

*La Vita di Merda*

“This is a life of shit!”  
shouts the taxi driver in Napoli. He proceeds to tell me  
in rapid-fire

ratatat Italian, most of which I can’t understand,  
how the wages here  
suck and don’t give anyone enough to live on.

He gestures towards  
the black guy with rag and spray bottle cleaning the windshields  
of cars stopped

at red lights for a twenty-euro-cent coin or whatever the driver  
will give him.  
He repeats his refrain in a louder, higher-pitched,

even angrier  
voice, “Questa è una vita di merda!” He tells me  
how life is

no different under *i socialisti* or *i conservatori*.  
It’s the same  
shit. He’s seventy-three and will retire next week. He’s had it

with all this traffic,  
cars cutting each other off, honking nonstop, vespas darting in, out,  
and around

the sedans, vans, and buses like so many minnows trailing  
in the wake of sharks.  
He’s driven taxi for thirty-three years. *Basta!* And, of course,

he’s right.  
All of us trying to scrounge a living. Antonio the woodworker  
in his hole-in-the-wall

shop on the Via del Grande Archive, sanding down *cornicelli*,  
the phallic  
hot-pepper-like, good luck charm that is the stocking cap of a small

mischievous  
three-faced Neapolitan devil, which Antonio will paint red and sell  
to tourists

for twenty euros a piece. He explained that to receive good luck  
you must give  
the *cornicello* away, pretend to sting with the sharp point

of its chili pepper  
the left palm of whomever you gift it to. He works ten hours six days  
a week so that Illyria,

his fifteen-year-old daughter with gold-blond hair, who looks as if  
she has just stepped  
out of Botticelli's *Madonna con Bambino e Due Angeli*, won't

have to get married  
but can go to l'Università, study fashion, and have a life he can only  
dream of. Everyone

needs good luck. I too bought a *cornicello*. The taxi driver sizes me up.  
He says, "You must  
be *un professore*. After half a lifetime of driving people

to and from  
the Museo di Capodimonte, I can tell. It's always lawyers, doctors,  
engineers, or

*professori*. You all dress the same." I get self-conscious about  
my chic tan shorts  
from Ralph Lauren, white linen shirt, the jaunty straw hat

my darling bought me  
in Capri, though it was made in China out of recycled paper.  
I want to believe

I'm part of a system in which I am a conscientious consumer.  
But it doesn't consume  
everyone, rich or poor, equally. The taxi driver doesn't

take me back  
all the way to my Airbnb. Drops me off at a street corner, tells me  
it's a short

walk from here. It isn't. He overcharges me and extorts  
an exorbitant  
tip. "Arrivederci, il buon professore!" I'm momentarily

mad, but don't  
really care. He has to make a living in whatever way  
he can.

All I know is that I, swindled man, still want to return to Napoli,  
this dirty city  
in which life is shit and short. In the toes of my sneakers

I feel the grit  
of black volcanic sand from a beach on Procida. What I will  
remember

most from my taxi ride is the young, tanned man in a sky-blue suit  
and red tie, whipping  
back over his shoulder in the wind, as he rode his vespa around

a curve, two inches  
from the cab's open window, laughing on his cell phone. I could almost  
have touched him.

*Ferry to Procida*

Last night's opera  
at the Teatro di San Carlo with all that suffering and sorrow expressed  
in slightly histrionic

arias is now only the moon's vague thumbprint left on the sky's otherwise  
clear window.

The ferry to Procida, smallest island in the trivium of islands

that rule the Bay  
of Napoli, is standing room only. Everyone is talking to each other  
or yammering

on their cellphones in voluble, excitable Italian. It washes over me  
in a wave

I do not pretend to understand. Cries of seagulls. The steady

hum of the engine  
throbs up through two decks and the bench on which I sit  
into my tailbone

so my hurt, decrepit body registers each vibration of the propellers  
rotating  
at one hundred thirty rpms. It makes me drowsy. Everyone

is eating  
greasy anchovy pizza or paninis from paper bags or *insulata di polpo*,  
octopus salad

with fennel, basil, slices of lemons. Only the lovers do not eat.

They are hungry  
only for each other. Slowly they devour the other's

ripe lips.  
Oh, to be middle-aged again. To not to have to hold onto the handrail  
when climbing the steep

stairs to the upper deck. Every age and shape of humankind  
travels by ferry  
to Procida. Shrieking babies. Old men with long, white, carefully combed

hair turned wild  
in the offshore wind. Faces so leathery wrinkled, so tanned that they  
seem carved

from twisted olive wood. They do not change expression.

Old women gossiping  
and hissing like geese at their grandchildren to sit still.

Stolid, forty-year-old  
couples, hand in hand. Young, pregnant mothers-to-be gently  
holding the beach balls

of their bellies with both hands in inexpressible wonder  
that their bodies  
can go through such change and still belong to them.

Young girls  
starting to realize their faces are smooth and touchable, staring  
into hand mirrors

and earnestly redrawing eyes with eyeliner for the hundredth time.

Teenage boys  
in aviator sunglasses, laughing, joking, punching each other's

thin shoulders.  
Tourists from Tunisia, the women wearing hijabs the dusky color  
of sky at dawn.

Americans in gaudy yellow T-shirts that say LAKERS in purple and gray  
or black T-shirts  
that read CALVIN KLEIN JEANS in gold. But fashion is international,

and our glad rags  
can just as easily be worn by Russians, Japanese, or Lithuanians.  
We export

and proudly market crass capitalism, our cultural imperialisms. Suddenly  
cries of "Procida,  
Procida!" Green, rocky, volcanic island, it looms

off the starboard  
bow. Then, the Marina Grande with its topsy-turvy houses  
and domed church,

which form a pastel rainbow that gets refracted and reflected in the still  
harbor water.

We hurry down the gang plank, day-trippers disembarking

into the rest  
of our lives. We want it all. Alleyways with high walls of stucco  
sunlight, overhung

with wisteria that fills our nostrils with such sweet incense. One gray  
lizard scurrying  
across the bright stucco and disappearing into a dark crack. The clear

salt water of Spiaggia  
Chiaiolella, name that is a cry of ecstasy, in which I'll swim  
and swim until

all my sixty-five years dissolve and the sea holds me  
weightless,  
ageless in its arms. It's so salty it will not let my body sink.

*See Naples and Live*

Death and Dionysus  
are both big in Napoli. At the Cathedral of the Duomo  
the priests claim

San Gennaro's dried blood contained in a round glass reliquary held  
in a solid gold  
solar monstrance liquifies every September nineteenth,

the saint's feast day.  
If it doesn't, it foretells a catastrophic year. I have walked through crowds  
of *ragazze*

and *ragazzi*, twenty-somethings drinking shots of whiskey  
chased down  
with Peroni in the Centro Storico, making out with one another

on the steps of fountains.  
Forty years ago, I was one of them. Now all I can think of  
is Cecily Brown's

twenty-by-twenty-foot canvas hung at the Museo  
di Capodimonte  
and titled *The Triumph of Death*. She painted it in the spring

of 2019, one year  
before the pandemic started. It shows skeletal Death on his  
white horse riding

over crowds of party-goers who twirl glasses of pink champagne,  
dance, talk, eat  
chocolate-dipped strawberries, walk their mastiffs, lazily picnic

on a park's green grass.  
Death smites them with his upraised right hand that says  
hi and goodbye,

*ave atque vale*, at the same time. The pale horse's apocalyptic  
hooves kick  
and stamp the revelers, hammer them into mute

oblivion. Cecily Brown  
gets it. Death's white horse with the golden tail snorts and paws  
the air

with impatient, iron-shod forefeet. Death can't control his mount. Napoli  
gets drunk on death.

The carabinieri with their AK47s, stationed on street corners,

are here to provide  
crowd control. They can't protect you from Covid, heart attack,  
pancreatic cancer, stroke.

Go to the Cappella Sansevero and see Sanmartino's *Cristo velato*.

Miraculous how  
white polished marble recreates the transparent shroud

that covers  
the corpse from head to toe. The veil of death distorts  
Christ's face,

separates the dead from the living. It turns his flesh  
to flowing folds,  
makes it look like he's decomposing, about to deliquesce.

If we look away  
and then look back, he will have changed to water. Hard marble  
holds our evanescence.

Death is trompe l'oeil. Through the veil, the stigmata  
are visible  
on his limp hands. By Christ's side lie the instruments of his passion—

bent nails, pincers,  
crown of thorns. Our life is full of Baroque, outsize  
suffering.

Sanmartino and Cecily Brown both say we must embrace  
our death, get  
to know it on a first name basis. But see the minute

embroidery  
of circles and floral filigree that Sanmartino has thought to carve  
on the shroud's

hem. And Cecily Brown's revelers kiss, frown,  
clap their hands,  
pet designer-brand chihuahuas, stub out cigarettes

in espresso cups,  
take another swig of Vodka Absolut straight from the bottle,  
leave garish



blood-red lipstick prints on empty champagne flutes, spoon against  
each other,  
put on elaborate hats trimmed with plastic violets

to go on leading  
frenetic, scribbled, overlapping lives. It's the triumph  
of life over

death. It's the huge pink shrimp with their antennae, beady-eyed  
heads still on  
upon a bed of creamy, black-peppered linguini that the waiter

brings me  
for my first course. I pull the heads off and eat it all,  
let the delicate

white flesh of fresh crustaceans slide along my tongue, over  
my molars, savor  
every least bit of it before I swallow. I raise my glass of piss-colored

effervescent Peroni  
and let it catch the last golden light of the summer solstice,  
reliquary of this our longest day.

*Cell-Phone Photos of the Diver's Tomb from Paestum, Italy*

If only death  
were as easy as this lithe Greek diver jumping from a stone platform  
towards the azure

Tyrrhenian Sea in a predictably graceful arc. The stylized fresco  
captures a young man  
in 460 BCE suspended in the air between land and salt water

at the prime  
of his life. His body is lean. Every muscle from calf to thigh,  
buttock to abdomen,

trapezoid to bicep, is taut. His small scrotum and prick hang down  
like a miniature  
turkey baster at Thanksgiving. All the five frescoes painted

on the inside walls  
and ceiling of the dead man's sarcophagus are a thanksgiving for the life  
he's been given.

On the side panels young men, wreathed with fronds of laurel,  
louge on couches  
and drink wine from kylikes, those wide-mouthed, saucer-like

cups. They call  
for more. One man plays a double flute while his companion gazes  
at stars that seem to bend

closer. Two others exchange palace gossip and smile at each other.  
One fingers a white  
stone. One plucks a lyre with his left hand. His right caresses

another man's  
nipple. The other man, who has a curly, oiled, black beard, puts his hand  
behind the smooth-cheeked

lyre player's head. They are about to kiss. All so the dead man may  
hear music, stare  
forever at the bodies he'll miss. But death isn't like this bacchanal.

It's a journey  
I'm already embarked upon. I lie on a chaise lounge on a small  
balcony at a BnB

in Pompeii and watch how dawn comes to the city's red-tiled roofs  
and terra-cotta  
or white-washed walls. Traffic picks up and revs on the autostrada

one hundred meters  
away. A green sign says this way to Napoli and Roma. I can barely  
walk—left knee

swollen from the steep stairs in Ravello, pulled muscle in my right  
groin.

I at sixty-five have the body of an eighty-year-old

man. I can't twist  
my torso without pain. If I crane my neck, I can see squat Vesuvius  
humpbacked

in the distance, this continent's largest active volcano.

It still looms silently  
over the city. Today I'll tour the famous necropolis.

Death is another  
tourist attraction. Roosters holler from the street below. *Wake up,*  
*dummkopf!* The most

beautifully crooked umbrella pine grows next to my balcony.

Dawn turns  
its scaly bark red-brown. It holds up a few cotton-candy strands

of cirrus clouds in hazy  
blue polluted sky. It holds up heaven. I gaze back at my cell phone's  
photos of the Diver's

Tomb. A naked man with only a semitranslucent, blue silk scarf  
draped artfully  
around his shoulders leads a man in a white, brown-polka-dotted toga,

who walks  
with a cane. The naked man leads the clothed man towards death.  
In the sarcophagus,

next to the skeleton, the archaeologists discovered his grave goods.

One black, empty  
amphora. Broken lyre made from iron, ivory, and the shell of a tortoise.

## *Villa of the Mysteries*

The figures are almost  
life-size. They stand in a room with blood-red panels bordered  
with green stripes

and gold, bold, geometric patterns—labyrinths and squares within  
squares. I stand  
in a tiled room that contains this other larger room on its walls.

The white plaque says  
that “the scene lends itself to multiple interpretations,  
and about a century

after its discovery, there is still no universally accepted  
explanation.”

It could be the secret rites of the cult of Dionysus. It could be

a wedding ceremony.

What I see is a boy, naked except for calf-high, leather boots,  
reading a scroll

aloud to two women in pale purple and brown robes. One standing.

The other seated  
and holding in her ringed left hand another scroll. Her right

hand rests  
on the boy’s shoulders. Her fingers gently stroke his cheek in an  
absent-minded,

maternal way while she gazes off to one side, grown sad  
and pensive  
from what she hears. As he reads, the boy’s face shows no

expression.

He concentrates on pronouncing each word correctly. He holds  
the scroll close, must be

near-sighted. A woman in a brown wraparound skirt, who may be  
pregnant, round belly  
starting to show, bears a platter of cakes towards a table where

another woman  
bends forward to shift the table’s position slightly, both her hands  
gripping its edges.

A laurel-wreathed woman, seated with her back to us, is caught  
in the simple act  
of spreading a purple tablecloth over the bare

table. A woman  
in a low-cut brown dress with a thin gold necklace pours water  
over the right hand

of the seated woman in a cleansing ritual. An old,  
balding, bearded  
man with paunch, fat thighs, and diminutive genitals

(the purple toga  
has slipped to reveal his nakedness) is playing a lyre set  
on a square-sided

marble pillar. In the fresco's next panel, two figures with pointed,  
Spock-like ears  
sit on a large stone. One plays the panpipes, accompanies

the fat man's  
lyre. The other suckles a brown goat at one bare breast.  
A black goat

in the foreground stares back at us and bleats. Next to them, a woman  
whose brown cloak  
billows behind her in sudden wind like a parachute

looks left  
towards the adjacent wall where the fat man appears again and holds  
a wine jar

up to the mouth of a young man who is about to guzzle it all down.  
Behind him  
another young man in a yellow toga fallen from his shoulders

raises in his right  
hand a tragic mask that resembles the decapitated head  
of the fat man

whose mouth is open in a dark circle around a scream we cannot  
hear. The woman  
with the parachute cloak reaches out with her left hand,

palm raised  
as if to say "Stop!" Now, a handsome man with a silver robe  
draped over

his loins reclines in the lap of a woman whose torso and head  
have been cut off  
where the fresco has crumbled away. All we see of her

is the folds  
of her purple dress and a white cloth over her lap. Her right arm  
curving over

the chest of her lover. The other hand holding a dark fruit,  
which may be  
a pomegranate. The man's staff, which seems to be sprouting

green leaves  
at its top and is adorned with a long yellow ribbon tied  
around it,

is propped against a small table. It intersects his loins, juts up  
at the same angle  
his erection would rise if he were aroused. Near him,

a young woman  
kneels in an ocher dress and is about to pull a purple cloth with gold  
fringe off a hidden

object three feet tall. Is it a herm or a phallus, as some  
experts think?  
No one will ever know. A winged woman brandishes a long, supple

stick and whips  
the bare back of a woman who lays her head in the lap of another woman  
who brushes the whipped

woman's dark hair back from her forehead. A naked woman  
with red-brown hair  
dances and strikes together two small cymbals over her head

while her ocher  
cloak streams out behind her and forms a shining parenthesis that encloses  
her body from shoulder

to mid-thigh. A winged boy, who must be Eros, raises a mirror  
so the woman  
who is getting her long hair braided by another woman in a purple

dress, can see  
herself. She may be a bride. She gazes back at us and also from the mirror  
Eros holds.

The three legs of the stool on which she sits resemble a car's  
front suspension  
struts. In the opposite corner of the room, an older woman

with a wedding ring  
on her left hand and dressed in ocher and brown robes sits on a pillowed  
divan and considers

these mysteries with her cheek propped on her right hand. What  
is it  
that she has seen? We will never know. What is it that we

have seen? I think  
we have heard a young boy reading aloud from the scroll of life  
words that he

cannot yet understand—about our need for food and music, for love,  
for drunken debauchery,  
the difficult relations of men and women, suffering, punishment,

ecstasy, theater,  
the innocence of animals, lust, marriage, motherhood, sex, terror,  
the empathy of one

woman for another. These are the true mysteries that will remain  
hidden. Sun  
under cloud cover. I wait in the world's womb, its walls

the blood-soaked  
color of this room in the Villa of the Mysteries, to be born  
by caesarian.