

Workshop Session IV: Pedagogies/Exchanges

1. **Teaching Early Modern Women via the Historical Novel**—Elissa Weaver, Harriet Stone, Craig Monson, & Ann Roberts

Summary of focus: The panel explores how good quality historical novels can offer a means to catch and hold the attention of present-day undergraduates. The workshop takes as its starting point recent work of Sarah Dunant, which figures prominently in highly successful undergraduate courses at Lake Forest College and Washington University in St. Louis. The four organizers will approach the topic from the perspectives of literature, music, and art.

Description of the Workshop:

Harriet Stone will discuss how Dunant's three historical novels set in the Renaissance serve as points of entry for a broad look at women's places in early modern Italy. She will explore how Dunant's trilogy opens up the period through a focus on young women making their way through life. Stone will discuss how, via these female characters, Dunant's novels can engage students in discussions of the role of art and religion in society; the tensions between science and magic; music's relation to gender and class; and the importance of Florence, Venice, and Ferrara as cultural centers.

Craig Monson will describe strategies for folding popular microhistory (e.g., a chapter from his recent *Nuns Behaving Badly*) into the fictional and historical mix, with an emphasis on music's utility in such a course. He will suggest specific pieces, comparatively accessible via download or CD, which non-musicians could convincingly exploit in terms of Dunant's early modern women as *donne di palazzo*, courtesans, and nuns, and will offer a few straightforward ways of conveying music related to all three gendered spaces to non-musicians (including Renaissance dance).

Elissa Weaver will show how Dunant's historical novels construct the restrictive spaces that were the domain of early modern women, inside convents, in the home, and, for prostitutes, in designated areas of the city. She will offer examples from her research on lay and religious women's writing that corroborate, and sometimes contest, the fictional representations of the way women sought to expand their boundaries, physically or through their intellectual work. These issues might be raised in classroom discussions of how the novelist puts history to work in a story: how she uses space to evoke the historical context, to frame the characters, their situations and conflicts, and to advance the plot.

Ann M. Roberts will discuss her experiences teaching a course, based in part on Dunant's *Birth of Venus*, in which she stresses intensive writing as a primary goal. This course explores a comparative literary approach involving a 21st-century fictional portrayal of an early modern woman (e.g., Alessandra from *Birth of Venus*) and a 14th-century fictional portrayal (e.g., Griselda from the *Decameron*). She will also suggest strategies for incorporating modern films, as windows into the Renaissance that are filtered through their own times.

Assigned reading:

Sarah Dunant, *Sacred Hearts* (NYC: Random House, 2009), Chapter 1, pp. 3-22.

Suggested supplementary readings:

Dunant's novels read together with a brief coordinated piece of fiction or non fiction:

Sarah Dunant, *Birth of Venus* with Giovanni Boccaccio's Griselda story, *Decameron*, X.10

_____, *In the Company of the Courtesan* with Margaret Rosenthal, "Cutting a Good Figure: The Fashions of Venetian Courtesans in the Illustrated Albums of Early Modern Travelers," pp. 52-74 (with 14 interesting illustrations) in Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 52-74.

_____, *Sacred Hearts* with Craig Monson, "Donna Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana of Santa Cristina della Fondazza," *Divas in the Convent: Nuns, Music, and Defiance in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 13-40.

Other potentially useful novels:

Brooks, Geraldine, *Year of Wonder*
Chevalier, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*
Gregory, Philippa, *The Other Boleyn Girl*
_____, *A respectable Trade*
Lapierre, Alexandra, *Artemisia: a Novel*

A few questions for possible group consideration:

What other novels lend themselves credibly to such an approach? What are their specific strengths and weaknesses? What seem to be the vices and virtues of those listed above for this sort of course?

Could film/video be enlisted in comparable ways? Independent of, or in combination with novels? What examples work best (or not)? *Dangerous Beauty* (1998)? *Artemisia* (1997)? *Vision* (2010)? *The Princess of Montpensier* (2010)? *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008)? *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* (2003)?

What supplementary readings, accessible to lower-level undergraduates might usefully complement such a course and/or specific historical novels?

What sorts of assignments might productively engage and evaluate students in such a course? What other approaches that get beyond the default settings of exam or academic essay can we share—whether general possibilities or examples tailored to specific novels?

CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE THE SCREAMING starts, the night silence of the convent is already alive with its own particular sounds.

In a downstairs cell, Suora Ysbeta's lapdog, swaddled like a baby in satin cloth, is hunting in its dreams, muzzled grunts and growls marking the pleasure of each rabbit cornered. Ysbeta herself is also busy with the chase, her silver tray doubling as a mirror, her right hand poised as she closes a pair of tweezers over a stubborn white hair on her chin. She pulls sharply, the sting and the satisfaction of the release in the same short *aah* of breath.

Across the courtyard two young women, plump and soft-cheeked as children, lie together on a single pallet, entwined like kindling twigs, their faces so close they seem almost to be exchanging breaths, the one inhaling as the other lets go: in, out, in, out. There is a slight sweetness to the air—angelica, perhaps, or sweet mint—as if they have both eaten the same sugared cake or drunk from the same spiced wine cup. Whatever they have imbibed, it has left them both sleeping soundly, their contentment a low hum of pleasure in the room.

Suora Benedicta, meanwhile, can barely contain herself, there is so much music inside her head. Tonight it is a setting of the Gradual for the Feast of the Epiphany, the different voices like colored tapestry threads weaving in and over one another. Sometimes they move so fast she can barely chalk them down, this stream of white notes on her slate blackboard. There are nights when she doesn't seem to sleep at all, or when the voices are so insistent she is sure she must be singing out loud with them. Still, no one admonishes her the next day, or wakes her if she

slips into a sudden nap in the refectory. Her compositions bring honor and benefactors to the convent, and so her eccentricities are overlooked.

In contrast, young Suora Perseveranza is in thrall to the music of suffering. A single tallow candle spits shadows across her cell. Her shift is so thin she can feel the winter damp as she leans back against the stone wall. She pulls the cloth up over her calves and thighs, then more carefully across her stomach, letting out a series of fluttering moans as the material sticks and catches on the open wounds underneath. She stops, breathing fast once or twice to still herself, then tugs harder where she meets resistance, until the half-formed skin tears and lifts off with the cloth. The candlelight reveals a leather belt nipped around her waist, a series of short nails on the inside, a few so deeply embedded in the flesh beneath that all that can be seen are the crusted swollen wounds where leather and skin have fused together. Slowly, deliberately, she presses on one of the studs. Her hand jumps back involuntarily, a cry bursting out of her, but there is an exhilaration to the sound, a challenge to herself as her fingers go back again.

She keeps her gaze fixed on the wall ahead, where the guttering light picks out a carved wooden crucifix: Christ, young, alive, His muscles running through the grain as His body strains forward against the nails, His face etched with sorrow. She stares at Him, her own body trembling, tears wet on her cheeks, her eyes bright. Wood, iron, leather, flesh. Her world is contained in this moment. She is within His suffering; He is within hers. She is not alone. Pain has become pleasure. She presses the stud again and her breath comes out in a long satisfying growl, almost an animal sound, consumed and consuming.

In the next-door cell, Suora Umiliana's fingers pause briefly over her chattering rosary beads. The sound of the young sister's devotion is like the taste of honey in her mouth. When she was younger she too had sought God through open wounds, but now as novice mistress it is her duty to put the spiritual well-being of others before her own. She bows her head and returns to her beads.

IN HER CELL above the infirmary, Suora Zuana, Santa Caterina's dispensary mistress, is busy with her own kind of prayer. She sits bent over Brunfels's great book of herbs, her forehead creased in concentration. Next to her is a recently finished sketch of a geranium plant, the leaves of which have proved effective at stanching cuts and flesh wounds—one of the younger nuns has started passing clots of blood, and she is searching for a compound to stop a wound she cannot see.

Perseveranza's moans echo along the upper cloister corridor. Last summer, when the heat brought the beginnings of infection to the wounds and those who sat next to the young nun in chapel complained about the smell, the abbess had sent her to the dispensary for treatment. Zuana had washed and dressed the angry lesions as best she could and given her ointment to reduce the swelling. There is nothing more she can do. While it is possible that Perseveranza might eventually poison herself with some deeper infection, she is healthy enough otherwise, and from what Zuana knows of the way the body works she doesn't think this will happen. The world is full of stories of men and women who live with such mutilations for years, and while Perseveranza might talk fondly enough of death, it is clear that she gains too much joy from her suffering to want to end it prematurely.

Zuana herself doesn't share this passion for self-mortification. Before she came to the convent she had lived for many years as the only child of a professor of medicine. His very reason for being alive had been to explore the power of nature to heal the body, and she cannot remember a moment in her life when she didn't share his fervor. She would have made a fine doctor or teacher like him, had such a thing been possible. As it is, she was fortunate that after his death his name and his estate were good enough to buy her a cell in the convent of Santa Caterina, where so many noblewomen of Ferrara find space to pursue their own ways to live inside God's protection.

Still, any convent, however well adjusted, trembles a little when it takes in one who really does not want to be there.

ZUANA LOOKS UP from her table. The sobbing coming from the recently arrived novice's cell is now too loud to be ignored. What started as ordinary tears has grown into angry howls. It is Zuana's job as dispensary mistress, should things become difficult, to settle any newcomer by means of a sleeping potion. She turns over the hourglass. The draft is already mixed and ready in the dispensary. The only question is how long she should wait.

It is a delicate business, judging the depth of a novice's distress. A certain level of upset is only natural: once the feasting is over and the family has left, the great doors bolted behind them, even the most devout of young women can suffer a rush of panic when faced with the solitude and silence of the closed cell.

Those with relatives inside are the easiest to settle. Most of them have cut their teeth on convent cakes and biscuits, so pampered and fussed over through years of visiting that the cloister is already a second home. If—as it might—the day itself unleashes a flurry of exhausted tears, there is always an aunt, sister, or cousin on hand to cajole or comfort them.

For others, who might have harbored dreams of a more flesh-and-blood bridegroom or left a favorite brother or doting mother, the tears are as much a mourning for the past as fear of the future. The sisters in charge treat them gently as they clamber out of dresses and petticoats, shivering from nerves rather than cold, their naked arms raised high in the air in readiness for the shift. But all the care in the world cannot disguise the loss of freedom, and though some might later substitute silk for serge (such fashionable transgressions are ignored rather than allowed), that first night, girls with soft skin and no proclivity for penance can be driven mad by the itch and the scratch. These tears have an edge of self-pity to them, and it is better to cry them now, for they can become a slow poison if left to fester.

Eventually the storm will blow itself out and the convent return to sleep. The watch sister will patrol the corridors, keeping tally of the time until Matins, some two hours after midnight, at which point she will pass through the great cloister in the dark, knocking on each door in turn but missing that of the latest arrival. It is a custom in Santa Caterina to allow the newcomer to

spend her first night undisturbed, so the next day will find her refreshed and better prepared to enter her new life.

Tonight, however, no one will do much sleeping.

In the bottom of the hourglass the hill of sand is almost complete, and the wailing has grown so violent that Zuana feels it in her stomach as well as her head—as if a wayward troop of devils has forced its way inside the girl's cell and is even now winding her intestines on a spit. In their dormitory, the young boarders will be waking in terror. The hours between Compline and Matins mark the longest sleep of the night, and any disturbance now will make the convent bleary-eyed and foul-tempered tomorrow. In between the screams, Zuana registers a cracked voice rising up in tuneless song from the infirmary. Night fevers conjure up all manner of visions among the ill, not all of them holy, and it will not help to have the crazed and the sickly joining in the chorus.

Zuana leaves her cell swiftly, her feet knowing the way better than her eyes. As she moves down the stairs into the main cloister and enters the great courtyard, she is held for a second, as she often is, by its sheer beauty. From the moment she first stood here, sixteen years ago, the walls around threatening to crush her, it has offered a space for peace and dreams. By day the air is so still it seems as if time itself has stopped, while in the dark you can almost hear the rush of angels' wings behind you. Not tonight, though. Tonight the stone well in the middle looms up like a gray ship in a sea of black, the sound of the girl's sobbing a wild wind echoing around it. It reminds her of the story her father used to tell of the time he sailed to the East Indies to collect plant specimens and how they found a merchant boat abandoned in steamy waters, the only sign of life the screeching of a starving parrot left on board. *Just imagine, carissima. If only we could have understood that bird's language, what secrets might it have revealed?*

Unlike him, Zuana has never seen the ocean, and the only siren voices she knows are those of soaring sopranos in chapel or wailing women in the night. Or the yelping of noisy dogs—like the one now yapping in Suora Ysbeta's cell, a small matted ball

of hair and bad smells with teeth sharp enough to bite through its night muzzle and join in the drama. Yes, it is time for the sleeping draft.

The air in the infirmary is thick with tallow-candle smoke and the rosemary fumigant that she keeps burning constantly to counteract the stench of illness. She passes the young choir sister crippled by her bleeding insides, her body curled in over itself, eyes tight shut in a way that speaks of prayer rather than sleep. In the remaining beds the other sisters are as old as they are ill, their lungs filled with winter damp, so they bubble and rasp as they breathe. Most of them are deaf to anything but the voices of angels, though not above competing as to whose choir is the sweetest.

“Oh, sweet Jesus! It is coming. Save us all.”

While Suora Clementia's ears are still sharp enough to make out the pad of a cat's paw, her mind is so clouded that she might read it as the footfall of the devil's messenger or the first sign of the Second Coming.

“Hush.”

“Hear the screaming! Hear the screaming!” The old woman is bolt upright in the last bed, her arms flapping as if to beat off some invisible attack. “The graves are opening. We will all be consumed.”

Zuana catches her hands and pulls them down onto the sheets, holding them still while she waits for the nun to register her presence. In the Great Silence that runs from Compline until daybreak, the ill and the mad will be forgiven for breaking the rule but others risk grave penance for any squandered speech.

“Shhh.”

Across the courtyard another howl rises up, followed by a crash and a splintering of wood. Zuana pushes the old nun gently back down toward the bed, settling her as best she can. The tang of fresh urine lifts off the sheet. It can wait until morning. The servant sisters will be gentler if they have had some sleep.

Taking the night-light, she moves swiftly into the dispensary,

which lies behind a door at the far end of the infirmary. On the wall in front of her, pots, vials, and bottles dance in rhythm to the flickering flame. She knows each and every one of them; this room is her home, more familiar to her even than her cell. She takes a glass vial from a drawer and, after a second's hesitation, reaches for a bottle from the second shelf, uncorks it, and adds some further drops of syrup. Any novice who breaks furniture as well as silence will need a strong soporific.

Back in the main cloisters, Zuana notes a ribbon of light under the door of the abbess's outer chamber. Madonna Chiara will be up and dressed, sitting at her carved walnut table, head erect, prayer book open under the silver crucifix, a cloak around her shoulders, no doubt, to keep out the night chill. She will not interfere—unless for some reason Zuana's intervention fails. They have an understanding on such matters.

Zuana moves quickly down the corridor, stopping briefly outside Suora Magdalena's door. She is the oldest nun in the convent, so old that there is no one left alive who knows her age. Her decrepitude should have had her in the infirmary long ago, but her will and her piety are so fused that she will accept no comfort but prayer. She talks to no one and never leaves her cell. Of all the souls inside Santa Caterina, God must surely be most eager for hers. Yet still He keeps her at arm's length. There are times when Zuana passes her cell at night when she might swear she can hear Suora Magdalena's lips moving through the wood, each word inching her closer to paradise.

But God is good and His mercy endureth for ever. Be thankful to Him and bless His name. The words of the psalm flow into Zuana's head without her bidding as she moves along the corridor.

The new girl is in the double cell in the corner. Some might argue that it was an unfortunate choice. Less than a month before, the sweet-voiced Suora Tommasa had been singing the latest madrigals in here, verses slipped in by a sister who had learned them at court, until some malignant growth had erupted in her brain and she had keeled over into a fit from which she never woke. They had barely cleaned the vomit off the walls by

the time the new entrant had been approved. Zuana wonders now if perhaps they didn't clean hard enough. Over the years she has come to suspect that convent cells hold on to their past longer than other places. Certainly, she wouldn't be the first young novice to feel ecstasy or malignancy pulsing off the walls around her.

The sobs grow louder as she trips the outer latch and pushes open the door. She imagines a child caught in an endless tantrum, flailing across the bed or crouched, cornered like an animal. Instead her candle throws up a figure standing flat against the wall, shift sweat-sucked to her skin, hair plastered around her face. When glimpsed through the grille in church the girl had seemed too delicate for such a voice, but she is more substantial in the flesh, every sob fueled by a great lungful of air. The one she is reaching for now stops in her throat. What does she see in front of her, a jailer or a savior? Zuana can still feel the terror of those first days; the way each and every nun looked the same. When had she started to spot the differences under the cloth? How strange that she can no longer remember something she thought she would never forget.

"*Benedicta*," she says quietly, the word denoting her intention to break the Great Silence.

In her head she hears the abbess's voice adding the absolution *Deo gratias*. Within her penance it will be recognized that she is about convent duty.

"God be with you, Serafina." She lifts the candle higher so the girl can see there is no malice in her eyes.

"Aaah!" The held breath explodes in a wind of fury. "I am not Serafina. That's not my name."

The words reach Zuana as flecks of saliva on her face.

"You will feel better when you have rested."

"Ha! I will feel better when I am dead."

How old is this one, fifteen? Maybe sixteen? Young enough to have a life to look forward to. Old enough to know that it is being cut short. What had the abbess told them when they voted her in? That hers was a noble family from Milan with important business connections to Ferrara, eager to show loyalty to the city

by giving their daughter to one of its greatest convents: a pure child bred on God's love, with a voice like that of a nightingale. Sadly, no one had seen fit to mention the howling of a werewolf.

"Maybe I am dead already. Buried in this . . . this stinking tomb." She kicks furiously at the ground, sending a ball of horsehair spinning along the floor.

Zuana lifts the candle higher and registers the debris in the room: the bed tipped over on its side, the mattress and bolster ripped open, stuffing strewn everywhere. The chaos is impressive in its way.

The girl rubs the back of her hand roughly across her nose to stop the stream of tears and mucus. "You don't understand." And now there is a furious pleading in the voice. "I should not be here. I am put in against my will."

Zuana sees her, kneeling in a whirlpool of velvet before the altar, head bowed while the priest guides her through the litany of assent.

"What about the vows you spoke in chapel?" she says gently.

"Words. I said words, that's all. They came from my mouth, not my heart."

Ah. Now it is clearer. The phrase is as well known as any litany. Words from the mouth, not from the heart: the official language of coercion. In the right court, before a sympathetic judge, this is the defense a wife might use to try to get a desperate marriage annulled, or a novice before her bishop to have her vows dissolved. But they are a long way from any court here, and it will help neither the girl nor the convent to be awake all night debating the problem.

"Then you must tell the abbess. She is a wise woman and will guide you."

"So where is she now?"

Zuana smiles. "Like the rest of us, she is trying to sleep."

"You think I am stupid?" The voice rises again. "She does not care about me. I'm only another dowry to her. Oh, I have no doubt my father paid very generously to keep me hidden."

"Even the greatest dowries come with souls," Zuana says gently. Each word that breaks the Great Silence is as painful to

the Lord as it should be to the nun who utters it, but kindness and charity are also virtues within these walls; anyway, she is committed now. "You will come to understand that soon enough."

"No! Agh!" And the girl flings her head against the wall, hard enough for them both to hear the thud. "No, no, no!"

Only now when the tears come they are of despair as much as fury or pain, as if she knows the battle is already half lost and all she can do is mourn it. There are some sisters in Santa Caterina, women of great faith and compassion, who believe that this is the moment when Christ first truly enters into a young woman's soul, His great love sowing seeds of hope and obedience in the soil of desperation. Zuanà's own harvest had taken longer, and over the years she has come to understand that the only true comfort one can offer another is the one you yourself feel. While it is not something she is proud of, at moments such as this it is impossible to pretend otherwise.

"Listen to me," she says quietly, moving closer. "I cannot open the gates for you. But I can, if you let me, make tonight easier. Which in its way will help you with tomorrow, I promise you."

The girl is listening now. She can feel it. Her body has started to tremble and her eyes dart everywhere. What is going through her head, escape? The cell is not locked and there is no one to stop her flight. If she wanted she could easily push past, out the door, across the cloisters, and down the corridor toward the gatehouse—only to find when she got there that it is not the gatekeeper who holds the night keys to the main door but the abbess herself. Or out into the gardens, then, through the orchards, eventually reaching the outer walls—except that they are so smooth and high that scaling them would be like trying to climb a sheet of ice. All this, of course, is common knowledge to those living within. Indeed, for some the real terror only starts to bite when they imagine themselves standing in the world outside.

"No, no . . ." But it is more a moan than a protest. The girl covers her face with her hands and slides slowly down the wall,

her back scraping against the stone, until she is crouching, curled over, crushed with sorrow.

Zuana kneels on the floor beside her.

The girl jerks away. "Get away from me. I don't want your prayers."

"That's just as well," Zuana says lightly, sweeping away the horsehair to find a safe spot to rest the candle, "since Our Lord is surely temporarily deaf by now." She smiles so the girl will know the words are meant kindly. Close to, in the candlelight, she sees a lovely enough face, though a little swollen and pock-marked now with rage. Zuana can think of half a dozen giggling young novices who would happily help nurse her back to beauty again.

She takes the vial out from under her robe and uncorks it.

"Stop crying." Her voice is firm now. "This panic that you feel will pass. And it will do nothing for you or your cause if you keep the convent awake all night. Do you understand me?"

Their eyes connect over the vial.

"Here."

"What is it?"

"Something to make you rest."

"What?" She doesn't touch it. "I still won't sleep."

"If you drink this you will, I promise. The ingredients are those they give to criminals on the cart to the gallows so their drowsiness will blunt the torment long enough for the worst to be carried out. For those suffering less it brings a faster and sweeter relief."

"The gallows." She laughs bitterly. "Then you must be my executioner."

I am the jailer, Zuana thinks. So be it. How much energy it takes to fuel rebellion. And how hard it is when you are the only one. She holds the vial out farther, as one might offer a tidbit to a wild animal that could bolt at any moment.

Slowly, slowly, the girl's fingers reach out to take it. "It will not make me give in."

Now Zuana cannot help but smile. If she knew how to make

a draft that could do that, every convent in the country would want her for their infirmary. "You don't need to worry. My job is to tend your body, not your soul."

The girl's eyes lock on Zuana's as she swallows. The taste is strong and makes her choke, her throat raw already from the yelling. If that talk of a nightingale was not another lie, she will need a soothing syrup to coax her singing voice back out.

She finishes the draft and puts her head back against the wall. The tears keep flowing, but with less noise. Zuana watches carefully, the healer in her now alert to the progress of the drug.

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my crying come unto Thee.

When was the last time she had to use this level of dosage? Two—no, three—years ago, on a girl with an equally fat dowry but a hidden history of fits. Her first-night panic had unleashed a seizure so violent it had taken three sisters to hold her down. Had the family been more powerful the convent might have been forced to keep her, for though epilepsy is one of the few recognized causes for the annulment of vows, that, like many things, depends on levels of influence. As it was, Madonna Chiara had successfully negotiated her return, along with a portion of her dowry somewhat reduced for their trouble. Such was the diplomatic acumen of Santa Caterina's current abbess—though what she might do with this recalcitrant young spirit was yet to be seen.

Hide not Thy face from me in the day of my distress.

The voice inside Zuana's head grows into a whisper.

"Through the noise of my groaning my bones cleave to my flesh."

When she thinks back on it later, she cannot remember what makes her say this particular psalm, though, once started, the words are apposite enough.

"I am like a pelican in the wilderness. Like an owl of the desert. I watch and am as a sparrow that sitteth alone on the house top."

"It's not working." The girl shakes herself upright, flailing, angry again.

"Yes, yes, it is. Stop fighting and just breathe."

"I have eaten ashes as if it were bread and mingled drink with weeping."

The novice gives a little cry, then slumps back down again.

"For Thou hast set me up and cast me down. My days fade away like shadows, and I am withered like grass."

She groans and closes her eyes.

It won't be long now. Zuana moves closer, to provide support when she starts to slide. The girl pulls her arms tight around her knees, then after a while drops her head down on them. It is a gesture of tiredness as much as defeat.

"But Thou, O God, endurest for ever: and Thy remembrance throughout all generations."

Outside, the night silence renews itself, moving out through the cloisters, across the courtyard, nosing its way under the doorframes. The convent lets out the breath it has been holding and slides toward sleep. The girl's body starts to lean toward Zuana's.

"So will He regard the prayers of the destitute, and He will not despise their call."

It is over; the rebellion has ended. Zuana registers a certain sadness mixed with relief, as if the words of the psalm might not after all be enough to guarantee comfort. She chides herself for the unworthiness of the thought. Her job is not to question but to settle.

And it is happening. The girl will be unconscious soon enough. Zuana glances around the cell.

At the entrance to the second chamber is a heavy chest. With cunning packing a nun might carry half a world within it. Certainly she would have her own linen; those whose dowries buy double cells sleep on satin sheets and goose-feather pillows. The bed frame can be turned upright without help, but even with the remains of the mattress in place she will need thicker covers. Her body, no longer heated by the force of her distress, will grow clammy, and what started as outrage might turn into fever.

"For He maketh the storm to cease, so that the waters thereof are still."

She moves the girl gently back against the wall and goes over to the chest. The lid releases a wave of beeswax and camphor. A set of silver candlesticks lies across a bed of fabrics, a velvet cloak

and linen shifts next to a wooden Christ child doll. Farther down there is a rug, thick Persian weave, and next to it a handsome Book of Hours, the cover elaborately embossed, newly commissioned no doubt for her entrance. She can think of a few sisters who will find themselves wrestling with the sin of envy when they see this in chapel. As she picks it up, it falls open to a lavishly illustrated text of the Magnificat: intricate figures and animals entwined in swirling tendrils of gold leaf, shimmering in the candlelight. And tucked inside, like a page marker, some sheets of paper covered in handwriting. Had they been read and passed as acceptable? Or did the inspecting gate sister perhaps miss them in among such riches? It would not be the first time.

“What are you doing?” She is alert again now, head jerking up despite the pull of the drug. “Those are mine.”

Mine. It is a word she will have to learn to use less in the coming months. The girl’s panic answers Zuana’s question. Not prayers, evidently. Poems, perhaps? Even letters from a loved one, as precious as any prayer . . . The light is too dim to make out any words. It is better that way. What she cannot read she cannot be expected to condemn.

She thinks of her own chest and how the books inside it saved her life all those years ago. What if someone had seen fit to confiscate them? She would have needed more than a sleeping draft to dull the pain.

“You have a rich life in here.” She shuts the book and slips it back into the chest. “And you are lucky to have these rooms,” she says, pulling out a piece of heavy velvet cloth. “The sister who lived here before you kept court some evenings between dinner and Compline. Served wine and biscuits and played music, sang court madrigals even.”

She moves the bed upright and hauls the remains of the mattress back onto the frame.

“From the outside the walls are forbidding, I know. But once you get used to it, life in here need not be the desert you fear it to be.”

“Iss your job to tend ma body, no ma soul.” Though she is still propped against the wall, her eyes are half closed now and

the words fall away into one another. While the spirit may be unwilling, the flesh at least is now weak.

"And they are glad because they are at rest and He bringeth them to a haven wherein they would be."

Zuana lays the coverlet carefully over the open mattress so she will not have the worst of the horsehair sticking into her skin. When she is finished the girl's eyes are closed again.

She pulls her up by the armpits, putting one of the girl's arms over her own shoulder and supporting her around the waist to steady her as they move. Her body is as plump as a partridge and heavy now with the drug. The remains of a perfumed oil she must have used that morning are mixed in with the sourness of her sweat. She feels her breath on her cheek, tangy from the poppy syrup. Ah, along with the clubfooted and the squinty-eyed, Our Lord takes the most lovely of young women into His care to keep them from the defilement of the world beyond. She herself had never been so desirable. Not that such things had mattered to her.

"I am no . . . sleep," she slurs defiantly, as she falls on the bed.

"Hush." Zuana wraps the coverlet over her, tucking it tightly underneath like a swaddling cloth.

"Give thanks unto God, for He is good and His mercy endureth for ever."

But no one is listening to her anymore.

She maneuvers the girl's body onto her side so that her face is tilted to the mattress, as experience has taught her. Her father once treated a violent patient who—unbeknownst to him—had prefaced the draft with an excess of wine. Halfway through the night he retched up some of it and almost drowned in his own vomit as he lay unconscious on his back. Trial and observation. The true path to learning.

See how the marvels of nature work, Faustina? How a medication, which taken alone can be fatal, becomes a healer if you understand how it moves with and complements other substances?

Her father's voice, as always, is ready at the edges of her mind, waiting for the moment when the prayers end and there is space for her own thoughts.

There was a time at the beginning—she can no longer remember quite how long it went on—when his closeness was almost unbearable because it reminded her so powerfully of everything she could no longer have. But the idea of being without him had been even worse, and eventually the grief had softened, so that his presence had become benign: a living teacher as much as a dead father. Of course she knows it is its own transgression for a nun to live in her past rather than her convent present, but his companionship has become so normal she doesn't bother to take it to confession anymore. There is a limit to the penance one can do for a sin that one cannot—will not—give up.

Watching over the sleeping young woman now, she invites him in again.

You must be sure to note the extra dose in your records. I know, I know, a few drops may seem a little, but they can be a lot. Ah, what a harmony there is in measurement, child. Authority and empiricism, trial and observation: the combination of ancient knowledge and our new world. Of course, we can't do as the Greeks did and test our remedies on criminals. If that were possible, we might have rediscovered the secret of theriac by now, and our dominion over all poisons would be secure. Imagine that! Still, we have already found much that was lost. And when you are unsure, or when there is no patient on whom to test new compounds or balances, you can always try them on yourself. Though with potions that deaden the senses you should take every precaution and mark the moments constantly before you fall asleep, so that you will have a close enough approximation when you wake.

She smiles. It was fine enough advice for all those university students who had stood in line for hours in the fog of a Ferrarese winter to gain entrance to his lectures and dissections. Over the years she had even met a few of them: his army of eager young scholar-physicians dedicated to prying the secrets out of God's wondrous universe. She too had grown fat on his wisdom alongside them, though of course she could never show it in public. While his acolytes went on to courts and universities, taking their knowledge with them, she was tenured into another form

of God's service, one where the pursuit of knowledge was second to acts of devotion, eight times a day, seven days a week, until death would them part. No wonder it had hurt so much at the beginning. There was precious little space for experiment within these walls. No time for a nun to become her own patient here.

Still, having worked her way to the office of dispensary sister, she does now as he would have done: harvests her plants, distills their juices, and notes down their influences. While the steps may be small, she moves forward. It is more than she would have been allowed without him outside.

She puts a hand on the girl's pulse: steady, if a little slow. How long will she sleep? It is late already. They will never wake her in time for Lauds, perhaps not even for Prime and Terce, though if they do rouse her she will have no appetite for resistance. Whatever the power of her will, for a while at least it will be tempered by physical compliance. The girl won't thank her for it, but Zuana more than most knows it is a gift of sorts. If true acceptance comes only from God, there is nevertheless a kind of comfort to be gained from the passing of time: hour upon hour, day upon day, time falling like thick flakes of snow, the next laid upon the last, again and again, until what has been is gradually covered over, its original shape and color hidden under the blanket of what is now.

Eventually the Matins bell rings out from the chapel. She hears the watch sister's footfalls on the flagstones as she makes her way through the cloisters. The knocks on the doors are sharp tonight. Habit (how apt that they should wear on their bodies what they also have to wear on their souls) will have some of them up and moving before they even know they are awake. But there will be others who have only just found sleep and will want to stay within it. In such circumstances, the watch sister is allowed to enter and shake the sleeper once by the shoulder. The ones who don't rise then will be confessing their misdemeanor to the abbess later in chapter.

The cell doors start to open, followed by the shuffling of feet as the nuns gather and move after the watch sister, a procession of black shadows in the gloom, candles flickering like fireflies in

the darkness. As they pass the novice's door, someone stifles a yawn.

Zuana waits. While the abbess knows of her night wanderings, it is important that she should disturb the routine of the convent as little as possible. The door to the chapel groans open on heavy hinges, then closes again after the procession has passed through. Further snarls of wood mark out a first latecomer, then a second. The sound of chanting is already seeping under the door as she leaves the cell and crosses into the darkness. In front of her she notices a small figure with a slight limp moving out into the courtyard from the upstairs cloister. This is a night wandering that wants to keep itself hidden. She lets the image slide from her mind. There has been enough emotion spent tonight. No point in making more trouble.

She waits until the chapel door is closed again, then enters quickly, head bowed, moving between the choir stalls to where the great crucifix hangs down in front of the grille that divides the nuns from the outer public church. She prostrates herself before it, registering the momentary shock of cold stone through her robes, before slipping into her place at the end of the second row of the choir stalls. She is without her breviary—the book left sitting on the table in her cell. While she knows the lessons and the psalms by heart, its absence is still a misdemeanor. The abbess's eye passes quickly over her. Zuana opens her mouth and begins to sing.

The convent is not at its best tonight. Winter has scoured a number of throats, and the chanting is disturbed by ragged bouts of coughing and sniffing. At night the church is fiercely cold, and across the choir stalls the dozen or so novices are struggling. With their fat cheeks and downy skin they look too young to be up both so late and so early. When they are tired, Zuana has noticed, some of them rub their eyes with their fists like small children. The convent's indefatigable novice mistress, Suora Umiliana, is of the opinion that each new batch is worse than the last, more selfish and prone to the vanities of life. The truth is probably more complex, since Umiliana herself is also changing, growing more fervent and demanding with the years,

while they at least remain young. Either way, Zuana feels sympathy for them. Girls of their age are greedy for sleep, and Matins, slicing its way through the middle of the night, is the harshest of all the convent offices.

Yet its brutality is also its great sweetness, for its very meaning is to coax and draw up the soul through the body's resistance, and when one is pulled from sleep there can be less distraction from the noise and chatter of the mind. Zuana knows sisters who, as they age, grow to love this service above all others, to feed off it like nectar, for once you have disciplined yourself to transcend tiredness, the wonder of being in His presence while the rest of the world is asleep is a rare gift, a form of privilege without pride, feasting without gluttony.

A few can become so close to God during such moments that they have been known to see angels hovering above them or, in one case, the figure of Christ lifting His arms off the great wooden crucifix and stretching out toward them. Such tremors of the soul happen more at Matins than at any other devotion, which is helpful for the young ones, as the occasional drama of palpitations or even fainting keeps them open to the possibility of ecstasy. Even Zuana herself, who has never been prone to visions, has felt moments of wonder: the way in which the night silence seems to make the voices more melodious, or how their breaths make the candles flare in the darkness, causing the most solid statues to melt, sending liquid shadows dancing onto the walls.

There is little chance of such marvels tonight. Old Suora Agnesina sits febrile with devotion, head cocked to one side, vigilant as ever for the divine note inside the human chorus, but in the back stalls Suora Ysbeta is already asleep, making much the same wheezing sounds as her rancid little dog, and for the rest it is an achievement just to keep their minds on the text.

To counter her weariness, Zuana pulls herself upright until her shoulders connect with the back of the seat. In most choir stalls, nuns rest their backs against plain wood, polished by years of cloth rubbing against it. But Santa Caterina is different. Here the seats are decorated by the wonder of intarsia: hundreds of

cuts of different-colored woods, inlaid and glued together to create scenes and pictures. The stalls were a gift from one of the convent's benefactors during the reign of the great Borso d'Este a century before, and the story is that it took a father and so over twenty years to complete them. Now, as the sisters of Sant Caterina pray to God, each and every spine rests against a different image of their beloved city—streets, rooftops, chimney pots and spires—recognizable even down to the slivers of cherry or chestnut wood that mark out the edges of the wharves and the dark walnut veins that make the River Po. In this way, though they live separated from the city of their birth, their beloved Ferrara is kept alive for them.

When Zuana's mind suffers badly from distraction, as it does tonight, she uses these little jewels of perspective as a way of connecting back to God's devotion. She imagines the voices floating upward, a cloud of sound rising high into the nave, up and through the chapel roof into the air outside, then moving like a long plume of smoke out into that same city; twisting and turning around warehouses and palazzos, passing along the side of the cathedral, hovering over the dank moat surrounding the d'Este Palace, poking its way through windows and releasing mellifluous echoes in the great chambers, before slipping out and returning to the edge of the river itself, from where it rises up toward the night stars and the heavens behind.

And the beauty and clarity of that thought makes her tiredness fall away, so that she too feels herself lifting free and growing toward something greater, even if the transcendence does not manifest itself in the beating of angels' wings or the warmth of Christ's arms around her in the night.

IN THE CELL across the courtyard, the angry novice moves heavily in her sleep, full of the wonder and madness of drugged dreams.