



# 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,  
that 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.

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.

She'll be, the Abbess, with me presently.  
I sit at first, but then get up and pace  
between the windows and rush-backed chairs,  
across a room that's comfortless: a small  
brass crucifix beside an altar cloth.

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.

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.'*

*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 later, 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,  
a man of substance now, with 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.*

*'She does not linger in your memory?'*

*Would that she did, good Reverend Mother. Sometimes  
I think all Venice is interred with bones.*

*'You think too much of limepits and encroaching  
fires, my son. She sings 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.'*

*She had more care than has 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.*

*'My son, I cannot give you absolution,  
but on this matter stay as simple folk  
who ask for order and for straight accounts  
in sums endowed to us that 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 that was denied before? Respects  
and courtesies to one who graced her station.*

*'You do not know 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.'*

## Part Two

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

Me she'd hardly deigned to notice, not  
the once among those scarlet personages  
who walked attending on the Doge's chair.

*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, Caliori, a painter, mason's son  
where she's a courtesan of peerless rank  
who trails a emperor's ransom in her clothes.'*

*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.  
At which she only laughed. Good friend, you'll not  
beguile the Schiavoni with your art.'*

That time will change, I thought, and vowed  
it like an adolescent, new arrival,  
who does not know what yawning distances  
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  
to say, *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.  
Be gone, my little painter, dog no heels  
or these attendants will undo your person.  
No, put him down,'* she said, and I was left  
shaking with anger as she sauntered off.

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.'*

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, 'or find some other face to paint.'*

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 grace  
and force so menacing I sought to use  
her features for my crowded city scenes.  
That, for six long years, was all my dealing  
with the donna Antonia Schiavoni —  
but things imagined and more empty longings  
that caused me mischief and a lighter purse.

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, and fragrant, dark and not  
unmusical, which drew all faces up.  
She laughed and threw a golden ducat down  
and said, as we made bows,

*'Come to evenings  
on the Monticegno, all of you.'*

*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.  
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,  
for all that later she would smile and tease.

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

But I, not now the raw provincial, smiled,  
and feigned a mute indifference to her words.

*'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?  
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.*

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?  
Listen, we are not different, you and I.  
We both serve Venice and our social betters,*



*as did my mother, and her mother too.  
And both, now note me, master painter, spoiled  
the future wanting as must other folk  
a child, a husband and a home at last.*

*Why look surprised? Your mind is subtle, quick  
to take in circumstance and hold its peace.'*

*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.  
So take me fully, with your mind and heart,  
or never have me henceforth to your thoughts.'*

## Part Three

No words were needed. Fervently I took the hand, and in the afterwards was made to delve as one who's lost his senses, feel more depths of wanting that a man can hold. 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 matter close to mind and then applied myself once more to ink and paint.

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 sunlight 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.

It was no more than that, for I am one who sees his miracles in daily things:

The breath of sunlight in the morning haze,  
the boats that bob and ply upon the far lagoon,  
to me appeared a token of the Lord  
admonishing in every word and act —  
who 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  
but 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.

God's hand was in that 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,

could only with his clumsy hands attempt  
to carve crude images in wayside shrines.

## Part Four

So now there comes to me the Schiavoni,  
and 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  
must be, 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.*

*I give 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.'*

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

*'Commission, Caliani, where is that?'*

*I think much lost upon the way.*

*'Ten years  
and nothing? Not a sketch? You're surely one  
to send for sorrow when 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.  
Who sat for those gross trumperies?'*

*None.*

*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  
to merchant wives with breeding who would hold  
a pose for ever if good Venice saw them,  
and 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, Caliori: ever  
the small man totting up the risk and cost.'*

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

*'Too late, my friend. Fulfil 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. What can  
you teach of dancing with 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.*

*For months  
your image hung against my thought, pressed up  
against me, filled my waking and my sleep.*

*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.'*

*I have seen you come as summer to a room  
and draw the fragrance out of winter's leaves  
in 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  
and should be conscious of a modest place.*

*'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 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.*

*'You spurned me, Caliori. That long year  
we lived together as the city starved,  
I sold my jewels, gave up apartments, dressed  
but modestly, becomingly, the while  
we both by gifts survived: I bore your child,  
and asked for nothing but a recognition.*

*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.'*

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

*'Whose daughter do we talk of? I it was  
who gave her schooling, taught her music, ensured  
a dozen gentlemen would pay their court.'*

*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 fast,  
before objections found their time to speak.*

*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 with its march of long events.*

*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 know reproaches afterwards. I have  
a last request: you meet one other so.'*

## Part Five

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.

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.  
Across the months and years, there came a sense  
of someone distant who was also mine.

At last I saw the Schiavoni child,  
if all 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. She went on by.

Yet 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  
in Venice and from far Verona even  
where I first painted and was therefore feted:  
a 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, Caliori.'* 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 on 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.'*

And so we 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.

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.  
And yet I found her one day at the church.  
'*Signor Pittore*' is what she said.

*'Signore,*  
*how is it that you paint but empty air?*  
*How are the figures vibrant, yet 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.

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?'*



## Part Six

*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.*

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. If  
I can 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. This I knew  
in watching you bring coloured life and breath  
to what are simple sketches, where 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 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'd have thought,  
but was the same surprised to have the message  
to join her company of trusted friends.

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

*'You're not. Be quiet and listen. Caliori.  
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.'*

Nor I.

*'And 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 quiet council for her constantly.*

*'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 thing that took my arm.

*'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 henceforth blight your life with shadows.*

*'And I've not wholly given up my hopes.'*

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, both of them.

*'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.

I have not mentioned my own wife, our workshop,  
Benedetto, daily round. Here all  
went well. Continually Elena was  
the which poor painters dream of, dutiful  
and courteous to workmen and the craft.

But still I thought on donna Anna, much  
as moon reflects the sun's fierce light.

The 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 must 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'll 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.*

*'Not little, Caliori: seventeen  
if you would notice as all Venice does.'*

*I'd rather hang myself than let her go.*

*'Men are men, Caliani, 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 sullen 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.  
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:  
tomorrow mistress of some famous name,  
who'll pay his court about where you must yield.*

*'How dare you say so! I will not. I may  
so settle as I please, or mother says,  
but I will choose, and when it's right.'*

*You go  
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.



## Part Seven

We shut the workshop. To the world outside  
we were as scarcely living, quiet as mice

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.

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 Caliarì, give me shelter  
a room to lay this weary body down.  
Where could it go that had no place but here?  
I tried my mother's house but it was locked.  
I knocked on palaces of old companions*

*but no one answered. And there I had to walk through heaped-up bodies in the streets. I saw 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.*

*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?*

*'Thoughtlessness 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.*

*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.*

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 how get that? Where could we stay?

They looked  
uneasy, spread their hands. We tried afresh  
the doors of taverns round us, each was shut.  
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 Alvisè, 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 the company.*

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  
for freedom fading out from 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.*

*'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,  
still lacked your 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, and in just accord  
to 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.*

*'Harsh words. And not too 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.*

*'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.*

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 thought. A voice called down.

*'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 recently  
and nothing in her laughter spoke of death.*

*'Then she has fled, my friend, as you must too.*

*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 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, but my wife  
there folded her large arms and said.

*'No.*

*For God's sake, Paolo, would you harm your wife  
and offspring, all about you for a whim,  
a promise made so long ago?*

*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. 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: in the smoke  
of oily torches and of burning cloth  
were 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,  
the which I vainly tried to stop and ask.  
*'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. A nun  
then grasped my sleeve, and said,

*'This place is deadly.*

*Believe the one you seek is somewhere else.*

*My friend, go home. 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.

At last I turned away and bowed my head,  
returned a chastened man who maybe saw  
some mark of justice in the wrath of God.

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.  
A long, long interval of mourning followed.

I heard the Schiavoni had returned,  
and sent a notice on. She did not come  
to one would have given up all wealth  
to have our Anna safe.

It's true in time

I found new clients. As before, I painted  
riots of carnivals, but now the colours  
had not that confidence of heaven's light.

Perhaps more awkwardly, 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.

All sorrows pass in time. 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.

## Part Eight

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 then 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.*

*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  
still whispered 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 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 truth*

*at last she recognized was also God's,  
and in my suffering had made His sign.'*

*But He, my little lady, does not ask  
we close the hand that feeds us, turn away  
from those high promises to Noah made.*

*'Belief is one thing, faith another. Think,  
my gran pittore how those steps in thought  
are but an issue from that well of faith.*

*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.*

*Besides, if were 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.'*

*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, gran pittore, take her hand  
and with your smiling courtesy redeem  
this long, hard 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.  
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 in turn  
my mother's and my own. From here you must  
in faith precede me to that other place,  
and I will pray for all those steps you take.'*

## Part Nine

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 thought of shadows in the stone at noon,  
that walk beneath our steps while we have breath  
above 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  
walls I decorated long ago.

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 truth  
of martyrs, is impregnable — as donna  
Anna told me, and I now have sense  
to kneel and light a candle, feel a weighted  
absence test the heart of things I knew.

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  
to what is ever-moving, and to me  
most blest and beautiful: our Saviour's light.