

# 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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