

An afternoon stroll in an Italian city

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An afternoon stroll in an Italian city

by [Quillori](#)

Summary

An empty square, a tower, two men who stand in silence before a statue ... there is a logic to the place, but it is an old logic, or perhaps a modern one, a dreaming logic that owes little to reason.

Notes

The paintings can be found in the requester's letter [here](#). I have also, as per their helpful suggestion, filched a variety of di Chirico's titles: these are used only as titles, and do not refer to the actual paintings.

Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon

The sun slants across the square, marking it in clear lines: dark and bright. The pool with its fountain is in the light, as is the arcade where the merchants sometimes walk. The other arcade is already in darkness. No one walks there. The town hall is also in darkness, and the clock has stopped. Two men stand in the sunlight. They shake hands, their deal completed. They stand so that their shadows combine, making one long tower of darkness.

Time passes, although the clock hands do not move. The shadows are darker, longer, but somehow that which remains in the light is deeper coloured, more vivid, for the close approach of darkness. The square seems smaller now, more cramped, as though the colonnade of shadows encroaches upon it, approaching the colonnade of light. The fountain climbs higher than before, hoping to escape into the night sky, or just determined to play fiercely in the last of the light, before it is crushed. Only the town hall is further away, receding quickly. Its doors are dark, but light gleams around their edges. Before, they were merely closed, inaccessible. Now, if you could reach them, they glow with hidden life.

The House with the Green Shutters

By day, the colonnade beside the pool is blank, windowless. As evening comes it sprouts windows, welcoming the last of the light. By day, its windows are elsewhere: it looks upon towers and factories (if there is a difference); statues; building sites. Sometimes a girl will roll a hoop down its endless length. Is it better to have a fine tower, or a factory with charming houses round it? Men come and go, but they cannot agree.

Flight Toward the Sea

Sometimes it seems as though the city is built of children's building blocks: the buildings solid, impossible to enter. The light strikes through the shallow colonnades, but there are no doors, no real windows, only painted decorations pretending to be entrances. The train station is a real building, however, with empty space inside: you can see clear through it, because it is empty. The train arrived almost an hour ago, and left soon after.

Elsewhere, the citizens go two by two (except the merchants, in the morning, and the others, who do not walk in the darkness because they do not exist; now it is afternoon so the merchants are all gone). Only here at the station, where there are travellers – seekers after knowledge and lost souls – is it permitted to go singly. There is a man by himself, a poet, who waits confidently for the train to return, clanking and solid and real. There is another man, a sailor, who stands to attention. He cannot be waiting for the train, because the train does not go to the port.

The city has a fine port, with a tall lighthouse to guide ships. (Trains do not need to be guided; they run on rails.) The difficulty is to find the lighthouse, which is outside the city. The fine piazzas open only onto other piazzas, until you return to where you started. The trick is to go somewhere out of the sun, but not yet too dark. The doors and archways are like the shutters, and open as the light begins to fail, but when it is too dark, they open only onto nothingness.

If you choose the right time, you can walk through a forest of arches until you come to a hill outside the city, where the lighthouse stands. Outside the city the sun is still shining. Strangely, the lighthouse has been built in the countryside: the farmland rolls in hills and billows all around, and there is no salt water anywhere in sight. Perhaps what the locals call the port is what you would call the station. Perhaps soon there will be another train.

The Sacred Fish

In the square in front of the town hall, beneath the stopped clock, the pool with the fountain is full of little fish. They are freshwater fish, and the pool is rainwater, for the city ordinances are quite clear: only pure water is permitted, from the rain or from springs. Even tears are forbidden.

The little fish are caught and eaten: you may buy them quite readily between dawn and the stroke of noon, after which time all trading must cease. They are caught always at night, when it is quite dark, for sin must not be exposed to the light of the sun, and it is sin to kill the living fish.

There are statues of the fish, without which the city would not exist, but they are statues of what the fish *mean*, not what they *are*: there is woman, abundant and fertile, melting into relaxation in front of the stark ranks of columns; there is a horse, ancient symbol of the sea (the horse has a rider, but he is not important); there is the man who founded the city and is still remembered in its dreams.

The dead fish become stiff and rigid. At dawn their guts stain the marble stairs of the merchants' colonnade with the red of dawn. The pond is very deep, and its depths remain dark even at midday.

la mattina ai bagni misteriosi

In the morning, if you do not want to go to the market (and it is hard to avoid the market, because it is in every piazza), you may go to the baths instead. They are the way they always have been, time out of mind: a Roman would not feel out of place. The water is very clear, and no matter how deep you dive, you do not reach the end of it. There is a fountain in the centre of the baths: as the day gets later, it leaps higher and higher. The baths are very pleasant, and some people like to spend all day at them, swimming to and fro in the sparkling water. It is wise, however, to leave before nightfall.

The Purity of a Dream

There is a tower above the city: it is not a tower but a factory chimney. It was not there before. The light has not quite faded, and in the last of the sunlight it casts a shadow, a long dark figure, like two men who stand so close together their shadow is united.

Perhaps it is not a lighthouse outside the city, but a tower, a fortified castle to keep invaders at bay. The welcome invaders, the travellers and the traders, come to the other side of the city, to where the train station is kept. It is a long walk from the train, but two by two the city is gradually filling up. One day it will be as full of people as the sacred pond is full of fish.

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