

ORIGINAL WOUNDS

Excerpt from

LE FERITE ORIGINALI

by

Eleonora C. Caruso

Le ferite originali © Mondadori, 2018.
Inquiries regarding rights may be addressed to
Emanuela Canali, Foreign Rights Manager
emanuela.canali@mondadori.it

English translation © 2018 by Anne Milano Appel

“Writing to your girl?”

Christian Negri tossed the phone on the floor – not because he was angry, just indifferent.

“My *girl*,” he repeated. “You talk like someone from the Seventies.”

Dante nudged the phone aside, to get to the door of the closet where he kept a change of clothes and a suitcase ready, even if it hadn’t been touched in months.

“Right, the Seventies, early October, to be precise.”

Christian stared at him and Dante realized that the “Seventies” was the most ancient date the young man could imagine.

“Bitch, are you that old? I could be your son.”

“Sure, if we were in Cambodia. Negri, you can count, can’t you?”

Christian ignored him, just twirled in his chair. His damp hair was dripping onto his sweater. Dante had found him in the corridor, after the workmen and everyone on that floor had gone home. He hadn’t revealed himself right away, he’d just stood there watching the guy unroll a sheet of cellophane from the wall to the elevator, and then for no reason dump an entire bucket

of red paint over it. It was a scene that in itself was quite surreal even without what happened next: Christian lay down on it and wrapped himself up in it. In the end Dante had unwrapped him – swaddled in that cocoon he reminded Dante of the Nineties’ ads for *Twin Peaks*, “Who killed Laura Palmer?” – and found him lying there, composed, with his eyes open, staring, despite the paint on his eyelashes and the paint-spattered strands of hair stuck to his face. Regardless of the obvious signs of imbalance, Dante did not regret having fucked him, even though to do so he had sacrificed a new Ermenegildo Zegna.

Among the workmen there were some who were young and athletic, but Christian Negri was something else again. He had the rather arrogant beauty typical of faces that were nonconforming and extremely hardened, the vain ones who know they have turned ugliness into its opposite; complex faces, determined by risky combinations, which you don’t get used to because you can’t sort them out. The first time he had seen him, Dante had made a 180 degree turn to follow him with his eyes. Christian had noticed. And hadn’t been surprised. The day he said to Dante, before they’d ever even spoken to each other, “well, do you want to just stare at me?,” he’d said it taking for granted that he would not be turned down, since that had most likely never happened to him before.

Now Christian was standing in front of the window, staring at either his own reflection in the glass or at the city seen from above, punctuated by the kinetic lights of the already late but still busy evening.

As he buttoned his shirt, Dante said: “Milan is beautiful, all in all.”

“What do you mean *all in all*?”

“I mean that all things considered it’s a beautiful city.”

“It’s not beautiful ‘all things considered,’ it’s beautiful period.”

“There are more beautiful cities.”

“No.”

He pulled a crumpled joint out of his wallet and, with that in his mouth, stood up to search his pockets for a lighter, but Dante took the reefer from him before he could find a light.

“How can you say that, have you lived in other cities?” “Yeah, a few, and you?”

“A few, yeah. Over the past twenty years.”

“Yet I always see you here not doing a damn thing.”

“Staying put in one place for ten days in a row is a partner’s privilege. You, on the other hand? I’ve seen you on all fours, but not to lay tiles.”

Christian didn’t answer. He lowered his jeans and undershorts down to his pubic hair to check two bruises on his hips that were turning purple. “Do they look like they’re from fucking?”

“Sure, because they are.”

“Then punch me.”

“What?”

“I have to tell my *girl* something.” He sat on the desk, waiting. “I’ll tell her I got into a fight.”

He seemed serious. Dante was not.

“You should have suggested it to me in the heat of the moment, Negri, I would have gladly done it, but coldly like this ...”

Before he had a chance to complete the sentence or put on his jacket, Christian emptied the marble pen holder onto the floor and slammed the heavy object into his face. With no warning, no hesitation. He said “fuck” afterwards, but matter-of-factly. Given that gesture, and

Christian's indifferent expression, Dante imagined he should be worried. He wasn't. Instead he went over to him, touched the spot where the bruise was already forming and laughed.

"You should treat it better, that face. It's the reason we put up with such bullshit."

"You and who else?"

"Your *girl*. For example."

Christian grabbed his hand and pushed the thumb harder against his cheekbone. He sighed lasciviously.

"Now you wish you had punched me, right?"

"Sure. I also wanted to kill you for the way you left the bathroom earlier, but by now I missed the chance."

"You don't have the guts to kill me."

"And you don't have the guts to die."

Christian smiled. He took Dante's hands and tightened them around his neck.

"Try me."

So, right now, there are two adult men in Christian's life: the one he pays to ask him questions and the one he fucks as long as he doesn't ask him any. A third man, his father, is AWOL, he hasn't heard from him in months, the last time was a text: "They're coming Monday to install the radiator thermostats." He feels like a stereotype, a textbook case cubed, but although he can't stand it, he must admit that the structure is working, like an ugly scaffolding that nonetheless supports a building. We can't choose what keeps us standing. Sometimes you have to think of one thing only, that is, not to collapse.

Dafne had fallen asleep in Christian's bed, and when she woke up he had not yet returned. The first thing she checked was the cell phone, which blinded her in the room's darkness, making her close her eyes and grope for the lamp. Twenty missed calls, but none of them from him. She took out her hair clasp and undid her braid, a plait that fell from the nape of her neck down to her navel. That was the room she'd known for twenty years, the bed in which she'd slept for six, she knew the contents of the drawers, she could tell you which old figurines matched the glue left on the furniture, but without Christian it was merely an alien place, somehow frightening.

It was eleven o'clock, why wasn't he home?

She curled up on her side, sensing that the ache in her stomach was coming back. By now not even two days went by without her experiencing it. Candida: the pain when it came was piercing. It felt like a battle was raging in the area between her breasts and her knees. She folded the pillow in two and leaned her head on it, observing the objects on the bedside table. There was a CD by Jeff Buckley (she didn't know that Christian knew him, let alone that he had a CD of his), a lighter (he smoked more weed than he told her, but she pretended not to notice because he needed to keep his secrets), and a USB flash drive in an open box of lorazepam. She picked it up and saw that the blister pack was almost full. Did that mean that he was doing well? Did that mean that he was doing badly? Sometimes, when she stopped racing, Dafne had the feeling that she was out of breath. It was as if she were always running at high-speed while not going anywhere. What was she running from?

The phone rang, finally displaying the name she was waiting for.

"Chris!" she sang, before bringing it close to her ear. "Ciao!"

"Hey, babe, ciao. Sorry I didn't call you earlier, today was utter chaos."

“No problem, I figured as much, don’t worry about it. How are you, what happened?”

* * *

The first time he sees him is by way of a group of noisy girls – a laurel wreath, stiletto heels on cobblestones. Sant’Ambrogio, metro exit. A dachshund is pissing at the top of the stairs and his master is talking on his cell phone: *don’t tell me you’re going to do something*, he says, *if then you don’t do it*. It begins to rain. Not immediately, it starts with a few drops. The young man stands there at the metro entrance, staring after the girl with the laurel wreath until she’s too far away, then his gaze slides over his iPod, an old black model. His glasses are outdated as well and he is very tall, but his shoulders are curved, as if his instinct were to shrink. Christian wants him. He has to take that boy with the glasses and ride him until he explodes, he must, right away, or the world will end. *Look at me*, he starts thinking, *look at me, look at me, fuck look at me*. The boy looks up, looks for him, no, he’s looking at the rain. The asphalt turns darker, one drop at a time, the dog is tangled in the leash, his master dries off the cell phone like it was his child’s cheek. The boy disappears down the steps into the subway. He didn’t look at him.

Christian becomes fixated on him the way he sometimes fixates on people, daydreaming about them until the sole force of his desire makes them materialize. He returns to Sant’Ambrogio again and again, and he finds him: he works in the university bookstore that Dafne frequents. Right now she’s at home, looking at the surface of little things, where she always manages to find a microsense of existence.

This time the young man notices Christian: all he has to say is “excuse me.” They look at each other and the boy hurries down the ladder he’d climbed, banging his knee against a step; the books he was shelving fall, he bends down to pick them up, then stands and hits his shoulder. It’s clear he has no idea how much space he occupies, or he does know and is self-conscious about it. He doesn’t know how to move in his body, which seen up close like this reveals an imploded physicality. He’s wearing a shirt, and Christian would like to fuck them all, all the twenty-year-olds in a shirt.

“Oh my God, you’re huge,” he says. “Will you let me have four inches?”

“If you want, I’ll let you have eight.”

“You’re fast.”

The boy blushes. Not a little, he turns beet red, then he does all those things that shy people do when they’re embarrassed – he giggles, lowers his eyes, turns away without turning, covers his mouth. Finally he forces himself to look at Christian, with a tense smile still hovering, and says, “Let’s pretend I didn’t say anything, ok?”

“Not likely, I’m still thinking about it.”

The young man gives another nervous giggle, then checks himself, takes a breath as if to let know that he intends to start over, and asks: “Can I help you?”

You can fall in love with me, for starters, Christian thinks, *in a way that makes you want to shatter the dreary cynical-sentimental rhetoric that afflicts every kind of interaction on this planet and that will lead us to surprise one another with fantastic romantic scenarios that will compose a never-ending musical extravaganza. In the absence of that, just fuck me, but fuck me good.*

“We sold the last one yesterday, if you want we can order it.”

“Okay.”

“I need your friend’s name and number.”

“Can I give you mine?”

“If you want.”

“Where should I write them?”

“Just tell me.”

“But if I want to write them?”

“I suppose you can.”

“On a piece of paper or should I write them on your hand?”

The boy holds out his open palm, but pulls it back as soon as Christian tries to grab it.

“I was joking.” He slides a pad of post-it notes towards him and Christian writes his number down, going over the figures twice, with his name in block letters, underlined:

CHRISTIAN NEGRI.

“Call me,” he says.

“As soon as the book arrives.”

“Call me,” he says again.

The young man actually only calls him when the book arrives. Christian, for spite, shows up soon after closing time. The bookstore is empty, the shutter lowered a quarter of the way down; the lights are off except for the one over the counter. The young man is reading or studying, his pad of post-its in hand; he’s crimping the corners and smoothing them out, then crimping them again and smoothing them. His glasses have slid down his nose and his lips, in profile, resemble those of a statue, that is, they seem softer than real lips.

“Good thing I’m not a student,” Christian says, as he pays 180 euro. He’s tossed out the hook for *why, what do you do*, but the clerk merely asks him: “cash or credit?”

“Cash.” He drums his fingers on the books. “Not that it’s about the money,” he tries again. “It’s that I can’t concentrate on things that don’t give me pleasure.”

The boy clears his throat, says “sign...” as if the idea was to attach a whole sentence to that word, but he doesn’t add anything else, so Christian signs. He returns the sales slip, sliding it across the countertop. The boy is about to take it, but Christian holds it down with two fingers.

“You?”

“My signature isn’t needed.”

“What are *you studying*?”

“Oh, Engineering Physics. A Master’s. At the Polytecnic.”

“So you people exist, you have a body and everything.”

“Yes, but we habitually mortify it.”

“I think you’re the first example of an Engineering student I know who’s on the loose.”

“I haven’t been set loose yet.”

“Will you go out with me?”

“Yes, the back room is already closed up.”

“You didn’t get me.”

“What?”

“Will you go out for a drink with me?”

The boy stops and simply says: “Oh God.”

“What kind of an answer is ‘Oh God’?”

“I don’t know, I can’t hear, blood is rushing in my ears.”

“Well, at least it’s moving downward, that’s something.”

“Oh God,” he says again, articulating each syllable. He’s so red that Christian can’t resist poking a finger into his cheek, leaving a white mark, and causing the young man to cry out in frustration.

“What’s your name?”

“Davide.”

“Davide what?”

“Rimari.”

“Sweet, that double ‘ri.’ Davide Rimari, tell me: aren’t I your type?”

“I think you’re everyone’s type, except for someone whose type is... well, hideous.”

“Then go out with me.”

“When?”

“Now.”

* * *

It’s a night like any other. A rank smell rises from the Naviglio, of things that are stagnant, maybe rotting, and there’s an icy wind. Milan is the most beautiful city in the world. No one could deny it, not from where he is standing, a place where the sky has dropped the clouds on the horizon as if they were grimy tatters, while everything else is limpid, a perfect blue.

Everyone complains because Milan is cold. Milan is cold because its breath is cold. Milan is alive, it gets sick, it recovers. Milan is in a hurry because its hurrying shows that you are alive even in Milan, that you can survive, despite Milan. The Milanese die, return to Milan, regenerate it. They are prisoners for all time, of the things it took away, of those it gave. The Fascist grandparents of the fashion blogger who made a fortune, the couple of vagrants burned near the Central Station, the guy on a scooter with his head broken inside his helmet. The witches. Christian closes his eyes and hears them, as anyone can hear them at certain times of the day when the sun breaks through the clouds and burns away the first layer of reality as if passing through a lens: even in Milan there are ghosts.

Christian adores Milan. He couldn’t have been born in any other city. Milan spewed him up from its viscera like some waste that flows out from the Seveso. There are days when he seems to be able to tap right into the heart of his city, and in those moments he is no longer either human or divine – he is a force, impassive and impartial, who was there before God and will be there when God finally defaults. He will watch the world collapse, Milan topple, and its thud will be extraordinary.

He lifts one foot and balances on the other, hands in his pockets. An instinct contrary to that of not clinging to anything – he has it. People look at him, not speaking, or they do but he doesn’t hear them. Or rather: he hears every word, but none stands out more than any other. He imagines the city as an amorphous creature, a benevolent sea monster, made violent by constant assaults. What a celebration, what a joy, how happy he is, buoyant, all the hopes falling out of his pockets along with the suburban bus tickets. Life is too short, too long, too exciting, so discouraging. If he took another step, what would he feel? Probably a sense of déjà-vu. He sets his foot down and looks at the Naviglio that he doesn’t deserve, that’s how beautiful it is. No, Milan couldn’t topple. Christian adores life, this extraordinary period of time when anything can happen.

The green M2 line at Porta Genova, passing through Cadorna on the way to Certosa; Riri would be happy to see him, even at this time of night. Transfer to the red M1 line, also in Cadorna, towards Bisceglie, Wagner stop; he has the keys, he could lie down and sleep next to Dafne without saying anything. But the direct route is the one which takes him to Moscova in five stops; home, to his brother Julian.

He sits on the low wall, his legs dangling over. He lights up a joint. He has many lives, but here he may well not have any. The wind breathes the voices of the dead and the living. Christian listens to them.

2010. He had stretched out on the couch, partly to be insolent, partly because he thought you had to. Mostly, however, it was to give his body a break, that loaded spring, ready to snap, that violin string strained to the breaking point.

He was twenty-three years old. His mother, Giulia, had died two years earlier in a car crash. A few hours before it happened he'd said goodbye to her as she stood at the door, maybe with her shopping bags in hand. He'd been brusque, as he always was when saying goodbye – he wasn't fond of the time that is lost in exchanging niceties between being with someone and no longer being with him. Instead, from that day on, that moment had remained pinned to the rest of his existence, like an old "For Sale" sign nailed to a door post. No more mama to always ask him "how are you," to tell him "talk to your father, don't be angry with him."

"Have you ever read Calvin & Hobbes?" Christian had asked.

The therapist was a man in his fifties, with an appropriately attentive, serious expression. He replied: "I admit I haven't."

"There is a fairly well-known comic strip that says: "Everybody seeks happiness! Not me, though! That's the difference between me and the rest of the world. Happiness isn't good enough for me! I demand euphoria!" Christian sat up. "I want that to be my epitaph."

Some mornings have Dafne's smell. It's like waking up in a meadow.

Why do women hide their smell? Doing that they all smell the same, except for a spot below the neck. Christian dislikes women who dab perfume on their necks even more than those who shave their pussy. *Come on, anyone can see you're not seven years old anymore, what the hell were you thinking of?* If he could abolish one thing, however, he would choose hair spray. Dafne doesn't use it. She never styles her hair, which is naturally red, long, beautiful. She wipes off the gloss before kissing him, because she knows that he hates the fruity taste of the strawberry condoms.

He will always remember Dafne's smell, because it was the first to arouse in him a conscious sexual excitement. "Butter thighs," her mother called her, because her legs were pale under her skirt. One summer her breasts had sprouted. Under the shapeless sweaters they looked like a couple of knobs, but squeezed in the two-piece bathing-suit from the previous year they were definitely real, actual future tits.

He'd asked, "Will you let me touch them?"

It was evening, you could hear music from the pavilion on the beach, some group dance. What was popular that year? The air was warm and sticky with gnats. Dafne hadn't answered.

"So keep them to yourself then," he said. "Your fucking business."

Dafne shrank. "Okay. You can."

They were eleven and twelve. They had grown up together and she was afraid that he was going to abandon her, that the inescapable and very evident distinction of their genders would turn her into something unfamiliar, boring, somehow ridiculous.

She would have said “okay” even to eating mice.

On those evenings, the adults always lingered around the table on the veranda, a little tipsy, with the mosquito lamp burning on the steps. Christian had a very clear memory of his mother getting up to feel the beach towels hanging on the clothes line and folding them if they were dry. That picture was clearer than the way he groped Dafne, pulling her nipples and telling her, “You look like a cow.” She was silent.

The first time she spoke up it was to say no, in the bathhouse at the beach, their rubber flip flops mired in mud. Christian went into a sulk. In the end she let him do it, then spent the rest of the afternoon peeling her shoulders under the umbrella. Christian hated the way she played the victim, and he hated Julian, who moved awkwardly on the sand holding his father’s hand.

The first time with Dafne just about summed up their relationship. He wanted to do it, she was eighteen and wanted him to love her. Christian pushed and found something, an obstacle, so he kept pushing until he broke it. Dafne was cold, pallid, dry, but it didn’t seem strange to either of them because it was the Nineties and kids were having sex, but they didn’t know shit about it. She let him finish, then smiled at him and asked, “It was the first time, right?”

No, it was not. Christian had lost his virginity at thirteen, in the car, with a woman a lot older who’d said to him “you’re cute, you should be a model.” He told Dafne yes anyway, and still says so, because Christian thinks that if you live a lie consistently and tell it repeatedly, it becomes the truth. Dafne laughs when they talk about it: “You’ve always been a beast.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What for? I was with the person I loved. That’s more than many girls can say.”

Her misfortune has been to always forgive him no matter what.

Her misfortune, it might be better to say, has been and continues to be him.