

Stories stacked upon stories and three seasons to set you ablaze

Review of *Sevastopol* by Emilio Fraia
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I first came across Emilio Fraia what seems like a lifetime ago. It was December 2019, just a few months before time slowed and then stopped for so many of us. I was on my lunch break, eating in a crowded vegetarian self-service cafeteria in the centre of Barcelona. A man from Nepal asked if he could share my table. I nodded, we chatted, and then I got back to reading a short story titled ‘Sevastopol’ in *The New Yorker*.

The story is set in São Paulo and explores a friendship between Klaus, an older playwright who has seen better days, and Nadia, the narrator, a young woman who wants, maybe, to be a writer. Both of these people are lonely, seemingly lost and guided only by the will to imagine—the ephemeral hope of stories.

I found the story charming, but later forgot about it. I didn’t search for Emilio Fraia’s biography online. I read his story during lunch and quite liked it. Back then, that was that. I had people to meet, places to go, menial meaningless tasks to perform in a crowded office.

Close to a year later, Lolli Editions announced that it was publishing a slim volume, a novel in three parts, by a Brazilian writer. Blurbs promised ‘a literary jewel;’ ‘accurate language, powerful imagination.’ The press release went even further, claiming Fraia’s prose was ‘reminiscent of the prose of Anton Chekhov, Roberto Bolaño, and Rachel Cusk.’

And while it may sound as if some people were using a bit of hyperbole, let me say that I, scout's honour, am not. This book lives up to the hype. Fraia's prose is magnificent and magical. *Sevastopol* is a gentle marvel. Zoë Perry's English translation is sparse and, deceptively simple. There is a stillness to the prose but *something* is going on just beneath the silky surface. The words and the character's memories of memory become interwoven and ever more complex, without ever becoming heavy. The stories are sad but light, the climax of each story offering a window, a reflection, a pool of shimmery blue – never darkness, no finales, no dead-ends.

Fraia's novel begins, just like its literary totem Tolstoy's *The Sevastopol Sketches*, with a section called 'December.' The narrator, speaking in the second person, tells of her obsession with climbing, and conquering, Mount Everest. Tolstoy's narrator presents, using the second person, amputees and wounded soldiers. In this 'December,' Lena, the narrator, herself has lost her legs in a gruelling accident. She is melancholic due to her own hubris, the perils of celebrity, a fleeting affair. Lena is unreliable and brave, impulsive and sometimes foolish. She is young and yet, at certain turns, very wise. And now, when she can no longer climb, she keeps thinking, replaying the images over her past—all that innocence and ambition, going further and further back, as if she could excavate some sort of true self. This thinking, the constant replaying, is what ails her but also what gives us the beautiful nesting of stories, like a film that we can rewind into dust, beyond images and into the twilight:

I underwent seventeen surgeries. Who would ever think that one day you wake up feeling fine, going after your dream of climbing a mountain, and at journey's end a piece of your body simply no longer exists? When asked how he coped, one of the thousands maimed

in the Crimean War said: The chief thing is not to think, it's nothing much. It mostly all comes from thinking.

Despite the fact that she's trying to move on, to tell a personal story of redemption, the past keeps coming back to Lena. The past appears in a particularly uncanny way in an art gallery, where she encounters her own story in a video installation. Lena still talks to Gino, the lover who was with her at that defining moment, the hour of her accident. She asks him:

And if today everything came floating back, and I now find myself writing this to you, it's because some things never leave us. I don't expect a reply, Gino. But I do wonder: what's the difference between the story in this video of yours and the one I've told myself for so long? Is there even a difference, in the end?

Lena's story is at once epic and almost tenderly mundane. This first story/chapter/section reveals itself as strange and touching. The reader, dare I say almost any reader, will be so engaged that s/he will turn the page and carry on to 'May,' where Fraia, following in Tolstoy's phantom-like footsteps, will explore truce and truth. This story opens in an abandoned rural hotel deep in the Brazilian countryside: 'It's a place with rusty cutlery at the bottom of heavy drawers. Chipped cups, chairs stacked atop the stained carpet in the corner of an empty hall.' Here begins the odd encounter and (mis)encounters between Nilo and Adán. We enter a layered tale, with echoes of amputations, violence, decay, wounded souls and lost limbs. Lena's story is still within the prose, but her story is perhaps just in the soil. In this middle section the land, and the landscape, man's relationship to the land and the landscape, and the cosmos, take centre stage:

Nilo looks up. Ahead, across the river, the lights come on in the house on Hermes' farm. Nilo crosses the bridge. On the mountain, he can see the machines at work, the machines that uproot, strip, and stack the eucalyptus. A mountain is an attempt to get closer to the gods. Like in Egypt, and in many of the desert regions of Central America, there were no mountains. That's why the Incas and the Aztecs needed to build the pyramids. The highest ones were chosen as altars, where the Incas took offerings and performed their ritual sacrifices.

In the east, night starts to roll in. The road disappears. On the mountain, the eucalyptus trees bow gently, I think the wind will carry them, I think they're coming. The dead are at peace. Nilo hears a rumble. He cranes his neck. It's the sound of an engine. A car. It seems to tear through the canopy, rising up from behind the eucalyptus trees, climbing the hillside. Echoing against the mountains.

But then the noise seems to grow gradually quieter, falling away. It's him. Adán. He's leaving.

The two men tell tales of their lives and the lives of others—other lands and animals, other lovers and children. In Fraia's world—a magical Southern Cone—May is the season of echoes, of injured souls and Eucalyptus trees—both misplaced and medicinal.

I began the last story, 'August,' also sensing an echo, a certain confusion. Had I read this story before? Perhaps in another language? There was a pace to the prose that reminded me of masters I've read in Spanish—Bolaño, but also Javier Cercas. But no, these stories are translated from the Portuguese, a language I don't know. Ah, no it was a story I'd read, not in another language, but in another world—in a crowded restaurant, for goodness' sake. This was the same story as the one titled 'Sevastopol' in *The New Yorker*, published way back in the final days of 2019. I had liked the story then, had found the characters charming, the ambiance familiar—the urban grittiness you find in certain cities of America: Santiago or Mexico City or New York. But over a year later, in my rooftop apartment during the greyest of Mediterranean winters, the story was much more than pleasurable or charming. Now, at the end of a collection, it was activating, the kind of story that ignites not memory but something better: imagination. 'August' is the sort of story that makes you want to write. Here, we meet two lost souls: Nadia and Klaus. And while they are sad, lonely, directionless, I envied their surroundings in the city of São Paulo: small, dark

theatres, tiny, crowded trattorias, smoke-filled apartments. Their dilemma—how to make art amongst the ruins—seemed universal and extraordinarily pertinent.

The city of Sevastopol arrives to contemporary Brazil via postcard and comes to life through the play Klaus is writing, which ‘takes place in 1855, in Russia, during the Siege of Sevastopol’. Klaus, who Nadia tells us did political theatre in the 1970s, has written a play about a painter called Bogdan Trunov, who was very much in fashion during the war. That war and the fictional painter are part of the dreamlike backdrop of ‘August.’ But this final story is actually about something more timeless—a fleeting friendship between two eccentrics, one a young woman, the other an ageing man. This is a book about such friendships, about what we might even call literary flames, about those moments of love that have burnt out but not before setting so much ablaze. Emilio Fraia, with his devastatingly gentle prose, has given us a slim and stupendous debut, a novel for all seasons, a book about wounded comrades, about the land, a book about love and war.