

Dante in Love

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by

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Partial English translation by L.G. Berger

LOVE HAS SHOWN ITSELF TO ME

I

“Era già l’ora che volge il disio”

T’was now the hour that turneth back desire

Yes, here I am, tonight as well. Let me catch my breath. I must be in pretty bad shape. The journey is long, from where I depart to arrive at this place.

The sun has just set behind the rooftops, the cupolas, and the bell towers of the city. As it does each time. The darkness is not yet complete. It searches, invading the air down the streets and around the houses like leaden water. The long shadows cast on the ground by the buildings and the passersby have disappeared. Everything by now has taken on their color. Everything is shadow. Myself included.

Are you listening to me? This is my time and my season. The spring equinox has just passed. The hours of darkness are still in balance with the hours of light. It is now, with the arrival of the darkness, that demons, spirits and ghosts will awaken from their sleep and mingle among the living. They prepare to visit their dreams.

I remember that once upon a time, this was the hour in which the torches were lit inside the walls of the city. The men returned to their homes, or longed for them, if they were far, alone, exiled. The sailors felt the loss in their hearts as soon as they sailed from the port, and all of the solitude of the wind and the waves was in front of them. I remember, too that this was the hour when the stars in the sky lit up, millions and millions of stars, as dense as blades of grass in a field.

I have arrived, and I am alone. As all the other times. Now I sit at the foot of the Bapistry. This octagonal building covered in white and green marble, from Carrara and from Prato, this is where I stay, as if it were my home. But I don't have a home anymore, I have not had one for who knows how long.

I am curled up on the ground, and I raise my head toward the sky, it is useless for me to try and look up. I can barely see the moon, through the fog and clouds that come and go. Venus, only Venus is still shining, the star of the night, the only vivid being that will allow my eyes to grasp it. The sky is empty, opaque.

Here is where I stay, the Bapistry, the Duomo, the Belltower surround me, towering over me. They protect me. If I stretch out at their feet then seem even taller, as if they were made of fir or ash or poplar, petrified long, long ago.

The artificial lights begin to turn on, these angry lights with no form, I don't know where they come from and they go everywhere ... I've never gotten used to them. I long for the torch, for fire. One can see where it comes from, and it always rises up, spraying its sparks all around, and its body is made of flames.

I long for fire, and for the stars. And for many other things.

Oh look, look who is here, what golden blonde curly hair she has, like the girls I was so enamored of; my friend Guido liked them, too, it should be said. Such a nice stride, she will be in front of me in a moment. I will nod hello to her, nothing too bold, just acknowledge her and that is all: anyway, she won't even see me.

I am glad that there are again many people around here this year. Last year something terrible must have happened in this city, or maybe across the land, I do not understand exactly what. It was as if a dark menace, coming from who knows where, lay heavy in the air and make it impossible to breathe. There was no one around here. Almost all of the storefronts were closed, the display lights off, and only a flock of seagulls had landed in the piazza, white spots in the dusty darkness. No one could enter the Duomo or the Baptistry. The few passersby had their faces covered, with blue or white cloths, and they kept to themselves, as if they were afraid of coming close to one another. A masked ball, I thought, but sinister, a carnival of death.

It's not that I enjoy the chaos, the traffic, the babel of languages that once again surrounds me. No, it is for them, the beauties within the for their elegant features that I can once again see. There are many beauties, all different, and they never cease to wound me.

The blonde girl with the curls is in front of me now: I see her lips, the point on which the beauty in a face gathers, where the weight of the flesh is darker and sweeter. And then the eyes: they are not of the flesh, the strength of their attraction is immaterial, like the reflection of sunlight on the surface of water. Love resides in the eyes, is transported through the eyes to arrive at the hearth, or at least this is what my friends and I wrote once upon a time.

Those entering the Duomo pass in front of me, I look at them, no one is going in to pray and to listen to the Mass, they are all going to take pictures with those small dark

rectangles that let loose an instant flash of light in the darkness that irritates me, if I think of the light of the fireflies and of the stars that is now gone.

They leave the Baptistery open in the early evening hours for visitors. And once again, there are many who come to see it.

A couple looks distractedly at the cupola of the Baptistery lifting their eyes from the pages of a worn little booklet and then lowering them again, now she takes a picture of him, and he of her, and then they ask a passerby to take one of them together against the background.

The two of them speak a language I do not understand but that I have been hearing for years and years and always more frequently around here, they seem to be here by some sense of duty and you can tell that they can't wait to leave and escape toward some other place less weighted down by history, to return to their hotel room and make love. My god, yes, they should go straight back.

A group passes in front of me, an orderly line of men and women, mostly of a certain age, wearing clothing that from year to year looks more and more the same: pants that come to the knee or even worse, to the calf, t-shirts with giant slogans on them that I am unable to comprehend, shoes with thick rubber soles or sandals that barely cover feet clothed in wollen socks.

Even now everyone has a white strip of cloth on his or her face, they follow their guide like crazed sheep as he holds a canary yellow umbrella straight up in the air. They are all small statured, with rigorous movements, they must come from an East which I know nothing about, but that I can now intuit must be rich and powerful, and that must maintain a sense of order that has been entirely lost here.

I called them crazed sheep, but this does not pay tribute to their discipline ... there are other crazed sheep that are crazier than they are who graze and butt heads around here, yelling, sneering, biting into slices of focaccia that oozes red sauce, singing terrible songs.

They have forgotten the quiet nights like those I lived during the last year, when I heard only the sirens of police cars or of ambulances, cafès with their shutters down and their window displays full of dust, all the lights out well before midnight ... I don't know what it was, but whatever it was, they have forgotten it now.

They live as they can, day to day, never asking themselves anything, happy in their noise-making and forgetting. Or at least, I think, even if I should no longer judge anyone, I no longer have the desire nor the right to. I should judge only myself.

Now they go in, the line dissolves into the Baptistry. I have not wanted to go back in there myself. Ever. I stay at the foot of its external walls. More often, like now, I stay near to one of the walls that is closest to the front of the Duomo. It is enough for me. I don't go in because my memories haunt me, still today. Inside, near the baptismal fonts, there something happened to me that has influenced my life in an evil way ...From then, perhaps right from that moment, my collapse began.

And yet I love the Baptistry. My beautiful Saint John. It is the place I come back to, where I rest all the hours of the night, I would not be able to survive without it.

Are you listening to me? I'm not sure why I am talking to you, why I am telling you all of this, why I am giving you a report of this very night. It is the 700th night, more or less. It has been very difficult to keep count.

I'd like to be able to trust you, to talk to you as I did to my friends in my youth, to Guido. Guido was very handsome, and always ready, with an agile mind and body, he was the first among my friends, perhaps the one I loved the most and the one I hurt the most deeply ...

You cannot see me but I am moving closer, I am taking you by the arm, I am looking you in the eye: my brother, stop here for a moment, I want to tell you what has happened to me and what continues to happen to me, I know it is not easy to believe, but please believe me, listen to me.

Who are you? Only I can hear myself. But my nature pushes me to imagine, to pretend, and tonight I imagine that you can hear me, you rascal, my brother, I don't know who you are, nor where you are from, or if you will ever be able to understand the strange and otherwordly situation that I find myself in. I can no longer even turn to you and say, "dear reader", as I did once upon a time. Because I no longer write, and somewhere deep inside myself I will have to find the courage to reveal the reason to you.

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