

# The Night of the Shooting Stars

On August 10 Earth passes into the orbit of the fragmented Swift-Tuttle comet, in the constellation Perseus, providing us with a splendid 2000-year-old annual celestial event known as "The Night of San Lorenzo" or "The Night of Shooting Stars." On this night Italians head for the darkest parts of the countryside, places free of light pollution, to enjoy a clearer view of the starry sky's meteor shower.

I heard about the shooting stars spectacle by accident years ago when I was camping with my children at Parco dell' Orecchiella in the Garfagnana. We were told to be ready after supper for a night hike through the forest, culminating on the mountaintop at dawn. Despite our torches, the woods were dark and spooky, but our guide Nazzareno reassured us that any wild animals were more afraid of us than we were of them. We stopped along the way to rest and listen as Nazzareno told us local legends and nature lore. Finally we arrived; we spread out our blankets, laid on our backs and gazed at the sky. Stars were zipping through the firmament in long lines or short bursts, like silent, linear fireworks. We marveled for several hours, until dawn, then made our way down through the warming forest as the light changed from a light



rosy pink to pale gray-blue, to full *celeste*.

I've often stepped into the garden on August 10 to gaze at the sky, but never have I seen so many shooting stars in one night.

How does San Lorenzo fit into all this? He was a martyr with attitude. According to legend, while he was being cooked on a gridiron by order of Roman emperor Valerian (258 A.D.), he is said to have commented, "Turn me over, this side is done!" At Ravenna's San Vitale Basilica, in the south wing of the Galla Placidia mausoleum (5th century A.D.), a lunette mosaic portrays San Lorenzo serenely

floating towards the flames, with a window into the stratosphere just beyond, and stars, snowflakes, and daisies overhead. Dante called the starry spheres (like those painted in the mausoleum cupola) "holy spinning circles." The rotating stars were said to make music as the circles rubbed against each other.

Giovanni Pascoli (1855-1912) wrote a poem, *10 Agosto*, dedicated to San Lorenzo, whose feast day is 10 August. The poem presents the misery of our world addressed to an indifferent heaven: "Oh! with a weeping of stars you flood/ this dark atom of Evil!" (my translation). Orphaned at age 13, Pascoli had reason to lament San Lorenzo's tears.

We are still star-gazing, but now, unless we are being scientific, we are more likely to "wish upon a star" and enjoy the beauty of a summer night.

— by Norma Jean Bishop



Van Gogh, *Starry Night*

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