



Leonardo Guzzo

THE IDOL

The beaten earth of the pitch no longer absorbs water. It becomes a bog after a little rain and it stays wet for days: a sickly grey muddy mess that no sun can really heal.

At the Acerra football pitch the car park is nothing but dirt. There's been no grass for ten years now: the wheels of a hundred cars – big flashy cars and clunkers – have turned it into Atilla's battleground. They are parked randomly around the pitch, in lines and circles, as if attempting to usurp the land. The cars of cocky club presidents, downgraded coaches, players who had to put their dreams on hold, blue collar wages and a piercing clamor of the Azteca stadium in their head. The players dive into the changing rooms, cursing the mud and come out dressed in bright red betting on how long it will take for them to get dirty. They enter the pitch, if you can call it that, and the pitch is just an extension of the car park: same old dirt – beaten down in the box and mounded up around the goals –, patches of grass on both sides, proof that grass still manages to grow. There is no trace of grass however in the car park (that's why they call it "the car park") yet this is where the most unlikely event in the world unfolds. For the last fifteen minutes, a team in blue has been warming up in a circle. In the cold, under the leaden sky, they perform a ritual with great professionalism. Two tall men, a goalkeeper dressed in a dark jersey, six of average height, three bald men, three short and two with curly hair. The shirt is just ever so slightly

altered: for an informal game they can't wear the official match sky-blue. But the way they are training, the toned muscles and the shiny new boots leave no doubt.

S.S.C. Napoli, as the poster proclaimed.

Faces that nobody recognizes. Old legends and reserves: two tall, three bald, three short, two with curly hair. No. One with curly hair and... the Idol.



You rub your eyes and count again. One tall and bald, one short, one average and curly haired and... the Idol.

He moves with the grace of a dancer, the precision of a violinist tuning his instrument. Tall he is not, he is not handsome but he glows: under a nest of curls is a faultless image of power. A paragon of perfection. Perfect, as a sphere. He drops to his knees and then explodes upward, he bends and twists, loosening his muscles, his legs and joints, stretching out his arms. And already

this is a show in itself. A silent intuition, which wins out over all other distractions, begins to draw the spectators. A hope against all odds, and then an unbelievable truth, spreading quickly by word of mouth, as extraordinary as it is inexplicable. Acerra is Pulcinella's hometown. The town of 'pyroclastic ruins', the volcanic flows which turn to black earth as they touch the ground. The ground scarred by cinders. A town of badly dressed people in camel overcoats and children looking like miniature adults, paraded around as if they were little saints sent out to collect money like shameless angels.



On the stands, which in fact is only one stand amongst the state houses and construction sites, there is a crowd of about ten thousand. There are too many. Those that don't fit, pile up behind the home goal, trying to spot Maradona's face as he runs forward.

They rub their eyes in disbelief. They look to the children to try to make sense of it all. It seems



like the start of a fantastical dream, a fable made up by a small town journalist; instead it is entirely true.

The Idol comes on to the pitch. He poses for the ritual photos, kisses children, waves at the crowd. He never smiles.

He looks around and lowers his head. Glances briefly around.

He breathes and stomps his feet, testing out the pitch.

He's serious.

He slips, misses a pass and returns to the mid field dejected. He leaves his opponents behind and delivers a wonderful assist to allow the easiest goal in the world.





“You alone!”, shout the intruders as they sneak down onto the sidelines, “You alone!”.
“Vattenne ind’a porta sulo tu!”. It doesn’t matter that the reds are home team, that the black and green goalkeeper feels the despair that any goalkeeper would.

“Into the goal, alone”.

He cheekily plays about on the wing, drives two players crazy, he lobs the ball to the centre-forward who passes it back, he scores with a flying kick and falls to the ground on his arse. He ends up in the mud. He’s annoyed. He frowns. Maybe no, slowly he begins to understand why he is there. His face has the shadow of one who needs to atone.

Atone for the night life and the attentions of the strange ‘groupies’ who see to his every need in return for a photo with ‘someone important’ or some odd invitation to either a tacky wedding or a christening; atone for the vices which make a mockery of the simple ignorance of his childhood pitches in Lanus.

He ran off overseas leaving his conscience behind. In this moment, he begins to understand. In the muffled lap of suspicion, he’s playing another game.

An hour and a half of rapture. The Idol dances in the mud and is covered with a different kind of dirt. He keeps afloat by the force of his legs and yet his heart is locked in a drifting hold. For all the others he’s a backup sun.

It is drizzling. The crowd yells and chants. They dance under the rain like Pulcinella himself.



Then the referee, hunched over like an accountant, blows the final whistle. The players return to the changing rooms: that is, they cross behind the goal and through the flower beds into a concrete shed. It's likely there will be no hot water but nobody has the guts to admit it.

A man in camel overcoat moves closer to the number nine in the blue shirt, and mutters in his ear, under the mass of curly wet hair. "Twenty million", he whispers excitedly. For the poor little boy and his delicate operation, twenty million. They laugh.

But the Idol doesn't laugh. He brushes against people, accepts hugs and pushes on past them; he needs fresh air, space. From his home on a cloud he has descended down to re-experience hell.

His butt hurts from the impact of the hard ground. He puffs his chest out and is a child again, in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. He goes to get some fresh air, and thinks about the beaten pitch that no longer absorbs the water, the leather-like, hopeless disillusion.

No sun, they say, can heal it.

Leonardo Guzzo was born in Naples in 1979 and lives between Sapri and Rome. He holds a degree in Political Science and works as an international organization advisor for the Free University “Maria Santissima Assunta”. He is on the editorial board of both the newspaper *La Città* and the monthly journal *50&più* and writes for various magazines and newspapers such as *Il Mattino*, *L’Editoriale*, *Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno* as well as for the blog *La Balena Bianca*. Some of his short stories have appeared in the major Italian literary revue *Nuovi Argomenti* as well as in the journal *Il primo amore*, edited by Antonio Moresco and Tiziano Scarpa. His debut collection of short-stories, *Le radici del mare*, was published in 2015 by Italic Pequod and was very well received by critics and readers alike. His second collection of short-stories, entitled *Terre emerse*, is forthcoming by same publisher. It contains *L’ultima spiaggia*, *The Last Beach*, published in the *Journal of Italian Translation* and translated by Charles Hann. Leonardo is currently working on his first collection of poems.

Alessandra Giorgioni (1996) is completing her MA in Literary Translation Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. An avid reader of literature in translation, she translates contemporary Italian literature for the *Journal of Italian Translation* and *NEKE-The New Zealand Journal of Translation Studies*.

Note: The images of this file have been retrieved from YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CavW80De54>