The eyes of those around me lower and my fresh opponent shuffles slowly back to his table. The waitress remains against the wall, eyes still focused on the floor. I replace my sword in its sheath, place my payment on the counter and amid hushed glances, exit the tavern.

The night air is much cooler than in the stuffy tavern, especially against my wet clothing. I feel rejuvenated and notice my surroundings with a heightened sense of detail. The beggarmen seem unusually ragged tonight in their worn clothing and un­bathed skin. And the lights filtering from upstairs apartments appear unnaturally moody in the dark night. I am anxious to reach my studio; I feel a sudden urge to paint. I can picture the finished canvas as clearly as I can see the rickety carriages rolling by me in the street.

The painting I see is set in a deeply shadowed room of a robust crimson cast. The figures, wearing weeping, sorrowed expressions, gather round the body of a deceased woman. She is draped ungracefully, over a table, barefoot and bloated. She is both hideous and beautiful. She is the Virgin Mary, as the mother of the common and humble. She, modeled from a poor dead woman I saw pulled from the Tiber last week, is also humble and human, herself.

Presently I awaken from my thoughts as I reach my studio. As I enter I throw my cloak and sword on the floor. I light the lanterns and the canvas before me awakens to the flickering light. The palette lies on the table beside me, awaiting use. I immediately mix a warm, rich red and thrust my brush at the canvas. The brush licks the surface repeatedly, more by instinct than by will. Red violet lays itself on top of the red in places. Black enters now; the surface begins to undulate. The layers build, becoming many layers, becoming a thick rich surface. A line of red evolves into a shape, and a draped cloth emerges above the heads of the mourners. I am unaware of time or the space around me. I continue like this for what must be hours, for the light of an early dawn sun is creeping across the canvas before I know it. The lanterns have burned out, the oil used up. When I can no longer stand, I enter my body once again. Laying my brush down, I throw my body onto a small cot on the far side of the room. I am spent and it is only a matter of seconds before I drift into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Bibliography

My address book would creep with ink
that spells your name and place,
constant number changes,
your life’s rearrangements.
All the alternate ways
I’ve been hard pressed, depressed,
and blessed to reach you.
I would want your whereabouts to take up an entire page.