

Three Italian Odes

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Forum Ode

How comfortably we move among these broken stones!
Pale under the noon sun, they whisper nothing
we haven't already heard. Our guidebooks raised,
we follow the grassy thoroughfares, with eyes already
full of their lesson: *How are the mighty fallen!*
We're all briefly Christian here, survivors
of the outrageous Coliseum. Now, complacent,
tolerant of vestigial tyrannies, we sense relief
among these columns; happy Time is a nemesis
to Romans only—bewilders our enemies.

Soon we'll recall our own decline is scripted here:
our churches age and empty, littering the suburbs.
Oh, some will linger—condos and shopping malls
gut them and clean their stones—but others, derelict,
will fall much sooner to this open silence.
Some precincts here—the Curia, Antoninus' temple—
are only upright as they housed or fronted churches;
the circle's fair and just. Saint Peter's may as well be
levelled, and its Square a ring of futile columns;
a thousand years from now, we'll swoon at restorations.

Augustus, *princeps*, he who found a Rome of lumber,
left a Rome of marble—he'd have scorned and razed
these ruins in a week, pilfered the stone, enslaved the locals
to stack new altars. He knew the use of temples: copied
statues of gods adjunct to Rome, and frank display of power.
That's broken too, even in this dismantled city centre:
the might of soldiers' arms that raised in thousands
in endless war, or mass-saluted Nero, is now
a single rasping *Ave!* from the Mamertine, a rhythm
in the Tiber swampland's gardened undulations.

His shamelessness is barely tangible. Titus's Arch alone
insults as it was meant to—snares the eyes of Jews
and mocks them with the pillaged relics of their Temple.
Others, pulled from centuries of landfill, have a hangdog
cringing in their stiffness—bones in a museum.
They did their best to crumble—many we've re-erected
after excavation. The Dioscuri were broken
down by the French, but some more sentimental
travellers put them right; so with Vesta's temple:
our relics show a little glue. No less our reverence.

That temple, though. Look at its size. That puny circlet housed the Roman hearth, the sacred flame kept lit by virgins, sworn to give their lives if hymen or the fire-light failed. On such a candle pioneers wagered their city's future. Half the power of Rome is in that ruin: a chosen sacred element, a ritual tending, in a modest chapel closed to the public, who recognize its dome as the womb of their world, and believe the utter good will perish at the instant of its stifling.

A propaganda cut in fluted stone, and veiled by the robes of priestesses: there's a Rome rewarding pilgrimage. And across the Via Sacra another endless vigil, in a littered brothel: six cubicles, not five feet square, a curtained cloaca their only route to air. A child slave pushing through to that daylight, feels the passing soldier's groin nuzzle her shoulder blades. Not five feet square; nor yet that high. A naked woman bent at the neck and hips, in lamplight.

The Atrium where the vestals wandered, cloistered in colonnades around a central pool, their limbs reflected by marble goddesses, and the glistening water, is now a shattered terrace, the statues (all but one, with half a face and shoulder) snapped off at the ankles. They must have heard, here or at their duties in the temple, money linking hand to hand—the spew of drunkards—there a man in climax—and the women's jaundiced laughter. So nearly housed, they would have heard each other's voices rising fearful when the Goths at last descended.

Is decadence no more than candid urban planning? Caesar's ghost, after the civil wars his murder spilled, was eased with a basilica—no cathedral, but an open airy mall, with offices, kiosks. Tradesmen in hundreds might be haggling, loitering, lunching afoot here. The Christians put the moneylenders well downwind, kept the useful floor plan—aisles, nave, apses—and raised their silent temples. Thirty yards northeast his chiselled bones were deified, before a recessed altar the brokers would have passed to gain the brothel.

A marshy little valley at the centre of the world
three gridirons long: how could they have our delicacy?
The genial Roman marriage of gods and profiteers,
prostitutes and virgins at their vigils in the darkness,
is lost on us: we like our empires fallen, penitent,
or plainly venal. Not this column rising skyward, the hot
blue of the pagan day lowering its lips to meet the perfect grace
of marble: each stone washed daily by women's tears,
whose blood is now suffused into that whiteness;
from this we lower our eyes—the beauty and injustice.

Who wouldn't want to see them, tailored cleanly,
issue into the Forum's public daylight, joining hands
in quiet proclamation, and the empire know them
powerful? But the trowel turns their earth again, and bares
the plain inscription of their lives: *some are for the darkness*;
decent servants work in silence, suffer when the mighty
save themselves and leave the city to barbarians.
This the columns whisper to the loiterer: *There are no
clean hands on earth. We, like you, will stand
as long as we have power; till we fall we mean to*

*take a profit, take a bloodstain, take a little pleasure
with equal candour. Show us the armed republic
righteous enough to knock us horizontal
that will not have its trafficking in pretty whores,
its sacred circles. Will they have as well our brutal
plainness in the sunlight? Then let them build a temple
saying so above us: let us lie at last, defeated,
back in the earth, as veins of marble in their gardens.*

Or some such jagged music—from the chisel of a mason
cutting these flowers on the pediment I lean on.

My fingers trace his petals. Some of his finest masters
linger on the record—architects whose stencils
blossomed beneath his wristwork—but his own face is dust,
though we share across millennia, by fingertip,
fondness for the coolness of fallen stone.
The master dies with laurels, patronage of senators,
a fame unrivalled—but dependent wholly
on willingness to bend; the mason with the freedom
to cut his eye's precision into marble, and to leave
his tools to a catacomb—awaiting excavation.

The public gates are closing soon. The others wander
up to the Palatine, its cliff-face now in shadow,
with gardens on its crown. There the house of Livia
welcomes the low-swept sunlight; here among the voiceless
darkness is growing, though the highest columns
linger, golden-capitaled, against the force of night.
I may have stayed too long to take the turnstiled pathway
through the brick and gardens of that fashionable suburb;
lingering here unnoticed, I'll be flooded with the other
captives in relief, eroded out of recognition.

Venice Dead

I

Seen from the canal, with the frothwise gulls
glib in our wake, the *palazzi* are lying
low in the water; their billowing galleries
sway in the rain; delicate columns
dampen their tonnage
and gold-leaf laces those water-broken stones.

Their windows like half-closed eyes, that bright
cloud overhead distressing;
and water-floors are sodden colonnades,
the door-sweeps crusted, chains and ornate locks
salt-slipped, and green foam clotting
the quay-side stones.

What frailty they sense, they dramatize
to trick the eye from water. But the wake
of a trash-barge shatters hard against
the crowded gunwales of our *vaporetto*,
swaying me to the lime-translucent water,
my scalp-nerve keen.

*what stones below that dark water
ignore the scrabble of sinking hands
the false gondolier desperate to anchor
his last tune before tilting
into the residue where lampreys sleep
the slime on those rocks
 scored by his nails
 and three days later ester'd green again*

*what servants did those cellars house
unwelcome sisters hospitalize
the grip of a mason's cheaper mortar
between their sleep-breath and that bad swamp of dreams*

II

The sunlight crosses Venice on a slipping wind,
and breaks against San Marco as the Moors
blang in the upper air;

the blatant stallions and Marzocco lions
rampant in blood on yellow, swap the sun
against a hundred snapping camera lines.

Each vagrant hoped to pose alone
against that iridescent, loud facade;
but every yard of air, marked off by marble lines
sunk in the granite, spills with throngs,
families, languages out of Europe, mysteries
unregistered: the crowd and its discoveries.

*suspended in green water
the masqueraders and their powdered hair
lank now starfish'd
around their upturned faces
and velvet bandaged eyes*

*near them the hooded velvet capes
of gowned ladies hung in the palace's
blackcherry wardrobes embroidered hems
 crusted in filigree
of dried swamp algae and the kiss of scum
hurrying carelessly from gondola to gala*

III

We enter the Basilica. All eyes sweep high
to the mosaic saints, who goggle-gaze
down through a golden cubic light
onto the floor of geometric stone:
rose and jade, circles of angles. Paradise.

That horizontal section of a god's torso
is undulating now. The nave
we may no longer cross is rising on a wave
gently, and a scraping of tesserae
pales the vague light and murmurous balmy air.

Admire as we may the Pala's gems,
the gaudy cups, the closeness of the Saint:
all stolen, copied, damaged and enthroned
glories here are sinking in their shrouds
and gasp like us for open air.

IV

*a father on the Bridge of Sighs
gulps a January ocean air
then down again into darkness
among slipped dignitaries stumbles
on prison legs
 until the daylight striking the block
 in the chill courtyard tell him
 they need no more standing*

*beside him the false son
who one night dropped in a demon's mouth
anonymous denunciations
these two in the severed body linger
under the Basin's jocund waves
their hands bright in that darkness
and below them a multitude
of knocking heads confounded in the mud of the Lagoon*

In room after room, vault after vault,
Venice, a shepherdess enthroned,
receives the tribute of admiring gods
and serene client kings. The Doges gaze
in fresco at themselves, their wizened eyes
identical behind a common beard.

The Medici looked at Venus till her hair
no longer caught their breath; the Pope, insomniac,
might as he wandered brush the Pietà's base
with a brocaded sleeve. The Doges knew
no heaven to commission but their own
corporate image: Christ Narcissus, floating.

In showy multitudes the blessed,
adoring him, kneel on no certain ground
but hover in their medium of cloud,
as gulls on the Lagoon, serene in a sudden storm,
lift from a *bricola* at a taxi's horn.

*but who will reach down those floors of the dead
for Faliero's broken hand? his pearl'd slippers
deft among the slimed and snaring
 oars of the Bucintoro
bandy the watching rowers' chains;*

*his mitre stirs the jewelled sediment
and lost eyes drift and linger there*

*the shipwreck'd Byron floating deep
in sunlight open-eyed
his torso linen-heavy tilting down
and horizontal limbs outstretched
the minnows gentle with his thinner hair*

V

The Bridge of Sighs, intestinal within,
from here's a whittled bone. Against its light
the cameras flutter: men in file behind
raise their lenses blind into the rain
and those in front, who might have gazed,
focus and shoot, and push away.

So many: for *la Serenissima's*
open to all desirers. Now and then the tide
adjusts, the squares are flooded: in the breath
last taken is a judgment of the world--
before that swim, all is pretension, style;
and after? Well, the city does abide.

*their eyes will not close
in that perfect medium
their cloaks' colours not dissipate
though their dreams are sodden and flesh vague
with that long remarking by the water
the sheer serene of republican manners
furls gently about their limbs
and late gratuitous gestures*

VI

Turning against the flood I find by chance
the emptied town: a land-locked square,
two narrow alleys entering, not a word
killing the village calm. The air
cools, as I approach a boarded well,
my eyelids, temples, hair.

Half in a slanting light, these houses close
their battered eyes. The wind moves bright

against a hanging sheet, that white cloud
billowing; my footsteps on the paving-stones
patter against the salmon stucco'd walls:
the eavestrough's tapping.

*so many and the city settles
firmly abed as they accumulate
and each flogged courtesan
whose corpse slips from quay side
to Lagoon lifts the water's edge
by so much weight of flesh, brocade
displaced and it will find its course
sea level rising
 like a dream of peace*

*and if by chance the tide and ebb
pivot them gently upward
to face the cloudy glass the surface skim
of water seen from locked suspense below
what vision will they gasp at
of goodness unperformed or unaccomplished sin*

*the hulls of dark gondolas glide over
against the green sunlight
before the wake and current turn again*

VII

This open air astonishes--the sea walls flung aside,
the Adriatic shatters its ashamed
service, rises hard against
the low Dogana stones. I lean at ease
against a column, wait for the sun to fall,
the undertow of prison waves--

Meanwhile the desired, distant
Venice settles in its golden haze:
east to the Isola San Giorgio, hung to dry
in spreading mist; south to Giudecca
tenements; north to San Marco, minarets
floating above the Doge's Palace walls.

Their coral brickwork sinks in shadow now.
The evening tours depart. Lingerers
Separate softly on the Piazzetta--

Impossible to hear their voices
As they disperse, with disappointed blessing:
The bells cry out of the just-closed tower.

VIII

*“we can remember that first sandbar
the wind in the spikegrass
and the lament of curlews
whose nests we disturbed
as we stumbled away from the sacked mainland*

*we remember the first
dwelling, and the little church
we built against the truth of the tide*

*we do not remember when
from these salvations
we thought to own the world
or all its trade routes call Venetian*

*somewhere between the effort of self-rescue
and the grasp after eternal reputation
all genius is cut adrift
to chance its outcome on the open sea”*

Florence from Fiesole

Once they were bright enemies,
The land between them broad enough for cities to contest.
Now it is the eye that hopes to seize
The plummeting terrain;
The afternoon precipitates in mist
Over the scene,
The pyrrhic sun declines
Before us, and its horizontal spires
Filter the dust in light; and Florence breathes
Late in her dividend of time.

Behind us Roman ruins come to light:
Turfed hillocks where medieval ramparts drank the Tuscan rain
Hid in their wombs the wings of theatres,
Stones that were kissed
By satin before Christ;
Quarried by Fiesole to build the brace
We saunter on, against the lift
Of bells. The valley calls her worshipful,
And tourist buses drain the belvedere.
I linger: now the height's appreciable.

Down at the Arno dusk breaks up
The force of vista, and the sun drops coins of light
On the Medici strongholds, burning stone:
Palazzo Vecchio, the Pitti bluff
And Brunelleschi's dome
Vivid again to envy, an art of rising power:
Fiesole first to fall
A suburb to that spell,
The sentinel's advantage at these heights
Sapped utterly when bankers came to war.

The Badia tower's nylon scaffolding
Preserves it for a later eye than mine; what centuries
Longer will it endure beyond its time,
Or San Lorenzo, scarfed
In plastic sheeting, shield
Its princes, and their effigies in crypt-light,
From shouting vendors littering the square?
The architect who raised the Dawn
Today would leave (as then he left for Rome)
For any living city, and a better tycoon's fee.

No one will curate Fiesole. It thrives
On neighbourhood, and charges prisoners mildly for the view.
I take the cool lanes
Augustus laid,
The shade of actors, and their exits too;
Then stroll the sloping market square alone,
Watch as the metal shop-front gates scroll down,
And evening leaves the air remotely kind.
Our footsteps muffle: one by one
The artisans desert the town.

As I descend, the sunset stains the bells,
The Campanile roof, and last these outer hills, Giotto's tower
Bone white in twilight. Down in that square
The floods are blaring on,
The gathering crowds
Yearn at Ghiberti's doors, facsimiles
Of God's. Riverwards, in the Signoria square,
The David silvers in a camera flash
And pale chiffons on waiting women sift
Mayhem accordions cool against their skin.

Behind them the Uffizi block is dark,
Her corridors in perfect dust, where sculpted heads of state
Briefly converse, in moonlight. They are in heaven,
Blind. Venus there
Suffers the wind to disarray her hair,
But less conceal
That nakedness that Botticelli made
Better than God designed; and Flora, gowned
Of that same flesh, scatters her budding vines
Onto the trellis of my longing gaze

And calls me home. That lazy-lidded smile
Was Simonetta's, who would quickly die; whose open grace
Survives the firmness of the painter's hand.
The narrowing twilight
Puzzles my eyes;
I find my way by music from the square,
Turn against heaven, and the Duomo fills
The sky with brutish rust. A passer-by
Lingers against my arm, her muslin hem
Fluttering loose above the cobble stones.