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Still Life in Ditch, 64 pp
by Fausto Paravidino
translated by Ilaria Papini
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review by Michael Todd Steffen

The denouement of the mystery plot in Fausto Paravidino's novel noir drama *Still Life*

In Ditch (Natura Morta in uno Fosso) intercepts the reader—it is at once so unexpected, shocking and psychologically convincing. It is a revelation that silently encodes the sum of its speakers and narrative with its illustrative guy-gal polarity, resonating with the reader (audience), as the play holds true to its proposal as a noir genre piece. A lot of the language is blunt, consistently stylistic in its display of brevity, irony and repartee. So if we at first wince at the rawness of the speakers' vernacular, little by little we can come to appreciate the authenticity of the characters in their linguistic portraits as fulfilling and adhering to pre-established genre criteria. The text even transcends its literary intentions by capturing the gratuitous bluntness of our current day street and pop-culture speech.



*If he gives me 5 million up front, I'll sell him the 7-mil debt.
Sounds pretty cool to me.*

*He thinks about it for a second. I quickly do the math and tell
him that he'd be making more than 20% on the deal.*

*He thinks about it another second and says, "Will you give me
back the 7 million?"*

*So I ask him if he's shitting me. If I wanted a loan I would
have asked him for a loan and he wouldn't have charged me a 20%
interest rate.*

*I'm turning over a debt to you—I tell him—you front me
the 5 and then, whenever you want, you go and collect the 7.*

*So then he gets all pissed off and says he doesn't like the idea,
that it sounds like a rip-off, that he doesn't buy debts from people
he doesn't know and besides, he doesn't trust me.*

So I ask him how things are going with Elisa.

"What the fuck do you care?"

*"I was just wondering whether you killed her because you
couldn't stand to be with someone who was smarter than you, or
someone else killed her to let you know that they didn't want to
deal with someone dumber than them."*

*He asks me what the fuck I'm talking about. I don't know if
he's playing dumb or if he really is a moron. (p. 28)*

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To be released this September, *Still Life in Ditch* is the 2013 winner of the Loose Translation Prize sponsored by Queens College, The City University of New York, and Hanging Loose Press. Kimiko Hahn, Queens College-CUNY, comments, "The series name...speaks for our collaborative mission to introduce voices new to English through translators able to foreground the extraordinary writing with which they work with great craft and attention to the original language."

This translation of Paravidino's writing by Ilaria Papini reads itself, effortless and transparent, as though it were an original text in English. Richard Schotter calls it, "luminous...a gift to English-speaking audiences and to anyone who loves challenging, intelligent theatre, artfully rendered."

Papini has shown her ability, moreover, to background *Still Life in Ditch* with an insightful *Afterward* in this edition.

As a lifelong reader of both fiction and theater, I find this play contains some of my favorite elements: the style of a literary noir, a multiple perspective narrative—among my lifelong favorites are such novels as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and such films as Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and Bertolucci's *The Grim Reaper* (*La commare secca*)—and a group of very flawed, supremely human characters. Also, it has a very unusual structure for a play, with its long, uninterrupted monologues, blurring the line between fiction and drama. (pp. 60-1)

Papini's *Afterward* goes on to reveal some depth of research into the text and its author's inspirations.

I reminded [Paravidino] about his initial commission to write a one-man show, and asked him how he ended up with a multiple-perspective narrative with six characters, two of which are women. He told me that he did try, initially, to write a one-character dramatic monologue, but after a while the other characters just insisted on being heard.

The elements of noir fiction, film and drama smack us, direct as they are recognizable: laconic, gruff characters caught up in the bang-up side-blinding consequences of decadent lifestyles. Sarcastic, stripped of sentiment, it portrays humanity at its rawest levels of gullibility, rage, selfishness and resignation. It's easy to stratify or cross-identify the male speakers of *Still Life in Ditch*, as well as to make out polarities between the speakers, say, between Cop and Dealer, Mother and Hooker. The guy characters each have narrow objectives and blunt approaches, including abrupt and radical reversals of fortune. Loveless sex, greed, murder, bad drug deals, users run out on their luck and money, blackmail, burlesque brawls, hospital beds all make for stock turns in the genre, all employed adeptly and entertainingly by Paravidino.

Under the shadowy fun-making veneer, however, the author suggests a sharp eye for humanity, by dealing his cards with credibility. The bereft Mother as a speaker makes a strong case against embellishments and sentimentality. Her daughter's death still fresh and surreal to her, she wants the grounding of the plain facts, no matter how stark.

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"The body is this way. If you will follow me I'll take you there."

His frankness makes me think better of him.

He takes us to her. Bruised, swollen, pale.

Naked in a way she hasn't allowed us to see her in years.

Her broad nipples, the curls over her vagina are not familiar to me.

But I recognize her smile over the teeth that someone has smashed in.

I look at the policeman, who is waiting for a verdict.

"It's Elisa Orlando, my daughter. Here are her papers," I hand them to him.

We are all idiotically embarrassed. Should we leave? Should he? How does it work? The policeman gives no sign, perhaps we get to pick.

Mario keeps on looking at our girl and says in a low voice, "Find the bastards who did this."

Hearing him invent these words that have no place in his mouth endears me as never before. He is infinitely small, suddenly I love him as if I were discovering something wonderful in him that he had never before shown me.

The policeman replies, "That's what I live for."

And of course that fucks everything up. (p. 14)

Noir plays on stereotypes. As direct and brutal as the males are, the female characters are typically revealed as weak, confused, contradictory and passive—the victims. Yet with their feminine patience and allowance, the gals show more acceptance, insight and roll-with-the-punches turn-of-fortune. Paravidino enhances this intuitive nature of the 'female' by making the Hooker, who is a key witness, an illegal immigrant with a fluent fumbling grasp of her new nation's language, rendered with delicacy and humor by Papini.

I am afraid, I don't want to do it, because if my bosses find out that I there with them I get in big trouble.

Policeman insist it is very important for me to talk with him because girl in photo disappear and I can help them for girl.

I don't want to, and cry and say let me go, let me go away, that this scare me.

Policeman explain to me that he know our situation well and that he not want to hurt me. And he say also if I want he guarantee his protection, my bosses don't find me and he help me get home again.

I tell him that at home there is war, I don't want to go and I want Italian papers.

He tell me that what I ask is little too much for what he is want me, but if I tell him interesting thing and I can be useful to him again for trial and things like that, he will ask his boss to get me papers and in meantime he will put me in protection program. (p. 54)

While creating his story within the criteria of noir, Paravidino demonstrates a curiosity to push his genre piece at its assumptions. To an extent,

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in the Marxian paradigm that crime and justice necessitate, and rely on, one another, the Cop and Dealer bear identity in apposition as two chess players across a board of strategic players. Yet at moments our Inspector Salti lends a suggestion of the virtue of magnified awareness on the side of justice.

I am following only one lead, one given to me by a snitch with ulterior motives.

I want to believe it. I want this to be just about drugs.

I want my victim to be a woman selling sex in exchange for drugs.

I want this so I can neutralize the violence.

Make it less dangerous.

To prove that they kill only each other.

That those who die have chosen this and the victims know their killers, just as the killers know their victims and all their lives they are hurtling toward this appointment and no one else has anything to do with it because the only ones who die are at-risk individuals.

I want to catch Gipo so he can confirm this theory.

I want to ruin the Orlando girl's reputation sully her past

so everyone can go to bed happy.

But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe that's not how it was.

Maybe violence is not quite so predictable... (p. 36)

Could anybody have been the murderer? Is it the Dealer? Is it the Boy-friend? Could this be a noir noir drama with the culprit one of the most unlikely, the Mother or the Detective?

Wonder, keep score for oneself, be on the trail of clues and cues of personality is all part of the fun and intrigue of reading a good mystery. Yet the speakers in *Still Life in Ditch* are so beguiling in themselves, it's easy to forget, as we are being entertained, that the story has its objective of unmasking the murderer. And this makes the moment of the enigma's solution all that much more startling, a moment duly left for the reader to discover.