Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Richard Jones: The Italy Poem

Richard Jones · Wednesday, December 2nd, 2015

Italy, by Richard Jones, is a book-length poem comprised of sixty-one cantos of thirty-one lines each. Narrated by a married poet who travels to a monastery in Italy in hope of healing his heart and mind, *Italy* is the story of one man's search for meaning, the sustenance of poetry, and the triumph of love. The ten cantos published here comprise the book's final pages. In a hill town in Tuscany we find the poet-narrator waiting by a fountain to be reunited with his wife, who has promised to show him a small chapel with frescoes by the little-known but resplendent painter, Pinturicchio.

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Higher up the mountain, bells were ringing,
and further up the lane children,
free from school for the summer
and liberated from their heavy book bags,
ran laughing and shouting, light as birds.
The stone wall cool against my back,
I took long, slow, deep breaths,
and to calm myself thought again of my wife,
who with her insights and knowledge of me
insisted I make this trip, begin this journey,
back when I was pacing the house
and she knew there was healing
to be done among chapels with God-infused paintings
and ancient Roman temples
and shrines and ruins,
marble and stone warmed in the sun,
steadfast as memory,
steadfast as love.
I pictured Laura and imagined the chapel,
realizing that today was the day we would see
the paintings of 'the little painter,'
Pinturicchio,
and I would sit in the church
holding Laura's hand.
I climbed again, now with quick steps,

and felt the narrow street under my feet
almost imperceptibly widen,
and the steeply-pitched lane grow level,
as before me in the town square
the fountain Laura had prophesized
blazed in the morning light.

*

As I walked through the ancient piazza
toward the holy grail of the fountain,
I said “Hello! Ciao!”
to the grocer in his white apron
and “Buon giorno!”
to the street sweeper leaning on his broom.
I was full of “Buon giorno’s” for everyone—
the policeman walking his beat in his blue shirt,
white shoulder strap,
and black pants with the red-stripe,
the old men playing chess at outside tables,
even the young tough slouching against a doorway—
all of whom “Buon giornoed” me back.
Bells rang once more as I crossed the square.
I dropped my rucksack, took off my glasses,
and leaning over the stone fountain,
cupped my hands and washed my face in cold water,
imagining my face sparkling in the sunlight.
The sun a fire in the sky, the square luminous,
my wet face was dry in an instant.
I felt like dancing,
hopping and leaping on the smooth old stones.
Then once more I splashed water on my eyes,
straightened up and looked around.
I’d arrived at my destination
and to my astonishment
had no farther place to go,
no greater distance to journey,
no other destination to hope for
but heaven at the end.
Then I saw the flower stall.

*

On the far edge of the square,
the vendor stood at his flower stall
in the shade under his green tent,
his metal buckets overflowing with colorful blooms—
asters, cosmos, giant daisies,
cut sprigs and spears of bougainvillea

with red blooms that flourished like music,
yellow and pink roses like silence,
oleanders, crocus, spring gentians,
dahlias, violets, and lilies.
The vendor watched as I crossed the piazza
and stood looking at the many metal buckets.
Scratching my chin, I pondered
what flowers to buy:
the jasmine of attachment?
the forget-me-not of true love?
the orange blossom, which
when translated from
the language of flowers
means, “your purity
equals your loveliness”?
The flower vendor’s flowers
spoke where I was speechless.
He held out the bouquet tied with string,
and said, “*Per tua moglie.*”
As I thanked him and turned to leave,
the flower vendor also gave me
a rose and a sprig of myrtle.
“*Per Il Signore*,” he said. And when I said nothing,
he pointed up the hill toward the chapel.
“For the Lord. *La cappella. L’affresco*. The Lord.”

*

At the fountain
I lay all my burdens down—
rucksack, flowers, map,
faith, hope, love, time.
I looked again at my watch,
sat down by the fountain,
opened my rucksack,
and pushed aside pens
and the empty notebook,
and took from the bag
my old traveling companion,
the sonnets of Petrarch.
The white pages seemed on fire,
the words blazing
under my squinting eyes.
In Petrarch I found
the aching music of the heart,
a near song whispering
mercies in my ear.
These verses hold the sound
of the grief my heart has eaten.

And turning the page,
what little I know of love
is her gift: my glimpse of perfect grace.
But soon I blew the fire out,
put the book back in my bag,
content, I discovered, to rest,
to let the mind drift,
to let time and the hour
carry me toward
light, love, air—my own soul's future.

*

As I rested in the sunny square,
a gust of swallows swept the sky
and disappeared behind tiled rooftops,
a line of poetry no one would ever write.
My wife would arrive at noon
at the very fountain she had chosen.
Even now, I thought, her train
must be crossing the valley,
arriving at the station.
She'll not climb the town's steep streets
like her foolish husband.
She'll tip a porter to carry her bags.
And to take her up the mountain,
she'll be sensible.
She won't risk her heart.
She'll hire a taxi, beeping its horn
before every treacherous corner.
As church bells ring,
she'll sit in the backseat,
look through her dark glasses
and wave through the open window
at the children, smiling because
she is happy, because she, too,
sees the swallows soaring.
Laura would arrive punctually,
precisely at noon,
just when the bells tolled;
I also knew she would appear
suddenly, unexpectedly,
as love often does,
and call my name across the square.

*

So under a sky from bygone days,
a clear sky Bellini

or Mantegna might have painted,
and the fragrant bouquet beside me,
splayed on the fountain's stone rim,
I uncapped my black fountain pen,
opened the red notebook I had been given,
and wrote this poem
for Laura:

I love you because
you love riding trains—
looking out the window
at fields of sunflowers—
and are glad to stay a few nights
at the Grand Hotel in Venice
and ride in sleek gondolas,
serenaded by handsome men.
But now the time has come
and I'm here at the fountain
waiting for you to join me,
waiting for you to show me
the chapel with the frescoes by
Pinturicchio, the little painter.
Noonday bells ring for joy,
so come quickly, find me
resting on sun-warmed stone,
face freshly washed, eyes closed,
my mouth almost smiling,
the book of poems you gave me
opened in my hands.

*

Closing my notebook,
capping my pen,
and putting away my rucksack,
I closed my eyes. The day was so bright
the darkness behind my eyelids was golden,
and in the golden light behind my eyes,
I saw I was a grape in a winepress
or dough in the strong hands of a baker.
I was sorrow transformed into joy,
and I would sing about this life
which I share with street sweepers
and train conductors and pregnant girls
who only want to go home to Holland
just as Laura and I will soon want to go home
to America and our children, whose lives
are countries as beautiful as Italy,
as Rome and Venice and Spello.

I leaned back against the fountain,
envisioning my wife in her white dress,
her cadenced and metrical walk,
her hands keeping tempo,
the elision of her shadow keeping measure,
the dark figure gliding across
the square’s sun-splashed stones
and saying my name.
Then, in the sun by the fountain,
I fell asleep and continued the dream.
And in my dream I saw Laura on the train.
She was looking out the window,
thinking to herself, her voice a song,
and I could hear her inmost thoughts.

*

Fields of sunflowers
drift past the train’s window
as Laura daydreams, already reminiscing
about her one extravagant night at the Grand Hotel,
happy to have ridden in sleek black gondolas,
serenaded by handsome men.
She wonders if her husband
would have enjoyed Venice, too,
the cozy pensions, the silken water?
I wish he could let himself be happy…
like when he looks up and sees the swallows—
I wish he’d let his heart soar.
On a distant hill, Spello shines golden.
She finds her sunglasses
and exits the station with porters carrying her bags.
She asks the boy leaning against his taxi
to take her up the mountain,
trusting this child
who beeps his horn at every corner
to get her from the outskirts of town
to the mountaintop alive. In the taxi,
she looks back across the green valley,
thinking how far she has traveled,
the years. She wonders and hopes
that the time in the monastery
has been good, that her husband
was happy writing, content and at peace.
She’ll ask, and when he says
yes, as she hopes he will,
she’ll ask if he has written something
for her, a few lines, simple and pure.

*

The taxi takes
terraced switchback
roads that, like a miracle,
climb and circle back
to drop her at a small hotel
a little higher up the mountain
than the square and the fountain
where her husband is waiting.
The hotel is perfect—
quiet and down-to-earth,
the room simple and unassuming,
the bed white,
the balcony open to the sky.
She leaves her bags,
heavy with the gifts
she will take home to the children,
and carrying nothing,
walks downhill toward the square,
feeling free and light.
She says hello to the grocer,
gives the street sweeper a smile,
and nods at three nuns
who lovingly watch the school children
running wild through the square.
In her hand, two coins are ready,
American pennies brought from home
so she and her husband can wish as one
and toss them in the fountain,
adding their two cents to the centuries.
But looking about
she doesn’t see him, her husband, anywhere.

*

Then above the square bells ring out.
The bells ring and ring for joy,
but her heart sinks:
where is he? She doesn’t find him
until she walks a few steps farther,
circling around the fountain
to find him on the other side,
sitting alone, leaning back against the stone,
his eyes closed, almost smiling,
a book of poems in his lap,
half asleep, it seems, and dreaming,
a bouquet of flowers
on the ground beside him.

Spray from the fountain
dazzles and sparkles in the sunlight.
She looks around the square:
the nuns and the children have vanished.
There’s no one around.
The square is empty, save the two of them.
She steps closer, then stops.
She takes off her sunglasses.
Never, she thinks,
have I seen my husband more peaceful.
She hesitates for a moment, thinking—
as swallows cross the sky
and the last bell echoes in the distance —
that it seems a shame to wake him.
But she does. She comes close,
and kneeling beside him,
she takes his hand
and says his name.

***Fifth Wednesday Journal* originally published ten cantos from Italy. It is where “Fields of Sunflowers” first appeared. *Poetry South* originally published seven cantos from Italy. It is where “Higher up the Mountain” first appeared.**

(Featured photo of the author is by Sarah Jones, his daughter.)

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