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A Train Passing Over Water

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A Train Passing Over Water

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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M.A. University of Washington, 2006

May, 2007

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For Anna

For my parents

For Guy

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Abstract

A Train Passing Over Water, a novel by Margaret A. D'Amico, takes place in southern Italy between 1917 and 1920, during and just after the First World War. *Train* is the first story in a trilogy spanning four generations. It follows three years in the life of Nunzia, seventeen year-old daughter of Elido Carlucci, a peasant from a village in the region of Puglia. The family of four is separated when Elido is called to fight for the Italians at the Isonzo front in northern Italy. After her older sister dies, Nunzia becomes the primary provider for herself and her grieving mother, Filomena. Nunzia struggles to survive as a field worker and realizes her talents as a barterer and village messenger. Her story complicates when she becomes an assistant to a mysterious Bavarian anthropologist. She faces new challenges when her mother's brother returns from America to take her father's place.

Introduction

“[W]atch the fruit and flower,
for every plant is known by what it seeds.”
Purgatory, XVI

A Train Passing Over Water, a work of fiction, is a story Nunzia, a southern Italian immigrant woman, tells to her son and granddaughter after her death. They may or may not hear what she says. The woman tells her story as an explanation, a defense, a belated apology. She remembers three pivotal years in her young life in a village in southern Italy during and just after the First World War. *Train* is the first story in a trilogy spanning four generations.

The Great War had a devastating effect on the Italian countryside. The Italian army consisted primarily of peasant soldiers, most of them from the South, who fought in the front lines. Most of these peasants had no idea why they fought. Their country, in the aftermath of its unification, had forgotten them. For the aristocratic Italian Command, the illiterate, underfed infantryman was an easily expendable commodity. Many peasants faced firing squads for disobeying the orders of their commanding officers. Many deserted, dying between the lines. Some soldiers disappeared entirely, their families never seeing or hearing from them again. The South irrevocably suffered the greatest number of war casualties while receiving the least amounts of aid. Peasants left in southern villages, mostly women, children and older men, experienced uncertainty, and social inequality in a system of absentee landlords and managed estates. Hardships intensified with cycles of drought and seasonal diseases. Women rearranged what remained of their families to work.

Elido, Nunzia's father, is one of the men who went to fight in the "North" and never returned. Nunzia is one of the women who remained. Her story begins in 1917 and tells us who she was, what she did to survive, how and why she left her village and country. Histories move

horizontally, but vertically as well. After death, this immigrant woman sees in her son and granddaughter the residue of her unspoken story. She speaks the story to acknowledge what she has handed down, to break the legacy of silence, so that something will change.

Provincia di Foggia

I

Life disperses into a century like shrapnel.

I had a sister once. Before the children I raised, I had another child. When I left the village where I was born, all of my family had gone to their graves. My father, Elido, never returned from the war, but I remember the day that he left, the season that took him, and my sister, Ada, away. My words are burnt straw now. My ashes speak instead.

I woke to the sound of Ada's shallow breath. Dark set deep, the coldest month. A sliver of moonlight fell from the window across my feet. My woolen blanket slipped from my shoulder, its worn corners trailing over the stone floor. I had barely removed my clothing to sleep, the salt and musk of my skin mingling with the oil of fleece.

Only a faint smoke remained in the air. The evening fire, made of straw and thin branches with shrunken leaves, burned quickly in the hearth. Its orange glow burst into the small room where the two of us lay, giving off little heat.

Hunger is where the wolves hide. The grain harvest failed, a second year in a row. We entered the new year hungry and weak. For months my family ate dandelion and thistle, little else. My mother and I gathered the prickly plants where we could find them, in the plains, the hills and along the dirt roads. The needles stung our hands, leaving cuts that we washed with mud to erase the sting. We boiled the plants, root and leaf, with a few dried beans until they were soft enough to chew. We ate them without oil or salt. The broth we drank as wine.

Mother pressed Ada's portion of food through a sieve, mixed in her bowl with broth and crumbs of bread. She brought the soup to my sister's bed. I lifted Ada's head, her shoulders

resting on my lap, her dark hair bunched at my waist. She opened her mouth for my mother's spoon. "Swallow," my mother said. "Another." She pressed the spoon into Ada's closed lips. My sister turned her head. The warm liquid dribbled from her mouth over her chin.

Winter in our Province of Foggia brought deluge that flooded the plains. The ruined fields became malaria swamps in the spring. The illness had attached itself to Ada's ripening body, devouring her womanly traits, only her bones left to consume the remaining flesh. The fever marked her soft skin with red patches that ruptured, leaving a waxy yellow resin in their place. My mother and I placed cooling plants on her chest, a poultice to draw out the heat, bitter herbs on her tongue to reduce the poison in her blood. Ada shivered under her blanket. The heat inside drained through her pores in quick violent spasms, until she lay in a lake of sweat, urine, and phlegm. My mother ground her knees into the floor, her hands together in a tight fist. When Ada lay still, I lifted the drenched blanket that covered her, pulled the soaked nightdress over her head. Her fluids had grown cold. Her arms flailed at her sides while I washed her soiled body with water, still warm from the hearth. I passed the cloth over her damp face, over her arms and legs, between her breasts, the cave of womb at her hips, her woman's hair. I turned her to her side, the ribs and spine, pressing through the skin of her back, washing her sores, her emaciated buttock, in its crack, the little feces she had passed.

In a wooden chest beside the door, I found a clean blanket. I dressed Ada in the cotton slip she wore under her skirts, keeping the bodice loose to ease her breath. I covered her with the blanket, wrapped her feet. She slept, like a child after tears. At her brow, her skin felt cool to the touch. The fever had subsided. Around her body, a faint aura of green.

The doctor came on his monthly rounds from the nearest village, an aged man who could barely see. A surgeon, so called, he had frightened the entire region with his use of the knife. Those who could fled to Naples for their cures. Ada did not stir.

“Who sent you?” my mother asked.

“The region,” the doctor said. “A matter of public health.”

“She no longer burns,” my mother said.

The doctor ignored my mother. His hands trembled slightly at his hips as he peered into my sister’s face. He mumbled words that we could not understand. It seemed to us that he spoke in tongues, waving us away like flies. He poured a syrup into Ada’s mouth. The doctors, when they had nothing else to offer, offered this. A remedy for all ailments that cured none. My mother tried to intervene. The doctor fixed her with his gaze, as if to utter his thoughts aloud, “It is the same with all of these people, their fear of the doctor, the statesman, the priest.”

He had a smell of soured mineral about him. Some mixture spilled on his coat had begun to ferment. “You might have called me sooner,” he said.

“We asked for quinine,” my mother said. “It never came.”

The latest shipment of quinine had not arrived from Rome. Most years, the quinine came to us well into the malaria season. Children in our village, with their first words, learned to beg for quinine as they begged for bread and milk.

“I tell you that you have waited too long.”

He brought leeches the next day. My mother sent him away. Ada had nothing left for them to take. The doctor pressed a coin into my mother’s hand. He left without touching Ada. I brought my fingers to her mute pulse. Her lids lay shut, concealing her passive eyes.

Biccari was the name of the village where we lived, its hills littered with stone, one-room houses, olive trees, and vines. Our fields ran over the hills, fanning into long wide plains that ended at distant hills, a rim touching the sky, as far as we could see. In our village square, we had a fountain, a round bowl, carved from stone, with draping leaves and a stem. Its base mounted on two steps. I went to the square to take water from the fountain every day. Walls the ancients built ran around our village, some low, some came up over my head. From the terrace in the square, I looked down at the north wall. A low wall, crumbled, gone in places, it fed into the fields. The front end of Biccari, Biccari's face. At the back end of the village, the southern wall came nearly as high as my head. It ran up the hills to the west, where it ended, its edges of rough stone. Pieces of fallen wall, smashed by boulders and clubs over the years, jugged from the earth like broken teeth.

We had had better years in Biccari. These years I speak of, seemed to us our worst. On the feast day of the Resurrection, few in our village had meat, no kid born. I saw the goats slaughtered the year before. Taxes, levied by landowners, demanded a year's wages from those who owned more than one goat or sheep. We had no choice but to kill the few that we had. My father killed the female, sparing the kid that died soon after. The beasts, thin and tough, we roasted the legs. My mother made sausage with the rest. She used the bones to make broth for our greens. With little fat and no salt to preserve the meat, half of her sausage turned bad before its time. Our goats gone, we had no milk or cheese. For the feast day, we made bread with the little flour we had left, mixed with ash from the fire. Dried figs, coursing with larva, we soaked in wine.

My sister's full name was Addolorata, Our Lady of Sorrows, but her name also contained the word *adorata*, one who is adored. This latter name suited her most. Ada was easily loved and easily pleased.

There had been two boys before Ada's birth. Both had died before the age of two, Francesco from the ague that comes in winter and Eduardo from the fever that comes in spring. My sister, always a small child, developed coughs that lasted for an entire winter. The slightest scratch could make her bleed for hours. My mother kept her inside the house except for the mildest days of the year. "My Ada, no mud child." By my mother's side, my sister learned the milder duties of the home, sweeping the hearth, shelling beans, how to use a needle and thread. She had what few other children had, the time and the aptitude for school and books. An only child for the first years of her life, destined for something more than the circumstances of her birth.

After five barren years, on the day of the Annunciation to the Virgin, my mother learned that she expected another child. Mother had prayed for a strong child who would work in the fields. She had not thought also to ask for a boy. My mother named me Annunziata. My father called me Nunzia.

I was a hearty child and ran outside at every opportunity. My mother pulled me from the ground, scolding me with a spank, my hands and mouth full of dirt. I disappeared at intervals, and then came wandering back to our house with handfuls of sticks that I dropped beside the hearth. When my father came home, I ran to him. He held me on his knee, or carried me on his back to the square. Sometimes, he carried me to the woods. At night, he built little houses with pebbles, sticks, and straw. Together we were wind.

My father's work in the fields took him away for long days and weeks. I waited for him. "When will he come?" Running through the house with my child's shout until I felt her hand. We had only one window in our house, a wedge of sky, high on the wall. The sun rose and set away from the window's reach. Many nights, through the frame of that window, I watched the moon.

My father taught me to see days in the moon's shape. "A rind now, look for me when it's half."

For all but the fallow season, he left the house and returned in the dark. He sat at our table where my mother served him soup of beans in a bowl. On the longest days, I played with Ada, or pretended to help her sew, watching my father's head drift closer to the table, sleeping before he finished his simple meal. At five, I followed him one morning, down a ravine that started at a thicket not far from our house. He took this path often to work in the fields at the back end of Biccari. A cap of sun rose over the rooftops behind us before he noticed me. "You make me tired before I begin," he said. I cried as he carried me back up the steep hill.

"You're a girl and too young," he said. "Stay with your mother and sister."

The boys in the village went to work at seven or eight. Two years later, I followed my father into the fields again. He did not ask me to turn back.

My father, a peasant his whole life, became one of the few *annaroli* from our region: the overseers, the skilled workers, the men who had work nearly the year round. In our village, only my father and one other man had obtained this privilege. The rest took their chances with uncertainty, waiting daily to peddle their labor to the *massari*, the bosses who came from other regions and signed yearly contracts with the landlords to farm their great estates. The *massari* chose the *annaroli*. At the beginning of each season, they selected their workers in the village

square. Mid-season and between harvests, the workers came to the edges of the fields, hoping for work. A good *annaroli* could choose his own workers. A bad *massari* could fire at will. My father left our home with the first flowers to pull weeds from the wet camps. When malaria struck, fewer and fewer workers walked at his side. He had survived malaria as a child, but the disease had left him shrunken on one side, so that he swayed to the right when he walked and leaned, when he stood, as if perpetually ready to scythe an acre of wheat.

When the harvest season began, I followed my father over the hills and across the flat rocky lands of the Guardabassi estate. The Guardabassi family owned the lands all around Biccari. They owned the only palace in our square. My father and I made a home of the fields where the floodwaters had retreated, leaving small islands of marshland amidst the sprouting grain. My mother watched us go, the two of us, while she and Ada stayed.

“We can choose to starve,” my mother said, “or send them to die of the yellow disease.”

Malaria struck people from my village every year of my life. From infancy, my mother kept Ada from the swamps and even the streams. We knew little of it then, only that the disease followed the season of rain, in the marsh, the fountain, the still pond. I looked for signs of the disease in tears, scabs on the scalp, the shaved head, but these things came and went. Most village children like myself, ran with their bellies swollen, half clothed through the grasses and mud that surrounded our village. When the fever took hold, it brought cries, it made the body shake, weakened the limbs. Only then would our parents ask us where we had been. Mattia’s uncle had seen him at the marsh. Tulio, my cousin, who walked with my father and me to the fields, played too long at the fountain when the water was stale. Alberta, the baby, put her hands in a small puddle outside. She touched her fingers to her mouth. I had done all of these things, year after year, and still lived.

Unlike the day laborers, the *annaroli* had the use of patches of earth where they tried to grow vegetables and bits of grain. The landlords gave us the worst of their land, far from our village, strips of ground full of rocks and weeds. The land bordered the marshland that dried only at the hottest times of year. But we tended these plots when we could, and on good years we could make something grow. I had the job of tying the beans to the long stakes that we placed in the ground.

This is where I came when I led my sister into the fields for the first time, stealing the first light of day, before the harvest in early spring. I was ten, Ada fifteen.

II

The moon rose behind a black ridge. I stood at the window. Ada watched me from our bed. February left a cool dust over Biccari's upturned fields. In the pale light, it settled like fine linen over acres of the sleeping.

"The ground is too hard for walking now. In another month, it will be too soft." I said, as if the trip to the flatland had not first come from my mouth.

"We'll wait for the early grasses," Ada said, "along the thorn path and down the rock wall." She repeated what I had often told her. Through me, Ada knew every route and path to the grain fields and the lower camps. She had never been to any of them, had scarcely wandered further than the strip of earth that bordered our house. I reminded her of this.

She was quick. "How many times have I walked to the school house or past the Madonnina at the edge of town?"

"The flat roads," I said. "Besides," I looked for a way out, her forgetting or changing her mind before then, "the eggs won't come before April." I used the authority I had earned. Ada was five years older than me, but I was the stronger one.

"I'll take you with me," she said.

"Take me where?"

"To the big house, inside, to the blue wall with painted angels, to the ivory keys."

She spoke of the villa of the Guardabassi family. We called it The Big House. Donna Luisa, our landlord's daughter who married a count, never invited me inside the house on the hill. If she looked out her windows, she saw me, like many others, bent over her fields. Ada who never worked. Donna Luisa had taken a fancy to her.

"When?" I asked.

“Soon. You will see,” Ada said. “But first, you must take me to the fields.”

A secret we kept between us, to leave before dawn at the sprouting of the green blades.

The morning came. My father slept in the fields far away. Ada met me at the door.

“Mother will be angry,” I said.

Our mother was fast asleep. I thought of the panic that would take her, rising to an empty house, Ada nowhere in sight. My sister’s eyes were not the ones I knew, a somber glisten.

I looked at the ground then back at her face, her smile as spare as the opening day.

“I’m ready, Nunzia,” she said.

We walked until the sun, barely grazing the edge of the hill as we left the house, reached beyond the tallest row of trees halfway into the sky. Gripping Ada’s hand firmly, I led and she followed. A slight girl, a little taller than me, with fine bones, unlike mine. I dug my heels into the earth while Ada glided over its surface. I was sturdier than some of the village boys who helped their fathers in the fields. We descended a slope bordered by a rock wall, covered with vines, the soaked ground under my feet. I steadied myself on the wall with my free hand, so that I would not slide, taking Ada with me. Ada let out squeaks and puffs of excited breath.

We approached the flat fields, half of the land flooded by recent rains. I set her on dry ground. Ada said nothing, but I could see that she felt tired. She took my hands, eyes roving the grasses and marsh surrounding us, the tuberous end of an uprooted tree, its black, waterlogged trunk, a grid of murk and pale green reeds.

“Sit here,” I said, making a place for her. I brushed the pebbles aside and smoothed the dirt. “I have a surprise.”

I did the forbidden thing, wading into the marsh. Ada watched from her island. The cry she made stuck like a hiccup in her throat. I looked back. She put a hand over her eyes.

“Not too far,” she called. “Careful. You have to bring me back.”

“I do this all the time.”

The water, a glass slate absorbing the motion of the sky. A ripple of breeze. The grasses held me at the knees while the water passed between my legs, forcing my skirt to circle up around me and then, with its weight, to grasp my thighs so that I stumbled as I walked. I searched for water fowl, nesting on newly laid eggs. I waded until I found a duck’s nest with three translucent eggs. I took them, carrying them inside my blouse to the place where Ada sat, her dark hair a ribbon down her back. She was delighted with my discovery.

“Show me the nests,” Ada said.

I pointed to the water I had come from. “We can’t.”

I lay on the ground alongside Ada, feeling the ground, still cold, against my back. The breezes still cool, the sun felt warm on my face.

“I’ll make a fire,” I said, “and we’ll roast the eggs.”

“Perhaps we should go back,” Ada said, “Mother will begin to wonder.”

“But you wanted to come. Don’t you like it here?” I thought of our journey back up the hill. Ada had not rested for long. I would have to carry her most of the way. “If we stay a little longer,” I said, “my skirt will dry. We can tell mother that we went into town, that we found the eggs by the baker’s shed.”

“I’m cold,” she said.

We left the marsh. Ada became weary of walking soon.

“Take hold of my shoulders,” I said when we reached the stone wall. I dug my hands into the sandy rock. Vines came loose in my grip and I stumbled backwards. She reached for my shoulders, her arms around me, her chin rubbing against my cheek. I adjusted myself, leaning forward to balance her weight. The two of us began to laugh. I carried her, feet dragging, up the hill, trying not to crush the eggs secured inside the apron of my skirt.

With the hill behind us, I let Ada to the ground. She took a few stiff steps, then began to walk ahead of me, a schoolgirl’s gate. My sister’s hips were wide and softly curved from her small waist to the leanness of her thighs. We passed through the grove that led to our house. I followed close behind her, my step slowed, our secret sinking into me, a cold stone.

She reached the threshold of our home before me. My mother darted from the doorway. She put her arms around my sister. “I nearly died. Are you chilled?” She took Ada inside.

When I reached the door, my mother struck me across the face. “Are you the one who will dig her grave?” The marsh grasses still clung to my damp skirt. “Murderess,” she said.

Through the doorway, I saw Ada, seated quietly in her chair, a blanket over her shoulders. I waited for her to speak, to tell the story of the eggs we found at the baker’s shed. Instead, she picked up a wooden hoop, where she had begun an embroidered scene. Ada pulled the needle through the tight stitches. My mother’s back to her, she glanced up at me, producing a wan smile.

“When will you?” my mother said to me. She crossed the threshold, shutting the door.

My sister’s skirt had touched my wet skirt as I carried her up the hill. I undid the hook at my waist, letting my skirt fall to my ankles. I would leave it to dry in the wind. As I stepped from the offending garment, I stumbled and released what lay cupped in the apron of my blouse. The eggs fell, breaking on the ground at my feet.

My sister never followed me into the fields again. She suffered influenza every winter since her birth, a fragile stomach when the seasons changed. I never gathered eggs again to bring them to our house, though, in early spring, when I went to the fields with my father, we looked for all the eggs that we could find. We placed them over fires we made, peeled back the burnt shell. I, who waded into the dreaded swamp and gathered water from the streams, had never fallen ill. "A saint protects her, or a demon," my mother said. I knew she feared the worst.

Ada's fever returned, like the fight of her body, weakened in strength. We called on Gelsomina, the village midwife to those who would have her, a sorceress for those with other kinds of needs. My mother gave her the doctor's coin. The woman examined my sister. The little fluid that remained in Ada's body had collected, making a small pool where her gown clung to the hollow of her chest. "Give me a cloth," the sorceress said.

My mother handed her a clean rag. The sorceress held the cloth at my sister's chest. Then she dropped the rag to the floor. I saw its pink tint.

"Burn it, soon," Gelsomina said.

"Can you do something for her?" my mother asked.

Gelsomina lifted her long arm above her head. Her fingers drew a line to her navel, then across her shoulders, then into the air again. Three times she did this, then brushed her sleeves with her hands. "Your daughter's body no longer belongs to her. I cannot interfere," she said. "For you I can do something." She burnt sage and rosemary to keep the destructive spirits at bay, from attaching themselves to another living being. "Bring no dead thing into this room," she said. "Not for food, nothing freshly killed."

"But we," my mother started.

We had eaten no meat for months, not even an egg.

“Do as I say,” she said to me. “Let air and light into this room every morning. Put straw in every corner of the room. The malicious spirits linger there. *Santa Madonna*. They feed on the smell. ”

I did as Gelsomina told me. At night my mother and I prayed to our village saints, spirits in animal and human shape, and to the Madonna my grandfather had carved from the chestnut wood of our sparse forests. Ada no longer opened her eyes or lifted her head and parted lips to spoonfuls of broth, but she continued to breathe.

My mother wept. My sister, kept from the dangers and hardship of field work, had become a gaunt, almost ghostly beauty. After her sixteenth birthday, more than one man, sons of the gentry, had come to look at her with the pretext of attending to something else. My mother brought her to the threshold of our stone cottage, Ada’s oval face bright in the daylight air, her back immersed in the smoke that obscured the interior of our one room house. One of the stricken nobles had given Ada an embroidered white shawl that she wore when she stood at the door. The villagers, some in admiration, some with envy, began to call her *la sposa*. The fine white cloth delivered to Ada the succor of grace and to my mother the injury of hope.

Ada’s sickness came with the news of the war. Secretly I asked myself if the vermin had festered beneath the skin in the two years since our foolish journey to the fields. Had my father or I carried the disease with us when we returned from our work? Did a villager cast a spell upon us to punish us for some unknown crime? We never spoke of it out loud, but silently my mother accused me and I accused myself.

Ada's bed was nearest the fire, a wooden cot, made specially for her, laid with straw and a blanket of woven fleece. Her face, a moist petal in the flame. I fed the fire its last branches before closing my eyes. Awakened and chilled in the night, I heard no sounds from the corner where my mother slept upright on a chair, only the soft measured hissing from my sister's bed. The moonlight bathed the my legs, wrapped in dark wool. I watched as the light passed from the edge of my bed and retreated into a small triangle draped over the window's ledge. The night became as silent as it was dark and I began to sleep again. My own breath I heard, alone, breathing me to sleep.

III

I did not dig my sister's grave.

My father left to fight in the North, as did all the able bodied men in the barren lands, just before Ada died. Though the two events happened, one so close to the other, I remember them separately in my mind. The men talked beneath the office of the mayor, jacket collars pulled up at the neck, caps lowered on their heads. Wind knocked into the square, dragging an iron chair. Like other men of our village, my father could not read. But they all learned to be cautious of the large black print, the list of names pasted to the prefecture walls. These black letters, whatever they said, hunted you down, came to your door. Better to know, better to find out soon. Gian Riccardo, a man from our village, he could read. For all who stood there, he read the names out loud.

I remembered the summer before, the well dressed men of the gentry, relatives of the Guardabassi clan, down from their winter houses in Naples, sat at outdoor tables set especially for them, or stood on the terraces of that family's palace, above the prefecture with their cigars and drinks. The scent of their world wafted through our square with the smoke as we villagers came and went. "They're back again," we whispered. "His troubles at the bank, he says. He whines and whines. If I had his. There he goes, talking about Garibaldi again." The reek and reassurance of their faceless voices, as rich as the purses they brought with them. Their words mattered little to us, their laughter, their boasting, their little spats. Their talk, a warm liquid passed between them. With the heat of the summer days, we waited for that liquid to boil over at any time, spill over us.

They spoke of *la guerra* at the borders up north over their summer meals. "Let the northerners defend the Trentino."

“What happens to the country happens to us. If we have allies, we must defend them.”

“What have the Hapsburgs ever done for us? Let them rot. Soon they’ll be coming down to us, and our children will grow up speaking a foreign tongue.”

“Would that be so terrible? They might do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Besides, my wife’s father is the son of an Austrian baron.”

We thought of the war as something that belonged to them, to the gentry, to Rome, like a house or a horse you might buy or sell. “What concern of ours? The north never concerns itself with us,” our people said.

“If they start it up with one another, let them keep it there? I have my little battles every day.” Carlino. He held the job of *annaroli* with my father. My father’s good companion, though a different sort.

“You need a wife,” my father said. “To have a few less. Look at them up there, waving their hands, talking about the country. These fields around Biccari, what else have I seen? When we have a sick child, they can’t be bothered. When Rome wants something from us, she comes around. Then it’s The Country, this banner of red and green.”

“I take my kisses where I can get them. For that I don’t lack,” Carlino said. “Do for the north, for the country. They’d all of them just as soon sever our heads.”

The gentry and the outsiders from Rome called us the forest people, people of the Black Madonna and the black cross. The statues we whittled from dark wood turned black from the smoke of our fires. The priests they sent came to our houses to see that mothers washed their newborn babies. “Disgusting thing,” one of them said. “She writhes like a little worm pulled from the dirt.”

We worked the land of the gentry, grateful to stay alive, to keep our hands in the soil. The farmers, the landlords, they drew from us as we grew into them, fed ourselves with their dirt. They asked for yearly tributes in goods, taxes and tithes. “We owe it to them. Thank you,” we said. Rome seemed like a churning machine, a fist. Rome blocked medicines, sent doctors who did not cure. Sent priests as well, some good, some bad. Don Palmisano, a kindly man, taught at our school the year or two before my father left. “All this talk of Garibaldi,” he said. “The Country unified around you, then set you aside.”

The Guardabassi could decide if we ate or did not eat. As for the forces we could not see, some said God, others Rome.

I stood with the villagers in the square. From the woods, I heard a gunshot. It silenced the rustle in the trees. Another shot, that crisp, dry sound, sucking air. Then a man’s cry. My father’s voice. I ran in the direction of the woods, to see that he was not harmed.

My father emerged from the forest bog, his dark boots covered with grey mud, dried in clusters over his coat and hands. His forehead marked with streaks of sweat. I knew that they had gone to hunt rabbits or hare in the thick bramble and the damp ground. My father shook his head. Vasco, a hunting companion of his, held a hand at my father’s back. Villagers came behind me. The hunters, seeing us, told their story with hollow eyes and toothless grins. The men huddled together. I stayed behind, cocking my ear to catch what they said. My father had tripped over a root, the gun firing as he fell. The shot left a burn in his sleeve. The story brought laughter, even to me, though laughter hardly replaced a good meal. My father swayed, his usual gate, walking slowly to the square. The hunters all carried guns or axes and nothing else in their hands, with the exception of one man, Carlino, who held a hare by its limp neck.

“You shame us all,” Vasco said.

“Lend me your knife,” Carlino said to my father.

“I lost it in the mud.”

“Liar.”

Carlino had many skills. A good *annarole*, he also dug graves for our dead. He acted as village messenger, which gave him a status that most of us did not share. Once or twice a year he traveled on mule from one town to another carrying packages and letters, mostly for the town government and the gentry, avoiding the affairs of the police. As a hunter, he had success when others failed. He brought game home, rabbits, birds, the occasional boar, in the leanest and coldest of times. When the village peasantry lost its hunting rights on less than a hectare of forested land, Carlino, along with my father, led a group. They stood at the forest confines with guns, mattocks and shovels in their hands. The gentry restored the hunting rights. But soon after, they hired sentries to enforce the laws of trespass.

Carlino came when we spotted a wolf near the village, which happened at times when food was most scarce. He made wine with roots and berries and spent the spring and summer evenings in the village square where he stood on top of the fountain, holding a lute-like instrument with four strings. He strummed and sang with his head held back, hooting at the evening sky.

My father spat onto the ground. “I swallowed some mud.”

“Dumb luck,” Carlino said. He took my father’s knife.

He skinned the hare there in the piazza, while we made our fire over the stones.

My father and other village men had two days to prepare before marching to the ice of the north. Ada, too sick then to say goodbye or even to comprehend that her father was leaving, placed her small fingers between his, already dreaming as he crouched over her bed. My father took his coat and a small portion of bread wrapped in cloth. He kissed my mother and me once on each cheek before stepping from the house.

I followed him outside. “When will I see you?”

“You’re older now,” he said.

The grave digger made a show of digging his own grave before he went to his uncertain future in the north. He offered, for practical reasons, not wishing to tempt fate, to dig as many graves as he could in a day. None of the men accepted Carlino’s offer and so the skilled man stopped after digging two new graves, one for himself, when the time came, and one for the next person called, whomever that might be.

I watched the two of them walk away. Carlino looked up at the sky. “I dare you,” he said. He put his arm over my father’s shoulder. “If I’m lucky, the winds and the rains will fill the ditches again before I return.”

My mother and I wrapped Ada in freshly washed cloths, the fingers of her hands curled into her palms. She held them this way the day that she offered me my first confected sweet. We sat beside her, my mother weeping, until the procession of deserted women and one priest came to take her away.

Gelsomina, Minerva, a cousin of my mother’s, and others from the village walked with us. We buried my sister in a small grove that lay within the village at the top of the hill. I had walked there early, the sun rising behind the mountain crest. Threads of light trickled over the

names engraved into the memorial stones, onto the fresh earth and the many crosses made of sticks and dried garlands, weighted with pendants and beads. We used one of the two empty graves. The fresh hollow, cool and ready. I laid the earth with straw, then, with the help of two others, lowered Ada's body. My mother kneeled, her head sinking to the ground. A she-wolf she became then, beating at her ears to silence her own sound. I took hold of her hands, thinking that she would harm herself.

Minerva pulled me away from her. She took me aside, whispering in my ear: "Leave her. She must. The child lived for years, gave her purpose, nourished her dreams. Now this. Ada was such a favorite of hers."

Ada had burrowed too deeply within me. I could not release her with tears. My sister's skin had the unnatural white that death brings, a dull silver, tinted with blue. I laid the shroud over Ada and knelt beside my mother before joining the others to cover my sister with handfuls of dirt.

IV

My father left Biccari with the other men, some by mule cart, some by foot. They took their papers in the square, signed their names, those who could, or made their Xs. The dirt stained hands on that wooden table. My father folded the paper and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. His eyes had the look of obsidian. “Those papers go with you. Have them on you at all times, whatever else,” the man in the uniform said.

Carlino to my father: “I prefer not to know what I just signed.”

My father: “Who needs to read to know.”

We had no word in the village until I saw Don Palmisano, days later, returning from an errand in Benevento. He told us the conscripted men all boarded a train there, an iron thing that extended along the tracks like an endless spine.

“How many?”

“Many, from this village and others nearby. A sad lot, I’m sorry to say, not a fat one in the bunch. I saw a few familiar faces, Elido Carlucci and Carlino Lombardi among them. We shook hands. Some of those men grinned as if they headed to a banquet. ‘They’ll feed us up there, at least,’ one said.”

“Do you think it’s true?” one of our women said. “They’ll feed them and give them the proper clothes. They’ll have money to send home?”

“All that. One hopes,” Don Palmisano said.

News of the men from Biccari came late. The white manifestos, newly fastened to the walls of the town square, brought nothing good. At best, they brought uncertainty. Most from our village could not read the list of names, so the deputy prefect came, and after each name, read the status of each man, “dead... dead.... dead.”

Nearly a year after my father left, Don Palmisano came to our door. “I thought it should come from me. *Disperso*,” he read.

“My husband lost?” my mother said.

“Missing in action,” the priest said. “Presumed dead.”

“Now you tell me he’s dead?”

“I cannot tell you for certain, either way. My condolences signora.”

The dual message bled slowly into my mother’s face. “How can I live with this?” My mother pressed her palm to her brow. She rubbed the creases of her tired face. “They take them up there then leave them, to go off wandering?”

“In a war, signora....”

She drew her hand along the wooden beam at the doorway. It left splinters in the skin she didn’t seem to see. She gave the priest an unnatural smile. “A grown man will surely find a way to return. All these months I’ve had no word, received none of his pay.”

“For this, you might visit the prefecture,” Don Palmisano suggested.

I spoke for the first time since the priest’s news. “Mother, lost is not dead.”

Another thought distilled in her face. “They’ll bring him home if he is dead?”

Don Palmisano took my mother by the arm, glancing at me as we entered the house. “If they find him,” he said.

“And for the families, of soldiers killed at war. They’ll give a stipend, compensation. Something. True?” We sat in silence in the stone cold room. My mother’s red, swollen fingers clasped at her wrists. Her hands shook. “They tell us nothing. Such torture,” my mother said.

“A torture, without a doubt,” the priest said. We had nothing to offer him and he could do little for us.

Don Palmisano returned a week later to say goodbye to us. “Any news yet?”

“We’ve had none,” I said.

“They called me to a new position up there. Not that I want it.”

“In Benevento?”

“Someplace around there,” he said. “How is she?”

“Not so well,” I said. Filomena swept at the hearth. She did not come to greet Don Palmisano.

“The messenger’s fate,” he said. I saw him to the door. He bent his head, close to my ear. “Carlino the grave digger is also missing. They were always good friends, those two. If they’ve managed to stay alive, they risk capture from either side. It does not go well for them.”

We made a cross with sticks, wrapped in black cloth, and nailed it over the threshold of our house. The cross hung next to three others, now weather worn and faded. I kept a shirt of my father’s inside our clothing chest. My mother and I kept to our confines for the next days. We took inventory of our belongings, finding little we could sell. My father’s hunting rifle.

“I could learn to shoot,” I said.

“Find someone to buy it,” she said.

“And if he returns?” I hid the rifle under my bed.

My mother found the rifle and left the house to bargain with other widows for stores of legumes and grain. They had little to share among them. She came back with a small sack of ground *cecci*, chickpea flour, and a handful of beans. “That gun never served him,” she said.

May rains made swamps of the camps. We felt our hunger. On good days, we had enough beans and chicory to make a soup. I went to the woods to gather mushrooms and asparagus. On my hands and knees I looked for those green stalks under oaks and between the fronds of fern.

The mushrooms curled and released their juices as we roasted them. We ate them without bread, oil or salt. They tasted of earth.

In mid June, we heard the call for the first field workers. I slept outside the Guardabassi estate the night before the *massari* came. In the morning the *massari* had gone. They sent their *annaroli* to make their choices, many of us who waited women and older men. The new *annaroli* remembered my face. He worked with my father for a couple of years. “You can come with us there,” he pointed to the gold hills far away, the grain fields where my father and I worked and lived during the hottest months. I wanted to go, but I feared leaving my mother so soon for work that took me more than a day’s distance away. I asked him for another arrangement.

“Perhaps later in the season I could go that far,” I said. “But for now.”

“You don’t ask much do you?” he said. “These other peasants are happy with anything they get. Talk to that *annaroli* over there, he might have work behind the estate. I take the far fields this year, near the Pinto grounds, and the beets just down there.”

I did not know the *annaroli* he pointed to, they had hired him from another town. I had better chances with a man who knew my father. “I can do the beets,” I said.

“You’re lucky a few of our crops have come through. The beets pay less though.” He sent me to the harvest at the bottom of the hill.

I arrived at the fields before dawn. With the others, I pulled sugar beets from the ground, wrestling with their long roots until sunset. The *annaroli*, Caglione, came over. “The *massari* don’t give you your first wage until the end of July. After that, we plough. If you keep working with us, we’ll pay you the rest at the end of August, or in September, when you’ve finished your

work.” With every day of work they gave us each half a kilo of bread. I ate half of that portion and brought the rest home to Filomena.

My first wage came in July. They paid me less than the men, though I worked as hard as they. When I worked with my father, I helped him. I took no pay. But I knew, from my years of planting and harvesting, that I had always done my share. “Rules are rules,” Caglione said. “I don’t make them. Be grateful for this much.”

I brought the wages home to my mother, with an extra half kilo of bread Caglione had given me. “Is that all you got?” she said. “We have to think of more than the warm season. We have nothing stored. We need *fave* and *cecci*, flour for bread.” She asked me if I could do something more.

With the other peasants I made piles of sugar beets, leaving none in the ground. The *massari* called the *annaroli* to the edge of the Guardabassi estate, where the orchards ended and the wheat began. If they hired us, we had another two weeks of scything to look forward to, then the ploughing, before our second wages came. The orchards were thick with fig and lemon trees. Olive trees lined the hill that led to the Guardabassi house, where I came with Ada, on the mule cart, only to wait for her outside. So many came, hoping to work in the Guardabassi fields. The big house I had thought a castle as a child, with its tall tower to one side, looked vacant on the hill, as if no one lived there. Our padrone, Don Guardabassi lived in Naples most of the year. I heard that he had died.

“Who lives there now?” I asked a girl from our village. The girl shook her head. A road separated the house from the orchards and fields. A road for horses and carts. The workers from Biccari and nearby towns used the byways that bordered the fields. I knew my way through these

narrow paths even when the wheat reached the top of my head. Once or twice, I noticed a horse and rider on the road above. I saw no lights in the house, even at dusk.

Caglione saw me watching the house. “Keep your nose where it belongs,” he yelled. He acted gruffly with workers I saw, while my father and Carlino earned respect in a different way. But for an *annaroli*, Caglione was not one of the worst. Like many, he came from another region, far away from Biccari. When our men left, he had reason to stay. He looked a few years younger than my father, a heavier man with a big chest. I wondered how he had escaped the same fate as the ones who went to fight up north. He walked the fields back and forth, taking to his new role. He used one of the Guardabassi horses to go to the far field, coming back once or twice to check on us in the same day. “Don’t get lazy,” he said. “And don’t think I can’t be in two places at once.” He lifted his whip and snapped it close to a worker who had stopped to take a rest.

“You won’t use that thing,” I said. I had no fear of him.

Scything began the next day. The wheat fields were vast. The *annaroli* wound through the workers who came from three villages surrounding the estate, mothers with children, white haired men. Most of them went home with no work. Caglione chose me and a few of the beet gatherers to finish that task. “We head out tonight, a three hour walk from here. Work starts at sunrise tomorrow. Get yourselves ready,” he said.

We made a line for bread. On this day, we received a full loaf, a kilo for each of us.

I took my bread from Caglione’s hands, glancing up at the big house behind him. “There’s a son in Naples,” he said. “Another one up there, in the north.” He pointed behind him, then placed his thumb on the tip of my nose, a gesture my father once made. I felt the weight of the round loaf on the top of my head. The tall, dry reeds concealed me. I turned my head to look

once more at the big house, awash in pink, warmed by the setting sun. I heard Caglione shouting at some poor peasant in the distance. I had to get the bread home to my mother, grab a few things, tell her that for many days, more than a week, I would work in the fields far away. The kilo of bread would appease her. I lowered my head, keeping my eyes on the ground as I walked.

I carried my father's scythe to the far fields. The night breeze August brings. How long I stayed? Time fell from the sky, turned to water at midday. The earth hardened and cracked under the sun, a hint of *scirocco* wind in the air. Priests said the wind followed the unforgiven. It brought heat and blight. That black dust. "Work faster," Caglione yelled. "The air has a scent on it. We'll clean this field and go to the next."

Eat or be eaten. An onion, eaten raw, will cleanse you of your sins. I found no onions in the ground.

We women wore black rosaries around our necks and a picture of Santo Stefano to guard from the snakes. Widows brought their children, who scrambled about or slept beneath olive trees lining the hills. We worked hard to keep the pace, against the flies, before the wind played its tricks, altered things in a bad way. From one day to the next, hard wheat turned to powder in the hand.

When we finished the first field, we moved on to the next, further away. Long into dark I lay in the fields with the others to sleep, we women to one side, the men to the other. "Nothing but the old ones left," the women whispered. "More tired than us. Our *annaroli*, he sleeps so peacefully, among so many women."

After the second field, I took my wages at last. I brought the wages to Filomena. “So little?” she said, not counting the cost in bread. A swarm of grey gnats circled her in the morning light.

Back I went into the fields. The wind had stilled and left us with only heat, saving one last harvest. The fields almost raw now, except for the trees and vines that climbed the terraced hills once forested with chestnut, their roots embedded in clay and rock. The grasses, the grain, fickle plants, spiteful enough to wrestle the ground from its sleep. We would see them again. If the trees died, we knew that something died in the earth.

Hectars of gold strands, bleached white. The Guardabassi fields were the ocean I had never seen, waves unfurling backward, stilled in blue.

In the last of the fields, our scythes entered the noonday skies, half halos, slicing through stalks of maize and wheat. Faster and faster we worked. Scorched chaff filled the air and attached itself to our skin. We worked against the sun, the flies that bit.

At night we spread blankets over the floor of a roofless cottage for a few hours of sleep. We lay over cool stones, the sharp blades of dried grass that came up through the cracks. “See what I’ve got.” Our bronzed faces sucked from a reserve of stolen plums, down to the pit.

Summer, nearing its end, released the day in gaseous sweeps of magenta and orange, laced with a poisonous green, the color of bile. We bound rolls of hay, leaving them across the shaved, boundaried land.

After hours in the fields, you imagine yourself an insect, a seed in the breeze. Your body labors but you have left it and watch yourself with a bird’s eye, brittle and parched. Each drop of water, the day beginning again. The dry kernel between the teeth. Heaven, that big sky, held me to the ground.

Earth leaches the grit and tissues of toil, grease from the marrow of your bones. What remains on the surface is salt.

V

With the money I earned, my mother and I bought three bushels of *cecci*, two of *fave*, and two sacks of flour. We managed to save a small amount. If Caglione thought I did well, I could still count on a week or two of ploughing, then sowing in October. I hoped he would take me for the olive harvest at the end of the month. After the pressing, they paid the peasants in oil. I would take my portion of that. Filomena could not see what we had earned, only what we still did not have. The legumes would last us until spring. Weevils might eat the flour. Then what would we do? She set her mind on a goat.

“Remember the goats that died,” I said. “We have no money to pay the tax.”

“One goat then.”

“With no kid? And when it’s killed?”

A new manner of hers, to indulge these fantasies. Before my father left, we had less than we had now. The crops could fail again she said. Then we would be glad to have a goat.

I took my share of water at the well in the center of town and carried it back home. When Filomena lay down for her afternoon rest, I went to the back of the house, unfastened my skirt and blouse. There I poured the cool water over myself, a summer’s dirt trickling in brown streams over my underclothes, already stained and yellowed from the years, the hours under the sun. I rinsed my hair and shook the dirt from my scalp until I felt the blood rise to my head. I opened my bodice, letting the water cover my chest. The water ran between my breasts, pooling at the place where my underskirt held my waist, soaking the cloth around my legs. I emptied my pitcher. Clear water ran with the dirt from my limbs.

Filomena still slept when I entered the house and opened the oak chest. I took from it a clean dress and a white shawl. Ada's dress. Ada's shawl.

My body had always been larger than hers, though I was the younger one. My sister had the weight of a bird. When she walked, she seemed to float. With the summer's work, I had a sturdy but lean build. I lifted the dress over my head and worked at the hooks in the back. Clothing flowed from Ada, trailed at her feet. I felt the seams of her dress at my shoulders and sides. It smelled of the laurel we placed in the chest. I put the white shawl over my head and left the house. I knew my way to the road that led to the Guardabassi estate.

I remembered the mother of the two sons, Donna Luisa, but she would not know me. Her father, a landowner from our region, had married her well, to a noble from Naples. When he died, her husband, Don Guardabassi, took all of her father's lands. They lived most of the year in Naples. The younger son fancied my sister, waited like a faithful dog outside our cottage door. His black hair the same as Ada's, rare in our region. It shone blue in the sun. My hair, like my mother's, the color of the chestnut tree. Paolo Guardabassi gave Ada the shawl that I now wore. I watched behind the doorway when he came.

I had informed myself, asking two peasants who worked for the family for many years. "Donna Luisa, alive?" I said, "One never sees a sign."

"She prefers it that way. God knows she never cared much for any of us."

"Don Guardabassi and his ladies. The high life in Naples. I think it never agreed with her. Now he's gone, she's returned home."

"To live alone in that big house?"

"With the gentry, one never knows."

Donna Luisa paid a boy to run her errands, I learned, but he left her to work in the fields.

Though people always said it, I learned firsthand that she had no love for those of us from the town. Ada and I rode in a mulecart to Donna Luisa's orchards, the summer before my sister died. The old woman yelled from her window. "Who gave you permission to come here?"

"Looking for berries," I said, knowing it was a good month before the berries came. Ada and I, covered in dust and beads of sweat. What a thirst we had. Donna Luisa pointed to a trough near the shed.

"Drink there," she said.

I thanked the *padrona*. We could wet our faces at least.

"Give me a glass, and fresh water," Ada said.

The old woman leaned from her second story window, watching for who might pass. "What do you want? Who do you belong to? Tell me your name."

"Annunziata," I said. "From the Carlucci, if you know them."

"Are you the peasant girl who bewitched my poor son?"

"No. That was not me," I said.

"He gave you that scarf didn't he? So finely woven and stitched."

"Signora no. He gave the scarf to my sister who died."

"You bring a curse to me!" The old woman began to close the shutters of her window, turning away.

"Wait, Signora," I called up to her. "You need assistance, I understand."

The woman came back to her window:

"They took Paolo to the north as well, the ingrates. My husband dead. Who watches after me now?"

“Signora I cannot help you with that but I have worked hard, many summers in the fields. The errand that you need?”

“Have you had your Holy Communion?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. I could not remember if I had.

“Bread,” she said at last. “Get me some bread. My man left and I have to find another. And tomorrow. Tomorrow, I want to send a letter, to Rome. Find a mule and a man, any man, who can do this for me.”

Donna Luisa dropped coins from the second story window of her large house. Two coins made enough for two loaves of bread, and another coin, enough to entice a page. We had one baker in the region, half a day’s walk to the next town. They said that he never lacked flour. He made bread for the gentry, which his sons transported by mule. The rest he traded for goods. If he had gone to the north like the others, his wife would certainly continue in his place, with so many to feed.

I walked along the road that I had traveled once before with my father when he traded oil from the Guardabassi for the rifle he used to hunt. The long distance we carried those heavy jugs. Six ducks flew under a single cloud in the sky. “If I had shot for that,” he said. My father never really learned to shoot. Once in awhile, when we went to look for eggs at the marsh, he brought out a duck with his bare hands.

The baker’s wife tended the store. Her cheeks glowed, red from the fire, as she slid unbaked loaves from an iron pan into an oven of bricks.

Two of the baker’s sons had gone with him to the north. Another two stayed behind, one still suckling, the other, the beginnings of a man.

“The girl needs a favor,” the baker’s wife said.

“Do you still possess a mule? Can you find your way to Benevento?” I said to the oldest boy.

“Benevento is more than two days away,” his mother said. “How much will you pay?”.

I gave the woman two of Donna Luisa’s coins and appealed to her to lower the price of the bread.

One month later, a message arrived for Donna Luisa from Rome. The news had surely been good because Donna Luisa called on me again and again.

“Say, you’ve got something going,” Minerva said when I saw her in the square. “That man who stays above the prefecture, he’s always looking for somebody to bring his morning water and paper to him.”

I listened to the voices: “Signora Troiese has the bad leg, I hear. She could use a hand once in awhile.” The whispers: “I can’t get that little tincture from the sorceress unless I go to her.”

Before long I became the village messenger, the go-between, the ambassador of potions and goods. People needing favors threw small coins from balconies. Others pressed them secretly into my hands. I never mentioned a wage, but on the occasion that some token remained from a purchase or payment, I kept what remained. I made an art of it after awhile, negotiating well on behalf of my patrons, with such phrases as: “Signora would be displeased, such a cost,” or, “This tincture cannot be acquired with such a meager sum.” The difference gained became my price.

Those who had money found ways to spend it, waiting for news of their husbands and sons. I traveled in between them, a messenger thief, the bit of reward I got for my efforts, like fine silt, gradually filling the pockets of my skirt.

VI

Ada came to me in a dream at night, rose colored, her hair a dark shroud. My father came to me during the day. I felt his presence on narrow paths and along hillsides. His voice came from the trees. Nuna, he teased.

I neared the woods. "Is that you?"

The branches pushed me back.

People of the village, and one within the walls of our house, believed that my father had died with the rest somewhere in the north. I did not let myself believe that he still lived, but unlike the damaged men who returned to the village, I could not imagine him dead. My *babbi*, who would swing with one arm from the branch of an olive tree to amuse me after a day of work, who scooped new life from streams after the rains, tadpoles squirming in his hand, a black beetle with transparent green wings, plucked from stalks of wheat.

I wanted to believe that I would see him again, like a new blade pushing itself through broken earth after a season of drought. Hectars of green stalks returned to fields once blackened by fire. The wind from the south could suck the earth up into the clouds and let it down again in sticky pellets of brown rain, but the *scirocco* destroys everything in its path. If my father returned, he would be a different man.

At first, I tried to learn something from the men in the square. They came to sit in the bar when it rained. In good weather, or when they had no money to spend, they sat outside at the round iron tables, on the cobblestoned terrace of our square, with its waist-high wall the Guardabassi had built. From the terrace, I could look down at the ruined wall of the ancients, see

the fields as far as they went, the sun rising over the hill, the Pinto estate that bordered the Guardabassi lands.

We had nearly grown accustomed to a village without men. One by one, the few who returned, found their way back to the square.

“Forget about it,” one of the returned men said to me when I asked him if he knew anything about my father’s fate. “If I had found the courage I would have done the same.”

I had to wait to find out what he meant.

Of sixty men who left the village of Biccari for the mountains in the north, only eight returned. Of these eight, one remained completely intact. Paolo Guardabassi, Donna Luisa’s youngest son, my sister’s former suitor. The army had removed him from the front lines, I learned from the men in the square, at his mother’s behest. “How do you suppose that one spent his time up there? Pouring wine for his general and dispatching messages.”

“Must have tired him, running around like that.”

The others returned with pieces missing, fingers and hands, feet and legs, eyes and ears. A man who once greeted you with a smile rarely opened his mouth. They exchanged short greetings with one another, disfigured but still alive:

“Where did it happen?”

“Friuli... Caporetto... Trentino.”

Missing in action, I learned, could mean one of two things: the enemy had captured my father and taken him to the other side, killed or imprisoned him, or, he had run, a deserter and, who knew, died in the mountains from hunger and cold. We waited long to hear that the government guaranteed a small pension to returned veterans, and wives. Wives and families of the dead.

The returned men, if they knew something of my father, did not dare risk what they had to tell what they knew. I understood something from the way they turned from me.

“I don’t remember the last time I saw him. Piso, was he with you?”

“Leave it alone. You are but a girl after all,” Gian Riccardo whispered. “What could you do?”

Gian Riccardo had taken an injury to the left leg. He walked with a limp, his arm on the same side, damaged too. At the hospital, they cut a nerve. It left him so he could only lift the arm out a few inches from his hip. Even before the war, he had a twitch that kept the lid half closed over one of his eyes. After his return, he grew a mustache that he tinted with dark oil. With the hand he could use, he trimmed it every day, a little differently on each side.

I had labored with these men, now maimed and half blind, and with some of their children in the fields. My father and Carlino Lombardi had been their overseers, their *annaroli*. Without much effort, I could read the thoughts: We stayed and fought, while they. Why he and not me? Safe and sound, feasting somewhere; if you ask me, they deserved what they got.

Among us, jealousies came and went. My father was a gentle man, but Carlino, though a peasant and nothing more, showed the gentry and the *massari* that he was not a man to cross. He hunted freely in the woods, forbidden to us. The woods belonged to nobody, he said. He cut through their wires, tied them high in the tall pine, a dead hare, dangling by its feet. Carlino tempted fate, my father said. Some said he was a violent man. It came to a standoff between Carlino and the Guardabassi one time. The master and his clan followed my father’s friend into the woods with their dogs and horns. Carlino perched high on a big branch, pointing his gun down through the leaves.

Before the dry years came, my father and Carlino had run of the work of twenty hectares. Unlike the *massari* and the foreign *annaroli*, they never wielded a whip. They worked alongside the day laborers, plowing earth, sowing, and reaping at harvest time. The day laborers knew that with them, if they worked well each season, they could return the next year.

My father, for his part, had ways of showing his loyalties. If the landlords paid wages, they never paid much. Before the war came, the day laborers often worked for little more than their daily meals. They ate rations of bread twice a day, and at night, *acquasale* from a large pot, a concoction of boiled water, salt, a little olive oil, sometimes a few weeds. They worked from the stirrings of dawn until nightfall.

As the night set in and the water in the black pots began to boil, my father strolled by the places where the men rested. He always found something more to put in a pot, beans from his own plot, the leg bone of a sheep, a rind of pecorino cheese. He knew where to find these things, picked over and discarded by the *massari*, but still, with plenty left to give.

I hoped that the returned veterans remembered this about my father and Carlino, in spite of any other differences they may have had. If my father had deserted and lived, he was an enemy of the state. Perhaps to protect him, they could not tell me if they had guessed where he might have gone.

“Was he with you in Caporetto?” I asked Gian Riccardo.

“Caporetto, Isonzo,” he said. “What do you care child? It’s all the same.”

For eight years before the war I had worked with my father in the fields. All those years, the only girl. I had no reason to fear.

I remember in a drought year how we had worked under the high sun, the earth so dry the surviving wheat had barely taken root. The pale yellow strands, some of them barren. We pulled them from the ground with our bare hands. I had often cut myself, stepping through the sharp grasses and so did not stop for the streak of blood on my lower leg.

The earth trembled with heat, waves of dark pools in the fields. The tremor moved through me. I felt the warm rush along my thigh, the thin red stream nearly dry as it reached my ankle and the inner arch of my foot. My fingers traced, in backward course, to the place where the blood began. I wore an undergarment beneath my skirt, something I rarely removed. It was not our custom to wear anything more. I took my hand from beneath my skirts. Dark red filled my palm.

My father walked from the patch where he worked nearby. At the sight of my blood, he ran to me and lifted me from the ground to carry me to a bald rocky patch where an oak stood. Spring rains often made a river of this strip of land. My father set me down against the oak. He looked but found no cut on me. His chuckle after that, a long breath. He held his palm between my shoulder blades. "It will end in a few days," he said.

Babbi brought me enough water to drink and to rinse my hands. He told me to stay at the oak, that I could not work for the rest of the day. Blood flowed between my thighs. Not knowing what else to do, I lifted my skirts away from me. My essence trickled over the roots of the oak, pooling before it soaked into the hard earth. My haunches strong. My head light. The weeping I desired came out with the blood. I felt the pressure in my hips. I thought of the howl my mother made when blood flowed from Ada's nose, as it often did, the little whispers between my sister and my mother at home. Ada disappearing with her little pieces of cloth behind the house. The two of them, so close. The things that happened between them never included me.

The next morning, I began to work again. We remained three more days in those fields before walking back to our village. We had no water for washing, so I rubbed my legs with dirt at the end of each day. I tied knots in my underskirt so that it hugged my legs. At home, my mother said nothing about it. Ada took me aside. She showed me her pieces of cloth, how she tied and fastened them at the waist. I learned to count the days, the moon that came and went. I searched in the chest among the items my mother set aside for mending. When the blood came, under my skirts I wore the clothes of a man.

VII

“Carlucci,” my mother yelled, at the clerk and then at the deputy of police who read a journal at his desk, “Elido Carlucci. You played cards with him in the square!”

The office, on the first floor of the prefecture, had the smell of all constrained, airless spaces, the slit of a window opaque with the smear of insect carcasses.

“Things have changed,” the deputy said, and he spoke the truth. Only a great war could dislodge the memory of an honest working man and make a drunkard, a failed peasant, the deputy of police.

The war’s end brought no further news of my father. My mother decided to bury my father formally. She placed a cross for him beside Ada’s grave, next to the graves of my two brothers who died early in their lives. The new priest, Furtello, came and recited his prayers. The next day we stood at the offices of the prefecture and the police. We had come to see about the pension due to the widows of deceased soldiers. Furtello had set my mother on this path of delusion. “Signora,” he said, “his soul rests in God’s hands. Your future may lie in the papers you sign in that room.”

I only guessed what this visit to the bureau would reveal about my father’s circumstances. From “Missing, presumed dead,” he had become simply “Status unknown.” The prefect and the police, with orders no doubt from Rome, had already decided how to treat such cases.

“So many soldiers have deserted in the north,” the deputy said, “turned renegade and vanished into the hills. Traitors, understand? We can give you no assistance until the state has evidence that Signor Carlucci is not one of these.”

“You have papers that say he is?” my mother said.

“Signora, with papers, we had already made our case.”

“If they captured him,” I began.

“His name doesn’t appear on any list of captured men.”

“On what list then?” my mother asked.

The deputy put his hand to his mouth. “As yet, signora, we have no list for him. If anything changes.” The deputy leafed through a few pieces of paper then went back to his desk, taking up the newspaper he had left there. He looked up at his clerk who sat in a chair opposite his desk. That one got to his feet and left the office then. When the deputy saw that we still stood there, he pointed to the door with his thumb.

“What happens to traitors?” I asked at the door.

“You have a nerve to ask that,” the deputy said. He lifted his arm so that I saw the back of his hand. “I told you what we know.” He brushed a dead fly from his desk. “If you insist on pursuing the matter.... Things may come to light. You know how people react to such things. They think of their own sacrifices. I would leave well enough alone.”

The clerk returned with a round tray that held two small glasses of coffee. He brushed my shoulder as we left.

“If you hear something,” my mother said.

The deputy stirred his coffee. “Don’t bother coming here again.”

On the steps outside, my mother gave me a feeble slap on the behind. “Why did you ask him that? Now see what you did.”

Was he? A traitor. *Tradere* had two meanings for us, deliver and betray. Why the latter meaning for my father who never chose to go? I felt hatred for the man at the desk.

“How will we live?” my mother asked, a question she repeated many times in a day.

“As we have done Mother,” I said.

Our visit had surely damaged our situation. If the Guardabassi were to hear that my father’s name appeared on a list of suspected traitors, what would they do?

I never told my mother about my savings, leftover change from all the errands I ran for Donna Luisa. Nothing I gave her could satisfy the want in those hands. Instead, I brought home small tokens from my brief journeys, wedges of cheese and bread from the baker. The dregs from liters of oil, left for empty outside the matron’s door. I drained them one by one into a smaller bottle, filling it to the top. “A gift from Donna Luisa,” I said. I let my mother think that this was what I earned. When the olive harvest began, I returned to the Guardabassi estate, doing my best to make myself invisible to those who would judge and punish me for my father’s possible crime.

My work as messenger carried me to the woods, to the next villages and as far as the most distant fields within our landlord’s estate. My mother, dressed always in black, kept herself within the perimeters of our house, tending the hearth and the smoke filled room where we lay at night. The memory of Ada, my father, the secrecy of my few coins, an untreated wound, festering beneath her widow’s cloth.

We cleaned the olive trees and pressed the first oil from the fruit. I watched as Caglione filled the last bottles with the golden liquid that would go to the Guardabassi house. We sealed the bottles with wax and set them in a wooden cart. Then we pressed the fruit a second time, crushing even the pits beneath the stone. From this, I took my reward, three liters of pale green oil. I walked through the upturned fields, clouds of sediment settling in the bottles I held close to

me. In the alleyways of our village, I walked with a goatherd, returning home from his route. Like the shepherds, he had learned to take his flock away from the region for months of the year to avoid the tax. We greeted one another. "Compliments," he said, seeing what I had.

"I have earned them," I said.

"You have your oil and I have this." He took a small round of cheese from his bag. "Still fresh from the spring." The cheese had a gamy smell. A metal cup hung from his belt. "If you'll give me this much," he said, lifting the cup.

"That is too much," I said, leaving him.

He pushed at the doors of his dwelling. The goats ran into the dark stall. "*Attende*," he said. "A moment please." He followed the goats into the stall and returned with a small lantern, something we could use at home. "For half a cup of oil," he said.

"You'll give me both."

We made our trade. I gave him his share of oil and took his lantern and cheese. My arms full, the lantern hung from my wrist as I walked with my stores. I had done well this day.

The back of my mother's head, her chair beside the cold hearth. I stepped into the room, setting my goods on the table, lifting each bottle to show her the oil. "One bottle is not full," she said.

I took the lantern from the table. "Look," I said. I lifted the glass to prepare the wick.

"Do we need that?" she asked. "It is still day."

The small window overhead let in a waxen light that fell over her chin and neck. She swallowed slowly, a bulge on her throat the size of a sparrow. We had, in our village, at times grown accustomed to this sight. The doctors said it came from a scarcity of salt. I gave my mother a bit of the goatherd's cheese. She chewed little, letting the cheese dissolve in her mouth.

She smiled as I had not seen her do in a long while. “Good,” she said. “I have not tasted that in a long time.” Her gums, darkened with sores, she had lost more of her teeth. I cut another piece of cheese for my mother and took a small portion for myself. The waning day left a chill in the room. I gathered sticks to start a fire. The flames flew up, snapping the dry branches. I stood a thick piece of trunk in the center of the hearth. My mother’s head rested against the back of her chair. The lump beneath her chin fell under shadow and into the fire’s light as she turned her head from side to side.

I offered to prepare her bread with warm water, something she could easily chew.

“Perhaps later I will want some,” she said. “Not now.”

“The lamp is for mending at night,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” the skin tightening over her throat as she spoke.

We had not had salt in our village since the war began, but I knew that this was something I could find at my patron’s estate. Another day passed. My mother had barely moved from her chair. I warmed the water for her bread soup, adding a bit of cheese and a drop of oil. She took the bowl from me, lifting the spoon to her mouth. I went to the door.

“Don’t wait for me. I won’t be long,” I said.

I had never entered that large house, only stood at the landing to wait for Donna Luisa’s coins. More than once, I had seen her cook carrying fresh parcels from the ground, onions, carrots, legumes. I knew that the storeroom lay at the back of the house, across from the barn and the quarters where they kept their horses. The horses that Paolo rode, now that he had returned.

A transparent half-moon floated across the dark sky, its course opposing the one I took. When I reached the Guardabassi estate, the sun spewed its last pale rays, fireflies over the

ground. I watched from outside the gates. Dogs barked, Paolo's hunting dogs. I knew their sound. On the second floor, I saw the light that came from Donna Luisa's room. I crept against the walls until I reached the back of the house and the pantry door. My spirit sank at the chain lock. One of the dogs barked again, beginning a low growl. I wanted to turn back, flee in the direction of the trees. Both of my hands flat against the side of the stone wall. I listened, hearing voices, that seemed to come from the valley, not from inside the house.

The barking stopped. I tried to make no sound. Any movement from me could set the dogs off again. My legs began to buckle at the foolish thing I had done, coming to this place. I used the door of the pantry to steady myself, my hands clutching the lock. The lock came to in my hands, the clasp not fixed.

I slipped into the dark room where I searched but found no light. I left the pantry door slightly ajar, enough to make out the rows of sacks on the floor. I went to the sacks and touched them one by one. By the feel and smell of them, I tried to discern what they contained. Unmilled wheat, flour, a small, sweet smelling grain I did not recognize, legumes, three kinds, sugar. I licked the crystals from my fingertips. For a moment I forgot myself, wanting to take handfuls of everything I touched. Inside a coarse sack, I felt the crystals of salt. The cord that sealed the bag was tightly tied. I worked at the knot. My fingers were calloused and strong, but not agile. As little as I could see, I scanned the room for a sign of something sharp to cut the cord. My hands touched the top of a shelf above the bags. I found string and a few shrunken tubers there, but nothing more. I pulled at the threads of the cord until one of its ends began to shred. My fingers worked at the fibers and then my teeth to loosen the cord until it came apart in my hands. I scooped salt into my small bag, enough to fill the space of my cupped hands, more than my

mother and I had seen in years. I swept what I had spilled behind the sacks. With some loose threads of rope I quickly tied my little bag, using the rest of the rope to retie the sack.

I closed the door of the storeroom behind me. Hearing nothing, I inched back along the wall.

A row of hedge bordered the dirt road, a copse running alongside. I neared, hoping to hide myself within the trees. A light shone behind me. I thought, at first, that the light came from the big house, that Donna Luisa had gone to another room. The light followed me as I walked, its glow keeping pace with my feet, bathing me until it loomed over my head. I felt a hand at my back, a tug at my shoulder, the tug of a man's angry voice.

"What's the hurry there?"

The dogs started up again. They made such a noise that I expected to see them tearing out of their pen. He lifted me at the shoulders, spun me towards him. Paolo, the youngest son, so close that our faces almost touched. He looked at me with a dulled expression, then a meanness surged in his black eyes. "Who are you?"

I did not give him my name. "I work for your mother," I said.

"Such a late visit? Who are your family?"

It escaped from me. "Dead," I said.

"All dead?" He loosened his grip on my sleeve.

"My father, yes, in the war. My sister, Ada. You knew her."

"Ada?"

"Yes," I said, "you gave her this scarf." I had worn the shawl enough to render it unrecognizable, dulled and rumpled, its tassled ends soiled.

“I have no memory of that name,” he said. His eyes traveled from my face to my feet and back up again.

He remembered her, I was certain. Remembered the face, if not the name. He held his lantern over me, scanning my face. He took the package from my hands. “What’s this?”

“Salt for my mother, from Donna Luisa. I left it and came back.”

“Then not everyone is dead after all,” he said.

“Everyone no,” I said. “She’s not well.”

“Not well? Such misfortune.”

“She’s dying,” I said.

“Go on then,” he said, dropping the salt into my hands.

Roused at my escape, I hurried along the road. I hoped that I would never see him again, that he would forget my face as easily as he seemed to have forgotten Ada’s. I thanked my good fortune that I walked away. And I had kept my prize.

The vigor I reaped from that achievement waned with each step. A nodule bored into my chest. Like grit, it scraped and made me raw. Though we were sisters, Paolo saw nothing of Ada in my face. It dogged me, the feeling, traipsed behind me, feathered my warm cheeks. To see through his eyes, know what he saw.

Sorrow finds solace in the silent duties performed upon waking and throughout the day. If love had entered my mother’s life in marriage, I did not know it. We learned early in our lives not to ask these questions of the people closest to us, least of all ourselves. Love revealed itself through the minute attentions we showed the dead, the *Madonnine* we left in the shadowed angles of buildings, in cracks and crevices along the road. We did nothing like this for the living.

My mother and I were fortunate to live in a house made mostly of stone. My father's father had earned some favor with the Guardabassi. He built the house with the stone they gave him, but the land belonged to them. "It's not our house. We could lose it anytime," my mother yelled when she and my father quarreled. "I grew up here. It's as good as ours. They have no use for it," he said. The roof leaked in places but it stood firmly enough when the rains came. Many of the villagers lived in goat stalls or shacks, made of wood, scrap, and stone. These leaked miserably when the heavy rains came. The ground swelled with water, bringing mud slides that carried the dwellings away.

Through April and May, my mother and I withstood the spring rains. I had nothing to do with myself but empty the pots that filled when the roof leaked, sweep the water from the floor after it seeped under our door. Filomena took stock of our dwindling supplies every day. When the rains let up, I went to the woods to look for mushrooms, or tramped through mud, down the slippery ravine, to the swamplands where I searched for clues of new nests. And Donna Luisa, I took the road to that house when I could, to see if she needed something from me. She always did.

Our village had rearranged itself since the men left it more than two years since. A woman left homeless after the floods, sometimes found refuge with a neighbor, or, more likely if she was still young, at the residence of her landlord whom she served in a variety of ways. The bachelor doctor from the next village, once despised by all as an incompetent thief, brought tidbits of food, powders and ointments to the most destitute of us. Widows kept him in their houses until, at last, he disappeared. Traveling merchants appeared in our village. They spoke of America. For their part, some of our men who had left the region years since and had fought with

the Americans during the war, returned later to buy land or to find a local bride. These were the bargains we made.

The salt had not lessened the lump on my mother's throat. The doctor said that she needed salt of another kind. My mother needed a yellow liquid called iodine. I found the coins in my store. He promised to send the order to Rome. Even so, it would take more than a month to arrive. Day after day, Filomena stared at the unlit hearth. The lump on her throat, one of many other signs.

For us, the death of a loved one brought more than grief to the living. Our losses became a mortal injury, a judgment, a retribution for sin.

They signaled a curse.

VIII

My mother remained inside the stone walls of our house. Knees to the clay floor, hands clutching a rosary. She vanished daily in cool shadows, wax and smoke. Her frail voice floated upward and settled in the corners of the room, begging for unguents and for salt.

Furtello, the priest, came. My mother sent him away.

Gelsomina, the *stregona*, came and she stayed within those walls for four days. During that time, I never crossed the threshold of our house. The rains done, the air turned warm and dry, I made a bed for myself outside. In a small bowl, I burnt the sage and laurel that Gelsomina left for me. Streaks of fire raced and vanished into the night sky. After that, I slept and woke to a quiet sky, hearing faint cries that came from the woods and hills around me, and from inside the house where my mother lay.

Gelsomina left our house early one morning. Before waking, I felt the folds of her skirt trail over my body as she stepped over me. The door lay open. I lifted myself from the ground, seeing that my mother slept peacefully in the bed where Ada had died. A spider's bite had left a red mound on my arm. The wound had begun to ooze. I had forgotten to burn the *stregona's* herbs on the fourth night. Accustomed to cuts and punctures on the skin, I chose to see the path of the spider as a good sign. The illness in retreat.

After pulling dry sticks from the ground, I entered our cottage and brought them to the hearth. Reaching upward to the small window, I opened the shutter, fastening it to the wall. Morning made a dim impression in the room. I worked to start the fire. The bread in the cupboard had gone hard. I set it on the table, waiting for the water to warm. The water boiled twice and cooled again.

I was a restless child. I left water in a vase and the bread, untouched, for my mother when she woke. I closed the door behind me and walked in the direction of the hills. I could make myself useful in the fields. Gelsomina came and went. "I'll look in on her," she said. I would find my mother as I left her when I returned home again.

The grasses garnered me. I threw myself into them with my ready scythe. For three consecutive nights, dry lightning made latticework of the sky. I stayed with the other field workers, as if our presence could ward off the strokes that burn fields. The dry tempest passed.

When I returned home, dust-covered from the fields, I heard the faint breath that bound my mother's body to the world. The hearth lay cold. The scent of charred wood hovered with a stale odor in the air. I entered the vault that our cottage had become, sun-stained, vital from the fields, mindless of the subtleties at work. "She smells of possession." A man's voice came from the dark corner, not my father's voice, a deeper sound. He sat in the chair where my father used to sit. Though I could not see his face, I could see that he was a larger man. Nothing appeared disturbed in the house, but the bread I had left on the table was gone.

"Who are you, sitting in my father's chair?" I said. Not my first mistake.

"Who am I?" he said, "You leave your mother, my sister, in this house, alone, like this. Who are you?"

My words set him against me.

"The daughter of Elido and Filomena. Nunzia," I said.

I had something to mend. Unprepared for him, he was prepared for me.

"Have we met?" I said.

"Perhaps," he said.

My mother had one brother, Ludovico. Ludo she called him, my *zio*. He had gone to America years before. He sent no warning of his return. I imagined his thoughts, finding his sister alone in a dark house. I told him of the midwife's visit, that Gelsomina still came to look upon my mother every day, that she had saved my mother's life. I told him of my work. I left hours before dawn to walk the twelve kilometers to the fields. After nightfall I returned.

"They talk in the town," Ludovico said. "I don't wonder, seeing this."

He sat at our table, the light of a single candle upon his round face. I had not seen him since I was a child. I did not remember him.

"What do they say of my father?" I asked, sure that he had informed himself there. He said nothing, waiting for me to serve him, which I did.

He watched me closely as I started the fire, then while I rummaged through the sacks in our cupboard, where I found *cecci* flour and a little oil. I used my fingertips to touch water to my mother's lips, using some of the water from her vase to make a paste that I spread into a heavy iron skillet, holding it over the fire. The *ceccina* bubbled in the pan. I turned the thin cake, browning it on both sides before sliding it from the skillet onto my uncle's plate. Earlier in the day he had taken what remained of the bread. We had no wine. My uncle ate what I gave him and pushed the plate away. I heard the sounds of my own hunger. No further words passed between us.

He slept in the bed where my father and mother used to lie. I felt tired but could not sleep with a strange man in the house. I pulled a chair beside the bed where my mother slept. If she woke, I wanted her first to see me.

A swarm of blackbirds lifted me from slumber, scattering before me. I held my knees to my chest, half-light circling my arms. My mother's curled hands rested over her chest. Eyes

open, she looked straight ahead. I regretted leaving her at that moment, not for her brother, for myself. I used a cloth to squeeze water into my mother's mouth, to wipe her face and feeble limbs. "It's Nunzia," I said, telling her of the last days, of Gelsomina's visits, the fever, the smoke and herbs. The lump on my mother's throat had receded, leaving a purple mark in its place.

"Who has died?" My mother said.

"Hush. None, mother." I said.

I sat with my mother until my uncle rose. In his under-drawers he came to her bedside. "Ludo," she whispered. "Is it possible?" She reached out to touch his arm. "They fed you well." Zio Ludovico lowered his head to kiss her on the mouth, a patch of bare scalp at the top of his head.

"My sister," he said. "We have much to do." To me he said: "Fetch some bread." I took his coin.

I found only hard-grained bread in the square, with its flakes of dark bran. I purchased the bread from the baker's son, the one I had sent to Benevento for Donna Luisa. A grown boy now, he came once or twice each week to our square, with hair on his chin and above his lip.

"For the new arrival?" he said, as I rarely bought from him.

"How would you know?" I asked.

"He's covered these hills in the last two weeks, looking for land. Everyone talks of him."

"So he is rich," I said.

"By the look of him. Where have you been?"

"At work in the fields."

“Work or play?” the young man said. The town talked of this too. I had left my mother alone and ill.

Beniamino sat with the other men at the tables. On his head the black felt hat he always wore. He waved to me. “Come say hello.” Of all the men who came to the square, he seemed to be my only friend. The eyes of a prankster, he had more success than Gian Riccardo at cards. His horeshoe mustache came down to his chin. “Don’t you remember your uncle?” he asked.

“I hardly knew him when I saw him,” I said. “How long ago did he arrive?”

“A fortnight ago, I’d say, then he left for who knows where. Funny he didn’t greet your mother. I knew that rascal as a boy, back when. The other day he showed up again. I saw him at the prefecture.”

“The boy said he looked for land,” I said.

“These are men’s affairs,” Gian Riccardo said. A sullen man to begin with, it seemed that Gian Riccardo used a harsher tone with me, since his return from Caporetto, and the end of the war. He and my father had quarreled from time to time, but for a peasant and a man of profession, they remained on good terms. I left the table where they sat. “Come here girl,” Gian Riccardo called. He beckoned me to him with the back of his hand. When I approached him, he spoke to me as one would to a small child. “Property is a serious matter among men, not your concern.”

“But my father.”

“You must let your uncle do,” Gian Riccardo said. “Too much goes rotten here.” Before his injury, Gian Riccardo drew the land survey maps for our region, the borders and boundaries that changed from time to time, after an inheritance or a payment of debt. Never much work in that, but he wore the black suit of the professional man. People said he had some private funds.

Perhaps he thought my uncle would give him something more to do. “Your uncle has even talked with the Guardabassi,” he said.

“But nobody goes to them.”

“Tell her about the reforms,” Beniamino said.

“You tell her.”

Beniamino spoke: “The war has changed things, not only for us. The landowners, some of the rich, now they want to sell.”

“My father said that a peasant could not buy land,” I said. Some had the right to small lots if they signed leases. They worked the land, and some built houses. When the leases expired, the landlords took the land away.

“A peasant with resources can buy now,” Beniamino said. “Your uncle has resources, and after his years in America, no one can call him a peasant anymore.”

“Has my uncle purchased something?”

“He has his eyes on a piece of land I hear,” Gian Riccardo said. “And just the other day, your uncle filed to purchase the lease to the house where you now live.”

“Can he do that? But my father.”

“Your father has made his choice, clearly.” Gian Riccardo took the deck of cards from Beniamino’s hands. “Now go and leave this discussion to us.”

“Gian Ri,” Beniamino said. “Be kinder to her.” He gave me a pat on the wrist.

I tried to learn more. “Has our lease expired?”

“Your father had no lease,” Gian Riccardo said. “But soon, your uncle will have.”

I held the round loaf to my belly, felt its weight there.

“Even if your uncle has the lease to your house, he cannot ask you to go, because you are his relation and have lived in the house your whole life. These laws do not change,” Beniamino said. “Go on. Your mother needs that bread.”

I returned home wiser with the loaf of bread. Minerva had come to visit my mother. She kissed me on the cheek. “I brought her a little soup,” she said.

“It’s kind of you,” I said.

“Eat something, Filomena, to celebrate your brother’s return.”

“It’s a wonderful thing, after all our troubles,” my mother said. She slept soon after taking a few mouthfuls of food.

“Getting on alright?” Minerva asked, taking a chair. My mother’s cousin kept to herself, but from time to time, she liked to tell a person what she thought. I trusted her.

“More or less. Who knows now. She thinks it’s a good thing.”

“Be prudent,” she said. She rubbed her hands on her apron. I sat with her at the table, cutting a piece of bread for us to share. She put a piece in her mouth. The dark hair that fell around her high cheeks made her thin face seem more narrow. She brushed a thin lock of hair from her nose. Her eyes warmed when she smiled. “Perhaps he’ll get bored and leave again.”

“Gian Riccardo says he has filed to purchase the lease to this house.”

She swallowed her bread. “With no news of your father, still.”

“That man hates me.”

“Who, your uncle?”

“Gian Riccardo.”

She laid her palm on the table. “That man. It’s his way. Pay no attention. Some day I’ll tell you about him.”

My uncle did not stop with the possession of our house. At the office of the prefect, he made another request. Within weeks, he took up the small plot of earth, composed mostly of clay, which had been allotted my father as an *annaroli*.

“Ludovico will take care of us,” my mother said, lighting a candle outside the church.

“Indeed,” I said under my breath. Zio was patient and swift to act. Because we now lived under his roof, we were his dependents. And until I was married, I would be his charge.

“You have been too free here,” he said. Who knows what he thought I might have done.

I returned to the house with my season’s wages. “You’ll put them here,” he said, where he kept his records in a latched box. “I know the *massari* and the *annaroli*. I’ll check with them that the sum is exact.”

My mother, recovered enough to tend the hearth, took to her duties with a nervous urgency, crossing and whispering to herself. Mornings, she swept in front of our house, lifting her broom at the *mal’occhio* she expected to see. She waited on Zio Ludovico who never thanked her, the next day, trying harder to please.

He began to think of himself as one of the gentry. Some in our village said that, in America, he had taken a wife. Others said they had seen him here and there with the widows, and some of the younger girls. He left the house early in the morning and came home when he pleased, to sup or to sleep.

“Can you pull weeds today, sow, till?” he asked.

I had no choice. “Yes,” I said.

Zio made things grow even in the hopeless clay, using seeds from America and powders that he scattered over the ground from a can. He used me to help him bore holes in the earth. At

the top of the hill, the Guardabassi son, who caught me outside his mother's storehouse with her salt, rode by on his horse as we worked. He watched us from the top of the hill as he passed. I saw that, once or twice, he lifted his hat to my uncle. Zio, who wore no hat, stood straight up and made a formal salute.

When it suited him, Zio sat with the men who came daily to the village square, with Gian Riccardo, with Beniamino, with Capro, Minerva's husband, who took the name of an old goat, with the barkeep, with the clerk, who kept a handkerchief ready at his nose. He waited to talk to others who came less frequently to the square, the official from Benevento, who sat by the door of the *questura*, that branch of the police that watched the daily affairs of the people, the *carabinieri*, the uniformed police, the priest Furtello, who stopped to talk on his way to the schoolroom or the church. My uncle secured a place in all of their circles.

I waited my turn at the fountain.

"Your uncle is a handsome man," Irma, the wife of the barkeep said to me. She pinched her face, taking an inventory of me that ended with widened eyes and a toss of the head. Her barely audible "hmpf" told me she wondered how such a man could be related to me.

"He makes the most of himself," I said.

Irma took her water and set the vase on top of her head. She pulled her sweater over her skirt with her free hand. "If you carried your vase this way, you might have better posture." She walked slowly, a swing in her wide hip, over the cobblestones.

"She's fond of her figure," Iona said, a woman who washed the pavements in the square. "I see that your uncle sits with the Guardabassi son when he comes. How he puts on airs. They say he has nothing better to do with himself."

"Who?" I asked.

“Paolo Guardabassi. And a count’s son,” she said. “Such a dandy, that one. He came here this morning. Your uncle stood apart from the others and went to talk with him.”

I had seen the two talking together in the square as I came and went on my errands.

“What’s her name?” I heard Paolo say.

Zio’s voice cut into the square. “Don Guardabassi. What should such a thing matter to a man like you?”

Soon, I learned. After Zio Ludovico took over the bit of land my father once used, he acquired a spot on the hillside, above the flood lines, at the tail end of one of the Guardabassi fields. By far a better site for growing things. With my help he planted fig trees and then built a large stall to house pigs. “Thanks to the junior count and his games,” Beniamino said. Paolo had privately arranged to sell a piece of his mother’s land to relieve his own debts.

I continued to run errands from time to time for Donna Luisa. I knew that she lacked company, especially now that she was weak and ill. Her groundskeeper had left, after an argument with her son, and the cook who served her for years had simply disappeared. She often sent a village boy to bring me to the outskirts of her villa. Each time, she waved to me from a window or balcony on the second floor. Each time she struggled to remember who I was: “Ah yes, you are the sister of that poor girl. What did you come for?”

“Signora, you called for me.”

She sent me on small errands, which I did, and never once did she invite me inside the house. I left the packages and parcels beside her large door. The coins that she dropped at each of our meetings, my reward.

“Why does your sister not come anymore?” she asked me one afternoon.

Before her death, Ada had entered the Guardabassi house only three times. Unlike her son Paolo, the old woman never forgot my sister. She talked as though the two of them had been great friends.

That hot day, after Donna Luisa scolded Ada and me, I had gone to take some water from her trough. Ada stood in the sun with her arms crossed, her pale skin flushed a moist pink.

“If you want your water in a glass,” Donna Luisa said, “you’ll have to come inside.”

The water at the trough did little to cool my face. I called to my sister. “Come here, to the shade.” She did not reply.

I listened to Ada through the open windows touching the cords of a piano that she would never learn to play. Her laughter rolled over the balcony and drifted down to the gate where I stood, waiting to accompany her home.

“Brava.” I heard the old woman’s voice.

Donna Luisa was not a learned woman. This I could tell by her simple speech. But she used the proper language that the gentry used. In Ada, she must have seen something of her former self. My sister, one of the only children who stayed in school after the age of seven, practiced her letters while I roamed. At night, she read aloud by candlelight, forming a pout around each word. In the bed we shared: “I read a poem about a sick man who never left his room. He died, climbing to the branch of a tree outside his window. When a man loves a woman, he brings her a bird.”

Vines dripped from the balcony over the sunlit walls. I waited for Ada, pacing back and forth over sticky grape must that stuck to my feet. When she slipped through the door of the large house, she held a parcel in her hands, traces of sugar on her red mouth.

“You had your water,” I said, after we started on the path to meet the mulecart that would take us back to our village.

“Tea and cakes,” Ada said.

I wanted to stop there and stamp my feet, refuse to go on, knowing that she needed me to find her way home. While I waited, tea and cakes.

We walked until the Guardabassi house disappeared behind the trees. Ada stopped. “Close your eyes,” she said.

“What for?”

She put her hands over my lids. “Just do it.”

Ada pressed a small cake into my palm. Its sugar icing melted in my hand.

Why did she live so, alone, Donna Luisa? A mad woman, some said, once a grand dame.

“Life in Naples did not agree with her, a woman of the country, with a country heart.” Gian Riccardo spoke fairly about her.

“*Rimbambinita*,” Irma said. She wiped the tables where the men sat. “She has become a child again.”

I did not remember the count, Don Guardabassi, who came with his two sons Stefano and Paolo when they were young. The shooting parties, when we who lived year-round knew enough to stay away from the woods. They emptied the woods in a short season.

Even before Don Guardabassi died, Donna Luisa returned for long stays in that house, as if to find her early years there. “She leaves her husband with his gaming and his ladies,” my mother said. My father said: “She comes for the air.” The count died in Naples before the war.

His eldest son, Stefano, became a statesman there. The other, Paolo, came back to Biccari to live with his mother. Then he too left to go to the north.

I learned that I had played a role in Paolo's life. The letter I had taken as her messenger, the baker's son I sent to Benevento.

"Why does he return home if ours do not?" I asked.

"The gentry have ways of buying the freedom of their sons," the priest said.

With my help, Donna Luisa's letter had gone to Rome. "Come again. Do your errands for me," she said. She threw a coin, the largest I had ever seen. Then Paolo returned.

More than once, Paolo passed on his horse, above the fields where I worked, or when I carried items to and from town for Donna Luisa. It pleased him to make his horse trot in place as I crossed his path. Dust rose in the air. I tried not to let him see that I choked. I had not exchanged words with him since the incident at the shed.

"You are well with the dirt," he said once, a smile on his face.

I turned my head. "Not so," I said, though what he said was true.

He drank from a flask. "I'll share this with you one day. You will like it," he said.

Paolo lingered in the village square and drank slowly, keeping himself apart from those who drank because they had no work. He wore the costume of the horseman, cropped jacket and pale trousers that hugged his long legs. An impressive, lovely figure to behold, with delicate, translucent skin. I could not help but look on him.

It puzzled me that he used the common language that we used, borrowing our dialect. "*Fo'i*," he said, when he talked to one of us. Zio Ludovico said this when he sat with the men of our village. With the officials, I heard him say "*Faccio io*."

“Not a lot of stack in that deck,” Capro said. He watched Paolo at his game of cards. “And until he drinks well he does not sit with us.” Capro was the father of Tulio, my cousin who died. He kept no mustache or beard, instead his face appeared always unshaven. A strong, almost bulbous nose, and lighter skin than most from our region, his face had become coarse and ruddy with the years. Minerva pinned the frayed sleeve of his jacket to the shoulder of his missing arm, the black jacket covered with a clay-colored dust.

At the fountain I waited while the women took their share.

“Will he do no work that Paolo?” Iona said.

“And spoil his good clothing?” Irma said.

“He waits for his mother to die.”

Tethered to long cords, Paolo’s dogs wound around one another, their hungry noses to the ground, folds of soft, grey skin hanging from their ribs. “That one needs a duck to hunt,” one of the sitting men said. The master raised his arm, “*Eh va.*” The dog leapt at Paolo’s hand and then lowered its head under the man’s fist. The dog crawled beneath the master’s chair. Another dog got loose from its cord and dashed out into the square. It circled the fountain where I stood and then ran until its body hit a wall, darting back out to cross the square until it met the opposite wall. The dog ran back and forth across the square until it stopped where three small children played together. The beast gnashed its teeth at the children then, with its snout, knocked the smallest child to the ground. The boy cried, the dog crouching, as if ready to take the infant by the neck. I watched the scene in quiet terror with the others at the fountain, unable to move. Even the men at the tables frozen in their seats. “Somebody do something,” one of the men said. The boy screamed the way that children do. The child’s mother, hearing him, ran from the doorway where she talked with another, her shrill sounds echoing in the square. She took up the child,

leaving the other children there, the dog wiping its paws on the stone. Paolo, still in his chair, lifted his stick and the dog lowered its belly to the ground and fled whimpering back to its master.

The two remaining children played where they were until an older sibling came to fetch them. We took our water at the fountain. The men resumed their cards, though none of them spoke for a time. “All for the better,” one of them said, perhaps Gian Riccardo. As I left the square, I saw my uncle approach through a joining street. Paolo lifted his hat. He had a strange effect on me. When I saw him, I was not quite myself. I became timid and coy. I often saw him from a distance in the stables and had no doubt that he also saw me from time to time when I stopped to do my errands for Donna Luisa.

“My son will marry a Neopolitan girl,” Donna Luisa told me one day. “Of good breeding,” she said.

After this, I came to the piazza only in the morning hours when I knew he would not be there.

Ugo

IX

The sheep route, going north to the lands of mountains and forests below Rome, came up through the plains and through the back hills of the Guardabassi estate. From the time that I was a child, I witnessed the passage of that white stream, stopping to graze on the grasses that marked the paths between fields. Before wheat, sheep covered the land. The year the earth shook, the sheep ran to the dry riverbed in hundreds, a stampede of ram, ewe, and lamb, pushing their current against the banks. A flood came without warning and spread through the river floor, carrying the sheep with it through the valley. When the water subsided and seeped into the hard ground, dead sheep lay scattered over the hills. Their bodies became white stone.

We called the hill the sheep-field, for its white rocks, some the size of those creatures, that the plough could not uproot. Here, low-lying wheat grew in places where no person had sown, over unbroken terrain. At the end of a harvest, the families of the *annaroli* came to pull what remained of the wheat from these fields.

A few shacks, where the shepherds sometimes stayed, remained along the sheep route, their roofs caved in, caked with mud after periods of wind and rain. The tremor opened a deep split in the earth where the sheep sometimes wandered and fell into the mouth of that great crack.

Our village learned of the earth's opening when a shepherd, following his stray flock, found their bodies at the bottom of the cleft. At the depth of the crevice, protruding from the ground, he saw what looked like an enormous spine, and a circular, hollow object the same color as the earth. Though the bones appeared too large to belong to a sheep, the shepherd thought nothing of it, thinking that another sort of animal had fallen into the crack, or that the large bones were something that the earth had produced.

We were a rich land with sheep, a poor land with wheat. We knew the break in the earth as the mouth that eats sheep. Along his route, the shepherd must have told the story of the bones, for a group of foreign men came to dig in its depths. They lowered themselves into the ground with long ladders and ropes. We waited for the earth to swallow them. The men stayed for the warm season and then left.

I came to the farthest ends of the Guardabassi fields. The rising sun lit the hill, a gold down, across from where I worked with a small group of peasants, binding my cuttings of wheat on the rocky hill. The shepherd's hut stood above the dry river bed, in cool shadow beneath a family of oak. I saw that it had a new roof.

"One of the foreign men is back," my companion said, "to lower himself into that devil's lair."

Peasants kept their distances from the earth's cut, from its hunger, and the spirits that escape from the ground. The few of us who had walked this distance woke in the raised field where we had slept for the night, and began the job of tying the bushels that we would carry on our backs. When we had nearly finished, I noticed a tall man with dark hair. He walked from the riverbed towards the hut. Seeing us on the hill, he called a formal salutation. We looked but did not answer him. A peasant, my father's age, put his hand in the air and bent his head. The tall man stooped to enter the door of the hut.

The dry stalks scratched my back as I walked with the others over the sheep hill to return to our village. The tiny flies circled and bit, sticking to the perspiration on my face. *Olandese*. No, *tedesco*, my companions said of the man we left behind. "What is that?" I asked, thinking that the words referred to the work that people do. The *olandesi* came first in a group, with their

pick-axes and shovels, to dig themselves further into that groove in the earth. They all wore long coats that came to their knees. This man was like them, but worked by himself.

Many came from the outside to our village after the war. There had been the *Suore di Gesù* who set up a small tent and a nursery for the abandoned children of the poor and the deceased. A new doctor wandered between villages in our region tending to the sick. Strangers, sent from Rome, appeared in our government offices.

I barely noticed him at first, only as much as to remark on his unusual size, the strange sounds that came from his mouth when he spoke. The government sent political dissenters to our region, as a punishment. I thought the foreign man might one of these. Before I exchanged my first words with him, I learned these things. He came from Bavaria, in the far north. Some said that we had fought with them during the war, others said against. He was a professor, I heard, a man of science.

At the time when most of these men went back to their countries, the Bavarian moved from the shack beside the river bed. With Gelsomina's help, he found a room in a sturdier house, at the periphery, of the village, not far from where she lived. Gelsomina's hut faced the tall wall and the hills at Biccari's back end. The Bavarian took a hut where the wall ended. The hut stood by itself on a rocky piece of hill, a slope of field half way between the back wall and the stone archway that led into our square from the east. He sat in the village square writing in a bound book. On more than one occasion, he followed us into the fields and into the woods. Mostly, he kept to himself in the small room where, from time to time, Gelsomina brought him his morning bread or evening meals. He wore a wool hat that cast a shadow over his eyes.

In our village we were unused to strangers. When they came, we treated them well, but cautiously and with continuous scrutiny. I knew little about this man except what some of the villagers had said. When they saw the stranger, village children trailed behind him, laughing and talking together. Sometimes they ran away. In the square, he often sat with his papers and books. I offered my wordless salutations with a bend of my head. He began to greet me when he saw me, first in Italian, then in our village tongue. One morning, I saw that he had removed his hat. His hair was thick and dark and came nearly to his shoulders. His eyes were sunken, with one heavy black line across his brow.

“What sort is he?” I said to Gelsomina at the well.

“A serious sort,” she said.

I often walked to the ridge of forest above our village. Beginning at the ravine near our house, my path took me upward, behind the houses that faced the hills where the sun set. I climbed to the grave site, where Ada and my two brothers lay, at the edge of the woods. So little of the forest remained around us. The spirits claimed their rights among the branches.

Smoke rose from the forest floor and mingled with a cover of mist that choked the trees. Ever since Zio Ludovico’s arrival, I walked in measured steps. I felt his eyes upon me, wherever I went. Unwelcome in my father’s house, it seemed that I had no future or past.

I could see little, and so, listened to the sounds that came from the trees. I heard the ancient voices, holding my ear to the ground to listen for the changing rhythms in the earth. Crouched there, I asked the spirits to show me something. They gave me the panicked sound of scattering feet, a vision of my father’s arm, raised to the sky, his body half buried in the ground. I heard the screech of an iron wheel.

I fell backward, my head hitting the ground. When I opened my eyes, a hand reached toward me in the fog. I waited for the spirit to reveal itself, but the foreign man instead knelt beside me.

“Forgive me,” he said, “I could not see.”

I hoped this was true, I had no wish to let him see me communing with the ground spirits.

“It’s nothing,” I said, lifting myself. He helped me to my feet. My head barely reached the level of his chest. I showed him a few strands of asparagus that I had pulled from the ground to turn his interest from my presence there. He wore his long coat and cap. Strange as he was, he did not frighten me.

“What brings you here?” I said.

“A shortcut through the fields, but I lost my way.”

He gave me his hand. “Ugo,” he said. I repeated the name.

We turned back towards the village. I led him through the smoke, stopping to show him where my family lay, the cross that held my father’s place. He observed me as I spoke.

“I hear of you,” he said.

“Hear what?”

“You make yourself useful, you like to work.”

“True.”

I did not ask him to tell me to whom he had spoken.

“What do you think if I tell you: I want to know about you, about your people. I need somebody to explain.”

“Explain what?” I said.

He offered me work, to help with his work. He would pay me, he said. What interest we might serve for him I did not know. I told him of the other work I did. He made no problem of it. “When you want. Come and go.”

He walked with me to the outskirts of the village and we shook hands before we parted. I watched him walk down the path, in the direction of the square, his grey coat disappearing behind the clutter of houses. I found few thin stalks of asparagus before leaving the forest. I began to nibble at their bitter tops, slipping the stalks one by one into my mouth, chewing down to the wooden stems.

X

Ugo had a way of appearing at moments when, engrossed in our activities, we felt least observed. Since our agreement at the edge of the woods, he had not addressed me directly, though he nodded his head or put his hand in the air. He watched from a distance, a daily presence in the square. He exchanged small talk and banter with the men.

“Professore,” they said, “what did you find in the dirt today?”

“Much, much,” he said, lowering his head to pass through an archway on the way to his little hut.

During the summer harvest, I continued to walk to the fields before daybreak. My uncle saw to it that I worked on his land in exchange for my keep, and I divided this inevitable duty with long days away from home scything barley and wheat. The days cooled slightly with the end of the harvest, and the threshing that followed. I went to the shaved fields to help with the ploughing. Ugo appeared on the back of a mule cart that often drove the road that passed Donna Luisa’s. I had grown accustomed to seeing him there, in that long grey coat.

With the change of season, when the colder months and the dark days approached, we held a gathering in the woods, a nighttime festival that, to please the priest, would finish at the church. None of my family came. My mother lay in bed. Zio Ludovico interested himself in other affairs. We set our winter *megea* in the fire, watching the flames erase the features from her wooden face and consume her black threads. When the *megea* had turned to ashes, we took up our garland of copper cups, pails, and figures made of tin that dangled from the long rope we carried over our heads. Our procession began in the woods and continued through the square and up the hill to the church. We stamped our feet to drive away all unwanted spirits of the dead and

warn them from the living and the newborn. Our implements became bells, swaying back and forth with the movement of our hands.

Furtello, a priest from the old school, bid us leave our garland outside the church. Palmisano had let us bring it inside. Like many others, I was a near stranger to that space, except for the times when I joined my mother and others with buckets to wash its earthen floor. In single file we entered the church. Furtello stood at the entrance with his branch of melissa. He dipped the branch in water and shook it over us as we fed into the room. Three standing candles stood on iron posts at the back of the room. Plaster that had begun to crack after the last winter's rains still lay on the floor, exposing straw and boards. Nothing adorned the walls but the somber-eyed Jesus whittled from wood and the featureless figure of the black Madonna, whose sister we had just burned.

One of the many priests who had come and gone from our village over the years once dragged me in to this church on my last day at his children's school. He threw *cecci* over the floor beneath the wall statue, making me kneel over the hard, round legumes to contemplate the savior's dejected face. He meant to punish me for biting the ankle of a nun who taught at our school I left an oval of ridged marks in her skin after she slapped both of my hands with a stick. My last days in school. The *cecci* dug into my knees until tears ran from my face. I felt the torture of the saints.

"A mere fraction of what your savior suffered for you," the priest said.

Sister Agnesi, whose ankle I had bitten, came to observe my suffering. She called me "vermin beast," tapping me on the head. White spittle always collected at the corners of her mouth when she spoke.

The priest, whose face, for me, blended into the faces of so many other priests of my childhood, the same sharpness always there, kept watch, forbidding me to move. Every time my head sank into my chest, he took my face between his hands and forced me to look at the figure on the wall, stretching my arms out at my sides to engrave the image into my body.

“Perhaps you’ll think next time,” he said when it was over. “But none of you ever do.”

When I tried to lift myself, I found that I could not stand. The *cecci* left holes in my knees and forelegs that turned into black marks that stayed with me for weeks. The priest called my father to the church to carry me home. My father, a man of scant words, had words with the priest. “You serve a demon,” I heard him say. Later, my *babbi* went back to the church and searched the cupboards. He came home with the sack of dried chickpeas. “We’re not so meek as that.” My mother put the *cecci* in water and cooked them the next day. How soft they became.

Our procession filled the small church. Furtello walked among us with his branch then brought a censer full of burning sage. I noticed Ugo among us. He stood by the church door. I saw something of the wretched saint in that sunken face.

A village woman who stood beside me crossed herself. “He has the eyes of a goat,” she said. One of those among us who saw the devil in everything. My legs began to tremble, as they had when kneeling over the hard chickpeas.

“You don’t mean it,” I said.

I left her, passing the stranger at the doorway.

Ugo followed me outside. I felt him behind me.

I saluted him, walking ahead. Those at the church would see that he followed me. They would talk.

We had reached the woods. I turned, half-looking for the horned spirals at the sides of his head. He looked at me strangely, the same look I had first seen in the woods.

“You don’t talk to me,” I said. “I thought you would.”

“I waited for you. Tomorrow then. Tomorrow we begin.”

I told him small things at first, answering his questions about our festivals, saints, the things we did with pieces of cloth and charred wood.

“Are we strange to you?” I asked.

Ugo shook his head slowly. I thought of what else I might say to him. I remembered sunlight in the room where the nuns wrapped Tulio in white cloths the day he died, the rafters overhead where pigeons perched. The pigeons flew through the open windows and, later, one of the nuns said that she had seen the dead boy lift his head. “It sometimes happens,” I said, “that one can lift his head after he is dead.”

“Is this what the nuns say?” he said.

“They say it but I have not seen it myself.”

“Tell me about your practices, what you have seen.”

I did not know where to begin. “Let me walk with you along the road,” I said.

I often did not know what I would find along the road or within the trees. In our village, we never talked of these things amongst ourselves, and we knew well enough to hide our business from the nuns and priests. As a child, I went with my mother and other village women to leave offerings to the spirits in the woods, small shrines made of twigs and leaves, a strip of clothing, a cutting of hair. We left them in secret shaded places, at the foot of a tree, behind rocks that lay by the side of the road. When we needed something, this is how we asked. In this way

we begged for mercy, remembered our dead. Wind, rain and insects invaded our little spirit houses. We let them have their way.

My mother made her offerings for Ada, to keep my sister from sickness. When my sister grew sick, she went again into the woods. "Shall I mend it?" I asked, after a rain had come and taken apart one of her spirit gifts.

"Never touch what another has made," she said. Later, she told me: "If you disturb the offering of a person who does not belong to your family, their misfortunes come to you."

I led Ugo past the gravesite and into the woods where I had first seen him. We slowed our pace at the small clearing, still and cool. "Do you feel it?" I asked. A circle of trees surrounded us. He looked up at the sky and said nothing. "Perhaps because it is so near their burial places, the spirits come here." Some person had made a cross of sticks and tied it to a tree. "I did not see this when I came before," I said. We walked from the clearing and saw more crosses of sticks tied to the trees.

"You have seen these?" I said to Ugo when we came to one of the little houses at the base of a tree, barely visible under the decay of fallen leaves.

"Yes," he said. He crouched to examine what remained of the shrine, brushing aside the wet leaves, then lifted something from the pile.

"We never touch these things," I said.

I could see his fingers through the fine white cloth he held. "What does this mean?" he asked.

I pondered. "It means that one has hoped."

We walked further along the road

Ugo asked me, if one person wanted to harm another, what he would do.

“The *mal’occhio*,” I answered. I hesitated to tell him more. How did I know that the spirits would not hear me and punish me for revealing their secrets? Harm attached itself to words. “In these matters, women and men act differently.”

“How so?” He waited for me.

“I cannot say.”

His eyes tightened when I said this. I bent my head and turned to leave. He took my arm before I left, a gentle but firm touch.

“Another day. I count on you,” he said.

I did not seek him out soon after, though I saw him often enough on my way to and from the square, or as I descended the hill to walk through one of the fields. He lifted his hand to greet me and I could not help but return his greeting. I had heard once of a woman in our village who killed a younger woman with a spell. The older woman cut a piece of the younger woman’s hair. She had her accomplices to help her with the rest. With the young woman’s hair, her killer burned a cloth that held her victim’s monthly blood. What had the younger woman done? A fine looking girl, I heard. The older woman had a son.

Between men, things happened differently. My father never talked of men’s matters with me, but I understood something from the things that he did say. I often saw men walk together through the woods, arm in arm, when they shared the same interest. “Each man makes his own path,” my father once said to Carlino after the Guardabassi father accused my father’s friend of poaching on his land.

“The trouble begins when he crosses my path or I cross his,” Carlino said. “The forests are common land.”

“Only a feeble man makes a curse,” my father said.

Carlino laughed at that. "I meet them with my gun," he said.

I knew from the way that people scattered, when one person cursed another openly, that the people of our village took these matters seriously. "When a man receives a slight and says nothing." My father said this after an incident, a woman of our village and a man, not her husband, who died with her. I waited for my father to say more, but he never finished his thought.

"I have something to show you," I said to Ugo. He came down from the hill where the church stood. I had seen Gelsomina earlier in the day. "The Bavarian tells me you hide from him," she said.

I took him to the woods. "One uses something from the body, like hair," I said. "Among women, there is always blood." He understood me. "With men, who knows why, something that touches the mouth."

Ugo looked at me. "I see."

I turned so he would follow me to the back of the woods. "I'll show you what I mean."

I rarely walked to the place where I led Ugo. Men came this way to hunt, I knew. They came for other reasons too, *cus' d'om*, the things that concerned men. "Once, I knew all the paths where our men walked. Since the war, they are much harder to find," I told Ugo. He said nothing and followed me. "Each who came here for his own business made his trail." I stopped. "Here, one from our village used to pass." I searched with a stick through the floor of leaves, disturbing the life there. Under the black dirt I uncovered the broken plate, fallen from the branch spikes where it had first been placed. "Please do not touch it," I said to Ugo. He did not touch the plate.

“I will tell you what our men do,” I said. “A man always leaves a sign, as close as the doorstep, or deep in the woods, a dead creature swathed in the victim’s shirt, left on a bed of sticks, a stolen dinner plate with traces of food eaten the night before.”

I led him away from that site, to a fallen log where we both sat.

“What worries you?” he asked.

“The spirits hear.”

“Tell me more,” he said.

I told him a story we all knew in our village but never discussed.

“It happened between a man from Biccari and a man from Troia who came to sell brushes and combs, small boxes, spun wool. Our man, Romolo, for a third of the year, took his sheep up to the north. He had a wife named Ifigenia who did not like to be left alone.”

Ugo’s long legs straddled the log. He set his notebook on the ground. “Go on.”

I continued. “One year, the Troian came and lived with the wife in the husband’s house. When the husband returned, the Troian left. The three repeated this practice for many years.”

“Is this common?”

“Sometimes, I think it happens,” I said. “Men know more of this.”

“Yes. Then?”

“Then, one time, the Troian came to sell his brushes in the season when Romolo lived in Biccari. The two men saw one another once in awhile. Nothing, ever. But this time the Troian did something he did not normally do. He went to see Ifigenia at her husband’s house.”

“And the husband came home,” Ugo said.

“Yes, for his dinner. This is what I heard. His wife and the other, dining together, laughing, eating from the same plate. The husband hid, watching the scene. After that, some say, he went into the woods and cried.”

“Had his wife forgotten the season?” Ugo asked.

“Who knows? But the wife and her lover left the table to lay on the bed. The two of them there, Romolo crept back into the room. They did not see him take the plate with traces of their shared food. The wife and the Troian lay together that night. The next day, as he walked through the woods, the lover found what awaited him: over sharpened sticks stuck upright in the ground, the two halves of a plate, greasy from the previous night’s meal.”

“What you showed me?”

“Yes. The Troian must have touched the bit of bread where Ifigenia left the marks of her teeth. Perhaps because he did not take the matter seriously, he lay with the woman again that night. Neither of them woke.” Heat rose to my face as I told him this.

“Both died from the curse?” Ugo asked.

“Some say that only the man died from the curse,” I said.

“And the woman?”

“For such things, a husband will strangle a wife,” I said. “A man can kill another man with a curse, but rarely a woman.”

Ugo took his book from the ground.

“Also,” I said, “a woman can kill a man this way.”

“You are brave to tell me all this. I am grateful,” he said.

One day Ugo brought me to the dusty study of his room, dark inside but for two small lights. He showed me a box of many things, bones and tools, taken from the earth. I would touch none of them, cautious as he led me through the objects, giving them all names.

“You keep dead things,” I said.

“Dead long ago. Now, like stone.” He gave me a piece of rock with a round, white object inside it. “A shell,” he said. “Water once covered the earth where we stand. Keep it. It will do you no harm.”

“I’ll keep it here.”

Not many days later, I returned to him. “Ekk-hh-ola. There she is,” he said. His voice sticking on the double c. The sound that chalk makes, grinding into a rough slate, like a bird’s cry rising into the air. As a child I ran from those sounds, from a room like this, to look for the bird. “You smile,” he said. I could not stop myself. I went to stand beside him, to watch what he did. With a small brush he scrubbed dirt from a long, flat thing. “I found it here,” he said.

“In the ditch, where the *ollandesi* go?” I asked.

“In that ditch.” He had many such things, some long and thin, some broken or curved, each of them a prized specimen. “My jewels.” He placed the cleaned pieces side by side.

“What are they?” I asked.

“You touch them when you till the earth,” he said.

I learned to pronounce the names before I knew their meanings: *schlusselbein*, *klaue*, *schadel*. One by one I learned to place them beside the clavicle, the claw, the skull. He taught me to use the brush and the little pick, to clean and polish the bones, to scrape into pieces of rock until I found something that once lived.

When he needed me for this, I talked to the stranger about the people of my village, the things we believed, the things we did at different times of the year. On my trips to the square for this errand or that, I began to listen more closely, not only to what people said, but how they said. I did not always know why we did what we did. He asked me one day: “What do your priests try to change about you when they come?” I could tell him something about this. “The faceless Madonna you carve from wood. Why polished in black?”

“To keep the spirit in the wood.”

When I answered his questions well, Ugo gave me a small coin. I accepted his coins, gladly at first. When I helped him number his bones and rocks, he taught me words.

Ugo told me that history records itself in layers of earth. I was part of all that he said. I wore my ancestors under my clothing and skin.

I sat at his chair, under his lamp, where he examined me. He stood above me first, then, knees bent, before me, turning my head from side to side.

“You have the face of the first Italians,” he said. “From before the Etruscans.”

“Etruscans. Who are they?”

He placed his palm against the nape of my neck and studied the bones of my cheek. I looked around me at the contents of his room. He had many books, in uneven stacks, papers, rocks, samples of clothing, tools and leaves. On a small shelf I saw three skulls, small, and stained with time. Ugo pointed to one of the skulls. “Ancient,” he said. “From the bauxite mines in the south.”

With a strange tool, he measured my head. The metal piece, the shape of a bow, made a brace that fit beneath my nose. Clasps at its ends held the brace at either side of my ears. At the angle of my nose, a ruler with a long bar attached. A smaller bar extended from the first. Ugo

slid that piece up and down at my forehead, finally adjusting it at the center of my brow. I sat still for him, his fingers framing distances from one part of my face to the other: from my chin to my hairline, my forehead, up and down, the width between my cheekbones, my jaw. I took a deep breath when he loosened the pinch of that instrument and lifted it from my face. After that, he asked me to sit for one more thing, a smaller tool, the shape of a wishbone. He fit the curved opening over my neck, pressing lightly into the skin at either side of my throat. Then he lowered the instrument to the crest of my sternum. He pressed between the ribs, making a note in his book, then he widened the wishbone's metal mouth, a centimeter or two, moving the tool downward over my sternum, stopping between the ribs, widening again, until he reached the soft tissue of my breasts.

"Very good," he said, setting that tool on the table. "May I measure your skull on another day?" I thought that he had given me permission to go. I stirred in the chair. "One moment." He placed his hands at my shoulders. I sat upright again while he looked closely at my face. "As I thought," he said. He seemed pleased. He said something in his language that I did not understand. And then he spoke in the language that I knew. "Perfect. Yes, perfect. Not beautiful at all, but something more."

He looked from my face to my eyes, twice, shifting from the specimen he studied to the living thing inside. For a moment he looked as a startled beast looks. I caught myself, in the moist, brown of his eye, in the indifference of his lowered lid. I pondered his words, as if each held separate weight on a scale. Perfect, not beautiful. I averted my eyes from the back and forth drift of his work, imagining that he had spoken in his language and I had not understood.

I was not beautiful I knew, but, until Giorgio, neither had I thought of myself as something else. Only Ada had reached the heights of such admiration, her pallor and frailty a rare strength. Ugo placed his palm over the years of my life, the calluses and scars of my hands.

As he studied me I began to study him. On his face the light showed the markings of a scar that began at the temple and ended at the cheek. He had dark circles under his eyes, with fine thread-lines like those on leaves, a valley beneath the bones of the cheek to the prominent jaw.

With a large camera, he photographed my head from all sides, once with the metal trap screwed to my head, once after he had taken it off, his head disappearing beneath the black cloth.

When he finished, he set the camera aside then lifted me from my chair as one would a child, taking me, as a kind of reward, to the photographs he kept: deserted lands and crumbled cities, sandy pits full of bones, mines littered with men extracting metals from the ground. He gave them all names that he asked me to repeat: Tripoli, Eritrea, Abyssinia.

“Where did you study?” I asked, wanting to know more about him.

“In Munich.”

“And during the war?”

“Gallipoli.”

I repeated the name, liking its sound. “Did you fight?”

“Few who did left there.”

“Your people are Bavarians?” I said.

“No, Jews.”

I had heard this word before, what the nuns said: “If not for the Jews.” I did not really know what a Jew believed. None lived among us. An *ebreo* did not follow Christ, people said. How much did we? Few came to hear the sermon of a priest. In our village, we remembered saints on feast days that came with the cycles of work.

Ugo lifted his head. “For some, it means everything. For others, little,” he said. He took up one of the photographs he had showed me. “Now, where is this?”

I could not tell one place from the other. “Abyssin,” I began.

He shook his head.

“Eritrea,” I said.

I kept a photograph, packed tightly amongst the few belongings that I would take with me when I left. In the photograph everything looks grey. The two of us stood against the trunk of an oak. I wore a scarf over my head, a white blouse and a long skirt with an apron, a basket of mushrooms in my hands. Ugo stood next to me, with his long coat, the cap on his head. The photo showed my grimace at the light’s flash. Ugo had just begun to smile.

With Ugo, it happened as one event happens, a natural consequence of many others. I learned to expect these consequences, to anticipate their arrival. I knew so little about him, about his country. He came to our village just after the war. And perhaps for the same reason, the things that troubled him, he came and stood beside me while I worked.

In my head, I practiced his words, not knowing how I would use them, away from this room, away from him. “You are my helper, my *assistente*, a value to me,” Ugo said.

I collected his words, stored them in some reservoir that belonged to another self, like my sister’s beauty, trapped inside my skin. I would save these words, own them. They would ripen and cure, like the filled jars the ancients took to the tomb, carry me through another life.

Every possible day, I worked at Ugo's wooden desk, chipping dirt from years of specimens he had taken from the ground. When night came, I worked under a glass lamp with rusted wires, until the touch of his hand at the small my back, the tips of his long fingers tracing my spine.

"Go home now," he said.

I obeyed, returning the next day to wait for that touch, for the fog of the lamp and its yellow light.

XI

Zio kept a close eye on me. “Do what he says,” my mother whispered at night after he had fallen asleep. He slept in a corner of our house and we two in the bed that Ada and I once shared. I did what he said during the day, feeding livestock and sowing wheat. The time that remained I kept for myself.

In the square, more and more, I felt that people stared.

“A strange man, that foreigner,” Irma said at the fountain. “It seems he makes good use of you. Do you believe he comes from the North, as he says? I’d say he’s from quite a different race.”

“I know little about it,” I said. “He pays me well for the little I do.”

The curiosity that I must have become to all, a young girl working alone with this stranger, a sorcerer some thought, a communer with the dead, a Jew. The whispers worked their way through a hush of voices. I knew what they were: something more than work between Ugo and the girl, his mistress, his little whore. The accusations flooded the square like birds to crumbs, stopping at my uncle’s doorstep. Whatever our differences, our prejudices against one another, we had a pact, those of us who survived the hungry years of the war and lost our families. We kept our secrets from the scavengers, like Zio Ludovico, who had come to feed on our remains.

Not until I began to work for Ugo did Paolo Guardabassi give me any more thought. He took it in his head to follow me on a day when I had just left Donna Luisa’s estate. He came on horseback, from behind the stables. I walked to the side of the road, expecting the horse and rider to pass, but they kept a slow pace, the horse trotting behind me. Before long, the horse and the

master rode at my side. I greeted Paolo in the accustomed way, *buongiorno signore*, bowing my head. He gave a quick nod in my direction, nothing more, keeping pace with me as I walked. I felt an uneasiness in my hips. I said nothing, pretending not to mind.

The rider circled round me once with his horse, so that I could not walk straight ahead and had to turn away. He did the same thing again, then turned the horse to circle me in the opposite direction. I tried to move forward even so. Each time the horse circled me it came closer, until the rider's leg brushed my arm.

Paolo did not look at me but stared straight ahead, as if to pass through me.

"Leave me please," I said at last, walking as fast as I could. It was then that he used the horse to cross back and forth in front of me, barring my pass.

He asked me to tell him where I came from in such a hurry, and where I headed.

"Home, to Zio," I said, to remind him that someone expected to see me.

My words did not deter him. I felt the warmth of the horse's body against me as I turned. The master pulled at the reins, making the horse lift its chin and shake the saliva from its mouth. The metal buckle of Paolo's boot scraped the top of my hand. I began to run, first from one side and then to the other side of the road. The rider followed me with his horse. His eyes fixed on me now. I could see that he had no intention of abandoning his game. I had the choice of fleeing back in the direction of Donna Luisa's estate or into the fields. I chose what I knew best.

The grasses stood tall. I ran into them, towards the valley where the spring rains collect in stagnant pools. Quickly, I made my way into the meadow at the steepest part of the hill. I heard the tread of the horse behind me. His thump sending out pellets of rock and earth. Paolo shouted and the animal uttered a high pitched cry, before obeying what its master asked it to do.

I reached the marshlands at the base of the hill. A low haze covered the ground. The fresh smell of damp grass mingled with the smell of rot in the drowned earth. My feet sank as I ran. Water seeped into my shoes. The mud grabbed at my feet, taking hold of one of my shoes. My bare foot slid from the shoe. The other foot, catching, sent me forward into the grass.

I tried to lift myself from the ground but the mud pulled at my foot. Behind me, the horse bounded down the hill, the sharp hoofs sinking as it reached the soft ground. The animal struggled to move ahead, its body thrust forward before the hoofs could free themselves from the mud. The master slid over the horse's neck. Landing on his shoulder, he slid on the ground. The creature fell to its knees in the mud. The man did not stop for the horse. I freed myself from the other shoe, pulled my body forward over the grass until I crawled on my hands and knees. I felt his hands at my back, grabbing my skirt at the haunches, lifting my hips while my hands pulled grasses from the ground.

He tumbled over me. I felt his breath on my face, his chest pressing me into the wet grass and mud. I struggled for breath, raising my fists against his arms. I was a strong girl, but I had never encountered this. With one of his hands, he reached beneath my skirt, pulling it upward to expose my bare thighs. His hips lay over me, pressing me into the ground, the pith of him hardening through the clothing he wore. He opened himself there. "Don't," I stammered in the mud, choking on the matter that had entered my nose and mouth. I closed myself to him, to the push of his thighs against me. He made loud, grunting sounds in my ear. A warm liquid came from him, trickling to the soft parts of my thighs.

When he lifted his weight from me, a gurgling sound came from my mouth.

"Get up," he said.

I thought only of running, unable to look at him. I did what he asked, kneeling with my back to him, pulling my soiled skirt over my legs before I stood. I tried to see through the dirt on my face.

“She’s plain enough,” I heard him say. “What an ugly girl.” His words mattered little. “Crying?” he said. Another substance filled my ducts. Near me, he held his hands over bent knees. “I can still see,” he said, leaning closer, his lips touching my ear, “find out, what your uncle does with you.”

I did not understand his meaning at first. What my uncle did with me? I did so many things for him, tilled the earth of his land, brought food to his pigs, left coins in his hands that rightfully were mine to keep.

“What will my uncle do now, to you?” I said.

For a moment he did not speak. A strand of his hair touched my cheek. “He’ll do nothing is what. He told me what you were.”

I felt a knot twist inside me, where the monthly blood flows.

I tried to stand, shaking in my arms and legs, the sting in my thighs draining to my heels. I heard the horse now, lifting itself from the mud.

Paolo left me to go to the horse. I steadied myself. He returned with a cloth and held it at my face. I took the kerchief from him and wiped at my face. He too was covered with dirt. He stood to the side of me, drinking from a small flask, then offered it to me. I shook my head.

“You’ll forget it,” he said.

I would not. I knew.

Some part of myself returned to me then. When he offered the drink to me again, I hit the flask so that it flew from his hands. This angered him. He retrieved the flask and returned to

where I stood, taking hold of my braided hair, pulling my head back as he tried to pour the liquid into my mouth. The liquid burned. I pushed at his arms with my hands, kicking at his legs until I freed myself from him. I ran towards the water and the drowned grasses. The grasses clung to me as I moved. I fed myself into the water until it reached my waist, pushing my body through it. The dead branches with their decaying leaves scratched at my face and neck.

The grasses pulled at my legs, tightening and then loosening their grip. A warmth spread through me, into the knot of Paolo's words. I was certain that he would not follow me into this. With only my head above water now, I scanned the place where he stood on the bank. I knew that he could not see me through the cloud of steam, the plant matter that floated in the water. My braid had come undone at the back of my head. I felt my long hair, unraveling from the water's surface as I pulled my head below. Under water, grasses claimed my face. I was no longer a creature of the earth. Water enveloped me, its swift arm dragging me further down.

I rested in that lock for an instant before my fight returned and I began to struggle with the grasses' hold. My hands reached for a branch above my head, the tips of my fingers touching the cold air. I surfaced. Reeds covered the base of the hill about me. The man who had pursued me into these regions had turned from the bank. I watched him retreat into the midlands where I had fallen and he over me. His horse stood chewing at the grass. The owner tugged at the horse by the bit, pulling that resistant face from its task. He did not mount the horse, but pulled at its reins until it followed him. Moving swiftly up the hill, he looked back over his shoulder towards the marsh where my grass-covered head moved slowly into the bank.

I pulled myself from the marsh, praying that no person would see me hurrying through the fields. As I neared my village in the dark, I came to the shack beside the wall, where

Gelsomina lived. I could not go home. It seemed I waited for a long time outside the hut where others came when they had some secret business, or something to hide. Her guinea hens called out from their pen. Gelsomina answered with her crow's voice from inside the cottage.

Her door opened. "Tame yourselves," she said to the fowl. Then she looked to where I stood. "Pffft," a sound she often made. "What do you stare at?" I did not move on. She stepped from the stoop. "Come over here." Her fingers touched the wet sleeve of my blouse. "You'd better come in," she said.

Gelsomina fed straw to her fire while I warmed myself. She dragged a chair from her table. "Here, sit." Then, to no one I could see: "Heh. Imagine. A fine figure. Those hens." She stood beside me at the hearth. "What happened to you? Go on, go on," she said when I hesitated. "Who can you trust in this village if not me? The things I know I keep to myself. *Per carità*." She made her double cross in the air. "To myself."

I told her about the mud where I fell, about Paolo's pith.

"I know of this," she said. "Heh. I know of this." She placed a saucepan into the fire then dipped a cup into the warm broth. "Drink it," she said. I sipped at the broth. "Did you feel pain, there?" she asked when I had finished drinking.

"Where he held me to the ground, where he rubbed himself." I did not tell her what Paolo had called me, "an ugly girl," or what he told me about my uncle. It scorched me to think of it.

Gelsomina took the cup from me. Standing she said: "Whatever else, that man. It's not likely he left you with a child." I choked. The straw in the hearth had begun to smoke. "Take this blanket," she said. "We'll dry your clothes."

I held the blanket to my chest until the wet garments lay at my feet. I wrapped myself well and took my seat at the fire. She picked the clothing from the ground, laying it over a line of

wire at her hearth, then placed a stool before the fire and sat down. Her fingers fidgeted over her lap. "Tame yourselves." She looked around her, reached for a small grain sack she had stuffed with feathers and began to stitch it closed. "Soon they'll go to sleep."

She had the sharp, hungry look of a bird of prey. A tall, wiry woman who towered over most of the men in our village, her ebony hair tied in a knot at the back of her head. She did not belong to the natives from our parts. Our features were broad and round. "Not like you and them," she said. "Where I come from, a small island, off the coast of Greece. Look at that." She sucked the tip of her finger where the needle had pierced. "Now I've lived here longer than there. Your people, *uffa*. 'No, no. Not you. We don't want you.' The trials. You can't imagine. The trials they put me through."

Because of her calling and because she mumbled to herself, many of our village considered Gelsomina out of her wits. Still, we all called on her for certain favors.

I wrung the water from my skirt at the wire. My hands drifted back to my hips. "Why ever did you come to live here?"

"Ah, that. My husband. How many times I prayed to the saints. Imagine, I. A man from Biccari. He made his way to Brindisi to join the fishermen. If he had stopped there, but no. He traveled as far as the Ionian sea, where I was, a young girl then, very young."

"How did you meet?"

"One morning, what did I know? I went looking for fish. The boats waited, and he, waited, moored at the dock. My hair, like a raven's everybody said. It fell to my knees. All the boatmen watched as I walked along the waterfront in my bare feet. I had no shoes. Then the foreign fisherman lured me to his boat, littered with silver catch. 'Come and see,' he said. 'Come and see.'"

Gelsomina had finished stitching the pillow. She lifted a hand to her brow, then wrapped the thread around her finger to make a knot, snapping its end. She began to mumble to herself. I thought she would tell me no more but she went on.

“Before I knew it I stood ankle deep in sardines and hake, enchanted by their flailing gills. Mesmerized. The fisherman, how he smiled. ‘I’ll give you a basketful,’ he said, ‘in exchange for a kiss.’ A basketful of fish. My family would eat for a week. When I took my eyes from the squirming fish, I saw that the boat was no longer tied to the berth. The fisherman and I had drifted out to sea.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“What could I do? I could not swim. Before I spoke a word, that man had changed his terms. No more fish. For a kiss, he would take me back to land. I protested. I wanted my fish. He called me a shameless girl. I began to cry at this.”

Gelsomina put a knuckle to her mouth.

“And you were far from land,” I said.

“Far. And he waited until I gave him what he asked for, a small kiss on the cheek. ‘Now take me back,’ I said. Instead, he took hold of me, folding my thin body in his arms, forcing his eel-like tongue into my chaste mouth. He whispered that we were as good as married now, that he had a fine home away from the sea where he would keep me. He coddled and stroked me in the belly of the small boat, among the little silver fins. A sardine nibbled at my foot.”

“What was his name?”

“He called himself Ettore. Great hero he was. Our union was brief. He brought me here, to his homeland. I never saw my family again. Imagine. Can you? He stayed for a week, then left

me alone in this unwelcoming village with all who stared at me. I had no one, no means of fending for myself. *Per carità*. He stopped loving me before we reached land.”

“And you never tried to return to your home,” I said.

As if she had seen me for the first time: “You’ll find a rag in that corner, and some water, to wash the mud from your face.”

I returned from the corner, wiping the crust of tear and marsh that had dried on my face. I did not know the man she called Ettore, but I had heard stories of such men. “To think he was one of ours,” I said.

As she continued, her story seemed less strange to me. “The people from Biccari treated me to the very worst. Some of them spat, called me ‘devil whore.’ Ettore had no fine home, I found out. Instead, he left me in a loft over a pigsty, the space so cramped I could not even sit up, only lie for sleep. I tried to leave many times, to find him, to force him to return to me or let me stay on the sea with him.” She stood from her chair, taking bits of straw from the ground that she tossed into the fire. Each one gone in a spark. “He cast a spell on me, you see. Every time I tried to leave, I left a different way, but always, I wandered in circles, losing myself, returning to the same place. He fit a tether around my neck that I couldn’t see. I never got further than the village wall. A hypnotist he was, and I, too young to resist.”

“It upsets you to talk of it.” I began to think that I should leave.

“No more. Now. Heh. *Per carità*.” She sat again. “For years I washed clothing when the wells filled. I wanted to be a good wife, to show him my industry when he returned. I cleaned the filth from that sty and fashioned a livable hut in its place. Then the men came with bundles of laundry to my house. You see how it is. I did the laundry gladly, only asking for bread. When they brought me that little bit more, I did what I could to make it a fair exchange. In the end, it

was a good arrangement for all. The more they brought me, the more they received in return. A good meal, a mended shirt, a warm place to sleep. Hush.”

The hens made no more sounds outside. My clothing had begun to dry.

“Still,” Gelsomina said, “I did not stop thinking of my lost husband, entertaining dreadful, jealous fantasies of his demise, the life strangled from him in the arms of a clinging octopus, wrestled from the nets of his captured fish. I knew that his betrayal, not ill fate, kept him from me. My sorcerer husband plied me well with his art. I had the right to draw from my reserves. In the town they called me ‘*strega*.’ Sorceress I became.”

“Because of us,” I said. “Then what did you do?”

“To cast a spell on another person, the feeling must be strong, whether love or hate. With my Ettore, my innocent love turned to hate. This is the worst, the most powerful kind.

“In despair I wound my long hair around my neck. Standing on a chair, I made a knot of the ends and secured them around an iron stake holding a side pillar to the flimsy walls of my hut. I pushed the chair away from me with my feet. My rope hair tightened around my neck, my head forced back in such a fit that I beat the wall with my fists until it gave way. My gallows and I came crashing to the ground, the straw roof toppling over me. The fall loosened the hair around my neck.” Gelsomina pointed to her head. “This much. This much hair,” she said, “ripped from my scalp.”

I imagined her, lying there, the picture of desertion.

“I thought I had died,” she said. “How long I stayed there. Then a shepherd came upon the shambles of my shack. He must have seen my body beneath the mess because I heard his ‘*Gesù santo, santo Cristo*,’ over and over again. He pulled the straw and boards that pinned me to the earth. What a sight I must have looked, my hair still knotted to the pillar, the open wound

of my bleeding scalp. Surely he understood what I had tried to do. ‘*Santa Madonna*,’ the shepherd whispered. Woman of miracles, he called me. He slipped a knife from his pocket and freed what was left of my hair.”

“You lived.”

“*Santa Madonna*. Yes. And things changed for me in the village after that. A couple of peasants came to help me rebuild my hut. The women still stared but none of them spat anymore. I had my talents and I shared them. People came to me. Nobody dared call me ‘devil whore’ again, for fear of angering the virgin, perhaps even more fearful of angering me. Heh. Hear how quiet now?”

I listened to her story, warmed by her fire. “I never knew,” I said. The shame of Paolo surged in my chest, like nettle that leaves its sting on the skin. “And the man, Ettore. What happened to him?”

Gelsomina pressed the flat of her hands to her thighs.

“With sheep shears, I cut all the hair from my head. I made a pit in the ground, where I placed the hair, and threw over it the bitter herb. Ettore left me with one thing before he disappeared. It came from a porpoise’s throat. To the fishermen, this brought good luck. I placed this into the pit, making a small cut in my finger so the drops fell where I let them. I said my words and let the fire take what it would.

“Thoughts of Ettore no longer visited me. Then, news came of his death. Floating near Brindisi they found him, alone in his boat for who knows how long, an entire hake spine lodged in his greedy throat. In crazed hunger he had tried to swallow the fish whole. The hake took its own revenge. Its skull protruded from Ettore’s mouth, its sharp needle-like bones, those tiny

swords, puncturing his wind pipe, piercing his neck.” She lifted her hand, as if to toss salt over her head. “*Per cari....* He gave me no peace.”

I pictured the dead Ettore, floating in his boat, the image of Paolo still fresh, his running from me as I sank in the mire. And I had helped his mother take him from the dangers of war. What had I done? What he did to me he could never undo.

“Be thankful that this man has made you hate him,” Gelsomina said.

How easily Paolo thought he had rid himself of me. Back in the comfort of his big house now, sitting by its warm fires. The gossip he would share with the men in the square, about the girl who vanished, ran off somewhere. Soon enough, he would see my living face.

XII

The water at the marsh had taken most of the mud from my clothing, but the grasses still clung to my skirts as they dried by Gelsomina's fire. Wrapped in one of her blankets, I drifted from my thoughts into deep tunnels of sleep, waterlogged, waking in starts, straining breath. Gelsomina talked and sang to herself. "We had no dowries," I heard her say, "A walk in the forest, the appearance of a man, what happens there. This is how a woman begins a life."

When my clothing dried and I had dressed myself, Gelsomina went to one of her shelves. "My *apotheke*," she said. She put a package in my hand, bound with paper and thread. Herbs of hers. "They may serve you."

"How shall I use them, if I do?"

"Carefully. You must place them in the other's food, only once. Take none of the food yourself."

"I will bury them."

I started in the direction of my family home, now my uncle's home, remembering what Paolo had said to me: "What your uncle does with you." A weight in my legs, a cold ache, my body turned from that path, as if it knew where it had to go. As I opened the door of his hovel, Ugo's thick, dark brow, his eyes lifted from his page just long enough to see who it was who entered the room. He sat at the far end of the table, in his usual place. The days had shortened, bringing early night. I was to have come the next day. As if expecting me to explain my visit to him, he said nothing, waiting for me to take my place across the table from him. I watched while he turned the pages of a book, stopping at one, flipping back to another.

"You can make tea," he said, then, changed his tone. "Never mind."

He leaned backwards against his chair, his long arm reaching forward as he handed me a covered glass. By the gesture of his hand, the contents of the jar, I knew what he wanted me to do.

I took the two dead insects from the jar, mindful of the black shiny bodies, the wings of one closed tightly against its shell, the other, wings open in one last motion, exposing the rich purple of its under wing, a vibrant lining beneath a black cloak. I found the pins and opened the drawer where he kept his boards.

“*Schabe*, beetle,” I said.

“*Prionus schabe*,” Ugo said. “Its larvae bore in heartwood.”

“Do they feel pain?” I asked.

“No pain,” he said, “They search for air, not knowing that gas too expands, filling all possible space.”

I pierced the beetle’s shell at its center with the long pin, then placed the other beside it, its wings rising, opposing the quick downward thrust that fastened it to the board.

When I had finished with the insects, Ugo placed a box full of dirt-encrusted fragments on the table. A piece of tooth in a shard of clay. He gave me the chiseling tools as I rolled the sleeves of my blouse upward, to the half-point of my arm and then reached for the brush to clear away the first layers of dust. Ugo took the brush from my hand, lifting my arm from the table, his thumb and forefinger holding me on either side of the wrist. I had become used to his doing this from time to time, taking me up as he would a specimen from one of his many boxes, measuring some portion of my shape and dimension against some fleshless bone he had pulled from the ground.

“*Eichel*,” he said, a name he gave me after the little nut. “You work too hard.”

I saw the marks on my arm, from my fall, where Paolo held me to the ground. The long red slices I took from the blade grasses. My arm stiffened, my fingers curling inward.

Ugo turned my closed hand, lifting my fingers one by one. He placed the flat of his palm over mine, then, with his long fingers, traced the inside of my arm up to the bunched sleeve that hid the rest of me.

“Just the small pieces today,” he said. His voice did not reach me at first, as if, standing just behind me, he had directed his words to a far corner of the room and not downward, at the girl who sat at his table with her back to him.

He left my side for the place where he worked across the table, rows of boxes, notebooks and tools between us. A moment of reflection: “Use some water with the brush.”

As I worked, I saw the top of his head, the pull at his brow as he looked up and down again. His arms, spread to either side, stretched the length of the table. With his mouth, he moistened the nib of a pen, leaving traces of black ink on his lower lip. I pulled a human tooth from the clay. How it had found its way into this piece of bowl. Dipping my brush into the water, I gently scrubbed and loosened the encrusted earth.

Under the lamplight I cleaned the last of the small fragments Ugo had given me. A piece of femur. I dipped it in the jar beside me, the water making a rich glaze over the dark surface. The time when I normally left to return to my uncle’s house had come and gone when Ugo stood from his working place and, in the way in which I had become accustomed, bent his head to avoid the ceiling’s low cross-beam that marked the dividing point of our two stations of work. His shadow fell over my arrangement of polished bones. I hoped for the touch of his fingers tracing the cord along my back, like an awaited evening bell that still startles. Instead, he touched the hair at the back of my head, lifting from its tangle a long strand of dried grass. I followed the

movement of his hand with my head, seeing, in the panes of the glass case where he kept his ancient skulls, the image of myself emerging from the dark contents of those shelves. The sweep of my brow masked the same spot on the skull behind it. Dark pockets veiled my eyes, over the strong bone of my cheek, a disk of light. The hair that fell on either side of my face a weft of pond debris.

The touch that always signaled the moment for my departure came. His hand rested at the small of my back. Now he would tell me to go.

“Strange one,” Ugo said. “Why did you come?”

He lifted me from the chair where I sat so that I had to grasp at his hips with my legs as he carried me to the place where his wooden bed lay. He set me there, observing me almost as he had done when he first examined me. For a moment, nothing, then, with the tip of his finger, he touched the moist pool that had formed in the notch above my mouth. He pressed lightly into my lips, parting them, the taste of salt as he followed the curve of my chin to my throat. With the same attention he gave to all things, he studied my blouse, its worn threads, the bindings that held it in place. He carefully pulled the blouse from my shoulders and lowered it to my waist. His hands, at the center of my breast, loosened the strings that held my bodice. Moisture bathed my chest.

I placed my hands at his sides, where the rib ends and the waist begins, waiting for the weight of his body. As if to remove from me all expectations, he lifted me up again, with a half turn taking me to the glass case where my image appeared before the skulls. My back at the wall now, he pressed himself into me, one hand lifting my skirts, the other securing me at the thigh. His face at my neck, I felt the coarse grain of his unshaved beard, the soft skin where no beard grew. His mouth brushed against my ear. The quick drive of his hip drew me upwards, tearing

me. The wall shook with us. I heard the rattle of skulls, the long dry bones sliding against glass. In spite of my pain, my hands pulled at the hair of his head to bring his mouth to mine. My first kiss. My mouth disappeared into his. I searched for him with my injured limbs.

Ugo's body was like the chestnut, made of knot and rope. The man who was my teacher, whose work I served, held his weight and length against me. We lay over his bed, my back to him. Through the opening of the under drawers that covered him ankle to neck, I felt the cave of his chest, everything that I had worn during the day bunched and twisted around my hips and waist. In the brief time that we had, we would never fully undress for one another.

His head pressed into my neck, I felt the splintered boards of his sleeping bench at my back. "It will not be easy," he said, stroking the back of my head.

I thought my plainness the reason he did not look at my face. His were not indifferent hands. They moved over the coarse outer layers of my clothing, releasing clasps to find small pockets of skin. He watched as I found ways to touch him, pulling at him as I would a mass of marsh reeds, that same tautness, that give. He made a deep, low sound, his hand at the back of my head, guiding me. I dove, a water bird following the long stem to its root until, clasping my hair, he lifted me upward for air. My mouth filled with the warm rush of his seed that trickled over my cheek and into my hair as I lay back. I swallowed that essence, its bitter afterward, his hum in my ear.

What took place between us happened in a matter of weeks, fewer than I could count on my two hands. "There it is," he would say, uncovering this or that part of me. He paid particular

attention to my knees, “round, very round,” moving to my calves, then to my jaw, “an ox bow.” Making the sound of a horn, he buried his head beneath my arm.

“The clavicle, where is it?” he said.

“*Schlüsselbein*,” I said.

“Bones that show themselves on others, hide on you.”

My hand, beneath his thick under layers, slid along his lean thigh. A ridge of soldered skin, smoothed by time, extended up to his abdomen.

“How?” I said, taking my hand from that hidden scar to the scar on his face.

“I’ll tell you if you like,” Ugo said. Minutes passed before he spoke again. “At the home where I lived, a gas stove for heating, a ruptured flue. Shards of hot iron flew across the room.”

I had seen a stove of iron only once, at the Guardabassi estate. Its long black pipe. We had no gas in our region. The peasants, fed the stove with wood.

“A terrible thing,” I said.

“That was the least of it.”

He spoke in even tones, a teacher’s even pace. “My wife had gone to light the stove, our small boy in her arms. I sat reading in a chair across the room when a wedge of hot iron struck my cheek. It knocked me backwards in the chair. My wife and son dead before smoke filled the room. Later, I found the cause. An obstruction forced through the flue with a stick and wire. A boy’s prank perhaps, I never knew. Our families closed their door to us when we married. I was a Jew from a wealthy family, living in a poor Christian quarter, with his Christian wife. Our neighbors did not welcome us but until the incident, they let us be.”

He left his university, with his trunks, to go south, “As far as I could go.”

I asked him if he had ever returned.

He shook his head. “In my life I have pursued a history of lands. Which brings me to you.”

I found a photo of the woman inside one of Ugo’s many books. The pale, transparent fabric of her under dress, its edges of lace, tiny dark flowers embroidered on a white blouse. The blouse perfectly pressed, a refined cloth made to show the delicate skin underneath. Her eyes as clear and light as her oval face. I picked her up and set her down again.

Ugo never tired of what lay beneath the skin. He showed me the roundness of the bone where I was made, its round, smooth curves. His finger inside me, pressed against the ridge, the place where the hardness and softness meet. My cry there.

After him, I went to that place, pressed my own fingers against the smooth curve, the groove at the bone’s base.

That bone is the word *origin*.

XIII

Before first light I left Ugo sleeping, taking in my hands the earthen vase that sat empty beside the door so that he would wake with water for washing. I would start the fire and make tea. I covered my head with a small blanket that rested over Ugo's chair, taking one of the narrow alleyways meant for the passage of livestock through town. The fountain at the hillside, used by farmers and shepherds, had gone dry. Shutters opened above me as I retraced my steps through the alley to the square where the town fountain sat, cautious that I would not meet my uncle there, he would not ask me where I had been, with whom I had stayed these last days. In the square, I saw only Gian Riccardo and Capro, the father of Tulio, both asleep at their small table, the first, his back at the prefecture wall, leg stretched out the length of his cane, the other's head turned sideways on the table, lying over his only arm, the empty sleeve of the lost arm reaching for his shoe. An emptied pitcher, a jug, a few glasses lay at their feet.

I walked quietly to the fountain, intent on meeting no one before I could fill my vase and leave. I held the vase while water flowed. One of the sleeping men stirred. He coughed into the cold, that sullen spray. The rattle of his stick falling to the ground. With the weight of the vase in my arms, I stepped from the fountain. Morning let brittle rays into the square through the archway leading to the hills. Cool patches of stone bled through the mist.

At the far end of the prefecture, where two walls met, something stirred from the stone floor. Two dogs, bellies at the ground, circled one another. One of the dogs lifted itself and growled, backing into the legs of a chair and table pushed against the wall. A dark green coat lay over the chair. I saw in his usual place the man who I had run from in the fields, the figure I had once admired. He stretched himself, his foot seeking the dog, his head rising from his chest. Our eyes met, my face inside the wool Capuchin. The back of his shoulders met the wall behind him,

a gelid, immobile stare in his waking face. His pale skin showed signs of fever from drink and the night air. He swallowed, a ripple through his spine, three quick starts of breath. I stood, though my legs trembled. He looked as though he had seen a phantom.

I turned from him, vase in hand, slipping as quickly as I could into the winding gutters through which I had come, glancing once or twice behind me to see that no dog followed at my heel.

As a living girl I made so little impression. How much more I made as a ghost.

I saw him once again, a day or so later, riding inside a carriage I had not seen before. A black covered coach with bright yellow drapes on the inside. The coach circled the village walls in morose parade before taking the high road above the valley fields. Paolo had married a Neapolitan girl. They rode in her father's carriage. Dust rose under pelts of rain, the wheels of the carriage throwing out clods of dirt. The bride wore a veil over her face. Paolo wore a black hat that hid his eyes. Neither looked at the other. He showed only the side of his face at the window, not looking out at all who gazed at him. The watchers stood, speechless, until the carriage passed.

"Our groom looked a little pale. Did you hear that cough? A dry sound."

"A humid sound, I'm sure. He put a cloth to his mouth."

"To catch phlegm or blood?"

"He goes to the warmer climates."

"With her?"

"We fêted him too well before the nuptials. He is not one of us, not accustomed to the way we live."

XIV

When I had seen the last of that black carriage, I returned through the archway, to the edge of the square. The pine branches above the terrace, heavy with rain, dropped their weight in a long shower onto empty tables and chairs. Some shiny substance covered the pavement near the tables. It bubbled like cream. I had reached the angle that fed into the narrow street to my house when I saw that, instead of spilled liquid, pieces of white paper lay over the cobblestones, soaked and puckered. Wrappings for small favors, I thought at first, left by the Guardabassi after the recent wedding. A custom of the old landlords, when Don Guardabassi still lived, for the new year or on special occasions, a basket of small cakes wrapped in paper, translucent with oil, tiny wooden balls for children to play with, appeared in the square. But even before the war, the Guardabassi family had abandoned this custom, and little joy or good will seemed present in the scene I had just witnessed.

I lifted one of the wet papers from the ground. On its face it had a drawing: in red, a sickle, in black, a cross. Irma, the barkeep's wife, came into the vacant square, her thick hair, unbound, hit her wide shoulders. Approaching the tables, she slid over the slick stone, then steadied herself, smoothing her apron over her hips. Some half obscenity escaped from her mouth.

"Look at this mess. Vito."

She bent at the waist, the fliers shredding in her hands as she pulled them from the ground. I folded the paper in my hand and left the square.

The next clear morning, I saw Gian Riccardo standing with Beniamino, where white manifestos covered the prefecture walls. The same black and red drawings, the sickle and cross.

Above this image, names in black letters. Seeing the names, I went to the wall, thinking some news had come of my father and others, missing like him. The two men paid no attention to me.

“Have you noticed?” Gian Riccardo said.

“I didn’t see these before today,” Beniamino said.

Gian Riccardo read aloud. I recognized the names of men, women, and children from our village: my mother’s brother, Ivo, the whole line of the Bisonti, half of the d’Amici. People who had died. Tulio, my cousin and childhood friend.

After the last name, Gian Riccardo read: “Dead of starvation.”

“Why do they bring this to us now?” Minerva, hearing Tulio’s name, came to the wall. “What reason to unbury our dead?”

I heard the name of an old peasant who had collapsed in the square, the day my father took his papers as a soldier. Beppe Ruberti.

“Remember him?” Beniamino said.

“An awful sight,” Gian Riccardo said. “Frothing at the mouth like that, his yellowed skin. I lost my younger siblings to cholera as a child. He had that same look. I backed away from him.”

“He died right here while we watched. Of starvation they say.”

“Perhaps it’s true. He had no family left.”

My father had taken Ruberti as a worker one season, but the massari, seeing how slowly he worked, sent him away. He and Carlino carried the dead body from the square, the night before the two of them left.

“I’ll never stop digging graves,” Carlino said.

After my father and he finished burying Ruberti, Carlino dug another two.

Beniamino lifted the hat from his head. He had not trimmed his mustache in days. Some of the hairs stuck to his upper lip. "Not the prefect who posts these messages."

"No," Gian Riccardo said. "Doesn't seem."

Coming from my uncle's piece of land, I stopped to pull dandelion along the road. Some peasants I knew talked with a stranger, a little way from our village steps. The stranger greeted me as I approached, lifting his cap. He had fine, sharp features and silver in his dark hair. I gave him the greeting one gives to a stranger, a lift of the head. "Day," I said, no more than that. The man had a familiar face but I could not place him. My father's age, some years more or less.

I saw the man again a few days later, from the square. I stood at the terrace wall. He talked with four or five peasants from our village, where the road bordered the fields, two young men I'd never seen with him. My uncle walked up through the fields. When the peasants saw my uncle, they left the three strangers. The older man lifted his cap as my uncle approached. My uncle jerked his head in the direction of the stranger and walked on.

"What do they mean with all these manifestos?" Beniamino said. "New ones every day: 'Reforms not honored, Promises not kept. We starve to feed foreign mouths. Property is theft'."

"The prefect is going mad," Gian Riccardo said. "He had the walls whitewashed the other day, and now, look at all of these. I heard him say he ordered one of the *carabinieri* to stand guard at night."

"Out in the cold all night. I'm sure they'll agree."

Not long after, I saw the silver-haired stranger in the square when I came to buy bread. He stood against the wall under the tall pine. One of the young men I had seen on the road stood with him.

Gian Riccardo paid the baker's son for two loaves. He glanced over his shoulder at the men under the tree. "The older one, I don't know where, but I've seen that face before." He took the bread back to his table.

I searched my memories of my father, the faces we saw as we came and went to the fields. I could not find my match.

While the older man kept his place against the wall, the younger man walked out into the light of the square. He wore the same wool cap as his companion. The younger man had a thin beard and slight frame. His clothing seemed to fall from him. He looked around him with quick, sharp eyes and then back to his companion whose figure, in shadow, I could barely see from where I stood. Midday and clear, many had come for their bread or water, or to sit and talk. The young man held his arms up, as if to catch something falling from above. "Beppe Ruberti. Landlords to blame," he called out. He stepped up onto the fountain step. He yelled the names that had appeared on the first manifestos, the names of our dead. "D'Amici, Lucero. Dead of starvation. Mignona, Tulio."

Capro sat at the tables. "Who gives you the right to speak of my son?"

"Calm yourself," Gian Riccardo said.

The young man looked at Capro who glared at him. Bright red spots at his cheeks.

"Let me speak," the young man said. "More die in Foggia yearly than in any other region of Italy. More die here than in any other country on the continent. Your children grow ill and die because they are not fed."

"My child not fed?" Capro said. He rose from his chair. "I gave him bread." He lifted his only arm at the young man, making the vulgar gesture. He walked stiffly towards the fountain. The young man looked back in the direction of the tall tree, then began his speech again.

“That bread you gave him, it was not enough,” he said.

Capro had reached the fountain. “Not enough? You say I killed my child?” He flicked his arm out to strike the speaker. The young man moved himself with a quick dart. Capro lurched forward, losing his balance. He fell onto the fountain steps. He lifted his head slowly, bringing his hand to his face.

Minerva went to her husband. Others in the square came to stand around her. The old men stood from their seats. The young man stepped back, so that he stood on the fountain’s base.

“Is he hurt?” Gian Riccardo said.

Across the square, the companion of the young man stood at the prefecture wall. He seemed unmoved, as if nothing worried or surprised him, while his younger colleague had an agitated air.

“Give him space,” Gian Riccardo called.

People stood away from the fountain.

“You fool,” Minerva said to her husband. “Picking fights with younger men. And you,” she said to the speaker. The young man said nothing.

“He’ll have broken something,” Gian Riccardo said.

“My husband drinks his pension from the war,” Minerva said. The two of them lifted Capro’s head. Blood covered his nose. Minerva took a cloth from her skirt and held it to Capro’s face. He pushed her hand away once, then let her do it.

“Explain yourself,” Gian Riccardo said to the stranger. “The boy died like many others, of malaria. And Ruberti, will you blame us for that? Are you another priest who blames us for our sins?”

“I have records,” the young man began.

“Who cares for your records?” Capro said.

The young man looked to the archway that led to the road. “The bread you work for, the landlords, they talk among themselves, they give you less than your share. Bread alone cannot feed you and they give you the worst. For this you weaken, maladies take you and yours.”

“Why this now?” Minerva said.

“I have my little piece of land,” Gian Riccardo said.

“You should all have.”

“Who sends you here?” Minerva said.

“I come with the labor groups, the *syndicalisti*, unionists, for worker’s rights,” the young man said. “More like me do this work.” He pointed to his companion. The older man did not move from his place. “Other regions have organized, for better wages, better food. Will you be the last?”

“We have no power,” Beniamino said. “The landlords ignore the people of their own region. Half of the seasonal workers they hire from the outside. Since my life began, and to this day.”

“For you, pensioner, but now give others a chance. Laws exist,” the young man said. “Laws in your favor, that they do not observe. Only you can change this.”

“We, change? How?”

“Together, stand up to them, demand what they owe you.”

“Do you know our history? People have tried this before. What you want from us is blood,” Gian Riccardo said.

“You’ve had your say young man,” Beniamino said. “Now leave us alone.” To Gian Riccardo: “He called me pensioner, as if I were dead.” He shook his head and walked back to his table.

The young unionist stood for a moment without speaking. With his head, he made a signal to his companion. The stranger walked to the gateway leading to the roads.

“Think about it.” He left the steps of the fountain. “Sorry old man,” he said to Capro, who still sat on the ground. “No offence.”

“Help him up,” Minerva said to Gian Riccardo after the young man left. “Here is your blood.”

Gian Riccardo and Minerva lifted Capro from the ground. Capro took the cloth from his nose. Blood had dried on his upper lip. He handed the cloth to Minerva.

“Keep it. You may still need it,” she said.

With his arm over Gian Riccardo’s shoulder, Capro walked slowly back to the tables, the former mumbling something in the other’s ear. Through the gateway, the two strangers took the road leading down the hill.

Minerva rinsed her apron of Capro’s blood. I went to sit with her at the fountain steps. “What stuff,” she said looking up at the sky.

“What did he say just now?” I asked, watching the table where Capro and Gian Riccardo had returned to their seats.

“Who, Gian Ri?” She lifted her hand to the sky. “What does he know? He said the man made some sense.”

“Ludovico’s furious,” my mother said when I returned home.

I dropped some beans into a pot of water and took the dandelion from my pocket, pulling the leaves from the root.

“For what?”

“Some vandals took an axe to his fence, where he keeps the pigs. One of the pigs went up onto the road.”

“Did he get the pig back?”

“Yes, luckily. But he’s worried they’ll come back to rob the shed. He says he’s going to use metal to reinforce it.”

Zio opened the door. “Both of you, come with me to the square.”

“Mother never walks that far anymore,” I said.

“She’ll walk today.”

“Of course Ludo,” my mother said.

I put a shawl over my mother’s shoulders and helped her from her chair. Her arm through mine, I held her upright as we walked slowly back to the square. Zio walked on ahead.

“Meet me at the prefect’s office,” he said.

My mother and I entered the dark building, taking some time to climb the stairs. His office filled with smoke, the prefect looked ruffled when we entered. He sat at his desk. I sat my mother in one of two chairs facing the desk. My uncle took a seat in the other chair. My mother looked up at her brother. Zio looked at the prefect. He held himself upright. The jacket he wore pulled at his back.

“You. Wait outside,” Zio said to me.

I left the building. Standing outside, I watched one of the young unionists who had just arrived in the square. “Young man,” Gian Riccardo said to the new arrival. “Come here. I want to say something to you.”

The young man went to the table. He sat with the men for awhile while they played their cards. Gian Riccardo eyed me, standing beside the prefecture. “Years,” he said, “since I’ve seen your mother.”

I waved at him. I could only guess what my uncle had devised up in that room. What did Gian Riccardo want with me? I looked at the ground.

By the time my uncle leaned out the prefect’s window, the young unionist had left the older men. “Come up and get your mother,” Zio said.

I did as he asked. Zio bounded down the stairs ahead of us. The prefect stood at the door of his office, watching as I helped my mother take the stairs. Through the railing, I saw him wipe his hands on the front of his jacket. He closed his door.

The young unionist circled the square. “Landlords, give us our share. Work for wages, not the rat shit that passes for food.”

The men who sat at their tables watched the affair. “Gentlemen,” Zio called. He gave the men a hearty wave. Gian Riccardo lifted his hand from the table in response. “These pests. Vandals,” Zio said. “I’ll get the *carabinieri* to chase them out of here.”

“Why should we mind. It’s entertainment for us,” Gian Riccardo said. Seeing my mother, he lowered his head.

My mother looked tired and flustered after our visit with the prefect. The unionist, still shouting, neared the prefecture.

“Get lost,” Zio said. “I’ll find out which one of you.”

“Thug,” the young man said. “The *massari* are thugs.”

Zio grabbed the unionist by the collar and dragged him to the *questura*. He pushed the young man’s face into the wall. One of the *carabinieri* came out from his office.

“What’s all the ruckus?”

“He’s a vandal,” my uncle said. “Do your job.”

The officer tied the man at the wrists. “I thought I told you. No disturbances in the square.” He pulled the unionist into the *questura*.

Zio left us to sit with the men at their table. My mother’s legs had begun to buckle. I held her up as we walked back to our house.

“What happened in that office?”

“Nothing.”

“Mother.”

“Ludovico needed my signature.”

“For what?”

“For the title of the house. I had to sign a declaration saying that I believed my husband dead. The house belongs to your uncle now. Ludo will take care of me.”

“And if Babbi returns?”

“He has no claim to the house. Your father left us.”

“Zio uses you,” I said.

“Say nothing. I insist,” she said.

XV

“This one who came said the privilege of land is due to all who work,” Gian Riccardo said.

I had come to the square to accompany Minerva who swept the leaves and branches that the wind had carried from the trees. Women in our village took turns with this task from time to time. Caglione sat among the men who talked. “Thieves,” he said.

“You do well enough among them,” Don Palmisano said. I had not seen him in our village for over a year.

“Once a priest, now a unionist,” Caglione said.

“Still a priest.”

“What brings you back here priest?” Gian Riccardo said. “The lot of you, what brings you here?”

“My lot has improved. I admit it,” Caglione said. “If you worked as I do, pensioner.”

“When you no longer have two good legs.” Gian Riccardo struck the table with his fist.

“On whose side do you stand?” Palmisano asked Caglione.

“Gentlemen.” A voice came from behind the tables. “The square has ears.” The silver-haired stranger stood against the stone wall, beneath the branches, his arms crossed.

Gian Riccardo turned his head to look behind him. “The man proves his own point. Who knew that you stood there? Come out where we can see you forester. Palmisano, the two of you know one another.”

“We are acquainted,” Don Palmisano said. “Sit down Falco.”

I remembered the man then, a forester my father and Carlino knew. He shifted his stance beneath the oak so that the last of the cool afternoon light fell over the side of his face. Light streamed through his beard striking his shoulder and arm from behind. The cap he wore I had

seen before, in the forest, where my father went to look for Carlino who had taken his gun into the woods during his dispute with the Guardabassi.

My father did not see me follow him when he went to look for his friend. I followed his footsteps under the autumn moon. Even then, I feared the sound of the Guardabassi hounds, two of them yelping under a large chestnut that my father neared with his wide, uneven step. Don Guardabassi stood at a distance from the dogs with three of his men. All of them carried guns. One of the men shouted at my father as he approached. "Stand back."

"I bring no arms," my father said, halting. The man who had advised my father turned his eyes to the place where I had stopped behind him. I ran to where my father stood. "*Che fai?*" he whispered, a trace of anger in his voice. He pulled me behind him. My hand clutched the back of his coat. The dogs leapt at the base of the tree. Standing on their hind legs, they scratched at the trunk. I looked upward into the branches where Carlino crouched among the leaves.

"Come down poacher," Don Guardabassi called up to Carlino.

"A forest belongs to the people, to no one man. I have an interest here," Carlino said.

"Poacher, these lands do not belong to you," Don Guardabassi said.

"We've used the forests for centuries, what's left of them. I've done no poaching," Carlino said.

"What will they do to him?" I asked. I felt my father's hand slide over my mouth.

The hunter who had ordered my father to stop pointed his gun up into the branches. "We'll take a fat bird."

Carlino secured his arm on a branch at shoulder level and lifted his gun.

"He's mad," I heard my father say. To Don Guardabassi he said: "My friend has taken nothing from these woods. The woods are bare. Hunger makes him fitful. He wandered from his

path.” I knew that Carlino hunted in the woods the Guardabassi claimed as theirs. My father went with him, from time to time. They said Don Guardabassi’s hunting groups had scoured the lands, leaving nothing. “*Compagno*, come down,” my father called to Carlino. “Do not shoot him,” he said to the men. “*Padrone*, you do not know this, but we work for you, as *annaroli* on your estate.”

“You trespass *annaroli*. And you bring this young girl,” Don Guardabassi said. I tried to hide behind my father’s back. I touched my forehead to his palm. My cheek burned. I had brought shame to him. “I have a witness who says this man has poached,” Don Guardabassi said. He looked over his shoulder. “Show yourself.”

“*Merda*,” my father whispered.

“A regular shooting party,” Carlino called from the trees.

I looked out again from behind my father. A fourth man walked slowly to where the three men stood. I had not seen him earlier, perhaps because he stood within the shadows of the trees. The sturdy man had a beard that covered his face. He wore a dark cap. He lifted his head to view Carlino perched in the branches. I saw the brown feather at the side of his cap. “*Salve*,” the man said to Carlino, a familiar greeting. The dogs had stopped their barking and stood inspecting the man who appeared.

“Forester,” one of the Guardabassi men said, “tell us what you saw.”

“I know this man,” the forester said.

“What did he take?” Guardabassi asked.

“On one occasion a pheasant. On another, a hare.”

“From these lands,” the man with the gun said. “You saw him take game from these lands.”

“I never said I saw this man shoot the game in these lands. I saw him walk with the game through the woods. Perhaps he took the game elsewhere, on the roads or in the fields. I said that the man had some skill.”

“Forester, for whom do you work?” the man with the gun said.

The forester stroked his chin, then held the palm of his hand against his throat. “A good question. Not so easy to answer,” he said. “Under certain jurisdictions, I work for the landed estates, for the Guardabassi, the Pinto, the D’Imperio further on. You will also find my name in the registers of each commune. I owe my service to each of them.”

“Common land, common land,” Carlino repeated. He still held his gun at the hunter who stood below him, neither of the two changing their positions. Wind shook the branches of the chestnut. Carlino slid his hand from the trigger to tighten his hold on the branch.

“We have a jurisprudent here,” the third hunter said.

Don Guardabassi rubbed his hands together. “It grows late. Who pays your wages forester?”

“Another good question sir. For services rendered.... It depends on the year. Last year I brought you wood, cleared your trails, counted your game, but the Pinto, who claim a smaller forest, paid me more. From the perspective of the communes, I am a public servant.”

“Why is there no game in my woods?”

One of the dogs had come to stand beside the forester. He lowered himself to stroke the animal’s head. “The years have been lean sir. Trees have fallen. You have your wood, but the game, where can it go?”

“That’s no excuse,” Guardabassi said.

“If you’ll remember, you brought many parties to shoot in the last years.”

“And if I did. My forests, my kill. You greeted this man as though you knew him.”

“I meet all who come to the forests. He pays me nothing.” The forester stood. “Forgive me if I say it *padrone*. A pheasant on the plate means one less in the bush. You did little to restore what nature provides. Had you asked me....”

A sour look came over Don Guardabassi’s face. He rubbed his hands together again. “Simone,” he said to the man who held the gun, “you might check your sources better next time. This man will take no side.” Simone looked from our landlord to Carlino. Lifting his gun, he took a step closer to the chestnut. Carlino pressed his face to his rifle. “That’s enough,” Don Guardabassi said. “Will we stand here all night to become murderers? Simone, Stefano, come, let’s go. I say it’s the Pinto who draw game from our woods.” The third hunter, handed a pair of gloves to the older man. I recognized the name of the man who had barely spoken during the affair, the oldest Guardabassi son. The son and the marksman gathered their belongings, the marksman taking charge of the dogs. As they left, Don Guardabassi shook his arm at Carlino. To the forester he said: “See that he gets out of here.”

“I’ll stay until he leaves the tree,” the forester said. “I’ll even escort him from the woods.”

“Go home,” Guardabassi called to my father and me.

My father’s back tightened at those words. “You go home,” he whispered.

“Common land is common land,” Carlino said. When the Guardabassi party had left the woods he lowered his gun. He and the forester had a good laugh, the one standing below, the other taking a seat on the branch, his legs moving back and forth in the air. My father did not laugh with them.

“You’ve made your point. Now come down before you fall out of that tree,” the forester said.

Carlino strapped the gun around his shoulder. He secured his arms on the branch above him, then let his feet down to a lower branch. He slid his legs along the trunk, easing himself down branch by branch until he hung from his arms alone. He dropped to the ground, landing in a pounce. “*Jesù santo*, I’m stiff,” he said. “But what fun.” The forester offered his arm. It took Carlino a few moments to stand.

My father and I left before them, the crisp bramble we crushed beneath our feet our only conversation. I heard the voices of Carlino and the forester behind us. As they neared, my father placed his arm over my shoulder. He held me to him as we walked. “Never follow me without my permission again,” he said.

I drew a breath. “No Babbi,” I said.

“Acorn,” he said as the others approached. “What a beating we’ll get at home.” Carlino mimicked the pheasant’s cry. “A fine victory for you,” my father called back to his friend. His mood had improved.

“So, Falco,” Carlino shouted. “Tell me truthfully. Have you seen any game in these woods?”

“A tough season, I’ll give you that,” the forester said. He lowered his voice. “If you want to know, the catch is less sparse on the Pinto grounds. But never say that you heard this from me.” He left us to take his own path.

The three of us walked to the edge of the woods. “Did you see that Guardabassi sniper, pointing his gun at me,” Carlino said to my father. “He’s been after me for years. Couldn’t wait to pull his trigger. Next time I’ll pull the trigger on him.”

We passed the gravesite, making our way down the hill, three shadows, crossing the empty square of Biccari.

Minerva and I began to scoop our pile of leaves into a sack that we would shake out again outside the wall, let them cover the hills. “Crush them first,” she said. “We’ll get more in.” We worked slowly, quietly, the two of us.

“Where’s your feather, falconer?” Palmisano said to Falco, in a hearty tone.

“I haven’t worn the feather in some time, but I kept the name.”

“No longer in that line of work?” Palmisano said.

“The birds, the forest. Times have changed.”

“You fought up there, didn’t you?” Gian Riccardo said, his thumb pointing up at the sky. “Come to the table where we can see you.”

“Riccardo, are we referring to the heavens?” The priest made a place for the forester at the table. “I had heard that you went up to the Trentino Mountains, but when did you return? I never learned that.”

The forester moved his chair back from the table so that, when he sat, half of his face remained in the shade. “I did surveillance in the mountains above the Isonzo valley. Then they sent me to Caporetto. I returned with the rest of them, after the Austrians... let us go.”

“Captured? For how long?” Gian Riccardo said. “Not wounded I see.”

“Not much,” Falco said. He paused for an instant before each response, a man who guarded his words.

Gian Riccardo pointed to his knee. “This happened early on. I helped out with mess for awhile, then they sent me home. Many of ours never returned. What village did you say you were from?”

“Did you hear of it?” Palmisano said. “A band of workers entered the storage cellars on a big estate over the hills, tore things up, got good and drunk. A little over a fortnight ago.”

“I heard the news,” Caglione said.

Palmisano continued. “The farmers have responded in kind. Some of them formed their own groups, hired some outsiders, bandits, thugs, the worst of the worst.”

“The *malavita*,” Caglione said. “They’ve gone through a few villages now, looking for the upstarts. They pick on whomever they please. Some peasants even killed.” To Falco he said: “You must know of this.”

Falco rested his bearded chin in the palm of his hand. He nodded. “An old practice, to scare the peasants. Workers come cheap. The people are easily contained when a landlord can always hire from the outside. We call the roving peasants parasites, worms, but they’re hungry like the rest.” He looked over to Caglione. “In a way, you are in the middle of it all. An *annaroli* is not a *massari*, not a peasant. Who handles the job of *massari* for the Guardabassi now?”

Caglione shook his head. “The American. Didn’t you know?” Some rancor stirred in him, that Falco should remind him of this. “Since when do you take an interest in these matters? You never held a peasant’s job. Still, you bring your radicals to unsettle the workers who then come with their complaints to me.”

“My radicals?”

“You know what they say. You can never trust a forester. He belongs to the people but aligns his interests with the landed classes. Do they pay you well?”

“Listen to him,” Falco said. He took a laurel leaf from the table and slipped it into his mouth. Its bitter taste spread over his face. “Say what you like, we’re all indebted to the same people. The landowners are running scared now. The *massari* have control of the lands. Tell the truth, you envy them.”

“Not so,” Caglione said.

“One must be cautious with words,” Palmisano said. “You accuse the forester. Whose part do you take?”

“I’m no *massari*. No thug,” Caglione said.

“Keep your head then. We speak the same language I think.” Palmisano lowered his voice. “Falco travels between regions. He knows the situation better than we do.”

“I only mention. His personal, stake in our affairs, remains unclear,” Caglione said.

“Our affairs,” Falco said. I saw the side of his face under the branches from where I stood, still chewing on a bit of leaf. Sunlight fell over his hand that rested at the table’s round edge. “You didn’t go up north with us, did you?” he said to Caglione.

“To fight. No. I stayed. So what? Because of my lungs. I stayed.”

“I’m hardly a young man and I went,” Gian Riccardo said.

“The priest gives good advice when he tells you to mind your words.” Falco spoke to Caglione but he looked straight ahead. “You talk of my stake. What about yours? Look around you. How much of the woods remain? You didn’t notice that they took it all away on trains? When I went to the north, some forest still existed there. When I left the Isonzo, gone, like that. Their trees. Our trees. Why do you suppose they intend to leave the farmlands here fallow for grazing? The farmer wants no part of the trouble, to hire, to pay in kind some little sum. Think of the worker, already starving. The Guardabassi have no reason to till their land.”

“The Guardabassi have always planted. We would have no food in the region otherwise,” Caglione said.

“How little trickles down to you as it is. The landlords have fled. The Guardabassi live in Naples.”

“The widow is still there.”

“She has no control over any of it,” Falco said. “The sons, they leave her there. That family has never learned to manage its own affairs. They all look the other way and hope for the best, while the *massari* do their will and pocket the profit.”

“He speaks the truth. Even a priest can see this,” Palmisano said. The priest looked to where Minerva and I stood against the terrace wall with our sack of leaves.

“Good to see you Palmisano,” Minerva called. She lifted the sack. “We’ve done our part I’d say.”

“You do a good thing,” Palmisano called.

Gian Riccardo followed Palmisano’s gaze. My eyes met his. Turning back to the table: “We speak of the girl’s uncle, the *massari* for the Guardabassi now,” he said, loud enough for us to hear.

“What do we want with your business, any of you,” Minerva called to them. “Leave us out of it.”

“Your point is taken,” Palmisano called back. “Compatriots,” he said to the men at the table, “the *questura* is inches away. We’ve stayed too long. Falco, you should leave soon.” He saluted them.

“Captured,” Gian Riccardo said. “Did you ever see the two who came from here? They went missing. They must be dead.”

“Perhaps. I don’t remember,” Falco said, rising. “Many things.”

Minerva took the sack of leaves. “I’ll get rid of them. The back wall is nearly at my door.” I did not go to Falco to ask him if he had seen my father anywhere. Perhaps I feared that he would tell me something I did not want to hear. I hoped that I might find an opportunity to speak to him at another time. As I walked home, I saw that my uncle stood in the street with a man I had not seen before. I did not like the man’s look. I covered my face as I passed them. Zio Ludovico, his back to me, laughed with the man who wore a dark shirt under his jacket. “Let them come to me,” Zio said. “I’ll show them how hospitable I can be.”

XVI

I did my bit for the turning of earth, fallow acreage we primed for its season of sleep. At the end of the season, fewer and fewer of us worked at this task. We had come to the borders of the Guardabassi lands. I slept on the cold ground those nights, away from my uncle's gaze. At dawn, I took my place at the corner of the field. An old peasant I had not seen before grumbled when they chose a *femmina* to work among them. For the days we worked, I kept my distance from him. Bent over the earth, he took no pause from the task until the day's end.

"Bring the cart, you over there," one of the peasants called. "We'll take our bit of earth."

"The good it will do us," the old peasant said.

The wooden cart sat in the middle of the field filled with rock and the dead herbage we had cleared. I left the corner where I worked as I had finished my task. The cart carried more weight than I could push myself. I did not argue when the old peasant took one of the handles, the two of us straining to move the load. He breathed as heavily as I did, the cart's wheels grinding into dry clumps of earth. "Sure enough, it's hard this year," he said. We had not had rain for the season. "It can't be planted, this ground. What a waste," the peasant mumbled. "I wonder what the farmer plans to do."

"Who knows who decides now," I said. "They may want to leave it dry, for grazing." A careless remark after the conversation I had overheard in the square. Land turned to grazing would deprive us of our work.

The peasant looked at me, his black pupil fixed on mine. A white growth of beard trembled slightly on his leathered chin. He groaned as we let go of the cart. "I've done my day of work," he said, lifting a small bundle of dried grass onto his back. "Where is the *annaroli*, for my pay?"

“He works in another field,” I said. “When they took us, they promised to pay us in the square. You didn’t hear?”

“I came in late,” he whispered. “They tuned me away at first. It made me angry when I saw you. Then that one there said they needed another man.”

I looked to the peasant who had called to us. “He’s not your *annaroli*,” I said.

“I worked, turned this earth, hard as rock. When does he come to the square?”

“In a day or two I expect. It’s never sure.”

“I want my pay,” he said. He walked from me, his body tilting from side to side as he tread slowly over the turned field.

From where I stood, I could just see the top of the tower beside the big house. The watchtower, my father called it once: “From its top, you can see further than all of the Guardabassi lands.”

“Can we climb it and look?” I asked.

“It’s not for us to use,” my father said. “Besides, the conquerors came before they could build the stairs. It’s hollow inside, I’ve heard. Only the outer stones remained after that siege.”

I took my share of grass and herb for our fire, ready to leave with the other peasants. Caglione met me, coming from his field. “Little one,” he said.

“No longer. One of the peasants who worked with us here asked for you. I told him to come to the square.”

“Alright,” Caglione said, “but they change the rules every day. Now he, your uncle, wants to know his profit before he pays.”

“How long will that take?” I asked. “You gave us no bread.”

“If I had it to give.” He wiped his head. “The other day, in the square, how much did you hear?” I said nothing. “Don’t take it harshly,” he said. He looked towards the hill where the tower stood. “I worked hard to gain their trust. Now, it seems, your uncle has overtaken me. His fat ladle stirs too many soups.”

“I gain nothing from that,” I said. I let my shovel fall to the ground. My father and Carlino had gained the trust of the other workers. With the landlords, my father said, one did best to go unnoticed.

“Our wages were to have doubled,” Caglione said.

I stared at the back of the old peasant who left the field. “Our wages or yours?” I said. “The Guardabassi always paid something. Many got nothing but bread.”

“It has come into law.”

“When?” I asked.

“A year since.” Caglione came nearer. “They burnt all the papers, the landlords. The Guardabassi son, and your uncle among them.”

“I know nothing of it,” I said. “He takes my wages as it is and I can do nothing about it.”

“The Guardabassi grease your uncle’s shoes. Lucky him.”

That bit of grease the size of the smallest fingernail that the favored workers took once a month as a reward for their labor. The hard leather in all weather, damp and dry, we needed that grease to soften the shoes. One fingernail full, not two. The poor worker could never take as much as the shoe required.

I took my shovel and began to walk away from him, dragging the tool behind me. He followed.

“We work for wheat and bring home chaff. Perhaps you’ve found another source for your bread.”

I ignored his insinuations. He used the words I had heard used by the criers in the square. He spoke for the worker while envying the position my uncle held.

“The landlords have spoken together. They devise a strategy, to give us less and less. ‘Worker’s wisdom,’ they call it. We take what they give or they cut off our work. You see that tower over there. The younger son had a bright plan to make it into a grain silo, to keep the grain from the earth. They knocked some stones out at the top then put in an iron door with a lock.”

“A crazy bunch, that family,” one of the peasants called. Most of the landowners kept their grain stores in pits that they covered with oil cloths and planks, or with flats of tin. A gang of hungry peasants could always get into one of those.

“Nothing much happened with that lazy son. Now your uncle thinks of restoring the plan. With the other landlords, he means to hoard the grain.”

“Why do you speak to me of this?”

“When I replaced your father,” Caglione said, “I did as he would do.”

“You are not my father,” I said. “My uncle is less my father than you.”

The pitcher of water, nearly emptied, lay where I had placed it on Ugo’s doorstep. I tipped the pitcher to rinse the dirt from my hands. The water streamed, breaking through a thin seal of ice. I shook the chill from my fingertips, then slipped cautiously through the door. He sat where I had grown used to finding him, broad shoulders over the table, the desk lamp throwing light onto his dark hair. He lifted his head, his eyes welcoming me for a moment, then turned back to his work.

“Gelsomina has come I see,” I said. They had continued the arrangement made between them when Ugo first arrived in our village. Gelsomina brought him his dinner in the evenings, stopping often to light the wood stove. In the morning, she came for the dishes. “Eh-oh,” she said on an evening when she found me still there. “You stay late.” An empty bowl sat on the table next to where Ugo worked. I had not eaten since morning and felt my hunger. The stove gave off a bit of heat. I took a piece of wood. “Shall I warm some water?” I said.

“Only if you want it for yourself,” Ugo said. I set the piece of wood down and went to the place where I normally worked. “It’s late for that,” he said. “Rest. You must be tired.”

“I’ll wait for you,” I said. I went to the bed where we had lain together and took a seat on its edge, my eyes drifting from the sparse haze of the room to the dim glow at the tableside where Ugo sat. I had seen him little among us in these last days when the outsiders came and went from our village. I wondered what he made of it all. Perhaps it did not interest him. He had stopped asking me about our customs and I could not remember the last time I had taken him to see the places where we made our offerings in the woods. If he went by himself while I worked in the fields, I did not know of it.

My head fell to my chest. I lifted my eyes to Ugo, still at his work. When I could no longer hold myself upright, I lay over the bed. A sea of dried earth filled my vision, thistles and weeds chopped from its crust, leaving black holes in the ground. I slept and did not wake until Ugo’s body lay next to mine.

“You’re awake,” I said.

“Yes.”

“How long have I slept?”

“It’s close to dawn now,” he said.

“You worked until now?”

I lay on my side. Ugo’s hand traced my shoulder, from neck, to elbow, to wrist. His hand slid under my arm. He cupped my breast, pushing upward beneath the rib. A rumble in his throat, stony smooth.

“I’ve wondered,” he said. “Don’t they say anything. About this. At your home?”

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” I felt his breath at my temple.

“No one has spoken yet,” I said.

“In the town?”

“What have you heard?”

His long fingers worked the hooks at the waist of my skirt. I lay quietly, my hand finding his as he eased the skirt over my hips. My uncle’s eye had noted some change in me. Though he often did not return to our home at night, I felt the concentration of Zio’s stare when our paths met. Since he had become a *massari*, my wages from the fields no longer touched my hands. I tended the house and his bit of land. If I had been more careless in these matters, he might have taken less interest in the other things I did.

“Such confusion everywhere,” I said. “The unionists who come. Peasants shout in the square. You’ve seen it?”

“Something, yes.”

“Why do you come so rarely to the square these last weeks?”

Ugo stroked the length of my spine. His mouth gently pulled at the skin of my neck. He lifted my underskirt from behind. His deft fingers slid between my thighs, gripped my woman’s hair. A warm ripple rose through my sacrum, through the arc of my back. I said nothing more.

I left the bed when the dim light entered the room, setting my bare feet on the cold floor. Some kindling and a few branches lay by Ugo's stove. I looked for a match to start the fire before I left, thinking then of the woman who had gone to light the iron stove with her child. I watched the white stream of my own breath as I moved, making as little sound as I could. I set the sticks into the mouth of the stove. My breath disappeared as it reached the small flame. I took a section of fat branch from the floor. Ugo turned in the bed.

Parts of my dress lay on the floor. I shook the stiffness from my skirt before I stepped into it and fastened the waist. Ugo drew a deep breath as I pulled my stockings and boots onto my feet. The blanket left him uncovered below the ankle. His face nearly touched the wall, tucked into the blanket, I saw nothing but the tuft at the back of his head. His empty dinner bowl still sat at his workplace. I took the bowl to set it outside for Gelsomina when she passed. When I had closed the cottage door behind me, I saw that she approached. I held the bowl in my hand.

"You come early," I said.

"One might say the same of you," she said.

"Well?"

"I have a few extra mouths to feed today. I need the bowl."

I gave the bowl to Gelsomina and took the pitcher from the ground. The little water left at its bottom, frozen tight.

"Walk with me to the fountain," I said.

That night, a dark pitch spread over the fields. After returning that morning to leave the filled pitcher at Ugo's door, I went to the house of my uncle, finding only my mother. There, I

swept and cleaned the hearth. I fetched water and, with the few coins Zio left us, a loaf of bread from the boy in the square. She would not take any food.

“Zio wants you to eat.”

“I have no appetite.”

I cut a piece of bread and left it beside her. “If you change your mind.” Then I cut a chunk for myself, finishing half of it quickly, putting the rest in my pocket. I left her with a small fire.

I returned to Ugo again, where I spent time cleaning and ordering his tools: the round *goniometro*, he had used to measure my face, the square *goniometro*, with its ruler attached, for craniums, his sliding compass, the compass, wishbone-shaped, he used to measure the thickness of the skin, the *cephalometre d’Antelme*, “For angular measurements at the side of the face.” He had used them all on me. I took them from the corner where they lay on the floor, one on top of the other. The metal, cold to the touch. I cleaned the dust and cobwebs from the tools, finding one or two rusted screws. Ugo gave me a fluid to pass over them.

“If you would, set those in the chest right next to you. Inside are some cloths. Cover them well, each.”

“You won’t use them again?”

“Do it please.”

I did as he said, then closed the lid of the chest. After this, I busied myself with the dust on his shelves, exchanging few words with him for the rest of the day.

Cold set in with the early night. Gelsomina came with the simple dinner she had prepared for Ugo. “Eat,” she said, “before it gets cold.”

“Yes, yes.” He looked at me. “You’ve worked hard today. You’ve worked enough.”

I brushed the fragments of rock and dirt from my side of the table. Perhaps because of Gelsomina's presence, Ugo did not look up at me as he took his mouthfuls of her soup and continued his work. I took my wrap and said goodbye to him.

As I left his cottage with her, I saw that people ran in the direction of the square. "What now?" I said.

Gelsomina shook her head. "I have my chickens to think of." She went her way. Remembering the bread in my pocket, I chewed as I walked to the square.

The hills across from Biccari glowed with flame. People stood watching at the stone wall.

"They burn the fields," somebody said.

"Who does?"

"The unionists."

"Dogs. Or perhaps the landlords do it, to collect."

Many whose faces I rarely saw had come out from their sheds to look. Minerva waved at me from among them. I went to her. In this season, they burned cut grasses and the rolls of hay we left in the fields. "That young one who came," Minerva said, "he wanted this."

"It makes an impression," I said.

The old peasant I had worked with the day before stood among the crowd. "The Guardabassi fields burn," he said.

I knew those fields too well. We had worked at their border. "Not the Guardabassi, the Pinto lands." A shiver ran through me as I said this, though I had never worked for that family, their fields met the Guardabassi fields. To see it, not only the fields burned, the fire burned part of the Pinto estate.

A burst of flame shot into the air. "What do you make of that?" Minerva said.

The peasant spoke: "The devil coming up from the center of the earth."

"The grain stores. They burn the harvest," I said.

"The winds are strong tonight," Minerva said. "The fire will spread." She took my hand in hers. "Touch my face, it's grown numb."

We took shelter under the eaves of the prefecture, not sleeping that night. If the fire had come before scything, it would surely have taken some of the Guardabassi fields. "A trick of fate it's not us, burning like that," Minerva said.

"Who knows what plans these rebels make?" the old peasant said.

When day broke, black patches smoldered across from us, letting out rivers of smoke. I followed Minerva back to her home. We stood beside her cold hearth, beating our frozen hands against ourselves. The flames in the hills had done little to warm us. "What fools, to stand out there all night," Minerva said. "The good it did us or them. Come, help me with this pan." She dragged a washbasin from the corner. We each took one of its handles, carrying the pan into the square. The peasants and villagers who still stood there found bricks and rocks to lay under the pan. The barkeep held his face against the window of his shop. With no shirt or jacket over his underclothes he unlocked the door of his small canteen and brought chopped wood for our fire. Minerva and I filled the pan with water and set it over the rocks. "Be a saint and bring us some coffee or chicory will you," Minerva called to the barkeep. He returned to his cellar, saying nothing. We all stood around the small fire. Smoke masked a pale disk of sun, suspended over the ridge of hills. The water rolled at last. The barkeep appeared again, a chunk of bread at the side of his mouth. He held a small bag that he gave to Minerva. She poured the contents of the bag into the water, the hot liquid turning a pale brown. The same man brought a tray of tin cups

to one of the tables then went back inside. One by one we filled the cups. The drink cooled quickly in the tin.

Villagers sat on steps and at the tables and chairs that looked out onto the fields. The old peasant came with one of the tin cups that Minerva filled with hot drink. “What’s your name old man?”

“Rado,” the peasant said.

“You’re not from here.”

“No, from Bovino. I go as far as Lucera or San Severo to find work. Little enough of it now.” The peasant glanced at me. “This girl says they mean to turn the fields into grazing lands.”

“I only repeated something I heard,” I said. The old man stared as though the decision had come from me.

“You had some fortune,” Minerva said, “to find a little work. They turn many of ours away.”

“I suppose,” the peasant said. “I used to travel easily in this region. Nothing’s certain now.” He wore a thin black jacket, too large for him, the sleeves turned back from the hand. “They say my town is all in a riot. I wouldn’t recognize the place. You won’t see me back there, and here I have to wait until they give me my pay.”

I had not seen Caglione since our last day of work in the fields. I too wondered when he would come to the square with the wages.

The peasant took his cup to the prefecture steps. I noticed Gian Riccardo coming through the alley with his customary slow gate, one hand pressed on the thigh of his weaker leg while he lifted the opposite hip. He, among others, had not appeared during the evening’s commotion. He seemed surprised to see us all there. Seeing no free chair, he stood for a moment before the stone

wall, then came to stand beside our small fire. “Look at that smoke. All the shouting last night, about this.”

“It doesn’t trouble you?” Minerva said.

“Of course it does. But you’ve heard about the stirrings in the region these last weeks.” The thought of it seemed to entice him.

“We didn’t see you here last night, nor the others who sit at the tables with you.”

“I had a bit to drink, I admit. I slept through it.” Gian Riccardo took the cup Minerva offered him. “Who knew? Don’t tell me you spent the night out here. Someone should go see what’s happened over there.”

“Do you want to be the one to go?” Minerva said. “The rascals may still be there. That’s for the police.”

The *questura* doors had not opened this morning. None of the *carabinieri* came from our village but, normally, one of them slept in the office overnight. Zio Ludovico, who I had not seen for more than a day, came into the square. He scanned the faces around him. None of them seemed to please him. He went to the *questura*, finding the door locked. The same at the prefecture.

“It’s still early,” Gian Riccardo called to him. “You can’t expect our officials to interrupt their busy schedules for such matters as these.”

Zio slammed his hand against the prefecture door. “Where’s your friend?” he said to Gian Riccardo.

“Which friend, friend?” Gian Riccardo said.

“The falconer.”

“You mean Falco, the forester. I haven’t seen him for some time.”

“I have some idea where to find him,” Zio said.

“Your own affair.”

“Somebody find us some bread,” Minerva said. Still chilled from our night in the air, I took a second cup of the warm drink. We sat on the fountain steps. Minerva coughed beside me. I dipped her cup into the brown liquid, stirring the grounds at the bottom of the pan.

Zio paced beside the prefecture wall as we drank then came to where Minerva and I sat. He stood above me, close enough that the toe of his boot touched mine. “You,” he said to me. “Out here all night. And your mother, did she eat?”

“Zio, where were you?” I asked. His shadow fell over my folded knees, a black gloved hand dangled next to my face. For a large man, Zio had small hands. I looked down at my cup. He took the cup from my hands.

“Let her finish, Ludovico,” Minerva said.

Zio threw the cup into the prefecture steps. “Get up,” he said to me.

I followed him to his piece of land. Zio had nailed metal sheets to the outer walls of his shed. He put his key to the big lock. Inside, he found nothing disturbed. Zio examined the grounds, lowering his head to enter the stall where the pigs slept. The two pigs lay over their straw. One of them grunted. Zio prodded them up with the end of his pitchfork. One by one, the pigs came out into the yard. He stayed in the stall, lifting the straw with the fork, thinking perhaps he would find something beneath it. The pigs knocked over a bucket of soured grain standing next to their stall. They made a good breakfast of it. Zio left the stall and went to unlock his tool shed. A few stalks of chard stood in the hard earth. I broke the stalks at the stem, throwing their half eaten leaves to the hungry sows. Zio fussed with his tools. In the dark shed, with his axes, a hunting rifle hung on one of the walls. Not knowing what else to do with myself,

I took one of the shovels and worked at turning the hard ground. I heard the sound of a motor on the road above us.

One of the small cars the *carabinieri* used stopped. An officer I had seen before stepped out of the car. He looked downward as I chipped at the dirt. Zio closed his shed and climbed the hill. He had taken a habit of tucking his pantlegs into his black boots. The two greeted one another.

“What’s left?” I heard my uncle say.

I could not hear everything the *carabiniere* said. His motor ran as he talked: “...oil in the pits,” I heard, “gone.”

“All that grain, what else?” Zio said.

“A mess,” the *carabiniere* said. “One of the overseers led them, almost certain.”

I heard nothing else until Zio called down to me: “Stay here. I’m going with him.”

I did not obey him. When the car drove from my sight, I climbed the bank to the road and started back to Biccari. Smoke from the hills covered the sky, the smell of charred herbage in the air. I traveled quickly on my feet, looking back over my shoulder for signs of my uncle returning in the *carabiniere*’s car. The wind whistled behind me. It grew darker overhead as I walked, a pressure gathering there. When I reached the road that led to the Guardabassi houses, a few white flakes came from the sky. They turned to water as they touched the ground. More white flakes flew in the wind, then the sky let go of its weight in a downpour of cold rain, mixed with ash. I covered my head with my wrap. I had nearly reached the Guardabassi estate.

The grounds appeared deserted. The shutters all closed at the big house. The stables stood empty. No hound barked. I continued along the road where I found some shelter, walking under

the trees. I thought of Donna Luisa. I had had no message from her in some time. Perhaps she had gone to stay with her older son in Naples for the cold months. Then I remembered the words of the falconer: Her sons leave her there.

The downpour slowed to a light rain. Water drizzled from the branches where I walked, twigs cracking under my feet. I came to a stop when I saw that another person walked along the road, from the direction of Biccari. The man walked with a stick, in the same uneven step my father had, advancing gradually. His dark suit hung from him, no hat on his head. As he approached, I saw the rise in his hip as he pulled one leg forward to drag the other behind him. “Gian Riccardo,” I said. “What brings you here?”

I had not known Gian Riccardo to leave the village since his return from the war. He did not stop, but continued his pace. “Hello child,” he said, with the little breath he had. His eyes looked ahead. With his free hand, he made a sweeping motion behind him. “Go on now. You didn’t see me here.” With the effort of each step, he left me, continuing towards the Guardabassi house that I had just passed.

I walked ahead, turning once to look back at him. He had stopped walking and stood gazing up at the dark windows of the big house. “Zio Ludovico returns along this road with one of the *carabinieri*,” I called to him. I did not know if he heard me. He began to move again, slowly, pacing himself until he reached the end of the house, slipping behind its corner so that I could no longer see him. I turned back to Biccari, quickening my pace.

XVII

Through the alleyway I saw only a young *carabiniere* in the square. He strode from one end of the terrace wall to the other. Turning back, he stopped to lift a fallen chair from the ground. Dampened coals from our morning fire lay over the cobblestones. Clouds hugged the hills over the Pinto estate. A blue patch overhead.

I heard none of the usual sounds in the street as I walked past the closed doors. A white kid with a black streak on its nose wandered by itself ahead of me. It came to a stop before the big wooden door closed with an iron bar. Bleating came from inside the stall, no sign of the goatherd, not one to lose track of his flock. The goat followed behind me to the street's end. I heard its small hooves against the stone as it turned back up the street. I took the narrow alley, down the few steps that led to Minerva's house. I knocked at her door. "It's me." I waited for a reply, then saw the shutters at her window above me, drawn.

I left Minerva's door, descending the rest of the steps to Biccari's back wall. I walked along the wall towards Gelsomina's hut. At the bottom of the hill, three men came through the trees and started up the rocky incline. I lowered my head behind the wall, thinking that one of the men might be Zio Ludovico. Two of them, I could see, were shorter men. I did not know them. The other I recognized as Caglione. The men spoke in low voices to one another as they climbed zigzag up the hill. The *carabiniere* who stopped on the road to talk with my uncle had accused one of the overseers of leading the attack at the Pinto estate, though he did not name the man. Remembering the way that he had spoken to me in the fields the few days earlier, I sensed that Caglione had some involvement in the affair.

The men had a disheveled, wearied look. Still, they made strides, mounting the steepest parts of the hill. The one trailing behind turned his head to scan the hill below them. Caglione had his jacket pulled tightly around him. I continued to Gelsomina's, looking back after I had reached one of the string of huts that came before hers. The back of the wall dropped into the hill. The men helped each other to its ledge, dropping to the ground. Dividing there, each of them took a separate street into the village.

Smoke rose from the chimney of Gelsomina's house. I called her name in a low voice. I had not seen her since our parting outside Ugo's door. I heard her steps inside the house but she did not come to the door. Perhaps one of the mouths she fed had come to eat. I looked out at the hills to see that no other person approached. I called her name again. This time Gelsomina came to the door. As she had done the first time I came to her, she took me inside. "The streets are empty," I said.

"Don't tell me. The one who just left stood like an idiot all night watching that fire. For what?"

Two bowls sat on her table, cleaned of her soup.

"Did you bring something to Ugo?" I asked.

"At the same table where he always sits."

A few potato peels lay on the floor beneath Gelsomina's table. I saw in the dark corner beside her hearth that the carcass of a guinea hen hung from its feet, the last of its blood draining from its neck into a small pan on the floor. The soft grey feathers she had pulled from the bird lay in a fresh mound in a wide basket she kept for this purpose. The organs of the bird glistened on the table top.

"More mouths to feed?" I said. "When others have so little, you keep such ready stores."

“What would you have me do, starve?” She placed the organs in a pan over the fire, then took the guinea fowl from its hook. “I’ll have a good soup with this one. It takes nothing to get hold of a hen. I had to work hard to get my cock.” She laughed when she saw that I understood. “You should speak to me of ready stores, your uncle with his sows. Heh.”

“Do you suppose he shares any of that?” I said. “Not with us. The best of it goes to the estates. I made his sausage after he slaughtered one of the pigs. Where do you suppose it went?”

“He has a talent for that. I’ve noticed. The prefect grows fat.”

“Not less the head *carabiniere*.” We both laughed.

“You must feel a rage,” Gelsomina said.

I went to her fire. “Zio has no love for me. He’ll give me a good slap if I go back to his house now,” I said.

Gelsomina slid her hand into the hen’s crop, then lifted the bird into a kettle. She gazed at the fire, next to where I stood. “And the foreigner?”

“He has not asked me,” I said. She nodded, looking back at the bird. “I have stayed with him once or twice,” I said. I watched as Gelsomina placed a few roots and herbs into the kettle. She made a gesture with her head and I fetched the pitcher from the floor. Together we poured water over the hen, filling the kettle to the top. I made myself handy taking the kettle to the hearth while Gelsomina wiped her hands with a cloth.

“What trouble have you gotten into?” she said.

I had my back to her. “Would you let me stay for a few nights?”

“*Per carità*.”

The next morning I returned to Minerva. She looked down from her window and waved at me to come up. Capro lay asleep on a cot. I had seen little of him since his fall in the square. Minerva spoke hoarsely. "When did you return from your uncle's land?"

"Yesterday before dark. Zio left with one of the *carabinieri* to look at the Pinto estate. I returned without him."

"Ludovico should have left you alone. Why drag you out there? After that long night we all had."

"He thinks the whole town sides against him. When I saw no one in the square yesterday afternoon, I came to you."

"I slept the whole afternoon," Minerva said, choking on the words. "That night air." Glancing at her husband: "The two of us slept well. As you can see, he has less and less interest in waking." She took a rag from the back of a chair and put it to her mouth. "After you left with your uncle, the *carabinieri* came and pushed us out of the square. They mentioned a name, asked if we had seen the man."

"Whose name?"

"The one you work for."

"Caglione."

Minerva coughed into her rag. "What would cause him to do it?"

I shook my head. An overseer for the Guardabassi. Many envied his job. "Perhaps the Guardabassi mean to sell the land," I said. "Or leave it fallow for grazing. The men spoke of this, with the forester, and Don Palmisano, the day we swept leaves in the square. They'd have no need for Caglione then."

"And your uncle, my cousin?"

“Caglione had much to say about Zio. The *massari* make these decisions, he says. They gain either way, while he.”

“That Ludovico, always an ambitious one. We can only wait and see how far it will all go,” Minerva said.

I did not tell Minerva that I had seen Caglione with the two other men returning to Biccari. I mentioned Gian Riccardo.

“A strange affair,” she said. “That one barely walks anymore. And you saw him as far as the big house? What business would he have there?” I shook my head. “Strange man. Has he returned?”

I couldn’t answer her question. “You said once you would tell me about Gian Riccardo. What about him?”

She touched the rag to her nose. “Ah that. Because he acted harshly with you. He’s had his disappointments, years ago.”

“He’s always had an easier life than we.”

“Not from the start. But when he got a little money, it went to his head. Your mother and I were young then. He was quite a bit older, a mature man. The daughter of Count Guardabassi used to come to the square with her friends.”

“Donna Luisa.”

Minerva blew her nose. “She and Riccardo were about the same age. They got on it seems.”

“Her father the count.”

“Then you see, and he always had that drooping lid over his eye. The count quickly made a better match for her. Riccardo really had no reason to hope.”

“You mentioned my mother.”

“That came later. Remember the beauty Ada was, poor angel. She took after Filomena, though one hardly sees it now.”

“Something with Gian Ri ?”

“Your mother came from a poor family. He, at least, had more money than they. I remember your mother, quite taken with the prospect for awhile. But your father came along, a man much closer to her age. Whatever happened then. It seems Gian Riccardo didn’t know about it for some time.”

“And I remind him of that.”

“There you go, every day, between your mother and the Guardabassi house. You know how they talk in town, you leave your mother, you should stay closer to her. How can you be in two places at once? You took after your father. And Gian Ri, the slight. First by a richer woman, then by a poorer one. It had to settle into him. Still, for all, he’s not a bad man. Filomena never told you any of this?”

“Perhaps she told Ada. She said nothing to me.”

“She regrets some things, I expect.”

Minerva looked tired. I offered to light her fire.

“No thanks,” she said. “When you leave I’ll go back to bed. I’ll save the wood, at least until he wakes.” Capro had not stirred since I entered the room. She took her shawl from one of the chairs and moved to the wall where a straw mattress lay on the floor. “You’ll find me better company in a few hours,” she said. She lay over the mattress without removing her shoes. “Those unionists,” she said before I left, “stirring everything.”

“The unionists, yes,” I said, taking the stairs. At the landing, I heard her long, drawn breath. I opened her door. “Perhaps not them.”

I took the alley to Ugo’s rooms. “I want you to see something,” he said. He handed me a rock, traces of a fossil inside. I used my brush to lift the sediment from the surface. Bones as fine as thread. “A bird before it hatched.”

I thought it strange that he said nothing about the night of the fire, nor did he ask about the destruction of the Pinto fields. His eyes paced the length of the long table, then returned to his book. He smiled over the book, turning the pages. The book had engraved drawings, strange looking trees. I glanced over his shoulder as I took a rag from his side of the room. His mood seemed much lighter than the day before.

“I’ve never seen a tree like that,” I said. In the drawing, the branches spread wide, fell to the ground, making new trunks.

“In the jungle, far away,” he said. “Trees with poison bark, trees that bleed.”

I cleaned and polished the rock he had given me. When I had finished, he came to stand beside me. He took the tool from my hand, then bent his long body, leaning forward, his face close to mine. “From now on, come only during the day.”

My head swam. I felt the heat of the lamp light on my face, the moisture above my lip. “As you wish.”

“In time, when things change....” He stood upright so that I looked up at him.

I pushed my chair back. “Has my uncle come to you?” He shook his head. I took my wrap at the door. “You do not plan to stay.”

I returned to him the next day, leaving by nightfall to sleep over the straw beside Gelsomina's hearth. I waited to go to my mother, not anxious to meet my uncle there. Ugo needed water. I returned cautiously to the square where I saw Iona enter the prefecture with her bucket and mop. Irma appeared from the basement of the bar. She carried a sack of coffee beans in her hands. She turned her head away quickly when she saw me, slipping inside the bar. I saw the outline of her large bosom, her mass of dark hair through the frosted glass as she wiped the counter. None of the usual men had come to take their coffee yet. The barkeep came out to wipe the leaves from the black tables where no one sat. Leaving the square, I passed Beniamino in the street.

"Beniamino, good morning. Have you seen Gian Riccardo?"

He looked up blankly, as if he did not know me, and walked ahead.

At night I turned, sleeping little on Gelsomina's floor. The odor of charred straw and the few feathers she had tossed into the flames lingered in the room. Mingled with that, the ripened scent of hen's blood thickening in its bowl. I touched the hearth stones. They had grown cold. Gelsomina uttered words I did not know. I looked to see if she had wakened but she still slept. I saw my uncle's gloved hands pulling at the chain and lock of his shed, his curled fists. I listened for the sound of his feet. When I had had enough of that, I rolled from the matt, my feet meeting the cold floor. Gelsomina's guinea cock had a habit of crowing the hour before sunrise. I stood long at the door, waiting for his first call. Gelsomina stirred. "Where do you think you're going?" she asked.

"Nowhere," I said.

"Will you take his breakfast to him?"

I waited for her to rise before I left with Ugo's bread. There, as Gelsomina had done, I lit his stove and boiled water for his tea. "I have no work for you now," he said as I set the bread and tea before him. "Perhaps later in the day." He thanked me for the bread.

I felt the cold set in me as I closed his door, staying there for a moment or two. Some obscure smog had settled over our village since the Pinto fire, entered even Ugo's room. The taste of ash in my throat.

XVIII

A cool mist rose from the ground as I walked away. Little light came through the dense sky. I had no purpose anywhere and too many I did not want to see. I took the path I knew well, past the grave site bordering the strip of woods where I had first seen Ugo. I stood there, not going further. Looking far into the leafless branches, lichen and vines clinging to black trunks. An absence of wind. The still trees unsettled me, told me not to enter them. I turned towards the path that would take me to the Guardabassi grounds. From the high road I stopped for a glimpse of the square, to see if Gian Riccardo had returned. Not a soul there. Two crows pecked at the base of the fountain then hopped over the cobblestone. I thought of my mother by herself in our small house, her piece of untouched bread. Something drew me further out in the direction of the Guardabassi estate, though I knew I risked seeing my uncle in the open, it calmed me to walk the roads I knew so well. The way Gian Riccardo stood, looking up at Donna Luisa's windows, before he turned to the back of the house. Some fancy from his youth. But finding the house dark, the shutters all closed, why had he not returned? Unless weariness, or something unexpected kept him there.

I walked at most a kilometer before a sound came from the side of the road where some reeds stood on the bank. A rustle an animal makes. The old peasant peered through the grasses with his unshaven face. I stood back at the sight of him, halting my plan to go on to the Guardabassi place. His eyes fixed on me, he slid on his back down the mound of earth, his trousers and jacket caked with mud. I made a circle away from him, turning back again in the direction of Biccari.

"I thought you might be that one," he said, coming to his feet.

"Which one?"

“The *annaroli* who has our wages.” The strain of hunger showed on his face.

“I have not seen our *annaroli* in days,” I said. I began to walk from him. I had worked with Caglione long enough to know his habit of paying his workers in a timely way. The *massari*, I knew, held the purse. Perhaps Caglione had quarreled with my uncle. Against all custom, they offered no bread during our final days of work, promising the same in pay. I too thought it strange. The peasant began to follow me. “I’m sure that he means to pay,” I said. “Our wages may not have come to him yet.”

“He promised them days ago.”

I could not deny that. “When did you last eat?” I asked him.

“Not since we worked,” He said. He showed me his empty sack. “I had a morsel of bread with me. It got soaked with the rain. I ate it that way but nothing since.”

“You stayed out here these last nights?”

“Two nights, at least. Before, I found a place with some shelter in a shed but they discovered me and told me to leave.”

“Who discovered you? Who told you to leave?”

He wiped his face with his hand. “Some men. I don’t remember. Slow, I cannot keep your pace.”

We reached the steps that led to the town center. The peasant stopped to rest. He placed his forearms on the wall, his shoulders bent. From hunger or some other despair, he wept. He smelled of dung and the damp fields. I did not know what to do with him. We could expect no hospitality from the *carabinieri* if we went to the square. “If you can go a little further peasant,” I said, “I’ll find you something to eat.” I took his arm as we made our way around the back wall to Gelsomina’s hut. She always managed to keep a fire.

“What do you bring me?” She grumbled when I entered the hut with the old man. After a look at him she said no more. We sat him at her table. Gelsomina dipped a pot into her kettle and took a portion of broth that she poured into one of her bowls. The peasant drank the soup without pause, then wiped the table with the piece of bread she had left for him. He stared at the empty bowl as if it might speak to him. Grease from the broth on his chin. He swept his sleeve across his face. Gelsomina poured another portion of soup into the bowl that he finished almost as quickly as the first. He chewed on a last piece of bread.

“You cost me one paying customer,” she whispered to me, no malice in her voice.

“I’ll find a way to repay you,” I whispered in return. I took a seat at the table. “Peasant, remind me. Your name?”

“Rado.”

“From Bovino, you said.”

He nodded. “But I go as far as the Gargano.”

“All bandits there,” Gelsomina said.

I leaned into the table. “You won’t like to hear what I say. These are not good times. I think you should go home.”

“But my wages.”

“The wages of many others too, may be lost.”

“You want me to accept that? They didn’t even pay us in bread.”

“What shed did you go to? Who told you to leave?”

“I don’t know the name. After that night in the square, I waited the whole day to see the *annaroli* who never came. I walked as we just did behind these back walls. A house, where the wall ends, had a wooden shed, no lock on its door. I came in where the flock had been, the hay

still there. I smelled the piss in the older hay, and the newer stuff. Sheep. I'm accustomed to that smell."

We had a shepherd who took his flock halfway up the sheep route once or twice a year. Sometimes he met with those who came from the north. Rado yawned.

"Can you remember more?" I asked.

Gelsomina went to the corner where she slept. She slipped her arm between the mattress and the wall. She came back with a bottle, a dark syrup inside. Pulling a chair to the table, she poured a small amount of the syrup into three cups. "From the berries," she said. She liked her own drink.

The syrup left a tingle on my lips. I remembered the fire Paolo had poured into my mouth. This had a much sweeter taste. "It tastes of them," I said.

Rado had finished his cup. Gelsomina poured more of the syrup, filling the cup halfway. "Go on," she said.

He filled his mouth. "I went to the little loft above the stall, climbing the ladder to a space, small even for me. I had to slide into it on my back. Somebody had laid a few pieces of straw there. It was dark enough that I didn't see much. I slept for awhile. When I woke, I heard voices, two or three men. Light from a lantern below. I lay there, trying to make no noise. One of the men complained that he had glass in his foot. I heard them laugh. One of them said: 'Did you sober up yet?' They laughed some more, but kept it low. 'Give me that,' one of them said. They seemed in a hurry to leave after that."

Rado finished what remained in his cup.

"What next?" I asked.

“I heard them leave. With the quiet I slept a few more hours. When I woke, I saw some light through the cracks, so I knew it was morning. I made sure I was alone before coming back down the ladder. I saw a sack on the ground. I took a look to see if it had anything in it I could eat. Nothing like that. When I opened the door, three men stood outside.”

Gelsomina poured another dose of syrup into the peasant’s cup.

“All this behind my house.”

“Save a little for yourself,” he said.

“To please you.”

“What then?” I said.

“They pushed me back into the stall. One lifted his hand. He wore a glove. I thought he would strike me. I lifted my arms to protect myself. ‘*Ladro*,’ he called me. ‘I am no thief,’ I said to him. When he struck me I fell to the ground. The one who struck me had a bald crown. He wore black boots that came up to his knees, as the *carabinieri* do, but he had no such uniform. Still, I thought they must be with the police. I assured them I had nothing to do with the fire on that estate. The other two wore dark shirts and some kind of cap over their heads. They looked around and let the big one talk.

“The one with the boots gave me a kick,” Rado said. “While I lay there. Then he saw the sack on the ground. I told them I knew nothing about it. ‘I only came to get out of the cold,’ I said. They saw the sack had nothing in it, then one of them looked through my sack. ‘Did you see anyone here?’ the big one asked. I told him no, I hadn’t been there long. He saw the ladder to the loft and went up to look then came down. He pulled a piece of straw from my back. ‘We found axes in the woods outside the Pinto estate,’ the man said. ‘I own no axe,’ I said. ‘I came to work in the fields.’ ‘For who?’ he asked. ‘I don’t know the name of the *annaroli*, but on the

Guardabassi land. I did the work but no one has paid.' I told them I stood in Biccari's square with many others while the Pinto estate burned. The big man looked at the other two. 'Do you believe him?' One of them came to me. He pulled me up from the ground. 'Look at this, could it smash a barrel?' The other man said: 'I'd say it could, or set a fire.' They played this game with me for awhile. 'I have no axe,' I said. 'I hurt nobody.' The big man took me by the collar. 'Lucky for you none of the family slept in that house. Get out of here.' One of the other men pushed me out the door to the wall, where he lifted me to its top and threw me down like a sack. I walked away from him, out onto the road."

Rado touched the rim of his empty cup then put his head on the table. I made a place for him beside the fire, seeing that he slept before I lay over the straw. The two of us slept past the cock's crow. When I woke I found Gelsomina outside with her hens. She handed me two eggs for the peasant.

"You'll have to pay me in gold."

"How many days do you think, to Bovino?"

"Don't ask me. I haven't left these walls since I came."

"I'll take him to the road." We met the baker's son on his mule. I asked him for two round loaves. "For Donna Luisa," I said. "Next time we meet, I'll have the money for you."

"Since when does the grand lady buy on credit?" He pulled the bread from his bag. "Don't think I'll forget."

When the young man had passed us, I gave Rado one of the loaves. He slipped it quickly into his sack. I took him as far as the sheep route. "Take it as far as it goes," I said. "Down to Campara. After that, the road will take you to Bovino."

"I might have gone to the Gargano instead," he said.

“It’s late in the season. You’ll find little there.” He shook my hand, turned his head for a last look at the northern route, then started on the southern path. I watched him until he left my sight. I hoped he would not change his mind and turn back towards the Gargano and the open road.

XIX

Wind carried the last leaves from their silver branches, medallions falling to the ground. For a moment the sun lay over the hilltop, masked finally by the pale grey that covered the sky. A blackness fell over the hills. Gian Riccardo returned to my mind, and Donna Luisa. What if she had stayed in the big house by herself? I could only gather from what the peasant said that Caglione and the men with him had plans for the Guardabassi grounds. Zio Ludovico, I felt certain, had plans of his own.

A band of peasants I had never seen walked along the road ahead of me. I passed them, no words exchanged between us. Then a mule cart, heading in the direction from which I had just come. I asked the driver where he planned to go.

“South,” he said. “Below Bovino.”

“After Campara, you may see an old peasant going that way.”

“If I see him,” he said.

“I passed four or five peasants just now.”

“The Gargano is closed,” the driver said. “From the riots up there. The police patrol these roads. I plan to leave them. A truck stopped me a few miles back. They wanted to know if I carried guns. They expect the worst. See what I mean?”

“Do they patrol the hills as well, away from the main roads, where the shepherds go?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you. But the bullies among them, they do it for sport. You from around here? Too much happens on these roads. A girl alone. You should go home.”

I had nearly reached the walls when I heard the choking sound of a vehicle behind me. I lifted my wrap over my head. The car passed me, the *carabiniere* truck, with only the officer

inside. He looked to either side of the road, with little interest in me as I mounted the hill. If I planned to go back to Donna Luisa's, I would have to go through the fields.

Minerva leaned out from her window as I descended the stairs to Gelsomina's. "Can you find me some bread?" She coughed through her words. Her face had grown red.

I had my loaf from the boy. "I can give you some of this." I went up to her. "I need half for my mother."

"Just a little then. Tomorrow I'll go out.."

I cut the loaf in half, then in half again. Capro lay still over his bed. I saw a few wafers of burnt paper in her hearth.

"My fires do not last. I'm out of wood, even straw." Her eyes watered as she spoke.

"I'll see if I can find something for you," I said.

Minerva went back to her bed. Her cough had grown worse.

"The Bavarian asks for you," Gelsomina called as I neared her yard. She scraped the ground in the pen. "My little hens, they make such a fuss." A hen followed at her heels, pecking at the broom.

"Last time I saw him he said he had no work."

"Now, it seems he has."

I tore a small piece from the quarter loaf.

"Why doesn't he leave?" I said.

"You want him to go? Doesn't he still give you your few coins?"

"Yes, that."

Gelsomina threw some grain from her apron then left the pen.

I entered Ugo's room in the early afternoon, forgetting my promise to Minerva. Still at his desk. "Come in," he said. One of his trunks stood open, filled with books and other objects of his. Another trunk he had filled too full to latch the lid. Two of the shelves that held his things now had nothing on them. The skulls and bones still in their glass case.

"When do you leave?" I asked.

"I don't know yet."

"Will you go back to Bavaria?"

"Not there, no." I noticed among the things he had packed the book where I found the photograph of the woman in her white blouse. "*Eichel*," he said. He had not used that name with me in some time. "Come here." I went to his side of the table. He had laid out the photographs of my head, each with numbers and notes. One of the photographs he had taken with the metal device on my head.

I turned away. "What do I want with those?"

"Not those, this," he said. The two of us, standing beside the oak where he had first seen me. Me, head covered, basket in hand. Ugo, tall as the trunk of that tree. The odd pair we were. "Take it," he said. "To remember me by." I started back to my side of the table. "Don't you want it?"

"What will I do with it? That isn't me."

"Who is it then? Take it." He pressed the picture into my hand.

"What will you do with the rest, with my head?"

"Nothing. I keep them with my notes, as an example, for proof."

"For proof."

I placed the picture of the two of us back on the table. He slipped the photograph inside the pocket of my skirt.

“You will leave soon,” I said.

“We’ll talk of it later.”

“I want to go with you.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“You could not live away from here.”

His fingers grazed my hand. I shook him away. “My uncle has spoken to you.” I left him, going back to my place across the table. I had no desire to stay. The mess he had made of his trunks, as if he had swept the shelves and let the objects fall whichever way. “How will you leave with all of this?” I said.

“I’ll send it ahead.”

“On these roads? Who will carry this load for you? A mule cart passed through not long ago. You might have sent your boxes with him.” Ugo dug his fingers into his face, pressing upward the folds of skin beneath his eyes. His heavy lids lowered beneath the brow. Dusk greyed the room. “I have to leave now,” I said.

“Tomorrow then, at least.”

I closed the door behind me.

I started back to Gelsomina’s, then turned, walking slowly in the direction of my uncle’s house. I stepped quietly onto the threshold. I waited to hear that no voices came from inside before opening the door. Filomena sat by herself in the dark. I could see that she had not

bothered with the hearth for more than a day. The lamp I had brought for her sat unused on the table.

“Saving fuel for the master’s return?” I asked. She did not reply. I set the half loaf on the table. “When did you last see Zio?”

“I don’t know.”

“Not last night?”

“No.”

I lit the lamp. The small flame flickered through the tarnished glass. I left the light for my mother, then went outside to search in the dark for some wood. I had not seen the sun for two days, or the stars. It seemed those fires had retreated behind a screen of haze. Finding no branches around the cottage I had to walk as far as the steep ravine. There, I filled my arms, returning to the cottage, heavy with wood. At the hearth I kept after the branches until the fire caught.

“Will you eat something?” I asked.

Nothing from her, then, “He will be hungry. He will want his *cecina* cake ready when he gets in.”

“Do you expect him?” I asked. No answer. When I had browned the cake on both sides, I offered it to my mother.

“It is not mine to eat,” she said.

This angered me. I cut a chunk of the bread from the half loaf, tearing it into pieces that I placed in a small pot with a little water and a drop of oil. I heated this over the fire and gave it to her. She ate her warmed bread with a spoon, chewing slowly until she had finished. She handed me her cup.

I took the cup from her hand. “Better?” I asked.

“Where have you lived these last days?”

“With the midwife,” I said. “I go there now.”

She stabbed at me with the end of her spoon. “Liar. What you do to this family. What you do to me.”

I took the spoon from her hand, holding her firmly at the chin. She withered under my touch. Mother of Ada, never mine.

I had no home. I found the old path through the dormant lands that I traveled daily for so many seasons of work, little to disguise me now that the grasses were cut, but night covered me, damp and thick. I hurried down the hill and across the field, losing my step over a mound of clay, falling to my hands. I lifted myself, listened to the sound of my feet moving, meeting small crevices, breaking clumps of earth. *You could not live away from here.* How little he knew. I took a path that divided two dormant fields, slipping into the tongue of trees at the road’s edge that led to the confines of the Guardabassi estate. The big house, closed and silent.

Over a row of hedge, I saw men, nearly twenty of them, crowded at the tower’s base. The men held lanterns, others torches in the air. The lights trembled, opened the dark. A man wound behind the crowd, back and forth, watching, his flame streaming behind him. I remembered his face, one of the men I had seen with Caglione, climbing the hill back to Biccari. “Keep your lights low, until we need them,” he said. Some of the men held mallets and the sharp-tipped axes we used to break the earth. Among the faces, men from our village, peasants I had seen in the fields.

The group divided then, for two men who carried a ladder over their heads. They placed the ladder up against the tower. The crowd came together again. A big-chested man rose above them. The man climbed as far as the ladder could take him. He gripped the wire handle of a small lantern with his teeth. Light on his throat, across his jaw, the ledge of chin. Caglione. Over his shirt, he wore the belt that workers wore, rope around his shoulder and waist. The ladder reached less than a third way up the tower. The men steadied the ladder from the ground while Caglione slipped his hand into the pocket that hung from his belt. He took an iron staple from the belt, fitting its pronged ends between two stones. With the mallet, he fixed the staple between the bricks. He hammered a second staple above the first, as high as his arms could reach. With the strength of his arms he pulled himself upward, until his foot rested upon the first rung. The men watched from below as he secured the next few staples. He made a knot at one of the rungs, unwinding the rope at his belt, then continued, climbing the tower until he had nearly reached its top. The men threw out muffled cheers of support. Caglione secured himself to the last rung.

“Tie an extra knot,” one of the men below said.

Caglione waved to the man. He lifted one of his legs, like a dog does. The men on the ground laughed at that. They held their lights in the air. Caglione took hold of the mallet, sending a shock through the stone as he hammered at the door to the silo’s shute. The latch broke. He folded the metal door back on its hinge, then lowered the remaining rope down to the men on the ground. The two who had brought the ladder tied something to the rope’s end. They lifted their arms in the air. As it went up the tower with the rope, I saw that the rope held a square tin. Caglione pulled until the tin reached him. He drained its liquid contents into the tower’s pit, then took the lantern from his mouth, holding it above his head.

“Drop it,” one of the peasants called from the ground.

Caglione looked down at the men huddled below. “Did you hear what the landlords said when we asked them for our full wages? ‘The wage increases apply to honest, working men, but we are not convinced that any of you are men.’”

“Drop it, quick,” the men shouted.

I heard my own voice in that chorus, though it wrenched me to think of this end to my labor. My body in that earth, in the kernel and hull, in the scythe. Our work, the food we could eat, taken by the Guardabassi, locked in that tower to rot. “Burn it,” I said. “Kill it.” I ran out from behind the hedge, past the dark house, to the place where the men stood. “Stop.”

Caglione tossed the lantern through the silo’s door. The men watched for the smoke. I stood behind them. First the smoke came, black and white, rising through the hatch, then the bright spark of flame. The Guardabassi had filled the silo with grain. A thin stream of fire rose through the tower, lighting the walls inside the cylinder of stone.

“Alleluia,” Caglione called. “Now, to the cellars. I’m for that again.” A burst of flame shot through the open door. Caglione jerked backward. With the sudden movement, his feet lost their hold. He slipped from the iron rung, dropping until the rope caught, a long whistle rising up with the breath pushed out of him. The rope he had tied around his waist squeezed him at the ribs, the weight of his body pulling at the highest staple where he had made his knot. The men below pressed themselves to the tower’s base. I inched closer with them.

The staple did not hold Caglione’s weight. He dropped again, further this time, a full body’s length, catching at the rung where he had tied his first knot. He swung back and forth against the tower. Above him, a long tail of flame whipped through the open door, reaching up into the tower’s top. The men on the ground lifted their arms. Caglione swayed, out of their reach, the ladder too far below him. His hands grabbed for some hold on the stone face. His body

finally stilled, he began to grope for a rung above his head. When he had that, he set one of his feet onto a lower rung. The fall left a gash at the side of his head, the premature victory blanched from his face. He touched his head, then lifted a bloody hand into the air. He seemed unsure what to do next.

The watchman stood at the base of the tower. “Steady, steady,” he said to Caglione. “A great fall. A hero’s fall. I’ll remember it.”

Caglione set one of his feet on a lower rung. He steadied the shake in his legs, beginning his descent. The men murmured, calling out warnings and encouragement.

“Quiet,” the watchman said. “Let him come down.”

Sweat drenched Caglione’s shirt, streamed from his lowered chin. I thought of the grain, at the tower’s pit, waiting for the flame.

The sound of shot came from the direction of the big house. Caglione looked around, caught halfway between the tower’s top and the ground. I looked for a sign of light in one of the windows. Nothing there. A peasant noticed me standing among them. He touched me as if to say: “What’s that,” then turned his head to the sound of voices. The voices broke into one unified shout. A river of men, as many as in our group, or more, rushed from behind the Guardabassi house, their axes raised. The men around me lifted their tools. I had nothing to defend me. I ran to the side of the tower.

The invaders rushed forward, swinging at the surprised men. One sent his mallet into the small of another’s back. That man dropped to his knees, then fell. Another invader swung at one of ours with an axe. I heard the bone crack. The hit man’s blood came out from him in a long spurt as he tried to run. I could not look at that. One of the invaders climbed the ladder, tearing at the silo with his pick to drive out the staples that Caglione would use to lower himself. Another

man, one of ours, chopped at the ladder until it split. The invader slid from the silo, dropping to the ground. I looked up at Caglione, his hands clinging to the iron staples. Some of the invaders had guns they shot in the air. At this, those who could of Caglione's men scattered from the base, their leader open to attack. The two groups of men faced one another, their weapons lifted. The watchman stood with a pitchfork at the chest of another man. The other had dropped his axe. Our watchman picked the axe from the ground. "Enough," the watchman said. He lifted the axe.

Zio Ludovico came from behind the invaders. He pointed a rifle at the watchman. Our men inched closer to the man with the pitchfork, their weapons raised.

I saw the pleasure on my uncle's face when he lifted his gun, pointing it at Caglione's head. The *massari* and the *annaroli*, hatred locked between them. I heard the click of metal as my uncle pulled his finger back.

"Zio. Don't." I stepped out from my hiding place so that my uncle could see me. His face thickened. The hatred he had shown Caglione, losing its warmth, became contempt.

"What are you doing...?"

"Get her out of here," one of the men said. I did not know which side spoke.

With that distraction, Caglione's men rushed back at the invaders, pushing me aside. A shot, then another, up in the air. Zio's men shot their guns. Caglione fell from his hold again. The ladder down, he dangled from the rope, his feet flailing against the brick side wall. The fall had pulled the rope up over his chest, over one of his arms, making a noose that caught him beneath the pit of his other arm, stretching across his chest and shoulder. The rope tightened as Caglione hung, digging into his throat and neck, choking his breath.

The watchman shouted at his men: "Do something."

The men looked up at Caglione. Two of them ran back into the dark.

Zio aimed his gun.

“Shoot him through the balls; let him hang there,” the invaders yelled.

Caglione’s men advanced towards my uncle. “You shoot him,” the watchman said, “you get it in the skull.”

The men who had disappeared returned with a curing table from one of the sheds. They set the table against the tower. One of them stepped up onto the table top, his arms just reaching Caglione’s legs that hung limply at the silo wall. He gripped the legs, pushing the body upward to lessen the rope’s pull. “Give me a knife,” he said.

A second man stepped onto the table. “We can’t reach him.” Caglione stretched down with his free hand. “Give me an axe,” the second man said. The first man pushed against the weight of the hanging man. The second man lifted his axe. The blade touched the rope just below Caglione’s neck. Two swift strokes sliced the rope. Caglione dropped into the arms of the man who held him, both of them landing flat on the table.

The second man jumped from the table. He looked at my uncle, surrounded by Caglione’s men. Caglione and the other sat up, the first choking for air. Where the blade had touched, he bled through his shirt. A deep mark on his neck where the rope had pressed.

The first man helped Caglione from the table. The two of them backed away from my uncle’s men. Three men lay dead on the ground. Another, a wounded peasant, crawled to where the Caglione and the other stood.

The watchman faced my uncle. “Do we call a truce or shall we split your skull?”

“It doesn’t end here,” Zio said. He looked to where I stood, at the tower’s base. “It doesn’t end.”

The smell of toasted grain. Grain charred. Blackened stone. I looked up to the tower's top. The smoke of black night.

XX

We called the threshing floor *l'aie*. A flat patch of land, a few meters from the fields, land reserved for this purpose alone. When Don Guardabassi still lived, we used a hectare of land just behind the Guardabassi house, every year scraping the stones and grasses, clearing the grounds. Peasants came with their buckets, scooping handfuls of water that we scattered like seeds, a communion to wet the soil. With paddles and shovels, we beat the ground, smoothing the earth to make it hard overnight. We covered the ground with straw. In the morning, we took the straw away so that we could spread cartloads of grain over the floor, that golden sea. Horses and mules pulled the stones over the grain, until the kernel came free of the husk. To get the grain, we needed wind. Some days we waited and waited under the sun. When the wind came, we ran to *l'aie*, filling our arms with grain that we tossed into the air. The wind carried the husks, as light as feathers, back into the fields. The berries, the spirit houses of the sun, fell back to the ground.

The boy came to me with his message. He stood at the wall outside Gelsomina's yard: "She wants to see you. Inside."

Donna Luisa. I left for the fields with the boy, to the big house. "She stayed then, through everything. None of her family have come?"

"None that I know," the boy said. "I saw her before the fire."

"How long before?"

We had crossed the last field and come to the copse before he answered me: "Enough for two Sundays to pass."

I had not left Gelsomina's shed for three days, since the burning of the tower. The old woman enclosed in that house, hiding in the dark, crawling over cold floors. Or did she sleep?

Donna Luisa had never been kind to me, but because of her, I knew that I could always find a way to live. Her sons had left her. We who were invisible to her had destroyed her tower. Who looks after me? I owed her this much. Someone had to go.

I left with the peasants that night, my uncle retreating back into the woods behind the Guardabassi house. The peasants carried their two dead and helped the two wounded men. Halfway through the fields, Caglione and the other men disbanded. I returned to Biccari alone.

At Gelsomina's, I fell into the straw, pulling my knees against my chest.

"You smell of cinders," she said. "I don't want to know." She lay over her bed. The next morning, when I opened my eyes, she sat at the hearth, plucking the feathers from a guinea fowl she had just killed. "Your uncle is in a rage I hear. It's only a matter of time."

I sat up. "Ugo will have left," I said.

"Perhaps," she said. "I went with his dinner yesterday and found him still there. He told me that I did not need to come again."

The day the boy came, Gelsomina made a visit to the square. She came back with somber reports.

"They left one dead, at the fountain where I went to fill my jug. I knew his face, a neighbor of mine. The chief *carabiniere* stood there. He said they left even more in the woods."

"The dead are ours, Caglione's men?"

"It looks that way but I hear some of theirs got it too."

"And Caglione?"

"Hiding, with the rest of them, I'm sure. The prefect has called for the military. The *carabinieri*, corrupt as they are, do not care to follow your uncle with his men into the woods. The chief says most of the unionists have fled."

“Zio is mad.”

“Another thing,” Gelsomina said. “In the woods, with the victims killed in the last two days, they found another body. An old man it seems. Dead many days. Not one of the peasants. They say he wore a dark suit. They had taken his jacket, left him bare at the top. *Per carità*. Some coward had broken one of his legs.”

The pitcher stood filled in the corner. I dipped my hands into the cold water, splashing my face before I crossed the room to open her door.

The fire inside the Guardabassi tower had blackened the outside wall around its iron door. The fortress still stood. At the house, the cracked walls showed the family’s neglect. I had not seen the caretaker since Paolo left and that son had never been one to attend to serious things. The shutters closed as I had seen them at both levels. One shutter, unfastened, hit the wall with the wind. The window too, left open, after the night’s chill. I stood at the arched doorway. The dried lavender still let out its perfume from winding vines. “She’ll have left it locked,” I said. “After all this.” The boy put his hand on the latch, pushing downward. He pressed his shoulder to the wood. The door opened, sliding against stone. A cold breeze blew over the threshold as I entered the house. There, a long table lay across the marble floor of a great room. The ceiling, high above my head. I listened for some sound of her. When I heard nothing, I called. My voice lost in that space.

I found the dark hallway at the top of the stairs, walking slowly along the corridor, I stopped to look in her vacant rooms, opening doors to rooms filled with beds and chairs, covered with white cloths. The cold air followed me down the hall. A strip of daylight crossed the floor of the last room, black spots where water had stained its painted walls. Through the doorway, I

saw the open window that faced the fallow field. The breeze from the window carried the faint scent of the trellised flower. I caught the rank odor of mildew. Next to the window, the piano Ada had played while I waited for her below.

You said I could go in with you, I said to my sister.

She does not want it. Ada's final taunt of me. Donna Luisa and she.

I expected to find the old woman sleeping. Seeing me close: "Who are you? What do you want?" In her usual way. I stepped through the doorway into the room. Not far from the piano, I saw the high back of a chair. A white hand lay over its arm. Not the stillness of sleep.

The face in the chair had a chalky cast. The blood had drained from her face, her features erased. Where the flesh had retreated, the bones remained. I covered my nose and mouth. For more than a day she must have lain like this. Her skin, a brittle hide, told me that she had not taken liquid or food for some time. She held one hand over her chest. A piece of note paper, folded and sealed, clenched in the dead hand. Three silver coins lay on the floor.

I pulled the note from her frozen fingers, breaking its wax seal. The coins I left.

I ran back through the long hall and down the stairs. In the room I had first entered, I unfolded the paper, the writing so faint I just made out the name of her son: "Stefano. Why do you not come?"

The boy waited for me outside the house.

"How many times did Donna Luisa send for me in these last weeks?" I asked.

"Three times she asked for you. She had letters, she said."

"But you didn't come to tell me until today."

"I tried once and didn't find you. Another time, I held the letter. Her man took it from me. I thought he would mail it himself."

“Her man? Did she ask you to you fetch bread for her?”

“She asked me to go, but the same man said he would attend.”

“And her storehouses? She always kept them full.”

“More than once she sent me to her pantries. I found them locked. The man I spoke of, the *massari*, had the only key. I told him that she asked me for food.”

“And he told you he would attend?”

“First he said that, then he said the woman had lost her mind; it was no business of mine.

‘Don’t bother me again. Don’t come back,’ he said.”

XXI

Zio pounded the door of Gelsomina's shed. She held her arms over her head while he lifted me from the straw. He bound me at the wrists with his leather strap, then placed a grain sack over my head. I felt his knee at my back as he pushed me forward each step of the way to our house, my head at that stone wall, then inside. His kick sent me down, onto the cold floor. I heard the murmurs, my mother in her chair: "*Dio Santo*, the pain she causes me. The pain."

"Little bitch," Zio said. I wondered that he had left me at Gelsomina's as long as he did. "You owe me," he said.

I tried to speak through the sack. "Owe you what?"

He hit the back of my head with his hand. "Insolent whore."

"You provoke him," my mother said.

I thought of Ugo then, the dead men in the woods. My quarrel with my uncle could not help him much. I knelt on the floor. "What do you want from me?"

He took the sack from my head, leaving my hands bound. "You'll wait for me here this time. When I return, you'll tell me the name of every peasant who stood with Caglione at that tower." I nodded my assent. He left the cottage soon after.

"Mother, assist me." I showed her the cord, tightened at my wrists.

"I don't dare."

"Who will start the fire?"

"Not until night, the fire for the *cecina* cake."

"The knife for cutting bread. Set it on the table," I said.

Outside the house, I gathered what I could of sticks. Quickly, I started a small fire. "Keep it from dying out," I said. "It will give you something to do."

“A man from the north, a Bavarian,” Gelsomina said, when we spoke of him. “Professor, man of science. Someone looks after him up there. Surely this will give your uncle pause.”

“You believe that?” I said. “Ugo left his homeland long ago. He stayed here because he found no one to deliver his trunks.”

I walked, towards the center first, then turned back. If Ugo had not left, I had to find him before Zio found me. Zio’s in the center, with the prefect, I told myself. No, he’s gone to the woods. To Ugo’s then. Go.

At the hut, the water jug stood empty outside. “Ugo,” I called. He would be angry with me. I put my head to his door, called again. No answer came. I opened the door. His trunks lay in all directions across the floor, their lids closed, his shelves all bare. Where the glass case stood, someone had broken the glass. The skulls had rolled to a corner. One of the skulls had fallen to the ground, split in half, cleaned of its insides, like a goat’s head after a feast. He had not left then. Some person had come for him.

Behind the village, I found the path to the burial grounds at the edge of the forest. Past Ada’s grave. I entered the woods. Where I had first seen him, picking asparagus.

Above the graves, crows lighted together, making their harsh sounds.

How did they kill them, the men in the forest? I asked Gelsomina. With axes and clubs.

Better to find the body of a dead man than to find his empty coat, better for the man. That shell gone. I had never thought of a coat as a keeper of souls. The long grey coat hung over the branch of a tree. Black wings circled above me, the clamor of black beaks. Trees with poison bark, trees that bleed.

I followed the circling crows. The rush of their wings. Light streamed out from behind a tree. A shot came from the back of the woods. A hunter's sound. The black wings scattered. Someone called.

A man came into the light. I could not see his face. He walked forward in slow, hulking steps. I stood back. The man wore no clothing, but for a thin undergarment. I knew him by his wide shoulders and chest. Caglione stretched his arm out, hand raised, as if to stop me from advancing.

"Get down," he said. "Quick." He dropped to his knees.

I did the same. We crawled back over the ground until we reached the place where I had entered the woods. I saw the purple clot at Caglione's skull. He bled beneath the rib.

"Ugo, the Bavarian," I said, bending over him.

He shook his head. "They took him, with the others. Hurry," he said.

"They? Took him where?"

He shook his head. "Go."

I pulled Caglione's arm over my shoulder. His blood seeped into my blouse as we stumbled down the hill to the back wall. I heard him pulling at breath.

"My lung's collapsed," he said.

"How is it they let you live?"

He took clipped sucks of air. For the last few steps, I tugged his weight. When we reached the wall, I called for Gelsomina.

Gelsomina peered out from the shed. "Why do you scream?" She came to where we had stopped. "Now what?" Seeing Caglione: "*Santa Madonna*. You bring me this."

"Quickly, please," I said. We pulled him to her door.

Caglione lay over the straw where I slept. His body shook from his core to his feet. I knelt at his head, pressing my weight into his arms to steady him. He struggled against me then lay still. His skin felt cool and damp.

“See how it’s taken him,” Gelsomina said. “Those cretins. He’s as good as dead. What do you want me to do?”

“Try at least. I’ll pay you well,” I said.

“Even if he does not live?” She put her hand over Caglione’s rib cage. “Broken. More than one rib. This man is your *annaroli*. You never thought much of him.”

“People can change.”

“But how many do? If mine only had. I’d say a splinter of bone has pierced his lung. Still, he has a little fight in him. There.” She pointed to her shelves. “The jar filled with grey powder. Bring it here.”

I brought her the jar with a mortar and pestle that sat beside it. Then I brought her water jug, nearly full.

“This will make a good plaster,” she said. “We’ll clean him first. Take my kettle to the fire.” We soaked her rags with Caglione’s blood. I cleaned the blood from his head and face. He moaned and stirred over the straw. Gelsomina lifted her head. “Hear them? Shush. I lost a man once. Now, go clean yourself,” she said to me.

Caglione wheezed as I washed my hands and face. His blood had soaked through my bodice. I felt its stickiness on my skin.

“Bring me a clean rag,” Gelsomina said. I took a cloth that hung over the wire at her hearth. She dipped the rag into her kettle. The cloth steamed. In the mortar, she mixed a grey paste. Bent over Caglione, his bruised chest: “The Bavarian. You found him?”

I watched her spread the paste over the wound beneath Caglione's rib. Her hands moved upward until the paste covered the broken ribs and his breast. "You have to help me."

"You didn't answer me," she said.

"Zio."

"Did you see the Bavarian?"

"I did not," I said. "Zio and his men took him. To the woods."

"And I've seen what they do to them, right there in the square where we fetch our water. They bring this upon us. Where does it end? And here I. For a basketful of fish."

"Zio took him because of me. Why wouldn't he leave?"

"The same kind of hunger. The same greed. Someone had to," she said. "Stop him. Must."

I took a seat at the edge of her bed. I thought clearly but my voice faltered. "'It doesn't end,' Zio said. I have little time."

"A man like your uncle will keep his word."

"The herbs you gave me, after the Guardabassi son."

"Use them tonight." Gelsomina touched her wrist to Caglione's brow. "A little fever is a good sign. He rests now."

"When it's all over," I said, "wait a few days, then go to my uncle's house. No one will remain to claim it." She lifted her gaze from the wounded man, peering at me with her black eyes. "The right to ownership lies in possession. My uncle said this. Take things that you own. Burn what you find there. After you go to his house, go to his lands." Gelsomina said nothing but I saw some understanding in her face. We pulled a blanket over Caglione. "You'll save him," I said.

“I’ll sleep beside him. I think he’ll live.”

I took the shawl from her chair. “I need one more thing. Something to make her sleep.”

Never before had I so relished the preparation of that *cecina* cake, turning it carefully from one side to the other in the pan. The cake perfectly browned, I placed a plate over the pan to keep it warm. Filomena sensed something.

“An occasion,” she said. “Perhaps he will bring some wine.”

“Usually he takes his wine in the square.”

My mother made it her habit not to eat until Zio Ludovico had finished his dinner. Often, she waited well into the night.

“When he returns, tell him, that you prepared the *cecina*.”

“Why?”

Gelsomina’s shawl, wrapped around me, hid the bloodstains on my skirt and blouse. I gave my mother the long end of the leather cord I had earlier cut: “Bind my hands,” I said.

Zio gave no greeting when he entered the room. I sat in a corner by the fire, feigning contrition.

“It’s good tonight,” he groaned, finishing the *cecina* cake. He stretched across his cot to sleep.

The cinders waned in the hearth. I stood beside my mother until her fingers had loosened the knot at my wrists. I placed her piece of dry bread in the pan, adding enough water to soften it, a spoonful of oil. The ground herb from my pocket I added last. I held the mixture over the coals.

“This will warm you,” I said.

“Who looks after me?”

“Eat mother,” I said.

I watched her take spoonfuls of soft bread into her mouth, mashing the mixture with her few remaining teeth, the tip of her tongue cleaning the moist crumbs from her lips. She handed me her empty bowl.

“Ludovico was right,” she said, “to bring you back here. You’ll thank him. You’ll see.”

“Let us sleep.”

Filomena slept in her chair. I covered her well with her blanket then lay on the cot by her side. A quarter moon came into view through the small window, colorless behind a sheer cloud. Her breath unwinding, long threads of air, rushing to stops and starts of silence. After, nothing but a glimmer of sound, fading with the night.

The moon had passed. I stared at the black wedge until a spare light entered the catacomb. A cist, Ugo said, is a burial chamber made of stone or hollowed trunk. The stone walls of our house shook even before my uncle woke. Not he as much as his body woke, parts of him coming up from the inside, coming out. Through the window, a rib of pink light.

I pulled the blanket over my mother’s head. Zio howled. His knees on the floor, his hands braced. The blood he wretched splattered the wall. He crawled across the room. His hands reached for the legs of the wooden table. He heaved. Blood poured from his mouth. A piece of flesh from his stomach dropped to the floor. A vulture regurgitating its kill.

I dug under the boards where I kept my box of coins. In the chest, I found a blouse of Ada’s, a clean skirt, and a sack my father used when he hunted in the woods. I put the clothing in the sack, along with the savings that I had kept hidden for years. Zio lay in a pool over the floor. He still lived.

I opened the door of our cottage. The last traces of frost in the air. A sweet, musty scent came from the ground. I heard Zio's voice. He choked and pounded the floor with his fists. The sounds he made. He called my mother's name. I went to where she lay. My strong arms lifted her frail body from the chair. I carried her outside, closing the door behind me. I did not look at her face again, setting her stilled limbs over the cool, untended ground. Twigs and half-eaten leaves, a bed of morning dew.

XXII

In the woods, the killers had removed the shoes of the murdered men, turned the soles to the sky. Outside the walls of our village, a military tank had stopped. From the place where I entered the woods, I saw two soldiers who stood in their grey uniforms talking with the hefty chief *carabiniere*, while two younger *carabinieri* roamed the site. “You might have come sooner,” the chief said. “This massacre left to the few of us.”

One of the soldiers shrugged. “I’ve seen worse.”

Few villagers stood together, waiting to look for a missing husband or son. The soldiers held their guns. I walked to where they had carved a line into the ground. “Stand back until we say you can cross,” one of them said. Two women, wrapped in dark shawls, went to look among the upturned shoes and cried soon after. The dead men, nearly twenty, lay covered with a floor-length tarp, nothing showing but their shoeless feet. The bare legs of one man, taller than the rest, showed from the knees down.

A soldier led the two women, and an old man, who told them he had come from Troia, past the dirt line. The women approached the feet of the dead. “Disturb nothing,” the soldier said. The women put their hands over the tarp where their dead ones lay. Their wool-clad bodies wept. The old man walked the length of the row of feet. He retraced his steps a few paces, then stood still. The sun on that pair of young feet made them glisten a pale blue.

I recognized Iona behind the black scarf that covered her head. She looked to where the soldier stood. “I want to see his face.” The soldier shook his head. One of the young *carabinieri* took her by the arm. She stood slowly. “This one’s mine,” she said.

“Make your claim,” the soldier said. “Over here.” He made a sign to the other young *carabiniere*, to count the feet.

Iona and the other woman followed the soldier. The old man joined them soon after, to put his mark on their page.

“When can I take him,” the man from Troia said.

“Bring your cart to the gateway, tomorrow at dawn,” the soldier said.

The Troian left with Iona and the other woman. Three of us who remained walked to the feet of the dead men. I went to the long legs not covered by their cloths. I put my hand over his cold ankles, seeing how they had beaten and bruised his calves. Then I walked around the bodies, to where they had covered the heads, crouched beside the bit of dark tuft that showed under the tarp. I held my hand above his head.

One of the young *carabinieri* stood near. “I wouldn’t,” he said.

“How?” I asked.

“With that one.” He put his index finger to his temple with raised thumb. Then he lowered the thumb.

“And the others?”

“You don’t want to know,” he said.

“What will happen?” I asked. “Will they punish the men who did this?”

“If they find the men, but who knows. The soldiers look for the unionists in the hills.”

“The unionists did not do this,” I said.

“You talk as though you know.” I had never exchanged a word with this *carabiniere*, but I knew his face. “You are the niece of the *massari*, who looks over the Guardabassi estate,” he said. “These soldiers want to talk with him.”

“I have not seen my uncle in many days. I left our house. I am not with him,” I said.

“No? Then with whom?”

“You found an old man, I heard, days ago,” I said. “You know who he was?”

“Him? One from this village, it turns out, who sat at the tables with the other men.”

“Gian Riccardo.”

“That’s it. More than once, when he and some of his companions drank a little too much, they’d spend the night in the square. I’d come out to check on them, to see that they hadn’t died. How he got himself mixed up in this. Probably got doddy and wandered off.”

“With broken legs?” The *carabiniere* looked at me with a curious squint. “We all knew him,” I said. “You buried him?”

“In the woods. Back over there. Had to. He was far gone.” He made a face. “To be honest, I heaved when I saw it. Then I saw all this, within a few days. I’m not the same. We checked but the old man had no family left so we went ahead.”

“What about the rest?” I asked.

“We’ll have to do the same, find a place for the bodies nobody claims. You knew this one, the foreigner?”

“I knew him.”

“An odd one from the start,” the *carabiniere* said. “Makes you wonder. A scientist he called himself, all the way down here. Should have left sooner, like the other foreigners. Who knows. This one, the old man. The two of them made somebody mad.”

“I worked for him. He took no sides,” I said.

“Beats me. He has family somewhere?”

“I think not.”

One of the soldiers signaled to the *carabiniere*.

“Unless you have a claim to make,” the soldier said to me.

“None,” I said.

I left the woods. Wind swept two seasons of fallen leaves at my feet. Beneath the brittle cover, a pungent layer of peat.

The near side of noon. Dirt had long since filled Carlino’s unused grave. Still, a deep groove remained in the earth, next to the place where Ada lay. I took my route behind the village then found the stairs that led to Gelsomina’s. Above me, the shutters drawn at Minerva’s window. Looking back over my shoulder as I descended, I saw the black cross over her door.

Gelsomina sat over the straw beside Caglione.

“How is he?” I asked.

“He sleeps.” She stroked his bald head. Seeing my sack: “When do you leave?”

“At nightfall. After we bury her,” I said.

From what I had seen, the soldiers had enough to keep them busy for awhile, with the families who came for theirs, and the graves they would make for the nameless dead. It gave me some comfort to think that Ugo might lie in the woods where the two of us had once walked, but I had no way to know what the soldiers would decide. I gave them another day, maybe more. Then they would turn to other things. They would go looking for Zio.

Gelsomina left me with Caglione while she went to find one of the men she fed. “He’s a good one,” she said, closing the door. “This time we’ll trade his coin for sweat. Take that guinea from the hook. The loudest one. She never stopped her chatter. And the fattest. How she pecked. Rest her little feathers. Clean her well. When he’s finished digging, we’ll offer him something good.” She turned her face to where Caglione lay. “Listen, how well he breathes. Not a scratch.”

Her man finished his digging by dusk. He met me, shirtless, dirt-covered, at Gelsomina's door. Without exchanging a word, the two of us carried Filomena's body to the site. "Let me," he said, shovel after shovelful, completing the task. I held my hands out, close enough to catch the spray of earth. When he had done: "She rests now." His smile showed his browned, crooked teeth through bristled beard.

At Gelsomina's door, the grave digger brushed the dirt from his arms and chest. He pulled his shirt over his head. The warm aroma of roasted hen and rosemary filled my nostrils. "Dine well," I said. I shook his hand, not staying to share their meal.

The soldiers' tank sat, unattended, beneath the gateway where the stairs began. Sack over my shoulder, I walked out onto the road, moving swiftly until I reached the place where I had left the old peasant, Rado. There, barely visible, the shepherd's hut where I had first seen Ugo, where he and the *ollandesi* descended and then returned from the mouth of the earth. I took the path down the steep hill, my feet sliding over rock in the dark. The peasant had only to go as far as Bovino. How much further I had to go. Down, the weight of my coins pulling at my sack, the slide of nickel and silver against wood, until I knew I had lost the path and had to wait until morning to find my way.

I slept little, nothing but my shawl for cover, beneath a small oak, my head over my knees. When I opened my eyes, dry, rocky ground, with patches of new grass. In a light as dense as clay I headed downward, finding the grooves left by the passage of feet and hooves. No road in sight, I followed this path well past midday. Here and there, the signs of hardened feces and fleece. A blanket of dull white covered the sky, letting in bits of blue as evening neared. I had reached a meadow where gusts of wind rippled the grass. I crossed the meadow, dry in my

throat, until I reached a reed bed. In the last hour of light I searched the ground for young leaves of chicory, chewing for the bitter moisture they gave. I lay beside the reeds, a few stars above me through a rip of cloud. Crickets lighted on my arms and face. The brush of their sturdy wings. I slept soundly in the scream of night grass.

In the morning, the green leaves came up with a mouthful of yellow phlegm. My memory of Zio fresh, I waited for more but nothing came. I held my head to the ground. When the worst of the sickness had passed, I stood.

Where tall grasses grew, somewhere water flowed. I followed the reeds a long way. The meadow dipped. At the edge of its bowl, a narrow hollow with a trickle of running water. I lowered myself, putting my mouth to the stream where it flowed over rock, splashing my face and neck with the cool water. I still wore the clothing with Caglione's dried blood. There, I undid my blouse and skirt and rinsed what I could of the stain, wringing the red from the cloth until the water ran clear. Then I took the clean blouse and skirt from my sack and dressed. The blouse of cotton carried the smell of laurel and smoke. It hugged me at the arms, pulled at my chest. I left the neck open, for easy breath as I walked, and the buttons I could not fasten at the breast. I draped the wet clothing over my sack, to dry in the air, then took another long drink of water. I followed the stream until it dipped into a ravine where I could not go.

On the bank, I saw hills on either side of me. I had never come as far as this, but I guessed that I had come east of Bovino, in the direction of the rising sun. A road lay somewhere near that town. I had my back to it now. The Gargano lay far above me, on the eastern coast. I would find that coast, and go south, as far as Brindisi.

I climbed past nightfall, under a clear sky, a half moon overhead. I had come to a patch thick with low shrub trees and thistle that stung and cut my legs. When I could go no further, I

found a spot where I could stretch myself. I lay down under an umbrella of leaves. Caterpillars dropped from the branches onto my head. I brushed them away, curling into myself to sleep. My hunger dug into me. I caught the scent of oily hen and herb on my fingertips. That, and the drop of those sticky creatures onto my skin, filled my senses. My head spun. A bead of sweat ran from my temple over my cheek. Bathed, I touched my dampened clothes. The muscle at the root of my gut forced upward the little I had inside me. The sour release of water and spit. My cheek flat against the ground, needles of fallen matter pressed into my skin. My eyes, open, saw nothing but dark. How long after that I put my hand to my face to feel that it moved. My skin had cooled. I shook the litter of caterpillars that clung to my shawl. Not long before light returned, I slept.

Sun flickered through the tight green leaves and knotty branches of shrub. Through that thicket of roof I peered up at the blue. My limbs stiff from the night air and rugged terrain, I sat up, then pulled myself into a crouch, holding on to branches that poked at my sides. I lifted my skirts to release a trickle of urine into the dirt before beginning my climb. Since I had last lain with Ugo, my time had come and gone again. Weeks past I had not bled.

Gazing upward, I followed the curve of blue through the mosaic of bramble. The thorned branches caught and held my clothing as I struggled forward. I fought them, breaking the sharp ends from their tawny trunks until, at last, the dwarf forest released me at the top of the hill.

Before me I saw nothing but rocky field, covered with a down of green, red poppies and blue mountain flower. I shook the dirt and twigs from my hair and rubbed my face. A brisk wind swept the ridge. It tasted lightly of salt. I had a hunger.

XXIII

The hill was steep enough that I crossed back in places to keep from sliding, treading over grass and ground cover where I could, away from the loose crumbling rock. I walked into the wind. The sun warmed the left side of my face before it reached its zenith. I stopped where I found a bed of yellow buds, their sweet perfume. I picked the calming flowers that bring sleep and put them in the pocket of my sack. Further on, I picked up the scent of fresh manure. I followed that around a rocky bend. The scent stirred my hope, though it reminded me of my queasiness as I walked. Where the grass grew sparse, I saw the worn path. I had come upon another sheep route. I followed this path long past noon, warm rays at the back of my shoulder and neck.

Below me, perched on the hill, I saw the stone hut surrounded by white boulders. Beyond that, a flock of sheep covered the hill, their noses to the ground. I approached the hut. A large white *maremmano* dashed up the hill, the fitful bark dogs use to greet strangers. The dog stopped a few feet away from me, shaking its white ruff. It growled. Below, a young boy appeared from behind the hut. He held a stick. His dark eyes stared at me, his head framed by a helmet of close-cropped hair. The boy did not move. The *maremmano* lifted its haunches in the air, scraping at the ground with its front paws.

A man's voice came from behind the house, a shouted order to the boy or the dog. Both of them turned to look. The man came out, stepping past the boy. Seeing me, he said nothing. He whistled and pointed his arm behind him. The dog turned and bounded down the hill back to where the sheep grazed. The shepherd watched me as I finished my descent to the hut. When I reached the two of them, the shepherd roamed me from head to foot. He had a wizened, surly look. The boy kept his fixed stare on my face. He seemed about fourteen, with rich olive skin and a large black mole over his upper lip.

The shepherd had his sleeves pulled up over his elbows. Wide blue veins jutted from his rosy forearms. His eyes narrowed. "What's this?" he said.

"I'm heading south," I said. "To Brindisi."

"By yourself?"

"My father's family comes from there," I said.

"Then you know it," he said.

"No," I said. "I've never been."

The shepherd's face softened a little. He looked to either side of the hill then back to me. "This is where we make our camp."

"Your son?" I said, looking at the boy.

"If you like," the shepherd said. "Where do you come from."

"From Foggia," I said, not wanting to give him the name of my town.

"You have a long way still before you reach Brindisi," he said. "You can't wander these hills in the dark. Stay tonight, if you like. We'll give you something to eat."

I asked him for water and he brought me to a milking tin where he kept that. "From a stream a few kilometers away. Rather dry from then on. You won't find much fresh water before the sea." He gave me a cupful which I drank without stopping. I felt his eyes, like sun on my chest.

"How long do you stay here?" I asked.

"Through the winter anyway," he said. "Into the spring. I go up to the Abruzzi Mountains in the summer, to get some fat in them. Do you like clover? No, I go as far south as Bitonto or even Conversano once in awhile, for the cold months. But we like it here. It suits us."

I looked for a place to sit, feeling faint. “I haven’t eaten in two days,” I said. “Do you have a little milk.”

When the boy left us to join the dog and the sheep below, the shepherd took me to the side of the hut where he had built a small oven of stone. “No chimney in there,” he said. The hut had a roof of tile and corrugated steel that hung over the place where he worked. “The winds are hard around here, not much cover. Put your sack down. Have a seat.”

I sat on a piece of chopped wood but kept my sack around my shoulder. He spilled a little milk from a jar into my cup. I sipped slowly, the rich drink coating my insides.

“They’re lambing now,” he said. “I’m up to my arms in cheese.”

“Where are we now?” I asked.

“Not too far from Bitonto. You’ve got a ways to go. What’s your hurry? Why not stay awhile and rest.”

The milk made me sleepy. I had no reply for him. Instead, I watched while he fit sticks into the stove and started his fire. An orange glow lingered over the hills, the sun a dark disk. When the fire had gone for awhile, the shepherd took a round stone slab from the ground and placed it over the coals. He lifted the lid from a piece of crockery by the stove, pulling out a fistful of dough that he flattened with his hands. He lay the dough over the hot stone. When the bread had formed a crisp brown crust, he turned it over to brown it on the opposite side. When he had done the first *torta*, he flattened another piece of dough and laid it over the slab.

“The bread keeps well,” he said. “We’ll have it warm with cheese.”

The boy ran up the hill with his arms spread like wings. His mouth made pumping sounds while he circled the hut. He let out a string of “gg-gg-gg-ggg-g.”

“*Basta*,” the shepherd said to the boy. To me: “That one’s not right in the head. You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Nunzia,” I said.

“Erminio,” the shepherd said. He prepared a third piece of bread. When he had pulled it from the slab: “Come on, let’s eat.”

Erminio disappeared into the hut then returned with a fat round of cheese and a dark green bottle. The boy came to sit with us. He stopped his sounds with big swallows before he tore a piece of bread from the stack and folded it into his mouth. Erminio grabbed one of the *torte*, tearing it in half. With his pocket knife he cut a chunk from the round of cheese and handed me my piece. The soft cheese melted over the warm bread.

“Give me your cup,” Erminio said. He poured a dark red wine. I swallowed its spark. I ate and quenched my thirst with gulps of wine. Nothing I had ever eaten tasted as good as this meal. The boy chewed, staring at me as I ate. Erminio watched as I finished my wine. “You like it do you. We make it ourselves.”

“It’s good wine,” I said. I had had little in my life. It tingled but did not burn my throat. Sweet and sour, I liked its taste. When he offered me more, I took another glass. I had set my sack down beside me while I ate. I saw that the boy stared at my sack. “He doesn’t speak,” I said to Erminio.

“When he really has something to say, which isn’t often,” Erminio said. Eying my sack: “What do you keep in there.”

“A change of clothes,” chewing my words. I swallowed more wine. “You do well here,” I said.

“We get by.”

The wine warmed my face and made me light. When the shepherd offered me more, I declined. We finished our meal in the dark. From what remained of his portion, the boy tore two small pieces of bread and juggled them in the air.

“Go,” Erminio said. “Light the lantern. We’ll make a place for her inside.”

The boy went inside the hut. I could not travel until morning and felt ready for sleep, though I sensed it would not be easy with both of them. I thanked the shepherd, grateful for my meal. I had fed my body well. That part of me was right.

With the shepherd, I entered the hut, cold and dank, a board floor, covered with shredded straw. The sharp smell of ripening cheese. In the light of the small lantern, I saw only a wooden bench and shelves against one of the walls where he kept his jars and fresh rounds of cheese that dripped into a flat pan. Erminio poured the contents of the pan into a small pale of rinds and crusts of bread. He left the hut and made a long whistle. I could hear the *maremmano* panting as it supped. He came back into the room. “She earns her keep,” he said. “I haven’t lost one in that flock yet.”

A bed of straw lay against the back wall. “Where will I sleep?” I asked.

“With us is fine,” Erminio said.

I asked to have a little straw for myself across the room.

“We don’t mind,” he said.

The shepherd looked back at the boy and that young one picked an armful from their pile that he carried across the room and dropped onto the floor next to where I stood. The boy went back to his straw bed and sat. His long arms draped over his knees, he stared at me. Erminio watched me as well. I took a seat over the straw the boy had left, my sack close to my side.

“Why don’t you lay down?” Erminio said. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Behind him I saw that the boy had moved one of his hands to the place between his legs. He held the hand there and touched. “Don’t wait for me,” I said to the shepherd.

He went to the straw bed and, seeing the boy, knocked the cropped head with the heel of his hand. “Get you,” he said. The boy lay down over the straw. The shepherd sat next to his feet. He looked at me. “Don’t mind us. Go on, get some rest.” He leaned into his knees. His wool tunic, open at the neck, showed the matted hair of his chest. “What are you waiting for? We won’t harm you. You think we’ll harm you? This one,” jerking his head at the boy, “runs around the hills all day. At night, he touches the straw. As quickly as that, sleep. Hear him?”

I heard the boy’s deep breath. “Shall I get the lantern?”

“No, let me,” the shepherd said. He came to the bench where the lantern sat, halfway between his bed and mine. His eyes roamed me. “Don’t you feel like it, really? It could be nice.” I shook my head. A glazed look came over his eyes. “Why not?”

“I lost my husband, few days ago,” I said.

“You don’t wear black.”

“I had none to wear. I go to my father’s family in Brindisi. There.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” the shepherd said. In the flicker of the spent lamp, he lay over the straw. “Sorry for you. No hurry. Maybe later, you’ll want to a little more.”

I lay down, not closing my eyes until I heard the loud rumble of his sleep. When I opened my eyes again, I heard the same rumble through forced outer breaths, the room coal dark. I did not hear the other breathe. The hut had no window. Only the few cracks, where cool air leaked into the room, could tell me when morning arrived. From the place I could not see, I felt the eyes of the boy on me. I lay quietly, not stirring, so that he would not know I lay awake. My hand rested over the sack at my side. I waited until a thread of dark grey appeared in the room, where

the ceiling met the roof. When I lifted my head, the thin, dark figure of the boy stood over my bed. I sat up, taking my sack. As I stood, I felt his warm breath. I ran my hands along the wall until I found the door. When the boy touched my skirt, I slapped his hand. He stepped back. I opened the door, slipped into the grey dawn.

The sheep rested on the hill below, where I had seen them graze. Against the wall, I saw the stone slab the shepherd had placed over his oven. On the slab, a piece of the *torta* we had not eaten. I took the bread from the slab. The green bottle stood next to the stove. The bottle still held some wine. I fit the bread into the pocket of my sack and held the neck of the bottle in my hand. Then I started down the rocky hill. The *maremmano* dashed out from amidst the flock. I pulled a small piece from my bread and tossed it at her. She barked once and swallowed the bread, trailing me as I took careful steps down the path. Glancing back over my shoulder, I saw that the boy stood at the door of the hut. He rubbed one of his eyes.

I turned my head back to the hill, waking with the brisk slap of breeze. The *maremmano* left me and rejoined her flock. With her nose, she nudged two lambs who had started down the hill, their long dried umbilical cords trailing on the ground. My feet turned sideways, sliding as the hill steepened. My descent eased after that. I found the path that wound downward to a flat rocky stretch. Not far from this, the shepherd said I would find a stream. Thirsty, I took a drink of the wine. It had grown more tart overnight. I tore a piece of bread and chewed that before swallowing the last of the wine. Still, I held my bottle. I walked towards a small copse of saplings and brush. There, I filled my bottle well and drank from the stream as the shepherd had told me I would find little water again before reaching the sea.

XXIV

At the stream, I took handfuls of cress that I chewed as I walked to keep my throat moist. I walked well that day over a flatland of marbled green, taking few sips of water to save as much as possible for the journey ahead of me. The trouble in my stomach had not returned. I passed my food in the usual way before the morning's end. When I lay over the field at night, I still had a piece of bread the size of my palm. I chewed some of the yellow flowers with a sip of water to wash them down.

I woke to a drizzle, feeling where it had wet my skirt and shawl. With the shawl over my head, I continued my walk, holding my sack close. Mist at my feet, I shivered, finishing my piece of bread. Thunder came from the hill behind me. Distant bursts of light. Rain dripped from the rim of my shawl onto my face. I held my tongue out, the bottle in my hand. Further on, in the direction that I walked, the clouds dispersed and a wide strip of blue hung over the hill. Soon, the rain stopped overhead. I came to the bottom of the hill and out onto a dirt road. I took that. The little sun that came through the clouds helped to dry my clothes. By afternoon, I walked under blue with few clouds, a breeze at my back. My body did not warm the whole day. I found shelter under a pair of birch trees near the road, no sign of a living person or beast around me. I judged that I had come past Bitonto by now, but how far I did not know. A Tarocco sun set behind me, casting a violet-pink over the dry hills. I chewed my yellow flowers, having nothing else. They came up before I slept.

A dragging sound on the road stirred me from my sleep. I had slept past dawn, the sky already a clear blue. A cart moved slowly over the dirt, not far from where I lay. I grabbed my sack and bottle and ran to meet the cart and driver. The mule kept its pace while I walked

alongside. The driver did not seem eager for conversation. "Can you tell me where I am?" I said. The driver looked to the side of the road where I walked then back to his mule as if he did not hear or understand what I asked. I quickened my step, speaking again.

He lifted his head. His mouth barely moved. "*Nuna*," I thought I heard. He used a dialect I did not know. "Nowhere," I understood.

"Brindisi," I said.

With his hand he told me "Ahead, a long way." When the driver saw that I did not leave him, he pointed to the back of his cart. I pulled myself up while the cart still moved. The wagon carried nothing but a few empty crates and milking tins. Its back wheel bounced over a rock sending one of the tins into me. The lid rolled. The little milk inside the tin spilled out onto the lap of my skirt. It had a sour smell. I pushed the tin away from me and replaced the lid.

We passed the first farmed land I had seen since I left Biccari. The young wheat still a sparse grass. I sipped at my water to calm my void, turning my face to the wind to lose the waft of old milk. It did not seem that the cart traveled any faster than my feet. I rested my limbs in exchange for the jostle of the wagon, certain only that we traveled southward.

Midday had passed when the driver rummaged through the bag at his seat. He pulled a large chunk from a loaf of dark bread and placed over it an oily piece of yellow cheese. I watched the back of his jaw, the work of his muscle as he chewed. When he had finished that, he opened a knotted scarf that held little mounds wrapped in brown leaf. Without turning his head, he handed one of these back to me. I unwrapped the dried fig. It smelled of smoked wood. I bit into its tough skin, reaching the toasted almond it held inside. Parts of the fig stuck to the roof of my mouth. I drank some water to wash it down.

With the cart's steady movement under the sun, my head drifted from side to side, my lids lifting enough to catch slices of velvety green, blue, or a haze of white dust. Then the cart stopped with a jerk, sending me forward into the wooden crates. "*Giù*," the driver said, without looking back. I complied, jumping from the cart with my sack. He pointed upwards to tell me that he planned to go that way. I had to stay on the road. I touched my hand to my head before leaving him. My shawl hung over my sack. At the curve of my shoulder, I saw that my blouse had ripped at the seam. The button I had fastened tightly at the center of my breast had come loose. The stitching of my undergarment, soiled with dirt, showed underneath. I walked a good distance after leaving the cart before my thirst reminded me that I had left my bottle and the rest of my water behind.

The few hectares of planted wheat ended and I walked again in a dry terrain. The horizon of cloud I thought I neared became white crag. A dusky brown hung over the cliffs. Where the hill steepened at my side, I walked in shade. Behind me I heard the grind of wheels over dirt, the sputter of a motor as it approached. I stepped to the side of the road, stopping for the heavy grey truck. Its dust rose to my face. I heard a loud whistle from inside the car, then another. The truck came to a stop. A young soldier looked out through the open passenger window. He put his fingers to his lips. Another grinned from the driver's seat, then a serious look came over his face. "There's a curfew. Don't you know?" the driver said.

"I hadn't heard," I said. The way the riding soldier grinned, I did not believe what the driver said.

"Brigands on these roads," the riding soldier said. "We caught ourselves a few. They roam the hills."

“What brings you out here alone?” the driver asked me. He did not give me time to answer. “Maybe you should ride with us in the back.”

“Come on,” the other said. “She can ride up here.”

“I go not far from here,” I said.

The two looked at one another. “You live in the rocks then,” the driver said. “Nowhere is not far from here.”

“Left your father or your husband?” the soldier in the passenger seat said. “I bet he’s missing you. I say we bring her along.”

I started to move away from the truck. “Leave her be,” the driver said. “Don’t wander too far in the dark,” he called to me.

The truck started up again. The rider leaned out the window, looking back at me as I walked behind. “Here,” he called, “Take this.” He threw something from the window that landed at my feet. I picked the wrapped sweet from the ground, its paper crushed and faded. At the back of the truck, I saw through wooden slats six seated men. A grid of wire made their roof. The men wore the simple clothing of peasants. They turned their heads to look at me as the truck moved ahead. None of them said a word. I saw rope around the wrists of one who sat at the back end of the truck. His arms bent, his hands touched the silver beard at his chin. His eyes watched me through the slats. I looked back, keeping his gaze as the truck continued ahead, until, behind the truck, I could see nothing but dust.

My horizon of white cliffs retreated behind a brown veil. Deep blue sank into night, covered the hills. I walked in the dark until my body refused me, slowing to a stop. At the road’s edge, my back rested against a wall of earth. The dried fig I had eaten earlier stuck inside me like

a swallowed pit. Wind blew dirt from the road into my face. I lifted my shawl over my head and wrapped my shoulders well.

Waxing moon and dense stars, a sight I had seen many times lying in the fields. With my father, finding the archer's bow. The night I woke to the roar of a peasant sleeping nearby, his every orifice releasing air, while my eyes watched a shower of night fire. My father, awake beside me, "See that? Hear that?"

Sleep came before I took my eyes from the stars. I woke with my head where it had fallen, over my bent knees.

None of the brigands the soldiers had promised troubled me in the night. I found the wrapped sweet the one had tossed, reaching to the bottom of my sack where my box lay. I lifted the latch at its lid to look at my coins. All there. I put two of the coins into the pocket of my skirt and closed the lid. This day I would find food and water where I could, somewhere, a person who had something to sell.

The soldier's almond sweet, too hard to chew, softened slowly in my mouth as I walked. It gave me a thirst. I looked at my dust-covered shoes, the holes at their toes. I removed one of the shoes, hopping on one leg as I flung a pebble that had lodged under the ball of my foot. After I had walked a good part of the morning, I caught sight of a stone cottage on the hill above me. Ahead of that, along the road, a cluster of small houses the color of chalk. A man and a woman walked along the road in my direction. The man pushed a wheelbarrow and pulled a long-horned goat behind him by a cord. The woman carried a basket over her head.

I brushed away the dirt I could feel on my face and ran my fingers through my loose hair, twisting it behind my head. The man and the woman stared at me as I neared. The man looked

twice the age of the woman, with bent shoulders and sparse hair. The woman wore a black dress that came to her ankles and no shoes on her feet. Her fingertips lightly touched the rim of the basket on top of her head. Her dark hair pulled tightly back brought a harshness to the long features of her face. The wheelbarrow carried an assortment of rocks the size of bricks. In the basket, I saw the dirt-encrusted ends of fleece. I greeted the two in a formal way. Neither answered. Their eyes watched me as they continued to walk. The woman straightened her back. The man bent further into his cart. He turned his head, looking over his shoulder at me as they passed.

I walked to where I saw the cluster of houses, four in a row. Tall, round wooden hoops, used for threshing, stood against the walls of each house. At two of the doors, two women, dressed in black, with black scarves over their heads, sat on chairs. One of the women dropped a spindle, her coarse fingers pulling up long threads of yarn, a shower of white hairs on her withered chin. A basketful of carded fleece sat by her chair. The other woman shelled pink beans into a pan, the pods strewn at her feet. The woman who spun gazed up at me with distrustful eyes, halting her work. The other placed a hand on her hip, staring. She tossed one of her pods at my feet.

“Permesso,” I said.

The women continued to stare, tight-lipped. The door to one of the houses had opened a crack. The older matron pulled her spindle from the ground. Turning to the other, “Who is that?”

“How should I know,” that woman replied, fitting one of the beans into her mouth. Her jaw moved to either side.

A child stepped through the opened door, shirtless and shoeless, a light stubble on his shaved head. He stood motionless then broke into a laugh.

“*Salve*,” I said.

He began to circle me slowly, keeping his distance, his arm brushing the flies that landed over the scabs on his scalp. A black, mangy hen darted between two houses. The boy took off to chase her. I saw that another child had come from the same house, a little younger than the boy, a girl of five or six. Then two more children came, an older girl who carried a baby in her arms. Doors opened at the other houses and more children came out, twenty or more who began to surround me while the women looked on. A girl touched my skirt, lifted its hem. Another pulled at the sleeve of my blouse, ripping it a little more at the seam. One of the boys pulled at the strings of my sack, trying to peer inside. The boy I had first seen ran back from chasing the hen. He hooted and spun around the others and they all began to laugh. The faces of women, young and old, appeared at the doors, all dressed in black. I began to think that I had arrived in another country, hostile to me.

At one of the doors, a grey haired woman stepped from her stoop. She lifted her hand and cried in a shrill voice so that the children scattered. The woman wore a long printed apron over her black dress. Her large breasts dropped to her waist. She came to me. Her hand touched my arm as she inspected me from ear to ear, then her dark eyes looked at mine. She touched my face. With relief I smiled at her. My needs were too great. “*Acqua*,” I said.

The grey-haired woman looked back at the two seated women. The younger one rose with a sour face and went into her house. She came back with a small cup, half-filled with murky water. Her dialect was foreign to me, but I understood her gist. “We haven’t got much,” she said. I thanked her and drank the water she gave me.

“Get her a chair,” my friendly host said. The same woman brought a chair from her house and I sat down. “*Aspiette*,” my friend said. She returned with her own chair and a large basket of

pink beans. I knew this task well enough. I set my sack beside my chair. The two of us began to shell the beans. After I had shelled a dozen or so, she tossed three pods onto my lap. “*Magne, magne.*” I opened the pods and slipped one juicy bean after another into my mouth.

After midday, the fires began. The women brought wood to a large stove made of rock and mud. It stood to the side of the first house. The smell of the coals brought the children running, waiting for the bread that the women prepared. One of the women brought a large bowl of liquidy dough that bubbled as she poured it over the stone griddle. They did as the shepherd, Erminio, had done, turning the bread from one side to brown on the other. But the women made a bigger, thinner round. As fast as the bread cooked, the children tore pieces that cracked and covered them with crispy, black pieces of crust. Then they began to run into the hills until I no longer saw or heard them.

The bowl sat on the ground, less than half full. My friend ladeled spoonfuls of the bubbling mixture over the griddle, making bread for the women who sat around. Four rounds divided between eight women. I got my half. I chewed quickly. Its nutty, fermented taste with tiny pieces of charred wood. The younger matron brought a pitcher and we all took mouthfulls of sheep’s milk. I saw that a little of the dough remained in the bowl. When a few of the women had left their chairs, I took the coins from my pocket. My friend still sat beside the hearth. I took her hand to thank her for the bread, then dropped the coins into her palm. I looked to the bowl on the ground then tilted my head to the road. “Ah,” she said, nodding. “Why not.” The younger matron stood from her chair and eyed me with a doubtful look. She carried her pitcher and chair back to her house. Two wheels of bread came from what remained of the dough. My friend stacked one crispy round over the other then folded them in half. I let the rounds cool before placing them in my sack. I meant to leave then and walk for the rest of the afternoon, but my

friend pointed to her cottage, “*Vada*,” then took me by the hand. I followed her into the sparse room. She led me to a bed of straw with a wool cover. “*Dorme, dorme.*” I lay over the straw, hugging my sack, and slept.

XXV

I still slept when the boy I had first seen pulled me from the straw. Outside, the small town had gathered. The matron with her white beard swept the ground in front of the houses. The hearth blazed. Two men, neither young nor old, tended another fire. They had the look that siblings sometimes have, a similar feature in otherwise unlike faces. The heavier one had an oval face, the other an hourglass between cheek and jaw. The same full mouth. They wore the clothing of shepherds, with rolled sleeves. The leaner man wore a heavy white shirt, the other a tunic of jute. Encircled by stones, the fire rose from the ground. The two men looked at me briefly, then turned back to their fire. The man with the white shirt left to fetch an armload of long branches and the other walked back up into the hills. The sun had nearly set. The children carried a figure with black and crimson robes on the long stick of a broom. The figure had a head of bark, her features drawn with coal and chalk, braided straw and fleece for hair. She wore a wreath of woven leaves. Every village has its saint. The boy led me to the wall of the last house where he and two other children took the wooden hoops. I watched two of the children roll one of the big hoops back and forth between them, as if tossing a ball. The hoop bounced over stone without falling to the ground.

“What do you call yourself?” I asked the boy.

“Alessio,” he said. “*Guardu*.” He held a stick at the inner rim of the hoop, then began to push it forward, rolling it past the houses, far along the dirt road before he turned. He ran back to the village, his legs barely touching the ground with his sprint. The hoop, higher than his head, whirled in front of him. With a bound, he caught its end. The hoop spun up over his head. He, at its center, waited for the wooden circle to land at his feet. He set the hoop upright then started out along the road again.

My gray-haired friend took me by the arm. The beans we had shelled earlier boiled in a large pot at the hearth. Two bowls sat on the ground, one filled with a lumpy, white curd, the other with dried figs, their stems and leaves still attached to the fruit. She gave me a large wooden pestle. I sat on the ground, removing the dried figs from their stems, ignoring the larvae that had bored into some of them. With the pestle, I began to mash the figs. My friend sat on her chair, mashing the curds with her hand. She stopped at intervals to drain the excess liquid into a jar. One of the children quickly came to drink that, her head leaning over my bowl. When I had finished mashing, the woman mixed the figs into the smooth curds. She gestured with her head and the girl brought a basket of almonds. The three of us worked, cracking and shelling these. Another child came to watch. He stole an almond or two, then put his hands over my sack, feeling what lay inside. My friend gave him a tap on the hand. He took another almond before he ran off.

I asked the woman where I could relieve myself. She pointed back behind the houses. The girl led me a little distance up the hill where an old fig tree stood, staring as I lifted my skirt. The calls of other children drew her back down. When I saw that no one watched, I opened my sack. I lifted the latch of my box and quickly emptied the coins into the body of my stained blouse. I twisted the blouse around the coins, binding them so that they would make no sound. I finished with a tight knot. Then I fit my bundle inside my underskirt, using the sleeves to tie it around my waist. When I returned, I carried the simple box, made from oak, in my hands. Alessio ran to see what I had. I gave him the box as a gift. He and the other children took their time examining the box then ran off to see what they could find to put inside it. I returned to shelling almonds.

As I crushed the shelled almonds, the man who had left returned with a lamb in his arms. The lamb bleated as he set it on the ground, his hand over its neck. It looked to where I sat. I saw the pink rim around its moist eyes. The beast stood motionless, its legs trembling. The man pulled a knife from his pants and drew it across the lamb's neck. The body fell limply to the ground. With one cut along its center, its insides poured out. The older matron brought a pan and the man put the intestines into that. Then he lifted the lamb's back feet and took it to the side of the far house to drain the rest of its blood. The younger matron brought two bottles to the fire. The lean man who sat at the fire drank from one of the bottles. The other came with blood on his shirt and took the bottle passed to him. I finished crushing almonds and added them to the curd and figs. The bottle came to where we sat and my friend and I drank then passed the bottle back.

The younger matron did the work of skinning the lamb. Her hands pulled the hide from the flesh in one stroke, cutting it free at the hooves. She shook her hands then laid the hide over the back of her chair. The men tied the carcass to a branch pole and stood it over the fire.

Our meal began with cooked beans and the sharp, slightly bubbly wine. Hands reached across the fire to pass the bottle. The younger matron splashed some of the wine over the lamb. A glow in her broad face, she passed the bottle to me.

While the lamb roasted, the man with the white shirt joined Alessio. He took one of the wooden hoops from the wall, large enough that he could stretch his arms and legs out inside. His feet spread at its rim, his body made an X. With a forceful tilt, he began to roll inside the hoop, spinning in cartwheel, a flash of hand and face through the dirt courtyard while children ran behind. The children scattered with screams of laughter as the man's body rolled over the ground and the wheel continued without him a few meters before falling to the ground. The man leapt to

his feet. Alessio ran to him. They stood the boy inside the smaller hoop, the man guiding while the boy began to roll.

After that, the older man I had first seen with the wheelbarrow appeared with the young woman. She wore a black, embroidered shawl, her shiny hair fell over her shoulders, reaching her waist. The man ate his bowl of beans and drank wine while she began to sing in a low, wailing voice.

The woman stamped her bare feet while the old matron clapped. The oval-faced man made percussion with spoons. She sang a song that I had heard Carlino sing, after wine in the square, though he sang fast, a deep growl moving to a high pitch. The woman had slowed the song, singing in a rich, low, even voice, nothing but her lips moving on her expressionless face. The matron wailed behind her. The fire sizzled with the lamb's fat.

Before the lamb, I had taken more than a few swallows of wine. I had not had meat in so long I could barely remember its taste. The night air filled with the beast's strong smell until its legs and head smoked and flamed like charred wood. I took the piece of meat my host offered me from a big plate. The crisp brown skin brought water to my mouth. Inside me, my blood surged. I shredded the meat with my teeth, intent on nothing else. When I looked up, my host with the blood-stained shirt gazed at me, a wide smile. He handed me the green bottle: "To help you wash it down."

The dour faces I had seen earlier smiled and laughed, with the exception of the young woman who sat aside in a chair, her eyes looking at the ground as she took small bites of meat. My hosts said little to one another or to me. Their eyes, their chewing mouths, their laughter passed between them, children running in and out of the circle to grab what they could. I chewed the tender, oily flesh. Tears rushed to my eyes as my blood moved, in my belly, then upward,

filling me as I filled myself, a joy in my head. Only my limbs I could not trust. When I had finished my meat, I placed my hands at the sides of my chair. I felt the weighty lump at my hip, my purse of coins, glad that I had no need to stand.

We sat in silence at the fire when my friend brought the bowl of curd and fruit. The children appeared together, crowding around the bowl to pull clumps of the sweet with their hands. When it came to me, I scooped a portion of the mixture from the bowl. Lumps of soft curd dropped to my chest as I ate. I lifted those from my skin and blouse, licking my fingers clean.

What remained of the lamb lay over a wooden board by the fire. The old man still ate, his fingers lifting pieces of roasted brain from the split skull. When he had finished, he leaned back in his chair with oily mouth. The children brought the figure on the long stick and watched as my host placed it into the fire, digging the stick into the burning branches and the ground beneath so that it stood upright. The flame caught. The ends of the crimson robe began to curl, the fire climbing to the dark face, the hair a halo of flame. Cinders flew up in the air. The children circled then stood still as the charred head fell into the pit.

That, I thought, marked the end of the feast. Then the old man stood from his chair. He took a branch from the ground and held its end to the fire until that flamed. With his other hand, he took a small bottle from his pocket, pulling at the cork with his teeth. The liquid disappeared into his mouth. He leaned backward, then, with a thrust of his head, he exhaled a long flame. The children screamed and danced. The man blew out another long flame from his mouth, his wiry body rocking back and forth. He whistled between breaths. The young woman, back pressed against her chair, her legs folded to one side, let a faint smile into the corners of her mouth. I clapped with the others and we stamped our feet as he performed again. The flames flew out

until the empty bottle ended in the dying fire. Before he could take a seat again, his young companion sidled from her chair. She slid her arm under the old flame breather's sleeve and the two retreated from the fire, her long, narrow feet paced to his shuffle. I watched them go until they merged with the dark road where I had met them earlier in the day.

My two hosts lay on the ground, their faces to the stars. Some of the children sat around them while others followed the matrons back into their houses. Alessio lay down between the two men. My friend sat in a chair next to me. I watched the red glow of the glass bottle in the fire. She put one of her hands over mine. "*Attende*. I'll fetch blankets," she said. "Sleep. Outside. Like them."

"Why not," I said.

"Viba," she said in the morning. I opened my eyes. "Viba." She pointed to herself.

I pushed the blanket from my shoulder. "Nunzia," I said.

Two of the children slept between us on the ground. Another child lay at my feet. We lifted ourselves from the ground while they continued to sleep. The two men and Alessio had gone. The old matron sat outside with her spindle, in the early light. Sometime in the night or dawn, the chairs had all found their places at the walls of each house, the ground swept clean around the fire, nothing left but grey cinders and blackened glass. I found my sack at the threshold of one of the houses. Inside, the folded rounds of bread. I brushed the dirt and leaves from my blouse, smoothing my skirt from behind, running my hands over my hips, my full purse at the crease of my thigh.

Viba brought a cup, half filled with the murky water. I drank it down. I had no hunger after the night's feast. "Leaving?" she said.

“I’d better.”

She looked into my bag to see that I had the bread. “*Venga*,” she said. She led me behind the houses where I saw the pergola, with its tough, winding trunks and trellis of new leaves. She opened the door to a small cellar in the ground. Half of her disappeared as she leaned into the cellar, returning with one of the green bottles. “Here, take it.” She put the bottle in my sack. “Come on.”

The two of us walked into the hills. We passed a small pen, not far from the houses, where some sheep lay with their lambs. A few goats chewed at the thistle of a big artichoke. Behind the pen, a row of young olive trees. Further on, Viba stopped to pull dandelion and chicory that covered the ground. We filled our skirts. Then we pulled the little white flowers, “*Valeriana*, for the head.” Her fingers deftly plucking from the stems. I gave her most of what I had picked of the bitter herb and put the rest in my sack to eat with my bread. I fit the flowers into the pocket of my skirt. “Brindisi,” I said.

She pointed to the white crag on the horizon, lifting her hands in the air. “I suppose.” She kissed me on either side of the cheek then left, heading back down the hill. I turned to the white horizon and began to walk.

A few wispy clouds floated overhead. Wind in my face. Beneath its tangled cover, the ground’s crust began to crumble under my feet. When thorns and sandy dirt had filled my shoes, I stepped from them, holding them in my hand as I walked. How many years I had run barefoot as a child. The stab of thistle and rock did not deter me from that pleasure. My calloused feet noticed little when they bled.

My ridge of hill sloped, bringing me down across a narrow road that curved away from the rising sun. I crossed the road, beginning another hill, my white horizon out of sight well past bright noonday. My body perspired heavily with the heat and the climb. I did not stop until later in the afternoon to open my green bottle, using a rock to lift its metal cap. The wine refreshed me and I had a need for bread. I sat on the ground. I tore a piece from my flat loaf and folded a chicory plant into its crisp crust. Smoky, bitter, and dry, the few grains of sand. A long drink of wine helped me with that. I slipped the bottle back into my sack, two thirds full. My strength returned. I pulled a few thorns from my feet and stood. I reached into my skirt to tighten the knot at my waist, then walked on.

It did me good to see the white cliffs again. Salty moisture in the air. A sting on my sunlit face. I pulled some white flowers from my pocket and crushed them between my teeth. When I reached my hill's decline, an hour or so before dusk, I nearly ran, digging my heels into weed and earth, my purse of coins bouncing at my hip. I had come well up the incline of the next hill before I slowed my pace. Thick night met me half way up the hill. I no longer saw my way. I found a strip of flat ground where I could lie down. I covered myself, already deep in the spell of sleep.

I woke in dew, a pull at my haunches, a deep, boring twist. I did not lift my head to look at what rushed from me, a warm flood, a knotted coil, ripping itself from my womb. The pool filled my skirts. Heat rushed to my face. I felt it twist. What came from me soaked through the cloth, into the earth. The stab inside pushed me backwards. My weighted hips rose to the sky. The sound I made went far into the hills. I saw the steel bow of Ugo's measuring tool, felt the

pierce of its metal screw at my temples, then the warm hand cupping that part of me that now bled. I came down, still, and lay in what I had given the earth.

The whole day I did not stir, though I remember turning my head, my tongue reaching for drops of moisture still on the grass. A pale fog rolled over the ground, then rose. Through that blanket, I watched the path of the sun. When dark came, the stars retreated behind a film of haze. Some time in the night, I put my hand between my legs, touched what lay at my buttocks and thighs. I brought my hand back to my face. Fingers at my lips, I tasted my blood.

Light came fast. I rose early the next day, leaving that portion of myself behind. The ache still in me, I walked under the sun. For half the day I climbed the remainder of the hill, grass clinging to my stained skirts. My bottle, my bread in my sack. I walked on swollen, blistered feet.

At the top of that hill, I came to a ridge. An endless body of water spread out below me, its deep blue flickering with silver light.

My world ended with water. The earth sliced in half. I stood at its edge, in a silence penetrated only by the call of birds soaring and diving between the rock face where I stood. A sweep of white sand trimmed the shore beneath. The sound of locomotion traveled up the cliff with the wind. Pounding, its scream rising, scattering shale. The ground trembled. The ridge curved and jutted out over the water like a smooth belly. I looked out at the long metal cars emerging from the body of the cliff, oiled and muscular, an arc against the blue, weightless, flying out over the water until a lip of precipice swallowed them again. I dropped to my knees and hands, my pouch of coins sliding from my waist onto the ground.

With what I saw, I did not know if I had come a long way or only a little. I wondered how much further I could go than this. Rounding the base of the cliff in the distance, the train became a thin dark line defining the parameters of the shore.

Vita

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