

Awakenings

by Francesco Verso

translation by Sally McCorry

*We are increasingly dependent on prosthetics and treatments to keep us alive,  
but reduce our abilities to enjoy life.*

Serge Latouche

I am alive. The first image that floats up from my memory is the fuzzy shape of Marco's long gaunt face. My substance hasn't transformed into a story to be told. Something in my life must still need to be written.

Marco's reddish beard, with its streaks of ginger, has rusted in many places. Being reborn after such a long time has its advantages. I would like to reach out a hand and stroke this variegated hair I hold so dear, but I can lift no more than a finger. He notices and lifts his gaze from his phone.

"She's awake! Come quick. Eugenia has woken up!"

It must be Easter because in addition to the flowers on the bedside table, Marco is holding a chocolate egg. He puts it down, takes a damp cloth and wipes my forehead.

"Hello my love, what year is it?"

Hearing my voice is like dredging up a memory; like one of those things that have been neglected for so long you think they might not work any more.

"Hello Eugenia, it is 2048."

A machine has been keeping me alive for all this time.

"2048?"

The number shakes my identity, shocked by the knowledge that I am emerging from a deep abyss. I don't have the courage to add anything else. Marco's face is full of joy and relief; it would be unfair and selfish of me to wipe away those emotions, so I say, "How long has passed?"

"Nine years."

Another number I cannot get away from: thousands and thousands of days, an infinite number of grains of sand have slipped by without me having lived them. The only consolation is that the flow was slowed.

I look towards the foot of the bed but I cannot see my daughter.

"Where is she? Sara must now be ..."

I can feel the floor vibrating with the footsteps of someone running. The shaking comes from my ankles, rises up my calves and just brushes my thighs.

"Eighteen years old!"

A shrill voice yells from the entrance to the room.

I barely recognise her. Between the Sara I remember and this adolescent there are many children and young ladies. A whole deck of identities time can not give back to me. She is wearing a black t-shirt, its short sleeves fringed, as if ripped. Her hair is long, hanging loose to her shoulders, (she used to hate her hair like this and would ask me to tie it up in a ponytail) and a pair of showy earrings, dangling metal spirals like whirlwinds, which light up intermittently. I get the impression they are recording the scene in realtime.

"C'mon, what are you waiting for? Come and give me a kiss."

She starts towards me instinctively, but then hesitates, and in the end doesn't move. She turns to the side and I notice someone behind her.

"May I, mum?" Sara asks a stranger.

An elegant looking woman, about forty, nods, the hint of a smile flashing across her face. I remember when I used to wear my hair like her, when I was younger: an impertinent fringe highlighting cheekbones and jaw.

I welcome my daughter in my arms, I hold her tight and sniff her neck.

“Mum?” I whisper in her ear. “What’s that all about?”

Husband, daughter, mum... After nine years it is as though the concepts shaping our relationships have faded into simple words and have lost their strength, crumbling and becoming vague, generic terms that are no good to anyone. If you don’t watch out, they can be lost for ever, whether you like it or not.

“Don’t worry,” Marco says, and starts opening the Easter egg. My heart races. When he has finished unwrapping it he holds it out, offering it to me.

“Why do you say that? Should I be worried?”

I take the egg but don’t know what to do with it, so it rests in my hands as if I am trying to hatch it.

“We... well, at the time, when the accident happened the doctors didn’t know... when or if you would wake up...”

There is guilt in his voice. The implicit admission of something to be ashamed of. Nine years are long enough to put anyone to the test. I drive all these thoughts out of my head. I don’t want to ruin my reawakening so soon.

“Well, now you know. Who is she?”

That woman isn’t a stranger. My daughter just called her mum.

What does Marco call her?

On the other hand my life has only just started running again, whereas theirs never stopped. When I used to read a book or watch a film, I would feel like I was following the

thread of a precise plot, giving substance to my idea of the story, but what happened when I wasn't reading or watching? What did the characters do without my eyes to watch them?

Marco looks first at Sara and then the stranger behind her. That woman has a familiar face, well looked after, a trace of makeup, not a hair out of place; now I was paying her more attention, I wouldn't say she was much more than thirty.

Over time any space tends to get filled. It is only to be expected. I just want to understand how it happened ...

"Sara was so sad after the accident. She didn't want to go to school any more, she spent hours and hours in the bathroom, she didn't even want to go out with her friends, she had practically stopped eating."

I grab my daughter's hand. She is wearing nail varnish. The same colour as the mystery woman's.

"I'm so sorry. I remember rushing out of the office, the network wasn't working. A general blackout... The people walking along the streets were panicking, then a car ... driverless. Drove right into me without slowing down. I remember the crossing's stripes on the ground, almost completely faded."

The spread of pain: it extends vertically, along the family axis and horizontally along the temporal one. Technology doesn't soften the intensity, it spreads it out.

"Are you OK now, my love?" Luckily she nods.

Marco sits on the bed next to me and rests a hand on my thigh.

"Who is she, are you going to tell me?" I am not easily shocked and I don't like public scenes. Above all, I don't understand what reaction I should have, faced with this apparition: anger, dismay, jealousy? The woman hasn't said a word, she has done no more than smile.

"I bought a mourning management service. She is you, with an artificial body."

"What? A service... Me?"

I pull my hand away, a reaction of uncontrollable disgust.

“Yes, she has your personality, rebuilt from a cerebral scan. She is an Artificial Intelligence who has relived all of your experiences right up to the day of the accident ... since then she has been emulating you.”

I shudder at the idea that for nine years a machine has been looking after me and another has been taking care of my daughter. Should we be grateful or pity our physical and psychological fragility?

“She... emulates me?”

“Don’t be angry, Eugenia. It was supposed to be a temporary form of therapy, psychological support for Sara to help her get over the trauma ... but then nine years passed.”

I cover my mouth to stop the scream coming out. I struggle with the absurdity of the situation. Is it how Marco says, or is this artificial intelligence, this anthropomorphic icon modelled on me, supposed to compensate for my physical absence and comfort him too.

“If it was temporary, like you say, she can be turned off?”

“Yes, of course we can do that.”

Sara turns to the other woman. My daughter is shocked and scared, a breath of anxiety escapes her lips. Every time my gaze rests on her I see two people: the child of the past, and the nearly woman she is now. I cannot resolve them into one image.

The *other Eugenia* frowns, analysing the data.

“Think about it though,” Marco hurries to say, seeing things are taking a turn for the worse, “Sara has spent more time with her than with you.”

“So what? What do are you saying? Wasn’t she just an emulation?”

“Yes, but... you would be killing her mother again.”

*Mother.* That word, naturally associated with me from the moment of her conception and for all of her gestation, from her birth through her nursing and growing up, has slipped

away a day at a time. It has slipped away from Sara's thoughts too, a little piece at a time... and that emptiness has been filled by another Eugenia.

"So that makes her the mother? Her presence negates mine?"

"No, of course not."

"Then maybe you would just prefer to send me back into a coma? Or leave me here?"

"What are you talking about. Nobody wants anything like that."

The egg I am holding is beginning to melt from the heat of my hands. The chocolate has got all over my fingers. I lick them to clean them. "Gianduia. It's delicious."

I offer the egg to Sara, she has always loved chocolate. She breaks off a big piece, the other Eugenia does the same thing, and Marco takes what is left.

"She can eat?" I ask without looking directly at it.

"She doesn't assimilate, but she can simulate," Marco answers jokily.

Licking her fingers Sara asks, "Couldn't we all just live together?"

I take the box with the Easter egg surprise in it, and put it on the table.

No one wants to open it.