

# Love's Faithful

## polyptych in Seven Panels for Dante Alighieri

Marco Martinelli

Translated by Thomas Haskell Simpson

*first panel*

THE FOG SPEAKS, ONE NIGHT IN 1321

I am everywhere

This morning

everywhere

In the fields

over the river

cloaking the mountains

way up there

I'm everywhere

this morning

I'm here too

in the writer's room

They left the window open

the banished poet

the exiled poet

EGO SCRIPTOR

the writer

is there

in his bed

in his rose-colored room

fever flays him  
like  
a lynx

death bites down  
enters his bones  
it penetrates, cracks open  
his skull-box

like me  
me  
who's everywhere  
this morning

he is dying  
the writer  
his mind *befogged*

Does he pray?  
Does he recite his Creed?  
Does he *see* Eternity?  
Or does he doubt  
sunk in remorse  
like a wounded stag?  
Or for a moment  
a single moment  
is he seized by fear  
and sees nothing but Darkness  
the Darkness of *the end*?

before  
he'd seen Eternity  
Paradise  
a thread of smoke  
pale blue incense  
he had *written* it  
black on white  
not far from here  
in the pine woods

*on the shore at Classe*  
and now those 13 canti  
those last 13 canti  
are hidden in his little room  
behind that rush-woven mat  
nailed to the wall  
in that forgotten  
cubbyhole  
dug into the wall  
yes  
it's Paradise  
Paradise  
it's inside there  
*walled in*

he is dying  
the writer  
the little worm  
after years of exile.  
In Florence they want him dead!  
Still!  
Never pardoned him!  
A bonfire  
in the public square  
oh sure  
they can't wait  
set fire to him!  
like a sorcerer  
a thieving grafter  
a corrupt politician!  
Stepmother Florence!  
Whorehouse and gallows!

They forgot to close  
the window  
and I'm here  
and they  
are all there  
the lords of the city  
students and friends  
they hosted him

the refugee  
opened a School for him  
where the refugee taught  
DE VULGARI ELOQUENTIA  
and then they sent him to  
Venice  
as ambassador  
to avert a war

the road's a river  
of filthy water  
a swamp  
of malaria  
malaria  
that melts your throat

and now they're all there  
those romagnoli  
watching  
their distinguished guest shiver  
spluttering  
raving  
Alabaster Ravenna  
Ravenna of the tombs  
Ravenna felix

Twenty years in flight  
over the mountains  
Sarzana Forlì Bologna Verona  
Arezzo Treviso Padova Lucca  
at the foot of the Luni mountains  
to Paris, perhaps  
in the Vico de li Strami  
day and night  
ice and heat  
no bread in his pocket  
no homeland  
stray dog days  
life's fangs gouging him  
like a vicious cur  
and now it sees him *swoon*

in that little room  
the exiled poet  
shit-smear'd  
the writer  
thrown back and forth  
on the shifting, roiling  
sea.

*second panel*

## THE DEMON CRIES OUT FROM THE DITCH

Cast your eyes below!  
At the river of boiling blood!  
At the great ditch of Phlegethon!  
In which boil  
those whose violence drove mad  
the lives of others!  
Oh mad, mad, mad  
Cruel bestiality!  
Oh you  
tyrants  
oppressors  
boiling  
there  
with piercing screams  
stench, feces  
the final black pit  
of the universe!  
Profiteers!  
Profiteers!  
Guzzling shit-sweetened blood  
and behind, the financiers  
the 500 families  
no longer  
walled in their villas  
no longer  
holed-up in their gardens  
no longer  
barricaded in their parties  
I see them there  
in a place mute of light

upside down in the mire!  
And the merchants of death  
doing business  
dragging down  
the disemboweled peoples and  
idiot Christs in the trenches  
nailed  
on the bridge of years  
between scorn and mockery  
pure, mute Christs  
with cut-out tongues  
scattered amidst trash and mud  
and sheet-metal  
with the stink of piss and  
anger and fear and desolation and  
trade in human flesh and  
cries of mothers in the night  
unheard and  
the armsdealers  
armsdealers on a cruise  
armsdealers out for a sail  
armsdealers sipping drinks  
taking a pose  
for the next photo  
amusing themselves  
making five-year plans  
on the death of others  
armsdealers double-breasted  
armsdealers hinting a smile  
armsdealers with facelifts  
armsdealers sneering  
bounteous in advice and sermons  
armsdealers aiming high  
armsdealers shining the shoes  
of the bankers  
reaching agreement  
with heads of state  
armsdealers foxes  
armsdealers hyenas  
armsdealers wolves  
presiding over the threshing floor

that makes them so vicious  
down there in the pit below  
upside-down  
and the International Organizations  
those too  
in the ditch  
the International Organizations  
bounteous with cash  
mountains of cash  
to pay salaries for functionaries  
to fatten their functionaries  
those plump functionary bellies  
those zealous functionaries  
punching their timecard  
concerned  
about world hunger  
while all around  
the bombs  
make the world a sarcophagus.  
Wars!  
Wars!  
Wars everywhere!  
Started by the insipid  
who wouldn't know how  
to build a chicken coop!

*third panel*

## THE CRUCIFIED ASS REMEMBERS

I was the one  
me  
me  
I was the one  
me  
who carried him in the valleys  
across the rivers  
I was the one  
  
look at me  
donkey skin and bone  
me

I carried him  
already sick  
ah, the malaria  
batters the bones

me  
I was the one  
I was the one  
me  
I carried him on my back  
the writer  
my cross-shaped back

what do you think  
it's all my life  
that I  
me  
carry these Christians  
on my back  
big and small  
lords and paupers  
blind, lame and bent  
bat-shit crazy

my back  
has carried the world

and I  
me  
feel it like a wound  
I wear the mark of the cross  
on my back  
I just can't see it  
I just can't see it  
I just can't see it

but  
but  
but  
if I look around

sure I see it, that cross  
I see it everywhere

the world  
is cross-shaped  
it even reaches the sky

men  
just throw out their arms  
they form a cross

the trees  
standing still, perfumed  
pray with their branches  
they're cross-shaped

lower your eyes!  
Don't you see?  
and all those animals  
even the littlest  
are cross-shaped

look up!  
look at the birds in the sky  
eagles, buzzards, swallows  
throwing wide their wings  
make a cross

and when mothers and fathers  
throw their babies  
in the water  
to keep from drowning  
the babies open their arms in a cross

the cross holds tight in its fist  
all the world's secrets  
she alone stands still  
while everything wheels around!

they've piled the cross on me  
they've called me ass

they've beaten me  
they've flayed me with thorns  
they've spit in my face  
they've mocked me  
Idiot!  
Idiot!

What do you understand?  
I couldn't care less!  
The cross stands firm  
And the world wheels around.

Without the cross  
there wouldn't be the world!

*fourth panel*

## THE VITUPERATIVE DEVIL CRACKS JOKES

Chastise, go on, chastise  
Castigate, come on, castigate  
Why do human people scold?  
Why do human people deprecate?  
Rebuke, go on, rebuke  
Condemn, come on, condemn  
Squabble among yourselves  
Tear out his hair  
Tear his guts out  
Tear out his tongue  
Why do human people disparage?  
Why do human people vilify?  
For credit, money, inheritance  
Accounts that don't add up  
Never equal shares  
Brothers split among themselves  
It's mine!  
No it's mine!  
Crush his skull  
Crush his skull  
till checks come out  
till checks come out  
till checks come out



*Love's faithful*, 2018. Photo: Enrico Fedrigoli.

Execrate, go on, execrate  
Defame, come on, defame  
Why do human people blame?  
Why do human people accuse?  
Some accumulate and some scatter  
Some keep and some waste  
Some screw you and some screw themselves  
Some clutch the cashbox  
Some destroy the family fortune  
Some go to ruin at the slots  
All the gold under the moon  
Exalted wealth and the Earth's kingdoms  
Are subject to the whims of Fortune  
She suddenly opens the door  
and slams it slams it slams it shut!

Reprimand, go on, reprimand  
Reproach, come on, reproach  
They pile up gold and silver  
Labor, yes, labor in vain  
Labor in vain  
And then?  
Can't sleep at night  
can't sleep at night!  
Labor in vain  
Labor in vain  
And leave it all to others  
all of it to others  
Labor in vain  
Labor in vain  
Nothing but wind in darkness  
They arrive in the fog  
They depart in the shadows  
If wealth grows  
So grow  
Those who devour it  
Think on it, no?  
Obscure life lost!  
Obscure life lost!  
Obscure life lost!

*fifth panel*

## ITALY KICKS ITSELF

First

there were Guelfs and Ghibellines  
Guelfs against Ghibellines  
Then the Guelfs split among themselves  
Whites against Blacks  
White Guelfs  
Black Guelfs  
then the Whites split among themselves  
within themselves  
Whites against Whites against Whites

is this what politics is?

Violence and clashing among brothers  
even ones on the same *side*  
split & split & split  
until nothing's left  
no *side* left  
cut in half even in oneself  
mangled  
guts hanging out  
and never worried  
if because of this war of theirs  
they drove their country to ruin  
robbed their children of their future

is this what politics is?

and there's no side left  
because there's no Heaven  
way up there  
SUPERIOR  
a Heaven superior to you & me  
a Heaven the birds can't reach  
even with a thousand wings  
a Heaven not for astronauts  
a Heaven inside you and me

to obey, gladly  
a Heaven of Light  
that no shadow  
no rancor  
no jealousy can scratch

Ah servant Italy  
abode of pain  
crippled Italy  
you never change  
Italy disunited  
Italy lacerated  
Italy mired  
Italy strangled  
Italy exploded  
false  
evil weed  
Italy adrift  
a ship of fools  
Italy of the paparazzi

Italy on light duty  
Italy for hire  
Italy bows its head  
Italy unlucky  
Italy humiliated  
Italy always on its knees  
that enjoys serving the powerful  
Italy, its eye corrupted  
Italy of the little men  
who love to obey  
neck in the yoke  
of this monstrous vice  
Italy I have a family to look after  
Italy I didn't know  
Italy I don't think so  
I confess  
that I wasn't there  
Italy there's always an excuse  
Italy it's always the others  
Italy the fetid

Italy losing sleep  
Italy we're the sly ones  
Italy of the favored  
Italy of the bodyguards  
Italy that, sir  
I'm here to grovel for you  
I'm your faithful servant  
I even piss on command  
but I'd like from you, if I may  
a ten-floor villa with pool  
a caramel-red Ferrari  
my own private mall

One is born a man  
but becomes a brigand

Italy of chit-chat  
Italy of the cafés  
Italy of the new media  
Italy do-it-yourself  
Italy the chirping tongues  
of facile opinions  
free of charge  
Italy of consultations  
Italy of insults  
bestowed on the evil & the good  
hailstorms on the web  
without distinction  
Italy of Italy's plagues  
Italy of the asswipes  
sacrilegious Italy  
shameless Italy  
winking Italy  
at their elegant dinners and  
fine salons  
Italy that sells its children  
Italy imperturbable  
Italy of the bagmen  
Italy of the front man  
Italy of appearances  
Italy of underneath it all

Italy of the scheme  
Italy that plays the Lotto

Italy can't breathe  
stumbles, falls, gets ups again  
in the poisoned air  
drowned in acid  
entombed in cement  
Italy of pestilence, fevers, buboes  
Italy spitting blood  
Italy of heart attacks  
who die on the job  
look around a little  
come on, it's a fact of life  
three die per day

Italy of murders  
Italy of misdeeds  
Italy of massacres  
of unpunished crimes  
Italy still mafioso  
Italy terrifying  
in the south, the north, and elsewhere  
up in the mountains and down on the plains  
Italy armed  
armed to the teeth  
Italy prostitute  
and never with the losers  
Italy always repentant  
always  
and it's never changed  
Italy of the fake honest  
Italy of the pretexts  
Italy of the credit transfers  
Italy of the arrests  
Italy of the contexts  
that this is a different thing  
that the rule applies to the others  
but doesn't count for us  
Italy the boring  
unchanged for centuries

Italy of the miracles  
of the fake miracle workers  
of the great magicians  
Scrofulous Italy  
of the wizard dictators  
Italy on parade

Italy through clamped teeth  
Italy I'm up to here with it  
Italy the washerwoman  
Italy are you all there?  
Italy this is costing me  
Italy you foolish twit  
Italy aflutter  
Italy disheveled  
Italy petulant  
must be a freeloader  
Italy sniveling  
Italy I ain't doing nothing  
Italy coconut vendor  
Italy I wipe my ass with it  
Italy in disarray  
like a witch  
Italy ignoramus  
Italy presumptuous  
blind as a mole  
Envious Italy!

*sixth panel*

## ANTONIA, THE POET'S DAUGHTER

Father  
Father I'm here  
Can you hear me?

Never mind, gentlemen  
he doesn't recognize us  
the fever devastates him  
my old dad is raving  
raving like when young  
when shaken by love

overcome by bewilderment  
he closed his eyes  
fell to the ground  
like struck by lightning  
and fell into delirium  
like mad people do.

Father, we're here, can you see us?  
It's Antonia . . .  
your Antonia  
and Iacopo and Pietro  
and mamma . . .  
gentlemen  
don't huddle over him so  
and what's this fog in the room  
kindly close the windows please  
let me be the one to hold his hand  
the fever is shaking him and  
he hasn't eaten for days  
feel his bones  
they're scorching hot.

When young  
he *made* songs  
he and poets like him  
fedeli d'Amore  
they *made* songs that took them over  
they fell on the ground  
thunderstruck  
all intoxicated  
all *made* by Love  
his friend Guido  
who died of malaria too  
in Sarzana  
and they would ask people  
can't you see Love?  
Can't you see him?  
How can't you see him?  
powerful Love  
Lord of fearful aspect  
and yet wondrous

and yet happy, cheerful  
who holds our heart in his hands  
and sets fire to it?  
Can't you see Love  
naked, draped in a bloody shroud?  
Can't you see Love  
who brings on vertigo  
who sings our name  
like on the first day of  
creation?  
How can you not see him?  
You can't see Love  
you can't see  
you can't feel  
that you're *made* by Love?  
That Love *makes* you every moment  
dawn & dusk &  
without this *making*  
you wouldn't be here, singing?  
Can't you feel Love  
that strikes your head  
like thunder  
that cuts your legs out from under you  
makes you tremble  
at the sight of the Beloved  
when the Beloved comes to you?  
Can't you see Love  
eternal Spring  
that drives the foals to embrace  
that makes them stamp their feet in the meadows  
stronger than death  
stronger than all your fear  
torment  
abyss?  
Can't you see Love  
the First and Last  
the Dead and the Resurrected  
whose brow is snowy  
eyes of fire  
feet shining gold  
whose hands capture the stars?

Can't you read Love  
in the great book of the universe  
binding All Things together  
holding All Things up  
even the ant  
even the rhinoceros and the whale  
even the cloud, the mountains  
even the ugliest visage  
even the body so scorned  
that  
when it passes  
people cover their face?

*seventh panel*

## AN ENDING THAT ISN'T AN ENDING

at a certain  
point  
towards the end?

fog  
ashen fog  
fog of ashes

the point  
the little point, me  
me  
Dante?

I, Dante?  
What have I given?

Is the Comedy  
too small a thing for you?

The refugee  
proud of his sacred poem  
doesn't know now  
terror seizes him  
now he *sees* the ditch  
and the worms

that shriek  
now he *sees* his fleshless skull  
now for a moment  
only a moment  
doubt  
devours him  
he plunges

into the fog

and he remembers his teacher  
Thomas Aquinas  
who, dying,  
looked at his *Summa* and said

MIHI VIDETUR UT PALEA

it seems like so much straw

Dante too  
at that point  
when the dark wood  
turns up again  
*punctually*  
to swallow him  
to Dante too it seems  
his poem is nothing but straw  
to be scattered by Time

tick  
tick  
tick

*the clock ticks and fades out*

tick  
tick  
tick

and at that point  
the refugee feels himself fall  
rolling down  
down  
down

at that point  
that very point  
the child appears to him  
dressed in the noblest colors  
humble & honest  
sanguine  
that same glorious little girl  
who had appeared to him  
at the beginning of her ninth year

APPARUIT IAM BEATITUDO VESTRA

That's how it all began  
two children looking at each other  
along the road

and the spirit of life in him  
began trembling so hard  
his pulse  
his breath  
his wild heart  
a fire in his heart  
he recognized his Lord  
recognized himself in Him  
I, Dante  
I, Dante  
A circle inside a circle inside a circle  
and Light  
Light