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# Ants and Stars

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As we approached the giant radio telescope in rural Sardinia, I found myself implausibly dressed in a light summer frock: a Brazilian one, lavishly decorated with black army ants. I should have worn something tougher, since our outing was a treat specifically arranged for Paolo Nespoli, a rugged Italian ex-Special Forces soldier who has twice lived in outer space.

Nespoli's first trip to orbit was aboard the U.S. Space Shuttle and the second aboard a Russian Soyuz, so this makes Paolo both an "astronaut" and a "cosmonaut." Most of his space career he spent working on the ground in Houston Texas, so we part-time Texans had plenty to talk about. Our little busload of telescope tourists was a motley crew: me, an astronaut, a science fiction writer, two astrophysicists, some doctoral students, a computer security expert, a nice Chinese girl terrified of heights.

Once at the site of the great towering astronomy colossus, we signed the guestbook and

strapped on white construction hard-hats. When the run began: climbing endless zigzagging stairs of industrial steel, in and out of instrument chambers and control rooms.

We then emerged from a metal door into the very midst of the vast white satellite dish, a colossal bowl with thousands of rectangular metal panels. The Sardinia Radio Telescope is a giant cosmic ear that can be tilted and spun on huge railway tracks. As we struggled to climb up to the perilous rim of this instrument, the slope got steeper and steeper. I crawled on all fours, for all the world like a black kitchen ant struggling to escape a white china breakfast bowl.

The shining walls caught the Mediterranean sun and began to bake us like bugs in an oven. When we reached the sharp rim of the antenna dish -- nothing like a guardrail there of course, just a sharp, clean drop to the construction trucks on the ground far below, looking back uncontrollably.

In that brief disorienting tumble I felt all the fear and horror of a human being floating out in space. The brave astronaut had just briefed us about those issues: his experiences of life without gravity, all about, as he put it, "becoming an extraterrestrial."

When living in orbit, you learn to float, eat, and even sleep and dream differently: you use all four limbs equally, bounding off surfaces that have no floor or ceiling. The soles of your feet, callused by gravity and friction, grow tender and soft like a baby's feet. You learn to grope for footholds, to snatch small objects as they drift rapidly away, to double-over with your stomach muscles so you can type away on computers.

Nespoli was a guest at the Leggenda Metropolitane festival of literature in Cagliari. There he explained to the warmly appreciative crowd how his dream of astronautics had been inspired by the writings of Oriana Fallaci, the late Italian world famous journalist. He'd even once met Oriana Fallaci, who had brusquely told the young soldier that, if he expected to make it in the world's elite corps of astronauts, he had better concentrate and not kid around.

The festival was held in spacious square above the old town overlooking the big port and Sardinia's strikingly beautiful emerald coast. When nature so inspiring, the eloquence soared to astronomical levels.

After three days of physical and mental exercises, the lively event was closed by Roberto Saviano, the 33-year-old bestseller Italian journalist. Given he writes about organized crime and the drug trade, Saviano has been living under mafia fatwa since 2006, when he published his first tell-all book about the mobsters of the Camorra in southern Italy.

Since then Saviano has led a rather Salman Rushdie-like existence, warmly supported by world intellectuals and writers while the underworld's assassins stalk him. Saviano briefly fled the country, but has returned to Italy, amid a conspicuous presence of plainclothes doorsteps, and so on.

Saviano was in Sardinia for the first time to promote his new book Zero Zero Zero, whose subject is the world traffic in cocaine. If you don't know the cocaine routes you don't know the world nowadays, he asserted to a huge, silent crowd of listeners who packed the square in ant-hill style. These are modern drug industries. modern ways of making modern money



flow across borders, the drug trade victimizing citizens, as criminals and bank officials become accomplices in offshore money laundering.

Saviano spoke with rare pauses for almost two hours, addressing his obsessions with such passion, detail and sobriety that even the stone-faced cops on stage with him were visibly moved. He said the Italian mafia is the oldest and best-organized mafia in the world. Being in the mafia has little to do with "laws" and everything to do with "rules": the internal family rules against the state's laws and the public interest. The mafia culture lives among Italians as part of Italian culture: our neighbors, family and even ourselves belong in someways to those extralegal circles of violence, favors and arrangements.

Saviano admitted that, being Italian, he too knows how to reason against the rule of law like a mafioso. Nobody is innocent. He urged his silent serious crowd to stand up against the injustice, by understanding the basic unfairness of the mafia, the way that the whole world is exploited by a few violent criminals. He interpreted some political problems as mafia doings.

Saviano has been a voice of the young Italian generation who wants to break with the past. This author said: I don't want to go into politics, I don't like to do that, I am not good at it, but I do want to be political. We all have to do politics for the sake of our corrupted country. Saviano's public appearances have become some kind of cathartic apotheosis: Italians do read the books, they see the movie *Gomorra*, they go to see him, they know it matters.

I happened to be in a restaurant as Saviano ate with a few friends and supporters, his face hidden under a billed hat and his shoulders hunched. Cops peered through the windows every other minute, and Saviano seemed to have the weight of the world on his back. He listened much more than he talked.

He reminded me of many political Balkan activists, mostly anonymous, who had no personal joys and private lives or youth, because of the wars. His hat looked paramilitary, like the cap my teenage father wore as a Communist partisan fighting Nazis. Even the people dining with Saviano had the furtive, let's-be-cool look of draft-dodgers during the Milosevic regime, people going on with daily life so as not to be pounced on.

Against social evils that are vast and centuries old, it seems so little just to write a book, a movie, or state a personal No... Even when the books and voices achieve a huge success and reach a vast audience, does that diminish the cocaine business and its drug mafias? Everybody knows the state of the matters in Italy, just as they know in Sinaloa and Tijuana, where cocaine soap operas are on TV every day and the journalists are gunned down in dozens.

Writers are like black ants in the white bowl of literature, set on the rotating earth. Still, we can offer our words and our lives, since that's what we have to offer. Blaga Dimitrova (a Bulgarian poet Saviano quotes) says: I am not afraid of being stepped upon, the trampled grass will become a path!