

Tibet



by Yiu Wang Leung

Yiu Wang-Leung is a foreign student and a senior in Philosophy. He went to Tibet first in 2004 and again in 2006.

Street Madonna

by Catherine Austin Alexander

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On July 1, 2006, she retired as Assistant to the Chair of Pathology.

She has published short stories in 16 literary journals, her work has been aired on National Public Radio, read by actor Jorja Fox in Hollywood and nominated for The Pushcart Prize.

At the Campo de' Fiori, filled with produce, flowers and restaurants, a Romani with Spanish eyes darker than the shadow she creates swirls her long, crimson skirt, the pleats stroking her hips. Small, shapely, advancing hips.

She nudges between converging tables in search of the outstretched hand filled with coins, which she finds and accepts with a nod. Tossing a mane of matted curls, she adjusts the scarf cradling her child and approaches the next table where beer-chugging men wrangle over soccer scores. The Romani stares with insistence, standing feet apart and hands on hips, her charcoal eyes darting from one man to the other. Carousers finally look up, sneer and pretend to spit. She sneers in return, picks up her skirt and clicks her high heels, which should—but don't—catch in the cobblestones.

If she were a Renaissance painting, she'd be a Caravaggio—spontaneous, grimy and real. If she were a marble Bernini with Apollo pressed against her, she'd be no Daphne.

The truth is she has only the clothes she comes with and two brassieres: one black and one white.

A line of priests crosses the Campo. Brother Stefano, a new priest, steps away to examine the local produce. Suddenly the Romani appears before him, knotted curls trailing down her back and a scarf of poppies nestling the child at her breast. Her ancient stare suggests a sorcerer, a soothsayer, a witch. But gradually her eyes turn to translucent green, her look as beneficent as the Madonna. Still, she demands a coin for her child. Stefano throws three coins on the cobblestones. As she bends to scoop up the change, the child slips from its scarf hammock. Tiny feet skim the cobblestones, but tiny lips never lose their latch on life. Stefano glares for a second, then rushes from the square.

With laughing putto in tow, Madonna quits the Campo de' Fiori, crosses Vittorio Emanuele and heads up the Corso to the Piazza Navona market. In the middle of the boat-shaped square, water spills from Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers--the Nile, the Ganges, the Danube and the Rio de la Plata. Madonna worries little about

world rivers, Bernini or the Baroque, knows not an obelisk from a column, Domitian from Augustus. Instead, she pays tribute to the street traders and performers—the salesman: with a dozen fake Gucci handbags on each arm, two accordion players, a base violinist and on either side of the fountain, one man painted green and one silver.

As luck would have it, a tour group with orange baseball caps advances in her direction. She ambles up slowly, quickens her step and sashays between the tourists with her palm extended. She tosses her hair, her skirt, clicks her heels. Each time her palm is filled, she slips the coins into her pocket and holds out for more. Finally, the leader with an orange flag shakes it at her, as if she's more odious than the man who has sprayed himself green.

As she ventures on, her breasts begin to swell and she steps into the Pantheon's colonnaded porch to feed her bambino. Then up through the Spanish Steps to the Pincio gardens where she takes her siesta behind a shady palm. When she wakes, a peddler stands before her with two long-stemmed roses, a buon mercato. She nods "si," clip-clops down the Spanish Steps and marches to S. Ivo alla Sapienza. The chapel is empty except for a coffin waiting for mourners. She sets the roses on the casket, lights a candle and takes a pin from her hair to pick the offering lock. In the Palazzo, she shares her hoist with Romanies hiding in the double arcades, keeping only what she needs.

At the Vatican, she pockets a few coins before she's caught bare breasted, nursing her Christ child. The Guarda robba demolish her just as Bramanté once did the Basilica. She leaves St. Peter's foot unkissed and spurns this holy Grand Central Station. Besides, she's at home on the cobblestones of the Campo de' Fiori. The fish heads in the piazza, the overripe figs and twisted carrots make perfect sense, along with brimmed hats and cheap straw bags.

Madonna knows she won't burn here like Giordano Bruno, poor mad heretic whose gigantic statue she leans against to count her morning bounty. She's fared well, but nothing like the peddler of jumping Disney mouses and 3D winking Jesuses on the streets of St. Peters'.

When Madonna was barely 16, a tall man with graying hair and a brooding nature took her to the Isle of Capri. There, flat-roofed homes pressed into jagged rocks that pushed out from the ocean to the top of Anacapri. So unlike Rome, with its grottos, misty air and small, gaudy shops.

The man called himself Emilio and dubbed her Constanza di Roma. He plied her with lilies and seashells, a coral cross and a skirt with three

flounces. Next, he sandaled her feet with straps of pearls and anointed her skin with island-made perfumes.

But then he changed. He made her work the grotto while he waited under the bougainvillaea and oleander. Afterwards he snatched her purse and abandoned her on the island. The love in Constanza's heart turned as hard as the obsidian beads she stole from the small, gaudy shops.

Madonna ran to the Funicular Railway that jerked down the rocks to the shore. She stowed away on a boat and ended up in Salerno. The clean provincial people and gulf air made her homesick for the Tiber, with its river rats floating on orphaned shoes. Rome's twisted pagan streets and crumbling churches were her history. Campo nights of beer bashing, days under the Titan sun, the perfume of decaying fish and apricots, led her to rapture. Rome, that pure old whore—Madonna was one with her, in this life and the next.