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The Punishment

Renzo Ricchi

The greatest vice is shallowness.
Oscar Wilde

1.

October 16th was a Sunday. A mild, almost warm Sunday. A slight wind rocked the trees. A few clouds ambled across the clear sky. It seemed as if autumn could not dispel the summer's scorching heat, the like of which had not been seen in years. The picture of our planet that emerged from the newspapers was disheartening. Economic crises, violence, alienation of those in despair, perversions of every kind, increasing damage to the environment, everywhere, buffeted by the wind of history, man endured the precariousness of his condition and looked to the future with fear.

Against this perplexing panorama, a strange-boxed advertisement in boldface print stood out on every front page of every national and local daily. It said:

BOOKS OF POETRY BOUGHT AT ANY PRICE

Individuals, corporations, publishing houses, foundations, cultural associations, bookshops, libraries and other institutions concerned who may have in their possession books of verse, by any dead Italian or foreign poet, of any period and in any edition, are requested to send or bring individual books or collections, whatever their condition, to the following address: **Poetry Recovery Pavilion**, Pergolini District – Florence. On delivery or by return mail, donors will be paid the equivalent of one hundred times the value of the books delivered or sent. Payment will be made in pure gold.

2.

The news went right round Italy within a few hours.

Naturally, the first reaction to it was one of suspicion: it had to be a practical joke, albeit a costly one, for during the day all the State and private radio and television stations broadcast the same appeal on their advertising spots.

As was only to be expected, the following day a few curious reporters appeared in Florence. And the first thing that Tuesday's papers had to state publicly was that an unknown man, by the name of Sirius Deneb, had bought a building on the outskirts of the city which was to house offices for a multinational but had remained empty. A high boundary wall had been erected around the building; the entrance was protected by a heavy barred iron gate. Inside there were silent, unapproachable men. Above the gate hung a large sign:

Poetry Recovery Pavilion

The story broke. Who was behind such a strange affair? Who was this Sirius Deneb whom nobody had heard or knew anything about? Where was he from? What was he up to? The civil servants shrugged it off: formally speaking, they could see no infringement of the law. Very soon in the area in front of the mysterious edifice crowds of people gathered – amongst whom there was naturally an abundance of radio and television news reporters, and police behind partitions.

On Wednesday morning there were two new developments. Around nine o'clock a middle-aged gentleman made his way through the crowd with a parcel of a dozen or so books. Having reached the gate, he rang the bell, while photographers' flash went off and television cameras rolled. A man in white overalls appeared.

–“I've brought these,” the middle-aged gentleman said.

The guard examined the books carefully, then he asked:

–“How much would you say they are worth?”

The seller thought about it: they were old, dog-eared books, among which were scholastic editions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

–“Fifty thousand lire,” he eventually murmured.

–“Would you mind waiting?” the guard said.

He disappeared into a porter's lodge and presently returned with a small container.

–“Yes,” he said politely, “your books are worth fifty thousand lire.” And handing him the container, he added: “This is for you.”

Outside the middle-aged man opened the little box: it contained a few small glittering coins. He put the box in his pocket, got in his car and, followed by a swarm of television cameramen and journalists, sped off to the nearest jeweler's to have the little coins valued; they were pure gold and were worth five million lire.

The second episode took place at about twelve. The postman appeared with a parcel. The guard took the package into the porter's lodge and returned soon after:

–“We shall see that the sender receives payment,” he told the postman.

The evening television news bulletins opened with pictures of the middle-aged gentleman being given the precious container by the Pavilion attendant. In homes and bars people talked about nothing else: they discussed it gaily, without any sense of alarm.

Early the following morning there was already a queue at the gate of the building: nobody went away empty-handed. Everything that was written in verse, whose author was a deceased poet, was accepted and paid for in gold.

3.

That afternoon Gabriele De Angelis, the editor of a local newspaper, went to an auction downtown.

He was a very thin man of about thirty-five, with long hair that was already quite grey. His dark eyes, which were intense and melancholy, stood out in his pale face. He was a journalist because he had to earn a living, but his mind was generally on other things. He had opted for journalism as a career because it had seemed to be the profession that was least incompatible with his restlessness and his intolerance of routine. But had it been in his power not to, he would not have done even that. He had just two profound aspirations: to live in contact with nature – a love he cultivated on long walks through the hills and the countryside – and to lock himself away at home and read, think, and *feel* time go by – to *sip* it, as he put it – and write down his thoughts. An unsociable man, distrustful of those around him (whose pettiness and more or less covert aggression he found hard to bear), he lived a solitary life with very few friends and occasional trips to the islands.

He lived alone in a small flat. There were two women who had been important in his life, but both of them had left him in the end: he was too complicated, too idealistic. He dreamed of an absolute love, which would leave room for nothing else, which would reach the heights of mutual contemplation, of a shared loss of self in the great nirvana of adoration. In short he had an enervated, religious notion of love. Women found his sensitiveness very attractive, at first; but in time it came to frighten them. The slightest thing was enough to disappoint him, to plunge him into silences that lasted for days at a time and made his partners feel rejected and guilty. When he read poetry to them, in his soft, seductive voice, they found him irresistible; but when he expected to be treated not like other men, but like a poet, or when, just because he wrote poetry, he expected them to put up with his moods, his feverish, sleepless nights, his anguish: then they chose to withdraw, but not without having first accused him – legitimately, when all was said and done – of being selfish, narcissistic and impossible to live with.

One of Gabriele De Angelis's hobbies was to attend auctions. Not to buy: he could not afford to, nor did it interest him. He was merely *fascinated* by the rite. For one thing he loved the buildings the showrooms and the salesrooms, which always had something secret and mysterious about them; and the people aroused his curiosity. The antique dealers, as a rule, sat in the front row; the refined ladies who spent their afternoon pleasantly purchasing small objects to satisfy their whims, chose seats from which their stylish outfits could be clearly seen; the Monuments and Fine Arts Service officials, who put in an appearance every now and then to check that unlawful sales were not taking place, tried to blend in with the crowd, but a practiced eye could pick them out immediately by their air of authority.

The high priest however, was the auctioneer: with his magic hammer and his watchful gaze, he conducted the sales with the skill of a puppet-master who knows at the outset how the show will end.

If the rite was, so to speak, the superficial reason that drew Gabriele De Angelis to auctions, there were however other more profound, spiritual ones, relating to the emotions and the thoughts that the objects under the hammer brought to mind. It seemed to him that an auction was in fact undeniable proof of how the *things* that man creates actually have their *own* life, their *own* history and their *own* autonomous path through worldly events and, indeed, that it could come to pass that their nobility was not derived from the people who had once possessed them, but that, on the contrary, it was owed to the candelabras, bookcases, paintings, goblets, and silver, which rescued from the dustheap of the past the men, women, houses and rulers swallowed up by time, and whom they had outlived: but outlived, and this was the thing, with a truth and dignity of their own. Even the artists who had created them seemed to owe their fame to the objects that had survived them, that had learned to move across the face of the earth along their own precise itineraries.

4.

In the same way, – Gabriele De Angelis sometimes thought – memories take on an existence of their own in the end, disconnected from the circumstances, the experiences, the people that gave rise to them, and become one with the heart and mind of the person who has carried them inside him. And so that afternoon, for instance, as he went to the International Auctions and Exhibitions Building, he kept mechanically repeating to himself a phrase that had come to mind a few hours earlier, when he was listening to a piece of music. The phrase was: "I dedicate it to you."

Sometimes he knew where these words came from: the last woman he had loved. He recalled whenever she heard a tune or a

symphony that she really liked, she would whisper tenderly to him: "I dedicate it to you." Mortified by her abandonment, he had in part blotted her memory out of his consciousness, but those five little words, *I dedicate it to you*, remained deep in his heart, and he still experienced them as a gift that was dear to him. And that short phrase revived the joy – tinged now with melancholy — that he had once felt when she whispered them to him.

Another phrase that related to that experience was now one of his conditioned reflexes. She would say:

-“You know, the world is full of people.”

At times he caught himself unwittingly saying those words over and over to himself. She had said them to him one night on the telephone, a few weeks after they had split up. He had been thinking about calling her, driven by a yearning to hear her voice; she had made it clear to him that she was not alone and all of a sudden, as if to offer him an unexceptionable explanation of the fact, she had added :

-“You know that, in the end, we are all readily interchangeable.”

5.

When he went into the small auction room, there were already a lot of people there. He sat on a velvet chair by the gangway and looked around. On the red fabric-covered walls hung gilt and laquered mirrors; the wooden *lacunari intagliato* ceiling was also gilded. The spotlights used to display the items that would shortly be up for sale were already on: their beams were directed onto the table on which attendants would place the “goods.”

The auctioneer appeared. The show began. The attractions that day were a collection of XVI and XVII century Sicilian maiolica, some valuable books and XVIII century English silverware.

The attendant brought in a stupendous vase and the auctioneer spoke:

-“Caltagirone, end of XVI century. Ovoid bottle with medallion framed by a garland in the style of the Della Robbia in yellow, and manganese, against a whitish ground. Scroll with Gothic writing in manganese on deep blue ground. Verso in four parts, decorated with stylized spirals of acanthus leaves on a dark blue ground and a profusion of coiling foliage surmounted by two large pomegranates in yellow, dark blue, copper green, and manganese on a whitish ground. Height about 33 centimeters. The bidding starts at one million five hundred thousand lire.”

The auctioneer looked carefully round the room and began calling out figures in a low voice:

-“One and a half million lire, right. Two million. Two and a half million, thank you. I am bid three million. Three and a half million.

Four. Any advance? Four and a half! Five. I am bid five million. Congratulations sir, it is a magnificent piece."

There followed very fine amphorae, jugs, jars, vases; all splendidly decorated, on whose surface cobalt blue alternated with copper green, yellow, dark blue and white, in a rapid succession of female portrait busts and young warriors, of vine shoots and acanthus leaves, of saints holding swords, lilies and crosses, of paintings of fishes and birds, cherubs' heads, baskets of fruit, hunters, putti playing the lyre.

When the entire collection of Sicilian maiolica had been sold, the auctioneer heaved a sigh of relief and said, after he had had a glass of water:

- "And now we have some very valuable books."

The attendant laid a thick book on the table and the auctioneer resumed:

- "These are the works of Catullus, Tibullus, and Propertius. The book was printed in an edition of a hundred and thirty copies by Archibugi in Parma in 1794. Dark half leather binding, title and rules in gold on the ribbed spine, cloth covers. Elegant Bodoni edition of these Roman poets whose works have been published together since antiquity. Each of the three sections is prefaced by a life of the poet. A very fine edition based on hand-written manuscripts and with careful philological revision by Artagea. I open at six hundred thousand lire."

There followed a few minutes of silence. "Books are intimidating," thought Gabriele De Angelis. "And besides, who wants to spend so much money on a book?"

And then the auctioneer spoke:

- "One million six hundred thousand. Right, thank you. Two million, two million two hundred thousand. Two and a half million." The bidding was very slow; the auctioneer did not force the pace.

- "Two million seven hundred thousand."

All of a sudden a man at the back of the room spoke in a clear and soft voice:

- "One hundred and seventy million, in gold."

Everybody turned around. In the back row, a gentleman with a long white beard stood up. He had smiling eyes of a very light blue and a mild expression, almost like that of an adolescent. He wore a pale-blue tunic.

When he started to make his way towards the bench in the ensuing silence, the auction-goers noticed that he was holding the hand of a little girl of six or seven; in his other hand, he carried a jewel-casket.

The old man and the little girl walked slowly up the gangway between the rows of seats and came to the table where the book lay. The old man reached forward and caressed it delicately; the little girl did the same. Then the old man went up to the auctioneer and handed him the jewel-casket. The auctioneer opened it and showed its con-

tents to a man – a legal adviser – who had appeared in the meantime. The two whispered together for a while; then the auctioneer said:

-“Very good sir. The book has been sold to you. Naturally it will be delivered to you after due examination of what you have paid us.”

-“Hurray!” the little girl cried in delight.

-“Please send it to my hotel,” the old man replied, holding out a card to him.

-“We’ll give you a receipt.”

-“No, it doesn’t matter,” the old man added, and taking the little girl’s hand he bowed and left the room putting a green velvet cloak over the child’s shoulders.

The old man and his young companion went down the stairs unhurriedly; and Gabriele De Angelis followed them. Once through the main door, the two turned right towards the Arno. As they passed, they looked at the beautiful antique shops on either side of the street, but they did not linger. They only stopped to look closely at the water pouring from the mountain between Via dello Sprone and Borgo S. Iacopo. The child asked the old man a question which he answered, bending down towards her. Then they crossed Piazza dei Frescobaldi and went over the Santa Trinita bridge. Half-way across they stopped to gaze at the sight that lay before them in the clear evening: the elegant Ponte Vecchio and the palaces on the right bank which cast their golden lights on the dark water; on the left bank the brightly lit shops promised happiness. They went on. Reaching the end of the bridge, the child stopped to look at the statues on either side of her. Then they turned down the Lungarno and soon after entered an hotel.

-“So this is where they are staying,” thought Gabriele De Angelis, his heart pounding at the discovery, as he prepared to catch up with the odd couple. But by the time he had reached the hotel lobby, the pair had disappeared. Turning to the receptionist, he said:

-“I wish to speak to Signor Sirius Deneb.”

-“I’m sorry, but we have been told not to disturb him,” was the reply.

He saw that it would be no use insisting and went home.

6.

Gabriele De Angelis’s apartment was very cozy. The study was cluttered with books: they were everywhere, even on the floor. The table was a great mess: what with the typewriter, his bundles of newspapers, piles of paper, notepads, pens, pencils, dictionaries.

He sat down in the armchair. What he knew had him on tenterhooks. The old man and the little girl fascinated him and inspired a profound feeling of respect. For the time being, he would write nothing about them in his paper, to do otherwise would be to expose them

to an out and out assault. Before he decided whether to publicize or hush up the news of their whereabouts he wanted to meet them, to talk to them. The indelible picture of the old man and the little girl walking, hand in hand, through the streets of the city, moved him and was constantly before his eyes.

He went into the kitchen and prepared a frugal supper, which he ate standing up. Then he went back into the study, poured himself a glass of cognac and lit a cigarette. While he was looking for a record, he knocked over an album which fell to the floor. Some photographs fell out, which sight caused him a stab of pain: her and him, happy in each other's arms in front of a well, inside medieval city walls. An enjoyable excursion one bright Sunday in September. So much in love, they could never have imagined that the relationship would end. ("You know, the world is full of people . . .") He put the photos back into the album, selected a record, sat down again in the armchair. The notes of Strauss's dashing, romantic *Roses of the South* wafted through the room. He remembered one summer evening, dancing in a village square in the country, she whirling around, irrepressibly, enjoying herself, cutting a tall, slim figure in the crush of holiday-makers and locals, he teasing her, telling her that she was a bad dancer, surrounded by the little orchestra that played slightly out of tune, the makeshift singing, the red wine, then later walking through the woods under the clear sky, the quivering stars.

The phone rang. It was Silvia:

- "I'm just up the road from you. Can I swing by and say hello?"

- "Of course, come by anytime," Gabriele De Angelis replied.

- "Time erases everything," he thought, "the harsh law of survival: the warmth and the scent of another body seem, at first, almost like a violation because our instinct and nostalgia cry out for us to be faithful; but how can we be faithful to someone who is no longer there, someone who has left us?"

Silvia knocked softly at the door.

- "Hello, is anybody home? It's me," she whispered.

He opened the door. She, too, was slender, but dark.

- "Is this the lair of the most unsociable of my lovers?" she asked as she came in.

- "I've come to seduce you. Is that Strauss? I adore Strauss. Come on, dance with me. Come on, dance, you are like a lead weight! Take off your jacket. That's it. And your tie too, you look like you're suffocating. Good. Now you're beginning to look like a human being. So you're not a dummy, perhaps you have a heart, like everybody else! What are you drinking? Cognac? I'll have some too. Do you realize that you'd turn into a fossil if I didn't come around every now and then to give you a good shake-up? Hey, Gabriele De Angelis. This flat is made of bricks, it's in a building made of bricks. This bottle is made

of glass. I'm a woman. You and I are made of flesh and blood. What was it that good old Nietzsche said? *There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom.* I want to make love with you, do you understand? We're not in the hereafter, we're still in here and now, fortunately. Come on, kiss me. Don't you find me attractive? Can I stay here tonight?" Crouching in the warmth of Silvia's body, the thermal synthesis of all women, the throbbing artery in her neck, a hot stream coursing the impervious universe oh her smooth limbs, the world is full of people, one love the same as another, one heartache the same as all other heartaches, the rite of passage and destiny of loss. "Aren't you pleased I'm here with you? Then hold me."

He drifted off into sleep. An uneasy sleep troubled by a number of dreams. He was on a beach. He was walking towards the shore. Someone called to him to be careful, and pointed to the sea. Beyond a narrow stretch of still, glassy water, a low range of gray, impassible mountains crested in the horizon. "Watch out," voices told him, "they've just emerged, they're giving off a fierce heat." So he backed away, for fear of being burnt. But then, the old man and the little girl appeared.

- "Don't be frightened," the little girl murmured, "it's not your fault. Come with us."

They set off along the water's edge.

- "Don't leave me here!" Silvia cried behind them. The old man stopped to wait for her; then, hand in hand, the four of them carried on walking.

In the morning, Silvia woke him by whispering close to his face:

- "Sir," she said, "breakfast is served. Tea, honey, crisp breads, fresh fruit and, of course, me. You can have me any time you like. I couldn't ask for more."

She left soon after. Gabriele De Angelis telephoned the hotel and asked to speak to Sirius Deneb.

- "Signor Deneb is not taking any calls," was the reply.

7.

Then Gabriele De Angelis resorted to a ploy. He took a copy of his collected poems out of a drawer and wrote – on his personal, headed note paper the following note:

Dear Signor Deneb,

I would like to meet you and the delightful little girl who is your companion. I need to understand. It is my duty to confess that I am a journalist. But I also write poetry (I would like to do just that, but I can't afford to.) I am sending you my one and only book. I want you to know in any case that unless I have your permission, I will not write about our meeting. If you will agree to talk with me for a while, please let me know.

Thank you,
Gabriele De Angelis

He put everything into an envelope which he addressed to the mysterious old man and left the package at the hotel. Then he went to the newspaper office.

Early that afternoon he received a phone call.

-“Sirius Deneb here,” said a very polite voice, “if you like, you can come and see us around six this evening. We’ll expect you then.”

-“Signor Deneb is expecting me,” Gabriele De Angelis said to the reception clerk.

-“Second floor, room 210,” the receptionist replied.

He took the elevator up to the second floor, found the right room and knocked. After a few seconds wait, the door opened. The old man appeared:

-“Thank you for coming,” he said in a low voice, smiling mildly as he led him into a small sitting room. “Do sit down. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Gabriele De Angelis sat down on an ochre velvet sofa, while the mysterious character went through into the next room, closing the door behind him. Through the thin curtains at the window, he could see lights shining in the house in the evening darkness. On the table by the settee was a fine edition of the works of Catullus, Tibullus, and Propertius. He admired the gold embossment in the binding; then he leaned forward and opened the heavy book. He read the few lines on the life of Catullus: “*Amavit hic puellam primarium Clodiam, quam Lesbiam suo appellat in carmine. Lascivisculus fuit, et sua tempestate pare paucos in dicendo; fraenata oratione superiorem habuit neminem*”¹ He skimmed through a few pages, then his attention was caught by the lines:

Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus
rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis.
Soles occidere et redire possunt:
nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
Da mi basia mille deinde centum,

dein mille altera, dein secunda centun,
 deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.
 Dein, cum milia multa facerimus,
 conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
 aut ne quis malus invidere possit,
 cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.²

He automatically related the '*lascivisculus*' of the introduction to those sad, timeless lines and, involuntarily, shook his head. He thought he could understand perfectly Catullus' state of mind when the ardent surrender to love ushered in the sad, chill thought of death: had it not always been that way with him too? It was the knowledge of the inescapable destiny that would terminate his existence that made him fervently desire a devoted love, through which he might reconcile himself to life, might give it meaning and warmth, through which, in other words, he might defeat death itself. What, he thought, was human being's yearning for love, if not the pursuit of solidarity in the face of fate, the yearning for an affection through which they might recover atavic fusion in the dark womb of the world, and unconscious longing for resurrection? Every living creature was condemned; and that condemnation was an outrage, an injustice that compelled them to return to the darkness. They suffered their sentence in sorrow because they loved what had been created, that is to say, the one truth, the one miracle which they could truly possess. Man's expectation of love, Gabriele De Angelis said to himself, was synonymous with an amorous attachment to life, to that magical act which had brought him into the world. How else could man desire to prolong that magic, if not by loving it with his whole being, loving it through love, and thus, above all, through his love for another creature, marked by the same destiny? Love, thought Gabriele De Angelis, is the only true rebellion against death, the one great and at the same time fragile victory over death. That is why, both in life and in literature, those who lose their loved one want to die: to punish themselves for their defeat. Love was then the true revolt against destiny; and love was the true faith – a human faith, which could not prevail – in survival.

There were sounds from the next room. A moment later, the door opened and the old man and the little girl appeared.

-“This is Bia,” the old man said.

Gabriele De Angelis got up.

-“Hello!” the little girl said merrily.

-“Hello,” Gabriele De Angelis said awkwardly.

-“Please do sit down,” the old man murmured.

All three sat down. At last he could make a calm and careful scrutiny of those two mysterious beings. The old man, whose age was indeterminate, had a serene, smiling face; he was wearing the very plain, light blue tunic that Gabriele De Angelis had seen him in on the evening of

the auction. The garment set off the white of his hair and matched the blue of his eyes. The little girl was quite beautiful. Her eyes were large and of a deep blue, her face round and chubby; her coloring was fair; she wore her fair hair, just touching the nape of her neck, in a helmet shape; it was secured over her temples and down to her ears by a thin braid that finished in a kind of knot, a sort of little coil; her nose was tiny, her lips full and upturned. Her features and her look altered with her expression, which was at times gentle or stern, mischievous or innocent, ironical or candid, restless or calm. The most striking thing about her, however, was the light that emanated from her smile. She wore a white silk dress, finely worked around the neck and sleeves and a string of pearls around her neck; on her chest hung a medallion on a chain.

-“Signor De Angelis,” Sirius Deneb murmured, “here we are! And we would like to say right away that your poetry touches the soul.”

-“Thank you,” Gabriele De Angelis replied as mild electrical charges coursed agreeably through his whole body.

-“It’s beautiful! Beautiful!” the child added with a happy laugh and, as she spoke, she reached out and touched his hand with her own.

-“You can’t imagine how pleased I am that you appreciate it,” Gabriele De Angelis went on.

-“Goodness, we certainly can!” the child flashed. But she looked at the old man and regained her composure immediately.

-“Signor De Angelis,” the old man resumed softly, “we can see from your poetry that you know what it is to suffer. You are a very sensitive man, so you will be our friend.”

-“Of course he’ll be on our side,” the child put in with a very roguish look, in another burst of feeling. “In fact,” she added, “he already is.”

-“Signor De Angelis,” the old man went on, “do you really want to know our secret? Well, we shall tell you. And there is more that I want to tell you.”

-“You can even put it in your paper!”

Bia all but shouted, with a start that revealed her inability to restrain herself any longer and her irrepressible desire to be the one to explain the mystery to him. But then she looked at the old man in sudden mortification and whispered:

-“Oh, I’m sorry Sirius, do forgive me.”

-“You did quite right to tell him,” Sirius said, stroking the nape of her neck; then, turning to look at Gabriele De Angelis again, he went on:

-“Yes my friend, you can tell your readers all that we are about to confess to you.”

-“Thank you,” Gabriele De Angelis mumbled in his embarrassment, “thank you very much.”

-“You’re pleased, aren’t you?” the child asked, and then, turning promptly to the old man, added: “You see how pleased he is? He doesn’t know what to say!”

The old man nodded patiently. Full of curiosity, the little girl leaned right over to Gabriele De Angelis who could not speak for his agitation.

-“Well then,” the child pressed him, “How will you write it? Are you going to interview us?”

-“That’s just it,” the journalist murmured. “I don’t know.” Silence fell briefly. The child was hardly able to repress her impatience; the old man, on the other hand, exuded an aura of tranquility. Bia got things moving:

-“Come on,” she said, “Let’s have the first question. Don’t you want to know where we’re from? Who we are?”

The old man signaled to her to control herself. After a while, he said:

-“Well, Signor De Angelis, listen to our story.”

-“Hold on tight,” said Bia in amusement.

-“We” the old man resumed, “are from another world. We have been sent here by all the poets who dwell there on Earth to reclaim all the poetry that they wrote during their lives on Earth, and to take it back to them. Yes, Signor De Angelis, the dead poets want to regain possession of their works.”

-“I see,” said Gabriele De Angelis, and after a few seconds’ silence he added: “And what is the reason, Signor Deneb, behind all this?”

-“The reason is that mankind doesn’t deserve them,” the child pouted.

-“Exactly,” the old man approved. “Unfortunately, the inhabitants of Earth have a lot of faults and do a lot of bad things. But that, after all, is all part of man’s destiny, of his right to choose. If man couldn’t do wrong, virtue would be meaningless. He has, however, one failing which, in the opinion of the poets who live in the next world, has now reached too high a level, and which they find offensive: *shallowness*. Our friends, the poets, think mankind should be punished for this sin, which they deem very grave. So we are going to take all the poetry away from Earth. Which is not to say that it will be lost, Heaven forbid! We will look after it and one day you know.. men will be able to read it, but . . .”

-“We won’t let everybody read it,” the little girl broke in.

-“What do you mean?” Gabriele De Angelis asked.

-“Only the most sensitive people who were not guilty of shallowness in their lives will have access to these works,” the old man specified.

8.

They all stopped. The little girl was leaning against the back of her armchair now, scrutinizing Gabriele De Angelis attentively. He sat with his head bowed, wrapped in thought. Eventually, he looked up at his companions and said with a very expansive smile:

-“I’m glad they made this decision. It’s true, we don’t deserve poetry. In fact, do you know something? From now on, I won’t write anymore: what’s the point?”

-“No, no, no!” the old man replied. “That would be a mistake. You would be lacking in respect for yourself, stifling hope, giving in to pride. Besides, you can’t refuse this gift which was given to you. Writing poetry is a very honourable way to live, don’t forget that. And then, the living have to try to improve their fellows. If they stopped writing poetry, to add to shallowness, there would be unfeelingness on earth. And that would be the end. You see, Signor De Angelis, if people like you stopped believing in poetry, they would stop believing in life itself.”

-“Gabriele,” the child interposed, “why do you write poetry?”

-“Because I suffer, because I feel lonely, because at times I’m full of memories and yearnings, because the world is beautiful, because it is a way of loving”

-“You see?” Sirius Deneb resumed. “Poetry brings peace and comfort to your soul. Why should you forego that?”

-“What shall I do?” Gabriele De Angelis asked.

-“You must help us towards our goal,” the old man explained, “by publicizing the information about the reasons for our being here. You will see, at first people will react indignantly, but then”

-“We know how to deal with them,” the child put in.

-“Can I also say that you are staying here? You won’t get any peace,” said Gabriele De Angelis.

-“Don’t worry,” the old man reassured him. “In a little while, we shall move to the collecting station. The building’s well guarded and impregnable.”

-“You will come and see us, won’t you?” Bia asked him with another spurt.

-“I’d love to,” Gabriele De Angelis answered.

-“Hurray!” the child cried and, in a burst of affection, she threw her arms around him and planted a noisy kiss on his cheek.

The old man stood up.

-“You will be able to come and see us whenever you like,” he confirmed. -“By the way,” he added hastily, “if you should have any difficulty in getting your paper to believe you, or if they should be reluctant to publish your article, let me know. We’ll think of something, you’ll see. And take this photograph with you too, it might help,” and as he spoke, he handed the journalist a photo of himself and Bia.

-“Look how well I came out!” the little girl said radiantly. Shortly afterward, Gabriele De Angelis left the hotel.

9.

Outside, it had become cooler. He did not feel like going home. He was too excited about what had happened to him. However, by now it was too late to go to the newspaper offices. He went into a bar and rang Silvia.

-“Will you come out to dinner with me?” he asked her.

-“Hey!” she said, “is the impregnable fortress surrendering? Are my seductive charms beginning to take effect then? I accept. I’ll be right over.”

They went to a country-style restaurant which was warm and intimate. Gabriele De Angelis was in the mood to drink, to unwind. And as he drank, he seemed to resume his human demeanor. He also became more and more forward: he kept trying to kiss her and slip his hands down the front of her blouse.

-“Do you mind telling me what’s the matter with you this evening?” she asked in amusement. “You surely don’t want to make me think you’ve fallen in love with me all of the sudden!”

-“It’s much more than that,” he replied. “You’ll see, I’ve got a tremendous scoop. But that’s not what I care about. Do you know something? we can be happy after all.”

Silvia did everything she could to get him to explain but he would not give in. Not one word about the meeting that afternoon came out of his lips.

When they went home he was intoxicated. He asked her to undress slowly and while she played at doing a strip, in some amusement, he murmured strange phrases to her like:

-“Are you a woman or a violin string? I wish you were a harp or a flute. So I could play you. So I could love you the way you love a flute or a violin.”

The girl lay down next to him and Gabriele De Angelis ran the palms of his hands over her skin.

-“But you are playing!” he exclaimed. “You really are! Listen! Listen!”

-“You’re quite mad, let me tell you,” said Silvia. “Mad or drunk.”

When they came together, Gabriele De Angelis had the feeling that he was hovering in the sky, buoyed up by a symphony of harpsichords and violas, and at times, he felt the burning rays of the sun filtering through the clouds and notes onto his body. Then silence slowly returned and now he walked through a field full of foamy mimosas and the air was saturated with their perfume, a perfume so intense it

made his head spin. All of a sudden, Bia emerged from the sunlit trees.

-“You can’t catch me! You can’t catch me!” she shouted.

He started to run after her and her little shrieks mingled with trills of laughter. Bia ran, in her white dress, through the mimosas and he was unable to catch her.

-“If you catch me,” the child said in her silvery voice, “I’ll show you the fountain-head of butterflies, shells and music. I’ll reveal the secrets of the stars to you, every soul has a star. I’ll give you lots of colored moons. I’ll show you the home of the seeds that bring the earth into bloom and the beds of all the seas where there are enchanted castles made of diamonds. I’ll introduce you to the winged poets and the blue birds that recite their poems. Come on, catch me! Catch me! At court, everyone played with me. You should never bewail your fate. Do you know what would have been my fate if I had grown up? The fate of a prince’s natural daughters: either I would have been married off to a country squire, or else I would have been an abbess. Either a great, fat abbess or the wife of a boor of a man, with a sweaty red face from drinking. Me! The Greeks were right, believe me: those whom the gods love die young. Come on, catch me, catch me!”

All of a sudden Bia disappeared and Gabriele De Angelis woke up with a start. He was in bed alone. On the bedside table was a note from Silvia:

-“I’m leaving,” it said, “because I have to get up early tomorrow morning and I don’t want to disturb you. So long. Thanks for the lovely evening you gave me.” It was unforgettable. When you’ve had a few drinks, you are even nicer.’

Silvia had slender limbs like a young girl’s, and small firm breasts. She loved everything soft. Sometimes she would wrap herself in the feather quilt on his bed: “This is my nest,” she would say. But she could not be still for long. Then she would jump on top of him, tickle him, and pretend to try to poke her fingers in his eyes. When they started seeing each other, bells always rang the moment they embraced. “A good sign,” she would murmur. Their relationship had begun without plans and without promises; and it had gone on the same way, had grown day by day, naturally.

He looked at the clock; just six. He sat back against the headboard and sighed. He was worried about the day that lay ahead of him. How would the editor react? Would he believe him? And on hearing the news – of an old man and a little girl who had come from the kingdom of the dead to punish mankind for its shallowness – how would his fellow-men behave? Would they endure the provocation or would they react against it? Would they understand and learn their lesson or would they, in accordance with an age-old attitude toward poets, take refuge in derision? Would they resort to depression and

arrest Sirius Deneb and his young friend, on the charge of defaming humanity? Would they send in bulldozers to raze the pavilion to the ground, and take possession of the gold that had presumably been stored there, in the name of Reason of State and of the "dignity of the Society"? Anything could happen, he thought.

10.

Gabriele De Angelis was aware, as he was getting ready to leave, that that day was, in any case, the start of a new era. Because the dead poets' stern decision undoubtedly contained a precise judgement on the living, a very harsh verdict. In the wake of their deed, the history of mankind could change for better or for worse: deprived of poetry and overwhelmed by gold, humanity could plunge headlong into barbarity or it could bestir and redeem itself. It was a gamble, a challenge. As at other bleak moments in history, the poets had aimed their blow carefully; but this time, mankind could not respond by imprisoning, exiling, or killing them.

It was ten o'clock when he reached the newspaper offices. The director had just sat down in his swivel chair. Gabriele De Angelis knocked and entered.

"I must speak to you," he said in a faint voice which betrayed his emotion.

"Sit down, De Angelis," the director replied. "What is it?"

Gabriele told him all he knew. The director listened to him very attentively, then he asked:

"You are positive about what you are saying, aren't you?"

"If you want," the journalist replied, "you can check it by ringing the International Exhibitions Building and the hotel."

"I shall do," the director said. "But in the meantime you work up a good article, and write it the way you told me about it. If it's all true, it will be a real coup. For the time being, don't say anything about it to anyone, not even your colleagues. You don't want them selling the story to one of the agencies."

At four o'clock, a late edition of his paper came out with the nine column headline: '**Poetry taken away from the earth / to punish mankind.**' The subheading explained: Sirius Deneb, the mysterious figure behind the affair' at the Pavilion for poetry collection has allegedly come from the Next World by order of dead poets outraged by human beings' shallowness.'

In the first column, in italic type under the headline: '**Between science fiction and magic,**' the director, cautiously distanced himself from what Gabriele De Angelis had to say. "There is no doubt that our reporter is telling the truth," the article said among other things. "We would not publish such an incredible news item without first checking

it out adequately. The episode that occurred at the auction is authentic: the elusive Sirius Deneb did indeed hand over 160 million lire in gold; in exchange for which the collection of poetry by the three famous Roman poets was delivered to him. It is also a great fact that this man – accompanied by a little girl who registered in the name of Bia de' Medici – stayed in an hotel in midtown which he left yesterday evening. The pair were seen entering the Pavilion. This all proves that the statements collected by our reporter are reliable. But we must be careful about the way we interpret these strange events; other people must carry out the necessary investigations. So long as they do so without delay. Our country – at this difficult moment in time – is in need of certainties, not further anxieties or cause for agitation."

No sooner did the paper reach the news-stands that the press agencies circulated the news throughout the world. That evening and the next day, the dailies and radio and television stations talked of nothing else. There followed a day of almost total silence. Then, the reactions began. The most important national paper resorted to nothing less than two lines of Theogonis for the two line headline, spread across the entire front page: 'All sorts of evils are in mortal men / All sorts of virtues too / and resources.' The gist of the more or less detailed reports, of the reverse block, Op Ed type-face, boxed news items and bold-face was this: people should be on their guard, this Sirius Deneb was unscrupulous. Besides, nobody had the right to insult the human race so radically. Human beings are not saints, but they still have plenty of good qualities. The parade of experts began: historians, theologians, physicists, sociologists, astronomers, all commemorating man's conquests over the centuries, and all scandalized that an aging visionary – but where had he got such wealth from? -- should dare to express such harsh judgement on the "lord of the universe." Even if, behind this facade, there really were poets, deceased or otherwise, it should not be forgotten that poets as a class were no better than any other – and then came examples of the pettiness and the vices displayed by the poets throughout the ages.

Naturally, there was no lack of reflections and declarations from certain famous living poets. For the most part, although the language they used was more subtle and sophisticated, and very often hermetic, they made no attempt to hide their indignation at the attitude of the mysterious old man. Of course – they asserted – the times were not ideal for poetry, which should have occupied a far more important place in society, and human beings were not angels. But they did not deserve to be 'punished' in such a way.

Only a couple of them appeared to be genuinely saddened by the episode, which emphasized a great harm that stems from shallowness, the cruelty engendered by it, a failing which for good reason affected and mortified sensitive beings and artists more than anybody else; and

they publicly professed to understand – in the sense that it was a moral reproof – their dead colleagues' act.

All the same, said one of the two, in a calm, well-written article, it should not be forgotten that the poets of all ages left their heritage to mankind as a whole, precisely to mitigate thoughtlessness and coarseness; to dispossess them, now, of their heritage would certainly mean lowering the quality of life for our society, depriving it of the ennobling corrective of poetry, snatching away from mankind a chunk of their very soul, denying them an important means of redeeming themselves. But, he added, if this was what was intended by Homer, Pindarus, and Solon, Alcaeus and Sappho, Lucretius and Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Dante, he could only bow to their wishes and withdraw into his home to think.

The following Sunday, on the front pages of the newspapers and on the radio and television advertising slots, there was another announcement from Sirius Deneb: everyone who sent or took books to the Poetry Recovery Pavilion would be paid a sum of gold worth five-hundred times their market value. Book owners were further urged to speed up consignment since the same process of 'recovery' would continue, nation by nation, over the entire globe, hence time was a problem.

11.

That was the turning point. The next day, an article of the utmost significance by a well known economist, was published in a very reputable weekly. The headline, slyly, asked: '**Punishment or reward?**' Then came the following text:

Our country – and not just our country – has been alarmed by the much publicized affair of the collection of poetic literature, by poets now deceased, by a likable old man who answers to the name of Sirius Deneb.

This alarm – accompanied by indignation – is due to the interpretation that various information sources have made of the facts, based on statements supposedly made by Deneb himself, who is apparently motivated by the desire to *punish* mankind for its shallowness (a quality which still needs to be clearly defined regarding its connotations and meaning; all too often, this word is used incorrectly, to denote the pure and simple art of living; the world cannot just consist of poets and sensitive souls). Of course, this moralizing 'verdict' is unacceptable.

'The moment has come to play down and put a stop to the rush of the defense of Man – whose works, over the centuries, are enough in themselves to testify to his fundamental goodness – so we can take

time to consider the positive implication of events.

Everyone who has sent or taken their books to the strange Pavilion has received gold in exchange; real, pure, unadulterated gold. And gold, as we all know, means wealth. At a time of national and world-wide economic crisis like the present, this unexpected injection of gold into the world is we might say a real manna falling from Heaven.

Perhaps we, together with the poorest countries of our planet, have been given a unique opportunity to make a further leap forward in terms of progress and well-being. A well-being based, at last, on gold, real gold, not on debts, international loans, or on the monetary policy schemes which have sorely tried us in the past.

On the other hand, the poetry of the past is now the common property of the human soul. Holding onto books is not important; what is important is to assimilate their content and for it to become so profound a part of us as to regulate the conduct of our present and future life.

So let's look at the bright side. Let's stop this shilly-shallying. The recovery of our depressed areas may depend on this extraordinary opportunity; as we might look beyond ourselves, overcome age-old evils like famine in the Third World, and deal with the backwardness and poverty of so many regions of the earth.

Let's greet this offer favorably – what does it matter where and who it comes from? Our country, our economy, the world we live in, need gold. And let's not forget that prosperity is also the foundation of peace and great civilizations, and of great cultures.'

Other similar declarations echoed this position. The large associations of employers, businessmen and artisans aligned themselves with the philosophy expressed by the well-known economist immediately and the unions themselves – after an emergency meeting of their General Councils – agreed that for the workers, on the other hand – who had been historically excluded from the culture of the bourgeoisie – a good shot of gold would be salutary; unemployment could be beaten and productivity boosted, working conditions in the factories could be improved and the health of the workforce would benefit. 'The poetry in books,' one union periodical asserted, 'is there to teach us that we must live poetically. But what poetry can there be in grinding poverty? Prosperity means security, which all manifests as happiness; when one is happy, one is more in harmony with the beauty of nature and creation, so the quality of life improves.'

The political parties were next to last to join to ranks in favor of the 'historic barter.' Their leaders expressed solidarity with the positions of the unions, although they warned that a course of gold treatment would not be enough to cure the country: "This heaven-sent downpour of gold needs to be carefully managed," wrote the

spokesman for the majority political party, and he proposed the setting up of an inter-party committee comprising spokesmen for the universities to decide what should be done.

Last of all – and not until the President has consulted the Head of the Institute for Broadcasting and the leaders of every parliament group – the government stated its position. It accepted the opportunity for economic recovery offered by Signor Sirius Deneb who, it assured, in any case did not appear to be linked with any criminal association.

It seemed as if that was all the entire population was waiting for. Starting the next day, books of poetry began to stream into the Pavilion by the ton. The police had trouble keeping the chaos under control. Fortunately – and this was a great help in speeding up the consignment operation – out of the main gate they built a long tunnel equipped with special apparatus which, in a few seconds, could examine books, reject fakes, and send those accepted inside; at the same time, other mechanical appliances took care of delivering the boxes containing the gold to personal callers or loading into vans the boxes which were to be sent by messenger.

12.

As libraries, bookshops, publishing houses, private individuals, and public bodies rid themselves of their poetic works, a sort of irresistible craving for joy and pleasure took hold of people. Restaurants, bars, cinemas, nightclubs, discotheques, in short every place of entertainment was packed, car manufacturers were unable to keep up with the demand for new and powerful vehicles; there was money being spent everywhere. Nobody would ever have imagined it could be so easy to be happy. Political wrangling became less bitter, people stopped talking about the government crisis (the government forecast large-scale investment in housing, schools, hospitals, roads, water-works, and leisure facilities), the various parties seemed to have finally found the path of concord. Trade unionists and employers met at marvelous banquets over which they vied with one another in making concessions and spoke of a common goal of social peace and of “happiness for everyone from the cradle to the grave.” And the foreign press was already showing signs of impatience and asking for the operation to be carried out faster; everywhere abroad, governmental initiatives were being taken in anticipation of Signor Sirius Deneb’s visit. A representation of Finance ministers from developing countries asked for, and obtained, an audience with him and then forwarded an official request that he should continue his itinerary on the earth via their states (there were even those who tried to bribe him).

There were, it’s true, a few acts of rebellion here and there.

Groups of intellectuals organized demonstrations in the course of which they distributed leaflets railing against what they described as the "infamous capitulation of culture under the heel of base gold." But they were all but ignored by public opinion which actually began adopting a threatening stance towards such attitudes when a regrettable scandal broke out: a well known poet, whose greatest aspiration had been, for years, to win the Nobel Prize, had gone on a protest march, but only after he had pocketed a large quantity of precious metal in exchange for delivering, to the Pavilion, his entire library. It was an irony of fate that a television camera should pan round onto him at the very moment the exchange took place. The cameraman had, unintentionally, zoomed in on his face, so the whole country could see the greed written all over it. From that moment on, anybody who tried to object to the course of events was in real danger of being lynched.

The great flood of books to the collection center went on throughout the month of November. At the beginning of December, the pace began to slow down, so much so that the tunnel was removed and, as at the start, the attendants in white tunics reappeared.

One morning, a strange contraption appeared on the building's terrace, which was nothing less than a sophisticated radar antenna. Shortly after, the Pavilion put out a map which gave the localities and addresses at which there were still books of poetry. In the days that followed, these volumes too, were brought up or sent to the collection center. On the evening of 15 December – a clear, cold evening, with a red sunset, streaked by small orange clouds – the operation came to an end.

That evening, Gabriele De Angelis went to see the old man and the little girl. Sirius Deneb and Bia came out gaily to meet him.

"I've been expecting you!" the little girl cried throwing her arms around his neck.

"Come in, Signor De Angelis," the old man murmured, ushering him inside.

There was not a single nook or cranny, not a tiny scrap of available space which was not cluttered with books. In between the tall, orderly, close-packed piles, only a narrow gangway remained. The three of them walked down it to a lift which took them up to the top floor. Here, the old man and the child had set aside a small, comfortable room for themselves.

"Do sit down, Signor De Angelis," said the old man.

The journalist did so and the child sat beside him on the same armchair.

"You know, we're just about to leave," said Bia. "Are you sorry?"

"Very!" Gabriele De Angelis replied. "In fact."

-“Yes?” the child encouraged him.

-“I really wish you would take me with you,” Gabriele De Angelis continued.

Bia looked at the old man:

-“We can’t, Signor De Angelis,” he said gently. “There are rules and laws that we cannot break. And besides, it would not be right. You must stay here. Now is the time the Earth needs poets. People will realize – at least we hope they will – that you cannot live on gold alone.”

-“What a pity,” the child murmured. “It would be lovely if you could come with us. You’re so nice.”

-“One day,” the old man consoled her, “you, or rather, our friend will come join us. But first, he has his duty to do: to write poetry and make a gift of it to his fellows.”

-“I’ll always be beside you,” Bia said, resting her head on his shoulder, “and I’ll wait for you. You’ll see how much fun we’ll have together, when you come. But as long as you are here, walk very tall, as if you were on stilts, do you understand?”

-“Will you show me the fountainhead of the stars?” Gabriele De Angelis asked as he held her to him.

-“I promise. But in the meantime, I want to tell you a secret.” Then, breaking off, she looked questioningly at the old man; as soon as he had nodded in agreement, the child went on: “Creatures’ souls are the fountainhead of the stars! For every creature who is born there is a star. Do you understand? Please don’t tell anybody, it’s a secret!”

-“I won’t tell anyone,” Gabriele De Angelis assured her.

-“If you come to the window,” Bia whispered, “I’ll show you mine.”

He followed her and she showed him a quivering star, in the east.

-“There it is, that’s me. Do you like it?” she asked.

-“It’s beautiful,” Gabriele De Angelis replied softly. “So, I have a star too?”

-“Of course you do! But I can’t show it to you, it’s forbidden. One day, you will have to find it for yourself.” And she added, very pleased with herself, “I know already.”

-“Is it a beautiful star?” Gabriele De Angelis asked.

-“It’s a big, big star, and it has a billion colors and it lights so many skies that you can’t even begin to imagine, and its rays are so bright that they resound, as they traverse the universe, and intersecting the rays of all other stars they make music, my dear, but oh what music! I should never tire of listening to it.”

-“I can’t wait to hear it for myself” Gabriele De Angelis whispered. “With you.”

-“With me, and with Sirius as well,” Bia said, turning towards

him; then she called: "Will you come here too, Sirius? Do you see how they're shining tonight? They're waiting for us."

The old man joined them. For a while, they stood silently, gazing at the firmament. All of a sudden, Sirius Deneb roused himself with a sigh and looked at Gabriele De Angelis with gentle blue eyes:

"You must go, Signor Angelis. Thank you for everything," he said.

Bia threw her arms around his neck.

"Good bye, Gabriele," she murmured tenderly. "Think about me from time to time."

"And you come play with me in my dreams now and then," he answered.

"I will. Goodbye."

Gabriele De Angelis took his leave. When he went through the gate, he walked a few yards and then looked up at the building. At that moment he heard Silvia's voice.

"Hello mysterious being. Excuse me, but are you a man or an angel?"

"A man, a man!" he said with a sigh, adding: "Thanks for coming."

"But I love you," Silvia whispered.

Suddenly, there was a great glow of light. The building began to sparkle and sweet music filled the air. Slowly, in an eddying of colors, the building took off from the ground and soared into the sky. Gabriele De Angelis raised his arm and waved goodbye. A few seconds later, the building disappeared into the dark of the night and was lost among the flickering dots of the stars.

Gabriele De Angelis and Silvia stood for a long time, gazing upwards. Then, seized by a great gaiety, they skipped off over the fields like two children.

But the world was robbed of its glorious poetical past.

Author's Note: The Character of the little girl is a transposition of Bia de' Medici, the natural daughter of Cosimo I by a Florentine Lady. Bia died in 1542 aged six or seven. Her portrait, painted by Bronzino, hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

NOTES

1. This man fell in love with a girl of important rank called Clodia, whom he calls Lesbia in his poetry. He was a lusty man, and in his lifetime, there were a few to equal him in writing poetry: in the art of using concise language there was nobody better than him.

2. Let's Live, my Lesbia, and love, / and give no heed to all the talk / of
crabbed old men. / Suns may set and rise again: / but when our brief light has
once gone out / all that's left is sleep through the eternal night. / Give me a
thousand kisses then a hundred, / then another thousand, then once more,
once more a hundred / then without a break another thousand and another
hundred. / Then we have totaled many thousands / we will confuse the
score; so not knowing how many we've exchanged / we'll prevent malicious
men from harming us / by keeping our kisses' number from their eyes.