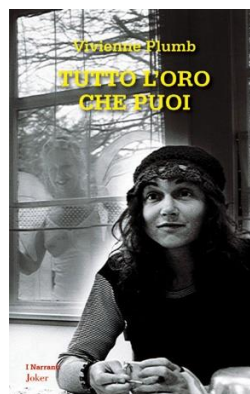


ALL GOLD

Vivienne Plumb
Tutto l'oro che puoi

Translated by Antonella Sarti Evans

Edizioni Joker (I narranti)
www.edizionijoker.ocm
2017, 196pp, € 17,00



Tutto l'oro che puoi, an Italian translation of *As Much Gold as an Ass Could Carry* – a collection of poems, shorts stories and theatre plays by New Zealand poet and writer Vivienne Plumb – was recently published in Italy by Joker Edizioni. This translation by Antonella Sarti Evans – a Wellington-based Italian translator, writer and teacher – came to light just a few months after the publication of Plumb's book in New Zealand. Plumb's original work, released in March 2017 by Auckland publisher split/fountain, is embellished by the illustrations of New Zealand artist Glenn Otto. Its Italian translation has a more austere layout, but – nevertheless – is visually enjoyable, including, in its final pages, a few pictures from Plumb's 1993 theatre play *Love Knots*.

Life as a subtle and mysterious interplay between appearances, disappearances and unexpected shifts suddenly changing the course of events is one of the most prominent themes in Plumb's work. In the short story *The Wife who Spoke Japanese in Her Sleep*, Honey, the female protagonist, without any apparent reason starts to make prophecies in Japanese during her sleep. No one knows or understands how – all of a sudden – she can perfectly handle a language that she never knew. This mysterious ability turns Honey into a local celebrity, leading, on the other hand, to unexpected, cataclysmic changes in her until then monotonous family life: her

husband disappears and never comes back, her personal life is turned upside down. In *The Glove Box*, probably the most exemplary and significant of her short stories, Uncle Whitey, *bon vivant*, heavy drinker and charming black sheep of the family – a fun, talkative, generous man, emblematic presence in Plumb’s childhood and protagonist of many family gatherings – one day vanishes into thin air. There is rumour that he died of cancer, no-one knows exactly when and where.

In Plumb’s work, life and time are depicted like whirlpools that inevitably and gradually swallow the loved ones. Plumb’s family life becomes a vivid anthology of characters gone too soon and her writing a constant battle against oblivion and an “act of love” – as she describes it in her poem *On Using People You Love in Your Poems*. In the *Glove Box*, the protagonist unexpectedly turns schizophrenic and her mental disease increasingly affects her relatives and gradually intertwines with their lives until she eventually dies. Plumb’s beloved aunt Flavia, gets cancer and starts to walk her inevitable path to death; her uncle Phineas only lived three days, dying as a toddler. Again: in her short story *Efharisto*, as well as in her poems *Something Trivial* and *Before the Operation*, Plumb describes her son’s fight against cancer and his journey to death. Death, in Plumb’s poems and short stories, is normalised to the point that it becomes a familiar presence, even a friendly one. The need to remember the ones who passed away goes hand in hand with the effort to rationalise what cannot be understood. When describing her son’s funeral in *Something Trivial*, Plumb writes “everything about the day feels massive” and “best not to endure life in the shallows, better to dive deep, a pure white sheet, a kiss between the thighs, and cachinnations not sighs” Again, as Plumb states in *The Glove Box* referring to her aunt Flavia, “I do not wish to forget. I want to be able to remember everything

about her. I do not want everything to remain invisible, veiled. I wish to be able to understand everything, to understand why she isn't here and why she, too, was taken away from me". However, despite the author's attempts to demystify death, it sometimes still appears as a big, unsettling question mark, as shown in the *Glove Box*: "They call it 'the other country' when a person 'passes over' or 'passes on'. Passed on into where, I wonder? They say you pass on into something beautiful, but what if it's not? What if it's as hard as being alive".

Besides being strongly marked by reflections on life, death and the importance of writing, Plumb's work is also remarkable for its capacity to re-create a sense of place through vivid and effective descriptions. Indeed, not only humans, but also the locations and landscapes that framed the author's life – Australia, as well as New Zealand and Europe – play a fundamental role in her poetry. Antonella Sarti's Italian translation highlights and reflects the artistic value of some of Plumb's best poems and proves particularly strong and effective when dealing with the description of places. This is clearly shown in Sarti's translation of the poem *The Capital City*¹: "è uno di quei giorni estatici in cui Wellington assomiglia ad un gioiello su un palmo aperto (...) che profuma di fresco, di vento, di pulito". In *The Intercity*, Sarti, in a similarly powerful way, translates the original poem² – that describes a bus trip through rural New Zealand – as "abbiamo passato Levin mentre dormivo, il nostro autobus è come un ago, cuce a linee incrociate pascoli / campi / foreste di abeti/ coste della Nuova Zelanda". Other poems centred on specific locations such as *Home (Casa)*, *Letter from My Daughter (Lettera da Mia Figlia)*, *Sulphur City (Città Sulfurea)*, *Back to Scheveningen (Ritorno a Scheveningen)*, *Motel in Taupō (Motel a Taupō)* and *Lorikeets (I Lorichetti)* equally showcase Sarti's ability to convey in Italian colours, sounds and atmospheres of Plumb's lively place descriptions.

Sarti's Italian translation of *As Much Gold as an Ass Could Carry* makes finally accessible to all Italian literature lovers a wide collection of Vivienne Plumb's poetry, prose and theatre, introducing an author still relatively unknown in Italy – an author able to tackle, explore and put on paper some of the deepest existential themes with Calvino's lightness.

Diego Bonelli

Notes

¹ "it is one of those ecstatic days when Wellington resembles a jewel on an open palm (...) it smells so windy, so fresh, so clean".

² pasture/paddock/fir/forest/foreshore of New Zealand. I have slept through Levin, our bus is like a needle as it criss-crosses the