

iv The Carrier.

With sovereign pose
he samples the air
and his sleek wet dark pelt flows
to where his long lean tail
plays in the water with casual flair.

Further than the eye can see
along the alleyway, the throng cries 'Hail!'
His tiny forelimb beckons me
to heave out of the water and wait.

Amid the piercing din
of the clamouring crowd,
I see him indicate
his desire for the procession to begin.

I wind along the jubilant and loud
labyrinth, till the shadows turn aside
to show San Marco's long bright square.

I move toward the golden arches where,
with my passenger, I stand with pride.
He waits motionless, until
every listener is devout and still:

*When we first secretly set foot
on these unsuspecting shores,
we knew that neither sword
nor axe nor marching boot
would lead to victory,
but now the grim accumulated scores
of death surpass all bygone times.*

From the gathered hoard
a wave of rapture climbs
into the air on roaring wings.
The Carrier waits for silence to return:

*We watched our enemies yearn
for calamity and death
to seek us out.
We have felt the mad dog's breath,
but now, in a strange inglorious
and pleasing rout,*

*the bragging hoards have fled.
We stand contented and victorious
among the bloated dead.*

*Let every creature from the tiny worm
to this ungainly beast
on which I stand
relish the flavours of our feast.*

*And let me now affirm
my heartfelt thanks
to all who heeded my command
and carried the Curse to enemy ranks.*

*Enough of talk.
Let the festival begin.
Allow this lazy brute to eat and grin
till it can no longer walk.*

My chin aloof, I sadly recognise,
in the glimmer of ten thousand eyes,
a lamentable disrespect. I will not fail
to seek a forceful remedy.

I flex my sturdy tail,
and, with a practiced lurch
of seamless ingenuity,
dislodge the villain from his perch
and catch him in the hollow
of my sturdy jaw
and pleurably swallow.

He will be seen no more.

San Marco Square is still
as the grave. I wait until
the silence is undone -
not with a warlike shout
or the pitiful bleat
of strangled pain,
but with a rush of trembling feet
seeking the nearest way out.

I have the city to myself alone
and wander into every unused lane
and every silent square.
I crawl along the empty quay,

where I once noted furtively
the dexterous flair
of eloquent hands
and the innocence
of clumsy feet, which bore the brunt
of superfluity from distant lands.

The memory of a child
sadly waiting on the waterfront
stirs a strange benevolence
and leaves me beguiled.

I watch with sweet familiarity
the hesitant return
of those whose flesh so frequently
kept me nourished and content.

May the passing hours of night
no longer fill the greedy urn
of death. May light-hearted cries
be the playful ornament
of a new unending festival.

You know the story well.
You taught the blind to see.
Yours is the final victory.

Whenever death comes out to dance
among the lepers and the lame,
inviting them to eat
with smiling countenance
and leaden feet,
I hear millions whispering your name.