

xi. The Boat.

(Turner, The Grand Canal, Venice.)



The lagoon waits
under the evening cloud
and there is not much time.

The lady's hand -
frail and proud
and stern with generations of command -
pointedly accentuates
her vexed tone.

A slow solitary chime
is heard and the oarsman smiles
with discreet familiarity.

Together they have grown
into a kindly pact –
his mask of deference,
her guarded courtesy
and artful wiles.

Her eyes meet
mine with a tremor of incongruence
and, in a poised unruffled act
of recognition and disdain,
she holds my gaze.

I fondly greet
her grimacing contempt
and sympathetically explain
how the enfeeblement
of her declining days
could swiftly end
to our mutual relief.

With the smile of a disillusioned friend,
she recalls her well-worn grief,
with dates of death and burial,
and the quiet part
on the Isle of the Dead where the children lie.

The oarsman knows by heart
how each story has been set
in loving ritual.

As the seagulls cry
he works the rhythm of the deep,
helping his aged passenger to keep
her promise to the holy sacrament.

She serenely notes, with no regret,
the abandoned quays
and old buildings like wrinkled skin -
uncomplaining memories
being brushed into oblivion.

She calls on you to bless
this crumbling monument
and waits without distress
till the unflinching line is drawn
from sky above
to the grey dawn
where life began
in the all-embracing mud.

I have seen the feast prepared by love
to gladly feed
with love's own flesh and blood
every strange and half-forgotten breed.