

Six Cities

When Flavio de Marco asked me to write a text for his show *Vedute*, I remembered something we'd done together, in a theatre in Bologna: he asked me to take three objects from my home, bring them along and talk about them, and it was one of the most beautiful and moving things I've done in recent years, so I said yes at once.

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The last time I went there was not long ago, I'm coming away from there now.

I'm coming away on a train full of children, one of those small trains, that run in the provinces, that stop in all the stations, that don't work with normal tickets, with special tickets, shaped like bus tickets, a train that might be a bus, full of children.

In the station, in the square, on a bench, there were two men who looked like tramps, two men who sleep in the streets, two homeless men, and one was shaving the other's head, with a razor, and he was being so careful.

Once a Russian poet, in a thing called Conversation about Dante, asked himself how many sandals Dante wore out in writing the Divine Comedy.

Nowadays, sandals don't get worn out much, bus tickets get worn out more.

In the Fifties it was a place where, in the morning and evening, when they opened and closed the factories, the buses were free.

Its colour is red, that is its colour, the red of the roofs, the buses, the rubbish bins, the letter boxes, the condiments, the red of the red flags, the red of the painting of Togliatti's funeral, which is here, in a museum that used to be a bakery, for the poor, there was a socialist mayor, here, at the beginning of the last century, and later it was a storehouse for coffins, and now a museum, containing a red painting, Togliatti's funeral, a famous painting, you see it for the first time and you've already seen it.

When I went to live there, eleven years ago, there were free buses for going to fairs, on fair days, not all fairs, only the big ones.

The people here, they say, are nice, the inhabitants, it's a pleasure, to hear them talk, it's only hard to find them, they've barricaded themselves away lately, nobody knows what for, to keep up with the rents, they say, they rent,

here, if you're looking for a rent, come here, you'll find one.

Music, it's hard to say, there are all kinds of music, any kind of music will do, you can play anything, people don't mind music, music is all right.

The language, I don't know, they speak a lot of them, the local one seems rounded, a strange use of the zed, wide vowels, the mouths open wide to say them.

The weather, the climate, as they say (in Russian it's called pagoda), the summer is very warm, the winter cold, always damp, lots of mosquitoes, the fog doesn't reach here, there are too many houses around, to act as a shield.

The food, they're famous all over the world, they invent dishes, the restaurants, they write underneath that they make them themselves, the food, somebody spread the legend that the cuisine is good.

They joke a lot, the inhabitants, they say serious things in a joking way, they call each other imbeciles, they don't get offended, they have good characters, it's a pleasure, talking to them, only, it's hard to find them, they've barricaded themselves away lately, nobody knows what for, to do accounts, they say, to see if they survive, if they manage, to do what, who knows, to do their accounts, I think, I don't really know.

The towers, they're famous for their towers, they told me there used to be a lot of them, now there are still a few left, some are straight, others are crooked.

But more famous still are the inhabitants, who are kind, and considerate, and outgoing, very hospitable, only, it's rather hard to find them, they've barricaded themselves away lately, nobody knows what for, to avoid fines, they give a lot of fines, *molte multe*, I wonder where the word *multe* comes from, I wonder if it comes from that very fact, that even before the word existed, they gave a lot of them, *molte*, I wonder what they were called before that, maybe *puche*, when they used to give only a few, *poche*, later they realized they were giving a lot, they changed the name, maybe that's it.

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I went there once. There was a closed square, an unplastered wall, the plastic chairs. They were white. I ate some fried things, on a paper tablecloth, the kind that's used for drying fried food. It was brown. I slept in a child's bed, in a deserted house, I was hungry.

I left the next day, on the train, a normal train, only a bit fuller than normal. I remember it well, I didn't see anything. Only a square, some chairs, a tablecloth, a children's room in an empty house. I mention everything I know, I know practically nothing. I've never been there since. Can I talk about something else?

About the place where I was born. Which is a city like that, not too big, which, I know it's not nice to say it, I like a lot. I don't live there now, I seldom go there.

There, at some times of day, there's such a light, in the street, that if you're in a mood where your thoughts let you look, you feel you're swimming, in the light.

There, when you're a child, and it's two o'clock in the afternoon, and you go out through the front door, from the gloomy hall of the apartment block where your parents live, and you open the door and go out into the light, which is time – from two o'clock in the afternoon till the evening – and space – on this side of Via Montebello, the whole district – there, every day the promise is so great, you feel like crying, to think of it.

Some things you don't forget, as an old man used to say, and then he'd tell you about one time when he had some bricks in his hand and, from behind the corner, he said, to a carabinieri, Come forward, now.

And the square, the chairs, the tablecloth, the children's room in an empty house, you won't have forgotten them, but if you're asked, you'll talk about something else, about the city where you were born, where some things will have happened later too, not long ago, four years ago, outside the windows of the flat you'll have rented when you'll have gone back to live there because you were running

away, away from another place, fast, outside the windows of that flat, on the first floor, there'll have been a five-a-side football pitch, and some evenings you'll have sat there watching the games, and one evening there'd have been two teams of immigrants, Slavs, from the way they talk, and the goalkeeper of one of the teams, the guy nearest to your windows, while he was playing, smoked.

And you'd have thought that, when you watch people, if you think with a rational head, you never really know what to do, whether to admire them or not. If you think with another head, it might seem to you that the only thing to do, with people, is not to do anything. Like thingummy, there, what's his name?

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The first time I went there was to the stadium, I was about five years old, my brother six.

They'd given us two flags and when they scored, and maybe we should have waved them, we heard people shouting so loud, an inhuman roar, we were scared.

After that, and for years, it was just the stadium, because that, to tell the truth, is a different matter, in that square, there, if they asked me I always said I've been there, it wasn't true that I'd been there.

Later I went to the Palasport too, in the same place, in the square, the one that later collapsed under the snow.

Nowadays, this has nothing to do with it, I find myself wondering what the point of it was.

All those movements, those sweaters, the windproof jackets, the motorway service stations, the waiting, the tickets, the buses, the flags, the cushions to sit on, the lunches, the booking, I look for a thought that might have been behind it but I don't find one, but previously, previously, for years, I never looked for one, what was I looking for, then?

It was a great way, it was great, it was a great way, but of what?

It took years for me to get inside it, I started going to a library, a specialized one, getting books that I later found useful, that I used again only a few months back, and there, I don't know, there was everything, and grey, and green, and strange, and the accent too, but I don't know about the people, what they're like.

One day, in the centre, I was lost, I see a woman, I go up to her, Excuse me, I say, can I ask you for some information? and she says It depends. Depends? What do you mean it depends? It's information, I'm lost, I need information. It depends.

I mean, to me, these things, I walk off. I start running and I go so fast they can't see me. The green, the grey, I like them, but I prefer yellow, and fear frightens me.

Later I went there again, to work there, and one of the first times I was going there, at the top of the steps to the underground, a man comes up to me, he looks at me and he says God damn you.

That kind I understand a bit better, I wasn't upset. There, that woman, I reckon, it's normal.

I worked there, ate there, slept in some houses too, and then one night, I'd missed the train, we walked all round the city, well not all round, but six hours, on foot, are long, but I didn't see much, the grey, the green, my head full of strange thoughts, when I thought I had to think, before I acted, and I was already grown up.

And nowadays, I go there often, well, I say often, six or seven times a year, to work, when it happens now, well, it's normal, it's a normal city, I find the people, a bit, unlucky, there are some restaurants that when you look at them, through the window, are places that, I don't know, but I'm tempted to say eating costs money, there are these places, where the people, you see them there, don't seem happy, as if they were serving a sentence, as if dining out was a sentence and that, I don't know, is my opinion, I know one guy, he's a singer, he came here to be in the yellow, he was here for two years, then he said I'm going back, to the green, the grey, he reckons our lives are going too well, he can't do anything, not him, in these parts.

So he went back there, and I haven't seen him since.

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You go there when you're young, to take lessons.

They give lessons.

They're nice, they get you to play games, to teach you. There's always a Japanese, or Korean, who finds it difficult, poor guy, and lags behind the rest.

Your hands sweat, you don't like it.

They ask you about your dreams. What is it you want to know?

Come on, it's a game.

Even if it's a game, I'm not saying anything.

There's a beautiful Hungarian girl who thinks you're a pest and a Spanish girl, ugly, who always follows you around.

In general there are lots of Spanish kids, who say We're all bullfighters.

There's a restaurant where you pay for one steak, you can eat fifteen, if you can manage it. You go there once a week, and on the way there you whistle.

The rest, some popcorn scattered around in there, on the floor of your bed and breakfast, white front, pretty, the Pakistanis who run it leave you a note Clean up your room or something like that, you haven't learnt it well, this language, you've never got inside it, it seems too brightly coloured, with those hats, how can you people do it?

And they all go to the disco, or around the town, to see the sights, The changing of the guard? What do I care about the changing of the guard? And you wander around, alone, in the shops that sell records, you realize you're a tourist and you're ashamed, you try to get drunk, you drink but don't succeed, you drink some more but still don't succeed, you drink even more and, still, don't succeed, and you spend the evening saying It's a shame, and you look for a way of coming home early but you're ashamed, to come home early, so you find four books, in Italian, in a bookshop all lined with dark wood, second-hand books, half price, strange things, you stay cooped up in your room, in the evening, and read, you read and clean, clean and

read, and what you read, *The Name of the Rose*, which in Italy you'd never have read even if they'd begged you in Japanese, I reckon.

And later, when you come home, when you see it, you remember everything, and especially the fact that the more you drank the less drunk you got, a very strange place. Very strange.

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I must have lived there, in all, twenty days. The first time I was at a conference, I saw only conference-goers. That was my impression of it, that the inhabitants were all conference-goers.

The next time I was at the home of a friend of mine. He would go to work, I would wait for him at home and not know what to do. I'd eat. The food's good, they say.

There was a pizzeria, there below the flat, there was a gentleman, small, he had a wig, black trousers, a white shirt and a red waistcoat. He would come to the table to take the orders, then he'd go round behind the oven, electric, put on an apron and put in the pizzas, frozen.

After that he'd return to the table, bring the bottles, and then go back to take out the pizzas.

Then he'd come to the table, he'd bring them, then go back behind the counter to make the coffees.

After that he'd go to the cash desk and make out your bill.

It wasn't expensive.

As a city, I don't know, I don't understand it. It's very big. There are some link roads. There are some districts. The buses, they say, always come in their own good time. The underground isn't very extensive, it's impossible to dig.

I don't know, I don't mean to be unkind, but when I think about it I think about the sewers.

Maybe they invented them, I don't remember now.

They invented a lot of things in general.

Which ones I don't remember now.

Maybe good fathers.

There are a lot of public things, in general, like palazzi, you recognize them because you're not allowed to go into them.

There are priests, lots of them, they say, I never see any.

Maybe they don't go to the places I go, though now, it's such a big city you don't say Let's go to the centre, it's all

centre, but the places I go are centre outside, there are few priests and even fewer nuns.

Here they talk a lot, here they like it. There are some people who don't stop talking all day.

I go there often, by train, I like the climate, I like the air, I like the sky, here there's a light that never ends, that's lengthwise.

I like it a lot, in general, only, when I'm here, I feel as if I'm doing nothing. I've never done anything, here, except eat, talk, see people. It's all so nice, so sweet, like a fig when it's really ripe, just before it goes bad.

That's how it seems to me.

I'm not sure.

Partly because of this doing nothing, nowadays, look, we were supposed to make a film, we didn't; we were supposed to do a theatre tour, we didn't; we were supposed to do a radio show, we didn't.

Well, nowadays, maybe, I don't dispute it, okay, maybe it's me, there are some people who work, some do even three jobs, cook, barman and waiter.

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It was whole, but hadn't been for long, only ten years, what's ten years, it's nothing, it was two days, for work, well, I say work, in two days I worked for one hour, it was the year two thousand, or thereabouts.

They took me around, what did I see, the bars and a mix.

It was modern, sure, but there was still something you thought was ancient, and it was clean, but had something old about it, not on the outside, like here, because here, outside, okay, but inside it's shiny, all new, there, I don't know if this makes sense, there it was old inside too.

The bars, here's an example, false ceilings zero, mirrors zero, and the décors all individual, each with its own face, and you almost thought that that furniture, that armchair, there, slightly torn, at the top, must have been picked up from beside the rubbish bin, it was clean, and it fitted in well, and it was used, it wasn't new, idolatry of the new, there was none of that, yes, maybe that was it, the new and the old together.

Apart from that I don't know.

The zoo, it's famous, there are two books, I prefer the first, the love letters, the underground is great, getting around is easy, the hotel, nice, small, I don't remember its name, with a wooden lift, and a white bed, two red heels below jeans, in the front row, and I thought, Hm.

A lot of Italians, nightlife, eating out, together, not knowing what to say, and the next day around the town, with the translator, who took me to a street, you thought you were in a different place, a big place, with those streets, big ones, with big buildings everywhere, sixteen floors, nineteen.

I was there, it seemed as if I was on the other side, further east, in a place I liked a lot, where the shops all had their own smell, where at night, in a dormitory area, on the outskirts of the outskirts, if you'd stepped out on to a balcony on the seventeenth floor, you'd have stayed there looking all night, those tall buildings, all already delapidated, discontented, each with its own flowerbed

below, tiny, with games for children, tiny, with Gagarin's rocket, like a see-saw, with a little ladder, with the duct for the rubbish that sends up its smell, through the stairwell, and with the people who, in the morning, twenty degrees below zero, went running bare-chested, with the soups, as breakfast, with the semolina, with toilet paper as a safe-haven investment, with your cigarettes that are worth an incredible amount of money, with a MacDonald's where you go in without queuing, and everyone else in line, they keep the plastic, to show it off, with the central telegraph, for phoning, and with a bar, on the fourth floor, that overlooks the central telegraph, with the waiters that are never there, and you can study and there's a textbook called *Ya uchus i lyublyu russky yazik*, I study and love Russian, as if only people who loved the language studied it, and with the sensation, an agreeable one, of not being anything, you weren't a Russian, you weren't a tourist, you weren't anything, you didn't talk much, you stammered, you blended in with the surroundings, you walked around looking for the street that smells of a lady's hairdresser's, Malaya Bronnaya, if I remember correctly, every child that passed might have been a child in a novel, it was great, but it was another place, further east, that has nothing to do with all this, here later the train that takes me home.