Excerpt from ‘Lavinia fuggita’ by Anna Banti

Translated from the Italian by Ekin Oklap

Every year, in the summertime, the girls of the Pietà would take their afternoon snacks and spend a free day outdoors together, prizing this diversion more highly than a month’s sojourn in the clear air of the Foscarini or the Duodo, easily granted to any one of them by Borrato, the doctor who examines them all and in all of them is wont to detect a case of hysteric flatulence. One time they went to the Zattere for Ascension Day, and this is a great memory partly because Lavinia was with them that day. And Lavinia said, on the morning of that very same Ascension Day when they had all of them risen before dawn and were losing their minds with how eager they were to set sail: ‘next year we shall not be together’. In the shared silence they can see her again now, her two friends, waiting by the dormitory grating from which they would speculate together on what turn the weather might take: her head turned upwards, that thin aquiline profile she had, the cords in her neck as tight as an old woman’s, and though she was young you could see that she was not just like any of the others and she knew what she was saying. The weather was fair but the hours would not pass, all the girls were restless and every now and again one of them would say: I don’t want to go anymore, I’ll stay at home, then make as if to take the linen cover off her lacemaking pillow; but she would not sit down. Until, without anyone being able to distinguish who had given the signal, they were all on the stairs and crowding upon the pavement by the church and the three barges. Only then did they learn that they were heading to the Zattere, for the Prioress did not want long sailings this year, and there was no question of going to San Nicolò di Lido.

Even today, Orsola and Zanetta are in that morning’s lively air, and feel as if they were immersed in the delicate water washing against the rocks on the shore and around the sides of the ships. Twilight deepens, the nocturnal fishermen’s boats, each with its own little lamp, have taken to the sea, and across from the windows of the Bertozzi household their tiny lights flicker with sparks and even the stars glow excessively; the northerly *bora* threatens to blow, already the wind is whimpering through the window panes, on her way home this evening Zanetta will have to wrap her shawl tight around her and walk with her head bowed down: but it does not matter, and as she works on her embroidery, she begins to murmur the aria from *Arsilda*, and moves her head and her shoulders just as Angelica, the choir’s soloist, used to do, to show everyone how assured she was as she deigned to step onto the barge. The two women are laughing now, a thread of laughter that stands out, isolated in the silence of this vast house, and both of them show their white gums.

The three barges could barely fit everyone, and it took a long while for them all to descend the slippery steps, particularly the older women among the wards who were afraid and wished to say the Hail Mary first. The girls who did various jobs in the foundling home stood on their feet, bunched up like anchovies and clinging onto one another so that at the tiniest motion they all collapsed together. The girls who sung in the choir, however, had made themselves comfortable under the awning and were conversing affectedly like ladies of rank, almost as if they had not noticed the curious passersby, commoners and knights alike, who had stopped to watch them from the pavement and make all kinds of comments. One of the choirgirls, Candida the kind-hearted cripple, was gesturing at Lavinia to step forward, but Lavinia seemed not to notice her, and stood by the mast, the tallest among them all, and so skinny was she that the wind that searched through her petticoat seemed to find nothing there.

Because of her, Orsola did not avail herself of her privileges as skilled oboist, but instead she and Zanetta tottered towards Lavinia and pulled her by the skirts. It always seemed to fall to them to remind Lavinia of her rank as teacher, while Lavinia herself was unheeding of inequities yet was nevertheless widely thought of as prideful. Just as expected, she did not even turn around, just stood there, stock still, lips and nostrils tight as if she were holding her breath, and looked out towards Lido. There was nought to be done but leave her be and turn their minds instead to enjoying the boat trip, which, with that cheerful breeze and the sun and the general havoc, felt like the beginning of a long voyage. They moored at Dogana, their supervisors shouting loudly and reproaching them quietly that they ought to be ashamed of themselves, to behave so indecorously, when the girls from the Ospedaletti conducted themselves like nuns in comparison. From the very youngest girls to the older ones there rose the sound of incessant laughter, and the din was such that even the private gondoliers sailing past along the canal stopped oaring, and the noblewomen peered out from underneath their canopies. With the way the girls kept tripping and stumbling and falling in heaps over one another, the bargemen too could hardly keep a straight face, and were soon holding some of the older girls' arms and waists, ostensibly to keep them upright. Two of the youngest wards were throwing up, unsettled by this glimpse of the sea and the breeze in the air, comforted by Ignazia who worked in the kitchens, and who was holding their foreheads and leaning them so far over the side of the barge they nearly fell into the water. Naturally the boats could not all dock at the same time, a fact which gave rise to disagreements and even panicked cries when one of the three barges, propelled by its sail, drifted off towards Giudecca while awaiting its turn, and the girls travelling upon it felt betrayed and believed they were being separated from the others as punishment.

Meanwhile, Pompeo, the bargemen's trusty captain, stood on the steps of Dogana with his brawny arm arched out for the girls of the choir to lean upon as they hopped off, their movements languid and pretentious as if they were accustomed to having a footman at their service. Orsola came off last, followed by Zanetta: they enjoyed nudging each other at the choir girls' affectations. They were not thinking of Lavinia then, they were having fun, and when they turned around after disembarking, they saw her among the young children and the older women, still looking out across the lagoon as if getting off the barge were not her affair. 'Looks like she'd rather go to Pellestrina,' said Zanetta, but the joke fell flat because they both remembered Lavinia's bleak pronouncement from before, and in all honesty, they were worried she might do something foolish. They could see a great big sail way out over there, red and yellow, and they knew well Lavinia's fixation with large sailing ships that came from afar, all the girls at the Pietà knew that she had been left in the foundling wheel wrapped in a swath of a sail from the east. Then the usual miracle happened, Lavinia regained her sense of that particular moment, wound her way, unhurried and sure of foot, to the stern, leapt off, lost a shoe, and fished it back out, her body bent in two so that it was hard to know how she managed to straighten back up.