moment when Moro used the word "potere" – power – for the first time

episodes and characters reflect the creative and personal interpretations of Pressburger himself. In his chosen post-Freudian context, in which Primo Levi is the fallen angel taking the place of Lucifer at the very bottom of Hell, Pressburger goes further than Dante,

in one of his sixty-odd prison communiqués. "I do not wish to be surrounded by those in power", he wrote. Up until then Moro had referred to the "men of the Party"; only now, Sciascia remarked, had Moro "found the right epithet – the dreadful word".

Giorgio Vasta's extraordinary first novel, *Il tempo materiale* (2008), an allegorical fable of political power, is clearly indebted to Sciascia. It takes place in the Sicilian capital of Palermo, Vasta's birthplace, in the "terrible year" of 1978. A trio of eleven-year-old schoolboys, Nimbo (Nimbus), Raggio (Ray) and Volo (Flight), avidly follow the news of Moro's abduction as it percolates down to them from Rome. To their pre-adolescent minds, the *brigantisti* are warriors come to cauterize the Italian people of their apathy. Outwardly, the boys live ordinary lives with their parents on the outskirts of Palermo. Secretly, they are smitten by the unpromising purity and violence of the Red Brigades. The terrorists' language – "purity", "overthrow", "strike" – has entered the boys' "like a disease", and they invent a "mute

zation, but through something like free association. The form of salvation which writing represents is the possibility of confronting History, Evil and the tragedy of loss without falling into the sin of despair or yielding to the temptation of suicide.

alphabet" ("un alfamuto") using only physical gestures, which will, they hope, act as a further antidote to the "verbiage" spewed out every day on Italian television. With news of Moro's execution, the narrative darkens: as the boys, drunk with the possibility of power, decide to kidnap a classmate and incarcerate him in a makeshift "people's prison", in imitation of Moro's persecutors. Appallingly, their victim dies in captivity; he is named Morana – a homonymous near-miss for Moro.

Il tempo materiale is a dark, disconcerting fable which offers few consolations. Palermo is portrayed as a wasteland of pariah dogs, burnt-out cars and juvenile extortion racketeers, a hoodlum outpost of the Mezzogiorno. Only on the eve of his twelfth birthday does Nimbo discover, to his sadness, that there is no gesture for "love" in the mute sign language that he and his friends have chosen. From that moment dates his birth into a more compassionate person. He declares himself ready to denounce his co-conspirators, and rid himself once and for all of the "disease" of the terrorists' language.

In alerting us to the wider significance of the event at the centre of his fable, Vasta makes idiosyncratic use of the Italian language, turning it inside out, deforming and interrogating it to powerful effect. *Il tempo materiale* is, without question, one of the most important novels to emerge in Italy in the past ten years.