

A black and white photograph of a narrow Venetian canal. The water is dark and reflects the sky. On the left, a building with a tiled roof and a tall chimney is visible. On the right, another building with a balcony is seen. In the distance, a bridge spans the canal. The overall scene is atmospheric and historical.

My Gran Pittore

a venetian tale in verse

by C. John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008

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My Gran Pittore

Part One

I leave the gate and take a path that leads
through flowering marjoram and open vines.
Above are oranges and, just as then,
the periwinkles sparkle in the grass.

It seems but yesterday the years I passed
in surrogation to our sovereign Venice,
but now a summer's breath is in the wind,
and all around there seems a happiness
that clothes these festivals of countryside,
and makes our littorals of floating lights,
the fret and hubbub of our carnivals,
but working transcripts of a dream, with no
more matter to them than the tranquil clouds
have business with us but to trail on slowly:
coloured turbans sailing into blue,
to canvases of nothing, or in-between,

remote and ever-moving and to me
most beautiful and of our Saviour's light,
His meek, perpetual majesty as shown
in wondrous spectacles upon the earth

I press on upwards as the path grows steeper
a free man walking in his own good time
a man at peace with God who is his conscience,
a man moreover kindly, with a wit
well known to Doge as to the quayside merchant,
a twinkling eye and ready deference
that brings commission from the Church or State,
for though at last this brush is laid aside
the workshop still has salaries to find.

I pause to get my breath, but looking up
can see the tops of cupolas through trees,
and over them that yellow, heavy dome
above the chapel where my work would hang:
a shout of outside laughter where the light is dim,
evoked with incense and with candle smoke,
with sins repented of, where God comes back
to figure in our soul- and self-perceivings —
as in those paintings that we see again
with long-forgotten passages that show
in our long trailings after truth we found
one day a resurrection of the light.

As so it seemed then, though the path was steeper.

A nun is waiting for me. Quietly
we go down corridors and into rooms
where all is ordered and the air is still.
I pass by apparitions bent at tasks,
intent on sewing, on the stitch and patch
of cassocks threadbare at the knees. One lifts
a head, acknowledges my greeting, sadly
smiles. The figures here were famous beauties,
hung with wealth and title, families
whose names make riot down the packed canals,
receive in palaces of gilded pomp,
where men in livery, good honest men,
must go the instant on some passing whim.
I think on that and how the memories
now cross at evenings with a careworn glance
from others in this withdrawn, shadowed place.

She'll be, the Abbess, with me presently.
I sit at first, but then get up and pace
between the windows and rush-back chairs,
across a room that's comfortless: a small
brass crucifix beside an altar cloth
of clean, white linen, nothing more: a Heavenly
Saviour sought through service and with fasts.

How different is the world beyond. The window
looks down to levels where my workshop lies.
The light still flares there but the prospect darkens
and what was glittering is laid aside.

The everyday returns and I can see
both shining interludes and what are now
but villages with churches, congregations
that bow to images and rough-hewn saints.

The ground falls steep away from these east walls
and leaves a promontory from which I gaze
as on a crystal globe of bulbous forms
now reaching out, now vanishing, and turning
with that far, heavenly music which we hear
but only distantly and out of mind.

A rustle: she is here: I make my reverence.

*'A new face for you, signor Veronese.
Please be seated. You must excuse my calling
one so well known, who has many duties.'*

*The workshop thrives. I have the leisure now
to see and travel, and in choosing hope
that what we undertake will please our Lord.*

*'My predecessor will have missed that quiet
appropriateness she often spoke of: words
that show a wise and courtly deference
but please both honest worker and the heart.'*

She's gone, the Sister Agnes? I had not heard.

*'This March. We buried her before the springtime's
scent of oranges and singing birds.*

*A long, harsh time it was. Our sister lingered
much in her prayers but watching, we could see,
the slow light drag itself on floors, the sun
pick out more solidly these heavy walls,
the trees and vines show promise with their buds
of summer's leafiness she would not see.
She lived with friends, but still that wasted body,
cooped up in long impatience, took its leave
without a backward glance, in pain, and late.'*

*To hear that I am sorry and would repent
of any matters that involve my name.*

*'Things to be cleared up in the contract here:
both parties put their hand to it but still
it lies these ten years after, unfulfilled.'*

It does.

'No drawings given us?'

None.

'And none intended? Ever? Voided contract?'

*There were some stipulations, features which
in a mind of giving or of recollection
I gave assent to, stupidly, which even
now I think on, and regret, and daily. . .*

*'You need not speak in riddles, master painter.
The donna Antonia has spelt the matter
out and wants no redress from the past.'*

Well then.

'You could not bear to draw that face?'

I tried.

*'Or did not want to, Veronese,
being a man of substance, a reputation
not assisted by such memories?'*

*No doubt, most Reverend Mother, but in truth
the hundred faces in my canvasses
have come from high life and the low.*

*I need
not say to one who offers grace and hope,
a sanctuary to all who hear His gospel,
and more, will take His simple words to heart,
how variously those pictures were assembled —
from artisans long out of work, poor men
glad for a glittering soldo to stand for hours,
from drabs and courtesans, rich merchant wives,
the most respectable, good burger folk,
the hard of heart and merry under God.*

*So painters see it, praying He forgives
their labouring handiwork if all their days —*

*from fragrant colour at the flare of morning
to untold brilliance as the evening dies —
be fashioned other than their sinful hopes
that walk in satined carnivals while God
sees through such finery and writes His name.*

'She does not linger in your memory?'

*Would that she did, good Reverend Mother. Sometimes
I think all Venice is interred with bones,
a feckless empery is in its pride
that mocks us emptily with courtier's phrase,
with words of love's submission, faithful service,
by which false lovers turn their quarry, lay
the body and besmirch it. So our city.*

*'You think too much of limepits and encroaching
fires, my son. She is with others, sent
from this distracted world of grief and pain
to where God's mercy is and all have peace.'*

*You never knew how kind she was, or what
perfection stood within those forthright features.*

*'God has His purposes as one who moves
beyond the firmament that makes our thought.*

*Has not the father of the Holy See
held service for us, said such solemnals
of prayer, that she and others have an end*

*appropriate in walls of dimming tears.
She is with God, my son, where body's needs
may no more make their inroads on the soul,
which is the citadel, where even love,
which here we answer to for scant reward,
becomes contumely, where the Evil One
undoes obedience to all better, turns
our faith to silvered grossi. She is at peace,
and nothing untoward prevails against
that image which is refuge for our faith.'*

*Nothing could. In her instinct for life
she was more prompt than is the wandering friar
attached to paternosters and his books.
The smallest frightened creature on God's earth
drew out her sighs and pity. I have seen
her nurse a tabby cat, a brindled stray
with sores and tattered ears and wariness
that kept to inner doorways or to dark
cloth underspaces of the vendors stalls,
with such a patience and a kindness
that it would wanton after stranger's steps.*

*'Then hers is paradise, and her good deeds
hang in our prayers long after she is gone.'*

*Who'd have thought it? That her innocence
would breathe such purpose that it brought
the bloom of quietness to all she spoke?*

*'My son, I cannot give you absolution.
This world of outward joys and untold griefs
is legendary in what it gives and yet
will not. Talk with your confessor, he
will know what keeps you from that inner path,
what may be done in retrospect to guide
you through the shoals and tempests of this life.*

*But on this matter we are simple folk
who ask for order and for straight accounts,
that sums endowed to us for your commission
be wrought in handiwork or handed back.'*

*With all regret, that must be so. I ask
pardon on my dilatoriness and any
want of candour, but that path is best.*

*'Is it, my son? The lady Schiavoni,
the donna Antonia whom you knew so well,
has asked for audience, that you say
in person how your thoughts incline.'*

*She's here,
the donna Antonia, now?*

*'Has been
these many years, in hope to make her peace
for all that she has done, or has not done.
Speak with her.'*

*What can words effect
in me or us that was denied before?
Those bonds of loving ended in our Anna's death:
was doubtless of my doing, of my pride,
unwillingness she take her mother's part,
to father something that was sport for men,
their leering anecdotes, repugnant jests.*

*More: it was a father's covetousness,
that what he sired should not be sold. Our child
became an ingrown thorn between us, will
continually the while we live. Respects
and courtesies to one who graced her station,
but nothing can be gained by speaking now.*

*'Sit with me awhile now, master painter,
and think the import of your previous words.
Where is the charity our Saviour seeks,
to act in principle as He has shown us,
against the altercations of our pride?'*

*Across these distances, good Reverend Mother,
what would our meeting do but stir up embers,
my pride, my failings, my overweening hopes
that led to acrimony, Anna's death?
I pray with all heart the wound has closed.'*

*'But has it? No. You have not heard how much
she mutters to herself and strikes her breast,
and mentions by the hour your name and Anna's,*

*and how the hours tick past remorselessly,
with only night to come and wreath in darkness
what love's rich embassies prepared for us.'*

*Time takes us to that other world in which,
after penances and purgatories, we may
converse with souls clean-shriven as our own.*

*'But not in pride, my son. Unless we be . . .
you know the words of course but will not hear them.'*

I will consider on it, but now must go.

*'You do not know me, with what experience
I came into this sanctuary of peace.
I gave my word, Signore, to our sister,
that you would see her, for the time that's past.'*

*Sometimes, as I have mentioned, promises
are made too quickly. No, I will not see her.*

*'So you would force us to pursue the contract?
Our hand is on the signing, as is yours.
Speak kindly to her as your reputation
assures us that you will. Good Veronese,
your case is just, but worldly pride will bar
the steps from purgatory all souls must take.
I go for her. Wait here. She'll not be long.'*

Part Two

What can that termagant expect of one
still marked by lamentations and his griefs?
Within these sudden and constricting depths,
are things unthought on that entangle speech
where nothing breathing can be brought to bank.

They say she's changed, is not that flare
of jewels and fiery nature that had made
once Venice follow at respectful distance,
and that great body in its open clothes
forgoes the armed retainers of its stride.

Me she hardly deigned to notice, not
the once among those scarlet personages
who walked attending on the Doge's chair.
Among the many in their titles, she
was foremost in the traipsing satined throng
of wives and courtesans and mistresses.

Who was that? I asked in confidence,
awaiting audience. My neighbour smiled.
*'The large, imperious one with golden hair?
She, Caliori, is the Schiavoni,
and not for us.'*

Please bid her talk to me.

*'You, Caliarì, a painter, mason's son,
would meet her in some tavern room,
and after drift up to your threadbare garret?
You are mad. Yes, a well-knit, handsome
man, well thought of here, commissions growing,
but she's a courtesan of peerless rank
who trails a emperor's ransom in her clothes.
Have sense: go find yourself a backstreet drab,
a better service, like as not, and more
in charity and humbly given, than these
high-moving courtesans who lack a heart.'*

*I want a sitting. On whatever terms
she cares to name will be commission
to give her ever afterwards a name.*

*'No,' he said the two weeks later. 'No.
Of course I told her that your portraits grace
the best of palaces, the Doge's rooms,
that all admire your well-wrought sumptuousness
of colour, candour and the breath of day.
But she laughed, how much she laughed. Good friend,
go hither; be as Titian: you will not
beguile the Schiavoni with your art.'*

That's as may be now, I thought. In time
she'll think the better of me. So I vowed
it like an adolescent, new arrival,
who does not grasp what social elevations
mark off the mountain peaks when seen from far.

I tried at first to call: she was not home.
I hung about the streets with words prepared.
I accosted her, but had my courage fail
as that full weight of bearing moved on me.

I said, *I am the painter from Verona.*

'Go by,' she said.

*Who wishes to record
your beauty that the ages hence will feel
how rich was Venice in that woman's day.*

She swore. *'Caliari, yes, I know your name.
Do not insult me with such hackneyed words.
Why should I care what afterwards the world
may think that now hangs breathless at my steps?*

*Be gone, my little painter, dog no heels
or these attendants will undo your person.
You understand me? Keep some interval
between your breath and mine. Go paint your saints
and angels, but leave to me the suddenness
of things material that have my gift.
No, put him down,' she said, and I was left
shaking with anger as she sauntered off
laughing carelessly, not looking back.*

And yet I'd noted how that body moved,
unyielding heaviness in folded arms,

and distant fury under gilded lids.
Immediately, in bitterness, I set
my chalk to paper. Feverishly for hours
I worked, bewildering our Benedetto.

*'What of commissions? Brother, speak to me!
First was idleness for weeks, and now
this headlong industry. Good man, take pause.
Who is this woman that you tear up drafts
that both of us have worked on and agreed?'*

Aghast, he watched me change the faces, bring
them round to that still ringing in my head.

*'Good brother, by the saints in Heaven, you'll get us
dropped from every Guild or Council. Be done,'*
he said, and *'find some other place to paint
what Heaven has given you, or some darker place.'*

How many renderings of a onetime beauty
were fixed in that small portrait I sent off
and waited, sent a message, waited more
as weeks turned months and came there not a word.

From distances I saw the Schiavoni
moving as great vessels do, with power
to break all obstacles, and in that bearing
a force so menacing I brought to use
her features for my scenes of crowding faces.
She spread unwittingly throughout our city

in Council, church and merchant's rooms.

And that, for six long years, was all my dealing
with the donna Antonia Schiavoni —
but things imagined, adolescent longings
that caused me mischief and a lighter purse
in low-life drinking shops and bawdy houses.

Our meeting when it came was unexpected.
I was playing of an evening at a tavern,
a solo part with lute, and not demanding,
but still I turned that heartache into song,
when from the balcony there came a voice
I did not know, fragrant and dark and not
unmusical that drew all faces upward.
She laughed and threw a golden ducat down
and said, as we made bows,

*'Come to evenings
on the Monticegno, all of you,
and you particularly, Caliori, I ask
attend my steward in the morning, there
to plan what's wanted and remuneration.'*

We're not musicians, lady, only friends.

'Nor I a singer either.' Then she laughed
with such a drop of voice that all stood still
and looked at me again. *'Goodnight my friends.'*

What can I say but she was gracious, kindly
even, treating us with deference.
And as we played, she sang and joined
as will a lady in the kitchen dress with herbs
the venison her maids have sweated for,
with humour and mock courtliness. Just that,
but sometimes of an evening it would seem,
this company of gallants, mistresses,
and we plain artisans were of one breath
that rang together as the crystal spheres
encircling Venice rose to make it one.
The long canals and flickering balconies
were of one symphony of day and dusk,
and we ourselves were wrought of coloured lights
of notes entangled and reverberating,
so each by chance assembled felt their soul
lift up with angels' wings, and in their passing
a peace in prospects falling far away.
I think if paradise is on this earth,
which we have read in scriptures will be ours,
it was those evenings in the Donna's rooms.

No mark was shown me, nothing favourable,
and though I burned for her it was in secret,
unknown to others. Sometimes she teased:

*'Now won't
you stay, my painter friend, and sing awhile?'*

But I, not now the raw provincial, smiled,
made jokes of it, brought friends and mistresses,
and feigned a blithe indifference to her silence.

'My friends,' she said one evening as we went,
'I'll bid you leave me signor Veronese.'
That was my name by then, but hardly had
she used it. She smiled and took me by the arm
impetuously, and when alone with me,
said:

*'You are not kind. What must I do? Write
threnodies in endless jottings on my face,
keep hours of darkness, dress in winding sheets,
forgo all riotous company and seek
to pass my days in sadness like a saint?'*

*My donna Antonia, I made an offer,
gave all I had in it, but was rebuffed.*

'In what?' she said. *'That painting? You were a fool
those days, which I forgave, and burnt the thing.
Why not? I want no pretty likenesses
to fill the office of my person, stand
in painted distance to my court of men.'*

*You burnt my jewelled work, a thing compact
of many beauties, as all Venice knows?*

She stared awhile, then swore, and struck me hard.

*'Must I, the Schiavoni, sue, for what
is daily pressed on me by Doge's sons
with gifts and courtesies and pregnant words?
Listen, we are not different, you and I.
We both serve Venice and our social betters,
as did my mother, and her mother too.
They both were courtesans, and in their way
as beautiful as any gracing ducal
courts. And both died poor, cast off by those
who tired of handling what they simply bought.*

*For both, now note me, master painter, spoiled
the future wanting as must other folk
a child, a husband and a home at last.'*

*It's true that each of us must must earn his bread
in ways appropriate to his gifts and station.*

*'Folly and arrogance. For what God gives
He does extract in envy of the crowd,
in fear of what divides us, things not weighed
in those high scales the angels hold, that dread
accountability to which we're called.*

*Only I shall not. My ship, tricked out
with wiser preferences will sail
from coasts to entrepots in what I seek.*

*Why look surprised? Your mind is subtle, quick
to take in circumstance and hold its peace.
You have seen my many flocks of suitors —
men well-bred and handsome, with the manners
acquired by trading through the lands they own.
Why should they not desire delight of me,
break through my inner fortress with bravado,
be royally bestial as good soldiers are?'*

*What can I say to you, my lady? I am
beholden to your kindness and your person
for hours of happiness, for having stayed
a little in the prospects of your gifts.*

*'I speak too plainly, do I? Caliori,
I know your dispositions: you would not paint
a woman's wantonness and love of clothes,
if not enraptured by that selfsame music.'*

Perhaps the body more. What do you ask?

*'I am as any woman is, who wants
some heart to pluck the inner chord of all
she is or would be soon. If that is you
or someone else I do not know, but I
would make a contract for a while, and give
this offer to you, honestly, Signore:
you take me fully, with your mind and heart,
or never draw me henceforth to your thoughts.'*

Part Three

How much that offer startled me! I stood
in awe of her, and gazing as on summer
clouds that float far over to the faint horizons.
I thought of her strong body and its soaking
breath as mine to turn in drenching passion,
to ride in tumult till its tempests broke
in sun-shot happiness, the brilliant swell
of water splashing on Rialto steps.

No words were needed. Fervently I took
the hand, and in the afterwards was thrown
to shipwreck tangle of loose spars. I strove
to delve as one who's lost his senses, felt
more depths of wanting that a man can hold,
who treads the water as entailing currents
thick-haul him down and under, afterwards
to thrust him upward in a rush of bubbles.
Her need was mine and with an openness
I could not think were possible in one
so calculating in her step and dress.

I kept the contract close to mind in days
or weeks, so many, that I did not see her,
and in that evanescent happiness
applied myself once more to ink and paint.

Veronese I must tell you was a name

that brought to mind the sumptuous animation
of annual festivals, of being dressed
as daylight, which in early morning breaks
as pale electrum on the Adriatic
— a film more liquid than the eye than grasp
to coasts that bring in pinewood and the grapes,
the dark-spiced cedars down from Lebanon,
Smyrna with its honeyed bales of dates
and figs, the rich sequestering of the light
that threads its circlets on the smaller islands,
surrounds Ionian hills with olive groves
sequesters Cyprus where the sea-borne Venus
arose in mystery and copper ore.

Such is Venice with its trading posts
across the frozen Caucasus, where camel
bells must trail and tinkle in the silence,
through summers blazing on beneath the vast
high dome of sunlight and the sodden plains —
all these I set down in my brush and wove
a thread of luxury through the damask cloths.

Those things I painted — in the liquid strokes
that lingered in an eyelid or a streak
of greenish ochre in the golden hair
there wound in braids and touched with pearls, in bloom
of healthy skin that brought in breast and ear —
were what I'd sensed or run my fingers through
on long-remembered afternoons, the sun-
light soaking into faded tapestries

or warming shuttering that closed the walls
and rose as battlement around that body,
which was not fully mine, as Venice knew
and smiled indulgently, as did her suitors
attending business or the Council meetings.

For me, there was much deprecating
of myself and station: necessary
in one depending on his trade and name:
an artisan, not one to talk on church
or trade or empire, but who knew that pride
makes hostage of us and enfeebled sight
assumes the carcasses of adulation
beside that one and everlasting bliss
reserved for saints and martyrs. And yet I am,
as I say, acquainted with such voyaging,
with need for drink and colour, celebrations
of festivals which in my earnest brush
I trace, enlarged, for delectation.

I am
no more than that, a looker-on, a painter
who sees his miracles in daily things:
The breath of sunlight as the morning haze
burns out in midday ripples on the water,
the thin-run molten lead that far down washes
the broken surface as the wave slopes through,
the laze of pennants, wavering light on stilts,
the boats that bob and ply upon the far lagoon
until they merge with nothing and the sky.

Mine was what I saw each day about
me in the tranquil finger of a God
who guided me throughout in word and act,
and made continually the ducats ring:

Your studio would do this? So much obliged.
Your last astonished us and therefore we
will meet your fees, in total, as agreed.
I was no madman with unlicensed dreams
who stood to cauterize the public gaze
but one who followed precedence and, being
but a mason's son, made good his skill
by practiced industry, a name in short
that stretched beyond the calculations
of dull Verona or the hillside towns.

Those glowing gifts were mine to celebrate,
that if there came at times more troubling thoughts,
as daylight surging through an inner room
bears through the sanctity an undressed sight,
what could I do who scraped the acres back
of sumptuous gossamers in damask, satin
braids, to see beneath the brimming cloth
our make-believe of inner natures, who
we are at sundown when we kneel at prayers.

I was no errant thinker, but one who sought
to make continually his show of praise
for riches given us, to bend my face

away from roaring merriment in rooms,
from flagrant gesturings on balconies,
and, worse, the genders of a doubtful sex,
those drabs who not so much exposed themselves
but did all manner of disgusting acts,
the which I knew too well, and had as clients.
Not contemptuous of them, yet I blessed
the scriptures that in safety, day by day,
to Canaan's land had brought me, sinning ever
in my thoughts and willing, as all do, echoing
perpetually that first of angel's fall
who brought perdition on us and this strife.

I lived, when young, with miracles, and lodged
their schooling in my mind. When daylight bloomed,
however late, dilatory, monastic even
on my rough father's walls, I'd rise and sketch
the shape of gesture on the smoother stone:
the figures sumptuous as they stood, life-proud,
imperiously contained within their forms.

Older now, I am appalled, renounce
them utterly as puffed-up trumpery.
I would repaint those walls of summer villas,
rework my awkward-fashioned altarpieces,
but yet I marvel as I marvelled then.

God's hand was in my painting, and I found
through puppetry and seeming make-believe
afresh new images that made them true,

and that hard conscience of my father gave
me grace to witness sorrow in his place.

To bless one lost in rages, more in drink,
a man turned on himself who, though he saw
the springtime fragrant in the earth, could feel
the angels passing in the wind, could hear
the chattering of leaves, the voice of rivers,
would only with his clumsy hands recarve
this one and much repeated line in prophets,
one opening from another, each one worse,
that kept him toiling at the wayside shrines.

Why God should let him labour on in vain,
would taunt with makeshift things, and throw them back
with limitless self-loathing I do not know,
but He no doubt had reasons and has made
the same rich dowry out of women's looks,
the most in my Antonia, whose grace
gave answer to a patron's vaguest thoughts
in well-drawn character and firmer shape,
as all the while, most modestly, I'd set
how this could be, or that, and from my brush
would come new instances, fresh prodigies
where they could view a world transported, sent
from that most distant past, and what they saw
stretched out from doorway or Rialto step
returned contemporary with that blessed land.
Here what they hoped for had been lived before,

as through our quaysides went our Saviour's steps
that He, in high-wrought meekness and remit
of pain, could leave His imprint on the world.

Part Four

And now there comes to me the Schiavoni,
when all my years are needed not to show
how changed she looks, where that high sweeping air
is sunk to petulance and bloated skin,
though eyes still blaze at me.

*How hard the stone
is here, how comfortless the cold steps down
to corridors and bare refectory tables.*

*'I am accustomed to confining walls,
to silences that reach to echoing steps,
where daylight at the window bars and waits
for evening's fading and the flight of bats.*

*This is my world now, Caliari, and even
clothes that were my solace have that look
of princes' emissaries, who urge to please,
but in the end say nothing but regret.
How strange the swelled effrontery of breast,
the pageantry of bodies and their satined grace
should shrink at length to this poor wheezing breath.*

*See here, this withered hand your lips have kissed
a thousand times in rapture now beset
by folds, loose veins and liver-spots.'*

My lady.

*'I am not your lady but a Magdalena,
a sister of reputation fallen on white charity,
who stoops her body down by altar steps
and calls most fervently that God's high grace
will give her ending in a contrite heart.'*

*May God so grant it with His abundant blessings
that those who seek Him here may have their rest.*

*'Amen to that. I see you have not lost
your gift for courtesy and fashioned phrase.
What is it you come for in this far
retreat of incense weavings and of smoke?'*

*I came at your request, against my own
good judgement, as the Reverend Mother urged.*

'The commission, Caliri, where is that?'

I think much lost upon the way.

*'Ten years
and nothing? Not a sketch? You, Caliri,
we'll send for sorrow then: you are so slow.'*

*So many orders came, at times from those
abroad with embassies we can't refuse.*

*'That all Venice knows, those highnesses
who want for allegories their painted women,*

*half-clothed and vapid, mouthing pious thoughts.
Who sat for those gross trumperies?'*

None

but memory as always, my dear Antonia.

*'No current favourites, little things that hang
on partial promises and tricked-out words?'*

*I've seen all women as our Saviour made them,
from bold ten soldi sluts who sit astride
and flaunt, or would do, gratis, what they have
in rubied breasts and thick-encumbered genders
to merchant wives with breeding who would hold
a pose for ever if good Venice saw them
their arbiters of fashion, as well of course
as true celebrities as you were then,
whose dress had jewels, of which just one
had paid my staff and paint bill for a month.*

*'Always the same, Caliarì: ever
the small man totting up the risk and cost.'*

*God has shown me many kindnesses.
I come, as you know well, from unroofed works
that face the Adige as it winds across
San Paolo's watery fields, the Campo Marzo
is not much counted as Verona's finest.
My schoolmates were its ragamuffins, sons
of labourers and artisans, the same to be*

*in turn. Good men and honest but unwashed.
Not for them to walk the Anastasia
or present credentials at the Scaligeri,
or climb the marble steps of Ragione:*

*At these I pass as a most prosperous man:
worthy don Paolo, take a glass with us, sit
and tell us how the Doge and Council spread
their laden fleets across the Adriatic,
or what the Valois King of France has said
to you of celebrations, Palladio's arch,
the courtesans who crowd the packed Rialto
and from its banks or boats made embassies
you were consulted on. All this was unexpected,
against the odds, in one who came from modest
circumstances, indeed impoverished.*

*'Who left that path, and quietly climbing, turned
as ever to prevailing winds.'*

*No doubt
there's truth in that, but, also, who can show
his handiwork but as his betters pay?*

*'Where are those stratagems of hint and tell
with which you tricked out palaces in paint?'*

*The world of learning has its great commanders:
my conquests echo in a rounder space.*

*'Do they, Caliori, and you're not
the man who peeps about when guests are gone?
Did nothing ever shake that soul, if soul
you have, but canvasses and pigment's cost?*

*Why should you show this vale of tears with drench
of colour when it is a vain illusion?
Why mock with trumperies our earnest souls?'*

*I came, my Lady, to enquire your health,
ask pardon of offences, make my peace.*

'Too late, my friend. Fulfill the contract.'

*That now,
is neither possible nor for the best.*

*If I have gathered in commissions, won
a living and some honour, gained the trust
of Doge and merchant, I have much to think
on nonetheless, and so I tell Carletto,
son and workman in my place.*

*'Yes,
I've seen those ill-constructed things. How dark
they look, so heavy, daubed and dull. What can
you teach of dancing on such awkward steps?'*

*It's true I paint the evening shadows which
have truth in outline, and were always there.
My time is fining out, and things around*

*now look at me reproachfully. They say:
you understand us, do you, Paolo, you
who took on matters as most painters do,
for purse and flattery and not the heart's
fresh-minted coinage? In truth I did and always
knew how bitterly came back to stay
the stratagems that caused a thousand faults.*

*Rich-hued and bountiful seems every day
when colours ache upon my palsied hands.
I walked in coming here along the small
canals, and thought me back to that young man
I was in stopping, and in going back
and forward, thinking of you, how to win you,
who were above me as the summer clouds.*

*The which I never told, how for months
your image hung against my thought, pressed up
against me, filled my waking and my sleep.*

*What liberties I took with it, extending
myself imagined into every part:
a heaven of having and of rough delighting,
till after, when the dawn light found me spent
and comfortless, what fasts and promises
and penance I'd have to make, confessions
that holy fathers even tired of me.*

*I scoured the taverns and the gaming houses,
and came to senses slowly, abused and staggering,*

*with head down, lying in the street: a thing
to pity at, though none there knew me. In women
purchased I would blear the features, make
them smouldering where they were but plain, a fire
of thrown magnificence in tawny hair,
and from the haunches and the heavy breasts
made out a rule to weigh all women by.*

*I blush to tell you even sombre eyes,
the hint of green, the silvery greys, all
I paint and am most famous for, began
in your rejection, mocking laugh, a mouth
that spat at me, a muscled form I sensed
had power to hold me and invade the heart.*

*'Fine words, my Veronese, and as cheap
as things you painted in the Levi's feast.'*

*Unavoidable and most unfortunate:
but not a single day in fact has passed,
at work, at recreation, talk with friends,
attending to the Doge, to friars and clients,
at my betrothal words, at hearing priests
recount the blessings and the penalties
that marriage brings us to — even then,
within the thickness of my body, thoughts
were only truant and returned to you.*

*'Much, much too late. Why is it now
you make the declaration, not that time*

*I had so many others, each with name
and ready purses? Is that my fault? Our lives
depend on whom we can enchant with looks
and sultry promises and further nights.
I told you rich patrician's sons would wait
on me and fight for favours. Did you think
that I who had the greatest of past Doge's sons
wear out their stockings on my polished floors,
to follow me with hangdog glances, such
as when we beat them hard will come back puzzled,
would give all up to be a tradesman's wife?
The best of Venice sought me and desired
to be the arm on which I left the court.'*

*The which would not be mine. How could it? True,
I am a popular and thriving man,
whose makes his passage out of nimble thoughts,
not fawning on but not forgetting, sowing
rank with courtesies the more remarkable
because so apt. To you, my lady, moving
as a ship of state, high laden, pennants
flying, all lesser craft must dip their flags.*

*I have seen you come as summer to a room
and draw the fragrance out of winter's leaves,
bright things that smoke upon imaginings,
and thrust an image into consciousness
of long defences, shaded battlements
and slow surrender.*

*I have seen see you dance
with women, laughing, lead them on to snatch
at men they should not notice, turn and look
a wild Bacchante with their passions flushed.*

*Who can deal with that but gentlemen
who keep themselves in bearing, where their name
can look but idly on a crowd, and know
whatever they may do, or do not do,
their prospects answer for. For me, I am
more conscious of my status, and my place
as nature's looker-on, no more than that,
but note exactly how they move and smile.*

*'That is not the issue, Caliori.
You had my waking and my company
far more than others who had flung apartments,
jewels and ducat nights on what was passing.
You I entertained in my long hours
of reading, playing at the lute or cards,
when I was larger than my thoughts, and saw
the silvered waters of the far lagoon
inflate with sunset as the ragged clouds
brought on the thankfulness of gondoliers
who no more shouted fares but sat as lapping
waters splash upon the steps and lift
their boats upon the element. That hour
of grace and recollection, heartfelt ease
before we slip on bodices and silken
underclothes and such extravagances*

*as parties shall demand: in these I was
in service to you and much more myself.'*

*For me as well they were enchanted hours,
my dear Antonia, and I still see
that shower of benefice as though the sun
had thrown its mintage into shuttered bars.
I felt our souls were moving as I took
the lute and hung upon your unclothed body
sleeping, a hand thrown out, or on the breast,
its palm turned up and open to the last
rich benedictions of the light, the rays
of that perpetual pageantry burned on,
and hoping as the heart was full, we need
but hear that music in our further natures.*

*'You spurned me, Calibri. That long year
we lived together as the city starved,
I sold my jewels, gave up apartments, dressed
but modestly, becomingly, the while
your importunings searched for friar and priest,
that time you lowered rates as all around
the Council deliberated and Doge nodded,
nothing to happen but that galleys went
out more hungrily and came back empty,
no bread or foodstuffs but such things our patrons
sent in by back- roads silently at night.
We both by gifts survived: I bore your child,
and asked for nothing but a recognition.*

Part Five

*'That was all, my Caliori, simply
name. I asked for that and you refused.
The Schiavoni, with her wealthy patrons,
beset by titled gentlemen, must beg
to court the daylight in some finer cloth.*

*The hours when you were glad enough to linger
in a bed thick-warmed by many others,
had been dispensed with: out we throw
a name that bears no muster in the Guild
of artisans and modest working stock.'*

*I offered wet-nurse, clothes and crib, and never
once suggested that dark foundling's grate
wherein so many issues are cut off.
I would support it, with a name in time
for mother's schooling or a workshop place.*

*'But not God's blessing, true — my Caliori?
You cast me off, an outworn shoe, not one
you had now further use of, being minded
to find another of more virgin shape
to grow about you as you trod your ways,
a bustling craftsman with his ledgers filled.*

*'And by degrees the balance in us shifted:
you rose in standing as my prospects fell.
All Venice knew my suitors gave you subjects,*

*prominence and suitable connections,
wherein your industry found rich reward,
until a body that was paid by favours
became a mockery of altar pieces.*

*'How many looking at those virtuous faces
will see a woman there who scorned such shifts?
Far more than Titian with his courtesans,
my sensual body had in subtle grace
reformed the common and the awkward. How?
You did not say but painted clothes in which
a luminous enchantment draws a veil
that women dream of and true poets make.*

*'Yes, I read as you do not. I know
the sonnet from a mish of half-baked thoughts,
can tell that Aretino's bitter words
still bite on substance that the learned heed,
much though the Church denies it — idiocies
are your way to a world that's not.*

*'Listen,
nothing's impregnable, but passes, Venice
even if she does not change. Those rich
and shifting constellations, those spreads of jewels
in oils and essences, bright invocations
of belief — they flutter out and burn
till what we see are shadows, sickenings
of souls in torment, Tintoretto's shapes*

*that flare in thought as marsh gas on the water.
But all the same, through courtesies and smiles,
our daughter's loss was certain as the grave.*

*'Because you chose but stupidly, and are
rewarded with a family of little
men, nonentities to whom you pass
your gifts as workshop practice. Think a moment:
how can Carletto have that brooding mind
to trace beyond appearances and draw
an outline to a larger world, that one
which God in majesty bequeaths to man
if he have peace and true humility?'*

*If that is so I have been punished, indeed
I have, and am, and daily count the cost.
I think of our poor Anna, her who bore
the golden testimony of our long nights.*

*Why did I throw that jewel away? Because
when new arrived I walked past palaces
and great canals where darkneses reflect
exuberance that puts the moon to shame.
I'd stop and gaze upon the festivals
of folk I did not know, that time would cure:
well furnished gentlemen with name and title
that spoke of ancient lineages, estates
that stretched beyond the simple countryside
of Mestre and Veneto marshes, lowland
settlements on heavy clays with willows*

*and poplars leaning to the morning light,
that half dissolved in silvered dispensations:
the which were nothing to the fields of fruiting,
the hunting lodges, long traditions.*

Sometimes

*I'd hear the voices from the balconies
call down and see the fleets of gondoliers,
rich-caparisoned, their men in livery
and women blazing in their satin-work
of jewelled bodices and whitened bodies,
all moving as great swans adrift, conveyed
silent and imperturbably along
the stream of company that makes our Venice.*

*That world I reached for, and have paid for. Now
its opulence seems commonplace, poor trade
for our good daughter, in whose smile, so frank
to me and welcoming was scented day,
her tutelage to grow in quiet grace
which time would only strengthen and enhance
with golden waiting at some ducal court,
though yet she was a delicate and ever
loving creature, sweet-natured, quick to pity
as to laughter, walking not as courtly
women stride, but in that subtle harmony
which lifts the shoulder up, and in the instep's
simple arching places each part so.*

I was astonished, certainly, but more

*so fearful of her standing and her name.
I knew too well what Venice breeds, what tempting
wagers would be laid that she would fall,
the one most perfect having most to lose,
undo the innocence and mother's heart.*

*'Whose daughter do we talk of? I it was
who gave her schooling, taught her music, ensured
a dozen gentlemen would pay their court,
substantial men with family and breeding,
good connections. Until, that is, this tradesman's
son dissuaded her from pressing on.'*

*Perhaps I said that on my mission year,
the one I went to Rome with Gerolama
Grimani and notables of Venice,
and was distracted, knowing how you'd drill
the child and likely would despatch her promptly
before objections found their time to speak.*

*Wonders in Rome and all the while in touring
the sights of Raphael, Michelangelo,
and antique statuary retrieved from sites
for palaces, another image haunted me,
alike in beauty but of closer blood.*

*Signor Veronese, come and talk
to us of your commissions, how you'd paint
this Rome of palaces and great St. Peter's
colonnades of marble, flights of stairs,*

*great personages on business with the Holy
Father, the first of capitals in this new world.*

*What did I say? I cannot remember: things
polite and deferential. Come, come, said one:
don't play the courtier here; you're now with friends.
Speak plainly to us. Then in truth I miss
the bustle and the personage of others
that pack our thoroughfares and mooring steps,
the furriers from Moscovy, Smyrna
merchants, Asiatics with their robes,
the blackamores, who bear the carriage, walk
with rods of ivory and heavy gold.
These I miss for all that Rome confounds
us greatly with its march of long events.*

*Two thousand years of history wait, I know,
in halls of jasper porphyries and white,
where every room is marble. I am a plain man
only, lacking taste for such.*

I lied.

*Before me stretched a realm more fabulous
than ever Titian's was or could be now.
What was one poor daughter to those yards
of canvases ablaze in papal chambers?
Pride, pride as ever in my gifts,
the praise of courtiers and of worthy men:
these took me from my path; I scorned the most
that God in His great mercy gave to me.*

'That I've always known, my friend, and as for peace, and my forgiving, that will come with God's own ordinances. Here I take my leave: you'll hear no further from me now, nor hear reproaches afterwards. I have a last request: you meet one other so. You'll not regret the time you wait for her.'

Part Six

And so she leaves, the long years echoing
which I may think on fading as a dream.
How curiously our hopes press on and leave
our fuller selves unhatched, and all those hopes
dissolved in recollections, which in time
fill out with poignant anguish and the hurt
in something still unread.

In our child's case —
Anna Matilda she was named — I went
then back and forth and sent her mother notes.
I worked whole nights or gamed in tavern rooms.
I was both young again and much retired,
repelled by memories and still drawn to them.

Long days I sat in silence, Benedetto
looking on. The honest workman that
he is could doubtless have divined the matter
but spoke of new commissions, days ahead,
the pigments now on order: studio talk.

Again I went and didn't, helplessly
I wandered round the streets, an adolescent
still at heart.

It was a girl, they said,
a pleasing-featured, forward little girl.
I thought of that hard frankness, that abundance

so cast in innocence and dimpled looks.
I thought of woolen clothes and how her feet
would make their first much-falling journey, how
that mouth would say its simple words, and how
she'd rush and hang excited to that mother's
breast I had so often clung to, strongly-
formed and for another warm and safe.
I thought as well how certainly her thoughts
would brood upon the absent father's name.
Across the months and years, there came a sense
of someone distant who was also mine.

I drift, as all the years were no doubt drifting.
I saw the Schiavoni's child at times,
if then too briefly: such a pretty girl:
her mother's nose and eyes were most distinct,
but head and attitude there spoke of mine.
I was consumed by thoughts of tenderness
and then of biting grief. I made at times
to see my one-time mistress. She refused.
I stopped her sometimes on the streets, and once
beneath the campanile. It was the same.
She smiled but with a bitterness, and then
appeared a small bent man I recognized
as one of our great names, who made his bow
and on his arm allowed the lady pass.

But on the child I marvelled more and found
God's handiwork's was with me from that day.

The trailing vesper bell that calls to prayer
us and our thoughts, has reveries no less
than these. I then reformed, was less at bawdy
houses, more at work, made such amends
commissions flooded in, from church and priory,
Venice itself and others, Verona even
where I first painted and was therefore feted,
the lad returning to his native haunt.

I met again my master Antonio
Badile who put me up and had his daughter
the young Elena wait at table where
I saw the small lithe body, neat and bony,
no grace about it but complete and comely,
round eyes and placid, smiling, questioning
and following each step I took. 'She wants
a husband,' said her father. 'You could do worse.
She'll wait upon you, run the workshop,
bear your children and be capable.
Think on it, Caliarì.' I scarcely did
but said as was required, how at my age
the good Elena could well look beyond,
how many candidates were thereabouts.

He laughed. 'She's set upon you.'

She cannot know
me or my life.

'Caliari, think
of your good father gone these fourteen years
and thankfully to earth. He wanted only
ministrations and a house in order,
as your poor mother managed till she died.
You have the world before you but no place
to go at nightfall or to eat with friends.
What life is that? A painter may do worse
than wed another's bearing, who in truth
will serve you faithfully throughout her life.'

He said no more, but as I went each day
to old apprentice work and was content
I knew at heart she would accept despite
what Venice knew, and not be jealous, no pledge
of faithfulness but piety and truth.
Nothing awaited me but wantonness
and drink and weariness as one by one
my old acquaintances were settling down.

And so I married. A short and country service:
Elena pretty, I most dignified.
We stepped out, smiling to the April sun
and settled life: and all went from that day
onward as by rote. Affectionate,
by turns attentive, I became in time
a father who would play with Gabriele
and then Carletto, happily, though toiling
at San Sebastiano, day and night.

At last there came Vitoria, a thing
most delicately fashioned, with a smile
so happy and ingenuous I might
have thought her recompense for someone else.
But then I met my Anna with her mother,
a thing of radiance and perfect grace:
there never was a more unblemished creature,
but twelve years old and fashioned with a high-
stepped disposition and a smiling self.

Elena knew? Most probably, and half
of Venice, like as not: I was
of course admonished, and continually
at pains to put her image out of mind,
to dwell, as priests and my confessor said,
on what I had and not the past, to walk
as on a road and endlessly so keeping
my eyes ahead, and never glancing out
to one of kinship who would travel close:
two lives adjoining that could never meet.

Or so I thought, and told myself, and yet
one day I found her looking wonderingly
as hung with cloths I was at that small church.
signor Pittore is what she said,

'Signore,
how is it that you paint but empty air?
How are the figures vibrant but in truth
but tiny dabs of paint?'

A trick, my lady.

She smiled and almost curtsied and I caught
my paintbrush quivering as she said,

'My name
is Anna Schiavoni, which my mother says
you know.'

I do, and bid you to please
excuse this artifice of handiwork.

'You are, Signore, much too modest. All Venice
knows you as the first of painters. Please
to paint some artifice for me.'

What could
a lady want that has so much?'

'My mother's face.'

Ah no, my little lady, that is yours
by right: you see it plainly every day.

'She said you would refuse. What then?'

What then?
My little lady, if you'd hold yourself
here a moment longer — this we have.
I showed it her, a rapid sketch on paper

that would not last, but still a speaking likeness
of that most gentle but still earnest face.

No more than that, a moment's daubing, yet
a thing I held about me when I went
to vespers or to workshop. There it hung
when I should kiss my own, or lie at night
consumed by differences that I must hide.

They both were pretty, true, but in the first
I saw her mother's counselling and grace,
her studies in deportment, languages
by which a woman's kindness can reach
the unformed darkness in the heart of Europe,
beyond the battlements of war and princes
to worlds of learning, smiling wit,
where body in its soft and satined way
can weave a transport of delight and make
a fitting consort to its curtsied eyes.

So was my Anna: day by day she came
more willingly — what could I do? — to watch
me painting, tell me tales of friends and outings,
what mother said of her, what schoolmates planned
for Michelmass or Whitsuntide. I smiled
but took on seriousness when next she said:

'Why am I talking now, signor Pittore?
Why are you listening to the empty chatter

as though this child were yours, as though your heart
wove in the incidents that make her life?'

These are your special years, I said, who have
a time to walk in sunlight through a world
that passes all too swiftly, a little time
before you take in aspects of a darker place.
Perhaps one afternoon, then grown a lady,
you will see my work, and think: Ah, what's
become of him? And smile and saunter on.

Part Seven

'I never will pass on, signor Pittore,
but here adopt you as my first of suitors,
a friend and councillor in days to come.'

Those words are such to break a father's heart,
I said, immediately, without good thought.
I tried to laugh, but was abashed and said,
Think no more of that, my little lady:
a thoughtless comment or a courtier's phrase.

When for a lengthening moment there was nothing,
a silence only: she hadn't heard. But then
the words in which I saw such piteousness
that tears came quickly and I turned away.

Her voice was gentle but with wondrous depth.

'You have not told me more than I have guessed
these long months past. My mother will not speak
but at your mention stands there motionless.
I am a girl who has not witnessed love
but holds it as a thing much wished on, much
desired, but I can tell my mother in her moods
and silence grieves for you. When vexed at me
she often says it is my father there,
that awkward fractious man who goes against
all counsel and good breeding. What man is that
if of the Doge's circuit or the Church?

And if I play and sing, as tutors say
I do most naturally, it is my mother
softened for a moment, and of one
who had much music in him. In this I knew
in watching you bring coloured life and breath
to what are simple sketches, chalked-through lines
no different from all others but with you
more fresh and vivid. You are that man. I see
among the heads, the gestures, hair done up,
a trace of my own mother, as sure as this
as my own features in each draft you make.'

My little lady, I said in bowing, bending
low to hold her and then looking up,
those days you speak of are another world.

We think, no doubt, when young that all's but passing,
that what is done can be redone or ended,
that what we say with laughter or with tears
is soon forgotten. No: it is not so.

It's true I loved your mother reverently
in every particle of thought and being,
and what I sought unconsciously thereafter
was warm approval in her cast of thought,
that smiling on me in each word and gesture,
however far or close she was. No doubt
continually and here she takes my brush
to draw the features which I can't forget.

My little donna Anna, go away.
A father asks that you to remember him
as daily he will think of you. That now
is all. He has another family
to whom he owes what is appropriate
and freely given as God's love to us.

She smiled and took my hand.

'Signor Pittore,
you are my father, always will be. I
will ask my mother that you meet sometime
to talk of things elapsed as old friends do,
kindly, without evasion or regret.'

Not an angel would prevail against
Antonia Schiavoni I would have thought,
but was the same surprised to have the message
to join her company of trusted friends.

Excuse me, Antonia, I said, arriving,
I am too early: there is no one here.

'You are not. Sit down, Caliarì.
I am not pleased to hear our daughter Anna
frequents your place of work and talks of meetings
ameliorating what the years have severed
irreparably for me.'

Agreed.

'So,
Is there more to say?'

No.

'Good day.'

I take my leave of you, Antonia,
and will respect what you have said, but ask
you tell the little lady that her father
still thinks of her and does what's best, and keeps
his council for her constantly, hoping
as always that her simple life be blest
with calm good nature and much joy.

She smiled.

'You have not lost your gift for courtesy,
I see, but that is sense. Good morrow to you,
Caliari. I will say as much
to one as willed and headstrong as yourself.

I left, and there it ended, so I thought,
but at the carnival a few months on
I was accosted by a delicate
and dancing little creature who took my arm
and skipping led me to her place with others.

'We are allowed, you see, if chaperoned,
to dance with strangers, and I will dance
with you, signor Pittore.' How she danced!

'Will I do?' she said, as out of breath
I took her to her place and made my bow.

I smiled. Indeed, most admirably, my lady.

'Lady? My little lady, if you please.
What then?'

I bid all pretty mistresses
a long farewell. I am too old for this.

'But not to talk to me.'

My little Anna,
I gave a solemn promise to your mother
I would not blight your life with shadows, never
would drag you backward with the thought-on days
that cannot be recaptured. You are a creature
captivating, blessed with graces, with eyes
that as your mother's can outblaze the day.
My name will only cause you thought and sorrow.
Be happy, think of one who loves you, will
forever think of you and wish you well.

I cannot tell you what a heavy pain
such separation causes, but I am
resolved, my little lady, to undo
the past that dogs your prospects, and may lose
that stainless beauty of a woman's name.

'I have not wholly given up my hopes,
and you may count on such-like sallies
that one day we will meet and be as friends.'

My turn to smile. But yet at intervals
for three years afterwards there were
odd meetings, common parties, all against
the instincts of the parents, yet the while
the lady grew as does a statesman whose
hard challenges will strengthen inner steel.

'I see at last,' she said, 'a promised land
beyond this heartache where my parents talk,
confiding as they did, and not through me.'

She spoke so openly, ingenuously,
that what was past took on a lighter step.
I do not think a footpad ruffian, the worst,
but would have let her pass and smiling too
with words of courtesy and awed reflection.
How this small creature came from two such parents
I did not know, nor did Antonia.
For us sufficient that this miracle
was ours, as all the time, in ways unheeded,
God led with promises in His good time.

I have not mentioned my own wife, our workshop,
brother Benedetto, daily round
of preparation, canvases and paints
and drawings and apprentices. All

went well. Continually Elena was
the which poor painters dream of, dutiful
and courteous to workmen and the craft.
She was, it's true, much like her father, not
inclined to hide her views or pass new fashions
by, but with her hands akimbo, contest
some offer, eye a nobleman much up
and down as I had need to speak of, hold
our final meetings elsewhere, which she noted.

'Paulo, be a man more, name your price.
All Venice knows your excellence, the which
cannot be had for love or money.'

Perhaps,
but there are the ways of treating gentlefolk
with manners and a deference to which
they are accustomed and extracts commissions.
And of my earlier life, the commonsense
and bustling Elena kept to herself.
She guessed, I think, but grew a prosperous figure
much like the merchant's wife she dressed to be.

But still I thought on donna Anna, as moon
is to the sun, now near, now far, but always
reflected in its trailing light. How much
I loved and watched that little creature, found
each day some noblemen or churchman stop
and bid good morrow to the donna Anna,
that may her life be tranquil as her looks.

Amen to that as our close, sticky month
of June swelled day by day to summer heat.
With which there came odd rumours: all who could
moved out to countryside or mainland house.

She should have gone, the donna Anna, but
of me she begged to stay, to be in safety
inside a busy workshop toiling on
at rich commission from the Emperor Rudolf.

She should be gone, her mother said. Plans
were now advanced to make her coming out
a thing of note.

'I have a nobleman
whose son will court her. All is ready. The two
will meet.'

Meet, how meet?

'What do you think,
to plight their troths and say love's silly things?
The family is honourable: the two must learn
to dance this quadrille that we call a life.
She must be captivating, he must please.
Enough Calibri, the contract's made and she
will take the first step as I did, as too
my mother did.'

No, I told her.

'No?'

No, I will not have it. Not for one
who is so beautiful and still so young.

'She's not
that little, Caliani: seventeen
if you would notice as all Venice does.
She needs experience, the courtesies
and tempting promises by which we women
move as vessels on our great affairs.
This place is far from pestilence, a summer
court to walk with others, learn her trade.'

I'd rather hang myself than let her go.
This miracle of kindness to be rendered
up as capon on a roasting spit.

'You are too coarse a tradesman, and forget
how much you took to my poor tempting flesh.
What did you think I trained her for? To be
a milliner or tradesman's wife? Good God,
she has no name, no money, nothing to
commend her but a body and a little grace.
Enough: I've said the girl will go.'

So you
have told her, have you? that her life must be
henceforth resold, her private parts compared
by men with guffaws and rough, ribald talk?

'Men are men, Caliarì, you know that.
And what they do not win they soon make up.
What has been taught her she will turn to good
and learn by doing how this world is built.'

I went out on the instant, consumed in turn
by saddened anger and a father's care.
I sought her out and walked the length of streets
much talking.

You will go?

'Of course I go.
What can I do? My mother tells me Venice
is broody, waiting, could be dangerous. They say
the pestilence is with us, lodged within.
For safety and for finishing I have
to go.'

And that is true, my little lady.
I took her hand. She looked at me and smiled.

'But I shall meet there someone I may charm
sufficient that he plight his troth to me.'

He will, assuredly.

'Continually
he'll think of me and walk distracted through

the days still dizzy with my laughter, write
his thoughts in rhymes and little scribbled notes.'

Perhaps.

He will. I shall demand it, will
not give to him one smile unless he serve
me in a thousand ways.

Oh, count on that.

'Why do you look at me so oddly, why
the riddling comments and this inquisition?'

My lady, my little Anna, look around.
Today you are a child, a trusting child,
an innocent of all the world's deceptions,
of how it is, and what it does. Tomorrow,
who knows? You'll come back changed, maybe
the mistress of some ribboned, famous name,
who'll pay his court about where you must yield.

'How dare you you say so! I will not. I may
so settle as I please, or mother says
but I will choose. Do not insult me, signor
Pittore, I go as to a garden party,
among my equals, to avoid the heat.'

You go to be a mistress, excuse my frankness,
to be a courtesan, perhaps a great one,

as your mother was. I wish you strength
to draw the honey out of poisoned meat.

Tears. I saw no more of her. The sickness
gathered all too quickly. Poorer haunts
saw boards go up, whole sections shut, on wharves
and workshops silence, all the bustle quiet,
and folk now fearful, watching, saying prayers.

Chapter Eight

We shut the workshop. To the world outside
we were as scarcely living, quiet as mice.
But each one with a cough or fever came
to be a harbinger of something worse
that made us strip them, search, though all was well:
no sores or pustules, the Lord be praised. Our God
was merciful and took His children through.

The news, though, was of whole streets gone, of wharves
suspended, empty markets, thoroughfares
marked out with crosses and with stench of death.

Our rules said no one came and no one went.
We took provisions from the market towns
that serve our city but now sent by friends.

In all that interval I thought on Anna,
despite my workshop, no one else. I asked
of one who served the household: no news came.
My brother watched me, and my wife, as though
to interrupt unwanted trains of thought,
gave bulletins on friends and what they said.
The days turned weeks and months: the workshop stayed
a hermit's place of silence: in our prayers
we felt God heard us: we were safe.

A knock
one afternoon was met with rough instructions,

which were our rules. Again it came: insistent:
I went to add authority but saw
the little donna Anna. Pitiful
she looked and was admitted, hurriedly.
I took her hand, which trembled as she said.

'Good signor Caliani, give me shelter
a room to lay this weary body down
that has been travelling so endlessly
it seems each carriage jolt is in the bones,
each sentry warning wormed into the ear.

Take not this journey, lady, not to Venice,
but seek a healthier upland air. Those lakes
and sweltering littorals breed yet more plague
as seethings in the air, invisible, that shimmer
as tiny gnats disturb the water's sheen,
but with their flittings bring a fearful death.

Where could I go who had no place remaining?
I tried my mother's house but it was locked.
I knocked on palaces of old companions
but no one would remember. I had to walk
through heaped-up refuse in the streets, beside
canals that gibbered at me, fecklessly
their poles and mooring jetties jeered or sank
in stench and veiled malevolence. Among
the rubbish thrown out in the streets the rats
showed teeth or fastened on each other. I saw
the suppurating bodies of good folk,

our own true countrymen hauled by on carts
and thence to loading points for God knows where,
by boats and gondolas new-draped in black.

More menacing were empty streets that moved
with shadows passing silently, each step
put down most carefully as though the sound
might draw behind them some more hideous thing
that reached and took them with the reaper's knife.

I saw a woman hawking rancid meat
that no one wanted. For pity's sake, she cried,
we have to live! I gave her half a soldo,
no more than that, but in the mud she knelt,
and blessed a woman more unfortunate
than her, who comes most fearfully because
you keep your workshop on, though seeming shut.'

We have commissions that we can't deny
or much delay. Besides, who knows when God
will call his ever-thoughtless children home?
The manner of our going is not known
but hangs as do the seasons, now inclining,
promising but days returning: all
in prospect only, where it's never wisdom
to call in or discount.

How sad her words:

'Unwisdom? That was mine, was solely mine.
I would not heed your ever-kindly words,
but closed my ears and took that sinful path.'

What's done is done, my little lady. We
must look for lodgings in this frightened city.
Here you cannot stay: we have our rules:
but let us find some place more out to shore,
where air is clear of pestilence and death

We left, the workshop looking at us strangely,
poor brother Benedetto at his brushes,
my wife indignant, with her hands on hip.

And what a way we went! All places closed.
We asked each gondolier we came to: none
would go.

Good friends, for conscience sake:
this is a lady begs you take her safely
from dark alleyways and fastened doors.
We are in health, moreover, have no signs
of sickness on us, neither. So, in short,
for courtesy and money, bear us on.

All shook their heads.

'You know, good Veronese,
that no one leaves this city at the plague
time but with written orders from the Doge.

But stay your haste, obtain those papers, when
the most concerned of us will gladly go.'

How long was that? Where could we stay?

They looked
uneasy, spread their hands. We tried afresh
the doors of taverns round us, each was shut,
some with crosses newly placed. I went
to friends and saw odd faces looking down,
and some were those I knew, but no one came.
From high and low we went, and calling out
arrived at those dark quarters of the northern
wharves, with stagnant waterways and tiny
streets, the houses leaning, packed together,
where, at the poorest, beside the little church
of San Alvisé, a tavern reluctantly,
for ready silver, took us in.

I'll find
you better soon.

'No matter, this will suit me
well enough: the place is clean. But visit
me now daily, and bring news of folk
recovering and friends still safe.'

I will.
And did. Each day I went to one who took
precautions earnestly, and kept her place.

'But none are taken, master painter?'

None,
so far, my little lady, and God's grace
perhaps is looking on us, so we hope.

'Amen to that. My mother's house?'

Still locked.
We have no news.

'No matter. Come and sit
and tell me you will take a simple meal
as with an old-time friend.'

The poorest meal
is made most princely by those present.

She smiled.

'You have not lost the courtier's gift,
my mother spoke of, nor musician's skills,
I hope. So come with viol or pipe next time
that we may hear some merrymaking where
these walls are silent with long-stifled breath.'

And so I did. I played, she sung. And seemed
as those poor linnets shut in wicker pens
who sing their heart out fruitlessly and wait
till light drops further from them day by day.

One time she curtsied. 'Tell me, is your daughter
one to gladden a well-practised eye?'

Much, much more than that, I said. To me
she sings as do the angels in high heaven,
conjuring into this wretched place
of grief and shadow those bright crystal spheres
where all is intricate with inner peace.

'I am like my mother, am I not?'

In grace, in lively comeliness, but even
she whose sturdy presence would invest
the air with senates listening and with grace,
as we may think the angels have, still lacked
that faultless innocence and gentle step.

'Then why not wed my mother, as she asked?'

For pride, for her sake and because a painter
is but an artisan who trains his hands
but has no standing in the world that counts.

'You never entertained the thought, refused
to hear her, called yourself unworthy, cast
her off as some contrivance from the past.'

I did in kindness only, in accordance
to rank and precedence by which our Venice lives.

'For your commissions only, so as not
to wait on courtiers who had used your wife.'

That is not so.

She laughed. 'Of course it is,
my gran pittore. All Venice knows but does
not judge. Her courtesans are made for pleasure,
displayed in high-wrought, conscious ostentation,
as jewels upon a fabric, as you know
who paint the outward more than inner heart. '

Alone to God is known that inner world,
and what I paint to His most truthful eye
will seem but baubles and poor children's toys,
for who can tell what stark depravities
may walk as nature in the stews of night?
What sins may smirk in courtesies but fear
the fire at last or lime as ends approach?

She shuddered. 'You are not cheerful, master painter.
Why should our ends be such, who have so far
survived against the odds?'

We have indeed,
and past the high-dressed fortunes of our friends:
so many dead, including our great Titian,
here gone the same despite his wealth and care.

'We need not follow, if we pray to Him
whose path brings ever-chequered light and shade.'

Most true, my little lady. With that hope
so may we look to Him as His great love
pours down in sunlight after scourging rain.

No one should read into the book of life,
for what is written there is writ in pain.

She sang, I played, the two of us. I thought
perhaps the months would see us through till frosts
would purge us of the plague. With that in mind,
with spirits mounting week by week, I came
one morning with a friend, who had his viol
and much good music in his head.

Arrived,
we found the doorway open. I stepped inside
and shouted. No one there. I went in further
until my friend with shaking hand pushed back
the door on which a cross was wet. He called
to me. I took the stairs, tried doors and rooms
and shouted at the street, though nothing came
but silent echoes and the smell of death.

Since when and where? I called. My friend made off,
crossing himself, as I continued, doors
and windows hammering, until at last
a voice came down from one high attic, said:

'My friend, enough. The occupants have gone.
They came this morning with the burdened cart
along this very passageway. All sped
to cemeteries and far-off smoking pits.'

But she, the little lady, where is she?

'I saw no lady with them, none like that.'

Impossible. I saw her yesterday
and nothing in her laughter spoke of death.

'Then she has fled, my friend, as you must too.
Leave off this foolishness and make your peace.
God grant the pestilence pursuing her
be not vindictive that it come for you.'

But where?

'To San Erasmo's monasteries,
for many go there when the sickness falls.'

I stared. The window closed. The silence dropped
a fearful stillness in my ears. I gazed as one
who sees the coloured daylight fall in sharp
portcullises of black. I then went
the whole way running to Rialto steps.

Resolved to go immediately I thought
of my own family and artisans.
I needed rooms made up, where she and I

could live apart, secluded, none to speak
with us, none eat with us, retired from chance
of any sickness striking if it would.

There was, of course, much uproar, consternation
at these words, my wife especially, flatly
folding her large arms and saying,

'No.

For God's sake, Paolo, would you harm your wife
and offspring, all about you for a whim,
a promise made in youthtime folly years ago?
Why should we suffer for that error's sake?
No, no, we want no pious words from one
whose bastard progeny — of course we know,
all Venice laughs at us — requires you show
acknowledgement at last of what you've done.

Much, much more there was of this, and I
was caught perplexed, in two minds wondering
how in conscience I should go.

'Suppose
you die, what then of us? Poor Benedetto
is not too capable, and honest men
for work depend on us. You shall not go.'

I went, but as a thief does in the night,
looking backward always, shunning folk

who walk in daylight consciences. I found
at last a gondola, black-draped, and sat.

'Take care, my gran pittore,' said the guide,
'for few come back from those far walls. The pits
are thickly limed but still you smell among
the leather-work and scrubbed interior
the stench of putrefaction, which will thicken
the more we row toward Erasmo Island,
where you will see the vapours barely lifting
from evil-coloured, putrid waters. But for
the coin you pay and pressing words I take
you as a sinner when the soul is lost.'

Evening when we got there, and the smoke
of oily torches and of burning cloth
stung throat and eyes, and on the walls made streaks
of flared out sooted black. Beneath were maggot's
nests of writhing bodies, hideously
distended though alive, and each one thick
with vomit, face encrusted, calling still,
between convulsions, on our Saviour's name.

Among them, quiet as flies that suck at meat,
there moved the convent sisters, tribes of them
that seemed suspended, hovering, held in fright,
but motioning the same that stretcher-bearers
cart off all at will, whatever age
or sex they might be in their final throes.
Alive and feebly motioning, so they went.

I stopped those dark-clad figures in their sleep,
but they avoided me or urged me on.
'Pray God your friend is elsewhere. Go from here!'

I searched along the heaped-up bodies laid
disorderly through rooms, beneath the walls,
in garden plots and orchards, everywhere
the same: some silent, sleeping peacefully,
some groaning in their agony, but most
transfixed with horror at their neighbour's plight.
The rich, the poor, the comely, young or old
were in one charnel house and under God.
I did not think or calculate but searched
more feverishly and helplessly as rows
turned into rows and rooms, more fields. A nun
then grasped my sleeve, and said,

'This place is deadly.
Believe the one you seek is somewhere else,
and therefore living still. My friend, go home.
Wash yourself. Burn clothes. Good brother, go.'

Where are those fearful pits, I asked, where all
the stretcher parties went with faces muffled?

How pitying she led me, where I saw
the piles of thousands dead, thick-sown with lime.
Dear God, they were as ragdolls, thrown in play,
but moving, some of them, with bloodshot eyes.

I turned away in tears and bowed my head,
and took the boat immediately, my guide
not looking so unkindly, but as one
inured to suffering, as will seek
some mark of justice in the wrath of God.

Repeatedly and endlessly the friends
and those we heard of, sometime friends of friends,
conveyed to San Erasmo's lime-draped pits.

In time the sickness lessened, though the storm
still poured its heavy drops as one by one
we heard of others when the church bells pealed,
old friends returned, and businesses resumed.
A long, long interval of mourning followed.

I stayed indoors, distressed, and could not speak.
I heard the Schiavoni had returned,
and sent a notice on: she did not come.
I went to service with a heavy heart,
with thanks for our deliverance but would
have given up our wealth and all commissions
to have one Anna safe.

It's true in time
I found new clients. As before, I drew and painted
riots of carnivals, but now the colours
had not that confidence of heaven's light.
Perhaps more sullenly, more prone to doubts
I tried all manner with the Schiavoni,

but saw in festivals how sad she looked,
this first of courtesans so plainly dressed,
a listless manner in the way she trod.

I had no answer for her, saw the bone
thereafter grinning at me through the skin.

Outwardly that passed. Our children married.
I grew more prosperous as gifts declined.
But courtier's elegance and women's grace
still hummed as flies do over pitted meat.

Chapter Nine

I should be gone from here, but seeming wait
for one to tell me how her life was cast
from things that hold their candle up to mine.

I hear the steps and turn. A nun with pock-
marked face, a stooping body, and with eyes
I still remember, stares at me.

*'So now
you look away, my gran pittore,
although I kept you foremost in my prayers?'*

I could not speak, but in my tears I felt
her light touch on my sleeve and on my hand.
I found her smiling as composure righted
and looking at me with an anxious kindness.

*'Have years been good to you, my gran pittore,
filled out your purposes as you once said?'*

*Prosperous, my little lady, blest
with wealth and standing. My sons are well, and one
inherits something of my workman's gifts.
For that much thanks. The rest I do not know.
The promise of a high spring morning, the birds
that lighten with their singing, wind with fragrance —
these I have not felt from that sad morning
of finding that far lodging house was bare.*

*You cannot know what pains waylaid me, what
stabbing penances I underwent.
I was more lucid afterwards, but God
stopped growing in me and my trust was stilled.*

*Where did you go, my little lady, why,
by all the saints, not leave or send a message?*

*'Pride and misery. I was afflicted,
with worse than pestilence, whose pain is short,
that left these pockmarks and this wasted frame.
For months I wondered why His grace should test
so small a helpless creature, tell my mother
that all she cherished in her heart was spent:
no more to walk in sunshine where the wind
could whisper to me as my suitors should.*

*'At length, not speedily, with long relapses,
I came to care for others, and with God's grace
became as they are now and gained my peace.'*

*Here, in this poor world of waste and shadow,
withdrawn to penitence and candle ends?*

*'I do not know, my gran pittore, what
to say to give you comfort or explain
our Lord's true purposes, the which I reach
but dimly, on occasions, never sure.
I sew and sing, and former learning serves
to help my sisters in their daily steps*

*along that testing journey all must take
to where in majesty our Lord awaits.*

*But there are duties, surely? Your poor mother
was entitled to have word of you.*

*'She had that news and duly helped me,
seeing I was lodged and in the care of nuns.*

*'In truth, whatever you had kept me from:
licentiousness and pride in my high bearing,
the boast of men and bestial tastes, that
at last she recognized was also God's,
and in my suffering had made His sign.'*

*It cannot be that for my squeamishness
some paragon of life and gentle bearing,
the best that Venice breeds for ducal courts,
could be so punished and denied the joy
of wealth and lovers and established life.*

*What is the testimony of a hundred crafts
that crowd the quays and bustling shops,
which offer powders, jewels and sumptuous cloths
as simple blessing on entitlement?
For else we have but anxious, little lives,
undone by thoughts and details, tedious worries,
and know no greater majesty of life
but trials and courtrooms to a further place.*

*In choirs we know of but may scarcely hear —
too far and faint the music of those spheres —
all turn to praise Him, and our bodies here
flare out as shadows of that final place.
Recessed the mirrors of this tinsel world
of what is beautiful in His great sight.
Our catechisms, schooling, long retreat
through things ungraspable but still believed
are aspects only of those distant shores
whose revelation is in sense unthought.*

*'So many are the claims and muddling thoughts —
as you must know and well, my gran pittore —
that what we choose must be as hearts
in spotless charity and long reflection
so lead us. Otherwise the world is passing
endlessly in suppositions, mirrored dreams.
In love we fashion images and form
a picture of our souls which heart can hear
as breathing testimonies, carried song
long after what was offered passes on.
Not in pomps and sumptuous spectacles
has God His glory but in simple hearts.'*

*But He, my little lady, does not ask
we close the hand that feeds us, turn away
from those high promises to Noah made
millenniums out of mind. The stamp of beauty,
which we must surely see if we will look,
no doubt is flickering, at times obscured,*

*but made renascent as the sun will rise
and flood each morning with its radiant light,
dispel all errors and revoke our sins.
We live in faith and earnestness, and pledge
a fuller consciousness to know our gifts.
Not in abnegation, but in life
God pours His talents out and says believe.*

*'Belief is one thing, faith another. Think,
my gran pittore how those steps in thought
of line or colour conjured out on walls,
each composition checked or mended as
some royal patron wanted, church or abbey,
are but an issue from that well of faith
the guilds have drafted, at best a thing spun out
of hopes much pondered on in earnest hours.*

*'You have walked, my father, far beyond
what earthly promises provided for,
have mixed with Doge and princes, laughed and shut
the ear as I did to a larger truth.*

*'If I were dead and truly gone, why then
no search or message for me, prayers or candles?
The capital you spent, which is our Lord's,
was turned to other uses: you in friends
and high prosperity confused the way.*

*'But think of my poor mother. Her commission,
for which she sold her jewels, you put aside,*

*ignored and painted on — when God made soul
bleed out to darkness and the glowing skin
retreat as some infected, loathsome thing.'*

*So is the father is humbled by the child,
and all he said in courtly remonstrance
has come to hurt him, and make sport of truth
that lives in actions only, not our words.*

*'Both words and actions make our path to God,
though it is hard for us, as for my mother.
Along her way of service and reflection
she takes her last and backward-tracing steps.
Be with her, my gran pittore, take her hand
and with your smiling courtesy pace out
to that last promontory we call the earth.'*

*I will, my lady, that those days of joy
be long remembered when you were conceived.*

*'My gran pittore, it is time to leave me.
I will take you to the entrance of that farther
world I have renounced, and send you on.
Your soul hangs on this instant, as will too
my mother's and my own. From here you will
precede me to that sure and heavenly place
and I will pray for all those steps you take.*

It's time to go now. I will show you out.'

Part Ten

I went, an old man tottering through the gardens
of flowering marjoram and empty vine.

Before me rose the blazing river, a fire
of stillness and of shining white, in which
God's hidden purposes were mixed with mine.

How different now my bustling city seemed.
Each hour of travelling put a further year
upon my recollections and the tears.

I looked out on this world of ours, the play
of water, the boatmen calling, wealth and colour,
that shaft of sunlight falling where my work
held up its transcript, briefly, and was gone.

I thought of shadows in the stone at noon,
that walk beneath our steps while we have breath.
I thought of bats at evening and the cool
cascades of leaves that show the unimportance
of all our stratagems and life's ambitions
that go the same to old-compacted ground
about the poles of wood that lift this firmament
to shout and spectacle.

How dark the water
seems as sun flares out and falls on past
the wharves and palaces, how cold the wind
now off the far lagoon that crimps the surface.

We come to land. The boatman helps me out.
I take the streets to San Sebastiano,
those walls I worked on in those summer evenings.
I step inside and can inspect again
the reverences I have seen a thousand
times but not from this sharp reckoning.

How hard the stone is here, how shadowy
from noon, as I have often noted, walking
in my red silk slippers, one with pageantries
of painted fabric on these walls. Outside
the sky is thin and ever changing; our faith
shuts doors against the day. Such is the faith
of martyrs, is impregnable — as donna
Anna told me, and I now have sense
to kneel and light a candle, sensing a weighted
knowledge in the heart of things. I think
of all the canvases, the lives that gutter
slowly, smokily in this dim air.

I never painted better. In these walls
I breathe my fullest confidence in life.
How false that was. The sun at zenith passes
and we from gaudy flowers fade as grass.

I am as one now rested in God's work,
who painted miracles, and was blessed
with friends and family throughout his life,
with commissions and honours and with a name
well known in this great city. The sunlight shifts

and sparkles on the water. Lord Redeemer,
speak to us and turn what is unfashionable
and unfathomable, murky, mixed
with sin, to sunlit clarity that we
from endless torment come to your pure sight.

Carletto bears my name, and Gabriele,
the first most gifted, and will take my place
within that fragile world of great appearing.
To both descendants I bequeath a land
companionable and ripening, fields criss-crossed
with willows and with poplar, fields that look
beyond the littorals that braid our lives
with silver osiers trembling in the wind.
The things we build, high towers and colonnades
and cupolas, great domes of learning: these
as shouts of citizens we take to God
in dreams and conjurations. So it was
and doubtless ever will be. In these walls
of flare and spectacle I bow my head.

Revised January 2008