PARADISE LOST

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In Carrara it's easy to forget about the sea. The Mediterranean, which lies just a few kilometres west of this small industrial city, disappears rapidly as you climb from the marina to the base of the Apuan Alps and the largest marble quarry in the world.

Likewise, from the water's edge, where solitary sunbathers, as dark as bronze, stretch out on great flat stones, the mountains seem less a reality than an optical illusion. They arise behind you like a crude etching or cardboard cutout: a kitsch alpine backdrop (the exposed marble looks like snow) that offsets the sea. An even row of palm trees that line the boulevard between the marina, where large blocks of marble are placed onto shipping containers, and the coastal city of Massa heighten the sense of displacement. As Eric Scigliano writes in *Michelangelo's Mountain*, the quarries above Carrara form, 'the greatest trompe l'oeil ever shaped by human hands.'

But they are real, and as you retreat back into the mountains the illusion fades. Yet it is precisely this confluence (of the sea and the mountains) that has so inspired and, at times, driven artists mad. It is also, of course, the source of the marble itself, a composite of marine invertebrate shells, piled up and compressed for millennia, that have formed against the weight of the sea and other matter into the sedimentary rock limestone and dolomite.

The quarries have long served as a sojourn for artists and writers. Dante, exiled from Florence in 1304 when violence beset the two factions of the ruling Guelph party, eventually found his way to Carrara, and immortalized it in the twentieth canto of the *Inferno*.

Aronte it was who in the depths that lie
Beneath the peaks of Luni, quarried by
The Carrarese who dwell below,
Had a cavern of white marble for his home,
Where, free to view the stars and sea,
His sight, unblocked, could roam.

Today, a ten-foot slab carved with this verse hangs from the cliffs of Calagio, one of the deepest quarries in the Apuans.

So Michelangelo was following in the footsteps of his predecessor when he first travelled to Carrara in 1497 to find the marble for one of his most beloved works, the Pieta. The stone for David was also extracted from Carrara, though not under Michelangelo's watchful eye, and was of lesser quality. Michelangelo would eventually make seventeen trips to the quarries from 1516 to 1519. However, much of the stone extracted from the mountains, particularly that intended for the tomb of Julius II and the façade of the Church of San Lorenzo (two colossal projects never completed), was never used. Such unredeemed efforts and a shippers' strike that forced him to venture all the way to Genoa in search of transport, explain Michelangelo's letter to his brother Buonarotti of 1518 in which he writes, 'Oh cursed a thousand times are the day and hour when I left Carrara! It is the cause of my undoing, but I will return there soon.'

Carrara's more recent chroniclers have rarely, if ever, thought of returning. Although Lady Blessington (1789–1849, an Irish writer known for her *Conversations of Lord Byron*) described Carrara as an 'earthly paradise,' looking down at the city from La Foce, a high mountain pass, most have not been so enchanted.

Montesquieu, who spent one night in Carrara in 1728, found its inhabitants, 'the most brutal and worst governed of all peoples.' Charles Dickens, a century later, was somewhat less disparaging, and discerned a certain beauty in that which springs from such 'miserable ground.' Today, although it may be part of Tuscany,

Carrara is a world apart from the Garden-of-Eden conception that informs books like *Under the Tuscan Sun*. It is, rather, a city with a rough edge, 'Italy's Wild West,' as Scigliano writes, 'a land of quick riches and long, slow poverty.' Indeed, Carrara is one of Italy's poorest regions, with the lowest per capita income and highest unemployment in Tuscany.

Although Carrara and its surrounding mountainside have not been featured in the pages of *Gourmet* or in one of Calvin Trillin's essays (although Trillin comes close in a recent piece on *farro*, a variety of spelt, that took him to Garfagnana and the mountains of north-west Tuscany), they did receive the attention of British food writer Patience Gray. Gray, one of the translators of *Larousse Gastronomique* and the author of *Plats du Jour* (1957) and *Honey From a Weed* (1986), came to Carrara in 1965 in search of marble with her partner, the Belgian sculptor Norman Mommens. They lived in a small house, 'marooned on the saddle of an Etruscan hill,' above the city. It was here, at La Barozza, as she called it, and in the mountain village of Castelpoggio that Patience received her first lesson in foraging for edible weeds. Although she had taken an interest in weeds on the Greek island of Naxos, she did not begin to study them systematically until settling in Carrara. (In her collection of *fascioli* – dispatches, occasional writings – entitled *Work Adventures Childhood Dreams*, Gray writes, of a French Governess, who, on afternoon walks would gather *les pissenlits*, *l'oseille*, and *les barbes-de-capucins* for that night's salad.)

In Castelpoggio, where Mommens had been given the use of a ruined villa ('confiscated by the Commune from a noted fascist,' Gray writes), Patience set out with the widow La Dirce to learn about the local plants and flowers.

'She [La Dirce] used to pounce on a great variety of mountain plants,' writes Gray, 'pull them out with a penknife, and thus abstract the crown of leaves with a piece of root. She stuffed them in a cloth and thrust them into the foraging sack. She called them all *radici* or *radicchi*, meaning roots.' Dirce would boil and drain the

weeds, and eat them with olive oil, a few drops of wine vinegar and hard-boiled eggs.

Gray received another valuable lesson in weeds at La Barozza from Eugenia, a young girl of seven whose father worked one of the local vineyards. 'As she picked each plant,' Gray writes, 'she said: "This is for cooking" or "This is for salad" (her plant categories).' And this is, essentially, how Tuscan vineyard weeds are delineated. There are the boiled variety (*radici*, *radicchi*) which include wild leeks and garlic, corn poppy, wild clary, comfrey, borage, sweet violet, and rampion; and the weeds and herbs used in salads, generally sweeter and more tender, the flowers of borage, wild rocket, white wall rocket, wild radish, burnet, and fronds of wild fennel. Gray was particularly interested in the knowledge of these wild plants and herbs and their seasonal use among the Greek, Italian, and Catalan people.

The gathering of wild plants and herbs continues here, though mainly in rural areas and in the mountains. Vittoria Alma Cordiviola, a local historian and botanist, says that the knowledge is still passed down as it always has been, from mother to daughter. (However, according to Cordiviola, men are expressing a greater interest in foraging for weeds today, and young women, especially in the city but even in many of the villages, have forsaken such knowledge.)

Cordiviola, whose last name means heart of the violet, has published three books on the region and spent twenty years identifying a local plant known as *castracan*, or castrated dog (*Leontodon tuberosus*). The name derives from the shape of the root after it is taken from the ground and cut. The plant is endemic to the region and has been gathered by local people for centuries. When I show Cordiviola *Honey From a Weed*, she pages through the section on edible weeds, pointing to the Latin names for many of the plants and offering their equivalent in Carrarino, the local dialect.

She then tells me that Gray missed many of the most important plants but that this may be attributed to the lack of sun and the

chestnut groves that shade the hillsides high up in the mountains of Castelpoggio, where Gray was living and foraging.

But when I ask her how the plants are cooked she describes, without pause, the preparation of *polenta incatenata*, or polenta in chains, a dish that appears in *Honey From a Weed* under the chapter heading, 'La Polenta.' According to Gray it was the marble-workers' favourite dish, and that for the Carraresi, 'ever intent on forsaking old ways for more ostentatious delights,' polenta, ever a symbol of poverty, was an exception and a point of pride. The dish is made in a large pot of boiling water flavoured with a ham hock. *Fagioli borlotti*, Tuscan marbled beans (or any other sturdy bean) are added and when the beans are partially cooked you throw in a bunch of *cavolo nero* (literally, black cabbage), a kind of dark green kale, before finally adding a couple handfuls of polenta. It is served in deep soup plates with olive oil.

There are two theories as to the origin of the dish's name. The first is that the polenta, when mixed with the beans and *cavolo nero* becomes entwined, or chained to them. The second, which Cordiviola thinks more likely, is that it comes from the Carrarino word *katuna* or *katina*, a terracotta pot used for cooking.

In *Honey From a Weed*, Gray includes an obituary for the city of Carrara and its piazzetta where the village market once flourished. She writes that, 'In the name of progress, the city's heart has since been transplanted to the periphery and carries on in a hygienic modern structure.'

Gray would visit the market daily before repairing to her workshop, 'a Florentine tower overlooking the marble saw mills and the torrent of the Carrione,' where she began to work in silver – a material as exacting as marble, she notes – in order to feel at home. The market, near a twelfth-century church was 'ruled by very old ladies' and crowded with pork butchers selling blood sausage, hams, and blocks of *lardo*; poultry farmers with guinea fowl, quail, and game; fishwives located in an alley at the bottom of the market, which 'resounded with frenzied shouting.' But what

most caught Gray's eyes were the vegetables displayed in the centre of the piazzetta: small winter artichokes, salsify and the black roots of scorzonera; spinach, cabbage, and wild chicory; white, green, and purple cauliflower and orange winter pumpkins.

Food for Gray was never without its connection to the people who cultivated it – the retired quarrymen who sold the herbs that they gathered, the women and children who collected weeds and other edible plants and imparted their knowledge to her, the sheep-herder who carried fresh ricotta wrapped in beech or bayleaves down from the mountains to the city – and shared in its wonders. In Carrara she writes, 'The feeling of the mountains was never far away...a dialogue between town and country was maintained, but also appointments kept between townsmen and freshly milled maize-flour in outlying farms. Those *borse*, leather bags, carried by everyone always turned out to contain not papers, but some rich find, golden polenta flour, a mountain sheep's cheese, a rustic mortadella...In those days it was still possible to feel that the Carraresi were definitely in touch with the "earthly paradise".'

The imprint of progress that Gray so lamented has only accelerated and what was once the heart of the city, the piazzetta, has been moved beyond the periphery to two antiseptic supermarkets, Esselungo, which has two stores in Carrara (a superstore closer to the marina and a smaller one in the centre of the city) and Conad, the thriftier version of the two. There are still fish, meat and cheese shops – their storefronts are scattered throughout the city – but I would imagine, far fewer than forty years ago. And they've all moved inside, eliminating the irreproducible ferment that comes from haggling over prices in an open square where everything is displayed. Shopping today, whether at one of the supermarkets or one of the smaller, speciality shops is largely a solitary act.

And what is referred to as 'the market,' held on Monday, bears little evidence of its past. Indeed, the only reminder of the former market is a worn stone plaque on one of the buildings that face the square and reads, Piazza dell'erbe (*erbe* and *erbucce*, in Italian, refer

to all wild salad plants) and the Via del mercato which meets it.

Today's market, which winds from Piazza Matteotti, where the International Anarchist Federation is headquartered, to Piazza Alberica, the city's main square consists almost entirely of clothing. Of the fifty-plus vendors only two sell produce. A handful of young African men, hauling their wares in oversized blue plastic bags, sell sweatshirts (D& G, Armani), leather bags, and shoes (Nike). Thus the market reflects less a dialogue between town and country than a dialogue between the city and the rest of the world. The country has disappeared or has been severed from what was once a vital link, the city and its people.

The impact of such a disconnect remains uncertain. What will become of the people who live in the surrounding villages? Perhaps they'll go on as they always have. (Although, this is an oversimplification because their lives have already been greatly affected.) Or perhaps they'll cease to exist, taking their knowledge with them.

The city's civic and business leaders, however, are intent on reshaping Carrara and turning it into a Tuscan exhibition pole that feeds both tourism and production. Or, as Ciro Gaspari, President of the Bank of Massa Carrara, triumphantly notes in the catalogue for the XII international *biennale* of sculpture held in September, Carrara will no longer only be the 'capital of a culture tied to the quarrying of marble, but the nucleus of a new type of cultural tourism.' The recent *biennale* was delayed for two years to prepare the inauguration of a new museum of sculpture housed in the former convent of San Francesco.

And according to the mayor who, it was revealed after he was elected, faces charges of bankruptcy in nearby La Spezia, Carrara's future lies 'beyond marble.' Perhaps in the twin industries of *carbonato* and tourism.

The *carbonato* industry, governed by the multinational firms Omya and Imerys, now dominates the quarries. *Carbonato*, a powder made from pieces of marble too small to be shaped or cut, is used

to make paper, glass, cement, plastics, calcium supplements and many other industrial products. Of the nine-hundred truckloads that barrel daily through the city, less than a third carry actual blocks of marble. The rest contain scrap and debris that is turned into *carbonato*.

In a recent vote, the city council, backed by the mayor, agreed to allow Omya to double its production facility, a decision that has left many disillusioned. (According to Maria Mattei, an English teacher who heads a local language and cultural centre, 'We have a left government, but it is not left.' Carrara has long been the heart of Italy's Communist Party and has a strong anarchist presence. The 'left' still dominates local politics.)

According to Cordiviola, who left the city and now lives in the hills after developing allergies which she says are a by-product of the chemicals used in the *carbonato* industry and the dust that ends up in the air and water, the mountains are being pulverized and the identity of the people is being destroyed. The dangers of quarrying, which were once limited to the *cavatori*, or quarrymen, one or two of whom died each month during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, now afflicts the entire province of Massa Carrara. Indeed, cancer rates in Carrara are significantly higher (120 per cent) than those in the rest of Tuscany.

'Our identity is at risk,' Cordiviola says, adding that excavation is changing the wind and weather patterns. It is changing the profile of the mountains. It might be said that this is a process that has been going on for centuries. Yes, but not at such a pace and not at such profits. Today instead of quarrying for marble Omya and Imerys quarry for *carbonato*.

And at least with Michelangelo and the other sculptors who have come to Carrara in search of marble, something redemptive came of the stone that they cut from the mountains. *Carbonato*, on the other hand, is nothing more than dust.