FOR DREAMERS ONLY

Rose Di Lorenzo Doer

Writer's comment: This essay was inspired by the memory of a person who greatly contributed to the legend of *la piazzetta* in the seventies, with his music and his gentle soul. He died in Sardegna, Italy, in 1990, poor, at only 34 years of age; all he left behind were his son and his two guitars. His name was Gaetano Bulla, my first husband and the father of my son, Alessandro. Gaetano was a simple man, a true dreamer and an artist with a heart of pure gold. To those of us who had the luck to know him, he left a whole world of love, songs, and passion for life. Gaetano, each time I go to Brescia, to the piazzetta, I can feel your presence; I can see you sitting on the marble bench by the fountain, playing your guitar, just as the day I first saw you and fell in love with you. This piece is dedicated to you, *con tanto affetto*.

— Rosa Di Lorenzo Doer

Instructor's comment: One of the assignments writing instructors typically require of Advanced Composition (English 101) students is an "observation" or "interview" paper, with the intent to teach students how to use primary research and move away from the strictly personal. As a variation, I ask my students to observe and describe a person, place, or activity in a way that would take them beyond the merely obvious and lead them into the essence. So I advise them to look closely at places or people they are much used to seeing - there is always another truth deeper down. What I ultimately want them to learn is how to explore a "journey" into the soul of their object and to present that journey to their audience. And Rosa does that in her description/observation of La Piazzetta Vescovato. "For Dreamers Only" is the chronicle of a place in the old-fashioned way, where the chronicler breathes life into a place through the passage of time and history and perhaps myth. Rosa's excellent essay uncovers the soul, the essence of the piazzetta.

— Aliki Dragona, English Department

PIAZZETTA VESCOVATO IS NOT JUST THE PRETTIEST SQUARE in the heart of Brescia's historic downtown. Piazzetta Vescovato is a powerful symbol. Nested between Corso Zanardelli and Via Trieste, this little site has been a meaningful part of the lives of generations and generations of Bresciani (inhabitants of Brescia). Half a century ago, *la piazzetta* (as I like to call it) witnessed the horrors of the Second World War, when frightened people stepped on its *sanpietrini* (those little cubic stones that made up the pavement of medieval European streets), attempting to escape the Nazi soldiers or to reach a *rifugio*, an underground cellar that offered protection from the bombs thrown down by German planes.

After the war ended, the little square began to swarm with people engaged in different kinds of activities: shops reopened, bars appeared, and the Vescovato (the residence and office of the Bishop), after having undergone some repairs, was functioning again - inciting respect and intimidation. The aura of sacredness surrounding it, backed up by substantial monetary funds (as in any good Roman Catholic institution), kept the masses at a safe distance, and poor people discovered quickly how the Christian message had gotten lost amidst the power and bureaucracy of it all.

La piazzetta did its best to escape the authoritarian, obscure effect of the clergymen across the street. The bar at the northwestern corner of Via Trieste and Via Mazzini, and the one right in Via Mazzini, a little down the street toward Corso Zanardelli, balanced things out a bit, with their noisy male clientele celebrating the end of the war with a few *bianchini* (glasses of local white wine), games of cards, and other rather mundane activities. After some time, my uncle Giuseppe and aunt Angelina, who were residing in Brescia, obtained permission from the city to turn la piazzetta into a parking lot, a common thing to do in Italy in those years (now it is prohibited, and the square, like much of the downtown, has become a "pedestrian only" zone).

Still (now in the nineteen-fifties), Catholic authorities overpowered that whole neighborhood, with the presence of at least four important Catholic bookstores (two behind the square in Via Trieste, and two on the other side in Via Tosio) and the Universit· Cattolica only a few dozen meters to the right of the Vescovato. A few specialized stores sold merchandise exclusively for the clergy: mass paraphernalia, from expensive golden goblets to incense diffusers; black gowns with beautiful, richly embroidered overgowns; precious wooden crosses, hand-carved by some recognized artist; elegant, leather-bound Bibles, with gold-sequinned inscriptions; and every sort of statue, from the Virgin Mary to Jesus to San Francesco. Passersby, looking inside the showcases in awe and admiration of such a display of fine and pricey artwork, wondered how regular priests could afford any of it. Certainly only wealthy clergymen, of higher rank, could buy such treasures.

Then the sixties arrived, and with them the Beatles phenomenon and a wave of new, fresh, anticonservative energy. La piazzetta warmly welcomed the first provos, beatniks, and other colorful characters who gathered next to the parking lot and began to talk about rights, love, long hair, and rock music. Their smashing purple and yellow bell-bottom pants with matching jackets broke the monotony of gray, white, and black dominating la piazzetta. Girls in orange and apple-green miniskirts started to join the male crowd shortly after, their happy faces announcing the arrival of a new, revolutionary period in the history of Italy and the world. The challenge was out in the open, and the Sacred was finally to face the Profane....

After the parking lot closed, due to new laws and the old age of zia Angelina and zio Bepi, the square was up for grabs. We were now approaching the seventies, and the provos gave way to the younger hippies in a perfect evolutionary fashion. The echoes of the Vietnam War were made tangible by daily news coverage. Italian students and factory workers marched together to protest American intervention in the war and the presence of NATO bases on our peninsula. La piazzetta became "the happening place," the

hottest hangout in the city. Half of it belonged to the hippies, and half to the "politicians."

Each crowd had adopted one of the two bars as its own. The Bar Frascati, in Via Mazzini, was the meeting place of the left-wing extremists. The other, il Baretto, on the other side in Via F.lli Lombardi, was the hippies' *buttagi`* ("dump"). The Vescovato, cut in the middle, looked down on the new population with horror and shame.

Oftentimes, groups of Fascists (or Blacks, as they were called), armed with heavy chains and Aikido wood sticks, came down from their "quarters" in Piazza Arnaldo, uptown, to raid the piazzetta, hoping to beat up some Reds. The two factions would nervously face one another and the tension between them would explode suddenly into a violent fight, blood seen almost unfailingly. Afterward, the Reds would return to their bar, counseling and supporting each other and anticipating the savor of revenge, swearing that next time they would beat the Blacks harder and longer.

Sometimes some Reds, sickened by the violence and annoyed by the closed minds of certain group leaders, crossed over and went to the hippie half of the square, initially with some hesitation, looking for what was missing in their half. Most of the time they stayed for good, and soon their hair grew longer, their clothes abandoned the sobriety of Fidel Castro-style coats for colored Indian purdas and hemp pants and sandals. In a relatively short time they would regain a smile, aided by good quality hashish and LSD. And for them, too, la piazzetta would become the place of wonderful trips, newly gained knowledge, shared dreams, and a feeling of *communitas*. The sky was truly wide open.

But then the eighties knocked at the door, and la piazzetta started to lose its colors. Italy's *anni di piombo* ("lead years" or "bullet years") faded away and political extremism was not in fashion anymore. Many *compagni* returned to a life of bourgeois security and fixed salaries. It was the end also for il Baretto, which closed its doors only to be transformed into an exclusive oysters and champagne bar. The last hippies contrasted with the materialistic turn that la piazzetta had taken, with remodeled, expensive boutiques and shoe stores, high-class herboristeries and, of course, the expensive clergy stores that had persisted through it all. Over a few months, the hippies cleared the piazza and never returned again.

The nineties saw a restructuring and beautification of Piazzetta Vescovato. Now a quiet, comfortable site again, it is a pleasure to take a rest on its marble benches, feel the rustling of the leaves of its four ancient trees, and drink the good, fresh water falling from its Renaissance clover-shaped fountain that reigns in the middle. The Vescovato has been remodeled as well, and the four Catholic bookstores still enjoy the strong business supplied by their valuable upper middle-class clientele. The oysters and champagne bar is gone. In its place, an expensive baby clothes boutique, right in front of one of the clergy stores, has been open for quite a while now. People stroll by, admire, and go on to mind their own matters.

It seems like the order has been re-established by some external force, unknown to the layperson passing by. But if you stop there for a minute and listen carefully, you may hear some of the thousand songs of terror, hope, glory, sadness, utopia, joy and grief, irresponsibility and disillusion trapped in the leaves of the four trees. It is a subdued howl that has become part of the spirit of the piazzetta itself. Not everybody hears it, or feels it. Only the ones who know how to dream have access to the magic of it. And only for them, Piazzetta Vescovato, symbol of Resilience, comes to life.