

To shake the soul awake  
*Rischa Paterlini*

*These hides won't turn into fat  
For your own hunger*

*You will not make your carpet  
With my skin*

*Your feet will never trample me*

*Not a slut,  
Not a whore,  
Not a bitch.*

*But only human  
Pale  
Flabby  
Real.*

Regina José Galindo

This poem by Regina José Galindo is enough to allow anyone to enter her world. The performance artist and poet, born in 1974 and still living in Guatemala, won the Golden Lion at the age of thirty as best young actress at the Venice Biennale, an event to which she participated three more times. Her works are shown in some of the world's most important public collections, such as the MoMA in New York, the Tate in London, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Rivoli Castle in Turin, just to name a few. This year, she won the famous Robert Rauschenberg Award.

Inspired by a sentiment of social justice, her art looks at those who are most disadvantaged, in sharp contrast with the forces that negate individual rights. Her performances spring from a heated political fight, which places constant attention upon the human condition, while the artist's body becomes the mean through which she tells *a story*, just like the story that – after over fifteen years of active collaboration – she decided to present in the spaces of Ida Pisani's Prometeo Gallery in Milan.

Nothing but the title, *El canto se hizo grito (The song became a cry)*, can be revealed; it is necessary to look inside our origins, in order to shake the soul awake.

Whilst cycling around Milan and looking up to glance at the façades of the magnificent palaces on the streets that lead me to the city centre every day, I have often let myself be carried away by imagination, to daydream about other people's lives. Lives lived in those apartments with the curtains or window shutters closed. As a romantic, I cannot help but think of happy families, like in those Mulino Bianco or "Ferragnez" advertisements, where everything runs smoothly and in an absolutely perfect way. Then I arrive at my desk, I read the first pages of the newspapers, and I realise that it is not always like that, and that the end of the story is not often: "...and they lived happily ever after" – rather, "and they lived

happily until death”. Because instead of turning into a prince, the toad has transformed into a violent man. Painful stories lived within the domestic walls, which know no time nor borders. A bitter theme, where women are often twofold victims, first of her executioner, then of the press. Titles like “He killed [her] out of rage”, or “She was making a new life for herself, she had to pay” constantly shift the attention towards the male psychology, on the weapon used, and *they forget* to put the victim at the core of the narrative.

We then add that gender-based violence is not to be linked only to poverty and social marginalisation; we must consider it as a cross-societal phenomenon which sees no differences of class, race, religion, or age, and which has deep roots in the past. “For one reason or another – writes Regina José Galindo – in the course of history, different cultures have reacted collectively, angrily and critically, before other people, and oftentimes out of fear. It is because of fear that they have been oppressed, attacked, punished, and even killed – allegedly guilty. During the Holy Inquisition, witch hunt was a phenomenon in Central Europe which persecuted women under false accusations; a simple doubt was already grounds for a sentence”.

Without going too far, if we think about the role of women in early twentieth-century Italy, we imagined them in the sitting room, or in the kitchen, married, with a child on their laps, relinquished to housework, proudly staring out of the window, waiting for their husbands, their brothers, their sons who had left for war. The mindset and the customs of those years were backwards and retrogressive; women did not receive any education; they could not vote and could not divorce from their husbands. It was hard, if not impossible, for women to break free from the automatism of men enjoying all rights, and to dedicate themselves to their own passion and dreams.

Scientific reasons for this were sought, in order to justify and demonstrate women’s inferiority to men: “how they, given that their physiological development is faster than men’s, have less time to expand the great organs and to develop their brains (Déveaux); how they, as for the so-called inferior encephalic segments [which are] more developed than in men, possess more heightened instincts (Morselli); how characteristics such as coquetterie, concealment, and admiration for physical strength are innate in them (Spencer); how their tactile, olfactory, gustative, and even pain threshold are lower than men’s (Sergi); how they are more irritable – since the weak organisms have more acute exterior manifestations than those who are stronger (Sighele); how even the extolled female philanthropy is in fact inconclusive and dictated by vanity (Mantegazza); how even modesty is superior in men (Sergi); how normalised and pathological lies are a women’s matter (Battistelli, Paulham); how they lack any sense of justice (Spencer); how women have a poor attitude to go from the particular to the general (Comte); how association of ideas are formed subjectively and uncontrollably in the female brain (Jastrow)”. To this we can add that the Italian Criminal Code, written in 1930 by Alfredo Rocco, the Minister of Justice under Mussolini’s government, is built around an authoritarian thought, in which women are inferior to men. The figure that is promoted is that of a woman who loves the motherland, who loves work and raising her offspring, who aspires to be a good wife and a good mother. Female inferiority is something that is considered *normal*, just like it is *normal* to beat a woman. To rape her, to abuse her is an unimportant matter, almost justified by the laws, as in the case of the sentencing for honour murders, a shorter conviction for those who kill their wives, daughters, and sisters in order to protect the honour of the family, or in the case of a shotgun wedding, organised to override a conviction for rape, most times demanded by the victim’s

family as it is considered the only way to counterbalance the shame placed upon them. In fact, the idea was that the person losing their honour is not the rapist, but the victim herself. French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, recognised as the very first work of contemporary feminist writing and inserted in the Vatican's register of prohibited books in 1965, once wrote: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", thus defining the concept of womanhood, not in biological terms, but as a social and cultural construct.

From that moment, things were about to change in Italy, too. In 1964, thanks to a valiant Sicilian woman called Franca Viola, who refused a shotgun wedding, a truly cultural revolution started to take place. The piazzas of our country were invaded by women, determined to demand rights that had been denied until that point: the right to divorce, and the right to interrupt an unwanted pregnancy. These are the years when, in the most intimate context, the relationship between men and women transforms. Following the empowerment of women, they develop a new manner to interact with their partners by way of seeking equality and participation. However, it is the attainment of this equalitarian relationship that oftentimes results in conversations where the male, having grown up in an environment that fosters traditional ideas on how a "true man" should be, refuses such parity, and seeks dominance over women by becoming violent. To nominate something implies that it exists, and it is always thanks to a woman, anthropologist Marcela Lagarde – one of the symbols of Latin American feminism – that the term *femicide*, which finds its origins in a century-long history of control over women's bodies: "femicide implies coercive norms, predatory politics, and an alienating cohabitation. Taken together, these represent gender oppression, and in their radical realisation, they lead to the symbolic and material annihilation of women, and to their control. To ensure that femicide is carried out in spite of its social recognition – that is, without causing any "social anger", even if it is only on the part of women – there needs to be a certain degree of complicity and consensus that accepts as valid a variety of intertwined principles: disregarding women's traumas, distorting the causes of such traumas, and negating the consequences; all of this to ensure that violence against women is not sanctioned ethically and legally in the same way as other types of violence, to exempt those who commit such crimes from their responsibilities, and to leave women without a voice, and without tools to free themselves from such brutality. There is will in femicide, there are decisions, and social and personal responsibilities".

It is evident that all of this originates from a serious form of discrimination which aims at belittling women; it is a cultural problem which belongs to everyone, and slides into all facets of our lives, from our families to our relationships, our financial, social, and political life, and which finds fertile grounds in a society like ours, a society that idolises male superiority and puts it in contrast to an alleged female inferiority. The right to life, to freedom, to physical and mental integrity are constantly being violated; only very recently have these started to be heard.

In short, this is the chronology of our progress. In 1975, the conception of a patriarchal family is abandoned, and equality between husband and wife is finally recognised. In 1996, the crime of sexual violence is instituted as a *crime against the individual* (and no longer against public morals). In 2009, with Law 38, the Italian Criminal Code introduces *stalking* as a crime. In 2013, Law 119 is approved, introducing new aggravating circumstances, and extending the protective measures for the victims of violent crimes.

However, more than seventy years after the writing of the Italian Constitution – and the consequent declaration of equality between men and women, the road is still long, although many goals have been met. Today, also due to the norms of social distancing imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, a woman dies at the hand of the man with whom she had a relationship every two days. The Criminal Analysis Service of the Italian Department for Public Security writes that, in the period from 1<sup>st</sup> of January to 30<sup>th</sup> of May 2021 there have been 104 murders registered, 42 of the victims were women, 38 of whom have been killed in a domestic or relationship-related environment; 27 of these were killed by their partners or ex-partners. Each of these women could have had our names, or our friends' names, our colleagues', our neighbours'. Violence rises because separation is not accepted, it rises when love mixes with control, when the freedom of women is experienced as a threat, when one cannot deal with the fact that a woman is not only a wife and a mother but needs her own spaces, her own freedom, and her own autonomy. Behind all this there is a recurrent scheme – that is, a relation in which one person takes control of the other, until the latter submits. These are steps that are constantly repeated; women are subdued little by little, until they become their partner's prisoners.

First step: seduction

Second step: circumvention

Third step: conditioning

Fourth step: first violence

Fifth step: [this becomes] ordinary

Sixth step: homicide, or incited suicide

Pierre Bourdieu wrote in 1998: “Male dominance over women is the most ancient and persistent form of oppression existing. It is therefore essential to shake the soul awake”.