

# Translations from Italo Calvino and Gaspara Stampa

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## The city of Cloë

(adapted from *le città e gli scambi*. 2)

In this town no one knows anybody.

Passers-by  
hypothesise encounters, chats, French kisses,  
love-bites, tabloid revelations, but they risk  
no more than glances.

On they go:  
the paunchy biker eyeing the furtive nun  
who has designs on the contortionist,  
their gazes shaping a moment's geometry.

Behind them come  
a cheetah on a chain led by a blind man  
whose other senses track a pair of coral-skirted trannies  
ogling a football team in leopard skins.

They huddle from the rain,  
silently consuming seductions, barely  
lifting their eyes, one finger scarcely  
brushing another. This most chaste of cities,

vibrates lubriciously.  
If Cloë ever lived its dreams, phantasms would take  
human form, each with its history of lies, pursuits  
and cruelty. Then the carousel of fantasies would stop.

## Zobeide

(adapted from *le città e il desiderio*. 5)

The city's white, and open to the moon.  
Its builders grew it from a hectic dream  
where they pursued a naked woman  
through a twisting unfamiliar town.

She got away from them. They never found  
the place after they woke, and so they tried  
to make the figment solid, wound  
new streets around the story of their need,

matching a city to their yearning's map,  
then lay (patient as revenants) in wait.

Although they're sure this time she won't escape,  
memory slips its leash, dreams lose their grip.

Later in arid hollows of the night  
they'll ask what drew them to this ugly trap.

## Adelma

(adapted from *Le Città e i morti*. 2)

This is as far as I can go.

Black water heaving sullenly,  
I disembark through drenching fog,  
recalling in a mariner's  
pox-ravaged face as he made fast,  
a long dead comrade-in-arms.

A trader loading a cart  
scurries down a passage  
before I can be sure  
if he resembles someone  
I recall from childhood.

Sprawled across the street  
a fever-victim with a rag  
under his head brings back to me  
my father's stubbled, sweating throat  
and yellow dying eyes.

This had better be a dream,  
I think, but just in case it's not,  
I won't meet anyone's eye.

A basket on a rope jolts upwards  
to a window, hoisted by a girl  
I used to know, who killed herself  
after her lover left her.  
Creaking, the ground floor shutters open  
and my grandmother looks grimly out.

So this is it, I tell myself,  
I've reached the age when all the dead  
I've known outnumber the living.  
My mind won't take in new faces,  
and recycles familiar ones instead.  
This isn't going to be much fun.

A line of longshoremen pass by,  
bowed under casks and chests, their faces  
hidden under hoods of sackcloth.  
They stack their burdens on the quay,  
and bare their heads. I know them all.

Ringed by frowns and grimaces,  
I say, These are the dead.  
Five minutes here and maybe I'm dead too.  
If this is The Great Beyond, it's for losers.

# Moriana

(adapted from *le città e gl'occhi*. 5)

It comes out of nowhere! prodigal  
Moriana, city of translucent  
alabaster, gables dressed with icons  
and esoteric curlicues, colonnades of coral,  
villas of glass where shadows rock  
and tango under starfish chandeliers.

But I've been here before: I know the trick.  
Go round the back, and get acquainted with  
the rusting strips of iron, sacking, planks  
bristling with nails, pipes black with soot,  
blind alleys where the desperate leave their scrawls,  
ropes good for nothing but to sling across  
a rotting beam to hang yourself.

This seamless city is a sheet of paper,  
recto and verso, nothing in between.  
The front and back can neither face each other,  
nor tear themselves apart.

“I could be like that”

(After Gaspara Stampa – adapted from the dedication of her *Rime d'Amore* to Collatino di Collalto, and incorporating some material from the sequence's first sonnet.)

the pains My Lord of love,  
mine

you wouldn't look, not once, at one by one my agonies  
or even write one word, no, not a single word  
so here they all are, all  
my torments,  
mine

how many, how much words for pain you have inspired

how much, how many words for not pain if you would pity?

Your Lordship  
not mine

what joy is not in such power?  
but there can be no cruelty without obligation

I have no wish to sadden you with the ocean of my tears,  
what I here offer is merely a burning trickle

your faithful your unhappy  
I am not worthy  
but I dream of glory, of some woman's envy,  
she will read and say that I am lucky to be so much, so finely abused,  
and wish, *why not me, why not me too?*

my self heart eyes  
not mine

my poor sad house should it ever receive so great a guest will tell, my pillows tell, my  
sheets, my sobs wet wet wet wet, all tell re-tell, read, read My Lord when you reach a  
truce with those dearer many concerns of your dear life  
not mine  
myself forgotten while I call Your Lordship's name and bless it for the pain, your gift  
which is mine  
alone