



Les Corbeaux de Pearblossom
Gallimard Jeunesse, Parigi, 2005
(ed. it. I Corvi, Il Castoro, Milano, 2007)
collage, matite e pastelli
collage, pencil and pastels

Anna Castagnoli
writer and illustrator
Anna runs a blog of studies on the world of illustration:
www.lefiguredeilbri.com

Guest of honour: Beatrice Alemagna

The world of fragile things

I pull a couple of cotton threads from the pages of *Mon amour*, strange embroidered animal, and into my hands fall coloured buttons, sequins, clouds of green netting, little pieces of broken leaves, a gooey lolly stick (what's left of a purple lollipop), a marble, an old train ticket and a hairpin. I look at this treasure trove of next-to-nothing and get the feeling that it has always belonged to me. It lived in my pockets when I was a child, I'm sure of it. It feels strange to find between the pages of a book that treasure which was mine and mine alone.

This is the magic of Beatrice Alemagna's books, you open them and find yourself pressing your nose against the window again, watching the raindrops as they run down the glass, as a familiar voice shouts from the kitchen: "the biscuits are ready!".

I have scattered all Beatrice Alemagna's books on the carpet in front of me and realise for the first time that, just like in *Un et sept*, the story by Gianni Rodari in which seven children from different countries are the same child, the books of this artist and author are nothing more than a single book. All the stories that Beatrice Alemagna has written and illustrated, all the texts she has chosen seem to want to answer this one question: how do I save "the things that disappear before we have had time to look at them?"¹

This great book is inhabited by the daintiest of characters, strange, often ethereal, seemingly bound together by the same ineptitude; genetically unsuited to the world, incomplete, absent-minded, uncertain, flawed, out of place, totally unable to remain afloat in a socially successful existence; yet stubborn, and determined to find somewhere in the world that can accept them just as they are.

These fragile heroes have a difficult mission: the world seems to be spinning too fast for them to keep up (*Une maman trop pressée*, *Histoire courte d'une goutte*, *Un lion à Paris*); the world seems to want them to fit in, but these little creatures have nothing more than an old peach stone in their pockets, and on being questioned, can't even say who they are (*Mon amour*, *Jo singe garçon*, *Le secret d'Ugolin*). Watching them watch me from the brightly coloured pages, with their big wide eyes, they put me in mind of Giorgio Agamben's *Gli aiutanti*: "And yet they embody something, an unfinished gesture, a sudden grace, a certain unmistakable self-confidence in their opinions and tastes, their lithely supple limbs and words that testify to the fact that they belong to a parallel world, hinting at lost citizenship or an unreachable elsewhere (...) Perhaps it is because the child is an unfinished creature that children's literature is full of helpers, parallel and nebulous beings, that are either too small or too big..."²

Despite their lack of confidence, these creatures are unimaginably

brave. Each of them meets its destiny with a strength that only the grace of truth can impart. A droplet, identical to a thousand others, falls into a sink as a great mouth is cleaning its teeth, is swallowed up by the water and spit, ends up in a tangle of pipes, and is able to catch sight of the wonderful jungle of objects living in the dark and the drains: "blotches of colour, plump faces, wild animals, water flowers, ice-cold oceans" and then dies as it evaporates on a pavement, without anyone ever having seen it (*Histoire courte d'une goutte*). A little glass girl, who is totally transparent, bravely battles against the prejudice of others: people are horrified by her thoughts of black crows, tears and sharp scissors. That's their hard luck! They'll never have her grace (*Gisèle de verre*).

A lion that has tired of the jungle decides to visit Paris and experiences loneliness in a metropolis where nobody is surprised by anything anymore (*Un lion à Paris*). Etc... Yet none of these anti-heroes allow themselves to be overtaken by events: the lion will find his place as a statue in the middle of a square, the little glass girl will travel tirelessly in search of a place where people are not afraid of the truth...

Despite appearances, the characters in Beatrice Alemagna's books are by no means losers. Read one of her stories where drawings and words are as one, and on closing the book you will discover that reality has been turned inside-out: the real losers are the others, the real losers are us, because we don't know how to stop and look anymore, we don't know what is truly important anymore. And they know that: the children, the main characters in Beatrice Alemagna's books, the fragile things, the animals. They know that. They know our weakness, they know they hold the truth that we have forgotten: this strange whirling journey, that winds up evaporating on a pavement, and only makes sense if we have the courage to be ourselves, to fulfil our dearest wishes, to fight for them, and if need be, pay the price of loneliness too; life's adventure is worth living if someone sees and loves us for who we are, even for just a moment. Thus summed up, this versatile artist and author's work may seem philosophical, carefully pondered and moral. Yet it is not. Beatrice Alemagna is not deliberately trying to convey a particular message. As their remarkable spontaneity demonstrates, each of her books is the result of her ability to rediscover fragments of childhood within herself. Because the truth that her characters are fighting for is carried by every child in his or her pockets: diamonds and rubies which only an adult who has forgotten their true self would mistake for pieces of glass found on the beach. What could possibly be more important or more pressing than owning a tortoise, or "smelling the grass with your eyes closed, running after pigeons shouting, listening



to the faraway voice of the shells, turning up your nose in the mirror"³? Who would dare to say that there is anything more important than this? Nonetheless, the adult world seems frightened by this beautiful truth.

But carrying this truth in your pocket is not enough. The truth embodied by these characters makes them strong but cannot save them from loneliness: being seen is what saves them; finding someone able to see us for who we are.

The droplet that disappears as it evaporates on the pavement teaches us this the hard way: if nobody looks at us, we die.

In all Beatrice Alemagna's books, there is always an encounter, a glance, mutual recognition, which changes the fate of the main characters. In *Karl Ibou* it is a child who simply says: *I like your hat* that saves the main character from despair.

"I love your hat, sir!"

"You like it?"

"Yes, I do. Can I have it, sir?"

"Of course, if you want it, it's yours." replies Karl Ibou, surprised that anyone can love something he owns. "You really are a kind child." says Karl Ibou.

"Me? Kind? Thank you sir, usually I'm an odious child."⁴

In *Mon amour*, it is another sketchy creature that sees the main character for who he is: "Don't you want to know who I am?", asks the strange animal, "You are my love", replies the new friend, teaching us that there is no need to know anything else.

On the last page of *La promenade d'un distrait*, it is a mother's hug which helps Giovanni put the pieces of his life back together. And it is also a hug, this time a rather brave one, which makes sense of the story of *Oméga et l'ourse*: the bear tells the child she wants to eat her and Oméga holds out her arms to her and replies: ok. In *Jo singe garçon* it is an encounter with the monkeys which helps Jo regain his identity...

When this encounter doesn't take place it is because Beatrice Alemagna invites us readers to be *the other person able to see them for who they are*, the little main characters ask us, the ones looking at them, to love them. They ask us to understand them, and we realise that we have to set aside our usual logic in order to be able to do it.

In fact there is never a reason why these characters are worthy of being loved, unless it is their shortcomings. The author appears to lead us by the hand towards an aspect of love quite unlike that which we have grown up with. We do not love someone for their qualities, we love them because we catch a glimpse of their fragility and this fragility touches us.

Without meaning to be rhetorical, I cannot help but underline how valuable this message is in today's world.

I would just like to comment briefly on the style that Beatrice Alemagna uses to tell us her stories. To begin with, you will have noticed that so far I have not spoken about pictures or texts. In my work as a critic I have always attached great importance to the relationship created between the text and pictures in an illustrated book, or to the compositional dynamics of the illustration... Unusually, each time I read one of Beatrice Alemagna's books, I forget to pay attention to all these elements of critical reading.

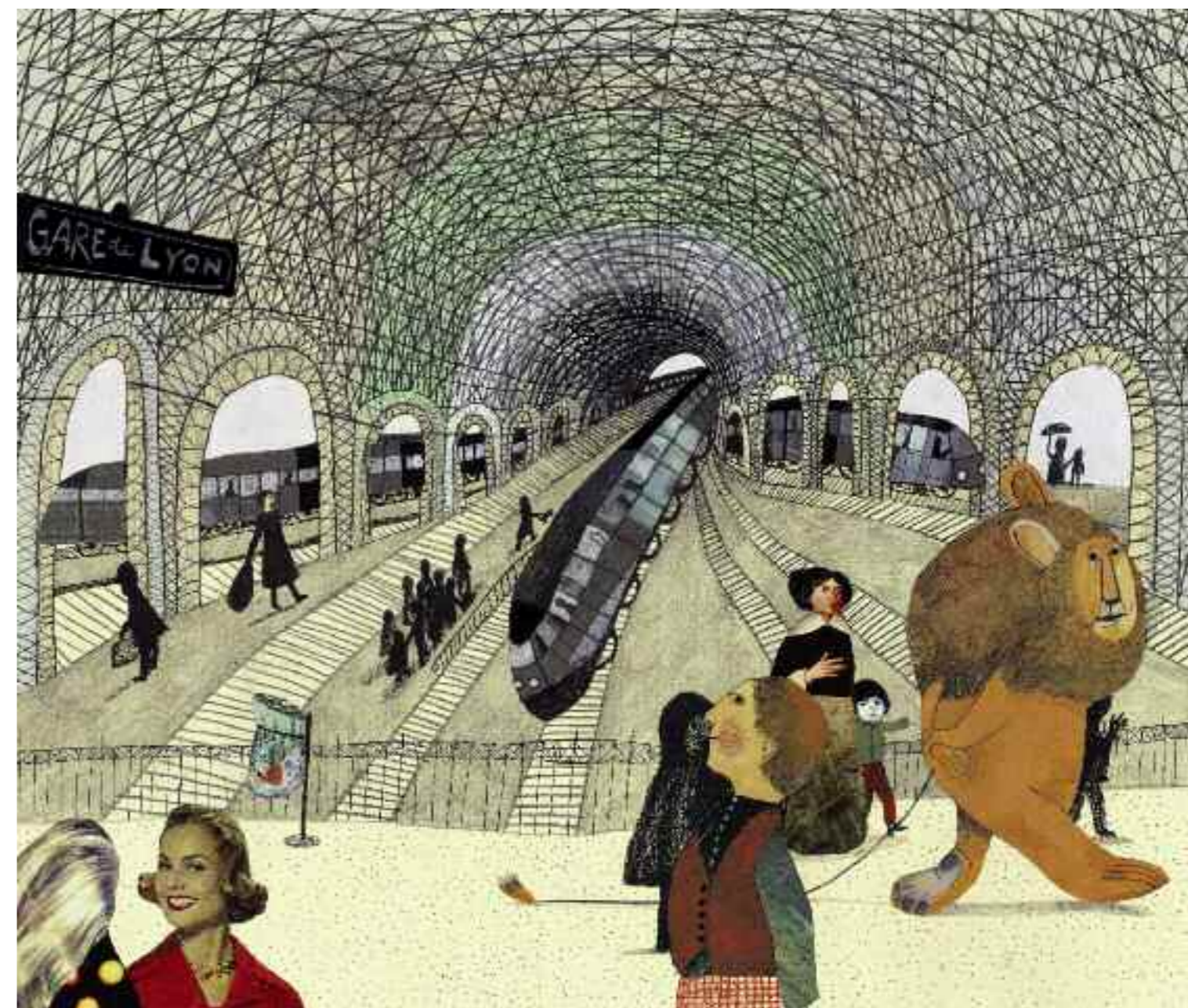
I am carried away by the story, as if the world painted by the pages really existed. The subtlest emotions aroused by the pictures and the words are such that every critic is silenced. It is a call for salvation that comes from these books, there's no time for the superfluous, for decorum, for reflections of an aesthetic nature.

Beatrice Alemagna's pictures seem to have been created with the same need: to tell an important story. There's no time to stop and draw well, there's no time to find stratagems to win over the reader. When a child draws, – if the adults haven't already made the mistake of teaching them what's pretty and what isn't, what colour to paint the sky, what green to use for the meadows – he or she draws to transpose an emotive state, or are prompted by the need to tell a story from within them. The shapes and colours that flow from the hands of this talented illustrator are characterised by the same harmony found in children's drawings, they convey the instinctive joy of Matisse's blues, the confidence of Picasso's shapes, they seem to respond more to the need to *feel* rather than to *seem*, just as modern art does.

Beatrice Alemagna's artwork can never be fully understood unless we first forget everything we know, our conceit as adults, exegetes and critics, to be able to then slip on a multicoloured checked swimsuit and make our way to the sea. We cannot dearly love the characters of her books if, having closed the door on the emotions experienced during our childhood, we do not stop and listen to them.

Don't be afraid: the emotions that quiver in Beatrice Alemagna's books aren't painful: it's true that loneliness is there, and the bitter feeling associated with being different, the tiresomeness of being absent-minded and losing bits of yourself... but all this effort to exist is the same as that in childhood: all that's needed is a friendly smile and a pistachio ice-cream to make things better. Salvation requires nothing more than "I like your hat"; it's enough not always to hurry; just lie down on the grass and watch the clouds go by, learn to look at the other person, so different from us, in their big transparent eyes and try not to be afraid of what you see; if only between the pages of a book, just remember all the fragile things living in our world and look after them.

1. *Histoire courte d'une goutte*, Beatrice Alemagna, Autrement Jeunesse, 2004
2. *Il giorno del Giudizio*, Giorgio Agamben, Nottetempo, 2004
3. *Che cos'è un bambino?*, Beatrice Alemagna, Topipittori, 2008
4. *Karl Ibou*, Beatrice Alemagna, Autrement, 2008



Un lion à Paris
Autrement Jeunesse, Parigi, 2006
(ed. it. *Un leone a Parigi*,
Donzelli, Roma, 2009)
collage, matite e pastelli
collage, pencil and pastels

Pagine precedenti/Previous pages:

La promenade d'un distrait
Seuil Jeunesse, Parigi, 2005
tecnica mista
combined techniques

Pagina seguente/Following page:

Che cos'è un bambino?
Topipittori, Milano, 2008
collage, matite e pastelli
collage, pencil and pastels