Cover: Domenico Modugno, co-winner of the Sanremo Music Festival in 1958, 1959, 1962 and 1966.

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Come February every year, my mother would force me to watch a popular music contest on Italian TV, a show oozing bad haircuts and roses: *Sanremo, il Festival della Canzone Italiana*. For five days, we would sit on the couch and listen to a bunch of songs performed by retired singers making a comeback, or new singers sounding like they never came back from a very uninspired place.

At least *I* would listen. Being deaf since the age of four, my mother would just read the subtitles popping up on the screen to follow the lyrics. Italian pop and melodic interpreters often act like opera singers, thrusting their arms forward as if holding onto the imaginary ropes of a shaky swing, wondering how did they get there and expecting a disastrous fall. But since they ALL acted like that, it barely made a difference: my mother couldn't tell from their faces or postures if it was a sad song or a love song or a political song — she had to rely on poorly transcribed subtitles showing up at the wrong time.

My mother always loved music. She was raised into an Italian-American family where tapes, accordions and Neapolitan musicals were very common, with their repetitive beats and cheesy lyrics, usually about impromptu cheating. As a child, I was exposed to the possibility of early marriages and the resurrection of a villain during a christening or a funeral, and expected to grow up swooning after young men rushing to JFK to prevent me from leaving the country, willing to hijack a plane if needed.

When I enrolled in college, I picked Cultural Anthropology. In my heart, I was signing up for an anti-stereotypes program. I longed to melt in relativity, dwell into class, gender, and ethnicity to watch them blow up, and be presented with a new form of hybrid humanity, so I could forget how those things had affected me. The first day of class, a professor said: "At the end of the term, you'll learn there is something true in the fact that Germans are inelastic people. There is something true in the fact that Neapolitans steal. And Romans are bad drivers." He was coming at us in earnest, and in some sophisticated way he was right; soon we would read a book by Michael Herzfeld called *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* and make our peace with it. This is why I don't feel ashamed for characterizing my Italian-American family through passionate criminal references. That's what they aspired to anyway.

However, when I started watching *Sanremo* with my mother I had no use for metaphor or allegory, and neither did she. When I translated the content of a song for her — writing down Nino D'Angelo's or Mario Merola's lyrics to help her understand and make her feel closer to her father who did love those Neomelodic guys — everything felt literal to us: people were really willing to kill and die for unrequited love. Those songs

were declarations of war, not transfigurations of sadness; they were transformative acts, not passive consolations.

Both my mom and I lacked context. We preferred lyrics when they were real, but we were surrounded by fictions.

Fictions carried by blood: deception was a common occurrence in her family, her parents and brothers bought her audio players all the time. An early heavy yellow Walkman she would pin on the waist of her jeans as she cleaned up the house, swearing she could follow the rhythm. "Don't you love this band?" she would ask to a random friend coming by the house, and the friend would look at me quizzically, wondering what was that all about since she couldn't hear: it was like saying he had a favorite braille letter. (Which he could have, of course, but it was not the same. Not if he was not blind.)

Family lore has it that when my mother was 14, her father saw an ad on a newspaper claiming there was a special procedure to help with hearing loss; but the doctor who visited her in Manhattan said she was a lost cause, and my grandfather punched him in the face. To her family, my mother was mostly a stranger, an incomprehensible girl. Even now that they have been living apart for three decades, and she travels to the States to see her brothers once a year, they still don't relate to the fact she can't hear. They share a funny language which is neither sign language nor immigrant language. None of them seems versatile in English and there are no talks of disability. What is disability in a kin in which everyone speaks and hears differently anyway?

"What's the music like?" my mother would ask when I was a child dancing tarantella in her father's basement in Bensonhurst. He would invite her to dance, tap on the floor with his leather shoes and hope the vibrations would climb through her ankles, sway into her hips and crash into her ribcage, while old men played their accordions and drank their livers out. Sometimes she would dance and sometimes not.

Then, at one point, she retreated. She stopped asking what the music was like, increasingly tired of that game. And as much as I loved to see her dance, I was also angry for it, annoyed at her performance and her desire to fit in: her steps were never fast enough or in tune and that made me feel slightly ashamed.

By the time she was 34 and we had moved to southern Italy, my mom gave up the pretension she could make any sense of music, and she watched the *Festival of Sanremo* with me and my brother as if it were a competition for the best short story of the year.

Lyrics were the only thing that mattered, formulaic prose poems that rhymed with love, loss, and lust — *cuore*, *amore e dolore*, the ever abused words ending in *-ore*, the easiest match you could think of as a child. She was all about songwriting, and owned a scarce but powerful collection of music books: the history of reggae, an anthology of lyrics written in prisons, Communist chants, Patti Smith's early poems, and Bob Dylan's songbook. Like her, I never wondered what those songs sounded like when I borrowed the books. We were both there just for the story. Before someone took me to a record store in my early teens, I didn't even know Smith or Dylan had an actual voice. I experienced those musicians just like my mother did: in silence. I tried to make them sound in my head, to find their pulse and own rhythm as I did with any other writer or poet I read. Their voices didn't come in as a disappointment when I heard them for the first time, not really, but I lost something in the transaction: a closeness to my mother. I crossed the line and entered that other world, where songs could be listened to and repeated obsessively. I also lost a fantasy of ownership that comes so easy when reading literature: I could no longer fill the cracks in their words with a music of my own.

Songs performed at *Sanremo* were less ambitious and by no means revolutionary or inventive or prophetic; they did nothing for the genre: the biggest concern for those popular songwriters was not to lose someone you loved or how to lose someone you loved so you could sing about it. But there were a few exceptions in that contest.

Both my mom and I lived for the exceptions.

In 1993 a young man called Nek showed up on stage to sing "In te" ("Inside of you"), a song about abortion. It was heavily pro-life, but at least it provided some variety. In 1996, Federico Salvatore tackled the issue of homosexuality in "Sulla porta" ("On the doorstep"), the lyrics focusing on a mother's rejection of her son. In 1999 songwriter Daniele Silvestri performed "Aria" ("Air"), chronicling the story of a man serving a life sentence in a prison in Sardinia.

My mother, she couldn't stand fiction. She always rooted for those socially charged songs to win, and they usually did, since they ended up generating a scandal in the newspapers. I think it was her way to champion meaning over sound, a form of revenge against the more instrumental songs whose performance left her baffled and clueless as to what they were about. She preferred lyrics that conveyed a sense of the material world: actualities. So I guess it's more accurate to say that in that specific competition, my mother was looking for the best nonfiction story of the year. "His girlfriend really had an abortion and now he's mourning" she would say about the pro-life singer. "How painful to be rejected by his own mother" was her opinion on the man discussing homosexuality. "I wonder if I could send him

a letter in prison" was her wish when she heard the song about that man doing a life sentence.

My father can't stand fiction either, and he's deaf too. To him, movies like *Scarface*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Evil Dead* are real life accounts. Whenever I tried to explain to him "This has never happened," introducing him to the subtleties of fiction, he would revolt and dismiss me, sometimes angrily. If I told my mother the movie we just saw was not a biopic, she would call it bullshit. *The Exorcist* is still a masterpiece of realism to her.

They both interpret life as fact and hang onto words for what they are, and yet — like many deaf people — they are also often suspicious, always afraid of people conjuring secret meanings behind their backs. For them, a rose is really a rose is a rose, really?

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As a writer, my life relies heavily on irony and metaphor, and both of my parents are deeply estranged by them. Whenever we are together we enter this very uncharted zone, a black market of language: I force allegories on them, I get slapped back with the uniqueness of words, the impossibility of ubiquity. My dad used to have very bad dreams after their divorce, so one Christmas I bought him a small white eraser as a present. I wrote "To delete bad memories" on top of it, and he didn't react well. I was trying to be his daughter, relating to the healing properties of materials and the literalness of objects, but that was not my quest to take on.

I always presumed deafness was an obstacle for their full appreciation of figurative language. As a child, I quietly assumed there was a cognitive impairment in my parents that I would do my best to fix, trading and interpreting words for them. But according to some studies, there are no significant differences in understanding a metaphor in a novel among groups of deaf teens and hearing teens. (Irony is slightly different: it seems deaf teenagers get more skilled in understanding it as they grow up, when they become aware of a tone infecting people around them. But again: irony is a figure that comes with a loss of innocence for everyone, whether capable of hearing or not. The first time my mother understood irony she was about 55, and both me and my brother stared at her, bewildered.) The path inside a metaphor may be slower, more crooked or unpredictable in a deaf reader, but that is not so uncommon: we do rely on a shared archive of symbols when we read a work of art, but our inner translations of those symbols are varied. So when I think about those tests on figurative language, I agree there's a wrongness if a deaf child misses all the symbolism in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, but I also feel myself longing for that wrongness.

I don't know if my parents took pride in disobeying grammar, if they were just too lazy to develop good literacy skills, or if they trusted their senses so much in order to demystify a code they fully didn't belong to, but I think about them a lot when I translate novels from one language into another: I'm no longer afraid of my temptation and inclination toward mistakes. My mother often does reversals in syntax. She would say "*stiro da ferro*" instead of "*ferro da stiro*" (iron) which, funnily enough, in English sounds something like "I iron from iron." (If she mastered English, she would say cleaner vacuum instead of vacuum cleaner.)

A short while ago, I found myself thinking about James M. Barrie's "Neverland." In Italian, "Neverland" has been translated into "L'isola che non c'è" (The Island that Never Was). Actually, a literal translation of the English noun would have been better: while "L'isola che non c'è" alludes to a territory that's impossible to find and may not exist, the literal "Maiterra" contains a refusal, a desire to cut ties with the traditional world which seems closer to the tone of the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*. More so: to make it sound like a child's battle cry, "Terramai!" is even more effective. "Terramai" is the literal translation of "Landnever." Something James M. Barrie did not use and that sounds like bad English, something that was never there in the first place, but my parents would have gone for it: I think their mistake is more truthful to what a child would say, providing a joyful sense of escape, and by rewriting the story in my head with a new word, I imitate my mother's daily acts of linguistic defiance.

As a translator from one hegemonic language (English) into a non-hegemonic language (Italian), I am always expected not to make mistakes. I could hardly get away by saying that my mistake was a conscious deviation from the English golden standard. If I do that, then I'm bad at my job. But what if my error is indeed a form of creative vengeance? Not a fallacy in the target language, but something that decodes a fallacy in the original text. Translation is also the history of poetic inaccuracies. At this game, my parents beat me all the time. Of course they know pigs don't fly, but what if they did?

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As much as she enjoyed watching *Sanremo*, my mother despised the strictly musical side of it. During the instrumental chunks of the songs playing on stage, no subtitle would appear. There was no effort to describe what was happening to the rhythm, whether it was slow or quickening or dreamy.

The only symbol to show up on screen was this:

♫ ♫ ♫

My mother would take in that ♫ ♫ ♫ and ignore it.

These notes, they actually don't mean anything, it's like writing a a a b b b c c f l l / / / / \ \ \ \ \ assuming that stands for something. They're just neutral icons to provide a distraction, to keep her in front of the screen without really having her.

I started to think about those notes and sounds — sounds that were lost to her — only after a long time.

In movies and TV series, sound captioning can be minimal but effective:

[ghostly screech] [impetuous storm] [wailing old man]

These formulas try to qualify noises through physical objects and adjectives that a person has learned to signify over time. Sound is mediated by meaning and yet it could generate a warm physical response in my mother that was similar to mine: a reference to a ghost was enough to scare her, a storm was enough to startle her.

These captions were mostly innocuous, in the way they were stylized. In their westernized versions, subtitles and sound captions can be pretty scarce in imagination, dull white marks on a dark background, usually in nondescript types. They rarely use color, different fonts and motion to let words slip into another aesthetic dimension. There are no refractions — meaning trumps everything. Captions usually appear at the bottom unless they are obstructing a crucial visual detail. In western culture, a good subtitle is an invisible subtitle, whereas in Japanese and Chinese films a good subtitle can be exactly the opposite, a form of art in its own, in which the very act of reading is revealed in all of its electric ambiguity.

What if a character on the screen is writing a letter or he's in front of a typewriter? Wouldn't it make sense to pace the surfacing of the words with that rhythm? Subtitles could also be a scroll on the side, pop one letter at the time and fade in the background, flow and pulse. I wish all people working in subtitling and sound captioning were poets; I wish public TV would hire an army of surrealists or language poets that would make blood trickle from a scary word in a scary movie, or words disappear when ghosts are speaking, or let angry words be wiped out and elided or let a simple sentence pulse like a heartbeat, if anyone on screen deserved it.

But most of all, I wish they would get rid of nonsensical formatting like this:

[woman whispering]
DON'T TELL HER I SAID THIS

How the hell do you whisper in caps lock? And how the hell do I explain that to my mother?

The most viable way to translate sound for deaf people is through technological devices.

My mother's parents were visionaries in that regard: they bought the wrong equipment, common Walkman and CD players, but they were on the right track. She needed extensions to feel what they felt. She didn't necessarily have to see the music to experience it: she could also touch it. Several tech companies have been experimenting with proper sensors able to convey sound through the skin, transforming the body into an ear stimulated by patterns of vibrations. These transducers are increasingly popular in deaf communities, and yet sometimes I resent their literalness. Once again, my love for figurative language clashes with my parents' longing for materialities.

A fact is a fact, and a sound is a sound.

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Sound captions and lyrics' subtitles are interpretations. And they are inherently ableist: we chose what noise or clap or rhyme is meaningful, according to what our hearing body feels. We choose what's in and what's not in this representation, we try to create a discontinuum between silence and not silence for someone who experiences it differently.

How do we represent this silence, our silence, apart from writing [silence]?

The Italian label Alga Marghen released a record called *Sounds of Silence — The Most Intriguing Silences in Recording History!* (the cover is the same as Simon and Garfunkel's *Sound of Silence*, people on Amazon had fraud complaints after their purchase), a vinyl anthology of silences by Crass, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Afrika Bambaataa and other artists. "In their own quiet way, these silences speak volumes," says the label.

They are performative, political, critical, abstract, poetic, cynical, technical, absurd. They can be intended as a memorial or a joke, a special offer, or something entirely undefined. [...] The LP presents the silences as they were originally recorded, preserving any imperfection that the hardware conferred upon the enterprise, without banning the possibility to satisfying the ear. The liner notes provide historical background for each track, revealing the stated (or presumed) motivations for these silences, while providing novel sound correspondences or interferences. This album is meant to be played loud (or not), at any time, in any place: a true aural experience!.

A true aural experience that may not feel true at all to someone I love.

In 1951, John Cage visited the anechoic chamber at Harvard. Inside that room of perfect silence, he heard a high sound and a low sound. He asked the engineer how come he had heard them if the room was to be noiseless, and the engineer said that the high sound was Cage's nervous system, and the low sound was his blood humming. That's how Cage found out silence doesn't exist.

It's a good anecdote, a famous one. Cage kept repeating it over a lifetime even though scientists explained that was not the case. The late composer Pauline Oliveros said that in that room Cage had a premonition of the stroke that would kill him one day, something related to his nervous system and blood indeed. I like this interpretation. In that room, Cage heard his future.

Last summer the Guggenheim Museum in New York displayed an installation that had been 50 years in the making, a semi-anechoic chamber designed by Dough Wheeler for a series called *Synthetic Desert*. Visitors could hang in the room for about 20 minutes maximum, a few people altogether. (The installation was meant for one person at the time, but New York is crowded).

My friends didn't want to go in, afraid they would feel sick and nauseous, but I did. I walked into that room and I heard my deglutition, the imperfect sounds of my imperfect body. Unlike Cage, I have not heard my future in the thick silence, but I've heard my past and I've heard my parents, who have lived in a similar room most of their life. Before entering that room, I could never really understand the disorientation and vertigo they feel as human beings in this world, the same vertigo that forced me to reach out for the walls, as if something was physically attacking me. They tried to tell me, they tried to explain it to me, but I always transformed that information in something else, mostly into a distance.

Language is a technology that reveals the world: words are little flames that we put next to the unspeakable to make it surface, as if the world was written in invisible ink. I can't build an anechoic chamber to pretend the silence we share is the same, but I can tell my mother about the sound of my blood, and she can tell me about hers.

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I've never been to a concert with my mother. I've taken her to musicals, theatre plays and to the movies, but we never went to see a band live. Unless it was a Beyoncé show, something with great dancers and visuals,

there would have been no point: music venues in Italy rarely provide an interpreter in the Deaf Zone, there is no Deaf Zone. She would have gotten bored, and I frustrated.

Last time I went to a festival in the States, I purposely visited the Deaf Zone out of curiosity, ready to experience some form of estrangement: albeit having deaf parents, I speak no sign language by my mother's choice. I'm very sensitive in this regard: none of the CODA (Children Of Deaf Adults) I met in my life were unfamiliar with signing.

My mother's friend from Serbia has a eight-year-old daughter who can sign in both languages — Serbian and Italian — and she makes fun of me when I can't follow, and I randomly draw made-up figures in the air. As I got older I became even more stubborn: I never attended a class to learn it properly, but I did make a lot of effort to come up with some-thing the deaf adults around me could understand. Usually the results were unsatisfying and my mother begged me to stop gesturing when we walked in the street, she said I looked like a maniac dancer discarded by a ballet company (plus I embarrassed her, just like she embarrassed me when I was a kid).

Dance: that was what everyone did in the Deaf Zone. The ASL interpreter was putting up a fine performance, but then every language is performance. Unlike me she was coordinated, graceful and most of all she was *meaningful*: French philosophers always looking so hard for agents "embodying a text," they should have paid attention to sign language interpreters at music festivals.

The amount of country music, hip hop and Americana covered by ASL interpreters is increasing day by day, and there's plenty of videos showing how this art is mastered. Hip hop performers seem to be particularly beloved for the challenge they offer, every single lyric has to be broken down and breakdanced to. But what about the other songs?

Being a literary translator, I often focus on the power differential among languages. I focus on the market forces of one language compared to the other, on the gradients of accessibility within one same language, but I rarely ever thought about sign language communities around the world and what music is available to them. Jay Z can be easily translated by someone who knows both American and Italian sign language, but what about the tracks that have no lyrics?

How often do American or Italian deaf people get exposed to Finnish ambient music or to African acid-rock tunes? Who is visually interpreting these tracks, and for whom?

I would like to think that an interpreter of non-Western music into Italian sign language would help her enter a realm of transitory spaces, of *bodytalk* and synesthesia, where the hierarchy of the senses is constantly reshaped and denied, and the Finnish ambient piece could retain all the power of its cultural tradition and landscape, but at the same time dissolve into familiarity.

And yet, as the *Festival of Sanremo* proved in its nihilism years ago, the only solution seems to be:

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