

Graze the Moon with Your Bare Hand

By *Margherita Carbonaro*

Translated from the German by *Bradley Schmidt*

Airuno, March 2020. I set the alarm on my phone to five o'clock before going to sleep. I want to drive down into the valley early in the morning, through the woods. The supermarket there is already open at six, and I don't want to spend hours waiting in front of the entrance, a line of masked people who are just learning to avoid each other with sad and mistrusting expressions. Normally the night is alive with sound here, but now there is an almost throbbing silence. In the moonless night, the lantern outside is a moon.

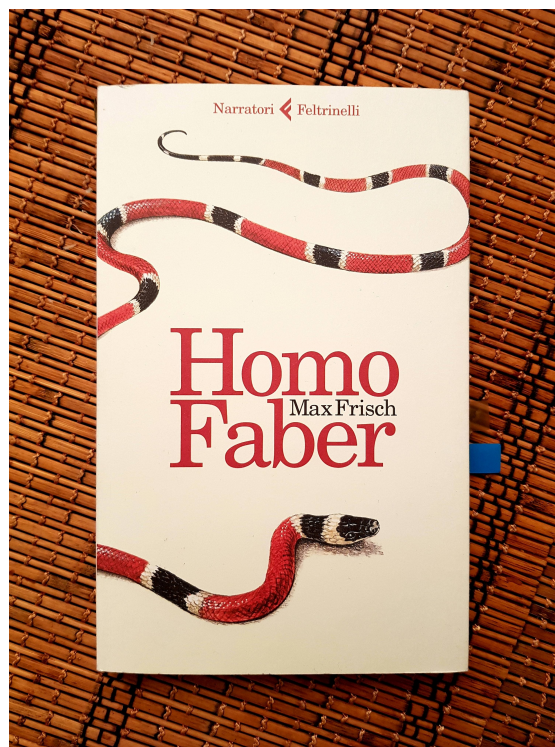


Then it's 5:50 and two men are already waiting in the dark in front of the supermarket. Both are wearing masks and latex gloves. I pat down my pockets for my black mask and gloves. Only one is there. I'm upset, powerless. Now my right hand is protected, but the left hand is bare. I know it will burn if I touch anything, as if the skin had been peeled off my fingers like a layer of latex.

My fingers must have also been coated in rubber when I picked up Max Frisch's *Homo Faber* a few years ago. The novel had long been available in Italian, but after forty years the time had come for a new translation. After a brief hesitation – is the protagonist close enough for me to lend him my voice? – I signed the contract and started to work. I was amazed at how well I made progress. When my first draft was

finished, I began to compare it with the old translation. And panicked: My work was useless. Walter Faber wrote, spoke, and narrated, but his voice was latex. The old translation was outdated – and still better than mine. How had I ever gotten involved in this project? I am a woman, and Walter Faber is a man. In real life, I would never be attracted to someone like him. He is arrogant, a narrow-minded technician, a macho man. As a translator, I have to get inside his head, look at him up close and from a distance, study the author's construction and somehow mimic it. I have to hear Faber's voice, not just figuratively, as an embodiment of syntax, but his very real one: What does it sound like?

Driven by the fear of an embarrassing defeat, I had to shed my protective shell. Regardless of *Berührungängste*: I stripped off my right glove. With my naked hand, I grazed the moon on a moonless night.



Homo Faber, Feltrinelli Editore

Faber gives significant attention to the moon. Already at the beginning, in the desert: 'When the moon rose (I also filmed this) between black agaves on the horizon, you could have gone on playing chess, it was so light, but suddenly too cold.' And 'I see the moon over the Tamaulipas desert – it is more distinct than at other times, perhaps, but still a calculable circling around our planet.'¹ The moon is bright and clear here, essentially a powerful lamp hanging in the sky. Later, in the jungle, it is cottony, slimy: 'It was Sunday when we packed, a hot night with a slimy moon, and the queer noise that had wakened me every morning turned out to be music [...], hammer taps without resonance, a ghastly kind of music, positively epileptic. It was some festival connected with the full moon.'²

This moon no longer has clear contours, it does not exude a clarifying light. Faber notes, 'We shouldn't have buried Joachim in the earth (it often seems to me), we should have cremated him. [...] Marcel was absolutely right: fire is clean, earth is mire after a single storm (as we found out on our return journey), decay filled with seed, as

slippery as vaseline, pools in the red dawn like pools of filthy blood’.³

The earth is *Schlamm* [mire], the moon is *schleimig* [slimy]. Faber has long since exposed himself although he continues to talk as if his protective covering were still there. His disgust is an expression of the fear he wants to expel from his clear-as-day logic (although the sun, a few lines later, is also described as ‘slimy’). It was in this jungle scene that I first heard Faber’s voice. It is metallic, confident, cutting, but already broken. Fear lurks on his shoulders, his hand is bare.

Endnoten

- 1 Max Frisch, *Homo Faber*, trans. Michael Bullock. London, 1959, 21.
- 2 Ibid., 44.
- 3 Ibid., 69.



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Margherita Carbonaro was born in Milan. She primarily translates from German and Latvian into Italian. Her translations include books by classic modern and contemporary German-language authors such as Herta Müller, Thomas Mann, Max Frisch, Carl Sternheim, Christoph Ransmayr, Terézia Mora, Ingo Schulze, and Uwe Timm. After spending several years in Beijing, she now lives in southern Germany and in Italy. Her translation of *Homo Faber* was published in 2017 by Feltrinelli Editore, Milan.

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