

My father, the dreamer, was born in Liguria, by the sea, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) away from Marsaglia. After marrying my mother, a native of those lands, he began to appreciate and then to love the Alta Langa. Enjoyment for nature, which he passed on to me since I was a child, was the main generator of his feelings. During summer holidays and shorter weekends spent in Marsaglia, in my maternal grandparents' house, my father started to set his eyes on that rounded, flat-topped hill right in front of the house, on the other side of a small valley. A completely bare hill, without a single tree, a wasteland covered with wild grass. It was named Chiarle, *Ciärle* in the local dialect. My grandfather used to say that there was once a vineyard up there (in the neighbouring plot a stone shed still stood, a *ciabòt*, for storing tools – it has now disappeared). That abandonment was a sign of the retreat of vineyard in Alta Langa, begun about a hundred years earlier, due to its poor profitability and then accelerated by the massive peasant emigration to industrial cities like Turin. In recent times, that setback was only partially compensated (around Alba, 40 kilometers or 25 miles away) by the development of a new high value wine production.

At the outset of the Sixties, my father was going to convince himself: «Let's buy that land, we'll build our house there». Apart from the doubts of my mother, always frightened by news, the achievement was not so easy: due to hereditary divisions, the land was then owned by three brothers, one residing in Monaco, one in Argentina, and one in Corsica. Despite having obtained their unanimous consent to the sale (already difficult to collect in those times), putting them together in front of a notary seemed really problematic. Then, one day, in the Mid-Sixties, due to a fluke whose cause I don't remember, a family reunion brought the three brothers all together after years to Marsaglia. It was done: in those days, in Ceva, a notary signed the deed of purchase.

In the following months, at sunset, with my father and my mother we went up there, in that bare solitude, looking at the view and dreaming about the future. Then work started up. First of all, it was necessary to reforest that empty and windy space, to make it welcoming as possible. My father bought dozens and dozens of saplings from some nearby nurseries. They were transported by truck to the base of the hill, then my grandfather loaded them on a cart pulled by an enormous white ox and took them up through a gravelly and dusty (or muddy) country lane to the top. Preparing the holes was a great challenge. The soil up there, as in most of the Langa, under a few centimeters of *humus* was made of marl, which in the local dialect is called *tufo*, a sedimentary rock that here appeared in its most compact variety, of a bluish color with red veins of clay, particularly hard. Each hole had to measure about one cubic meter, and was dug with a pickaxe at the cost of great effort. And maybe a hundred were dug. Then, in the following years, drought, wind, and heavy snow would have brought about a cruel natural selection on those small pioneering trees. But today, by now, the strongest survivors have created a real forest, destined to remain for centuries, I believe.

In 1967, if I well remember, a small building company set in Belvedere Langhe, another village not far away, began work with the employment of improvised masons from Marsaglia, torn up for a season to their work in the fields. There were ups and downs, enthusiasm and setbacks, waits for rains to stop and winds to change, all things that my father, as a city man, did not fully understand and that distressed him.

Finally, in June 1968, at the beginning of another long summer of school holidays, we went to live in our new white house on the hill. On the advice of my mother we had called it “la Calandra”, the largest of the larks, one of which had been living there for years. A tribute to that solitary bird that every summer went on singing uninterruptedly, high in the sky on that solitary meadow, almost motionless, fluttering its wings, and then suddenly fell silent and dropped like a stone towards its nest hidden in the grass.