

ALBERTO IOZZIA

WHERE THE LOCOWEED DIES: A FOREWORD

A young man journeys towards the cradle of civilization as humanity approaches its end: this is, in a few words, the story of *Where the Locoweed Dies*. Written in the first person and in diary form, Livio Horrakh's short story recounts the final days of a traveler who is pushing his way eastwards through a Sinicized and collapsing Europe. Behind him, the world slowly and inexorably crumbles.

First published in the Italian science fiction magazine *Galassia* in 1971, *Where the Locoweed Dies* beautifully conveys a sense of grief and disillusion. The bleak atmosphere of the post-atomic apocalypse permeates every page, and yet the catastrophic nuclear event gracefully hides between the lines and disappears into the premise of the story. The decaying world the protagonist travels throughout shows the consequences of the nuclear war, as if they were the symptoms of a disease to be found everywhere: a subtle infection that is invisible and undeniable all at once. The bomb of *Where the Locoweed Dies* has exploded before the story begins, and it just takes the reader one paragraph to become contaminated with the effects of the atomic fallout and with the narrator's inevitable resignation.

The tragic and yet magnetic diary of the protagonist is based on the actual journal Livio Horrakh (1946) kept while hitchhiking from Trieste to Iraq in the summer of 1969: a manuscript that is a phenomenal document in itself, as it records the stages and the emotions of an outstanding journey that – as the author himself recently pointed out – would be impossible today. The more Horrakh moved away from Italy, the more he saw the world as he knew it changing: he saw the West disappearing into the sands of the Syrian desert and – all of a sudden – he found himself as an alien in a strange land. Such a deep sense of estrangement survives in his short story, enhanced by the plot and amplified by Horrakh's blunt style.

Indeed, the great realism of the text helps to build the tone for a tale that leaves no hope for regeneration or reconstruction. *Where the Locoweed Dies* is a reflection on the frailty of memory and on the transience of human cultural constructs, it is a wonderful instance of disenchanting post-beat narrative, and it is a story that I can list without hesitation side by side with the major works of post-apocalyptic fiction of the same years – from J.G. Ballard's *The Burning World* and Philip K. Dick's *The Penultimate Truth* (1964) to Anna Kavan's *Ice* (1967) and John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968).

Where the Locoweed Dies was awarded best Italian short story at the 1972 European SF Awards. Since then, it has been translated into Hungarian, Greek, Chinese, French and republished in several specialized magazines around the world. Among so many translations, Eliza Jermyn's is the first official one in English, and it is here published for the very first time and alongside the original Italian text. Jermyn's excellent translation maintains – as Livio Horrakh confirmed in a private comment on her work – “the same tension, the same desperation, the same concision” of the original text.

Publishing Jermyn's translation today means providing readers who are not proficient in Italian with a unique access to Horrakh's story. It is also an opportunity – as the COVID-19 outbreak reshapes our lives by eerily and gradually transforming the world into the sinister pantomime of too many familiar plots – to reflect on the role speculative fiction has in dealing with social fears and global anxieties. While waiting for the works of narrative that will channel the preoccupations and the apprehensions of these grim days, we can sit down and read how a young man processed the anguish of his generation forty years ago. We can read our new fears through his, and we can perhaps make more sense of them as we come in terms with our own rediscovered fragility, both personal and social.

The good news is that, as long as we can share tales about the end of the world, it means that the world still is not over: it means that the apocalypse has not come.

Not yet. Not as bad. Not as we thought it could.

ALBERTO IOZZIA, UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

March 25, 2020