———*Acheiropoieta*———

Giacomo Leonelli was out walking, considering a recent dispute with a patient. It had been a beautiful day all the time he was in his office, so beautiful that he had turned his chair almost entirely sideways behind his desk to better enjoy the view from the window which ordinarily was entirely to his back, but now that he had finished with this last patient—the young man who had given him such trouble today, at the end of the day, not late for his appointment, it's true, but unkind in choosing an appointment so late in the day anyhow—why, now, it had become like spring again when it had just seemed summer. The sun had looked so warm—had it not heated his office all day, so that he'd needed to remove his frock and roll up his sleeves, and still he sweated enough that he had been glad to turn his chair, so that one elbow could be raised in articulation, at least somewhat, without revealing to his patients the dark spots that had appeared below his arms? Surely, no doctor should be seen to sweat like that, not in his own office, at least, mopping his brow like a farmhand, it would destroy him. It is not even as though I am so easily exhausted, Giacomo was thinking, in fact, I am vigorous and quite healthy. In my capacity as a doctor, I would be alarmed to see a man of my age and with my amount of hair on his body not perspire as I did today in my office, from the crotch of the arm straight down to the hip, so that I had to turn my chair almost entirely sideways behind my desk and keep my right arm (it being on the side that faced them) stuck rigidly to the side of my body as though affixed by the hidden sweat itself.

Yes, it was not shameful to hide it, Giacomo thought, and neither was it shameful to have sweat. It is simply the role of the doctor. I am entrusted to know that this amount of sweat is normal and healthy on days when the sun comes in through the windows as strong as it did today, and yet my patients would never forgive or understand such clumsiness of body should it be happening on my side of the desk—which in reality is much closer to the large window and thus significantly warmer.

And when this patient came in only a quarter of an hour before closing time! There are certain young men and women of this new generation, Giacomo knew, who had a wily look about them far too early, they would get up early and be out in the streets with the elderly, speaking quietly and standing by the town fountain, filling skeins and loading them into their bags, and when all of them had gathered and all of them had filled their bottles, they would leave together from the town with their horses. Out of Manoppello to north, often walking alongside the fishermen until they hit the river that ran down from the port town of Pescara to which they were headed. Ten years ago, when they had first begun these journeys, they would walk the whole six hours along the mild winding river, drinking their cold water until it ran out and then wading in to refill in the slow water, and it was only after enough of them got sick and had come to Giacomo in a thirsty fever that they learned to wait for a few minutes for the silt and rime they had kicked up to be carried off by the current before refilling their bottles. One of them had even died, Giacomo suddenly remembered, and it was actually very sad for it was a very young boy who had died and he had only come along on the expedition out of curiosity and not with the same unwise intentions as the others, and he was apologizing to his mother the whole time that Giacomo was treating him, and even the priest had blushed to see it. The journeys continued, however, and people soon forgot—how is it that I had so completely forgot? Giacomo wondered

—and once they had made enough money in Pescara to purchase a small boat such problems disappeared, for now they could make it from Manoppello to the nearest part of the river, board their boat, and sail up river in so little time that the cold water did not run out until they were already at the fountain in Pescara, coordinating the various tasks and timing of their day. At night they would return with crates of goods that had made their way to Pescara, through the hands of many seafaring merchants, from all across the Mediterranean. And they brought news and knowledge, real and false, of the strange places from which these items came and the people who, living in these strange places, had no choice but to be strange themselves as well, with incomprehensible customs and faces. The doctor, though he was not an especially learned man, recognized in this supposed emerging world the same world of stories that had occupied the coastal news of his own youth, of Marco egging Kublai on, and it was no doubt from the assumed newness of this other world that these young people learned to expand their chests and rush around like sails.

There is never any wind in Manoppello, it is often said. Instead, there are fragile things. The tiny white moths that now whirled about outside windows in the darkening afternoon, like winged parchment trying to illuminate itself—Giacomo watched them, smiling, in complete control of the still, odorless air. There are things you cannot have on the coast: hats, a meal outside, and thousands of little white moths.

At ten to five, when the patient came in (no hat, spread shoulders, red arms), Giacomo, in his role as Dr. Leonelli, was cordial. The young man introduced himself as Sablo Petrucci, a name that Giacomo had heard a few times in connection with those expeditions to Pescara. He came complaining about his forearm. There was a pain that lead to his elbow and it got worse the longer he let it rest. Giacomo asked him what sort of activities he did with this arm. Sablo had been operating boats, moving crates and trunks, and had recently been fabricating. Fabricating? Dr. Leonelli asked. Yes, Sablo smiled, just small things for my family: window frames, shelves—that sort of thing. Not able to get up or shift position, the doctor asked him to make various shapes with his hand and wrist and signal which made his arm feel the most like pain.

After this examination, Dr. Leonelli considered the case of the amateur carpenter for a moment quietly, for it was not clear how to proceed. It would have been clear to anyone that something in his forearm was strained from overuse. It was quite possible something had been injured or torn. No one could know it to be true more than Sablo. And yet he had gone along with the examination dutifully, as though completely in the dark.

The doctor took care with his explanation, footnoting the diagnosis with excerpts from the examination they had just completed. Sablo listened and shook his head. He had started to massage his forearm with his other hand, pressing hard into the muscle with his thumb. There is nothing to do but rest? he asked. Yes, replied Giacomo, surprised to have gotten through so quickly. It had to be left alone; without rest it would only get worse.

As their conversation went on it became clear that Sablo had not come to find out how to recover. He approached his question slowly because, Giacomo thought, he knew it was not natural to the doctor to come out with such information. Giacomo, for his part, understood that Sablo was looking for a prognosis, a deadline by which he would no longer be able to use the arm at all, but it bothered him to give it directly. Perhaps with patients who he had less suspicions of he might have brought it up naturally in order to describe the scale of the situation

("as they are, you probably have a few more good years left on those knees"), but that was meant to be understood as something of a joke—not to be funny, but to invoke the feeling of a repairman who is trying to sell you on getting that work done this year, before all that rain comes; once that rain comes it's going to be very, very hard to get this part back to normal. It is simple bedside manner. Giacomo always tried to speak to the patient of their body like a contractor addresses the proprietor of a troubled homestead, so that they were always discussing the concerns of a plane of less consequence. A very close but non-critical interest—like a family member. The doctor still spoke softly, still consoled; after all, the body is the closest sibling. To talk as though one could leave behind the other, like the passing of a cousin or a condemned house: why, this hip is going to give out on me (but I'll keep going), and these fingers are getting all skewed from their joints (but I'll keep going), even my heart will stop eventually, oh that's a great pity (for I, who goes on and on, will be devastated).

Giacomo stopped for a moment outside the church to sit down. The hill had made him uncomfortable in his shirt again, where the sweat was stuck cold to his skin. He turned and looked out from the ridge, towards the town center across the north valley. At this distance, he felt tied to the hearts and minds of those people on the next slope. They are preparing dinner and changing bandages with the windows open still, with the first sunset just starting, but they have candles and lamps ready for when it gets dark. Everything is ready to be closed and sealed (windows, doors, a cloth along the bottom of the door) before the moths come. At this distance, the line is just about taut, and pulls on its anchorage in the low part of Giacomo's stomach—tied off right at the indention.

It was on his childhood visits to this church, situated as it is a long walk south from the city itself, that he first saw his home from the outside. So it was at that distance that his attachment formed. Really, he was attached to the Distant Manoppello, and for him there was no other. To think about the town as a project, to see what might be right or wrong for it, Giacomo felt, one had to be looking at it from here. When the time came to arrange his own life, he'd set up here, among the church buildings and outposts, rather than remain inside. People were put off by it at first—he still took jibes about it now and then—but family by family they grew grateful to him for some or another medical trial resolved. He knew he was a trusted and important man for Manoppello, and he attributed it (privately) to the location. When he was as he was now, standing on the ridge looking out, his concerns and pride for the town were at their clearest.

The more he thought about Sablo the more lightheaded these passions made him. When a patient made the trip down to his office, slack appeared in the line. By the time they had arrived, it lay completely limp on the floor. In a lot of ways, this was a good thing for Giacomo. He was able to move around them freely, break them off from his conglomerate town, and treat them with clearheaded medical intelligence.

That he believed the young carpenter to be trouble for the town would regularly have dissolved in their meeting. But in the room together, seated at crossed angles, Giacomo had not felt that pull relax. He could not stop thinking of the expedition crew that Sablo was so urgent to return to, or of the stories they kept telling. He kept on at that distance, like he was in the room alone. There's no other way to explain it: it was like he was in his study, thinking about large problems, and yet there was also another person there with him. This person whose presence never relaxed the line.

And when he had spoken all those times in the contractor's phrase—it was never to be taken on its face. Sablo asks: how much longer until it's really done? He must intend to work until he can't, rather than wait. Probably something is happening soon of which he will not be left out.

Oh! Giacomo felt so strongly across the valley. He knew the tie was stretching. Its other moorings had found small ways to move, but that was years ago, now they had made themselves a range. They would kick like sudden fish, down and away. And as they pulled north towards unlikely currents, the line frayed and stretched, simply stretched; it slid past itself too long and made a new rope. At night, when everyone returned to their original places, the new long rope sagged into the valley. It disappeared into the shadow down there, but Giacomo could still feel it swaying in the breeze. The slow wave below a dark pond. That that washes people to the shore.

There are no strangers in Manoppello, but here came a pilgrim walking. The hooded figure carried a purse on one arm and a parcel in the other. Giacomo took note of the lack of staff or walking stick—and indeed the pilgrim did have a vigorous and upright gait, unusual among the young people of the region but too strenuous for the older ones.

Giacomo watched the straight-backed pilgrim from his bench outside the church doors. Strange—he could barely remember sitting down. He thought: surely, that must be a sign I'm becoming old, or preparing for it. I was just standing there, at the lookout, where I had already stopped to catch my breath a little, and then … then I wandered across the whole front plaza to this bench, without noticing it. In fact, he thought, it was only that pilgrim that made me realize it. Maybe I've been stopping here every night—the place is so desolate at night, only the clergymen and I stay here past nightfall—could it be that I rest on this bench often? After services, when the town mills about in the plaza here, it is the old people that sit here, worse, the elderly people, feeding bread to the children and the birds. If the pilgrim has seen me (and now I think he has) I hope he will not fly over asking for bread, for I could not fairly refuse him here. I deserve it, town figure that I am; and I don't mind deserving it, only better to deserve it as the respected doctor than the man who probably sits outside the church every night.

The doctor was glad to have rested long enough to have stopped sweating, though, for the pilgrim had begun walking toward him. He crossed his legs, to show that he was not yet fifty and could still do uncomfortable things, and decided he would let the stranger speak first.

So the pilgrim arrived, and spoke:

—Good evening, Signor.

And Giacomo replied —good evening.

—There is no one else about.

—No, not here, no. They are all back in the town by now, over there.

Giacomo pointed across the valley, where he had seen the pilgrim looking.

—Yes, I've come from there. I have something to give to you.

—To me?

Giacomo uncrossed his legs. The pilgrim was looking up at the church facade.

—What is the name of this church?

—It is the Chiesa della Santissima Annunziata [The Church of the Blessed Annunciation]. You have something to give to me?

The pilgrim smiled and held out the parcel:

—Annunziata.

Giacomo took it and turned it over. It was wrapped in cloth and tied with a long leather strip. He began to unwrap is as the pilgrim continued.

—It is a gift for you and for this town. I could not tell you anything about it, besides that I know I cannot have it anymore.

Even as Giacomo worked to untie the strings, the pilgrim never looked down from the church building. The doctor unfolded the cloth on his lap until he had unfolded back to the place he started, and the layers separated. In the dark, he had missed the parcel's content: a smaller piece of fabric, softer than the rest. He took it by the corners and tried to get it in the way of whatever stray light there was in the court yard, but the fabric was too fine. Whichever side he looked at and from whichever way he looked, it was always backlit. And the light broke through the fabric as evenly as through a mesh, so that no design or decoration showed on the silken cloth.

Giacomo said to the pilgrim, —I cannot tell what it is.

—And I cannot tell you, the pilgrim replied. I myself do not know.

The doctor could not catch the pilgrim's gaze, which had climbed now above the roof of the church.

—Then you'll excuse me for a moment.

Giacomo stood up, placing the cloth wrapping and leather ties back down on the bench. He opened the door of the church and entered. There were candles burning on the altar table at the end of the aisle. He approached slowly, still turning the fabric around in his hands, but the candle-light only shone through the thing even more, as though it were a perfect translucent surface, taking on the flickers of the distributed fireplace.

There were seven candles on the little table, and not enough space for him to put the fabric down. He moved four the the left, and three to the right, and in the center he put the fabric down. Finally, he got a flat look at it—it was as he had seen it before: very soft and tightly woven, but of a material he had never seen before. It shone slightly golden in the low light, as the oblique angles of the candles was reflected in the sides as well as the top of each thread, or fiber, or whatever they were. At the edge and corners, where some of the material had split back into separate strands, he rubbed it between his forefinger and thumb. He felt he had touched it before, maybe a very long time ago, some boyish memory of crushing dry grass, or seaweed, or perhaps a feather; it was the soft feeling of the harmless and dead.

He was rolling the corner in his fingers, considering the memory it gave him, and he saw a sliver of pigment on the reverse—so he turned it over and there was the face of the Son. There is no way to describe shock; he was not thinking in words. The face can be described: the upwardly cast eyes of a deferent plaintiff, a long nose low to the face, thin and relaxed eyebrows. The hairline had receded far back, save for a snarled widows peak, but hung down to chin level on the sides, fraying into the same waved tendrils as his patchy beard. At the mouth, the bottom lip had fallen slightly open. The hairs of a wispy mustache, absent at the center (just as the beard is absent at the center of the jaw, and the widows peak present at the center of the hairline), gave the illusion of deep wrinkles around a prematurely aged mouth. The whole face was abnormally long, so oval, it could not be ignored, that the distance between the detail marking the bridge of the nose and its end were separated by inches of unmarked cloth. The cloth itself, gold and

pigmented by a deeper brown, had been folded and distended before its apparition here—for, it was an apparition; Giacomo was returning to himself from the reverie and he began to gather words for telling. In the church, well, it was a gift of the pilgrim—to him, to him—but he'd brought it into the church, this was a plain piece of beautiful cloth before, with the face of the Son appeared on it, perhaps then, as he held it, or perhaps before, and the face was *in* the strange cloth, so that you could not see it unless you really stopped to look and put it down on a table.

He bent over the cloth to look closer, now that he realized he has been rubbing the corners he stopped and cursed himself and he felt like apologizing, but the face didn't change. Leaning in, the tears at the edges of his eyes pooled together into little bowls and he jerked away, not wanting to do any damage to the picture. One of the candles rocked itself back steady.

He help up the cloth by the already damaged corner with his right hand, turned until the candlelight was at his back, and knelt down so that it could illuminate the cloth over his shoulder and head. Then, placing his left palm against the back fabric to block out the blue light that came in from the open door, he went over the entire portrait again in sections. He had already begun to memorize it, so that he expected the details as they arrived, but he found he had also already cleaned it, forgetting its eccentric proportions. Again, the length of the face surprised him as he followed the bloated cheeklines with his supporting hand. The nose, he noticed, was off center, or else the cloth had been stretched oddly—oh! and the pigment, yes, yes, yes, the pigment was not even that, not paint or dye, it couldn't be, for it was only on the very face of the fibers. The margin was impossibly small, it didn't color down the sides of each thread, let alone in between the threads; it was like the mud that a log raft picks up, the protruding parts picking up the substance. And it could it be—why couldn't it, considering—so couldn't it be the case that this fabric was imprinted in the same way? Laid over His face and head?

Giacomo ran outside. The plaza was empty. Its stonework shone in the leftover light of blue country. From the lookout he could see far down the path into the northern valley, toward the city. In the other direction, only as far as a rightward bend around the hill exstrata. There was no one anywhere; it did not bother him. He was crying, still, though he no longer felt emotional about it—now he was joyful about all the meanings that came to him and kept coming, swimming through his perceptual field like temporary cataracts. He looked upon the ground, equally upon the dirt road and the stones, and called them sacred ground, just to himself, but then he wanted to be modest so he did not look out across the valley toward the town even though he wanted to. It calmed him; he kept it to his back.

Outside the church to close the door he had left open, a panic of white moths. There was no good explanation for them—how they came and left so quickly, or how they lived in the place they went. When Giacomo was a child in a different town his father had told him that they were what sparks became, and that they were returning to the fire to breed. But his mother called them thoughts, and said they came out of his ears whenever he thought something without saying it, so be honest, child, or else don't sit there staring into the fire.

———

The appearance of the Holy Face in Manoppello to the doctor Giacomo Leonelli spread like healing ointment. They had little information and thought (with excitement) that they were

being deprived, but the account they assembled was actually nearly full; with some events even the full account is mysterious.

They knew that a cloth bearing the face of the son had been given to Dr. Leonelli in the nighttime, and that it had happened in the second district, on the southern hill where the church, monastery, and doctor's office were. It was unclear from the information what the nature of the gift-giving was: had Dr. Leonelli been entrusted with it personally? or, in his capacity as a major town figure, had he accepted it on behalf of the town? or, seeing as it nearby the church—because the story of the candlelight apparition inside the church had reached them as well—perhaps he was simply there, and offered to receive it on behalf of the dormant church and monastery? The church officials did not make direct answers to these questions, refusing in the first days to speak of the cloth until they, too, knew what to make of it.

Of the pilgrim nothing was said, for people understood from which parts of the story something might be divined and which parts were already complete.

They knew, though, that the doctor was claiming the cloth and its portrait to be the product of a spontaneous transfusion. He said that the visage of the Son had poured onto it across a moment of contact. And although the story excited them and even reminded them of something, it confused them. How would it be apparent in the image that it was not the work of a painter—the icons in their homes were not signed, the bricks in their walls were unmarked, but they knew they were not miracles.

To those that doubted, people said: you will have to wait until we can see it, for those that have seen it have believed it. They did not want to wait, though, and the young people especially complained to the old. The older generation enjoyed the attention and were slow to pass on the complaint. They had already begun to treat the cloth as a blessing, or so they joked, because it had brought their children back into the home, for even the expeditions to Pescara had stopped—so rare was the news.

The doctor had been the first so see the cloth and he had showed it to his wife, Soliana, and his daughter, Marzia. None of them had been out to town in the few days since—an absence felt especially by the young men who often sought ought Marzia's company when she came walking with her mother. Clergymen had also been seen going into the doctor's house a few times, but they stayed silent on what appeared to be either an ongoing process authentication or negotiation.

The only leak had come from a maid employed by the Leonelli household, the wife of one of the men doing business in Pescara. Her name was Tedesca, and she had grown confident and popular in recent years as her husband's business became suddenly profitable. No longer needing to spend all day at the loom, she had moved into domestic work. Her back straightened out, she gained back the weight she had lost in harder times. Her complexion deepened and she began to laugh. Tedesca, reborn, soon became close not only to the Leonelli women for whom she worked but also to many of the women in town whose husbands worked alongside hers.

She was therefore a sort of interface figure. The townsfolk would confide in her, knowing that she would certainly "betray" them to the Leonellis, and the Leonellis would dutifully do the same. Then, having supplied information of their own lives, they would make a show of asking after their counterparts on the other hill. It was part of the routine that they had to pry it out of Tedesca, who would squirm and laugh and only eventually give up a small bit of information

before closing up again. This guaranteed that the betrayal could only occur in the face of belligerent curiosity from the other party, so that the extended conversation that Soliana and Marzia were having with the women of the town required and sustained mutual interest. It satisfied the Leonellis to see how much prying it required to get something out of Tedesca, because they knew that when their information was revealed on the other end (as they knew it always was), it meant someone had put up a fight to get news of them.

There is no real line demarcating gossip from news, and the relative idle or vital character of the information that Tedesca was medium to would be difficult to distinguish. Some talk begins idly, in a rumor, but then becomes consequential; suppose the building of a new home by a certain family was rumored: if it never comes to pass, then discussing it will have turned out to be of no use. If, however, it does come to pass and ground is broken and supplies and workmen needed, then the initial rumor merges seamlessly into the first word of a thing now happening. And as they traded in happenings-underway as well as happenings-under-consideration, there was therefore between them sectors a model of the town so up-to-date that it verged on prophesy.

Tedesca acted as the interface and so spent her time in the information area between them. She walked from one hill to the other all day. As she swung back and forth through the valley, she would think about what information to give and in exchange for what, so that she always acted efficiently and effectively on arrival. The moment she entered town, for instance, she would already have a route planned—so much so that she might even enter town by a different path so as to get through her visits faster.

Information built up on her world like spit on a teller's windowpane, and the more she learned about the town's deep activity the less straight its streets and alleys seemed. She felt that the information came from an active site buried in the belly of the hill. Each week there was new information and new contacts, and she felt that this meant the belly-curve of the hill was growing. She thought she could see it, too, sometimes in her walk returning up its side, which seemed more and more arduous each time (just when she was feeling more vigorous and healthy than ever before), and sometimes also in the ground itself which could pull so hard on the stone foundations that they cracked. It was even pushing up the stones in her backyard, moving them farther apart until she could not step clean from one to the next; one time she had slipped trying to get across the gap when it was raining and she did not want to step in the mud. She fell because they were too far apart and she felt so much smaller in the world again, even though her back was straight and she was stronger, because she was dirty from the mud in her own garden.

On the pregnant hill, where the iron in the soil made her stockings black, she allowed it to build up upon her—in fact, she took special care that it accumulated—because she did not trust that anyone else was paying attention. Signs, Tedesca reasoned, are easily missed, and then change is a surprise. There are good changes, like what had happened to her and her husband, and then the surprise is not so bad. But there are other changes too and those can become tragedy if the mind is not prepared. A rumor is one possibility, the shadow before a fact or a falsehood, but two opposing rumors are as good as a truth. In the expanded world of the interface Tedesca, there were rarely surprises, only updates as to which way the line of occurrence had headed.

The appearance of the holy face in Manoppello did surprise Tedesca, but not in the manner of an unexpected outcome, for it was an arrival, a beginning, from an outside source. She was certain the pilgrim had no cause in Manoppello. Of the wider world she trusted little and

tried to imagine less, for the more its outcomes came into the town the worse the fidelity of the signs she was collecting. She loved her husband and was pleased with his success, but she had needed to order him to stop bringing back curiosities from the port. The rise of the expedition group had greatly destabilized her image by the chaotic introduction of the objects and ideas of other worlds. She now extended her visitation rounds almost every year in order to keep up with the new arrivals.

For she understood these novelties were immigrants. When they returned with a barrel of alcohol made from dates and flavored with sumac, she knew that there were foreign minds and souls behind its slats. Each person that paid for a taste was introduced to the strangers who had ground the dates and built the fermentation vats, and to the person who first wondered if sumac might go well with the warm flavor of date sugar. She watched the townspeople drink it and discuss whether they liked it or not. She tasted it too and enjoyed it, and then she became upset, for instantly she had felt a kinship to its absent foreigners for their palettes. Once they had been smuggled in through some such talisman, there was no leaving them from town. They became very important to the legitimacy of both the expedition and the enterprise to which the talisman belonged. A brewer in town was very pleased with the spectacle of the date alcohol; Tedesca heard from his wife that he had begun to speak to her of the decisions he was making batch to batch, and that he had started keeping careful track of his proportions. Although the new seriousness brought pride to his process and profession, he had become very harsh on the quality of new batches, so that he had even poured perfectly good alcohol onto the ground by the river when the taste not harmonious enough. Tedesca was current, she knew he was silently conversing with the immigrants from the barrel.

She was relieved by the appearance of the Holy Face, and she felt such a gratitude on hearing its story that she was convinced that it must be true. A beautiful object created by no one, conjuring no foreigner—it had reawakened the town to the possibilities of inhuman beauty, or so she saw it. It was news that dissolved the surface of a water so she knew healing would follow its confirmation. She saw her role and rejoiced.

Tedesca waited a day after the news to make a visit to the Leonelli house. She spent that first day listening and visiting her sources. Everyone had more or less the same story, and from the average of its deviations she came to know about as much as was known. That first day, as she sat through many renditions of the same story, the desire to see and hold the object itself developed and stirred within her. By the end of the day it was a stomachache. Her husband talked about the Face during dinner but she did not say anything—even though he seemed confused about the story, believing the pilgrim to still be with the doctor—because every time she tried to she felt immediately a pressure in her throat at the moment of focus. She did not want to cry about it yet, and so she was quiet until they went to bed.

In bed, with all her body relieved, she could feel the churning of her stomach even better. She tried to explore the feeling, in the dark of the senses, and discovered the shape of a star turning. She had never had geometry on the inside. It was a gift or it was a disease; she couldn't tell which; she slept it for protecting.

Then, the next morning, Tedesca put on shoes and walked to the Leonelli house. In the valley the downslope became the up without noticing. Once, it had been the basin of a river which, in its dying years, had dragged sediment so unevenly across its bed that there never was a

nadir. One descended into an ascent, like on a looping ladder—as a child, before she contracted work, Tedesca had tried climbing a water wheel in the north river. A friend would hold it until you reached the top and then they'd let go and it would send you yourways into the river. She once asked a friend to please keep holding it the whole time because she wanted to go the whole way around, over and under the water, but when she got past the top it lifted her friend up too and she couldn't finish. It was funny to be both hanging there but it was not what she wanted.

There were two monks outside the door of the Leonelli's house who were usually not there. They had strange noses and strange expressions, but they must have been told to allow Tedesca in, for they made way for her to enter the house.

She found the women in the sitting room standing by a table at the back wall. From behind, the similarities in their skeletons were so apparent one could have imagined them sisters. They had the same long shoulder blades, as straight as second spines, but Marzia was taller than her mother, much taller. She had grown her hair longer so that it fell to the same height as her mother's despite the different length; it made her head appear elongated and her lips more full—at least so long as they stood as they were standing then in a mirror pose. Marzia tried to extend the effect by adopting her mother's styles and mannerisms, so that she might still appear stretched even when in a room by herself, or off in town unaccompanied.

Marzia was the one that turned around when Tedesca came in. A smile came to her tall mouth, but her eyes were unfocused. She had been thinking of other things. Soliana continued staring at the objects on the table.

—Hello Tedesca! she said. There is a miracle here, in our house. Have you heard?

—Yes, said Tedesca. It even stopped that town so that people could enjoy talking about it. For me, that is almost miracle enough!

Marzia laughed and said —I'm sure you've been enjoying the holiday. What is everyone saying?

Tedesca gave an account of the core story and she could see from Marzia's expression that it was accurate to what the Leonelli's knew as well. Then, to humor Marzia (and Soliana, though she had not yet made any movements), she listed a few of the exaggerated details that she thought unlikely. Marzia blushed at the embellishments and the names associated with each.

—Well, I cannot blame them for inventing some extra pieces. It is a mystery, the whole thing, and they never have mysteries like that. That night, father woke us right when he returned and I could not understand it; he even showed me and let me hold it and I still couldn't understand it, because it is very unusual. I'm not sure I could explain it to someone without feeling I was forgetting something. It's better to see it, although even when I first saw it…

While she spoke, Marzia was checking to see if Soliana was listening—or she kept looking at her face anyhow—and as she went on without interruption she became more and more excited. She often had trouble expressing herself because she would get all covered up trying. She seemed to believe that everything was clear in her mind, and perhaps it really was, so that even when she was struggling to get the whole clear thing out she was too satisfied by the thought that she knew what she meant to ever get the thought out. Conversation made Marzia stubborn, as well as frustrated and assured, which gave her speech the hesitating arrogance that drew her suitors so close.

Soliana found it disagreeable and suspected those that found it charming. Evidently, she had been listening to her tall daughter trip happily upon her own knowingness, for she cut her off, suddenly, and turned around.

—Hello Tedesca, it's good you've come to us.

Tedesca was surprised to see her as she appeared to her now. Unlike Marzia, whose gaze had been clouded upwards, she looked to have spent the time since Tedesca entered clearing hers of the exhaustion everywhere else it apparent. It was as though she had forced it out by radial turns; it was swept beneath her bulging eyelids, it dirtied the wedge of her nose. Those traces, though, were gone from her speech and eyes, which is to say, from her mind. When Tedesca had paused too long, she continued:

—I regret to put you to work today, when I have not even called you in, but seeing as you are here there is a matter with which we would appreciate your help. Marzia and I had just discussed sending for you anyway.

She looked back over her shoulder at the table, and then Marzia did too. If the daughter did not appreciate being interrupted, she had not shown it, and when she looked back at Tedesca in the entryway she had the placated look restored to her eyes. But her mind was clearly still at work, for she said to herself something like —that it makes you like looking at walls— but Tedesca could barely hear her, and anyway, Soliana picked up again in the same severe tone.

—You know well that we trust you and respect the way you are in the town. I know that you have skill in weaving and other threadworks. The cloth which was received by my husband two nights ago is in good shape, and although it may be indestructible, we think it would be best to be careful with it, at least as a symbol of our respect.

Soliana had her hands on the table. Her tone was less severe now. She seemed to be calmed by her control of the situation.

—I am going to ask for your help mounting the cloth to a frame. I have seen your work in the past and know that you have the kinds of hands and eyes capable of the task. I know there is no need to urge you to caution. However, I also know (and please take no insult) that discretion is not among your finest skills, and the church has not yet given us permission to reveal this miracle to anybody else. So:

She flipped over the piece of cloth, starting with the nearest corner so that the design was never visible. For the first time, she moved away from the table. Tedesca recognized, collected beside the cinnamon-colored square of cloth, the pins, frame pieces, glue, and glass necessary for mounting fabric in a frame.

—I am also going to give you some news that you may bring to the town. You might otherwise have guessed it, but I don't mind saying it outright. And you are the best emissary anyhow, especially as Marzia and I can not come in town at the moment. The church has been in close conversation with Dr. Leonelli since the occurrence. Despite the fact that they were the first to know of it, besides Marzia and myself, of course, and despite the fact that he is very willing to allow them to take as much time and effort as they need to certify the miraculous appearance, they have been hesitant. I am surprised how suspicious holy men can be of miracles. I only pray that they are not battling jealousy or covetise, and if they are, that they soon emerge clean from it.

The matriarch had lost her recovered edge. Now that the subject of frustration was in play again, the exhaustion seemed to be fighting the desire to go on with the grievance. Tedesca approached their table slowly, and spoke:

—You honor me with the offer. Of course I will mount the cloth for you. It does not matter to me that I cannot see it yet; just to work with it is a great gift. And I am sorry to hear about the trouble with the church, I will pray for them as well. May I ask: does the doctor intend to gift the cloth to the church?

Soliana looked up quickly to meet the eye of Tedesca, who was now standing with the women by the table. It was Marzia that responded, pulled from her reverie:

—The pilgrim gave the cloth to father specifically; they even asked his name. Just because we do not know why it has come to our family is no reason to give it up. It was the will of someone that it end up with us, and in this house, and it's not even so strange, for…

Soliana interrupted her daughter again —Although we are not bestowing it to the church (because, as Marzia explained, it was meant for us), we have no intention of keeping it from them or from the public. In fact, Tedesca, this is the information I ask you to bring back to the town when you return: in two days time, this Sunday, the Holy Face will be on display for the parishioners following that mornings service. It was only this morning (in this very room) that Dr. Leonelli and the church officials were able to reach the agreement that could allow this to happen. They kept imposing more confusions and protections which my husband could never have properly followed (probably in order to accuse him of a breach and take possession of the object), but they were eventually able to settle on just two terms. First: the cloth must be left permanently available for public viewing, and second: it may never leave Manoppello. Once they had worked it out, they left together to make contracts somewhere; it will all be sorted by Sunday. Please make sure that everyone knows to come.

Soliana embraced Tedesca and thanked her, then moved out of the way, falling into her chair. Marzia nodded for Tedesca to sit down at the framing table.

—It is really what we wanted, Marzia said as Tedesca prepared the work.

Tedesca said that she had never seen a fabric like that before. It looked like sun-baked soil, but it was not dry or coarse; it had the softness of down, of the thousand little hairs on human skin. It was easy to work with but difficult to keep evenly stretched, for the weave was not as tight as it was close.

Later, when she had come back to the town and was addressing the group that assembled to ask her what she had seen, she described the material to a friend, Gorga Petrucci, whose husband Sablo had been the last person to see Dr. Leonelli before the pilgrim. Gorga still worked in textiles and had even increased her workload recently (taking up some customers on Tedesca's recommendations) because everyone said something was wrong with her husband's hands. They had a son, Pancrazio, but he was only fifteen and anyway had odd ambitions; he went with his father to Pescara and would spend all day among the merchant's stalls, asking for stories and goods. He would listen to them and then tell lies, like that he was born in German country and had only learned Italian recently, or that he had been smuggled in from Syria in a fishing vessel and he did not even know his name. Each week he would ride the ship in, disembark, and walk into the commercial district as a new foreigner, as though he had not just entered from farther inland. He practiced his inventions on his mother, Gorga, but he found her unhelpful, for it was

rare that she was able to correct his explanations with greater knowledge of the outlying lands. When he talked to the merchants and the sailors in Pescara, they would tease him by telling real stories about his adopted homelands until he broke character to ask questions.

Gorga was filled with pride to watch her son become knowledgeable about the world and about the many countries in it. Sablo found it amusing as well, so he suffered through Pancrazio's lectures on the sailway back at the end of each day. What does it mean, he thought, when your son wants to make you understand the names of the oceans. But really there was a lot Sablo did not know, so he went on pretending to humor his son because he did not like to look interested or surprised. When he was in a lot of pain over his hand, sometimes he would complain to Gorga about the child's behavior in town; Sablo worried that all the true things he wants to learn are only for making something else up.

Gorga did not worry as much. She had her own knowledges, very similar to Sablo's, but she was not anxious like him. She listened to Tedesca's description of the fabric and agreed it sounded unusual. From the texture and the shape of the threads, she would have guessed a sort of down, twisted from bird feathers and animal hair, but Tedesca said it was completely flat in the light, preserving the golden cinnamon regardless of the light. Regular down fabrics glimmer more from up close, because birds try to keep their beauty near to the breast. If the cloth given to Dr. Leonelli didn't have this private look, then she had no idea either. She told Tedesca she had never seen a fabric like that, but she said she would have to see it in person to know for sure.

The night before the exhibition, when Tedesca had finished spreading news of the coming exhibition to the entire town, Gorga and Sablo discussed whether to bring Pancrazio along. Sablo had not left the house since the news of the apparition. He would not say what he was thinking about, but he asked his wife all the information she got and then he would become quiet again. Sometimes he would break from his meditations to jump at Pancrazio, who complained about the lull in the town's activity. Sablo would stand up and scream at him to not speak like that, and he would cry out to Gorga that they had the only evil man in Manoppello for a son. It was not clear what effect these reprimands had on Pancrazio, for he would fall quiet for a long time after without apologizing. Sablo told his wife that they should not risk a similar scene at the first exhibition.

—At some point,— he said,— a liar gets too tall and then that is demonic, because tall liars bring soldiers and other languages.

—Ever since your arm began to hurt,— she replied, —you obsess over the strangest things. He is our son: when would he have become a demon? And on whose counsel?

—When does a man become tall?—he replied, because he had been thinking about it,— And on whose counsel? When did you and I become him?…you know, when he was first born and you were holding him, and for a long time after that, I did think that he was still the two of us, but now he is not that either. When did that happen too? He is too good at bad things, and yet you know he looks quite like me!

Gorga was happy to see her husband proud of his own ideas. It had been a long time since he spoke so freely; perhaps it had been a long time since he had the occasion to think. She went on disagreeing, though, because it was something she had thought about too.

—You know those questions do not treat me fairly. A slow change does not keep quiet for sinister reasons. It is just happening in the world anyway. If you didn't notice our son has been

getting tall, it's not because anyone was keeping it from you. I agree he is not you and I anymore, but I did see it happen; it was happening every day and it was not strange. I grow peppers in the front garden and I look at them every time I go in or out the front door. Do you know that I know the entire way each pepper comes out of the stacking plant, from the white and closing flowers? Everything we eat is like that, one end of a long thing, and we are never poisoned by it.

—Yes—he responded, and her speech at first seemed to have calmed him. —I do think that is true. But some things do really enter from other places, and those are interrupted. And don't you know there was a King in Tartary who had his enemy's wine replaced with animal blood, but gradually, so that he would become accustomed before the change? And once he was drinking only blood, he began to go out to the fields at night and drink of the unsuspecting lambs there, which can not especially run away without dying. When the farmer's captured him and put him on trial, he told them all that the desire to go drink the blood of livestock had been his own, although he couldn't understand where he'd gotten the idea or why, and he was put to death believing he had simply gotten carried away.

A stern delirium had come up in her husband's eyes, so Gorga did not say what she thought about his story, or of her place in it, or that it had likely been told to him by Pancrazio himself, who was usually the one to take interest in such rumors. Sometimes, she thought, he was too precious about work. He made everything he could (although the injury had slowed that down in recent months), and, once made, he refused to fix or replace anything. They had uncomfortable chairs, because he had made them when he was first learning to work with wood. The entire house tended toward higher quality the further inward you went, for he had finished it from the outside in, learning how to get the boards more tight and even as he went along. Nothing frustrated him so much as the suggestion that something functional ought to be redone, so long as something new could be done instead. So she became social in order to get people to come inside where the nicer rooms and more comfortable furniture were. He worked in the same way at his ideas, working hard with the tools he possessed until he had a working solution—which he then held on to with the same stubbornness as the chairs. She had often thought this a beautiful trait, for it kept him always in a sort of forward motion and allowed him to amass a great number of creations. But she knew that it did him harm, too, because clumsy construction is one thing in the early phases of a house and another entirely in the building of an intellect. Stubborn countenance reveals itself more on faulty assumptions than fair ones, and the axioms that Sablo had decided useful as a young man were every day more compromised by the world they were asked to contain. With friends, she joked—entirely seriously—that the only really bad idea he had was that it wasn't worth changing your ideas, and that that was the one that ought to go.

So when he told her the story about the Tartar king, she found it difficult to separate her complete disagreement with her tenderness for someone who could not find a way to be less disagreeable. Thinking about the apparition (from which he was only barely removed) was a great discomfort to his mind. Instead, she told him that the boy was not so dangerous yet, and even if he did seem attached to telling lies, he could do no harm at the exhibition where everyone knew and was fond of his antics anyway. She said:

—You know he is beloved and he never hurts anyone; he may find a way to be like that forever and then it would not be anything bad.

Sablo nodded slowly, with distracted eyes, and resumed working on his forearm with his fingers.

Moths beating against the front windows.

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All of the furniture had been cleared out of the Leonelli's sun room, so that the large windows passed the warm light from the garden outside onto an clean floor and an empty white wall. On an easel in the center of the room, just out from the back wall, sat the Holy Face of the son of God imprinted on fine golden fabric. A church official stood to the left of it, the same one who had given the prefacing speech to the crowd before the sun-room doors were opened. First he announced the certification of the miracle and told them that to take the gift deeply into their hearts. A spontaneously generated image of the son of God, delivered to us by a holy messenger. Then he explained that the door on the right was for entering and the door on the left for exiting, and he asked the people there gathered to please not get too close to the sacred object.

The miracle was very well received. Some people came once through the room and then went to go talk in the garden. Others left with a quiet face and got back in line again. Some were rapturous and spent a long time inside the room and when they left they sat down. Occasionally, someone would whisper a question to the church official, who smiled and nodded affirmations back at them.

At first, the Leonelli's stood together right outside the converted gallery, in between the two doors. People would nod toward them on their way in and then shake Dr. Leonelli's hand after coming out the other side. They were standing in front of the window facing out, in full covering of the same late summer sun, so that by the time everyone had made at least one trip they were all three shining with sweat. Dr. Leonelli had an unfortunate forehead, which he had only ever known grow larger, and even though the sun had already decorated it with dark coins of all sizes—like a rocks pressed into soft ground, forming a footpath, so often had the sun traversed his head—still he felt the spring break out, and soon it was in his eyes to turn them red. Soliana noticed that her husband was now wiping his brow constantly, almost to the point of wringing out his handkerchief, and that he was keeping his eyes closed and his head tilted toward the ground. She suggested that they split up and find shade, seeing as most everyone had been through the gallery by now. Marzia assented, although her sweating and freckled face did not have the same distressing look as her father's, because in youth those bodily functions that will one day be the cause of discomfort and depression take under the sign of health—vitality which continues into morbidity, or was always probably morbid anyway.

They dispersed. The doctor went to sit on a flat rock in the shade. It was very low to the ground, so his knees came up high towards his chest. The sort of people that usually liked to discuss town matters with him after church services quickly gathered around him, electrified by the rare circumstance. Never had there been as much to discuss and never had there been more people interested in discussing it. What was to be done about the miracle? For once, not just the old guard but the younger generation too were invested in a future Manoppello; Sablo and the other expedition members joined the conversation around the doctor, suddenly anxious to have their say. Several times Giacomo tried to make clear his suspicions of the newcomers' sudden

attention to town affairs with some slyly biting comment, but each time he felt he had failed to get his sarcasm across. He attributed the failure to his unfortunate position so close to the ground, in which he felt too childish to be effectively condescending. As a result, each of his attempted rebukes only managed to encourage the loud young faction even more, and he was forced to stay quiet.

Soliana went over to where Tedesca was standing under the lemon tree with a group of other women. Small children raced about below waist level, swinging on the adult's legs and bringing lemons to each other. There was always a strange remove between Soliana and the women of the town, because although they knew very many and intimate things about each other, it was rare that they spent any time physically together. Tedesca did what she could to mediate the conversation, but it could not proceed naturally, for no one wanted to be the first to betray Tedesca's half-confidential betrayals, so everything was constantly being explained to to one party or the other as though they did not already know everything. When the conversation had been long enough performed, Soliana asked them for their opinions on the miracle they had been granted, and they quickly fell to discussing the image and its meaning. Tedesca tried to describe the enormous feeling she had for it even before the viewing, and some of the women agreed, although they had not been allowed to touch and work with it as she had. She told them that seeing it had made her confused, for it was not beautiful in the way she had hoped it might be. Gorga and others disagreed. They said that it was not as they had expected either, but when they had seen it they realized they had been thinking of something else. Tedesca asked them what feelings it gave them to think about, and when a few of them had explained themselves she shook her head and looked upset, but she didn't say anything else. Soliana stayed quiet too and listened to the discussion with interest, watching the children all the while.

One child would take up a lemon from the ground and bring it to another. Once received, the lemon was kept in the sling made from the bottom of their shirts, which they had untucked and held beneath their chins. They had to pin the shirt-sling with their chin because children carry one lemon with two hands. As the game went on, the smaller children ended up with more and more lemons, because it took them so long to pick one up from the ground without spilling any cargo; and they could never catch the faster, older kids so they usually presented the lemons to each other, further consolidating the hoard. They were as serious as businessmen, there among the wood of legs and dresses, and they never spoke except when they made the transaction and they would say 'here is a lemon for you' and the receiver would say 'thank you' back.

Marzia remained in the sun with the other people her age. They should have liked to begin serious discussions of their own, but did not like to do so in front of the older generations assembled with them on the lawn for fear of the smiles they would surely see passed around at their attentions. Marzia, who was separately desperate to get away from the house, suggested that they go for a walk out into the woods.

There was a simple path that she knew well from her childhood. It ran to swift brook and then alongside for some ways, as though looking for a crossing. She apparently thought the way more confusing than it really was, for directly they set out some boys were out in front and leading the group, and though she watched carefully in case they went off the trail at any point, they found the little stream with ease.

It was rare to have almost the entire group assembled as they did then and in the beginning they were confused about how to proceed. There was much gossip to be told, surely, but little that did not directly involve one or another present person. When the reached the river and Marzia was able to relax her supervision of the navigators, she had an inspiration, and turned the gossip on the only party that could not back down from any accusation: Pancrazio Petrucci.

Pancrazio took her initial question, that she had heard he was involved with some danger or scandal with some stranger, and, all but bowing to begin his performance, began such a run of wild improvisations that the rest of them ended up preferring them to the actual gossip they could not have. As his deranged inventions wandered on, he was careful to implicate more members of the present group as if they, too, had helped him on this or that adventure or, for some of the more sour audience members, as if they had tried (but failed) to stop him. He wrapped everyone up in his stories, especially Marzia, who always seemed to be coming to his aide, and as he called people out they would blush to see themselves a part of the ranting. Some would deny it, laughing, and others, at least once he had really got going, would join in on the pretending and even add an unwieldy detail or two, like a member of the court throwing an extra knife into the jester's juggling ring as he passed them by. Soon, they learned to strategically involve the subjects of unspoken rumors into the narrative, so Pancrazio might be obliged to admit that he had run into two supposed lovers, for example, in the cornfield where he was hiding from the soldiers he had stolen from. With this innovation, even those that were reserved at the beginning began to volunteer coded information into Pancrazio's story, so that it soon became far too complicated and heavy to be properly a story about his own rogue adventures. There was some share of malice in this too, for many of them were jealous or mistrustful of the young Petrucci who seemed, even now, to only do those things that profited him. Marzia thought him clownish, but quick and smart; it was interesting to watch him struggle with the additions that he was now being laden with at every opportunity, especially as he seemed to care little about the underlying gossip. He was purely focused on continuing his story and seemed unwilling to allow it to become anything else, so when it became such a mess that no one seemed anymore interested in his role in it besides as a sort of oblivious patrolman, making rounds of the town's youth population, he simply ended the story and moved on quickly to something they would not be willing to insert themself in, all in one uninterruptible breath, like this:

—…yes yes, but then I left them there and fell asleep for thirty or forty hours on the floor of my front room (there was no one there to check on me, and it was a healthy sleep besides) and when I woke up the next day to the sound of someone knocking on the door, a stranger! They were dressed as a pilgrim and I did not see their face, for my eyes cannot focus for a full hour after I wake up, especially if I have slept for a very long time as I did then.

The group was quiet at the mention of the pilgrim's clothes, which satisfied Pancrazio immensely. He felt he had left them behind, finally, and continued with his daring.

—The pilgrim put a few coins in my hand and asked after my father, who I knew would have already set out for the doctor's, because it was very late in the afternoon, and I said as much then. I pointed toward the church on the other hill, and they went off walking.

Marzia had the opportunity to watch Pancrazio's face very closely as he spoke, because they were walking right next to each other. She felt very much like hitting him, or pushing him. The rest of the group received the story with disapproving looks and an uncomfortable guilt

came over them all—save, of course, Pancrazio, who carried a sneering, righteous look. Someone tried to salvage things by tacking some obviously false detail on to the story in the style of the first anecdote, but Pancrazio vehemently denied it, insisting that his encounter with the pilgrim had been as brief as described. He added:

—It may not even have been the same pilgrim who brought the cloth to Dr. Leonelli, there is no way to know it. But the circumstance is very curious, you have to agree! I have been thinking about it for a few days, and now I'm almost sure it must have been…

The pleasant flush that the earlier silliness had brought to Marzia's face was now superseded by a truly furious red, and she even felt herself personally embarrassed although she could not think why. The more she tried to dispel the embarrassment and rage, the greater and less reasonable each grew. She could not help herself from revenging herself upon the boy, and probably he too would benefit from some clarifying of the proper boundaries of mischief. She began marching them back toward the house, coming out to the front of the pack with Pancrazio at her side. She still looked at him but did not talk; if he noticed her anger she saw no sign of it. To pass the time without losing the strength of her feeling, she tried to understand it. There can be nothing worse, she began, than misinforming others of one's own thoughts and memories, which already contain enough difficulty to intrigue even the smartest people. The formulation satisfied her—and held onto enough of her then intensity—so she repeated it to herself as an elaboration: confusion is a cheap kind of complex and she tried not to look at his relaxed face any more.

When they got back to the reception, everyone was mostly where they had been before, although a few of the oldest people had left the two adult conversations to play Lemons with the children. Marzia walked Pancrazio straight through the group to where her father was still sitting on the rock. She announced that he had just shared with them some unbelievable news. She had trouble controlling the edge on her tone, or else did not feel it necessary. She felt already half-celebratory, and allowed herself a look at him; he was still smiling.

As soon as he saw his son reemerge from the woods leading that distressed parade, Sablo had begun signaling to Gorga. She could not excuse herself from her conversations without drawing attention to the commotion growing in the other group, and so all the women soon joined the thrall as well. She joined Sablo at the front of the crowd where her son was now telling, directly to Dr. Leonelli and to the church official behind him, a story she believed at once to be false. Watching it, she felt something close to a complete embarrassment. All her memories and all her knowledge which makes belief was now crushed into her chest, through the gap between the collarbones, where they point at each other and there used to be a line. The connection, which was a sort of faith from one half of her body to the other, was severed as he spoke. He chewed through the center like braided gristle, down into the valley between the breasts; she coughed and began to cry. And when Sablo took her hand she let out a sob like wood buckling. Pancrazio looked up at the sudden sound, and his face went white with confusion.

There was silence in the crowd. The boy looked sick, almost to the point of collapse. He went on looking at his mother. Dr. Leonelli had tilted his head to the side while listening; now his curious posture took on a note of concern. Sablo spoke into the breech:

—Good Doctor, I have to apologize for my son. Do your best to ignore the lies he cannot stop himself from giving out. He is not well and has not been for some time, but that is no reason

to forgive him. It seems even the most holy circumstance is not enough to keep him ashamed. My wife and I will bring him away from here.

The doctor turned his face towards Sablo as he worked out the apology, but his shoulders stayed facing Pancrazio. He said, as if out to a deliberation:

—You know … the pilgrim did tell me that he'd come through the town. Perhaps there is truth in the boy's story; after all, isn't it true you came to see me that afternoon, just before?

Sablo remembered their clash that day in the office. He almost thought he could hear the reprimand repeated in the doctor's tone. So he was quiet, for he felt now to be making an insult of the host with each direction—yes, he had gone that day, but no, there could not be truth in the story; he didn't even think Pancrazio had been home when he left. Please, he said, do not encourage him. And to make it clear his scorn was not directed at the doctor, he went on to give some part of the same vicious speech about his son he had practiced on his wife the day before. The crowd watched the face of the young boy, who seemed to be too ashen now, too withdrawn and dry, and there was a sympathetic feeling among them not unlike an embarrassment. Gorga's anguish seemed only to increase as her husband went on with his cruel explanations, so that eventually even the doctor felt confident to stop him.

—Mr. Petrucci, please, please, that is more than enough. He is very young still. If he turned out to have made up the story, it would not matter so much. There is nothing to worry about.

Sablo tried to interject and finish off his attack, but Gorga would not let him. The doctor went on.

—We have not seen like the Holy Face before, in this town, or in this age; really it is bound to confuse us. Why, it is difficult to tell the truth about something you do not yet understand. When I explain about the cloth, about its divine provenance and its uncrafted origin, I still feel as though I am lying in some part. Maybe some of you think I am; it is difficult to be convincing of something you can barely believe. I think perhaps the same problem has confused your son, for the details of his story are quite believable.

Now Sablo could not be quieted, and responded:

—Of course they are believable, they are the details of your story, of the true apparition. They are taken entirely, neither added to or changed. I have seen it, that's why I know! It is the way he makes his lies.

The doctor responded calmly that it was true, although the same is often true of truths. He turned to Pancrazio. —Well, boy? Have you any other details you could share?

Pancrazio finally brought his stare off the ground, and looked upwards, past the crowd, toward the lemon tree. He seemed to consider the question, and then he spoke:

—I do remember something else.

If not for the doctor's interest, Sablo would have carried the boy off right then, over his shoulder; he tried to make a fist but his forearm gave no response, as though it didn't hear. Once, when he was only a child himself, his father sent him to get water from a well. He tied the rope to the bucket, sent it down, and then, after it had gotten to the water, the resistance disappeared from the rope. When the end of the line appeared, snapped into a painful looking fray, he became very scared and went home crying with the dead rope. He could not go near the well for a long time after.

Pancrazio said to the listening crowd:

—I thought when the pilgrim spoke to me that I heard a slight foreign accent, as of Syria or other Arab lands, and one of the coins he gave to me has that look about it, too, though I cannot decipher it.

He now took a coin from his pocket and handed it to the doctor, who examined it with interest. It was brass, with the figure of an amphora on the one side and a curled, running writing that Dr. Leonelli had never seen before. On the reverse side there were no symbols, only a small relief of an oval with emanating lines, like a floating fern.

—There is a type of cloth that I have seen in Pescara, although never in the markets, never for sale. I'm sure it is the same fabric that was given to you. It is fine, and golden, and they call it sea silk, for it is woven from the fibers of the pinna clam. The pinna spins those threads to tie itself to the bottom of the sea, otherwise it be carried off by strong currents—since it stands upright and since it is so tall. When it is done with its anchorage, usually about once a year, it comes running up onto the beaches, choosing especially the rocky shores of unpopulated islands, and rubs this wool off on the sharper rocks. Then it returns to the ocean and lets the tide bring it to a new area, where it begins again to tie itself to the ground. Fishermen collect those bundles of discarded golden wool whenever they appear and bring them to their wives to spin and weave into the final fabric.

Sablo had lost his posture, and did not try for an immediate response. The doctor asked:

—And this sea silk, which is so precious, it is a foreign product?

—Yes, and from the same sort of places, I think, of which the pilgrim's accent reminded me.

Now one of the other expeditioners who often went with them to Pescara—and so who knew Pancrazio's well—took up for Sablo for a moment, and remarked:

—Well, it may be foreign stuff but there are pinna clams all over the coast here. I've done much business with the fishermen there, I have a pretty good sense of what's all available. I think they may even be as close as the bay at Pescara.

The help installed passionate sympathy in Sablo. He felt himself drawn out of a well, if only partway, enough to try and speak out again to the world he knew well. He said

—It's true, they are pinna all over the sea floor in Pescara. If the boy knows anything about them at all it is because we have seen them together, a few years ago, when I would take him out fishing with me.

The doctor was growing more agitated at each new detail. He asked Sablo:

—So you've seen these pinna? And do they make yellow wool?

—I've never seen it exactly like he said, but there are often short and broken fibers coming out of the shell…the fishermen dragged nets and cages, searching more for fish and crabs, so the pinna were incidental. They stand up so straight one always nets them dragging—you could feel it if you were holding the lines. There's a catch, and then snapping feeling; once I thought the rope had snapped, because of the way you feel it in your hands.

The doctor was quiet, thinking. He enlaced his hands together with a fanning motion. Sablo had a great feeling, or perhaps it was only recover, but he was suddenly feeling much better, and he added:

—Though, I've never seen golden wool on the beaches, or on the rocks of islands off the coast, and I never heard the fishermen speak of it either, and I've heard all their stories ten times each.

The doctor smiled to Sablo and, moving to face him, he was very calm. The thought of these long clams, rising upright out of the darker sand, pacified Giacomo, it was alarming an unwanted part of him. When they hold a flame to a leech, and it shrinks back, slides off; there is no better reason to be thankful for sexual things—Giacomo relaxed into the new, smooth feeling—so, too, when they pull out a large weed, which has gotten large by not making a complicated root, and it makes no effort to stay, it simply slides out, and the soil it was working is all smooth and dry, like ash, and it, too, colors the hand and even spreads to the forehead.

They talked more, and once they had begun on details the crowd had begun to disperse, and Marzia went to Pancrazio; she tried to apologize, but he was more sober than before and they ended by sitting quietly together on the grass. Once, he went back in to the gallery and was in there for some time. He looked faint, and he would not talk to anyone—even his mother, when she came to him inside the gallery, was received in silence, although he did look at her and moved his head a little. He had nude lips, usually so close to the color of his skin when flushed pinkish, but in this dehydrated state they stood out against his flat skin like a mark of burning, or an inflammation. Soon, his mother told him, you will miss the days when all of us are thinking about the same thing. He was cold, and they all put a cloak around his shoulders.

———————

The first boatsman came out from a small red building; it was his office, and it was the only building on that part of the coastline. There was one window, next to the door, with colored bottles crowding the inside sill. They helped him carry the boat down the sands to where the waves stopped and held it in the shallow water there while he set the gunwales and oars. It was the shape of mouth closed tightly. The beach was deserted, but crabgrass up further, mixed under-in with tall and waxy fronds, one stem you could unroll with your fingers—they were called early-blade; they split like ladders.

In the dangerous boat, Giacomo and Sablo. As he had the whole way in, the doctor seemed content to observe, so he sat back and watched the coastline, or the water drooling around the stern, so Sablo spoke up, at least to not offend the boatsman. He asked him about the pinna, and the pinna cloth, and the boatsman told them he had never seen cloth made from those bristles, and that it would be hard and not worth doing. Sablo agreed, and stopped asking questions. But the boatsman continued.

Although he had not heard of such a cloth made from the pinna's wool, he told them it seemed quite possible, considering the birds that do come from certain sea creatures, that it did already exist, or could, at least, be done. His story came out slowly, for he was the only one rowing, in fact, so regular were the pauses he took to breathe, at one end, or swing, at the other, that it carried the intonation of lyric poetry, the kind of grunting song that reminded Giacomo of a sick patient always running out of breath, and of distractible countenance, frog-hopping.

The boatsman told them: there are certain birds, many of them here, the geese, or goose-like bird, for it strikes me as a fake one; they spend the summers here, eating up my beaches,

never laying eggs; they, with that hooking neck, what's the use of all that neck? Never even straightened out—these birds, or look-like-birds—they use the season gathering, discarded wood and broken spines, then, before the winter, they just go die quietly, all at once, one night on beaches. First they take the wood from where they've left it soaking, just off shore, and squeeze in-between the swollen pores, starting with the beak—that's why its shaped like that—until enough, a seed, gets stuck; fish eat the limp and hollow carcass left—those flying fish, perhaps, that swim—and a barnacle develops from the seed, over the cold winter, the water never gets unbearable, at least not once you're in, it grows the beak first, in the shell, and then the snakeblack neck, with feather-buds that look like scales; you'd recognize them if you saw them, where these geese are, and it stops being surprising, too, when they finish development and appear, grown and flying beautifully, next springtime. Probably, he said, there were birds like that, rare, with many colors or eyes, you can more than imagine them, in fact, they do have them in some places, where there are more interesting things in general, and they really do make many-colored downed fabrics out of the wild feathers that these birds drop off, or from their corpses when they die—complicated animals and plants die often, and are born rarely—but it takes patience to sort out the different colors which vary so much on any one feather spine, since they have to make parts of eyes or other, larger circles, and so this fabric is only for kings and their friends, or for the settling of imperial debts, and it is rare for a king to have difficulty settling a debt.

Sablo told him that the fabric was not multicolored, but rather a golden brown. The boatsman laughed, and told him it was likely unrelated then, and that he only meant to suggest that the pinna's hairs could really be used. Or—he joked—maybe they just didn't sort the colors. When they reached the next boat, from which they were to be diving, Giacomo slipped as he crossed over, falling into the dark slime collected on the decking. It had the smell of rocks, or else brought them to mind in some way.

The second boatsman, who Sablo had never before met, was very tall and uncomfortable to look upon, especially out at sea where there are almost no tall things. He was quiet initially, dealing in an awkward manner with the ropes and sails, the whole apparatus made his fingers appear longer then they really were—actually he had quite normal hands, but he was very good with them, and he was able to gather lengths of rope through one hand alone, casting them and wrapping them about any protuberance of the boat, so that Giacomo and Sablo felt like drawing their legs in keeping their hands in their pockets to avoid being accidentally snared. In the bow of the boat, Giacomo noticed, was a massive iron bell lying on its side, with the open cup facing away from them, rocking gently on the boards with the satisfying, riding crackle of a press.

As soon as they had made some distance—they seemed, actually, to be coming back in towards shore, only much farther along than where they set off, and in the less sunny coves around the other side of the cliffs—the new boatsman began to ask talk to them with great vitriol about the first boatsman. Giacomo thought it slightly unfair, as the first boatsman, though an unpleasant character, seemed to be in a far worse position than this tall fellow, who had this large sailboat and all these strong ropes, as well as a massive bell, whereas the first boatsman had only that poor shack and small rowboat in which to live. When Sablo mentioned something of this sort to the new boatsman, who was constantly adjusting their course, alternative aggressive tack and gybe maneuvers, so that they were all thrown about as the vessel continually squared into the

wind at ever more unusual angles, constantly obscuring their actual heading, but no matter how fast they went—they weren't really going all that fast—the boatsman never seemed tired or distracted from the conversation, he barely even moved with the boat, often his feet were not even touching the ground, so bound up was he with ropes, it was remarkable that he heard the questions at all. Bitterly, he told them that the first boatsman was in reality far, far wealthier than he, and that he, the tall boatsman, had only this one boat and five others that he operated, all of them alone, as they could see now, which was exhausting—in fact, far, far more tiring than rowing, especially a small boat like that. Besides, he went on to explain, the first boatsman was not only very rich right now, but had been rich before even entering the boating business, in which he has only succeeded on the strength of his investments—namely, the small rowboat and his house. His house?—Giacomo asked, pulling his coat back over his knees, which were still bleeding from the fall—You mean that shack that he lives in, barely off the sand itself? Ah, said the boatsman, it's true that the shack is very ugly and I do find some small comfort in that. If you have ever been inside, however, which I can tell you have not, I once was, for it was in fact me that first counseled and trained him when he was entering the business, it was me, in fact, who explained to him what sort of a rowboat to get, how much to ask, yes, we were once very friendly, it is a great shame to me now, but he was the first man I'd known who had been through higher education and he confused and probably hypnotized me then, but inside of the ugly shack there is no floor, rather, a very small ledge, about which one might edge along, flat against the wall, around a deep and homely shaft, easily navigable with ladders and lit by many bright torches. His personal library, his papers and business records, his collections of sketches and sheet music, as well as all his food and indeed a smart cooking stove—all of these are installed in shelves and hollows in the walls of the shaft. Probably there is quite a significant cave for his money, which he used to keep in a locked bag, but it may be that he has moved it to an even more ostentatious container now; yes, it is a very beautiful and comfortable shaft, or was, at least, last I was allowed to see it.

As he was saying this last part, the wind died down somewhat and he began to spin and move around more than usual, suddenly he took one rope in both hands and pulled incredibly hard, throwing his body weight past his shoulders in one motion, and the piece of wood it was tied to splintered and cracked away from where it was attached the mast and fell onto the stern deck. He pulled it over to him, freed the stick from the knot, and then shoved it through a hole in the flooring, where it clattered into the underspace below. He took up the slack rope and began pulling himself about again. Giacomo wanted to ask more about the first boatsman's house, especially as the tone appeared now more nostalgic than malicious, at worst it was only jealousy, and it didn't upset him to hear in that light, but he wasn't sure the tall boatsman had meant to break that piece off at all, and he didn't want to call any attention to him when he might want privacy. Sablo, if he was curious at all, was more cautious, and merely set in on his forearm again, head down.

The boatsman, however, continued on his own, and it calmed him down to speak about it. He sleeps on the ladders—he said, now facing into the wind—and whenever he needs new spaces to put things, for example, when his shelves fill up, he simply goes farther down one of the ladders and begins carving out a new space with a shovel head that he holds in his hand, or sometimes he uses a pickaxe for the rockier parts. But he never goes into the hollows, that's what

is important to understand, he does everything on the ladders. If it seems strange, that's because you have not seen the way that he goes about it, it is actually very natural, most things are easier without a floor—although if you or I were to try and live like that we would of course fail. In fact, even when I would go over there practically every night and we would stay up very late in the shaft, he showing me pictures from his books or letting me play with some items from his less valuable collections, not once did I manage to spend the night there, although he did usually offer, it was just too uncomfortable for me to sleep on those ladders with the torches burning all night and I would inevitably leave at some small hour and return to my bed, in the dark of my own wretched room.

A few times during his speech, his voice carried the sound of crying, but when he turned away from the wind and bow, as he did then, suddenly, dismantling the sails and casting the anchor in a few efficient, racing strides, it was dry and plain as it had been before, if anything, dryer. Sablo stood up. We are diving here? he asked. They were still far from shore, inline with a peninsula, after which the shoreline went back in aways. Yes, said the tall boatsman, there is a shallow flat that continues out from the land there, and there are pinna here in large numbers. Wonderful, Giacomo said, and stood up as well.

First the tall boatsman attached one of his thicker ropes to the loop on the top of the bell; it was impossible to tell where the other end of that rope led. Then, bringing up weights from below deck, he began tying these, too, to the bell, on cleats along the rim of the open end. Some weights he left on the deck, together with empty barrels, open and sealed with pitch. When he had everything positioned, the three of them worked together to swing the bell out over the side of the boat, until, lowering it slowly along the hull, it reached the calm water as flat as they could manage, sealing off the air inside. Then, the weights (which had until then been kept on the deck) were thrown in after it, and the boatsman let them pull it down slowly, so that it sank evenly, sealing the water inside. Once he judged that enough line had been let out, he cleated the rope and sent them in.

They dove down in their underclothes, but these became an inhibition, floating and sticking, so they took them off once they were underwater, and swam naked. The boatsman fished the wet clothes out with a pole as soon as they appeared on the surface. He lay them to dry across the diveside gunwale.

Sablo and Giacomo followed the rope down, and the light fell off as they went. A swallow, and the ears click along the way, but everything is very easy, and there is little left of the normal forces. Giacomo realized he had not been swimming in a long time, and Sablo felt no pressure in his forearm, he almost stopped to see if he was caught in something, or had been stung, but he did not want to leave Giacomo, the two of them moved slowly and he enjoyed the dignity, at least while the discomfort had turned away. Going down, in the water, is pleasantly difficult—the thought occurred to Sablo, and he wanted to say it to Giacomo—he felt he was climbing up a good, hard tree.

Passing through curtains of fresher, colder water, the light fell back behind the swimmers. They reached bell. It was suspended, and the iron felt the same underwater as it had above, which was a comfort, for otherwise one could start to think things were generally smoother than they remembered. They had to let go of the rope get below the bell, which required extra kicking and moving, so that when they did make it past and underneath the lip, they were already feeling

very sharply the need for some more air, and they sprung so quickly up inside it that Giacomo became completely disoriented.

It was perfectly dark, the bell shadow covered even the water at its base, and the air seemed to push against one's skin, harder than the water did, with the weight of a hand; it was difficult to think of that stuff as air and not some other, terrible thing far worse than water—one would almost rather inhale the water, and really, Giacomo could not convince himself to breathe in this air which seemed to be poking around his mouth and into his nose, so he screamed. It was short and weak, for he had almost no breath left, but it rang out inside the bell with all the harmonic curve of a headache, and it kept at peals for so long, almost growing louder as it died out, higher and higher in closing space, that he pictured suddenly speaking into a nighttime hill, or some scene of that type, and walking with the echo over a great broad space, and it let him gasp, gasp in the sharp air that brings mild relief, and he was mildly relieved by it, and breathed as himself again.

Sablo talked to him, quietly, because the sound carries so well. There was a sort of bench on the inside wall of the bell, and a shelf where he thought the light was. He was slow to work out what each piece was—Giacomo was impatient for light, but stayed quiet and breathing—and sometimes dropped small things into the water or onto Giacomo's head. Once he got the first sparks, though, he very quickly got the lamp going. The oil lamp, its flat wick cut into two points like an epsilon, cast a split flame against the wall above the shelf, and light spread fast on the darkened air, because darkness is the condition that awaits light, darkness is like dry brush to the torch light; it is a stabile preparation. So, too, the light focused down upon the waters, as a searcher, and dimly, in gray and yellow tones, the sea floor showed its first parts.

And Sablo looked in the light he had made and smiled to Giacomo, who smiled back. Sablo came down off the bench and into the water where Giacomo was, holding onto the bench to keep himself above the surface. The hair on his arms had slicked down while swimming, so, too, the hair on his head. He wasn't sure what it looked like.

They dove down from the cave, down in the column of dissolving light. In moments, the whole white force would catch upon debris, or on a stream of breath, and shine right into the eye readying itself for lower light. It felt as though a painless thing had just gone through the eye, right into some unsuspecting matter, which now lit up and remembered itself into the back of the chironal eye. Someone had here wetted the dust, clouds of kicking sand and silt rose, flooded over the dunes. They waited—it was probably only the fast things escaping.

When everything had settled, Sablo and Giacomo looked out over a buried village. The still feeling of an undisturbed snowfall, or indeed of an undisturbed grave, all the comfort of small places—these things came to mind, and certain others less agreed upon; they had their own thoughts about the landscape into which they had descended.

Deserted, hundreds of pinna stood out above the mass of colored tubes and scales that carpeted the ground. Sometimes, bubbles, escaping from around seizing tendril, would disturb the silt covering at their bases, but the shells remained at ease, in random distribution, and with its great halves separated only slightly. The expression of an absentminded speaker, pausing, perhaps pausing forever—for these things did seem to be on hold—it gave Giacomo a peculiar feeling, a very nice and very peculiar feeling, as one gets when seeing a face that really ought to be familiar. He stopped in the recognition, but the recognition had started, and ended, and now

would not resume. He swam up to one. The shell was grown over, completely covered by eyeless crawling stuff, his sympathy extended, but he did not really notice, for, covered though the shell was, he could see now in the opening—oh! the frill of a soft thing, with fine and waving tassels. There is an animal inside, made of translucent lace, with arms that pull things together, in toward the center—and the lace animals, he realized, resigned themself to weaving, or at least thread making; perhaps there is a distaff in there, collecting all the aimless fuzz that drifts about—now the diligence was really starting to be known, Giacomo thought—and makes transference, makes special spit or tries to, and knots together the loose basin here. After all, why shouldn't the water just filter through, as it does on land anywhere there is not the constitution of a crabgrass, or an olive grove, such plants can be commended for the work they do as well, but here, to hold the finest, weakest stuff of sand, and collected silts, and bind it with this black thread…there, at the base of the pinna, he saw the wool run down into the sand. There is a lamb inside, with its organs out, and in its noble industry he felt he knew its entire motivation, the every intelligent dispassion that it takes to manufacture solid anything. And within the blessing was a desire, and he almost spoke it aloud again, for it came to him in words, without any sort of struggle—which could be worrisome news—that he should like to touch it, have the dress of wet membrane inside his hand, only to be blessed by it, and to feel its connection to the root, and to comfort it, be gracious, for the living stones hold up the sea and the land beside it, what thankless work, what work thanked only by tremendous product; how proud each noble shell must be, like pins along the sewline, anchored and mending. He reached out his hand, but these are skittish creatures. The shell closed up, slowly, with the cold authority of a castle gate, and he felt himself a trespasser, dizzy in exotic lands; of a service in a cave, curling wands of incense and mosaic gold; of the man who has lived here forever on the fruits of a red desert; he drives a screw deep into the hillside; he opened it up; he was like a list, like crushing powders and like the list going on, stained in the first beautiful way.

And Sablo had taken one of the pinna in his hand, which Giacomo saw as he turned to look at him now, and he twisted it, so that the roots snapped, and he had pulled it out the ground. He saw Giacomo that Giacomo was watching him, so he held it out toward him, roots first. The doctor could not speak, and he looked at the thing being offered him, and he looked at the ground where it had been, where now the dust was circling, and when he understood, looking at the sprung coils, what it was, he closed his eyes and mouth and drew his hands around him, as if to cover himself, and no longer said anything, indeed, he was gone from that place and began to float upward, unconscious, into the light of the bell vault.