

Returning to My City from Cologne via Istanbul on January 27, 2020, Amid an Epidemic

by Xi Chuan, translated from the Chinese by Lucas Klein

The inescapable year of the rat. An unavoidable destination.
White clouds and black clouds bearing me back, the epidemic teaches me the meaning of my family and nationality.

In your face. Head on. Empty street on empty street. Facemask avoiding facemask.
The person wearing a facemask while jogging is frustrated but still won't give up hope of a long life.

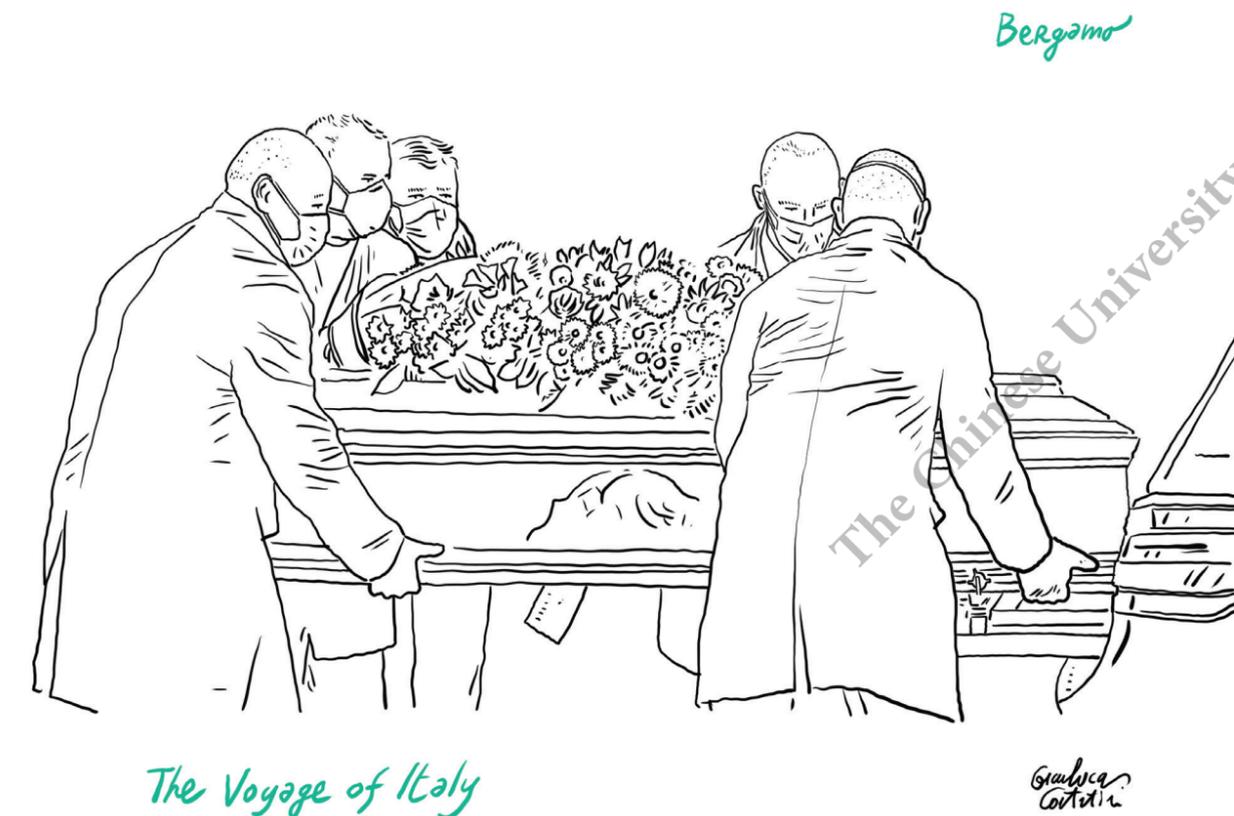
The sky that snows like it used to agrees with the sunlight shining after a dark night like it used to.
No matter which paradise the bus is driving toward it's driving breathlessly, because there's nobody on it.

Wangfujing, sixteen years ago, I wandered the streets in search of a dictionary,
and it felt like I was the last man in the city.

Now I seem not even to be a man, but to be panting in a
doubly unreal world, and find myself a bit indifferent all of a sudden.

Online the people who've cursed for a whole week, then napped for a while only to wake up and curse another week,
are lying to themselves, scaring themselves, getting themselves high, and encouraging themselves all at once.

The people at home who've gone stir-crazy in a locked-down Wuhan wriggle over to the window and pass each
other wishes to "stay strong."
Oh, to praise the people who make things "mad good"!



The Voyage of Italy

Giulio Cortina

A roar of donations, and the GDP disappears in a chain reaction.
The retrograde choose greatness! Hipsters grow up overnight and learn how to make their own dumplings.

What secrets, what grievances, made the director of Huanggang Health Commission
admit to ignorance before the Central Steering Committee and the TV cameras?

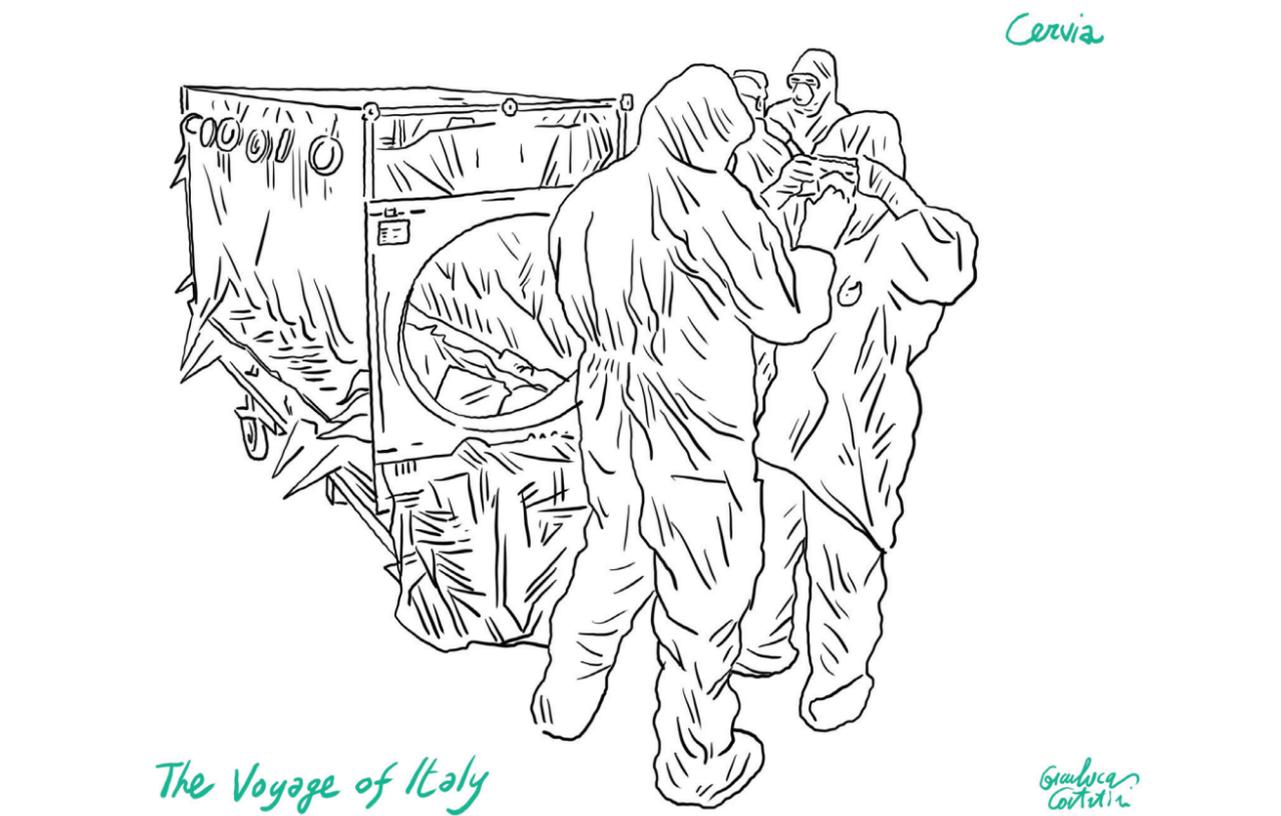
What must happen is: after winter, flowers will still bloom in spring,
inhaling all this virus—ironic on the face of it—this virus doesn't know who it is.

What must happen is: life will carry on, the new waves of the Yangzi will see off the old
but the new waves and old will more or less resemble each other.

Thinking of Meng Haoran returning to Deer Gate at night, of Wang Wei back at Wangchuan Villa at dusk,
I return to my city amid an epidemic, grasping the poetry of empty mountains at the sight of the vacant streets.

But I can't do anything: I don't dare cough, and I don't dare get a fever;
watching official news broadcasts about the epidemic you end up coughed a little closer to rumor and gossip.

After walking past drugstores where facemasks are out of stock and restaurants closed for business and markets that
have taken a hit,
I silently and silently close my door, shutting out the crowds of maybe and perhaps.



The Voyage of Italy

Giulio Cortina

Ode to Facemasks

by Xi Chuan, translated from the Chinese by Lucas Klein

If I could, I would put on a facemask and walk into the desert to meet with fairies and angels.

I put on a facemask to resist sandstorms, put on a facemask to resist smog, put on a facemask to make it through days of the avian flu and days of SARS and days of the novel coronavirus. The old boat has passed ten thousand mountains, but there are another ten thousand mountains before me!

I've worn a facemask to be fashionable, worn a facemask for my identity, worn a facemask to avoid the mass surveillance system, and worn a facemask to shout and to talk to myself. My tenure wearing facemasks is just as glorious as the tenure of those in antiquity who didn't have facemasks!

But I haven't gone so crazy I'd rob a bank. Facemasks have their own insanity and brute force, though, so bankers should fight back with their own facemasks, so their own bright eyes will triumph over the blurry, bewildered, brutal eyes of the robbers.

Others of the new era, internet trolls online, are probably wearing facemasks too. To post anonymously is to post while masked. If they put on sunglasses along with their facemasks, they'll be footmen to hackers, waiting to be crowned with blocked accounts.

But after all, from doctors and nurses, people wearing facemasks are just scared citizens, facemasks protecting their trembling. The gangsters you see in movies never wear facemasks. They save the cops a lot of trouble with their old-school good looks.

Scared citizens put facemasks on their dogs, put facemasks on their cats, even dream of putting facemasks on pangolins and mice. I have to say, this is the reality surrealist poetry is rooted in!

The node of surrealist poetry's victory is: wear a facemask to eat, wear a facemask to smoke or drink, wear a facemask to make love, wear a facemask to spit, wear a facemask to die. The surrealists come back to haunt us again and again.

Mom dug through the cupboard in search of facemasks for me to wear. Since she keeps a tidy house and hates to waste anything, she'd managed to keep a stash of facemasks for seventeen years, ever since the SARS crisis.

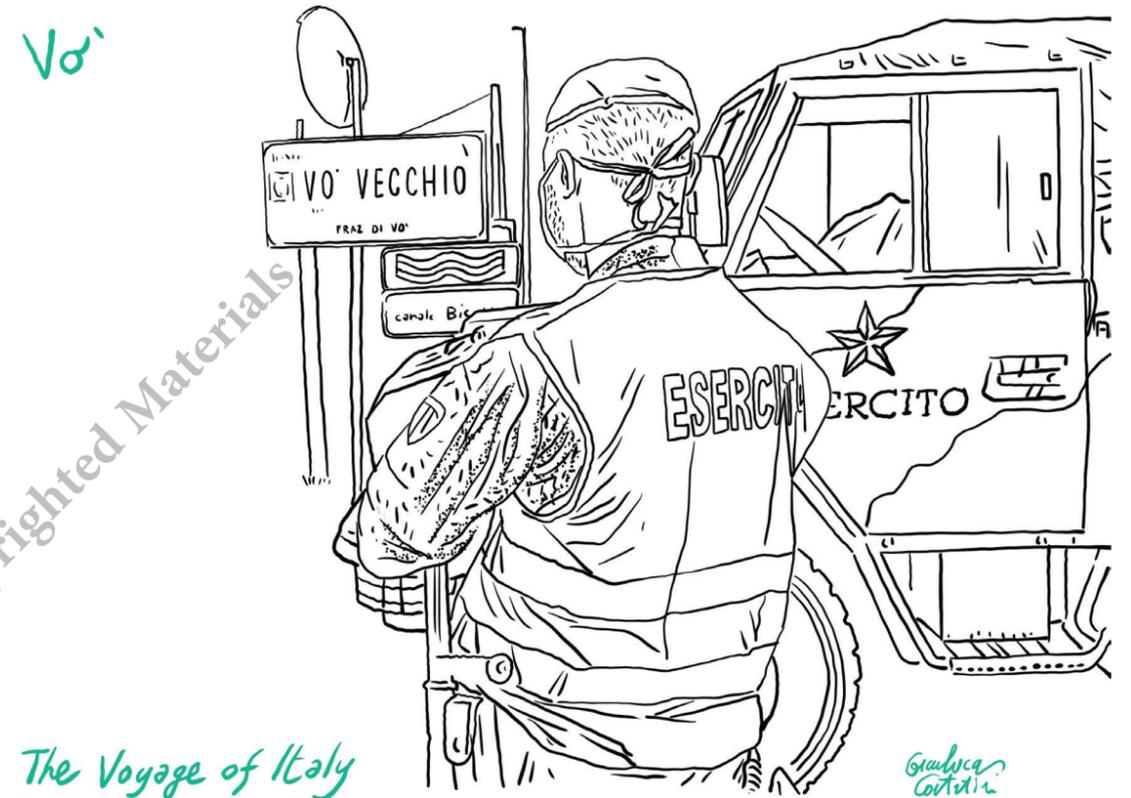
I said to her: Now that facemasks are out of stock, I can't believe I didn't open a facemask factory back when I had a chance—I'd be rich! I spent a whole week lamenting my lack of understanding of society, economics, and history.

But after a week I figured my understanding of fate had deepened, so as soon as the drugstores were selling facemasks again I started stockpiling them, unethically looking forward to next Facemask Season.

There have been Chinese people getting beaten up on Sydney streets for wearing facemasks, or ordered to remove their facemasks in Berlin. How can the naked mouths of Sydney and Berlin understand, this is our way of life and means of existence!

If I could, I would put on a facemask and walk bare-assed into the desert to meet with fairies and angels.

People don't recognize me in a facemask, and because I wear a facemask I don't recognize myself. In my own mind, I confirm who I am over and over, but my facemask always denies me. When I take off my facemask, though, it turns out to be nothing—nothing at all.



The Voyage of Italy

Aostau



The Voyage of Italy

All Right, All Right*by Xi Chuan, translated from the Chinese by Lucas Klein*

All right, all right, I won't sneeze, I won't cough, I'll wait a whole month before sneezing or coughing; if I'm still not allowed to sneeze or cough in a month, then I'll put it off for another month. But at some point I'm going to have to sneeze, going to have to cough. If you don't let me cough or sneeze, ye gods, I'll try to take the whole situation into account, but you'll owe me one. You owe me so much already.

All right, all right, I won't spread rumors. To keep from spreading rumors I once plugged my ears, shut my eyes, but then I couldn't hear or see the proper truth, which always comes a beat too slow, so I unplugged my ears and opened my eyes. If I say something wrong, ye gods, then give me a position in government, so I can have a chance to take the long view.

All right, all right, I won't die, and I won't let my family, friends, or coworkers die. I call each one up. They ask me if I'm all right. They want to come see me, even if it means risking their lives. I say it's nothing, it's nothing, it's just that I've had my consciousness raised. After which they get even more worried. So I have to go out and see them, as if the streets belonged to someone else, and I just happened to be passing through.

After all sorts of lies, I finally manage to get my hands on the exit permits, and have to remember the secret codes of various neighborhoods. I find my friends and coworkers in a daze, playing on their cellphones, singing, eating, cooking, writing poems; whenever they refuse to see me I know they're making love. I remind them from the other side of the door: making love is fine but no porn! The eyes keeping track of the spread of the epidemic are also keeping track of public opinion and the spread of pornography.

All right, all right, I won't cause trouble. I rearrange my bookshelf, disinfect the flowers on the windowsill, tell stories to the cat. I put away my thoughts, put away my curiosity, and find that pair of wings I hid in the shoe cabinet all those years ago. Sorry, gods, I have to fly! I need to fly for just a little while at least in the clear blue sky! But before takeoff I need to lose some weight, clear my lungs, have an enema, and look in the mirror.

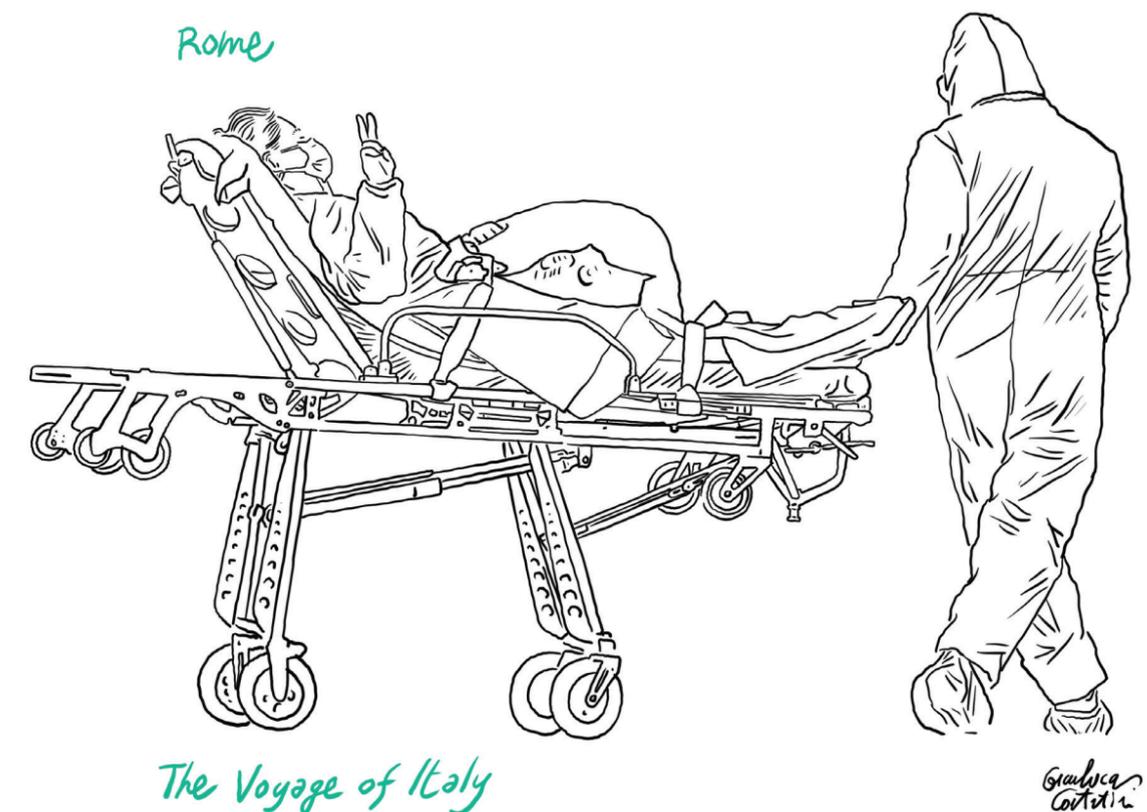
Looking down with the blue sky at my back, I have to say, I do love this city and all its people. I've just been badmouthing myself, not the whole human world. I love these people, as flustered and funny and vulgar as they can be, even though most of the time I am one of them. Everyone is making fun of this epidemic, except for all the people dying because even doctors can't save them—

they never got ready for death.

For Those Who Share My Interests, At a Time of Plague*by Xi Chuan, translated from the Chinese by Lucas Klein*

Peace halts with a screech at the Year of the Rat.
Things are not right. And just like that,
all of Wuhan is sealed and Lunar New
Year falls upon a dark Prid. Kal. Do you
have enough isopropyl or any
N95 facemasks? Now dogs run empty
streets, and all the while I dream ten dreams
each night but do not really sleep. We seem
to keep other distant, but my claim
is that avoiding the wide world is shame.
I think of China while I wash my hands,
but wonder: what is there to understand
behind shut doors? So I relish the snow
and all its slight and light descent, but know
that heaven's will is terrible. I pour
another cup of tea, but then I howl
to clear the smoke out of my lungs. Instead,
all of a sudden Li Wenliang is dead,
benevolence's star just plucked out from
the sky. The only true remaining crumb
of prophesy are words by Zhong Nanshan.

The days are clouded out by rumor and
the reckless callout things that loose lips say,
with bold words boasting to while time away.
I ask each morning at the East Gate shops
"Uh, how much is the price of ginger up?"
Then I go home to hide inside my books,
in dust a hundred eras deep. Now look:
see clouds drift, mountains move, as demons get
eradicated from the towns. And yet
to dispel demons, man must first be known,
and human harmony means being done
with filth: sweep it away. We've been indoors
for two months now, but pity all the more
those working in health care. What used to be
small rebuses of joy—bats—now, we see,
have just themselves to blame. They are maligned,
but dare we hope for more auspicious signs?



Song of Despair in the Time of Pandemic*by Chris Song*

We share atypical memory
Some died obscured
We sing our grief; riot control echoes
Still purging tear gas from the heart
we resigned ourselves to blood buns
The drugstore clerk, masked in the dark,
rolls down the shutters, his eyes aglitter
dead set on the pneumonia
Some fall silent but fulfilled
Others speak but emptied

We choke on water and cough
Eyes doubt, bodies lean off
elbows panic, as indifferent as sensitive
The mask puffs with breathing
The number of cases grows every day
The sun sets to grill the officials
making efforts not to close the border
A breach remains forever closing
Some decide to go on strike
Others plan to settle scores

We draw a neutral stick in the temple
Spring drizzle muses on the growth of mould
Haven't worshipped door gods for many years
Let's have the ones auspicious for health
Stew a soup, get rid of the damp-heat
and cleanse the lung. Speaking of which,
Qingming is approaching, let's burn
some paper masks to replace the offerings
Some want to go out for a mask hunt
Others stay in, unwilling to speak

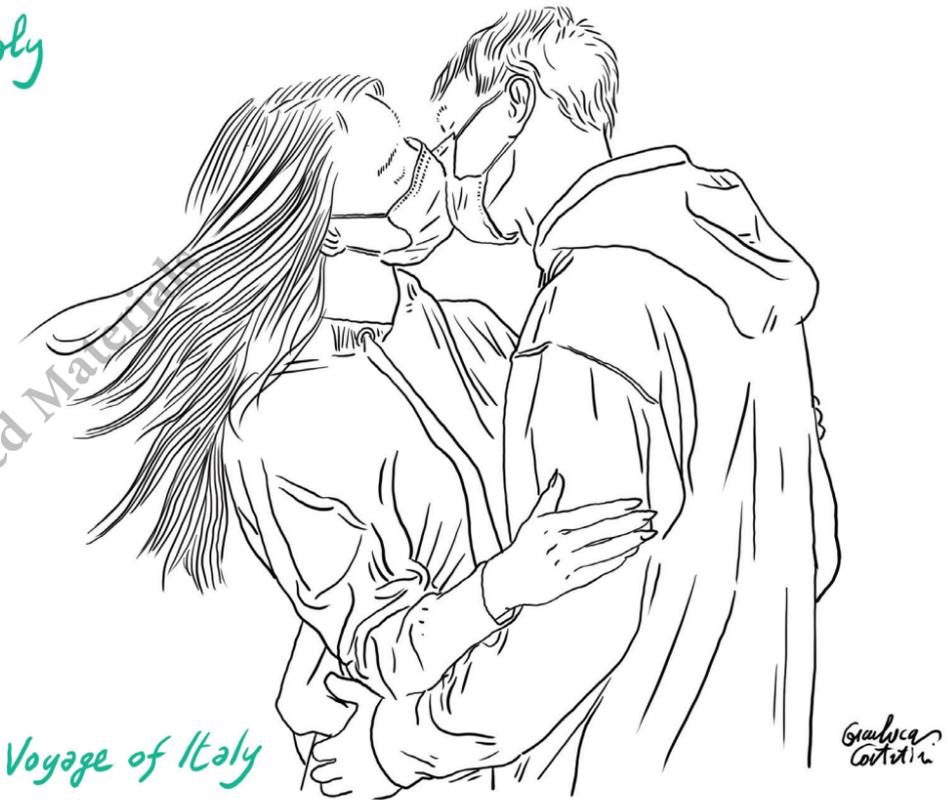
Silhouettes show up on the cruise deck
and soon disappear into the mist
We wave ambiguous hands from the shore
How should we meet them after the mist lifts?
We cut short the travel and rush back for shelter
Capricious on the border is the body temperature
Contagious in Lan Kwai Fong are tears and laughter
Sober up, go to the gym, and get another round in!
Some spread panic wearing masks
So do others not wearing one

The fridge is stuffed with frozen dumplings
Can we regain the warmth of home?
Self-isolated in the small flat
the relatives we miss are always far off
We follow a recipe to make a family dish
but still we lack the seasonings of lineage
Rationing affection and toilet paper
let's practise living life in the apocalypse
Some roll deprived of sleep during the day
Others sneak out to line up for masks at daybreak

The corona iris stares down the world
A pandemic crystalizes the hostility of eyes
unimmune from the colour and tongue of hatred
The poet who pondered on virtue and justice
passed on. You and I continue to lyricize
Shadows of the virus bewilder our strokes
from the beginning of spring to the vernal equinox
The summer still seems far. Will I see you again?
An outcry bursts from the lion rock
Earth and sky echo a whimper of despair

Italy

The Voyage of Italy

**The Masks We Don***by Edith Knight Magak*

We don the masks at the dawn of day.
This thing of sawbones, now part of us to
hold and behold, for better for worse till when?

We sanitize and isolate
Isolate and sanitize. Six feet away, or six feet deep,
We don the masks at the dusk of day, of fear.

How many died today? Where
How many infected today? Why
How many recovered? How
We don the mask at the dusk of day, of courage.

Dial the numbers of blood and bones, of friends and foes,
Are you safe? Are you home?
Are you home? Are you safe?
Stay safe, stay home

We talk of days gone by, at beaches, at parties,
How we hugged and cried, and played and loved
How we kissed and fought, and danced and laughed
Ignorant of the future

Scenes from Hong Kong Last Winter in Five Haikus*by Gary Lai*

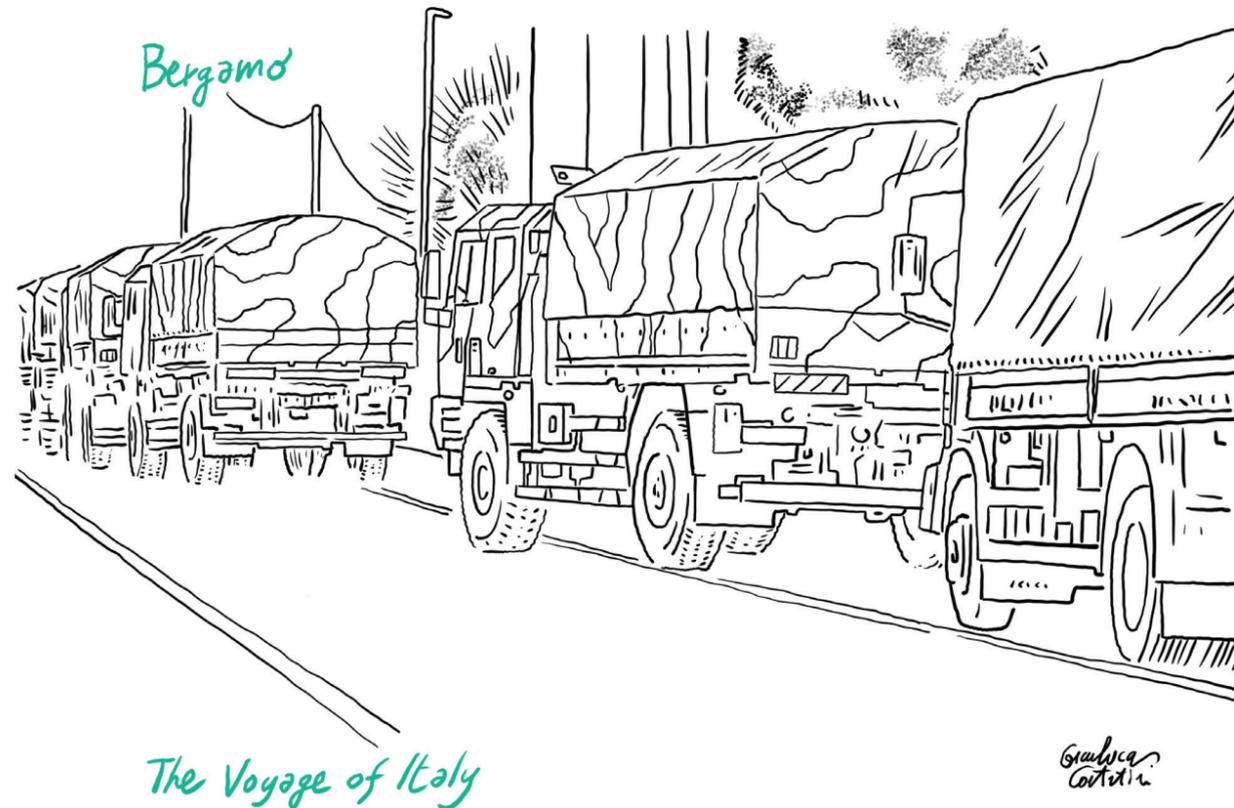
The air-con is off;
the air, humid and sticky.
My face needs wiping.

Well into winter,
the air pierces my body,
to take a shower.

Lunch at *Budaoweng*,
steam emanates from hotpots.
The tables are filled.

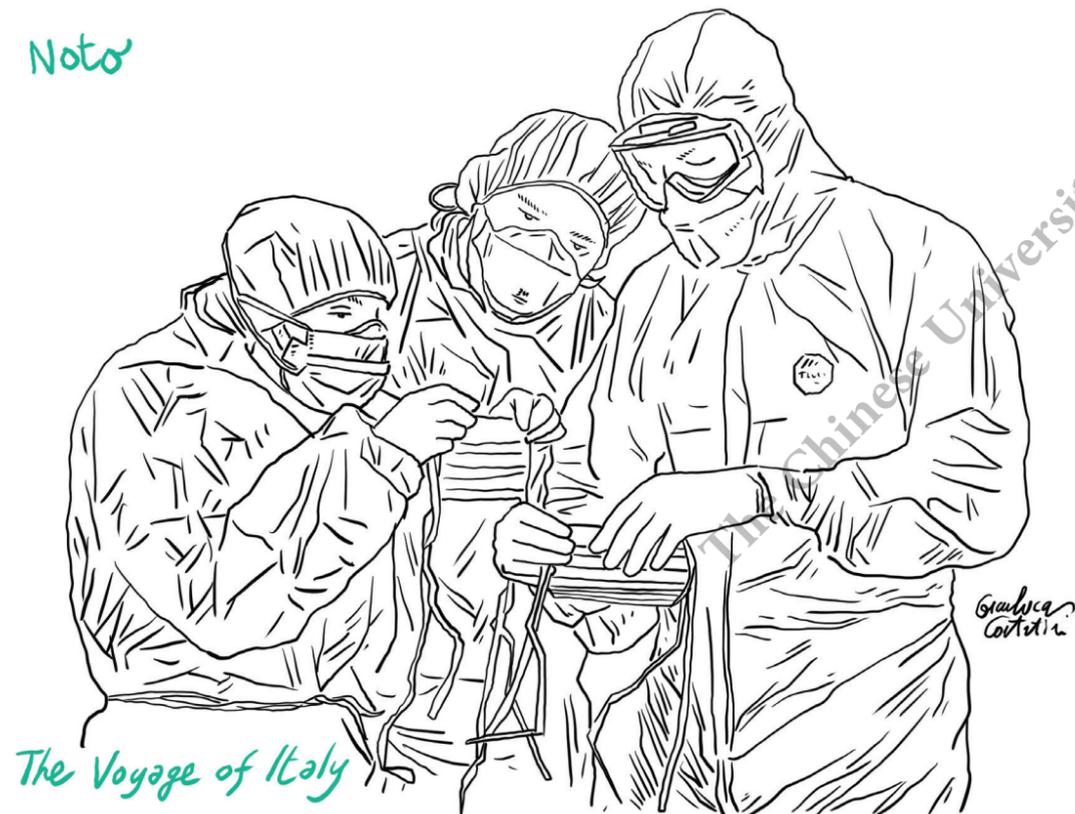
People on the street,
faces covered with green masks
to stave off the flu.

Beside Goose Neck Bridge,
shoppers with their grocery bags
stomp on the wet streets.



The Voyage of Italy

Noto



The Voyage of Italy

The Plague Doctor

by Kate Rogers

1.

Some riders peer sleepily over winter sky—
blue paper masks,
accordion folds stretched
snug nose to chin, elastic hooked
over ears. They squint
smiles and nod as I lurch
through the moving streetcar
without grasping a pole,
to a vacant, green plastic seat.
I keep my parka hood up,
wolf fur ruff low over my eyes,
zipper above my chin. A window
glimpse of my reflection
in profile: my N-95 mask
originally round as a D cup bra
pokes from my cinched hood
like a Plague Doctor beak.
I inhale short sips of air.
Panic tightens my chest.
I can't fill my diaphragm.

When I couldn't sleep last night,
in spite of chamomile tea,
a wafting lavender candle,
I searched online for soothing
potpourri to slow my heart. Stumbled

into the "Garden of Earthly Delights"—
Hieronymus Bosch. Among his naked
corpses, a discovery of bird men:
physicians goggled beneath top hats.
They stuffed their long bills
with mint, camphor, a vinegar
sponge to disguise
the sweet stink of rotting flesh

2.

The streetcar trundles past
storefronts, restaurants darkened
at noon. Low cloud nests
on top of buildings. I push
the red stop button, alight,
walk south towards the lake's
blue brooch, pinned
on a loose weave of
trees. I seek the Trumpeter
Swans, their growing flock
of survivors. The sleeping white
islands of adult birds,
young with pale grey throats
paddling behind.
(Ornithologist Audubon
preferred a swan-quill pen
for his ink sketches
of birds.) The Trumpeters'
black bills swivel towards me
as I crunch along the snowy path,
clatter onto the bridge
in my hob-nailed boots.
This time, my pockets
are heavy with corn.
Will my pointed profile
help me pass?
Black webbed feet splay
as they rock their broad
white hulls onto land.
I love how their beaks
stab my black leather palm
as they pluck my golden offering.
Would Hieronymus Bosch paint
this scene—the swans
his angels?