

GEOFFREY BROCK

South of Rome: 1999

Codesto solo oggi possiamo dirti,
ciò che *non* siamo, ciò che *non* vogliamo.
—Montale

I. Spring at the Academy

And at my back, a party in high gear,
a surf of noise licked by the tired salt breeze
that's sighing in from Ostia. The shy historian,

armed with a steel guitar, forgets his stutter
when he sings: *I went down to the crossroads . . .*
Behind us stands the wall Aurelius built,

in whose cool shade the gardener yesterday,
digging to plant a plum tree, struck a tomb.
(The archaeology fellows are still abuzz.)

Below, a taxi blurs down Via Masina,
the driver's door flaring open like a gill.
Above, an eastbound plane. (Gioia del Colle?

Bosnia?) Beside me, a married abstract painter
leans on a classicist, who's pointing out
visible landmarks. Colonies of light

displace the dark. *I'm going down to Rosedale . . .*
I'm out of place. I'm trying to miss my wife.
The Appian ways, old and new, race south

toward the Mediterranean, toward Velletri,
the ancient hill town (maps in my head like flares,
like telescopes) on whose dark slopes my grandfather,

the day before Rome fell, was shot—his first day of combat. I've made it as far as Rome. Someone hands me another Jameson's, neat.

II. South of Nettuno: Early Summer

We park at "Neptune Beach," then pick our way, Anzio at our backs across the bay, south over iron-black sand, past games of soccer,

sprawled bodies, and a shattered concrete bunker left there like litter. Farther south, beyond these crowds, stragglers scoop clay from a lip of land

that falls six feet or so, from grass to sand, and coat themselves; as the clay dries, they turn from gray to white. (One woman, clad only in clay,

strikes Venus poses at the water's edge; a man snaps photos.) On we walk, beyond a warning sign: we've entered army land,

this stretch of beach a firing range in winter—but winter's over, and now the beach is ours. (The only other people near: an old

gay couple, holding hands, still farther south. By whom are *we* afraid to be observed?) We lay our blanket amid the sea's refusals:

mineral-water bottles, orphaned shoes, old nets, a plastic fifty-gallon drum, made in Japan. But there are treasures too,

and my friend has an eye: chunks of mosaic tiles from ancient villas that used to line this coast; smooth shards of blue *pasta di vetro*; and two

species of marble—deep red *porfido*,

green *serpentino*—whose quarries long ago
gave out. The only marble I find dates,

my friend says, from “the empire of the sixties.”
And these odd bones that look like plastic? “Ossi
di seppia . . .” And so Montale comes to me

with his old mantra, insisting, like the sea,
on what we’re not, what we do not desire.
Anzio shimmers. The sea hangs from its wire.

III. Sicily-Rome Cemetery, Nettuno: Late Summer

Well nourished and imperially trimmed,
the plush grass stretches over the curved earth
like a crewcut. The bone-white crosses and stars

of David blur into stripes. Beyond them, rows
of cypress trees: bored sentries backed by blue.
I prop a few carnations (cheapest of flowers)

against the cross I’ve come for—flesh on bone,
my little travesty of resurrection—
and sit a while as if waiting for a judge.

I pluck the grass the mower missed. I trace
his name. His rank and date. I see him still
as he looks in the only photo I have of him:

he’s beaming; his tick-eradication bill
(he won great praise for that) has just been signed;
he’s shaking hands with a grinning Governor Allred—

folks said he’d soon be governor himself . . .
But then he left his wife for an Austin woman;
that cost him reelection. Then—what then?

Too old for any draft, he volunteered.
His final letter to my mother came,

ghost-like, after this cable: *Ragsdale led*

*a patrol to clear the area of enemy snipers . . .
three snipers were killed . . . Ragsdale rushed another,
firing his carbine . . . was shot . . .* And then the part

about how brave he'd been. Is that what he was?
Another day and he'd have survived the war.
Another day, he might have been reelected.

And yet I come back every year or two.
I sit alone, amid the marble crowd,
to curse and mourn a man I never knew.

IV. Fall at the Velletri Grape Festival

He's coming right at me, through the thronged
medieval main street of this bombed-out
and rebuilt hill town, perched above the heads

of the earthbound, each of us with our plastic cup
of new wine, above children with their grape-bunch
balloons—coming right at me, looking down

from high on his unicycle, his eyes seeming to say
that his presence here can be ignored only
at my peril, and at his too, that he may fall

from that height, that I may be too close or slow,
and I freeze, no idea which way to turn,
no one to snatch me aside, but the near-falls

seem almost rehearsed, so that we're meant,
I finally guess, to doubt him, so that only children,
who shrink toward parents or point, eyes wide,

from a safe remove, really believe he'll fall, which
he doesn't, not now: he careens smoothly around me
and keeps on faltering his slow way through us.