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ARCHIPELAGO

...Newly arrived and quite ignorant of the languages of the Levant, Marco Polo could express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage—drums, salt fish, necklaces of wart hog's teeth—and pointing to them with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the hoot of the owl.

The connections between one element of the story and another were not always obvious to the emperor; the objects could have various meanings...

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

I have not told the half of what I've seen.

—Marco Polo, *Il Milione* or *The Description of the World*

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It is June in California. It is 1989, four days before my little sister's eighth birthday and three days before I will be diagnosed with juvenile onset diabetes. The morning after my diagnosis, my mother will drive me to Petaluma, where I will give myself the first of approximately (to date) 41,000 insulin injections, this first one in the backseat of our Mazda 323. Then, after a few hours of hair and make-up and some light tests, I'll ride a wheelchair through a flock of sheep. Three weeks or so later, a photograph of that event will appear in a J.C. Penney catalogue, as an advertisement for back-to-school clothes. Many years later, I'll show a saved image of it to my partner, Craig, and laugh. His son, Robin, will pronounce it "weird" and ask for more toast. And later that day, after toast and peanut butter and coffee have all been put away, Craig will learn that he has won a fellowship and we are all moving to Italy for a year. But I don't know any of that yet. Right now, I am wearing a pool-blue bathing suit with a small ruffle around the waist. My little sister is wearing a pink and green bathing suit that's supposed to look like a watermelon. She bounces herself above the waterline bubbling, "Marco!" I try to trick her, to throw my voice. "Polo!" It doesn't work; she catches me. Naturally, I accuse her of cheating.

THE IOWA REVIEW

Explorer Marco Polo was the first European to describe a source of petroleum, one of the many things (asbestos, paper currency, a postal system, a certain kind of sheep) he identified in his record of his twenty-four-year travels along the Silk Road, a book most of his European contemporaries disdained as fable. Marco Polo's journey originated in Venice, his home and a city that has always been at the crossroads of East and West. He was named for the patron saint of that city, after whom the main piazza and basilica of Venice are also named. But San Marco wasn't always the patron saint of that city. Before the ninth century, the city's patron saint was young San Teodoro, who (according to the Catholic Encyclopedia) was tortured and burned at the stake after he set the heathen Temple of Cybele ablaze.

Venice grew during the Crusades, as a gateway to the Holy Land and provisioner of Christian soldiers, and the people of that city began to see an upstart vandal as an unworthy patron. A band of Venetian mercenaries went to Alexandria and disinterred the body of Saint Mark the Evangelist. In order to conceal their cargo from the Arab trade inspectors, they covered the body in smoked ham, presuming the Muslim prohibition against pork would disincline them to investigate. They guessed right, and so the corpse came to Venice, and Marco was installed in Teodoro's place.

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It is March in Venice. It is 2006. My little sister and I leave the Pensione Accademia on the Grand Canal and walk to the wooden bridge. She has just finished telling me the story I have just told you, how Marco came to replace Teodoro, which she read about the night before. Emma is wearing a thick, drapery sweater. I am wearing a long gray scarf. It's cold in Venice and though the air is metal-bright, the ubiquity of water seems to threaten damp. Emma's pulled her long blonde hair into a ponytail at the nape of her neck, and she's saying that she has learned all the important words in Italian: *sciopero*, which means strike; *sopresso*, which means cancelled. She can recite the automated train station announcement: *Attenzione. Arriva il treno da Roma-Termini a Venezia-Santa Lucia. Alontenarse de la linea gialla.* Attention. The train from Rome's Termini station to Venice's Santa Lucia station is arriving. Enlengthen yourself from the yellow line. She also remembers *tocca a me*, which means *it's my turn*, because in Italy, jumping the queue is a national sport.

Emma has brought a bunch of tattered paperback Dan Brown novels to read on her trip, since they all take place in Italy. She likes the idea of read-

ing about the Quattro Fiumi in the Piazza Navona while sitting under the Quattro Fiumi in the Piazza Navona. I am reading *Death in Venice* because I like the idea of reading *Death in Venice* while not dying of cholera in Venice. But reading last night, I noticed that I'm having trouble focusing my right eye. I assured myself that this had something to do with astigmatism and drank an extra glass of wine to drown out the low-frequency panic that hums in me all the time, a kind of emotional tinnitus, a panic about the unknowable future and the complications my disease can cause—blindness, kidney failure, heart failure, stroke, the loss of circulation to extremities, the amputation of toes, fingers, feet, legs.

But this morning it seems a little better, and Venice looks like a photograph of splendor. I would live in Venice, if anybody still lives in Venice. I'm not sure. But Emma has never been here before, so we are going to visit the Basilica San Marco. She wants to see "the horses."

The Byzantine basilica presides over the Piazza San Marco, next door to the infamous Palace of the Doge. Over the years, repairs and expansions have been made to the basilica and at some stage, the reliquary bones of San Marco were lost. They were believed for decades to be somewhere in the basilica, but nobody had a record of where. One day (probably a result of the foundation of the church shifting as the city's water levels rose), a pillar in the nave cracked open, and San Marco's bones came tumbling out.

There is some debate as to whether, for certain, the bones belong to St. Mark the Evangelist, or whether some poor anonymous Venetian was enclosed in the pillar—maybe as punishment for some offense against the Doge. But whoever's bones those are now resides beneath the altar under a dome painted as an indigo blue sky mottled with golden stars.

The basilica is almost completely leaved in gold, which gives the effect of walking around inside an illuminated manuscript. There are many reasons to illuminate a manuscript, but of all the reasons this is my favorite: it was believed that the candlelight or sunlight reflected off the shiny pages of a sacred text onto the face of the reader—the visible alleluia of light rising from the book—was a physical blessing, a transference more literal than any interpretation of the text could bestow. Fitting, I think, for these stories about words made flesh, in this place that exists because of bodies moved, removed, and resurrected.

“The horses” that Emma wanted to see, not unlike San Marco himself, were stolen from the East—Byzantium to be precise—and brought back as spoils. They were installed in the façade of the basilica, where they remained until acid rain began to eat away at their bronze bodies. Now, perfect replicas take their place, and the fragile originals reside safe inside.

In the piazza outside the basilica, water remains in small, fetid pools, left by the ebbing tides that spill into the town squares. A pigeon walks across one of the puddles as Emma and I watch, then turns and drinks out of it. Emma says, *You know you’re a pigeon when.*

Not far from the Piazza San Marco, just back across the Grand Canal, sits the church of Santa Maria della Salute, Our Lady of Good Health. The church, marble and as echoey as a tomb, was built in the early 1600s, after the Republic had been ravaged by plague. Emma and I make our winding way there. In a matter of days, Carnival will be in full swing, and we pass couples sitting at sidewalk cafés wearing immense costumes, feathered and furred. We pass a young man playing a mournful violin, a would-be jester arguing with a shopkeeper. Since we have to cross the Grand Canal at a point not arched by one of only three bridges, we allow ourselves to be punted across on a raft manned by a silent youth in a Juventus jersey.

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There are churches like this all over Europe—all over the world. The shrine of Monserrate, in Bogotá, despite being perched high in the Andes, a long, steep climb from the city, is piled deep with the crutches and walkers and even prosthetic limbs of the faithful. I light candles in these places, but I will never leave my insulin and syringes, my glucometer and test strips, my lisinopril and lancets. I wish I could, though.

I have now been diabetic for about twice as long as I have not, and sometimes I feel like Sisyphus—repeating the same tasks and gestures, hauling the same weight of anxiety and fear each day anew. It is so easy to wonder whether all this energy, all this effort can possibly be worth it. Albert Camus, in his essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” describes this desire to feel or know that one’s keeping-going will be worth it as “absurd.” Then he poses the question: if life is essentially meaningless, and the search for one’s purpose is absurd, is suicide then the answer? His response: an unequivocal no. “The struggle itself,” he writes, “is enough to fill a man’s heart.”

I light a candle in the church. The wind blows it out.

I have this friend. Let's call her "Bill." One bright Roman morning, the phone in our apartment rings. It's Bill. "Dude. I just phoned a suicide hotline," she tells me. "Are you okay?" I ask. "Yeah," she says. "I just wanted to talk to somebody, and I knew nobody else was awake. But then after I called, I remembered you were awake. Time zones."

Bill's story about calling the suicide hotline goes like this: The phone rang about three times before a recorded message picked up, which said, *Thank you for calling the national suicide and crisis prevention hotline. If this is a medical emergency, please hang up and dial 9-1-1. Para español, toca el numero dos.* "And so on," says Bill. "I mean, what if I'd been genuinely desperate and feeling like a nobody in an impersonal world? Or serious about offing myself? Like: *If you are experiencing arterial bleeding, please press 1. Para español, toca el numero dos. To speak to a representative, please press 3. If you are hanging from a noose and so cannot speak to a representative, please press 4. To hear Albert Camus's extended meditation on the Absurd Man and why revolt, not suicide, is the answer, please press 5, or simply hang up the phone.*"

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The thing is, I want to live. Not just survive but actually live. Despite that everything is harder this way—eating a meal, any meal, means lots of calculations in my head; going for a walk, moving furniture around the house, and going out dancing all require planning, to say nothing of moving with my partner and his son to another country for a year, but still I want to do these things. Every day, it's really hard. But for some reason—maybe because there are places like Venice, maybe because there are books I haven't finished, maybe because of Emma and Bill, my mother and father, and Craig—I just really want to live.

In her novel *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson writes about Venice in the historical moment of the Napoleonic Wars. In contrast to the hard, fast lines of rational, masculine Paris, Venice is a female principle—fluid, organic, enveloping. The path from A to B is never the same from day to day, and only the boatmen know how to navigate it. The hero, Villanelle, is a boatman's daughter, born with webbed feet. Besotted with her is Henri, a young defector from Napoleon's army, who finds her irresistible. The lovers in this Venetian story are gamblers, risking life and limb—a lost heart is reclaimed from the corner of a closet, a pair of hands is framed in a glass box lined with velvet. The world's first casino, Casino di Venezia in the Ca'Vendramin,

opened in Venice in 1638. Among others to lose money at its tables was the infamous lover Giacomo Casanova. The refrains of Winterson's love story are a gambler's mantras: *What you risk reveals what you value. And: You win, you lose, you win, you lose. You play.*

Back on our side of the canal now, and having had enough of medieval iconography and crucifixion, Emma and I decide to stop for wine and lunch. The *enoteca* we choose is next to a shop called Ca'Macana, a *mascherie* founded and run by a group of architects who started making masks for extra cash when Carnival was reinstated in the late 1970s, after a two-hundred-year hiatus. They made the masks for several movies that feature Carnival masks, including *Amadeus* and *Eyes Wide Shut*. So, after thick red wine served in immense, chic glasses, and after some very salty ham and olives and warm bread like a thick rug, we went in to look around.

Of the many masks of Venice, the Commedia Dell'Arte are probably the most iconic—the Arlecchino, Dottore Peste, Pulcinella, Pantalone, and the Bauta. Fantasy masks could be a lion, a queen, a moon and stars. Another traditional mask is the Naso Turco, the “Turkish Nose,” a half-face mask with a long, hooked nose that curves down over the mouth. Almost all of the true Venetian face masks have this feature of obscuring the lips, mostly to distort and disguise the wearer's voice without inhibiting his or her ability to eat or drink. From the early 1400s until the Napoleon's 1797 invasion, Venetians wore face masks in public for at least six months of the year, by law. In part, masks were thought to help stem the spread of diseases like cholera. But also, masks allowed individuals to disguise their identity, social class, and gender—and Venetians were notorious libertines. Masks allowed people to have completely anonymous sexual liaisons, which they did, all the time—women with others who turned out to be women, socialites with dockworkers or priests. You might have a liaison with a close friend and never really be certain who it was. *You win, you lose, you win, you lose. You play.*

On this occasion, I bought a fantasy mask, a turquoise and peach half-face mask wearing a crown, the whole thing adorned in copper filigree. Emma bought a fantasy mask, too, in green and bronze—a season, maybe; Demeter, maybe.

Don't you sometimes wish you could just be someone else for a little while? I ask Emma.

She looks at me for a moment. *Sometimes*, she replies.

I think it can be the case that when you leave wherever you're from for any length of time, you wear your origins like a kind of mask. Everything about them—the color of your skin, hair, eyes; your accent, your language, your passport—all of these things efface you. Or anyway, the parts of you that are not (just) those things. Some people act differently in other countries than they do at home.

In *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann's main character, Aschenbach, becomes someone else in Venice. Or, rather, he becomes himself at last. Perhaps the purpose of disguise—whether it is a Carnival mask, or make-up and hair dye—is the concealment that permits vulnerability. Only then can you surrender yourself as you might want to.

From Anne Carson's *Plainwater*, "Short Talk on Defloration":

The actions of life are not so many. To go in, to go, to go in secret, to cross the bridge of sighs. And when you dishonoured me, I saw that dishonour is an action. It happened in Venice, it causes the vocal cords to swell...

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Il Ponte dei Sospiri, the Bridge of Sighs. Byron called it that—what else it was called is lost to memories in turn lost. The enclosed bridge links the Palace of the Doge with the prisons. Though no one could see the prisoners who passed across the Bridge of Sighs, they could hear them weeping. Some say the bridge still sighs with the echoes of the pitiable souls who passed across it all those years ago, but I don't think memories have to make noises to haunt us. Today, tourists who buy a ticket to visit the Palace can walk across the bridge, but I never have. I do not like the Bridge of Sighs, and I do not like the name Byron gave it—romantic, even beautiful. It is hard to be frank about human experience, but one should try.

Juvenile-onset diabetes, unlike its much more common adult-onset counterpart, is an autoimmune disease. So, paradoxically, the very defenses that ought to protect my body from harm have harmed it beyond repair. The body I need to live is the very thing that makes my life so difficult. So now I am what doctors call "insulin dependent." This is paradoxical to me, too, since I have always hated (beyond the telling of it) the idea of being dependent on anything.

And yet, also paradoxically, what we most value about Venice, its extraordinary geography, is the very thing that threatens the city's survival. And yet it survives. Venice shores itself up against its own ruin, makes of itself its own foundation, builds deeper and deeper until roofs become floors, gardens become basements; it constructs of itself its own subconscious, bracing it against the rising tide.

Venice, of course, is sinking. At the same time, the planet is warming, and sea levels have already begun to rise. Walk around Venice, and you see water lapping over an empty windowsill, you see brick foundations covered in a pelt of green algae, you see stone washed smooth by the lap of the canals.

In 2007, an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* reported on the decision by the Italian government to go ahead with a dizzyingly expensive and dubious plan to build a sea wall to protect the city from flood surges. The article reads:

The gates will lie flat on the sea floor inside the three entrances to the lagoon. In conditions of "acqua alta," the gates will swing up to form a temporary wall against the water. The gates are designed to protect the city from flood surges of up to 6 feet. That's sufficient to keep up with sea-level rise for at least 70 years, says Giovanni Cecconi, an engineer with the New Venice Consortium. "It's not a permanent fix, it's just a way to protect the city during this century until another solution can come into place," he says.

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In other words, there is not yet any cure for Venice's chronic sinking and flooding, but we will go to great lengths trying to keep it alive in the meantime.

It is usual to think of water when one thinks of Venice, but at least as striking is the light in Venice. In part owing to the narrow maze of streets, in part the reflection of sun or lamplight off the hundreds of thousands of inlets and canals, the light in Venice makes its own sense of the city. On as bright and as blue a day as you can imagine, you might still find yourself in a dark alley, the sun retreating far above the buildings and palazzos huddled as if to keep warm. Conversely, a moonless night along the Grand Canal twinkles with

the lights and reflected lights of boat headlamps, lit windows, streetlights, docking lanterns, and signs for shops, restaurants, entertainments.

It's nice, Emma and I agree, after all those Byzantine churches, to look at art that could be called "new." We have come to the Peggy Guggenheim collection to have a look around. I see a painting that I believe is intended to represent the style of French surrealism, but in Venice it does not seem surreal. It seems accurate.

A house in darkness, hemmed in by the black outlines of trees, lit by a single streetlamp. An unshuttered window glows. Above the roof, more silhouetted trees, and above those, a bright blue sky traversed by clouds.

Magritte seems the right person to paint Venice, even if *Empire of Light* isn't of Venice. *Ce n'est-ce pas un pipe*, Magritte writes under the image of a pipe. I like that idea—not just that things aren't what they seem, but that in fact, they aren't what they are. I am and yet will never be a truly independent person; Venice is and yet will never be what we might feel it represents.

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The city of Venice is technically an archipelago, a scatter of thousands of small islands and inlets, like the holes in a lacy tablecloth, both linked and separated by the rivulets and canals that pass between them. In this way, Venice is a study of the relationship of the part to the whole. One island, like San Giorgio Maggiore, might be dedicated entirely to a single church and its cloister. Another, like the Ledo, might be dotted with sunbathers and hustlers. Then there's Burano—the Lace Island; Murano—the Glass Island. Or consider the Island of San Michele. Originally, this is where the sick were quarantined during plagues or cholera outbreaks. Now it is a graveyard.

Emma and I take a water taxi across the lagoon to visit some of these islands. We start with the glass and lace islands, where all manufacture was traditionally restricted to the island dedicated to its respective art. For most of the life of the Republic, glass artisans were not allowed to leave the island of Murano on pain of death, lest they should pass trade secrets to another State. Those glass artisans could not have foreseen the global invasion of their little prison. Today, the glass artists still blow out thin, hot liquid into goblets, swans, horses, lamps; still melt slender colored rods together and slice cross sections to make the Venetian *millefiori* glass, the thousand flowers pattern. People from Japan, America, England, Germany, Argentina, Russia watch them do it.

The women of Burano who hooked and knotted white threads day after day into sinewy webs of doily and tablecloth almost always went blind from straining too hard to see white against white. Eventually, their eyes failed to discern anything. The thought of this reminds me of my own worries about going blind. Once the lace-makers lost their sight, they had to stop making lace. But there have been blind poets—Homer, probably. Milton. So if I go blind, I will write an epic poem that will be remembered for all time, obviously. This doesn't seem so bad.

What I don't know at the time, while I'm thinking all of this, is that almost exactly two years from that day, I will lie down on a table in the University of Utah Hospitals, and a retinal specialist will inject a chemotherapy drug called Avastin into my right eye to staunch yet another hemorrhage that has darkened some of my vision. Today, if I were to stand where I stood when I was thinking about the blind lace-makers, in front of a whitewashed building under a diffuse sky, it would look very different than it did to me then. I would not see the wall, its warps and crevices. Instead, I would see the history of the inside of my eye—the dancing black threads of leaking blood, the spots in my peripheral vision where the laser surgery has destroyed some of my retina so that it asks for fewer of the blood vessels that form this tiny lattice of scars, this vascular lace.

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It is only a short journey between these islands via water bus or *vaporetto*. From Burano, we take another short trip to the island of San Michele. Ezra Pound is buried in San Michele. For Pound, having been quarantined in his own way during his lifetime, this seems a fitting place. The grave is small and unpretentious, a flat granite slab nearly overcome with ivy, that reads in all caps, EZRA POUND.

I knew a fair amount about Pound before I ever read his poetry. Perhaps knowing about Pound is why it took me so long to get around to reading him. So when I first read all of Pound's *Cantos*, the year before we moved to Italy, I heard an ecstatic rant, seeming to come in and out through radio static, radio silence. I love those poems, but I am afraid of Ezra Pound, as unpredictable and mad and sublime as the city in which he is buried.

In a *Paris Review* interview a few years prior to Pound's death, Donald Hall asked the poet about his involvement in World War II in Italy, about his opinion on the intersections between language and politics and culture, about his

Cantos. Trying to explain how he saw the work of the poet in modern times, Pound said, “It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indicators are that you ought to write an apocalypse.”

I’m back in America, at Craig’s family’s home in the mountains of Colorado. It’s a massive place, so when I wake up and Craig is not in bed, and I can’t hear or see him, I call out: “Marco!” From the kitchen, a long way away, I hear a distant “Polo!” It is February 2008, the weekend after Valentine’s Day. While Craig makes whole-wheat blueberry pancakes and bacon, I cup a mug of hot coffee and read aloud what I’ve written so far in an essay about Venice.

It’s very fully realized, he says, when I finally finish.

But what, I say.

The whole bit about Pound being quote-unquote quarantined? he says. *It’s bullshit.*

A heated argument begins about Pound and morphs into an argument about narratives, received and otherwise, the construction of information, and whether it is worth making a distinction between truth and accuracy. We eat breakfast, clean up the dishes, and by the time I’m in the shower and Craig is sitting on the bathroom floor watching me shower, the argument has come around to whether my version of certain events is or is not accurate according to his memory of the same events. I am convinced that I remember it right. Craig is convinced that his version is correct. The argument eventually ends, but without real resolution. I am still having it. I am having it right now.

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Emma and I take a vaporetto home from our visit to all these islands—Murano, Burano, San Michele. It’s nearly sundown, and the sky is beginning to gather above us. A wind picks up, and the water begins to slap the side of the boat with more gusto. We are glad not to be in a smaller boat—a water taxi or gondola. To get home, though, we have to transfer at San Marco for another vaporetto that will take us up the Grand Canal to the Accademia stop. As we wait for the boat-bus to arrive, it begins to rain again.

When it rains in Venice, the water comes from everywhere. It patters from the sky, it gushes from storm drains, it swells in canals and pours over cobblestones. The rain now blasting the water in the lagoon sends more water upwards, suddenly displaced from the sea’s surface. Despite our umbrella, we are soaked through.

Emma and I accept our soggy fate. Somewhere on the other end of a short misadventure with Venice's public transportation system, there is a warm shower, clean and dry clothes, and an *enoteca* where we'll be given red wine in large glasses, small plates of olives, and grilled vegetables and fish. It is almost enough to keep us in wry grins.

This sucks, says Emma.

It could be worse, I say.

Sure, she says. *We could be IN the water. We could be drowning. Or all the way drowned.*

At dinner that night, Emma and I get a little tipsy. It happens by accident; at some point we forgot to pay attention to how much wine we were drinking. We chat to each other, to the couple at the table next to us, away for a romantic bank holiday weekend from Milan. They give us what's left of their bottle of wine, an excellent bottle of white from the Alto Adige. We are having a marvelous time—my teeth are purple with the cuttlefish ink that colors my pasta sauce, the sound of water is all around us, and I love my sister and wish I had a voice big enough for this much feeling. Emma leans forward over the table and points the rim of her glass at me.

Promise me, she demands. *That no matter what happens, you'll always be there.*

I raise my glass in return. I don't know what will happen. I don't know, for instance, that in a couple of years my little sister will move into a small brick apartment across the street from the Iwo Jima Memorial with her boyfriend and his miniature parrot. I don't know a lot of other things, either, that I still don't know. Perhaps I will reread this a year or two or a decade or two from now and think of the fear I've described as a feeling I once had. I might be sitting in the garden I would like to one day plant—a garden full of good-smelling things like lemon trees and mint. I might be in some other country I haven't ever thought of living in, the way I'd never thought of living in Italy before we did. I might look back on the me who wrote this essay as someone obsessive and obsessed and feel sorry for her. Maybe not, though.

We clink our glasses. *Okay*, I say. *I promise.*

One of the Venetian painter Titian's finest and most enigmatic pieces sits in the Galleria Borghese in Rome. Titled long after his death—we don't know what Titian himself might have called it—*Sacred and Profane Love* depicts the same woman, doubled. One of her wears lavish silvery robes trimmed with

lip-red cloth, her hair coiffed and her maidenly hands obscured by leather riding gloves. She looks at us almost suspiciously out of the sides of her eyes. On the hill behind her, a manor stands sentinel over the scene. The other of her is nude, loosely draped in a billowing length of that same shimmery red cloth that seems to accent her double's gown. To the right and far off in the distance, a village steeple ascends to scrape the wind-thinned clouds. She leans against the edge of a stone sarcophagus full of water and looks at her elegant sister, who sits at the unlikely cistern's other end. Between them, a plump cupid reaches into the water for something in his view, but out of ours. The nude woman lifts a small oil lamp into the open sky of the composition. And somewhere off behind them, a pursuit races towards the woods.

No one really knows why Titian gathered these disparate elements into their arrangement, a pastiche of symbols from various traditions like a polyglot pun—how *si* resembles *see* and can suffice for an *I told you so*; how easy it is to make the French word for mustard sound like an English insult. The painting is neither pagan nor Christian, neither portrait nor landscape, neither allegory nor representational narrative; we don't even really know which woman represents Sacred and which Profane love, or why, or whether it might be neither. Or why, though they may turn their gazes in different directions, both figures seem to wear the same facial expression, which might best be described as serene.