

ART AGAINST STONE

Palpable relief—emergent, flotant, thawing and loosened—whispered through the entourage of only a half-dozen or so exhausted men riders plus their two guides as the silent troupe traversed with welcome the thinning snow pack now lacy with widening gray patches of bare leaden rock. The truly treacherous, the intimidating and often dangerous, was behind. The egregiously highest cresting altitudes of the Dolomite Alps were recessing now into distant heavy clouds behind them, even farther in time and distance the Bavarian Alps, and furtherest still lay, sequestered in its' locale, serene and quiet Nuremberg, where in months passed Albrecht's journey had begun. As well, in the passing of the summits, the horses also even felt a nerve-loosening shudder of accomplishment, cautious relief; though reality of many many winding miles of long exhausting journey still lay ahead. From their nostrils their breathing smudged the air. The pass trail clung to an inclined stumbling cant downward, yet the eventual coming onto the narrow slope of terrace quite perceptibly enough offered

in distance a glimpse of expansive vista out toward passing into the lesser peaks and down into the ragged treeline and the far spread of clustered foothills. As each clearing day so far had been, the colours Albrecht saw were splattered brilliantly luminous: the clear ethereal blue of the sky, bombast of whiteness and shadow of slate in the clouds, the deeply green cool earthiness of the encroaching spruce some still embedded heavily glazed in shining drifts of white snow, into the tremendously far ripe valleys the gold and russet verdant and full-blown flower of waning summery autumn in this fortnight before All Saints' Day. These tired riders would halt near in some amenable spot to offer a quick but most sincere ritual of thankful prayer for such safe passage thus far. The thin clear air shone in a heightened brightness, a vibrating quality, that seemed almost indescribable by the hand of even the most accomplished painter; though Albrecht scrupulously noted it, faithfully recording it in his memory while passing through it, feeling it soak into the recesses of his consciousness to lay there until he needed at some future point staring at the easel or the etching plates to withdraw it again. Some times it proved more difficult to draw forth the

retained impression of images than at others. How complex was the impulse, the memory, the stimulation, the inner workings, the residue, the shadings and tones, the permutations of colours, the detail upon detail. Albrecht could at last will the memories forth. The details were key. To see without hesitation as many as possible of the Great Creator's infinite details, that was the requirement of vision aimed toward perfection of reassembling it on some blank flat inanimate surface. It would take more than a lifetime of brim-filled years to enumerate such an incalculable number of such details and variations, such was the evolving shift of the myriad of their number and complexity. Even an interior room existed awash with such detail of life lived, and those objects of its' most ordinary daily occupations. Beyond one singular room was infinite world upon world of scenes. Albrecht had thus far seen only the daintily thinnest slice of the vast globe. Perpetual astonishment catalogued the sights, even the musical sounds, the colours and contrasts, the surprising and the mundane, as many details as could be seen assaulting the eyes. Albrecht pulled his cloak closer, a sensation of detail in each hair of its fur lining, numerous as the cascading

copper ringlets on his own head now swathed in a cap under a woolen hood.

Descending down among rocky steeps to sloping planes leading to the foothills each, every, vista floated now across sight with abundance, enticing Albrecht's eyes and mind, etched there with precision. Late summer's heavy leaves of dusty green were fading when, though under wet skies, the entourage had left Nuremburg, Germany those weeks since. Though the fir and spruce forests were soon to be laden with snow lain fluffed and blistering white, Albrecht was eager for his journey, pacing his cage to be on the trek southward. Eager enough to re-explore the magnificence of Venice that on which his hungry vision had engorged ten years earlier, eager enough to leave his complacently settled bride of eleven years and again return in a pilgrimage to an opulent city of splendid light, and exuberant commerce, and radiant art, and the possibility of transcendent learning. But more than the destination itself was the journey. Daily passage through a world glowing and ever-evolving was every day, every turn, a revelation of astounding creation; and many miles, leagues even, of

Italy at its' most resplendently fruitful still lay ahead. Italia; Venezia. Many eruptive—so visionary—ideas and techniques, so many explosive creativities, were happening there, intriguing news of which had penetrated even into the north, Albrecht's rapacious curiosity prodded into exploration.

Albrecht scanned his eager eyes over the cascaded layers of descending landscape, blue and clear, from the spot where they had stopped to rest the horses and offer the prayerful praise; his breath straining in hungry gulps. Palettes of colour arrayed in the vista of each direction, myriad variations beyond number; Albrecht could hardly take them all in. But, as always, he must—however intense the effort of concentration. His darting brain galloping ahead, he must file them away in the memory of things seen: unexpected colours, flora encountered, light and shadow and clouds discerned, landscape and figures observed. He took in the actions of the horses, their stance at rest in the crystalline mountain light, and the asymmetrically random patterns of figures splayed in repose or grouped in activity. Albrecht's gaze just slowed to linger on one of the Austrian guides standing atop a rock outcrop at a distance,

eyes fixed also into the descending valley, the wind fluttering his woolly homespun tunic and an ample cloak about the solid uprightness of his strapping frame, tall, barely nineteen years, the rigid, but supple as a young pine tree, youth's cheeks deeply crimsoned more than their natural colour in the clear chill air; he whose smile was the startlingly thunderous occurrence for which Albrecht sometimes on the pass trail yearned, always with a bit of belly-wrenching awe. Albrecht's eyes were bound with calculating exactitude to the cavalier youth's outstretched footing braced against the edge of the precipice. Albrecht polished the youth with his gaze, adding shining highlights to his colouring and splashes of dewiness to his hewn and hardy planes. The boy needed not so much embellishment for already he was a picturesque exemplar, a fertile meadowland, though adolescent, of graceful yet as well manly sturdiness. In addition, grateful for the boys' practiced skill as guide, so was Albrecht unable to inhibit an appreciative smile any more than he was able to turn his gaze to another aspect of the landscape until the boy had shifted and walked again into the activity of other men performing their various duties around him

in the place where they had stopped to rest and offer their prayer. Albrecht turned, too, and looked into a cloud. Albrecht had in company always been shy, inward leaning with his thoughts, hesitant and even now at middle-age, at thirty-four, was still the same and likely to comfortably remain so, conversing inwardly with his own thoughts in volleys as unlikely opposed to his outward taciturn reserve. He had not instigated a conversation with the young guide, nor exchanged more than a pleasantry of the day; but he had silently observed his form, and proportions, and lines, his easy movements. Albrecht admittedly had only conversed sporadically with any others of his traveling party, several merchants and a cleric and a vintner's apprentice plus the Alpine guides. He was most intent on inscribing on his memory the observations of things seen and tabulated for future references in his pictorial representations, the scenes he composed out of the compartmental palette of his mind's storehouse. The colouration of the younger guide's complexion and the heart-chilling clear blue of his eyes fixed him in a place there in that expansive storehouse, the exquisiteness of his form among the birds and leaves, and animals

and grasses, the clouds and rocks and shadows, the natural observations of the marvelous world around him that Albrecht stored within.

When the travellers reached the first of the high foothills, the scattered streaks of presently slushing Alpine snow receding into memory, and the more languid precincts of Italy scattered before them, the Austrian guides turned back toward the Dolomite's peaks; the merchants veered direct toward Venice. Albrecht and his apprentice, who was also attending him as groom, set out on their own, embarking on their looping journey toward the Po, to the country on the northern banks above Ferrara, to then re-enter the Veneto and again toward Venice. It did not occur to them in whatever manner to hurry—for they were merely at their own leisure marvelling at the countryside, noticing the inhabitants, lazing in the golden pale warmth and the lush breezes, observing. The roads they employed were not well-traveled, except near placid villages where locals were occupied with errands. Occasionally they encroached upon another distant traveler or a market-bound wagon loaded with wares or a farmer speaking to himself while

passing between fields, sometimes a pilgrim on their own particular quest. Flowers, wild and buoyant, sprang from the rocky ground in patches spreading spot to colourful spot; mild sunshine spilled from behind the passing clouds to brush the meadows and trees at the road's edge. Delightfully agreeable vistas abounded in all directions. Albrecht and Hans, the apprentice/groom who attended him, rode for great stretches in silence, wonderment in their outlook, sharing in the new sights and smells and warmth. Riding at times along the road through forested growth, not the dense shadow-shrouded vertical forests of Germany but swaying sun-dappled copses of variegated trees, and at length through stretches of farmland or meadows, intermittent, with clusters of cottages or a sprawling villa, and in certain expanses a compact village centered on a simple basilica church. Ten years ago on his first trip to Venice Albrecht had gone directly there but now he was exploring the countryside a little further afield, and it blossomed to a re-newing experience in visual education by process of exhaustive closer inspection just as the manner that Albrecht most enjoyed. As the country broadly

widened out the expanding picture enlightened Albrecht again and again no matter how many times he had encountered presumably similar such scenes--but now at each observed and tallied moment still awe-inspiring as well. The Italian sky loomed far, bloomed in abundant fluffiness above an undulation of hillsides, lakes, of meadows and rolling fields, patchwork layered under the caress of sun, and in the far distance a towering dome of cloud with a cool blue shower drizzling from underneath onto the growth of ripe crops. Most faintly he could smell the damp earth. The tremendous bitter-sweetness Albrecht sometimes felt overwhelm him when he saw such sights of natural beauty, as well now the remembrance still elicited but whose reality of presence long passed into the mountain pass trails holding the sturdy and beautiful Austrian guide, such examples of moments of such astounding although transitory beauty, awesome and vivid, drenched his sensory perceptions in a stunning revelatory awareness and empowered his careering mind with a jolt of astute transcendental awareness of life and time and the fleeting moments of the present world. The shifting clouds raked and piled above the

glowing fields with their moving shadows and patches of vibrant colour ever-changing as the lazing winds prodded them made Albrecht's heart quicken, and then almost skip, at the insistently demanding beauty of the sight. His heart tugging so keenly within him, eyes darting and caressing across one scenic pleasure to another even more awe-inducing. The grandeur of Nature's world held coddled in the Almighty's hands astounded the senses, accumulated in a molten lump at Albrecht's breast. Albrecht's spirit sometimes wilted when he beheld such overwhelming sights; to astonishedly think that this world was so grand, and no matter how grandiose the next might be, to never again see the honeyed sunlight on leaves against the background clouds, to never see the sunlight giving warmth on one's shoulders, was a contemplation of abject dejection. The breath of the breeze touched against Albrecht's face. It could make him weep, for beauty's sake.

Riding through the Italian fields, following the lower path of valleys southward was a listless leisurely exploration, a tour both informative and affirming; and provocative with discovery. Colours, russets and ochre, and scents, of sage and apple orchards,

a world laid out in lands and clouds, and scenes of the Italian working people going about their daily routines rose before Albrecht's inquisitive gaze, appearing at every perambulation with fresh and abundant aspects. Days and miles passed, each dawn heralding the new-sprung pleasures of journey and discovery. Even Hans, on occasion, remarked on the rippled bend of grass or the unfamiliar bird-call or the oddly shaped tree; though Albrecht had already in an instant noted it all. Approaching the northern banks of the Po late on an evening redolent with the smell of dampened earth and wind-crackled wildflowers and withering hewn grass, as in the meanwhile passing in a violet hue fading into misted eventide near the outer edge of a copse-studded meadow along the roadway a little to the north of what Albrecht would learn was the village of Fioricollinari, Albrecht, astride the bay gelding, with Hans following, came upon a rambling ancient locanda, stone and tile and smudges of dried moss flung into a surrounding thoroughly tousled with overgrowth of gardens amidst a jagged grove of beech trees. Balm of evening light coalesced as the weary horses clomped into a courtyard bounded by the stone

walls and on one side by a row of tall stalwart poplars interspersed with cypresses. Shadows were stretching across the fields and road, scraggly talons clawing across the light patches. Typically redolent of inns across this countryside the weather-beaten stone glowed with smudged mute of magical colour, in the waning day, inviting the traveler to stop for a time of rest and refreshment. The established of ancient time plantings of the gardens were abloom with the plants of golden autumn, and a fountain bubbled among them. Albrecht, Hans assisting him down from his mount and although stiffly at first touch of earth, walked for a while for a stretch of his legs along the various pathways, smelling the air, noting the colours, feeling the atmosphere, nodding to a couple who were doing the same taking of the air while wandering on the paths. Hans led the horses away to the stable where he would guard while they were tended, seeing that the innkeepers local groom carefully repacked away the caparisons for the return portion of the journey through the Alpine passes but unneeded now that daily warmth was still firmly implanted on this expanse of

verdant and golden Italy. The liquid light of dusk ebbed away, and an opaque shade settled from all around above.

Albrecht, entering the heavy wooden doors into a narrow vestibule of the old building lit by double torches, faced an archway into a great room slightly cramped and be-scattered with board tables and stools and a few chairs and one corner a hearth, while a stairway ran around the opposite side and leading off into wings in opposite directions. A twilight gloom hung in the greatroom but a maid was just laying a fire in the wide hearth's chimney. The *proprietore*, a dark middle-aged man beginning to exhibit a rotundness but albeit with a quick efficient step, led Albrecht up the stairs to examine a chamber and settle in, summoning another maid to promptly fill the wash basin. Albrecht was then left alone in the tidy room which had a small window high on the wall and a candle burning in a brass bowl on a table.

Later when Albrecht reappeared down the stairs for exploring the great-room, plus in search of a bite to satisfy his growling appetite, the fire on the hearth was blazing crisply, exuding a flickering and cheerful glow, crackling with a festive air.

Albrecht inquired of Hans if he was satisfied with his accommodation and reassured both that all was well, that a pleasant and slumberous evening lay ahead, that anyone's wish was for the asking. The high-ceilinged room rose so upright that its farther corners were draped with shadowy edges, and softly warm. Shadows leapt across the stone walls, playing in tremendous grasps behind the few people who sat at the tables, couples engaged in quiet conversation during their meal or solitary travellers in thoughts of their own before, at evening's length, among those so inclined, the later expectant tableside conviviality of meeting with traveling strangers for drinking and questioning and tale-telling. Albrecht, despite his innate shyness, takes inwardly festive pleasure in the convivial atmosphere and coziness of this greatroom, comfortable, somewhat bare but for the grouped tables and chairs. A few tapestries hang on the walls, and three paintings, two portraits of passing interest and a landscape which Albrecht dismissed, leaving the other portions of wall to give off the warmth of colour in stone and display the shadows and flickers of the firelight. Albrecht, with determination, took a seat near the center

of one wall. The couple from the garden path dined, and conversed quietly, as if still alone among a rose-strewn bower. There were several young men, singly or in duos, most likely students traveling from university who animated their at times jovial, at other times quite serious and intense conversations. One middle-aged man sat alone. As Albrecht enjoyed his meal, excellent veal chops, he noticed across the room, in a corner, another man alone who brazenly though in carefully guarded intervals glanced his way as if adding up a talley of surreptitious looks. The man at times stared straight ahead as if looking through Albrecht and as well as directly at him. This was much as Albrecht himself had, at times, occasion to study intensely on all the remarkable objects that he discovered abundant around himself. All, singly or not, relished their meals, enjoying the food they received, quietly; and then satisfied, some joined the expanded group of men who gathered at the communal drinking table, the logs of the fire inexorably dying down and shadows slumping leisurely in the corners and nooks. Albrecht strolled around the room once, at a cautious pace, taking in another look at the surroundings, took a seat, stretching his long

legs, contentedly breathing in the soft fragrant evening air of Italy, now layered over with the smells of roasted meat and rosemary and wine. There was laughter. Stories unrolled scroll-like from the tongues and winking eyes of the travellers, enjoying an evening of pleasant company in the warm tavern-room of the inn. After a few petite sips of cordial the ladies had retired to their respective chambers but the gentlemen remained wrapped in their stories. Listening Albrecht might lose the thread of narratives as he tried to follow the dialects, but intently he listened to their heartily recounted stories, and duly observed the expressions on their faces. When the alone man who previously had gazed so noticeably at Albrecht's presence joined, nevertheless accentuating a discreet distance, the group shifted but continued their conversations. The man sat, casually, and gazing, Closer, Albrecht noted the man's particular appearance, as always making mental notes, appreciating the imposing aspect of the older man's solid form, seeming about forty years, dark hair salted at the temples and sides, heavy earthen face with bent nose and dark nearly black eyes; he was dressed simply in dark tunic held by a fine leather

belt. Albrecht did instantaneously consider that this man possessed the crackling flash of lightning within his accumulated attributes; whereas additionally this imposing man embodied a certain attractive swagger, a resemblance to a solid slab of impenetrable rock, confirmed when later the man mentioned that he had been inspecting at the quarries at Carrara. Elaborating in his conversation about the pristine beauty of the marble there, as he spoke with elation his otherwise tired eyes reflecting the flame of light from the flickering logs of the hearth and candle that sat near him on the long table where he leaned his muscled arms. At length, leaning a slight bit toward Albrecht, he said, “Scusi, signore, I have forgotten the niceties. Allow me to introduce myself—I am by name known as Michelangelo Buonarati.” A surprised Albrecht looked at him again in the flicker of firelight, focusing on the darkness of his eyes and the heavily rounded lips from which the words came. Albrecht's breath did not come for a time long enough for him to hear his heart stutteringly pounding several quick times, and he reached up to swipe a thin hand over his incredulous face before tugging at his ears. Albrecht was unsure,

dumbfounded. How could he believe the fortuitous coincidence of this moment of this encounter of incalculable chance? “Amazed”, he said, adding “I am Albrecht. I am amazed. I simply do not believe this fortune. You are the artist...the sculptor and artist called Michelangelo?” Then the man looked into Albrecht's pale and astonished face, a steady piercing look deep into his eyes, “Si, I am a sculptor; and my name is Michelangelo Buonarati—for quite a few years, since birth.” His attempt at humour gave Albrecht a passing smile.; and Albrecht replied, “Ahhh...but I cannot believe that I have had the fortune to meet you, such a dream. I could not have expected the honour and pleasure to encounter here the famous creator of renowned and exceptional statuary excellence of art. But perhaps I should have known by your arms—the muscles of your arms.”

By this hour, except for a cluster of several of the young students who were drinking merrily, and the innkeeper, the two men were the only ones left in the great-room, and they agreed readily to share a table. “Is it possibly...possibly by grace I have encountered the renowned artist, Michelangelo?” Michelangelo

offered what might pass for a smile, warmth even, in his heavy face. They bowed with smiles and grew talkative: exclamatory, verbose, ruminative and quiet, off on a new extol of nature or humanity, until the shadows had thickened into knotted clumps and the embers only glowed incandescent red and hot. Albrecht was overwhelmed, flushed with a tide of excitement; he had never imagined the possibility on an ordinary road near a remote inn of meeting the illustrious artist whose fame had spread already to the far lands north of the Alps where Albrecht's own publicly recognizable persona seemed by comparison small and local. Michelangelo's reputation as the flamboyantly talented of the Italian masters, especially the wide-spread descriptions of his David, standing tall and proud and excellent in Florence, had reached the ears of the interested and incredulous everywhere in the art centers of most of Europe. Albrecht flushed in awed palpitation by his fortune at meeting this man, already as iconic and revered as his figure of David; and as he looked at the man's peculiarly intense and swarthy face, even as the shadows began to envelop their features while speaking, Albrecht could make out the

glowing radiance that made this Michelangelo alive and consumed with the warmth of creative combustion.

“I have heard of you, heard many things, of your extraordinary talent” breathed Albrecht. “I, too, work as an artist—and would hope to have a portion of what you possess in reputation, that which has come to me of your extraordinary work.”

“I thank you. I work—of course, I try to please those who patronize me—but I work to appeal for—to appease myself. For it is the work I care about, the expression of the work—the expression of life, living life itself, my life.”

“That,” breathed Albrecht, “also, with me.”

Alone now together in the great-room, save the sleepy innkeeper, Albrecht and Michelangelo talked on—about traveling, and their training as youths, about childhood, and their reverence for Creation. They spoke of differences between the German and Italians. Their voices came out of the thick muffle of the increasing darkness in whispers. When the time seemed about to totter into the eleventh hour, of a sudden Michelangelo said, “We must talk

further; come to my room, and join me.” So they rose, thanking the innkeeper, took a bottle of the local wine, and started up the steep and narrow stairway. In the darkness, at a point on the stair's ascending, Albrecht felt Michelangelo turn and place a light hand on his shoulder. It rested there in a delicate but steady touch. It was warm, that very hand now caressing lightly on Albrecht's shoulder, the hand that had finely fashioned the hands and limbs of the Florentine David.

In Michelangelo's small room but for the tiny glow of the candle the only light was from the dwindling fire on the grate and a thin portion of moon that glowed palely through the small high casement. Sparely was the room furnished, with an adequate bed graced with linens and coverings, and a chair and writing table where Michelangelo had set up a makeshift easel with sketching sheaves leaned against it for observation and study. Papers and charcoal crayons lay in piles. Albrecht stole quick glances at the easel. Michelangelo sat the candle on the hearth. As he uncorked the bottle of wine, he said, “Tell me more about the art you make?” He sipped from the bottle, and finding it pleasantly

adequate, he took a good mouthful. When with coy forwardness Michelangelo offered it, Albrecht was for a moment stung by the lack of a glass, of the lack of nicety and responsible respect, but then a feeling of bemusement landed over him by this tentative show of intimate friendliness; and thus smiling upon the reticence of his inward boy-child he took the bottle from Michelangelo's hand and tasted it, his lips drawing from the still-moist neck of the bottle a long full draught.

“I have prints, a great many etchings, and oils from the easel, so many many things. I have drawn since I was a child, drawn and painted quite seriously since I was apprenticed at fifteen years old. I, of course, study nature avidly, some mathematics, and much reverence for Holy Scripture inspiration. My interests after so many years seem even still insatiable”, said Albrecht.

“Yes”, consoled Michelangelo. “It is good, so good, to be interested in life. That, too, is my consuming passion: the world, the astounding Creation, and all its' beauty. Is it not a wonderful, amazing, and majestic place; most especially the people of this spit of lost paradise? The human being is amazing, the unbelievable

elegant machine of this human body, the human form. I study the human form as a miracle of motion and beauty. There is no other thing so grand, so close to sublime, so graceful.”

“It is that, truly; a miracle, born anew at every morning,” Albrecht smiled; he was lean, even thinking himself too thin, and Michelangelo was a man of hard muscled heft and solidity, with a heavily featured visage. Outwardly they were not alike, almost virtual opposites physically, yet within their own perceptions each could worship the ideal form of mankind with all its' variations.

“Someday we will not have to worry about keeping our clothes mended or finding the best berries growing in some hedgerow, nor hoarding a store of sturdy bottles for new wine, nor any momentary activity—even our own work—that fills our days, for we will have passed into the realm of death, and flown from this world.”

The wine bottle, murky green glass as dark as the night that surrounded them in the thickened dark of the room, they had passed between them, each tasting the warming liquid, savoring the flavor of wine and a warm pulse flowing with life. Michelangelo, as

of speaking to a familiarly trusted acquaintance reunited once again by happenstance after inexplicable absence, expressed himself, “ I believe it is my most sacred trust to try to create sculpture and paint that will capture that beauty of man's flesh for so long as it will stand “ ; his voice poured forth from out the darkness like a chanted hymn, a hymn to glorify the ever-miraculous human vitality of man. “In the dark, in the vast immeasurable dark of eternity, the bodies, Michelangelo bodies sculpted of cold stone, only they might last through time, firm and unchanging, while our bodies, warm and fragile, our selves would have ceased, fallen into the finest dust, ceased to exist for the rest of all eternity.” Albrecht listened, and looked, lost in amazement at the moving outline of Michelangelo's face, at the sometimes gleam of moonlight caught and refracted in his eyes, at the depth of his thoughts. “ Man,“ Michelangelo continued, “is supposedly created in God's own image, and, not just the flesh, but the dynamic workings of the human body and the impulses of its' constantly driving mind, incomparably exquisite and complex.“; and Albrecht lost count of how many of the sturdy Italian's thoughts were

similar to his own---how congruent the impetuses of emotion, how astoundingly alike the experience of being vital, artistically acute, informed with energy---in their essence these very thoughts so enumerated energetically in this ideal and so human form of a man now encountered while until this moment separated in distance by half the continent.

“Though we like to think of an artist as someone who sees the world as it is,” Michelangelo continued, “we are all a bit of dreamers, after all” adding, “especially perhaps when we have crossed over the line of a taboo, and reached out in the mind into a world of wishes and desires.” Michelangelo, having stripped himself of his tunic, loosened his shirt, letting it fall open to whisper a revelation of the fur of his chest.

“The body and the mind, how sometimes at odds they are; and yet they work together to bring about the motions of life,” Albrecht answered.

“The motions of life ...its' ups, downs; the search for beauty, truth, a serenity, accomplishment...always a searching...a stripping away, or, perhaps better said, a chipping away to find some hidden

inner essence that the heart might already have seen shrouded in its' core.”

“ Ahhh”, Albrecht sighed. He handed the sturdy and thick wine bottle to Michelangelo, who took from it a last gulp and set it lightly on the floor near the hearth. It was empty, but the warmth from it had been infused into the room and the conversation and the two men's blood flowing in their arteries. Sprinkles of ember light still played about the shadowy corners of the room and at moments caught glowings from Albrecht's coppery curls which fell in long ringlets. Then Michelangelo stepped close and reached out cautiously—but firmly—to place a hands' tentative caress to stroke the dazzle of Albrecht's hair. He rested his hand there, and then clinched his fingers into the bounteous mass of ringlet curls as if it were gold. Albrecht went taut, anticipation and excitement at the perceived relief of his earnest longing for being touched electrifying him. A newly-intense and raw longing so filled Albrecht's chest that it took commanding control of the breaths he inhaled. He swam deep into the dark recesses of Michelangelo's eyes shadowed in the dimness of the room with only the firelight embers to

illumine them, plus the inner kindle that burned within Michelangelo, a warm flame of desire, of a man compelled to reach out a pair of strong sturdy arms, lips that smouldered and warmed. Michelangelo placed kisses on Albrecht's cheeks until he at last found his anxious and willing lips to accompany his own. Michelangelo lifted Albrecht from his tremulous stance, holding Albrecht's hips against the thin linen of the chemise across his own chest, for uncountable lingering moments grasping tightly and letting him slide down. Quickly then they found the cool bed, unclothing each other as they went, kissing and revealing and touching and soothing and grasping. The night time became a wave which continuously and insistently constant broke upon the beach, the sound of the seas rushing in the ears. Michelangelo wrapped his strong bare workman's arms around the marble-white shoulders and sinuous torso of Albrecht, roaming his capable hands as if measuring the planes and curves. Michelangelo wrapped his sure and questing tongue onto every surface of Albrecht's willing body, studying his contours, encouraging Albrecht to accompany in same. Albrecht, rigid with timourous nerve-freeze, tentative while

at the same time with a complicit push toward eager abandon let Michelangelo lead him into corridor after shadowy corridor of exploration until they both collapsed at once energized and exhausted at the same time and cascading into a heap of tangled perspiring limbs and glistening ecstatic satisfaction.

The shadowy darkness had even more deepened, black dark like a charcoal drawing, as the fire had dwindled. A rivulet of moonlight tracing the ridged flow of Michelangelo's abdomen as he lay deeply breathing but serene on the tangled bed, his abdomens' deep slow rising and falling the lone indication of the life inflamed inside. Their joined breathing had slowed and softened, and out of the velvety darkness, Michelangelo sighed audibly and breathed, "Bellissimo". Albrecht flung an arm across Michelangelo's great wet chest, and said, "Yes. It is beautiful to know the passion of life, to feel the surge of living, inhaling the very breath of being alive, to feel your breath warm, the lovingly grasping of my shaft." What is this man?, he thought; this exquisite, earthy, intense, incomparable man, this man who excites me as never before with his vital body,

and with such deep and inspiring thoughts as like to my own that they seem twinned reflections in a looking-glass.

“That action of lovemaking,” said Michelangelo, “when it comes, showing its' grand presence, when it is allowed to reach out and touch one other being—simpatico—is one of the supreme accomplishments of life's fulfilling moments—it is like the perfecting of art, a sketch, a sculpture in fine flawless marble, a creation of beauty and worth.”

“You are beautiful in mind and body” added Albrecht.

“No. I am clodden earth, and lumpy”, countered Michelangelo. “It is you who are fine.”

“But I am lank,” admitted Albrecht. “Not at all the subject for great art—for your art.” Michelangelo studied Albrecht, lifting his arm to its' stretched length, gazing, studying, feeling the surface with the smoothing finger of a sculptor. And with this Michelangelo became fiery with hunger again, and searching anew along the contours of Albrecht's luminous torso, he once more retraced the planes, hands and tongue smoothing, caressing, remolding the shape of Albrecht's firm lean musculature. And

Albrecht responded in kind, brushing with the sable bristle of his own tongue to paint with detailed precision a smearing wet portrait of Michelangelo's densely solid form, wet with the oil of brilliant and fiery colours. They inflamed their passions anew, kneaded each other into pliable loaves of manly desire, chiseled at each others' forms until ideal nudes, perfect in every way, evolved as magnificent creation out of the base marble rock that thrust from the depths of the far primeval earth, volcanic and boiling and molten. At once, eruption. The volcanic shudder of life and passion and the attempt at creation exploded forth, its moment of delirious glorified life in its most ecstatic thrall spuming against the hard rock and iridescent shore that lay outstretched under the warmth of the sun. That impulse of creation now momentarily satiated in a drowse of both energy spent and languor afloat as if the very shimmery silvery image, of immense sea, of rising tide. They clung. Exchanging and prolonging the shared caresses in the darkness of the faded embers they slowly moved, embraced, polished their handiworks.

“Nature is sublime...beautiful”, breathed Michelangelo, “and man is the sublime emblem of fantastic and beautiful and boundless nature. What a world we inhabit! So infinitely full of wonder and beauty. We can only stand, or kneel, in awe in our short time, at its' infinite wonderful-ness.”

“You move me to tears”, said Albrecht. “I have so far spent my thinking life trying to understand and perhaps in some way record the details of the world I see and know to be a marvel. I try to analyze all the minute details and still be aware of the vastness of the scene—the enormity of every bit of life.”

“To see—to really see,” chimed Michelangelo, “And to record, to shape, to leave something beautiful. For life in this world could be over in an instant. Soon enough—for I am already thirty years in age—we will be gone, never to return ever again. All will disappear from our feeble sight; all slipped from our grasp. However triumphal and inspired might be whatever lies beyond, imagine no longer breathing in this world, this world that teems with life, with the minutest detail—never again, never to taste someone's lips, to see gardenias bowed in the rain, or even to feel

the sun-warmed breeze that lovingly soothes the body.” Michelangelo caressed Albrecht's arm, then held him snugly in a firm warm embrace. “My work”, he continued, “my efforts, those figures pulled and tamed from raw white stone, my cold marble figures, so shiningly life-like, crafted so precisely if I am able, will never be able to contain the warmth of life—the spark that ignites life, an incomparable singularly human—male or female—exquisite existence, living, breathing, one reaching out to touch, as we touch now. That touch that flames from a spark from deep inside life, that exists only once for each of us.”

“Still the art you create is so real, so evocative. It is a beauty captured. With paper art” Albrecht added. “it is the same. It might be a lovely illusion, but still only an illusion—not a life itself. The hope: but though it might live on after our own lives have reached their end. That is all we can hope; and live our lives, every moment, as fully as possible.”

Michelangelo sighed, “Yes.”

“How fine heaven must be if it is more wondrous than this world—but this world I love, and all its creatures, *amore con corazon grande.*”

“Ah, *si*, you learn *italiano*,” smiled Michelangelo. “Perhaps you will see some great and true art here on your journey in Venice .”

“I have already seen some great art here in this evening,” Albrecht laughed, deep and merry. Michelangelo stretched, and chuckled also. “But I do hope to see much more new art in Venice, and wherever I might.” They pulled the fur throw and coverlets closer over themselves, their nakedness falling cool as the embers turned ashen.

“Tell me, Albrecht, have you *sinned* in this darkness of night?”

“Now, in my head, I can say expanded thoughts. What is sin? Sin is something for priests to think about. Most people think of what they must do, of what they are compelled to do—of what may cause them happiness. Most people think, if at all, of the abundance of life—overwhelming abundance. A glorious night. One night in a

thousand?--I think not—not as sin. What can be the truly damning sin when a man can express with honesty his love, his longing, for a fellow?”

“It is described so—described as mortal sin. Men who have no *largesse* of heart or feeling describe it so—“ a pause revealed only Michelangelo's breathing, “but they are small of mind and heart. But I am ever and always a captive to beauty. It can overwhelm me.” He once again grasped a handful of Albrecht's gold-copper curls and tugged them to his nostrils to inhale them.

“Beauty is all around us. To me, your beauty is as a sunrise, “ confirmed Albrecht. “It might—the perception of beauty that we perceive--overwhelm us at any sight, whatever that sight that truly or unexplainably touches our heart, something that reaches out at our core deep inside of us.” They held each other to conserve the warmth, caressing, spreading little kisses to implant a breath of comfort, caring. When in the fleeting moments of tender sleep Albrecht would reach out a finger to touch Michelangelo's hair or one of his giant hands, his thoughts would float among the layers of those shade-lands and he could sometimes grasp also at the barest

fragments of insight into the eternity of the Divine plan. He could glimpse the experiencing and maturing processes for their eternal qualities. It had been ever thus, eternal and anciently timeless, a dream surrounding himself, when he yet remembered their fragments, gave a vision to himself of himself and the myriad possibilities of this much-imaginary world and how, though the countless details change, the process of the eternal remains much the same, ongoing pendulum in the vast universe clock of time itself. If only we could remember and collect those insights, but they were as rapid as the puffs of air that propelled them. He knew Michelangelo would affirm that one could only capture one transitory moment, one perfect reflection of the perfect body or of falling light, and that was the goal; but Albrecht wanted to accumulate those details into compositions that held more, that held the vastness of everything.

Michelangelo stirred in the darkness; so did Albrecht—but they never lost the contact of their touching in the big comfort of the bed. They drifted among their own dreams, their own moments of remembered pleasure, and artistic desires. Then they returned

to sleep. So their conversation continued, *a duo*, even in the lands of dreams, as sleepers walking.

...

When the rose-petal light began to inform the edge of the small forlorn window it only slowly but relentlessly crept into the still dense gloom layered across the room. Albrecht, bobbing like a cork in his slumberous daze, stirred beneath the bedcover. The room's soft blue glow was faint and cool, the significant remembrance of a night past and well spent. Michelangelo rolled, too, but settled again into a clump and slept on. Albrecht stared into the space near the ceiling, thinking about his moving through the journey ahead, how it still held such excitement and wonderful amazement, although now in an entirely newer world. How might he be able to travel on? If only Michelangelo could travel beside him and share its' adventure; but, of course, that was not to be an option. Michelangelo must follow his own path, and invigorate his own plans and prospects, fulfill his own destiny. So must Albrecht; but Albrecht had never felt such a sadness at parting as from this new-found acquaintance, the heavy sadness laying on himself like a

stone. Day became more intrusive into the quiet room, and sounds of the stirrings of the outer world entered in around the languorous men who had coupled all the night. Albrecht rose, and assembled his clothing. How comfortable, now, nakedness was. Still, one must dress and face the world—time does not wait for any one, the inevitable sand grain by grain slipping through the hourglass. As daylight increased even Michelangelo began to stir, languid, tossing himself astride the bed. Albrecht watched him laze against the coverlets, and admired the light of dawn revealing the muscular solidity of this remarkable lusty man. Albrecht mused, “A paragon of artistic impulse, an idol, a man of monumental and inestimable talent, and I have had the astounding fortune of meeting him, his touching me, of spending like one could barely imagine a thrilling evening with him.” After splashing in the water basin, sighing, they gathered their garments, slowly dressed, and went down the stairs. There was bread and butter, and bowls of fresh milk. Conversation began again, slow, halting at moments altogether, each subdued in a jumble of private thoughts. With breakfast finished, and wandering outdoors into the courtyard, Albrecht fought the sting

of a tear at his eye. To himself he thought, I cannot leave—but the inevitable was unfolding. The trees shimmered in the light of the bright glow of October Italian morning, and intermittent showers of burnished leaves clustered to the ground. Evaporating haze revealed intense patches of blue in the sky that was stretched like a canvas overhead; a sharp drift of woodsmoke lingered from the chimneys above the kitchen fires. Albrecht strolled, glancing toward the receding hills, wondering if the sunniness would last all the way to the outlying districts of the Veneto, if it could last for him at all without Michelangelo at his side. How warm the sunshine still now was—before his journey brought him to the edge of the sea where the eventual autumnal mists would envelope him. Too quickly enough a careful Hans brought the horses, groomed and ready to wander on. Albrecht looked at them, roanish and stamping, their fortitude and silent docile perseverance. Albrecht strode with a determined quickness back to where Michelangelo had waited. He touched his arm; and each devouring the other's face with his own eyes, they whispered goodbyes: “Auf weidersein.”

“Fare well, dove.”

Albrecht mounted and turned to ride away. He pondered how he would remember in future this journey, might recall its' memories. Once onto the road and diminishing away he at last turned to gaze back, to see Michelangelo still half hidden beneath the arch, watching, from the courtyard waving a salute, leaning against the gate.

--J. F. Lowe