

Vera Portatadino
Talking to Strangers at Night

There are images that do not arrive as statements, but as presences. They do not impose themselves upon the gaze, nor do they seek center stage. They remain at the margins, surfacing slowly, like something emerging from darkness without ever fully separating from it.

In Vera Portatadino's practice, painting seems to originate precisely on this threshold, where the image does not describe reality but receives its trace, its echo, its slightest movement. Glimmers, floral fragments, nocturnal apparitions, bodies resisting a univocal definition coexist within a painterly constellation shaped by proximity and displacement. Nothing appears fully given; every form remains traversed by a certain opacity, by a distance that does not coincide with absence but with possibility.

Portatadino's environments inhabit the canvas like dense, stratified, and mysterious ecosystems. The close detail coexists with the elusive; what seems to offer itself to the gaze immediately withdraws from stable definition. Much like the forest itself: a space that never fully reveals itself, complex and necessary, but also — and above all — a place that proposes an alterity capable of disorienting us. Realm of the archetype, site where enchantment and the unknown converge, the forest has always been perceived as a liminal space, where light filters through the foliage, opening to brief apparitions.

It is perhaps here that the thought of Maria Zambrano, central to the artist's reflection, finds particular resonance. In *Claros del bosque (Clearings in the Forest)*¹, a text suspended between philosophical reflection, poetic writing, and almost spiritual testimony, Zambrano reworks Heidegger's notion of the *Lichtung*, the clearing: that open space in which Being may manifest itself. Yet Zambrano's *clearings* do not fully coincide with Heidegger's. They are not merely sites of appearance; they are fragile openings, temporary epiphanies granted only through waiting, receptivity, and listening. The forest remains dense, dark, partially inaccessible, and the *clearing* does not dissolve mystery: it interrupts it for an instant. It is precisely this movement that traverses Portatadino's painting, whose images emerge while allowing the visible to continue dissolving and recreating itself within an indeterminate zone.

If the forest is therefore not a place to possess but a space that observes, likewise alterity, in Portatadino's work, never presents itself as an object of the gaze, but rather as the condition of encounter. To look at the other — human, vegetal, animal, atmospheric — means exposing oneself to transformation. In the artist's practice, nature is neither backdrop, scenery, nor symbolic repertoire; it is a living presence, an interlocutor, a subject.

¹Maria Zambrano, *Clearings in the Forest (Claros del bosque)*, 1977), Italian translation by Elena Laurenzi, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2004.

This tension became particularly evident to me in the small canvas *Due (Two)*, 2026, whose title already introduces the possibility of relation: the first number after one, the first figure of plurality, of reciprocal existence. Emerging through the green stratifications of the surface are two points of intensity: not forms to identify nor images to resolve, but thresholds. Here nature does not appear as an immobile landscape to contemplate, but as a presence that, by returning our gaze, fractures the centrality of the anthropocentric perspective. We are no longer the ones observing the natural world from an external, ordering position; rather, nature itself turns toward us, returning a gaze charged with an ancient, vital, ancestral, almost absolute energy.

If *Due* preserves the eyes, *Come una nuvola (Like a Cloud)*, 2026 seems instead to propose a voice. Amid milky veils, barely contained apparitions, and forms that emerge only to dissolve again, red lips appear. They do not construct a portrait nor organize a narrative; they arise forcefully from the landscape itself, as though the voice belonged not to a defined subject but ascended from the depths of the image, speaking to us through a silent and profound alphabet.

The title of the work derives from a reference to Anne Carson's writing, and in particular to the Italian edition of *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, published under the title *Era una nuvola (She Was a Cloud)*². Here Helen of Troy and Marilyn Monroe overlap, collapsing myth and contemporaneity, exposure and vulnerability, image and subjectivity. Yet the reference does not end with citation alone. As the artist observes, the gaze directed toward alterity — and with it the gaze turned toward nature and the non-human — cannot be separated from a reflection on femininity and on womanhood as a subject situated within relation. In Portatadino's poetics, the feminine does not appear as a theme to illustrate nor as a declared identity; rather, it traverses the work as posture, sensitivity, a way of inhabiting the world. Desire, care, vulnerability, and attentiveness toward what remains lateral, fragile, or unspectacular thus become means through which to enter into relation with the other. It is perhaps here that Anne Carson and Maria Zambrano draw close to one another. Though emerging from different territories, both seem to share the same tension: making space for what can never be fully named nor possessed.

Portatadino's images move precisely along this *limen* that allows reality to reveal itself through fragments, apparitions, and traces.

In *Almost Roche* (2026), the reference to the *Roche Limit* — the minimum distance beyond which a celestial body, drawn toward a larger one, disintegrates under tidal forces — introduces a subtle reflection on relation itself. An encounter is never neutral: it implies attraction, proximity, risk. Remaining too close may mean losing one's boundaries; remaining too distant prevents any possibility

²Anne Carson, *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, New York, New Directions, 2019; Italian edition *She Was a Cloud (Era una nuvola)*, translated by Patrizio Ceccagnoli, Milan, Utopia Editore, 2024.

of transformation. Petals, lips, eyelashes, and leaves merge within a work that seems to inhabit that fragile threshold where desire measures itself against rupture.

A similar tension also traverses *La Cicuta* (*Hemlock*, 2026), a title that deliberately recalls the text Maria Zambrano dedicates to the plant in *Claros del bosque*. In her pages, hemlock appears as a fragile and ambiguous presence, linked to moonlight, traversed by attraction, absorption, and transformation. Within the work, however, the reference does not become illustration: not a recognizable subject nor a symbolic element to decipher, but a diffused presence within the fabric of the image. Hemlock thus loses its role as a simple natural element. It becomes sensitivity, permeable matter, a presence that absorbs, retains, and returns. As also in *Notturmo (Autoritratto)* (*Nocturne [Self-Portrait]*, 2024), where inner and outer landscape seem to merge in an interweaving of signs and floral apparitions. The self-portrait no longer coincides with representation of the self; it becomes an ecosystem traversed by memories, desires, and forms of life — a porous space in which the “I” loses centrality and opens itself to relation.

Ultimately, nature seems constantly to remind us that no existence is autonomous and that every form of life emerges within a web of interdependencies, reciprocal care, and bonds that make coexistence possible. Perhaps this is precisely what Portatadino’s practice attempts to render visible: not isolated subjects, but relations; not closed identities, but presences that observe one another, brush against one another, and transform each other reciprocally.

A painting that invites us to remain attentive to those whispers that continue to traverse the world, as in a summer nocturne, when the light has almost disappeared and yet something continues to glow.

Ilaria Gianni, May 2026