



Gracious Hospitable City

Ronna Bloom

I appeal to the gods of the lagoon, to the dirty filthy spirit
of boat spume and masks discarded,
Help me understand Venice.
To Fondamente Nove which ends at the water: *throw me in.*
To the man who took my suitcases on board answering
his cell phone,
"Mama, dimmi." Speak to me.

I appeal to the resistant force inside
who holds her secret heart secret
so no one can make a Las Vegas Doge's Palace of her love.

"Everyone loves Venice." And I nod.
But does everyone have a hidden life revealed to them
in the mirror of a place they've never been?
A place that's cherished and also grieved?
I knew I had to come, but for years avoided it,
as though beauty were a wound I couldn't look at.
Remembering Rilke, beauty is the first touch of terror
we can still bear.

How to care for a place being shipped into the sea by its keepers
sold to the highest bidder and
offered as knock-off of itself to those who don't know?

While the ones who do know
age perilously on the slow #1 vaporetto to work —
or from human overwhelm, take a cart into the calle
and ram it into a group of zombie-eyed walkers
with small flags from around the world —
or who host every minute they walk out their door —
or restore paintings in the back of the Accademia to repair the sky.
Whose dogs' back legs shake like spider webs as they crouch —
and whose stringed instruments break the fragile air
the way the high tide siren does —
who still marvel at their own churches, arches, light and water
with anyone who'll look, whispering *the beauty is free* —
and lean out their tired windows and smile.

Respect does not mean being left alone, but cared for.
Who can answer that in a language everyone will understand?
Dimmi.