

'MARVELLOUS
... BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN
... COMPELLING'

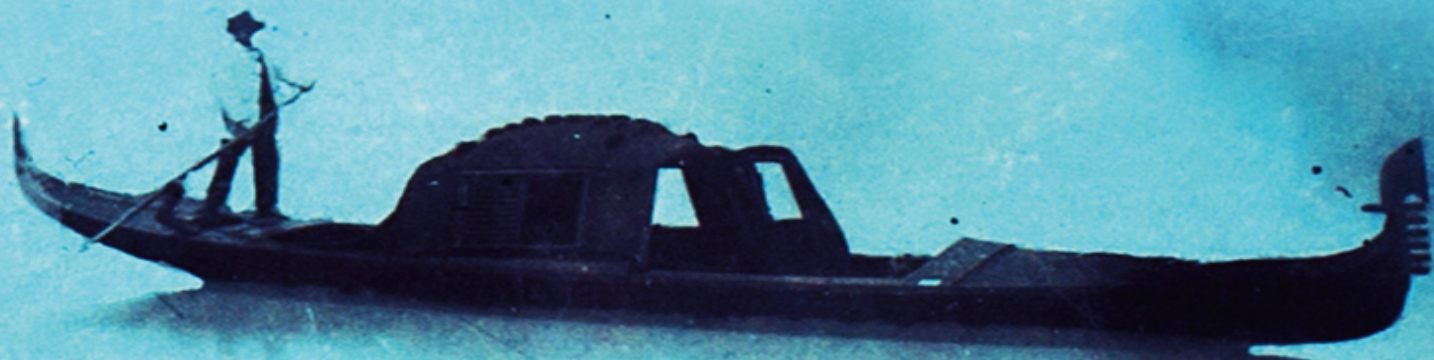
DAILY TELEGRAPH

'IMPRESSIVE'
SUNDAY TIMES

Barry Unsworth

BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF
SACRED HUNGER

STONE VIRGIN



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About the Book

For five hundred years a statue of the Madonna has watched over Venice. Now, dulled by time and pollution, she is prepared for restoration. As Simon Raikes immerses himself in the painstaking task of cleaning and repairing, he is inexorably drawn to the stories of violence and lust which have surrounded this stone virgin.

Simon's investigations lead him to Chiara Litsov, the wife of a renowned sculptor. A dangerous attraction develops between them and it appears inevitable that once again the stone virgin will bear witness to passion, betrayal and murder.

About the Author

Barry Unsworth was born in 1930 in Durham. He was the author of many novels, including *Pascali's Island*, which was shortlisted for the 1980 Booker Prize; *Stone Virgin* (1985); *Sacred Hunger*, which was joint winner of the 1992 Booker Prize; *Morality Play*, which was shortlisted for the 1995 Booker Prize; *Losing Nelson* (1999); *The Songs of the Kings* (2002); *The Ruby in Her Navel* (2006); *Land of Marvels* (2009); and *The Quality of Mercy* (2011), which was shortlisted for The Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction. Barry Unsworth died in 2012.

Also by Barry Unsworth

The Partnership

The Greeks Have a Word for It

The Hide

Mooncranker's Gift

The Big Day

Pascali's Island (published in the United States under the title *The Idol Hunters*)

The Rage of the Vulture

Sugar and Rum

Sacred Hunger

Morality Play

After Hannibal

Losing Nelson

The Songs of the Kings

The Ruby in Her Navel

Land of Marvels

The Quality of Mercy

Stone Virgin

BARRY UNSWORTH

 WINDMILL BOOKS

Madonna Commissioned

HE BRINGS ME writing materials without asking for money but he does not speak, I cannot be sure what his motives are, whether he has seen my worth and wishes sincerely to help me or whether he is merely acting on orders from his superiors or it is possible he has believed my promises to reward him when I get out of this hole but whatever the truth of it I take this chance of reaching you, noble lord, I beg you to find out who are my enemies and speak for me, I mean those behind my accusers. From you a few words would be enough. I am innocent of the girl's death. I swear it by all the saints. Ask me to make any solemn oath and I will do it. I was in another part of the town when she was drowned. Those who say I was with her are lying, they have been paid to lie. You are my generous patron, you are one of the Three Hundred, you obtained for me the commission from the Supplicanti, having seen my work at Bologna, my lord please help me now or I will sink under this weight of false witness, why would I kill a girl for no reason? Besides she was a whore. I will tell you everything I can about Bianca and the carving of the Madonna.

My landlady Maria Nevi has said in her deposition that I have a violent nature giving as evidence threats to her and threats to the boatmen on the day they brought the block, however she was not present on this occasion, she was buying fish in the market, so already she is perjured because she has said on oath that she witnessed this scene. Why has she done this? I know the hag dislikes me - I always called her Fiammetta as a joke though she is more than fifty and half her teeth gone and her thing pickled in its own vinegar. But there is more than dislike in this.

I remember that day well because of the beauty of the stone and my own fury. At the last moment, before swinging the block across from the barge on to the *fondamenta*, everything ready, myself standing there on the edge to help guide the block over, at this moment the boatmen began to demand more money, two of them at least, the third remained silent. Perhaps he was ashamed – or dumb. These two spoke in turn encouraging each other.

I see them quite clearly in my mind's eye, the days in this cell have done nothing to cloud my memory, I always from childhood had the faculty of remembering well, not merely vividly but in detail, when I worked as an apprentice stone-cutter for the Carthusians at Pavia – having run from the life of goatherd in my village – I was known for my ability to copy window mouldings and all the details of *modanatura* from memory. (Umberto of Bavagna was my master then, I learned the elements of my trade from the monks and even some Latin along with the stone-cutting.) One was young and smooth-faced but he had a diseased eye, the other older, spitting frequently over the side, both grey with the dust of the depot, in loud voices they explained to me and others who had congregated – Venice being at all times of day full of people with nothing to do but stare – what labour it had been to transport this block of Istrian stone from the terraferma.

My lord, they had been paid already. I would have given them something, *una bene andata*, but they were asking for a whole scudo. My eyes became confused with anger. Fortunately they were out of reach, God thereby saving me from violence, which he has done often before, otherwise they would have repented their insolence, sons of whores. I will confess that I am passionate by nature, my elements of heat are not properly blended, I was conceived in July, the worst possible month for the passions, my mother was barely eighteen, too young even for the limited balance women may achieve, Vegi tells us this, a woman cannot be

ragionevole e intendere, even *seconda donna*, until she is twenty at least and moreover I suspect that my father was too eager and intemperate in his approaches to her, though naturally evidence for this is lacking.

So in this heat of the moment I may have said unwise things, but nothing against Venetians or the state of Venice, that I can swear to. But there was hostility towards me in the crowd because of my Piedmontese accent – a crowd had gathered now, my neighbours the saddle-makers, Marsuppini father and son, who have since given evidence against me, two lads with trays of cakes, various idlers. But I never said anything against them, I have the highest regard for the citizens of this great Republic.

They saw my weakness, that spitting rogue and the other with the crusted eye, and they exploited it to the full – typical Venetians. A barca loaded with grain was seeking to pass but could not because the rio is narrow and the barge took up the space so the oarsman of the other boat grew quickly impatient and joined in the shouting. I threw the silver down into the hold. This was from the money the friars of the Supplicanti had paid me on signing the contract for the Madonna, money to live on while I executed the work not throw down for these animals to scramble for, but they did not mind the indignity, being creatures of a low order, and were now all smiles and made haste to swing the block over, and I myself forgot everything else, seeing the stone settled on its rollers and manoeuvred into place on the workshop floor, workshop that was also living room and sleeping place to me.

It was still with smiles that they left. The third wretch, who had said nothing, was smiling too. Reverence and awe is what they should have felt, seeing me left alone there, understanding what a guest I was left with. They were men after all, though thieves. But they departed grinning.

When they had gone I examined the stone again. There were the bruises from the quarrying but the grain was

perfect and I knew that I had chosen well and I gave thanks to God who had whitened this stone in the darkness for my use and His greater glory and I repented of my sin of rage and crossed myself as I do now again. Anger that is past leaves a mood of vacancy sometimes and so it was now and in this vacancy I stood at the window and I looked round the room as if seeing it for the first time – the block made everything else seem unfamiliar. It was warm, though still only March, and there was sunshine in the room and dust moving slowly in it and reflections from the canal also moving slowly – over the walls and my work bench and the pallet in the corner and the rat tracks in the dust of the floor. Light moved freely inside the room, having passed without damage through the membrane of the glass. So the Holy Ghost entered the chamber of Mary's womb as it is explained in the teachings of the blessed San Bernardo where he says that as the brilliance of the sun fills and penetrates a glass window and pierces it *con una sottigliezza impercettibile* so the Word of God, the splendour of the Father, penetrated the virgin chamber without hurt, *senza ferirla*. But there was more, my lord, because into the chamber of my room I realized that God's seed had entered, the stone was God's seed waiting to be transformed into an image that would glorify His Incarnation and it seemed that I could hear this dumb stone crying for its form and with a cry that was everywhere in the room like the light and inside the walls of my being and it was loud and silent. Then my body lost its weight and my mind became mingled with the light that was inside and outside and the pleading of the stone.

When I came to myself again the Angelus was ringing and there was the *fondamenta* and the bridge and the older Marsuppini outside his workshop, bald head lowered over his work. Cutting and stitching all day long, who needs horses in Venice? But now that our new Doge is leading us to glorious acquisitions on the *terraferma* people will have

estates and so horses – I hear his step, he comes for the papers now the light is fading and he takes them at once not giving me time to finish I will ask for a lamp

I could not stay longer there with the mute stone, in the dying light, but it was my misfortune to meet Fiammetta as I came out on to the street and at a moment when she was already heated by an altercation with the fishmonger (I call this crone Fiammetta as a joke because it is a name much used in love songs. Her real name is Maria Nevi.)

We met at the corner of the Marsuppini *bottega* just a few yards short of the *sotoportego* that leads off into Campo Sant'Angelo, five paces more and I would have been under the archway and missed the hag altogether, as it was we met face to face on the corner and she at once began raising her voice. Five liras, eight soldi, she screeched at me – it is her usual practice to utter the exact amount of my debt loudly and repeatedly like a parrot, not listening at all to anything I might say in reply and in this way she achieves several of the triumphs to which her hag's life is devoted, for example causing others to overhear and thus offending my dignity and also by showing such an exact knowledge of the amount she puts herself in a commanding position or so she thinks but she is mistaken, *io me ne frego*, and God has justified this through the gifts He subsequently made me, which I am not at present free to reveal, not even to you, noble lord. And the poverty is not my fault but caused by the unfair practice of closed guilds here in Venice so it is impossible for anyone not native to the place to set up his own *bottega*.

So I merely felt sorry for her as she stood ranting there clutching the mullet to her breast and her face working, she is a hysteric also, I mention this to show that her evidence is not to be trusted. Five liras, eight soldi, she shouted again. He thinks a poor widow can live on

promises but promises will not put sausages into my mouth. (Marsuppini has said in his deposition that I answered her lewdly and obscenely at this point but that is lies.)

Still she railed on. This great maestro, she said, when will he pay it? She put this question to the sky, it seemed, looking upwards, her jaws working and her eyes blinking but she gets just as excited talking with the fishmonger and I paid no special attention. Here is a great fuss, I said, but she was not listening she was laughing falsely up at the sky exposing the interior of her mouth in which many teeth are lacking, clutching the fish as if I was threatening to despoil her of it. Here is a great fuss to make out of a few paltry liras, I said, speaking calmly but again the demon rage was climbing up, my face had become suffused with blood. Have I not told you about this new commission? I said. The block has come. I shall have money when the Madonna is finished. (I did not mention the advance they had paid, I needed all of it.) What is five liras? I said, and I tried to get past her into the *sotoportego*. Five liras, *eight soldi*, she screeched straight into my face with her breath of sour milk, the *capomaestro* is a great man, he can forget about the soldi, but I am only Signora Nevi.

Go and fuck your fish, I said. Imagine my feelings, confronted by this detestable crone upbraiding me in full hearing of others though of course I am indifferent to the opinion of others, as I have said, but she was raising her voice more and more and I was trapped there, once again base talk of soldi dinning into my ears, the block of stone in the workshop, my great task all before me, my first independent commission in Venice after seven years – yes my lord seven years of servile work at others' bidding, trimming stone, labouring over obscure details of decoration, jobs no one else wanted to do. It was from this you rescued me, thanks to your good offices I had the commission from the friars of the Supplicanti, a Madonna

Annunciata for their new church soon to be consecrated, destined for a prominent place on the façade, a work of high and holy importance and one in which I should express my veneration for the Santissima Vergine, the Mother of God, and through her the respect due to all women and here was this hysteric hag with her mummified cunt and her withered tits in their black fustian of a fictitious widow, the husband never existed, she is a poxed-out *puttana*. Go and fuck your fish, I said to her, I have no more time to waste here, and I got round her into the *sotoportego*. Scum of Piedmont, I heard her shout after me but I took no notice. Other things too she shouted, threats. She has said I told her to go and fuck her fish, and that is true, but I did not push her aside and I did not invoke the devil against her by making the sign of the horns. However, it is true that I told her to go and fuck her fish, which profanity I regretted when my anger had cooled.

I did not notice which way I walked at first owing to the disturbance of my feelings but there was a strong light everywhere, I remember that evening for the brightness of the light on everything, on the water and on the buildings and yet the sunset bells had rung some time before, I had heard them while still in my room and so there is something difficult to understand about these memories of light, but I cannot be mistaken. I think now that I was bestowing this light on things, that it was in me, this evening was the beginning of God's gift of light to me which remained with me all the time I was carving the Madonna and accompanies me still even here in this prison. (When I close my eyes I can feel the sweetness of this light within me and sometimes, in certain conditions, I see it on the surface of my skin.)

So I walked for some time at random. Campo Sant'Angelo then over the rio but by the long bridge, Ponte dei Mercatori, I must have wandered south a little. They were working on the façade of San Zaccaria, hammers and

bells and the booming of the cannon as the ships coming into the Bacinto saluted the image of the Virgin on the Basilica of San Marco. The city was crowded with visitors come for the Spring Fair – more than a hundred thousand it was said. It was Wednesday, the market was open, sausages and cockles and the smell of sawdust and wet fish. *Pan buffeto*. I remember everything about this evening on which I met Bianca, even the prices of things – prices are nostalgic for men in captivity my lord. Ten snails, four soldi, a secchio of wine, thirty-five soldi. I had the friars' money in my pocket that day and I had hopes.

In one corner of the Campo Santa Maria Formosa there were actors performing on a platform hung with lamps and I stopped to watch. They were good, especially the Pantalone, he was a good tumbler, dressed all in red with a fierce mud-coloured mask and he had Turkish slippers too large for him which he kept tripping over and falling on to the platform with a great clash of bells, he had bells inside his clothes somewhere. He wanted to creep up and spy on two behind a screen who wore the masks of lovers, the one with the male mask was trying to put his hand up the skirts of the other and just as he succeeded every time a crash of bells and they sprang apart. The people in the crowd were laughing and some were shouting advice of an obscene nature.

After this I began crossing the square towards the north side. For no particular reason I turned down that street about midway across which is called after the church and leads into the warren of the San Severo district. As I was thinking to retrace my steps I heard a woman singing somewhere above me not very loudly but distinctly enough in a voice low in register but very sweet and the notes lingering, a haunting song, not Venetian by the sound of it.

*Tu m'hai promiso quater
O mocatura o mocatura*

I looked up but the street was narrow and the balconies were high and I could see no one. I had to go to the end and then turn to look, before I saw her. She was sitting at the edge of the balcony, looking over the street and she was in a red dress with her shoulders bare her hair dyed gold and her face painted. She was smiling a little as if she had pleasing thoughts. But this was the habit of her face, as I learned later, she had few thoughts. This was my first sight of Bianca. I knew she was for sale, how else could it be, alone there, in that exposed position and singing to draw the gaze? But that was not important in my mind. Also she was very beautiful but it was not that. She seemed pleased and self-conscious like a child dressed up. My lord I had never seen her before but I knew her – it was that which kept me there, I stayed gazing but she did not look towards me. People were passing, they stared at me, a thing I hate, and still she did not look, she was lost in some dream. I had to move away but her face stayed in my mind. There was a tavern on the corner with a sign of crossed silver keys and so I entered, not to go too far away, not expecting trouble of any kind – it was chance that I went there. It is true that a man came in who was known to me but after seven years it would be strange indeed if I had no acquaintance in Venice. This was Rodrigo Nofri who used to be a painter of masks, a bad one, and now is in the silk trade and making money the dog has made money out of this business, he has testified that I uttered treasonable sayings against the state of Venice and in support of her enemies, particularly Francesco Bussone, Count of Carmagnola, and that I caused an affray. My lord this was in March it was before the arrest of Carmagnola I said nothing against Venice and as for the fighting it was the Florentines who began it. There is a web of false evidence against me, I am enmeshed in it. I beg you to find Nofri and question him privately. I know he has been bribed. Not only that, he has been frightened. With him there was another man and his name I

think was Bechine, from Murano. I did not discover his occupation but if from Murano almost certainly to do with glass, a big man, rather taciturn but not quarrelsome, none of us was quarrelsome, it was the Florentines who began it all. I will tell you what happened.

I had fish pie and radishes and a

Conversations with him have always the same form. He does not speak of his own accord but he makes responses, always the same, so it is like a litany, he is my congregation of one. I remind him that we have our agreement and I watch his large head nod slowly and I wait for him to say yes it is so – he has a harsh voice and a thick accent of the Veneto. I ask him if it is certain that these papers of mine are being placed directly into your hands and he says it is certain. And without the knowledge of anyone else? Yes, without the knowledge of anyone else. And no reply? No, not yet. But he will bring it to me when it comes? You have my promise, he says. Once I give my word to a man it is sacred with me. Yes, I say, you are a man whose promises one can trust. Besides, you will be well paid. Sometimes it comes into my mind to try to overpower him and attempt an escape but I am enfeebled by these weeks in prison and the brute is strong. He is an ox and cannot read therefore I can abuse him at least.

This time I surprised him by asking for a light, explaining that if I had a small lamp or perhaps candles I could continue my writing after dark. His first response was not favourable. It seems that it is no small thing that I have asked for. He says that he cannot give a man light without permission otherwise he will be out of the job on his arse but he will see what can be done and meanwhile I should make good use of the daylight. So I do my lord though it comes late into this pit and leaves early.

When I was dragged out of there and thrown on to the cobbles that coward Nofri was nowhere about, it was the Muranese who helped me and he told me afterwards that the girl saw it and felt sorry for me and called to bring me up off the street before the *signori di notte* arrived on the scene but he did not do it. It was the same girl.

He would have come the whole way home with me but as I walked I felt better, the bleeding stopped, and we parted at the Merceria. He is a good man and if he could be found I know he would give a true account of the evening. Andrea the first name and I think Bechine the second, from Murano.

Once back in my room again I lay down on the pallet and almost at once sank into sleep but woke with the first light because of my bruises and did not sleep again but lay there as the light strengthened. I could see the dark bulk of the stone in the middle of the room. Her face came to my mind, faintly smiling. It is difficult to explain but I wanted to keep this memory of her face separate from everything else in her whore's life.

I never paid her a single soldo for sexual favours whatever that prying crone Fiammetta claims to have seen through my window. She was the model for my Madonna.

I knew from that same morning that it would be so. I think I knew it from the time I got up to light the lamp having grown impatient or alarmed as I said and being unable to sleep again. The block of stone was lit up, its crystals glittered along the planes where it had been cut, it shone brighter for its wounds as also Christ did. I thought again of the illumination of her face. Slowly it came to me, like music, God's intention, the quarrel with Fiammetta which upset me so that I walked without seeing, then the light everywhere about me and the impulse that made me choose that street to walk down, the song that made me

linger, her face above me. It was clear to me in that moment that God had guided me to her. That was the evening when the light began also. Besides, what other explanation could there be?

It was early still when I made my way back. I knew the house was one of those opposite the tavern. There were three doors that could have been hers but I chose without hesitation and it was the right one and that is a further proof that my actions were being directed from above. I mounted the stairs and knocked and a woman answered, middle-aged, she was wearing kerchief and apron and seeing my impatience smiled, mistaking the nature of it and she made a remark about the *uccello* that rises early. This was Bianca's doorkeeper. She closed the door on me and kept me waiting there several minutes, ten minutes or so during which time my impatience grew so that my breathing was affected, I have said that my nature is excitable.

Then she came back to admit me. Bianca was standing at the balcony window with the sunlight around her. The floor coverings had been rolled aside and the planks were shining wet – the woman had been cleaning the floor when I knocked. On the wall a caged goldfinch, struck by the sun, was singing in brief phrases. There was a music-stand with a sheet on it and red wall hangings. She was holding a book which she must have just snatched up.

She did not move towards me. Good morning, she said. Did you bump into something on the way? I did not understand this at first but then I saw she meant my bruises. She was smiling, she too I think mistaking the purpose of my visit and my haste, haste which caused me to stumble a little as I went towards her but the smile soon went when I spoke. You have been chosen by God, I said, wanting to impress her with the seriousness of the matter but it was too sudden and she was frightened, as also perhaps by my stumbling entrance and swollen face and I

have no doubt the light was shining from me. So I stood still and tried to smile and I told her not to be alarmed. This is good news for you, I said.

You are the one outside in the street last night, she said. She crossed her arms over her bosom as if she thought I would attack her so it was clear that she was not reassured by my words or perhaps did it out of modesty seeing I was not a customer. She was still holding the book. She had dressed hastily and carelessly. Her hair was up on her head but some golden strands had fallen loose and hung down. She was wearing a blue gown drawn together at the front with white string. I saw that she had been roused by her attendant and had dressed and prepared herself hastily and this touched me even at such an important moment, this dutiful effort to get up and play the hostess, it was in keeping with the music-stand and the snatched-up book which I do not think she could read.

Don't be frightened, I said. You must realize that this is a great compliment. Out of all the women in Venice you are the chosen one. And I explained to her about my commission for the Madonna Annunciata and about the block of stone waiting there.

Then she laughed but still with distrust. She kept her arms crossed over her body. Me for the Madonna? she said. Me for the Santissima Vergine? You will be beautiful, I said to her. You will live for ever in the stone. The power of my talent will transform you completely, you will be immortal. Think of it, up there on the façade of the church for everyone to see. Also there will be dressing up to do, you will dress up in the robe and headdress of the Madonna.

She liked this idea as I had thought she would. Her hands slipped down to her sides. White, she said, and the robe should be high-waisted and it should have a full skirt. *Brava!* I said. And the face as nature meant; no powder, no paint, no beauty patches.

She laughed again. Listen to him, she said. Everybody knows the Holy Virgin didn't use those things.

I will pay you, I said. I will give you one whole scudo for every hour. In advance.

This offer of money decided the matter as it does most matters, coming on top of the favourable circumstance of dressing up. All the same she was not laughing when she finally agreed, she sounded sad, or resigned rather, as if she had lost some argument. Yes, as you like, she said. I will come.

She came that same afternoon bringing items of her costume in a beadwork bag, she was wearing a beauty patch at the corner of her mouth and

She came decked out in her best, a puff-sleeved gown of blue and crimson with a brocaded corselage, a lace shawl over her shoulders, red silk stockings and little gold shoes with those block heels that are so much the rage now in Venice, God knows why, the women can hardly walk in them. I complimented her on her appearance reflecting that she must make some money from her trade to dress so and have an apartment and employ a *ruffiana* to keep the door and it surprised me she was beautiful but not very clever and harlotry is competitive in Venice, this *terra delle donne*. In obedience to my instructions she was not wearing any paint but she had not been able to resist a beauty patch at the corner of her mouth and I asked her to remove this. Then she introduced a commercial note by asking for some money in advance.

I have just the one room not so very large with the privy at one end of it so there was nowhere else for Bianca to change into her *cose di Madonna* as she already called them. I wanted nothing underneath, no bodices, no petticoats, nothing to spoil the line. She showed some modest reluctance about undressing in these unfamiliar

surroundings and for this unusual purpose and seeing this I kept my back to her and busied myself moistening the clay. When I turned to her again it was a revelation, she was transformed. She was standing in the middle of the room beside the block of stone. The full white gown – it was a nightgown she had brought – covered her from neck to ankle, she had arranged the headcloth a little towards the back of her head no doubt with an instinct of vanity but I saw at once that it was exactly what was needed, it framed the face and showed her wide brow, her brow is not high but it has good width, and the front part of her hair was also revealed. The gown itself by fortunate accident was traditional in style, gathered high at the waist and fitting quite closely over the upper part of the body. The line of Bianca's shoulders and the full shape of her breasts were clearly visible but the cloak, which I clasped at the throat, concealed the bosom partially as was becoming.

She saw my approval but misunderstood the nature of it I think. She looked down at herself, she was pleased at being dressed up. She had that smile on her face, secretive somehow. Half the time she was in a world of her own. I want you to put your hair down, I said. Take out the combs. Perhaps she heard something of awe in my voice not for her but for the Holy Virgin whom she now represented because her own face became more serious though that inclination to smile never leaves her face, it is in the shape of the mouth. Excuse me my lord that I speak of her sometimes still in the present. I do not always remember that she is dead. I never went anywhere near San Maurizio the night of her death, I was in my room. Those who say they saw me with her have been bribed to lie. My lord I beg you while there is still time to have the witnesses questioned privately.

She did as I asked her and her hair which as I have said was dyed gold and curled with tongs fell down over her shoulders concealing the sides of her face. No, no, I said,

use the combs to gather the hair behind, at the back of the neck. Then the hair will be loose at the temples but off the face, I want to see the sides of your face. She did this and I arranged the headdress as I wanted it and I set her at the window where the light could fall evenly across her face.

The pose was difficult. Here is a girl, a virgin, she has just been told that she is to be the mother of Christ, a shining archangel is standing before her she cannot be unmoved she cannot be simply a monumental detail for the decoration of a church façade as we often see these days. Well, I said to Bianca, the Angel Gabriel has just announced to you that you are to bear the Son of God. You are in your house reading the Bible and in these familiar surroundings, quite unexpectedly because you have had no warning at all, you are quite unprepared, the archangel appears bright and resplendent, possibly he reduces his splendour because shining beings are able to contain their light, I know that from my own experience, but a startling sight in any case. He gives you the news. How do you behave?

Bianca paused to give this her consideration, I saw the faintest of frowns mark her brow. Then her face cleared. I say the Magnificat, she said. No, no, no, I said. You say nothing, you have a desire to run away but you cannot because after all he is a visitor, a holy one, you have your duties. And then, you are a virgin, you are confused at this talk of conceiving a child.

But it was useless to explain, she liked posing and pretending but she had no imagination, she could only see herself as the Queen of Heaven. I wanted that drama of the pose I had seen as a child in country churches in Piedmont, they were crude but they had life and movement. I made her stand with the right leg advanced and the trunk turned away slightly from the announcing angel though her face regarded him still, her right hand laid over her breast the left against the side of her thigh – this I changed later. I did not know at this stage exactly what I wanted except that

drama of the turning body and to show the inadequacies of Bartolomeo Bon who carries all before him here in Venice with his uninspired carvings where you can simply see the original shape of the block and the limbs either touching the body or joined by drapery and all outlines smooth and continuous, completely primitive. He goes on with this because it is all he can do and the people have no sense of what might be better and so he is rich and has a big workshop and many assistants.

So I spent time getting the girl into the right position. I took her shoulders and turned them to the angle I wanted. Now look towards me, I said, and when she did so I experienced a surprise almost like a shock at the gaze of those eyes of hers dark brown flecked with lighter colour in the sunlight from the window, she had beautiful eyes, vague-looking - she may have been short-sighted. As I moved her this way and that I remembered it was her trade to move her body in ways that men wanted and this thought disturbed me because she was also my model for the Madonna and was wearing the Madonna's robes.

And so I began to handle the clay and while I moulded and kneaded it to make sure the moisture was properly distributed and adding sometimes water from the bowl I had there and played with the clay as I always do before I start the modelling to get the right feel of it and get my hands used to the texture and also to warm the clay because no one can make a living form out of cold clay, God warmed the dust before he made Adam. Afterwards when I began on the figure we talked, she was I hear his steps outside, he comes earlier for the papers now

She talked to me, once the first constraint had worn off. Her voice was low not much inflected and so rather monotonous to listen to, not grating but it was easy not to attend to it or I mean attend only intermittently and that is

why much of what she said I cannot now remember or only imperfectly. Also I was absorbed in modelling the clay which was of excellent quality just stiff enough and I had bound it with jute fibre to make it hold better. The figure being complicated I had made a wire armature and this was fixed to my work bench. I was moulding to one-fifth life size building up the form by addition – I never cut the clay though I have seen others do it.

It was gossip mainly. She stood at the window posed as I had posed her in the white clothes, the headdress, the high-waisted gown with the silk girdle, the cloak fastened at the neck, her face peaceful and self-absorbed she had that smiling expression, accident of the mouth. She spoke about her neighbour Corsetta who was there on the night of the quarrel in the tavern when my only offence was to defend Carmagnola against those pigs of Florentines, he was Piedmontese my lord as your lady wife is and as I am and for this I was knocked senseless and thrown out, she is a whore too that will be a *nom de guerre* not her real name. She lives on the floor above or did then – these girls come and go but if she could be found she might be able to throw some light on Bianca's movements the night she was killed. They were friends so Bianca said. And there was another girl she mentioned whose name I have forgotten or perhaps I was not told it but called Sfregiata because of her scars, she had been slashed on the cheek for coming late to an assignation – only some minutes, according to Bianca she had been visiting an aunt at the Convent of the Convertite though that seems unlikely, but in any case the man thought she had been with someone else during the time he had paid for. Bianca herself had been beaten once at least and badly though no bones broken. For laughing she said, but I cannot remember the circumstances. She laughed often. Also, but she spoke of this later I think, she had once been subjected to a form of the *trentuno*, but only by six. The man had taken her for a pleasure trip to Chioggia,

given her a good dinner and wine to drink, treated her like a princess she said then afterwards she was pushed into a room with six of his friends waiting and they all fucked her some of them twice. I asked her if she had given the man offence and she said no he had done it for a joke.

As you see my lord it was trivial matters she talked of. I try to remember anything that might help you in your efforts on my behalf but it was tittle-tattle of the streets. This was in March my lord you will remember that they had just executed the transvestite known as Rosso and the girls were talking of it as he had been an attendant of the courtesan Masina, they had paraded him through the streets in women's clothes slit up the front to show his genitals and after that he was garrotted in the Campo di Santa Maria Formosa and his body burnt. He was weeping, she said. What, I said, while they strangled him? A man cannot fight for breath and weep at the same time. No, she said, before, when they led him through the streets. She had not stayed to see the execution. I wish now I had not joked though it was funny to think of tearful Rosso in his skirts with cock and balls hanging out but I am sorry I joked now that I know what happened to Bianca, they strangled her half to death before they drowned her.

Later, when I had started on the stone, she spoke of others, and this is more to the point my lord. She made references to a protector, a rich man with an illustrious name, also to a pimp known as Strascino because he drags one leg as a result of syphilis. He took money from her perhaps for protection which she with her grand ideas called a fee, *un onorario* and she called him her *mezzano* as if he were a conversationalist and connoisseur instead of a leg-dragging syphilitic *puttaniere* but it was typical of her to call things always by higher names and this was not exactly lying because she persuaded herself of the truth of it, all this was mixed up with her ambitions, more like daydreams, she wanted to be thought of as a *cortigiana*,

not a common whore. Also as I have said she liked to make mysteries about herself. She spoke of Strascino always with some fear and once she forgot he was supposed to be the *mezzano* and she told me he and another had broken a girl's ankles and the bones never set properly. She did not give his real name but I think he is that Stefano Benintendi, described as trader, who has testified that he saw me with Bianca in the area of San Maurizio the night she was killed. A tissue of lies from beginning to end my lord. A common pimp and they take his word against me. Alone and unsupported he would not have dared. There is someone behind this Strascino and I think now it is the same one that Bianca spoke of, calling him usually her protector sometimes her uncle. I know this man visited her at regular times because she once had to leave me hastily when his visit was due. She was frightened on that occasion of being late, she was more afraid of him than of this miserable Strascino. Bianca's fears were numerous but none of them deeply lodged or so it seemed, she could not hold things long in her mind, for example fear would quickly turn into something else some coquetry or private dream or gossip of the day and so I did not always pay attention.

The weather was very hot and the smells of the canal came in with the low tide. I was sweating as I worked on the clay. I worked in shirt and drawers only and still I ran with sweat. Moulding clay is hot work my lord. She was standing at the window as usual in her *vesti di madonna*. She had been telling me that her mother was connected to a noble family, by birth she implied. The block stone was there where they had left it in the middle of the room. It cast a straight shadow between us. I did not believe what she said about her mother and in this I was right because later when we had got into the habit of fucking she told me her mother was a serving woman, she never spoke much of a

father and I do not think she knew who he was but she once said he was a French officer, which also I did not believe. It is possible that her mother was a servant in a noble house and if so she may have procured Bianca for some member of the family and that would explain the apartment and so on but Bianca invented so much it was difficult to separate truth from lies and there was no reason then for making the effort. But I sometimes felt an impulse to shake her out of all this fantasy give her a sight of more important things by telling her about God's favour that had been shown to me and about the light I carried within me and which sometimes shone from my skin though only certain people could see it.

However I refrained which was a good thing because I did not need to boast, Bianca knew it all the time not perhaps as visible light, she was not able to see that but she was affected by the power which came from me, and this was proved before long. She had been telling me about these fictitious connections of her mother's. I told her to be silent as I did not want her mouth to move. But after a while she exclaimed and made a groping gesture and then she slipped down on to the floor and her face was as white as her gown and her eyes were closed. I gave her some water, raising her head so she could drink, and I loosened the ribbon that held her gown together at the neck. Her eyes opened but they were not looking at anything and she began trying to sit up but she could not and made groping fumbling movements with her hands, then I suddenly saw that this feebleness was the result of my power that God had given me so I became excited at once and I began to kiss her. Her lips were cold. Her eyes were able now to look at things, they were on my face. I was myself unable to see properly because of the heat that had risen to my head. I lifted up her gown of the madonna and I was pulling her legs apart, they had no resistance, she gestured to me to wait I think to inspect her to see she was free from disease,

the usual courtesy of whores, but I could not wait, I threw her back and mounted her at once her body was cold she cried out when I went into her – a cry of pain my lord – and I knew this was a certain sign from God that she had become a virgin again for me. After that we did it often. If she was cold that first time she was hot always afterwards, she was *solis filia* and *calida* if not *callida*. (You will remember the pun of Lipsius my lord.) Bianca had a gift for love. She was not clever, *una cervellina*, but she knew how to give pleasure. Always she would keep on her Madonna things because I wished it so. I never saw her naked when we fucked only when we washed each other afterwards from the bucket. And she took no money except for the time spent modelling.

All this was afterwards. I had started on the stone then, I had made those first cuts that are so terrible. It was a good piece, freshly quarried, free from flaws, with no hard outer skin. A block should be set up and carved according to the lines of its bed otherwise it will split and break off. But this was a fine piece. All that summer I laboured to release the form contained in the block. I worked nearly naked but still the sweat came off me. I used an iron point for removing the spawl you must keep a steady rhythm of striking with the point because this is less tiring also by a regular stroke your life is moving at the same pace as the life of the stone your thoughts keep exact pace with your material as God's did when he made the world and that is why men can have some understanding of the nature of God as is explained in the writings of Origen. So therefore carving is rhythm my lord, no man can carve well who has no rhythm in his strokes either with point or claw.

The claw was no use for this hardest of stones. I used a granite axe, bouncing the blade on the surface of the stone, bruising the stone to give tooth for the chisel. Day after day striking at the stone. You must not cut too early with a fine tool, this closes the surface, takes life from the image. I