

One night late at the monastery on the mountain I was suddenly startled from sleep by an inhuman cry – it seemed half man, half beast. The next day I discovered that the experience had not been mine alone. Many of the priests had heard the shrieks, as had some townspeople. Then I learned the story of the werewolf of Castelfuoco, a poor farmer who emerges from his simple dwelling on nights of the full moon. In such a small rural town, where history becomes legend, where the miracles of the shrine are as much a part of one's existence as the spaghetti he eats, where communism to its believers takes on the metaphysics of something more than a political movement, where the supernatural and natural become fused, there is little knowledge of mental illness. So it is not surprising that exaggerated, other worldly-myths have grown up around the local 'werewolf'. Here is the story as I pieced it together from the accounts of several village gossips.

Garibaldi del Trucco was the first one to encounter the 'beast man' while returning home late one evening from one of his interminable poker games. The moon was full. As he walked down the Corso degli Scalzi, only the splashing of the many aged and scarred fountains interrupted the profound stillness. In order to chase away apprehensive thoughts that dogged his solitary shadow, he whistled a loud cheerful aria. As he reached the crest of the Vicolo della Lumaca [Alley of the Snail], near the fountain of the Pilotta, he saw what seemed to be a man, with eyes flaming like two firebrands and 'fingernails' that would be the envy of any cat.

'Jesu! What is he? I must escape... but what if he follows and catches up with me just as I reach my door? Aiee, no, per carità! Better to crouch here in the shadows...' The monster had not moved a centimetre; only his features and claws grew nastier. Garibaldi invoked all the holy spirits in purgatory.

As the minutes dragged on, the creature started an animal grunting which grew to piercing howls. He clawed at and crawled over the low wall surrounding the fountain. From his torn hands drops of dark red splashed into the turbid water.

'Good fellow, just let me pass', Garibaldi nearly croaked out but the words strangled in his throat. He thought of screaming aloud the name of his wife, but his house was located at the bottom of the Avenue of the Dead, the farthest corner of Castelfuoco where only spiders and snails ventured out.

'If I survive', he promised himself 'I will change houses. I will give up poker...'

Meanwhile, the werewolf was flinging himself around convulsively in the water, satisfying some mysterious animal drive to bathe himself. Garibaldi thought the time had come to flee. But to reach the shelter of the Vicolo della Lumaca ten meters away he would have to pass in front of the creature.

Another eternity went by. The purple shadows began to give way to a pale light. At this point the werewolf's baying died to almost imperceptible moans, and rapidly his 'monster' semblance changed to a human one. A last shuddering dip into the fountain, a last hoarse roar and he was liberated from his nightmare. The werewolf passed quietly by Garibaldi del Trucco, who was having difficulty staving off a violent attack of nervous diarrhoea. The latter dove into the Vicolo and a few seconds later flung himself onto his sleeping wife who grumbled at this unwonted aggression.

The next morning every stone in Castelfuoco heard the increasingly grandiose versions of Garibaldi del Trucco's story.

‘Yes, last night I wrestled with the werewolf at the fountain of the Pilotta’, he boasted carelessly. He never tired of recounting the adventure ten, a hundred times to the villagers, who listened raptly. They discussed it at length in the bars, in the piazza, at the crossroads, and even at the twilight vespers where the women between Hail Mary’s and recitations of the rosary, did not fail to satisfy their own morbid curiosity about the werewolf.

Some of the idle young bucks, the *vitelloni* [idle young men], saw in the situation a unique kind of adventure. ‘Tonight those of you with strong livers will come with me to catch the werewolf’, their leader announced.

As the same swollen moon glanced over the rooftops, the small band stationed itself silently under an arch near the Fountain of the Pilotta. Everyone held his breath in anticipation and fear. Then the werewolf vaulted into the tiny piazza and began to undress slowly, as if in a trance. Under the white brilliance of the moon his bare figure was even more terrifying. With two shrill howls the unfortunate creature began sloshing water over himself, and at this moment the spectators rushed whooping toward him. The werewolf responded with an even more terrible shriek, leaped from the water, and fell to the cobblestones as if mortally wounded.

For an instant the *vitelloni* remained riveted. No one believed his own eyes. The werewolf was no more than a timid day labourer of Castelfuoco who lived for his work in the fields and the sacred evening mass. But on nights of the full moon, he came forth questing for water with wolflike sounds and strength.