

Casa di Giulietta

Fragments

MARIA FRANCESCA LODICO

Quand Émélie découvre qu'une maison médiévale à Vérone a déjà appartenu à la famille des Capulet, elle est la proie d'un engouement viscéral face à l'art italien et rêve d'une rencontre avec la Juliette de Shakespeare. "Casa di Giulietta" est une méditation de prose poétique, intertextuelle et fragmentée sur l'art et l'histoire, le désir, l'amour et la mort, et la féminité.

Prologue

She beckons with her finger, taunts me, laughs when I stumble, she remains just beyond my grasp. I run after her through the cobblestones, yearning to touch the red velvet, the gold brocade. Her name is ... what's in a name?

She floats, her skirt never touching the dirty ground. Yet, she lifts it, slightly, revealing a satin slipper, a stockinged ankle. She has the longest hair, twice her height, and it trails after her like the train of a wedding gown, down her back into a carpet that never touches the ground.

"Catch me if you can!" she says.

I pursue her through the cobblestone streets of Verona.

I began to dream of Giulietta in the summer of 1994. Perhaps dream is not the right word. I was obsessed. Possessed.

At first it seemed like an odd literary take on Stendhalismo, a curious affliction that is mostly legend. The malady causes visitors to panic or collapse in front of Italy's great works of art—a case of being driven insane by too much aesthetic beauty, nervous exhaustion from an intense exposure to art. Named after the French writer Henri Stendhal who supposedly suffered from the condition in 1817, Stendhal's Disease mostly afflicts European visitors to Florence, especially the English, never the Italian or Japanese.

But art was not the only thing driving me mad. It was also an English play based on an old Italian legend. And it was Giulietta. She wouldn't leave me alone. So I followed her.

Rome, June 27

Stefano and I are finally here, in this city of eternal origins. I close my eyes and see a map of the city long ago imprinted on my mind, a relief map with Palatine Hill at its core.

At the Termini train station we are swept into the traffic, the mass of automobiles diluted by Vespas, slick women and men leaping off of *Emporio Armani* billboards onto mopeds, briefcases securely attached, cellular phones in breast pockets. I had expected to be greeted by olive-skinned men and women in togas. I had expected a winged chariot.

We take a taxi to the *pensione*, lurching forward on Via Cavour in spurts and starts. A woman, map in hand, gesticulates to a man wearing a fluorescent sun-visor. He holds a video camera. The taxi inches forward. Suddenly, the tip of something oddly familiar begins to appear from behind a row of buildings. "Il Colloseo," says the driver. Barely one block away, the vast expanse of the Roman Forum, the Coliseum to its left: *Fragments of a glorious past*. I felt like I knew these places intimately from pouring over photographs and diagrams, one-dimensional slides that always left me salivating for rounded figures, the longing for flesh and blood. All these images coalesce and I reach out to touch a stone, a column.

Stefano pays the driver and I run out of the taxi, towards the Forum, terrified that what was there might finally disappear, finally collapse into oblivion. But the Forum had closed. I lean over the thick wall that separated us. The receding sun casts a sheet of honey onto the ruins. Scaffolding encumbers the Arch of Titus.

I picture a reconstruction of the rubble, a neat and tidy rectangular outlay with healthy temples—nothing like Piranesi's crumbling walls—surrounded by vegetation and running fountains, dotted with patrician men and women, their sandals imprinting the dirt as they stroll through the plane. I scurry after their footprints, afraid they would disappear. I run faster, after the beautiful Livia

in white and gold. I trace the footsteps, running faster, following Livia's scent, the scent of laurel. The Forum's 2,000 years presses down on me. I struggle to separate the various strands of history, but it bears down on me in a mass so dense that I feel its pressure where the marrow touches bone. How many times had the Forum come tumbling down, set on fire, destroyed by the ravages of humanity? How much more digging to sift through the layers, successive eras sitting on top of one another, side by side, residues of past, present and future?

In the reconstruction, frescoes currently displayed at

as carefully remembered after history's dismembering. She stood poised, on the bow of a ship, amid the sea and wind, and I soared with her.

With my breath I gathered up the fragments of her headlessness. I kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her lips into time. A moist touch is all it takes to weld together flesh and history, a headless victory over time.

Laying on the bed next to Stefano, facing the window, I stare at the ancient Roman wall of the adjacent ruins which history had no doubt named, but which I could not identify. We are drenched in sweat, ceaseless traffic

Was there a renaissance for women? Has history ever been able to carry the weight of the hurt female body? Whose gaze is it, anyway? Whose gaze? Whose?

the Museo Nazionale would be restored to the House of Livia at the topmost level of Augustus's Palace.

I scurry after Livia's footprints, afraid they might disappear under another layer of history. I run faster, after the beautiful Livia in white and gold. I trace her footsteps, following the scent of laurel. Coming up behind her, I gently lay a hand on her shoulder. Livia turns around, and I ask her. I was tired of not knowing and perhaps Livia would know. I needed to know. It was about the kind of need that I would die from if unfulfilled. I needed to know: *How much more digging was needed to sift through the layers, successive eras sitting on top of one another, side by side, residues of past, present and future?*

I lean further over the thick wall, my arms unable to reach the edge. I want to hurl myself over the wall, crashing to smithereens against those ancient rocks, one more sacrifice to not knowing.

Stefano, behind me, wraps his arms around my waist. He pulls me up against his body. "Magnificent," he says.

the Professor asks her students

Was there a renaissance for women? Has history ever been able to carry the weight of the hurt female body? Whose gaze is it, anyway? Whose gaze? Whose?

Rome, June 29

It reminds me of *Nike*, of that moment when I came upon the headless figure in the Louvre at the top of a grand staircase. I stood before her, beneath her, the magnificence of her windswept wings. *Winged Victory*, they have named her. The sheer size of her, such a mass of marble, as carefully reconstructed as it had once been constructed, just

on the street below, birds circling overhead (what kind were they? such cries!), they occasionally stopped to perch on the wall. I am waiting, I think, for them to come to me, as I had gone to *Nike*, so that I could step onto their cries and soar, as I had soared with *Nike*, to the pinnacles of history.

To be a part of the wall, a piece of the Coliseum's rubble, a speck of sand on Palatine Hill. To be a part of history's concrete.

But with my breath I'd rather be a part of its moistness and kiss the flesh back into time.

Florence, July 1

At the Accademia all eyes are glued to *David's* body, flashes bouncing off its sinewy surface, video lenses stalking him.

"Honey?" A man motions a woman a few steps back. "Yes ... yes ... no ... another inch. Honey? Stop fidgeting. Can you smile? Honey?"

"Have you got the head, George? Don't cut its head off. Are you getting it all, George?"

The woman clutches a black velour banner emblazoned with a golden *David* and postcards of a close-up of his penis with the caption, *La Dolce Vita!* "Are you sure you got the head?"

"C'est le *David*, ca?"

"Oui, de Michel-Ange."

"J'imaginai que c'était plus petit que ca."

"Mais comme c'est beau."

"Oui, oui."

"Es muy bonito."

"Si, el *David*."

"De Miguel-Ange."

"Es muy bonito."

I escape the commotion, leaving Stefano behind, and wander into a less crowded wing. A marble sculpture, its surface less chiseled than *David's*, its contours raw, its energy potent, arrests me. Michelangelo's *Young Slave* (*Captive? Prisoner?*) struggled to free himself from a block of marble as if the piece was unfinished, an allegory to illustrate Michelangelo's belief that sculpting was about liberating form from within the stone.

The *Slave's* left arm covers half his face, the curve of the elbow raised over the forehead and above the eyes. There it is, in the half-hidden face: desire.

Florence, July 3

At the San Lorenzo cloister we pause at the entrance to The Biblioteca Laurenziana. Michelangelo had designed the steps to resemble a lava flow.

We tiptoe up Michelangelo's stairs, it is so lovely, all is quiet, and it is as if we have been led back into the womb. Michelangelo's lava flows so gently, so softly, makes you believe that a staircase can be tenderness itself, makes you believe that the source of this eruption, *the architecturally correct reading room, its carved benches and beautifully illustrated manuscripts, a fifth-century copy of Virgil, a treatise on architecture by Leonardo*, was the womb itself.

I think of another eruption, of Mount Vesuvius, whose devastating lava smothered Pompeii. In one of the preserved frescoes a bride is flogged as part of her initiation into Dionysian mysteries; in the Villa of Mysteries, a portrait of the mistress of the house, *The Mantled Woman*. Are the women trapped inside the plaster casts on display – casts made from the shapes left in the volcanic ash, distorted figures in agony as their bodies melted? What is it like to have skin made of molten metal? Are the bones inside soft, smooth, creamy, whole? Imagine the strength and courage of such bones to withstand the test of time and lava. So that was the answer, *to get to the bones*.

the Professor describes the fall of the modern body

More than any other sense, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains that distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing, has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.

Florence, July 4

"A Mannerist sculpture, of a rape, of Sabine, three naked bodies intertwined, one on top of another, in a spiralling movement upward, her anguished face turned away, upward, her left arm extended gracefully, delicate fingers in a gesture of defiance." I do not like these words, this vocabulary, to describe what I am seeing.

Words taught, words inherited, their tongues down my throat. *This statue epitomizes the Mannerist obsession with spiralling forms and balance. / She is perfectly balanced, her body held gently by the arms of the young man who stares directly at her while her eyes look away in anguish. / This is an interesting Mannerist composition of an older man, a woman and a young man.*

The marble is dirty, discoloured. Was it only the surface that had been chipped, marred with stains and deterioration? Was the stone beneath, the inside of the statue, soft, smooth, creamy, whole? Did the shattering only take place on the surface, the core intact—and creamy?

If Sabine had stared back, instead of away, if she had returned his gaze with her anguish, her rage, would the statue have lost its balance shattering to the ground?

If Sabine had stared back. But Sabine looks away, she does not see her body, the bodies of the men, raping her. Giambologna, why does she look away?

Giambologna. A mouthful of a name. Gi-am-bo-lo-gna. What's in a name? Gi-am-bo-lo-gna. Your figures grace the Bargello, G_____. *To get a comprehensive idea of the Renaissance achievement in Florence, two museum calls are essential: the Uffizi and the Museo Nazionale del Bargello. Nowhere else in Italy is there so full a collection of sculpture from this period, and yet the Bargello is normally uncrowded, the majority of sightseers passing it over in favour of the Accademia up the road.* Your figures, G_____, such a spectacular mouthful of a name, with your tongue down my throat in the company of Ammannati, your Sabine in the company of Ammannati's Leda, her face rapturous. *Leda, wife of Tyndarus, king of Sparta, bore four children to Zeus, who visited her in the shape of a swan; the four were born from two eggs – from one sprang Polydeuces and Helen, from the other Castor and Clytemnestra. Zeus visited many women, visited Leda in the shape of a swan. So casual, Zeus was, about his visits. Like going out for a Sunday stroll, a Sunday visit to see Aunt Flo. And then he fucked Leda, on that visit. And did she want to be fucked, by Zeus? Because Leda did not know that she was being fucked by the father of all gods, Zeus. who visited her in the shape of a beautiful swan.*

Bologna, July 6

We walk through the streets exhilarated by the University. At the Tower, an anarchist rally, students spraying graffiti while denouncing Derrida, Barthes, Eco. At the Fabio Mauri exhibit I cried, *Language is War*, over and over again, he said it over and over.

Verona, July 7

My nostrils are dry and I pick for a moment before falling into a deeper slumber. "Thy lips are warm...." I wade into the Trevi, the velvet gown clinging to my limbs, my breasts swelling in the water. Pennies slip through my

fingers, to the bottom of the fountain. I swallow one, wondering what it would feel like to swallow a goldfish with transparent eyes, large and purple as the moon. A flash goes off in my face and I avert my eyes. "Lick your lips. Lift your chin. Smile. Into the camera." I close my eyes, but there it is, the light, underneath my eyelids. "Giulietta?" My gown slips away from me and I begin to sink, the penny I had swallowed pulling me down. My bronze body was too heavy for the surface of the water. It belonged in the Bargello or the Accademia. I sink sideways, beyond the reach of the flash, to the bottom of the fountain, cast-iron grating against marble. "Thy lips," There was only calm at the bottom of the fountain, and the flatness of pennies, and the moon....

"Verona!" shouts the conductor.

Enter Juliet again [above]

Jul. Hist, Romeo, hist! O, for a falc'ner's voice.
To lure this tassel-gentle back again!
Bondage is hoarse, and may not speak aloud,
Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies,
And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine,
With repetition of my Romeo's name. Romeo!

Verona, July 8

I climb pink marble bench after pink marble bench. My right leg goes up, my body weight lifts slightly, I gather my skirt, the foot settles securely onto the next bench, the sole taps the stone, my body shifts forward lifting itself entirely, the left foot joins the right one, tap, I stand upright.

I pause, then resume.

It is close to midday, the moment of absolute heat in Verona. Stefano had taken the wooden steps built over the aisles and has already reached the topmost tier of the first century AD Roman Arena which is scattered with tourists. I peer at him from under my straw hat. He leans against a column surveying the first century AD Arena through his binoculars. He waves.

I continue climbing and imagine the Arena full of 20,000 spectators, the gladiators and lions below. I negotiate my way through the riotous, trembling crowd. They have blood on their hands, all 20,00 of them, of that I am sure.

When I reach the forty-fourth tier Stefano is waiting with extended arms to help me up the last step. My body shifts forward lifting itself entirely, my left foot joins the right one, tap, I stand upright, and Stefano is waiting, with extended arms, he holds me in place. *If he let go, would I topple backwards, somersaulting down the forty-four tiers, falling into the middle of the stage? Would the lions waiting there be gentle? Would it all come tumbling down, if he let go?*

"No," I say when Stefano offers me water.

"Isn't this astounding, Emmie? Isn't it magnificent? Aren't you glad we came?" Stefano smiles.

On my lap, the travel guide flips open: "Only in Verona Romeo and Juliet are actual historical figures. What is now a rather seedy bar on the Via delle Arche Scaligeri was allegedly once Casa Romeo. Juliet's House – Casa di Giulietta – is better maintained. It is a compact medieval townhouse complete with balcony. In recognition of the terrific publicity Shakespeare has given their city, the Veronese often perform his play during the summer months in their Teatro Romano, an ancient construction of perfect proportions and superb acoustics. The bereaved Montague's closing speech has certainly proved prophetic:

"That while Verona by that name is known,
There shall be no figure at such a rate be set
As that of true and faithful Juliet."

I mark the section with a ticket stub.

"Maybe we could still get tix, Em. We'll ask around? There's got to be a way. It would be so amazing to be here with 20,000 other people."

"If it's sold out."

"We should look around for scalpers."

"That would cost a fortune!"

"But think about it, Em. Think about it. Thousands of people, sitting here, on these benches. And the acoustics."

"What about the Teatro Romano?"

Stefano returns to his binoculars. "The Roman Theatre? But *Aida* would be so much more spectacular."

"So much more spectacular," I repeat. And I lean into my lap. I hear the almost whisper again, an undercurrent to the roaring of the spectators.

"Thy lips are warm," whispers the muffled voice, *Thy lips are warm, my love, my girl, my angel, my rebel girl. Thy lips are warm.*

Why did Shakespeare choose to end it in the way that he did? *Go get thee hence, for I will not away. What's here? Cup clos'd in my tru love's hand? Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end. O churl, drunk all, and left no friendly drop To help me after? I will kiss thy lips, Haply some poison yet doth hand on thee, To make me die with a restorative. Thy lips are warm,* she said, *thy lips are warm, thy lips are warm.* She took Romeo's dagger, stabbing herself, falling on Romeo's barely dead body *Thy lips are warm* herself dying *Thy lips are warm, O so warm.* It was a matter of seconds, a fleeting moment, could Shakespeare not have allowed them this one moment?

In the old Italian legend on which the play is based Juliet does wake up *before* Romeo dies. He has already drunk the poison and so there is that moment of terror between them: Romeo knows that he will die and Juliet must witness her lover's death. Why did Shakespeare not write this moment? I longed to live in such moments of terror and ecstasy. *Passion felt where the marrow touches bone.*

The muffled voice whispers. Romeo hears of Juliet's death, he goes to the tomb, he takes Juliet's body *Thy lips are cold*. Lets her stand, holds her close, her dead arms encircling his neck *Here will I remain*. He drinks the potion, one of Juliet's hands flutters with life, their eyes meet, for a moment, passionterror *felt where the marrow touches bone* just as her hand moves to touch his cheek, Romeo falls, Juliet in his arms, their lips warm. "Yes," I say. *Yes*.

Verona, July 8

She taunts me through the streets of Verona, laughs when I stumble, she remains always beyond my grasp. Her name is Giulietta and before I could lay a hand on her shoulder, before I could ask her, *are the yearnings inscribed on any one body different, truly and fundamentally different, from any other?* she floats away, her gown never touching the ground, she lifts it, even though it never touches the ground.

I follow her to the Scaligero Bridge. I lean over the stone wall, half my body falling over the other side, my arms, my head, my hair flailing in the wind, I am ready to fly, down, down, down.

How long would it take for my body to hit the River Adige? How long?

And this is what I saw: living in the moment, in pure exhilaration, where there is nothing waiting at the other end, free-fall. That was a life worth living, in that moment of yearning. Must there be death waiting at the end? Damn, damn, damn the spectacular endings.

Maria Francesca LoDico is a Montréal writer and cultural journalist. Her work has aired on CBC Radio and appeared in many magazines and anthologies. Most recently an essay about her father's passing away, The Disappearing Sicily, won first prize in the Accenti Magazine Literary Awards. She is also the editor of the Montréal Zagat Survey and co-creator of World Bites, a television series about food and identity. Francesca is currently writing a novel based on her childhood in Sicily for which she has received grants from the Canada Council and the Conseil des arts et lettres du Québec.

Sources

Girolamo de la Corte, in his history of Verona, offers the story of Romeo and Juliet as a factual event that took place in 1303.

"Romeo e Giulietta." *Historia novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti*, Luigi da Porta (Venice, 1530).

La Giulietta, Matteo Bandello (1554).

The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet, Arthur Brooke (1562).

Palace of Pleasure, William Painter (1567).

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, William Shakespeare (1595).

The above were inspired by: Hero and Leander, Pyramus and Thisbe, Tristan and Isolde.

In da Porto and Bandello, Giulietta does revive before Romeo dies; in Brooke, Painter and Shakespeare, she does not.

Architecture and Body, Scott Marble et al. (A special project of *Precis*, The Columbia Architectural Journal, Rizzoli, 1988).

Insight Guides Italy (1990).

The Real Guide – Italy (1990).

DESI DI NARDO

The Diamond Ring

Your tongue caught between your teeth
Looks like an expired clam
The limp meat, fleshy swollen
Protruding from your lips

The antique photo,
Your impeccable memory of it—
The profound bottom where the dead
Details dispersed in your murky purse

You yearned to become her— a heroine
In her freshly starched, daisy-print dress
With a view of the green, green rolling hills
A model housewife, pinning laundry in the
wind

The fluttering, snapping sheet
Was all that separated you from him
As it lifted, a million sparkles fell from your
girdle
Over Mr. Gatsby. Looking elusive on the other
end.

Desi Di Nardo's work has appeared in the LRC, Descant, Lichen, Fireweed, 13th Moon, the National Post, Poetry on the Way (TTC) in 2006, and Canada's Parliamentary Poet Laureate's "Poems of the Week." Desi is included in the University of Toronto's Library of Canadian Poets. She has worked as an on-air entertainment host/writer and English professor. Her website is: www.desidinardo.com.