

Stories of God

Rainer Maria Rilke

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A Scene from the Venetian Ghetto

As translated by Linda L. Gaus -

Mr. Baum, landlord, alderman, honorary chief of the volunteer fire department, and holder of a few other positions, but, to make a long story short: Mr. Baum must have overheard one of my conversations with Ewald. It's no wonder; he owns the house where my friend lives on the ground floor. Mr. Baum and I, we have known each other by sight for a long time. Recently, however, the alderman stands and tips his hat just enough that a little bird could have flown out from under it if one had been caught there. He smiled courteously and established our acquaintance: "Do you travel sometimes?" "Oh yes," I replied, a bit absentmindedly, "that could certainly be." "Now then," he continued confidentially, "I think we are the only ones here who have ever been to Italy." "So -," I made an effort to pay better attention - "yes, then it is urgent that we should speak with one another." Mr. Baum laughed. "Yes, Italy - that's really something. I always tell my children - Take Venice, for example!" I stopped walking: "You remember Venice?" "But I ask you," he groaned, for he was a little too fat to fill easily with indignation - "How should I not - anyone who has seen it. These piazzettas - right?" "Yes," I countered, "I especially like to remember the trip through the canal, this hushed, silent gliding on the edge of things past." "The Palazzo Franchetti," he recalled. "The Cà Doro," I replied. "The fish market -" "The Palazzo Vendramin -" "Where Richard Wagner," he added quickly, as an educated German. I nodded "The Ponte, you know?" He smiled with recognition: "Of course, and the museum, the Academy, don't forget, where a Titian..."

Thus Mr. Baum had subjected himself to a type of examination that was somewhat strenuous. I undertook to compensate him with a story. And so I began without further ado:

“If you pass under the Ponte di Rialto, by the Fondaco de’ Turchi and the fish market, and say to the gondolier: ‘right!’ then he will look a little astonished and probably even ask you ‘*Dove?*’ But if you insist on going right and disembark in one of the small, dirty canals, negotiate with him, swear, and go through the crowded alleys and black, smoke-filled doorways into an empty space outdoors. All of this solely because this is where my story takes place.”

Mr. Baum touched me softly on the arm: “Excuse me, which story?” His tiny eyes darted back and forth a little fearfully.

I calmed him: “Any one, your Honor, not one worth mentioning. I also cannot tell you when it took place. Perhaps under the Doge Alvise Mocenigo IV, but it could also have been a little earlier or a little later. The pictures of Carpaccio, if you have seen them, are painted as if on purple velvet. Something warm yet woody permeates them, and eavesdropping shadows throng around the subdued lights. Giorgione painted on matte, aging gold, Titian on black sateen, but in the time of which I speak, people loved bright pictures, set on a background of white silk, and the name that played on people’s lips, that threw beautiful lips into the sunshine and captured alluring ears, when it was dropped with quavering tone, this name is Gian Battista Tiepolo.

“But none of this happens in my story. It concerns only the real Venice, the city of palaces, of adventure, of masques and of pale lagoon nights which, like no other nights, have the tone of secret romances. – In the part of Venice of which I speak, there are only poor everyday noises, the days pass uniformly, as if they were only a single day, and the songs that you hear there are growing laments that do not ascend, but rather hang like billowing smoke over the alleys. As soon as dusk falls, lots of shady riff-raff creep about, countless children make their homes on the plazas and in the narrow, cold doorways, and they play with the shards and spoils of multicolored glass, the same glass from which the masters made the solemn mosaics of San Marco. Noblemen rarely come to the ghetto. Only at the time when the Jewish

girls go to the well you can sometimes see a figure, black, cloaked, and masked. Certain people know from experience that this figure carries a dagger hidden in the folds. Somebody claims to have seen the face of the young man once upon a time, and since then it has been claimed that this black, slim guest was Marcantonio Priuli, the son of the Proveditore Nicolò Priuli and the beautiful Catharina Minelli. It is known that he waits under the gateway of Isaac Rosso's house, then, when it is desolate, he crosses the plaza and goes into the house of the old Melchisedech, the rich goldsmith, who has many sons and seven daughters, and from the sons and daughters many grandchildren. The youngest granddaughter, Esther, awaits him, nestled up to her aged grandfather, in a low, dark chamber where many things glisten and gleam, and silk and velveteen hang softly over the vessels as if to still their full, gold flames. Here, Marcantonio sits on a silver-embroidered pillow, at the feet of the aged Jew, and tells of Venice, as if he were telling a fairy tale about a place that has never existed. He tells of the plays, of the battles of the Venetian army, of foreign guests, of pictures and ornamented columns, of the '*Sensa*' on Ascension Day, of Carnival, and of the beauty of his mother Catharina Minelli. This is all the same to him, different expressions of power and love and life. To his two listeners, everything is alien, for the Jews are strictly excluded from all association, and even the rich Melchisedech has never set foot in the realm of the Great Council, although, as goldsmith and because of the general respect he enjoyed, he could have dared to. In his long life, the old man had extracted some benefits from the Council for his people, who all loved him like a father, but he had also experienced the backlash. Whenever calamity struck the city, people took revenge on the Jews; the Venetians themselves were too much like them in spirit for them to have used the Jews for trade as other peoples had. They tortured them with levies, robbed them of their goods, and restricted the area of the ghetto more and more, so that families that were fruitful and multiplied despite the dire circumstances were forced to build their houses upwards, one atop the roof of the other. And their city, which was not on the sea, thus grew slowly towards the sky, as into another sea, and all around the plaza with the well, there arose on all sides steep buildings, like the walls of a giant tower.

“The rich Melchisedech, in the whimsicality of old age, had made a strange suggestion to his fellow citizens, sons, and grandchildren. He

always wanted to occupy the highest of these tiny houses, which rose in countless stories one above the other. People were glad to grant him this strange wish, for they no longer trusted the load-bearing capacity of the lower walls anyway, so on top they used such light stones that the wind hardly seemed to notice the walls. And thus the old man moved house two or three times a year and Esther, who did not want to leave him, always went with him. Finally, they were so high up that when they left the confines of their chamber to venture onto the flat roof, another land began at the height of their brows, of whose customs the old man spoke in dark words, half like a psalm. They were now very far up; the path wound through many other people's lives, up steep and slippery stairs, past chiding wives and past attacks by starving children, and its many hurdles limited all association. Even Marcantonio no longer came to visit, and Esther hardly missed him. In the hours when she was alone with him, she had gazed at him so much and for so long that it seemed to her as if he had fallen deep into her dark eyes and died, and now, in her, his new, eternal life was beginning, the one in which he, as a Christian, had believed. With this new feeling in her young body, she stood for days on the roof and looked for the sea. But as high though the house was, all you could see initially were the gables of the Palazzo Foscari, some tower, the dome of a church, another more distant dome, as if freezing in the light, and then a grid of masts, beams, rods against the edge of the humid, trembling sky.

"Towards the end of this summer, and despite all protests, the old man moved house again, although climbing had become difficult for him. For somebody had built a new hut high above all others. When he, after a long time, crossed the plaza again, supported by Esther, many people thronged around him and bent over his fumbling hands, asking him for his counsel on many things; for he was like a dead man to them, who climbed out of his grave because some time had fulfilled itself. And thus it seemed. The men told him that there was insurgency in Venice, the nobility was in danger, and soon the borders of the ghetto would fall and everyone would enjoy the same freedom. The old man did not reply and just nodded as if he had known this, and much more, for a long while already. He entered the house of Isaac Rosso, on top of which his new abode lay, and climbed up for half a day. At the top, Esther, gave birth to a blond, delicate baby. After she

had recovered, she took the sky in its open eyes for indescribable clarity. Then a few stray lights alighted for a while, and then floated sky. And there, where this highest point something a still, silver light: the grown accustomed to the on the edge of the roof, spread wide and forced slowly unfolding. His luminous thought; it was fell forwards and pressed. The crowd stood gathered few gestures and words of the lonely, praying old youngest as in the cloud and collapsing anew in below grew and did not God, the eternal, in his gl

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had recovered, she took the baby in her arms and laid the whole golden sky in its open eyes for the first time. It was a fall morning of indescribable clarity. Things darkened, almost without radiance, only a few stray lights alighted on them, as if on large flowers, lingered there a while, and then floated across the gold-lined contours out into the sky. And there, where they disappeared, it was possible to see from this highest point something that nobody in the ghetto had ever seen – a still, silver light: the sea. And only now, when Esther's eyes had grown accustomed to the magnificence, did she notice Melchisedech, on the edge of the roof, right at the front. He arose with his arms spread wide and forced his dim eyes to look into the day that was slowly unfolding. His arms remained lifted up, his brow bore a luminous thought; it was as if he was immolated. Then he repeatedly fell forwards and pressed his aged head onto the shoddy, rough stones. The crowd stood gathered on the plaza below and gazed upwards. A few gestures and words drifted from the group, but they did not reach the lonely, praying old man. And the crowd saw the oldest and the youngest as in the clouds. But the old man continued rising proudly and collapsing anew in humility for quite a while. And the crowd below grew and did not take their eyes off him: did he see the sea or God, the eternal, in his glory?"

Mr. Baum made an effort to say something very quickly, but at first he didn't succeed. "Probably the sea," he said dryly, "this is just an impression" – which is how he proved himself especially enlightened and wise.

I took my leave quickly, but I couldn't help but call back to him: "Don't forget to tell your children about this event." He thought it over: "The children? Do you know, that young noble, this Antonio or however he's called, is not a nice character at all, and then: the child, this child! That would be – for children –" "Oh," I comforted him, "You have forgotten, dear sir, that children come from God! Why should the children doubt that Esther had one since she lived so close to the heavens!"

The children heard this story too, and if somebody asks them what the old Jew Melchisedech had seen in his ecstasy, they reply without thinking it over: "Oh, the sea as well."