

not to the *spirit of things*, we behave exactly like the blind men of Hokusai's illustration, ourselves naïve illustrations, laughable in the same manner as we touch our own inexplicable, labyrinthine, false elephant.

In the *Illustrated Book of Glories of China and Japan* (1850), a classically “clawed” wave carries the god-dragon of the sea, evoked by the hero who intends to beg it to hold back the ocean's waters and allow him to besiege an opposing city.

Hokusai, old man and eternal beginner, was eighty-four when he painted two large waves to sit atop floats. The people of Obuse were awed by those images moving with the rocking of the carriages, creating the illusion of moving water, as if real waves were crashing against the sky. It looks as if Hokusai, right near the end of his life and research on the *spirit of things*—someone whose longest and most important chapters could be defined as the ones on the spirit of the waves—was caught by one last intuition. He put the liquidity and mobility of the wave into relationship with the impassible, mineral stasis of Fuji, he transformed its waves with feline claws and with a flock of birds that dip the oars of their wings in the wind. The *spirit of things* can't be drawn or taught, but when we are able to grasp something close to it, we discover an alchemy of metamorphosis and the secret sympathy of contraries. One can't even be sure that the wave, this tremendous tool of meditation, is simply a separate element in the eternal wheel of symmetries, juxtapositions, and conquests. No, if you look carefully, hit your head and mind against it for a while, another truth comes out, a further couple of contraries to overcome: now the site of the struggle is the wave itself and its dichotomous nature of male and female, phallus and vulva, gush and squirt . . . but there is never, truly, time to get to the bottom of things, to the sunken deposit of the spirit of them.

—from *Londa del porto. Un sogno fatto in Asia*, Laterza, 2005,
translated from the Italian
by Michela Martini and Elizabeth McKenzie

Emanuele Trevi (b. Rome, 1964) is a literary critic and a writer. His book *Istruzioni per l'uso del lupo* (Castelvecchi, 1994) advocating a change in the artificial, technical language of Italian literary criticism was groundbreaking. Trevi contributes regularly to newspapers such as *il manifesto*, *La Stampa*, *la Repubblica*, is one of the editors of the literary magazine *Nuovi Argomenti*, and has hosted the cultural radio program *Lucifero* for RAI Radio 3. His debut novel appeared in 2003 (*I cani del nulla*, Einaudi) and was followed by *Senza verso* (Laterza, 2005), *L'onda del porto* (Laterza, 2005), *Il libro della gioia perpetua* (Rizzoli, 2010), and *Qualcosa di scritto* (Ponte alle Grazie, 2012). This essay is an excerpt from *L'onda del porto*.

Michela Martini, a native of Genoa, Italy, received her MA in Italian literature from the University of Genoa, where she studied with Edoardo Sanguineti. Her translations of Italian poetry, in collaboration with poet Robert Hahn, have appeared in the *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, the *Literary Review*, *Poetry International*, *Gradiva*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, *Italian Poetry Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *International Poetry Review*, *Unsplendid*, etc., and were anthologized by Geoff Brock in *The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry* in 2014.

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KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI

Fine Wind, Clear Morning, 1830

Ukiyo-e woodblock print, 10.13 x 15 in



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