

Towards Rust

Prisca Agustoni

Italian, Interlinea, 2022

"if roots have memory
like underground mines

one day
at the first movement
at the first wrong step

there will be rust-coloured buds
that burst
threatening and indecent

flowers opening on to the precipice"





Verso la ruggine (Towards Rust), the latest poetical work by Prisca Agustoni, draws inspiration from the terrible environmental disasters which, between 2015 and 2019, struck Minas Gerais, the state in South East Brazil where the author – originally from Lugano in Switzerland – has lived and worked for some years. The texts, divided into two sections (*Colpi di scure* (Axe-blows) and *I sopravvissuti* (The Survivors)), drop the reader into a tragedy that becomes a metaphor and symbol for a catastrophe that includes everyone.

Title
Verso la ruggine

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an intrinsic literary value? With *Towards Rust*, Prisca Agustoni not only takes up this challenge but, answering the threefold question, invites the reader to see with a vision beyond the purely civic dimension.

Prisca Agustoni's new poetic work, probably her most profound and mature, takes its inspiration from the environmental disasters which, between 2015 and 2019, devastated Minas Gerais, the state in South East Brazil known for its iron production, where the author – originally from Lugano – has lived and worked for some time. Disasters caused by human mining activity: worst of all, the dumping of a huge basin of toxic water into the Rio Doce after the collapse due to negligence of a dyke which led to multiple fatalities. This catastrophe also compromised the riverside habitat, from on which the indigenous Krenak population were dependent for sustenance. Eco-crimes the poet and essayist Fabio Pusterla uses the term in his rich introductory note.

In *Towards Rust* Prisca Agustoni appropriates the accounts and the pain of others (animal and vegetable included) with a dash of natural empathy, finding in those tragic events the echo of her own existential experience. So on the one hand, this leads to a book which, uniting ethos and pathos, splits into a general lament (Axe-blows, the first part) and in the voice of the Krenak people (The Survivors, the second part). But at the same time, in a way more recondite and perhaps more intriguing, the protagonist of *Towards Rust* is the same poetic voice which declares itself here and there to be a reflection on language, until it becomes a background and revelation of the real. There are many examples of this: 'a story that plants roots in your mouth', 'a toxic tongue licking the earth', 'the alphabet of resin and rubber', the 'black tongue' in a 'foreign syntax'. Aside from that, it is also significant that Prisca Agustoni wrote this very Brazilian book in her mother tongue – it would subsequently be *rewritten* in Portuguese.

'they speak mud/ the suicides of this disfigured kingdom/ and there is no way to return/ to the shrubs, to the infernal sufferings// the wood already razed to the ground/and all its seed eradicated': if the wealth comes from iron, it is symbolic that that iron should succumb to the rust alluded to in the title of the book. *Towards Rust* thus also translates the erosion of all our certainties.

Text by Massimo Zenari

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Awards

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SAMPLE TRANSLATION BY SHAUN WHITESIDE



Prisca Agustoni was born in Lugano, Switzerland and has lived for many years between Italian Switzerland and Brazil, where she works as a translator and as a teacher of Italian literature. She writes and self-translates in Italian, French and Portuguese and makes

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