

Consiglio, Italy
Café

15 October 2009
freezing

© A deep and terrible blanket of cold settles over most of Europe. I return here alone, to the Consiglio, to walk these frozen paths. A place like all the places that summon me; drawn by the mixture of appearances. The mud had frozen overnight and the moss on rocks and trees sparkled in the weak sunlight. As I ascended along the path, I passed through patches of light and deep shadow. A strong wind overhead swayed the tall pines. A powerful woosh filled the still forest.

My face was cold but the chill was refreshing. I came to the 'foiba' or cave where a plain wooden fence surrounds the dark chasm that reaches deep into the earth. A black cross, its base wrapped in barbed wire, bears the inscription, *Silentes et Loquiron*.

Further, there is a stone inscribed *Al Caduti Senza Nome* or The Nameless Dead. I sat on a nearby frost covered rock, wondering about the Latin expression of what here is expressed in silence. A place where the locals say hundreds were tossed to their deaths for collaborating with either the Fascists or the Nazis.

Is it this – the march of the unnamed: men, women, and children, probably handheld, who were pushed into eternity for allegiance to a cause, decades past, that eerily whispers here? Or is it more, is this dark pit in an Edenic forest but a single page to the history of man written in war and in times of peace that speaks? Does there exist things in the human heart that are timeless and unchanged since Europe had been ruled by nomadic tribes?

There are only two monuments here; the yawning cave and the black cross, symbol of the savior standing over the place of the forsaken. That there is a terrible coldness in this place all can attest to, but it is not solely due to the thick shadows that hover. This place is like a Calvary Hill to mankind itself where neighbors had turned on each other. Neighbor murdered neighbor defending a dark idea that tore apart this world.

Just inside the fence someone had tossed a bouquet of red and pink roses. Their petals glisten and lie frozen, congealed to the earth. A noble gesture by one who chose remembrance over human capacity to forget. As I took in the cold surroundings and the dark maw of earth, I noted the slow descent of colorful

leaves spiraling, tumbling end-over-end, twirling and settling gently down. Very few ever fell into that pit.

I saw only a lone leaf fall into the pit. One. I wondered if the large gaping formation, by some strange design, altered the descent of leaves – displacing them. I wondered at the depth of the pit. I tossed in a rock. No sound echoed back. It seemed to fall eternally. I tossed in another stone – nothing returned – all sound seemed swallowed whole.

I looked at my watch, a *Fossil*, the second hand moving smoothly. I removed the watch from my arm. It would make noise I could hear. It was silver and heavy. Thus I pondered bringing time into a place where time for countless souls stopped. A place where eternity met them in their moment. I threw the watch in an arc, high above the fence – it passed into sunlight before descending.

There is a part of the cave that sticks out, a promontory that juts like a moss-covered wall, dividing part of the cave. At the right angle it appeared as a swirl of dark stone. If the watch hit it, the effort would be wasted. My heart slowed as the watch landed right atop that mossy swirl. I heard the glass shatter at once. What happened next, I could not have imagined.

The back of the watch snapped right off. It bounced high in the air, twirling between sunlight and shadow. For a moment, I was certain it slowed, paused even, before disappearing into streams of gravity. My breaths slowed. Which way would it fall? The back part of the watch fell into the dark cave, the part I couldn't see into. The rest of the watch fell on the other side, closer to the wall that reached into the earth. My attention, my entire being, moved in the depths with those pieces of metal.

Atop the wall, part of the glass shimmered against the frozen moss. The metal backing hit the inner wall on its way down. What followed was a series of distinct pings as the metal hit the walls, for some reason, three times. With each series, the time in between the pings narrowed, as the depths must have also narrowed.

The metallic sounds from the walls rose from the dark pit. I felt a chill in my body as I listened. I also noted I was not breathing. The echoing sounds resonated for at least seven to eight seconds. It is not what I had expected.

Immediately after the final metallic ping reached out of the depths, there came a fluttering from high above that caught my eye. Did it come from the pit?

A pale white bird alighted on a nearby tree blackened by lightning. Looking at this thing, I wondered if there were white ravens or albino ravens. From those oval-shaped pink eyes it stared down at the pit. One caw and a wing flutter. Then it looked at me. One caw. I felt those eyes touch me as those pale wings fluttered furiously. A pale feather spiraled into the pit. Then a third caw came. It echoed over the vast forest on the chill air. I stood like a stone staring up at this thing.

“Spirit of the pit,” I whispered aloud. A chill deep inside shivered me. It swooped down over the pit. Then it passed right over. The woosh moved my hair as it passed above me. Its wingspan was at least eight feet. I heard the powerful sweep of its wings as it climbed over the treetops. I felt dizzy and leaned against the fence, closing my eyes.

A strong gust now filled the space, blowing up against me. I suddenly felt very cold. Listening to the swirling winds, I heard anew in my depths, the rhythm of the watch hitting those solemn walls, narrower and fainter as it descended. I had only wanted to know how deep that cave was but the answer that came back gave more. Those metallic sounds from the darkness carried to my senses more than depth, distance and speed.

This science can neither measure nor describe. I came to know it by the stark coldness that passed through my senses and disturbed my soul. Yes, mere sound connected me with the expected. But what was carried inside mere sound touched in me similar depths. Perhaps from a similar darkness carried in the depths of all human hearts.

Beside the cold that filled me, I felt a deep regret for a curiosity that should have remained on the other side of the fence. Unlike the bouquet of roses lying in the frozen earth, a testament to a sacred understanding. I foolishly trespassed the boundary between time and eternity, man and the angelic. I could not undo it.

My question was misplaced. The word carved on the black cross, “Silentes” is all I should have come for but I needed to hear more. As if I were at all naïve to what lingers in humankind. I didn’t need a cave to teach me.

Later that night as I tried to sleep, I was haunted by the descent of the watch tumbling over-and-over and that pink-eyed pale bird that looked into me. I pondered the odds of that thing landing just above the scene and peering down at that exact moment. No science could answer it. Spirit of the pit it truly was. My last thought before descending into sleep, 'I should not have trespassed there. I am sorry.'

Consiglio, pronounced: con-seal-ee-oh

