



## **GASPING**

LUCAS VERZOLA

TRANSLATED BY BÁRBARA EHLER

Whenever the door opened and the light beam invaded the room, my body froze, my hair bristled, my heart raced, my eyes opened wide then closed tight, as if to reinforce how much I squeezed my crossed fingers on each hand, hoping that I wouldn't be the one chosen for the night, neither any of my closest friends – though in some nights I not only hoped that we wouldn't be chosen, but also wished someone to be taken, usually a looney who kept shouting to high heaven, or a brutal inmate who would threaten us, since our group, though having a high turnover, would normally shelter the calmest mad ones of the place – which was a real advantage as it made us go unnoticed by the nurses (or “watchdogs”, as we called them), who were always looking for cases they considered extreme to be taken to the first floor, where the ties were tighter, the sedatives stronger, the electric shocks more powerful, and from where, the dogs said, the boys would leave straight to their parents' house – which would bewilder us, and so much so that Seventeen (we had numbers, not names) forced himself into a heavy fit so as to be taken there and, who knows, go back home, something which we never found out if actually happened because we never saw the lad again, but if I were to bet I'd say this whole business about going to your parents' house was nothing but a cock-and-bull story — not only because I had learned to consider every good thing they said as a lie, but because Thirty Six and Fourteen didn't even have families and they simply vanished after they were taken to the first floor by a nurse called Afranio, a repulsive guy with a ginger moustache who looked like Yosemite Sam and smelled of formaldehyde and had his white coat dirty with something I knew was blood, which it must have been, since open wounds were extremely common there, and it was even more common for the wounds to become infected and spread to large areas and release pus and other fluids which would leave the place stinking even more, fit to breed maggots, and which would almost always result in serious problems such as scars on the skin, deformity or the amputation of limbs, or even in the death of some of the boys – something which, for better or for worse, we ended up getting used to the longer we stayed there, even though we never really knew for how long exactly we had been inmates, as there was no official record, and our attempt to track the days with scribbles on the walls (four vertical lines and a horizontal one every five days) was ruined when they took two of us to the first floor because of that – something which astonished everyone, as it was hard as heck to believe that a mere attempt to measure time would lead to such drastic consequences, which were in fact becoming each day more normal, so that a simple light beam shining through the door would produce fear, even though such fear never really became an actual danger for me, who survived, while those around me perished – perhaps because their fingers weren't as tightly crossed, or maybe because they resigned deep inside, which is something I never allowed myself to do, even with the pain of a hundred volts caused by two electrodes attached to my head or by the precise blows given by the watchdogs on the most fragile parts of



the poor children or by the harsh words telling me that I was crazy because of my slut momma who wouldn't have caught syphilis if she had been a good girl or by seeing my friends being taken and never coming back, to be forgotten, to dis-exist, as it could have happened to me even though I resisted, and fought, and crossed my fingers the tightest I could – and this is why I write: as a way of carrying on resisting and existing, even though from so far away from that place – so that they will never forget.