

MAD MESSIAH

The Second Cycle – Floating Eyes in Venice.

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Fragment – ageing Jesuit.

*My earliest companions came
to this city of canals and silken ways
and whispering conspiracies.
They waited for ten thousand days
till hope had ended its torturing game.*

*I follow them along the crumbling quays,
where all beneath is dark and wet.
One day my ship will come
and carry me to far Jerusalem.
May she come soon, but not quite yet.*

i. The Friendly Neighbour.

In the glare of the bright full moon
these eyes are close to the ground,
as I calmly emerge with a slurping sound
and with delicate skill
I remain quite still
like plaster calmly waiting to be set
in the mud of the ancient lagoon.

I watch the stooping silhouette
of strangers driven by fear -
the howling face in the flaming night –
and I shed an unavoidable tear
in the grey half-light,
unobtrusive and discreet,
close to their trembling mud clogged feet.

May they sleep with unclenched fist
and in their dreaming find
new innocence.
May the friendly morning mist
soothingly unwind
all shadow of malevolence.

Here may they find true rest.
May they proudly raise,
a practised hand
to the brow and gaze
at broken bits of land
endlessly caressed
by lapping water, swathing sky
and the bleak barbarous cry
of seagulls swerving with agility -
loudly at home.

May they thrive in domesticity -
food abundant, offspring numerous -
and, beneath the great arched dome,
where every prayer ascends
in hopefulness,
may we all be friends

and if some friendly neighbour disappears –
as may happen periodically –
enfolding by the shifting mud
or carried off by the flood

of the tide, I call to mind,
with lavish sympathy,
the grief, the anguish and the tears
of loved ones left behind.

ii. A Helping Hand.

The lurking child explores,
as I watch and fully understand
the burden of parental chores -
sailing up and down the coast,
building homes and salting fish.

It is my earnest wish,
to offer a helping hand
as every neighbour should,
but I warn the children not to boast
about our antics in the mud.

I lie still as a fallen tree,
as all the children eagerly
run up and down my back.
At times they pretend
there is a fortress to defend
and crouch behind my battlements
ready for some barbarous attack.

Some will go for a ride –
sitting astride
as I amble peaceably
and, if they have the sense
to hold on very tight,
I just might
take them for a swim.

It wounds me horribly
to see my noble intentions
impugned by faces grim
with lurid inventions.

It is so libellous and quite unfair.
Who invents these overstated fears?
Why all this half-baked reasoning?

I am quite aware
that only with the passing years
can human flesh acquire due seasoning.

I like my meat
tough decrepit flavoursome and sweet.

iii. The Relic.

Deathly still, I wait
on the slick wet shore,
for the cries of murderous hate
to grudgingly subside.
Then I will freely move once more
among the languid waterways.

Long before the days
when a timid remnant came to hide
from terror's wild and shrieking face,
these eyes had come to rest
on the featureless mud of this lonely place.

They grew in numbers and audacity,
zealously voyaging east and west,
in search of profit and sweet luxury
and honour for a new born power –
their banners high above the earth,
exuberant and stern.

I revelled in the hour
when a city came to birth
in the sly adventurers' return
from a land as old as death.

On the welcoming shore
with rapturous breath
they honoured San Marco - their dream -
in a rough-hewn box of wood
raised high and proud.

You will know San Marco's text –
the treacherous scheme,
the shedding of blood,
the folded empty shroud.

His symbol is the lion's roar,
not unlike my own deep growl,
and I am saddened and perplexed
that my city in her glory
raises the lion's belittling scowl
and not my own more amiable grin.

I see the value of that story
in this place of humble origin

and I admit to undue haste,
but I was intrigued by the thought of a taste
sweetly ripening for a thousand years.

I was sadly unaware
of how the flavour disappears
when flesh returns to dust
and so, it seems, I must
most dutifully make amends
to dear San Marco and his faithful friends.

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.

v. *The Palace.*

Raised arms, bleak cry,
hair tarred with blood,
you come like a demonic bird
to where we crocodiles wait,
interweaving with slow elegance.

Arches of crocodile tails
pointing to the sky
like galleon sails
in full magnificence -
here you lie in state.

Your broken skin
dribbles as I taste and see,
with furtive grin,
your lavish generosity.
To give one's flesh and blood,
one's physicality, as drink and food
suggests a mind relentlessly at home
with all the wild and daring ways
of art. I understand; I gaze
in recognition of shared genius.
Now you must be my guest and come
and taste the subtle pleasures of my bliss.

When you sail into my sweet lagoon
on the placid water in the noon
day light and the bow calmly veers
toward the bristling masts and quays
of the Giudecca, the diamond appears.

In high serenity it floats with ease,
pink and white, above the intersection
of each archway's crocodile motif.
I watch with proud affection.
I linger like a floating leaf.

When the Carrier's dance of hate
was overthrown, there was no monument
for me to quietly appreciate –
my jaw line proud and tremulous.
As I had long since understood,
my taste for certain forms of nourishment
was vilified by the ungrateful populace.

Imagine my enchantment and surprise
when smiling lips and knowing eyes
close to the sovereign's noble seat
spoke of homage for my daring feat.

When you called the greatest and the least
to sit and share your kindly feast,
how could you foretell
what glory it would bring?
No king or emperor can claim
so much beauty crafted in their name.

I too (though to a limited degree)
have known that fervent swell,
unalloyed and deeply comforting,
of sweet emotion on my face
as I stand before a place
of beauty built for me.

vi. *Signor Bellini's Madonna.*

(Giovanni Bellini, Madonna of the Meadow.)



Beneath a mountainous display
of blue silk she sits in the passing day,
her fingers scarcely touching
almost holding back, as if perplexed
by the careless lie
of your head against her thigh -
a tiny sleeping drunkard languishing
between one indulgence and the next.

Your foot points up to hooded wings.
A long-beaked bird with shrill squawk
is dancing with a squirming snake
and the raven, on the thin bare stalk
of a tall tree, looks on with a cold eye.

Beyond these fearful posturings
a lazy champion sits, grudgingly awake,
legs casually apart
in a crass reply
to the mother in her simple chastity.

Signor Bellini's art
now forms a sweet trajectory
along her shoulder line, to tenderly caress
your mother's wholesome cheek,
toward the towers and roof tiles
in the early afternoon.

Can you hear the aching tune
of a lonely flute? Can you hear it speak
with thin lipped smiles,
while the white robed figure slows its walk –
with the mournful curiosity
of a cow turning to gawk.

Signor Bellini graciously
requests a curved and genial seat,
for mother and child. I pose with dignity,
but our good-natured harmony
is shattered by the figure's high pitched wail.

Curious heads from far and wide,
gather for news of a frightful tale
and, when they see me stretched along the ground
with the virgin on my rugged hide,
I hear the righteous piercing sound
of human animals at bay.

To avoid undue embarrassment
I bid the virgin rise
and, bowing to the venomous intent
of the mob, I apologise
and bid them all 'good day.'

vii. *Signor Tiziano's Creation*

(Titian, Venus of Urbino.)



In the summer evening light
she lies before her long awaited guest
with calm unguarded elegance

and a generous rump, clothed in white,
protrudes from the finely painted chest
with sweet incongruence.

An imperious bared arm,
framed by the colonnaded tapestry,
demands the requisites of modesty
to be produced – *'This instant! Right now!'* -
as her child, naked with finely arched brow,
reclines on the crumpled clean white sheet.

May I fervently and proudly greet
the one whose wisdom and benevolence
welcomes me to this enchanting scene.

Signor Tiziano has my confidence
as I have his. He knows my ways.
He is not aggrieved if my gaze
hovers discreetly between
our heroin's alluring thigh
and that dearest little friend
at her feet, appetisingly curled.

He has no intention to offend
when he asks, with a patient sigh,
if the curtain might be left unfurled
and I sadly accept
that my watchful eye
might be out of place
hovering above the lady's breast.

As I am politely swept
by the curtain's solemn grace
into obscurity, my vision lingers
on the lady's languid fingers
brazenly at rest.

I accompany the lady and her smile
down all the years
as we hover with good-natured guile
on the Uffizzi Palace wall
till a lonely messenger appears.

Standing barefoot on the marble floor
between the world's beginning and the end,
I see you longing for the soothing call
of light hearted love.

You savour with elation,
my solitary friend,
Signor Tiziano's creation
enticingly at play
with the earth below and skies above,
teasing the wounded and the strong
in the elegantly gathering dust.

I see how, in your loneliness, you long,
with amiable lust
and with the famished way
of flesh and blood,
to be passionately named,
love's long awaited food -
tender worshipful and unashamed.

viii. The Pilgrim.

Fond admirers, through the years
have gazed with groans and tears
at Mad Messiah hanging on his tree.

Across high mountains and the raging sea
they come to kiss the ground
of that ancient place,
which felt your feet and saw your face
and where miracles abound.

A limping pilgrim with a noble heart
is calling on his friends to start
the journey and they gather with one mind –
no trace of falsehood or conceit.

They overcome each barrier. They find
their way. Their joy is deep
with kind laughter and untroubled sleep
and unaware of what the future brings
of unknown worlds and influence with kings.

With journey half complete,
they stand amid the opulent displays
the jeering eyes, the winding waterways
and I watch him with his brotherhood
raising his head with sweet tranquillity
and open mouth, as if to taste the sun.

Your flesh and blood
feeds his longing for Jerusalem.

Along the crowded quays they walk
in search of news and friendly talk
but voices knowingly debate
the turning tides of distant war.

They listen for the long expected word
but, like the rising score
in some losing game, the passing days
relentlessly accumulate.

No news of peace is heard.
No ship makes ready to depart.
but, as with Estragon and Vladimir,
when Godot is unable to appear,

I am enchanted by their foolish ways
and disconcerting art.

ix. *Il Redentore.*

(Canaletto, *Il Redentore* viewed from the Giudecca Canal.)



They come in the shadows of the night
on the still water with silent ease
and whispering breath
and riveting formalities -
the shroud eating harbingers of death –

and children open their eyes with fear
in the dawn's grey light,
as the jingling limping tune
of the pizzacamorti draws near.

Out in the lagoon
on a secluded isle
I wait for the flesh and bones
whose whimperings and groans
have spoken with death as a friend,

but when, with an anxious smile,
they begged for the end
to come with speed
in mercy's name,
death paid no heed
and had no shame.

At this grim heartrending hour
I do what must be done –
all within my power –

to move this foul contagion,
discreetly out of sight.

Sometimes I wonder if you might
not see, in its full clarity,
the true nature of the high
and worshipful esteem
which you enjoy, while I
must watch with calm humility,
as my own efforts go unrecognised.

I am intrigued at how
the contorted face
the pitiful scream
the pale perspiring brow
are strangely harmonised
by calling out your name.

They come to an imposing place
of smiling mysteries
rising like a flame
on the Giudecca shore
and in the elegant display
of geometric harmonies
I see your glad arms opening
to welcome and implore:

'Come, eat my bread and drink the wine.'

I hear laughter echoing
on the serene waterway
as footsteps, with annual festivity,
approach in a hesitant line
along the pontoon's wavering course.

You who hold the gentle source
of healing in your hands
need only turn your eyes
toward the whispering plea
and a city haunted by death
can be sweetly spared

and I shall arrange for detailed plans
by Signor Palladio to be prepared
and Il Redentore shall rise
on the new dawn's shimmering breath
to carry the name of your benevolence.

This place of worship when finally complete
will be a monument to my discreet
and kindly influence.

x. *Signor Canaletto's Crocodile*

*(Canaletto, The San Marco Basin
with the Bucintoro on Ascension Day.)*



On Ascension Day each year,
to honour battles gloriously won,
the Bucindoro and its passengers appear
to re-enact, with due solemnity,
the betrothal of the city and the sea.

Beyond the gilded helm
the wedding ring is cast. The deed is done.
It falls into the silver dappled realm
till once again its day of glory comes
with trumpet and the playful tap of drums.

On the evening of the holy festival,
fortune's gratified inheritors
bask with studied nonchalance,
till the water stirs
and I move, discreetly sculptural,
with an amiable glance
at the bemused paralysis
induced by my lazy withdrawal from view.

Behind the fluid masque of the lagoon,
these eyes watch all the sodden crevices
and every unclosed shutter, every stone
and every floating interest passing through.

Beneath the frayed and fractured quays

I see how the ebb and flow of the tide
mirrors the praise of the passing sun
for the beauty of our city-bride –
rising heavenward, radiant, at ease.

When you stood high above Jerusalem
I could taste the longing in the tears
rolling down your face,
for I too weep with mournful care
for La Serenissima - beloved place,
whose beauty is beyond compare.

I weep amid the howls and jeers,
the wounds of shame
and bitter circumstance,
as public harmony
allows no reference
to my place in history
or my name.

Signor Canaletto has my measure.
I think we understand each other well.
When observed with sympathy and leisure
his art exerts a potent spell,
for he knows how to enhance
every watery expanse
with two eyes furtively at play -
not too near and not too far away.

My place in Signor Canaletto's high esteem
has created quite a stir
and evokes the mysteries of carnival
where masques are never what they seem.

Mine is the most inscrutable of all,
yet masques are but a signature
a ripple on a proud reality
where much has been achieved.

This city's high repute in far off lands,
inspires a litany of gratitude.
We salute those nimble hands
who have conceived
countless works of music and the arts
and we must certainly include
heroic travellers to distant parts.
(Signor Polo comes to mind.)

Lets not forget, in these enlightened days,
Signor Casanova and his praise
of femininity.
(I know him well
and, if you are inclined,
there is some possibility
of gentlemanly conversation.)

His memoirs tell
how Signor Casanova overcame
(not unlike yourself) the pain
of uninvited notoriety.

He admires your reputation
with our older families
whose children can be carried off
by plagues and other tragedies,
imperilling the future of the line.

They pray with heartfelt piety,
for you to bless their married state
with the joyful sign
of fruitfulness – well above
what is required.

And yet, though much to be desired,
without due vigilance,
fecundity is sure to dissipate
the family inheritance.

So gentlefolk of high repute
will always passionately pray,
that a child of meagre expectations
might renounce the low temptations
of the world and leave to others the pursuit
of earthly gain and harmless play.

I watch their delicate design
unfolding like a pirouette
as, with serene and smiling etiquette,
they eat and drink your bread and wine.

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.

xii. *Peggy.*

(Jackson Pollock, *Eyes in the Heat.*)



The day I first met Peggy Guggenheim
near her palazzo on the Grand Canal,
the vaparettos' friendly sound
under a brooding sky
brought intimations of that distant time -
melancholy, almost incorporeal -
when I first found
this waterlogged location.

A overly familiar cry
made me turn with scornful irritation
and an aggrieved stare
to see, beneath a large rococo pair
of spectacles, her frown, playful and grim,
and, balanced dextrously along one arm,
her faithful companion in pampered bliss:

*Do take my darling Capucino for a swim
and he'll give you one big wet woofy kiss!*

Beyond that crazy masque of wayward charm
I see the light of sympathy
reaching out with nonchalance
to quietly caress and calmly praise.

She has invited me to dance
with all the proud agility
of Mr Pollock's masterful displays,
where looping light and shadow wildly fling.

She allows no wavering.

I move across the canvass gingerly
feeling ill at ease and out of place,
but when I turn and see what has been done
in unlikely loops of tangled grace,
a new chapter has begun
in my long odyssey.

My creation is triumphantly
unfurled and the medium is red
and lavishly applied - shed,
spattered, splashed and swirled.

The ancient masters, with due deference,
are solemnly agreed
that this artist has indeed
achieved a work of wild exuberance.

xiii. *Il Ultimo Biennale.*

'Do the villains make the hero bleed?'

The children want to know,
as they listen to some tale from long ago
for, where blood is to be found,
imagination takes firm hold
with full attention guaranteed
as, with smirking lips and squinting eyes,
they seek out where the body lies.

Most heroes from the ancient past
wait upon the shelf,
till we decide to take
one down and have a read,
hoping for the mystery to cast
its bloody spell...

but with you there is no need.
Not many heroes get to tell
their listeners how to make
their flesh and blood appear:

*This is my very self
before your eyes – right here!*

When you held up the bread and wine,
you began a most intriguing story line
and I have set myself the task
of adapting your gesture to our age -
though, being of little more than average
creativity, I scarcely dare to ask
for your approval and advice.

Might I be a living sacrifice
endlessly retold?
Might my flesh be torn by faithful hands?
Who might reverently draw near
to take this blood upon their lips and tongue?

Where might this body find a strong
and unseen father who commands
a trembling second birth?
And when I plead with him, what might I fear?
How might I hang between heaven and earth?

(----.)

And in the tomb, what longing will survive?

What if, on the appointed day,
I go unnoticed by my grieving friends?
What if my memory descends
into oblivion, my name unrecognised?
Will I be rescued from the glacial frown
of death? Will my unseen father turn away?

You will note with due relief
that clear instructions have been written down.
La Fondazione della Biennale has been authorised,
to accept my body in the cause of art.

I will make my admiring public part
their lips in bewildered disbelief
at the blink of what was once an eye
and from the aged city's languid air
I will make my last and parting prayer:

Do you know how to live and bleed and die?