

“Et in Arcadia Ego”

W.H. Auden, 1965, *New York Review of Books*

Who, now, seeing Her so  
Happily married,  
Housewife, helpmate to Man,

Can imagine the screeching  
Virago, the Amazon,  
Earth Mother was?

Her jungle growths  
Are abated,  
Her exorbitant monsters abashed,

Her soil mumbled,  
Where crops, aligned precisely,  
Will soon be orient:

Levant or couchant,  
Well-daunted thoroughbreds  
Graze on mead and pasture,

A church clock subdivides the day,  
Up the lane at sundown  
Geese podge home.

As for Him:  
What has happened to the Brute  
Epics and nightmares tell of?

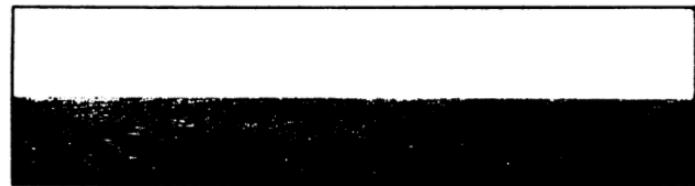
No bishops pursue  
Their archdeacons with axes,  
In the crumbling lair

Of a robber baron  
Sightseers picnic  
Who carry no daggers.

I well might think myself  
A humanist,  
Could I manage not to see

How the autobahn  
Thwarts the landscape  
In godless Roman arrogance,

The farmer's children  
Tiptoe past the shed  
Where the gelding knife is kept.



# W A T E R M A R K

J O S E P H   B R O D S K Y

*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*

*New York*



any moons ago the dollar was 870 lire and I was thirty-two. The globe, too, was lighter by two billion souls, and the bar at the *stazione* where I'd arrived on that cold December night was empty. I was standing there waiting for the only person I knew in that city to meet me. She was quite late.

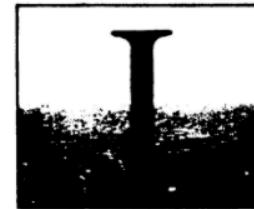
Every traveler knows this fix: this mixture of fatigue and apprehension. It's the time of staring down clock faces and timetables, of scrutinizing varicose marble under your feet, of inhaling ammonia and that dull smell elicited

on cold winter nights by locomotives' cast iron. I did all this.

Save for the yawning bartender and immobile Buddha-like *matrona* at the cash register, there was no one in sight. However, we were of no use to each other: my sole currency in their language, the term "espresso," was already spent; I'd used it twice. I'd also bought from them my first pack ever of what in years to come was to stand for "*Merde Statale*," "*Movimento Sociale*," and "*Morte Sicura*": my first pack of MS. So I lifted my bags and stepped outside.

In the unlikely event that someone's eye followed my white London Fog and dark brown Borsalino, they should have cut a familiar silhouette. The night itself, to be sure, would have had no difficulty absorbing it. Mimicry, I believe, is high on the list of every traveler, and the Italy I had in mind at the moment was a fusion of black-and-white movies of the fifties and the equally monochrome medium of my métier. Winter thus was my season; the

only thing I lacked, I thought, to look like a local rake or *carbonaro* was a scarf. Other than that, I felt inconspicuous and fit to merge into the background or fill the frame of a low-budget whodunit or, more likely, melodrama.



t was a windy night, and before my retina registered anything, I was smitten by a feeling of utter happiness: my nostrils were hit by what to me has always been its synonym, the smell of freezing seaweed. For some people, it's freshly cut grass or hay; for others, Christmas scents of conifer needles and tangerines. For me, it's freezing seaweed—partly because of onomatopoeic aspects of the very conjunction (in Russian, seaweed is a wonderful *vodorosli*), partly due to a slight incongruity and a hidden underwater drama in this notion. One recognizes oneself in certain elements; by the time I was taking this smell in on the steps of the *stazione*, hidden

dramas and incongruities long since had become my forte.

No doubt the attraction toward that smell should have been attributed to a childhood spent by the Baltic, the home of that meandering siren from the Montale poem. And yet I had my doubts about this attribution. For one thing, that childhood wasn't all that happy (a childhood seldom is, being, rather, a school of self-disgust and insecurity); and as for the Baltic, you had indeed to be an eel to escape my part of it. At any rate, as a subject for nostalgia this childhood hardly qualified. The source of that attraction, I'd always felt, lay elsewhere, beyond the confines of biography, beyond one's genetic makeup—somewhere in one's hypothalamus, which stores our chordate ancestors' impressions of their native realm of—for example—the very ichthus that caused this civilization. Whether that ichthus was a happy one is another matter.



smell is, after all, a violation of oxygen balance, an invasion into it of other elements—methane? carbon? sulphur? nitrogen? Depending on that invasion's intensity, you get a scent, a smell, a stench. It is a molecular affair, and happiness, I suppose, is the moment of spotting the elements of your own composition being free. There were quite a number of them out there, in a state of total freedom, and I felt I'd stepped into my own self-portrait in the cold air.

The backdrop was all in dark silhouettes of church cupolas and rooftops; a bridge arching over a body of water's black curve, both ends of which were clipped off by infinity. At night, infinity in foreign realms arrives with the last lamppost, and here it was twenty meters away. It was very quiet. A few dimly lit boats now and then prowled about, disturbing with their propellers the reflection of a large neon CIN-ZANO trying to settle on the black oilcloth of

the water's surface. Long before it succeeded, the silence would be restored.

I all felt like arriving in the provinces, in some unknown, insignificant spot—possibly one's own birthplace—after years of absence. In no small degree did this sensation owe to my own anonymity, to the incongruity of a lone figure on the steps of the *stazione*: an easy target for oblivion. Also, it was a winter night. And I remembered the opening line of one of Umberto Saba's poems that I'd translated long before, in a previous incarnation, into Russian: "In the depths of the wild Adriatic . . ." In the depths, I thought, in the boondocks, in a lost corner of the wild Adriatic . . . Had I simply turned around, I'd have seen the *stazione* in all its rectangular splendor of neon and urbanity, seen block letters saying VENEZIA. Yet I didn't. The sky was full of winter stars, the way it often is in the

provinces. At any point, it seemed, a dog could bark in the distance, or else you might hear a rooster. With my eyes shut I beheld a tuft of freezing seaweed splayed against a wet, perhaps ice-glazed rock somewhere in the universe, oblivious to its location. I was that rock, and my left palm was that splayed tuft of seaweed. Presently a large, flat boat, something of a cross between a sardine can and a sandwich, emerged out of nowhere and with a thud nudged the *stazione*'s landing. A handful of people pushed ashore and raced past me up the stairs into the terminal. Then I saw the only person I knew in that city; the sight was fabulous.

I had seen it for the first time several years before, in that same previous incarnation: in Russia. The sight had come there in the guise of a Slavicist, a Mayakovsky scholar, to be precise. That nearly disqualified

the sight as a subject of interest in the eyes of the coterie to which I belonged. That it didn't was the measure of her visual properties. Five foot ten, fine-boned, long-legged, narrow-faced, with chestnut hair and hazel, almond-shaped eyes, with passable Russian on those wonderfully shaped lips and a blinding smile on the same, superbly dressed in paper-light suede and matching silks, redolent of mesmerizing, unknown to us, perfume, the sight was easily the most elegant female ever to set a mind-boggling foot in our midst. She was the kind that keeps married men's dreams wet. Besides, she was a Veneziana.

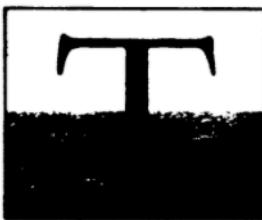
So we gave short shrift to her membership in the Italian CP and her attendant sentiment toward our avant-garde simpletons of the thirties, attributing both to Western frivolity. Had she been even an avowed Fascist, I think we would have lusted after her no less. She was positively stunning, and when subsequently she'd fallen for the worst possible dimwit on the periphery of our circle, some highly paid

dolt of Armenian extraction, the common response was amazement and anger rather than jealousy or manly regret. Of course, come to think of it, one shouldn't get angry over a piece of fine lace soiled by some strong ethnic juices. Yet we did. For it was more than a letdown: it was a betrayal of the fabric.

In those days we associated style with substance, beauty with intelligence. After all, we were a bookish crowd, and at a certain age, if you believe in literature, you think everyone shares or should share your conviction and taste. So if one looks elegant, one is one of us. Innocent of the world outside, of the West in particular, we didn't know yet that style could be purchased wholesale, that beauty could be just a commodity. So we regarded the sight as the physical extension and embodiment of our ideals and principles, and what she wore, transparent things included, belonged to civilization.

So strong was that association, and so pretty was the sight, that even now, years later, be-

longing to a different age and, as it were, to a different country, I began to slip unwittingly into the old mode. The first thing I asked her as I stood pressed to her nutria coat on the deck of the overcrowded vaporetto was her opinion of Montale's *Motets*, recently published. The familiar flash of her pearls, thirty-two strong, echoed by the sparkle on the rim of her hazel pupil and promoted to the scattered silver of the Milky Way overhead, was all I got in response, but that was a lot. To ask, in the heart of civilization, about its latest was perhaps a tautology. Perhaps I was simply being impolite, as the author wasn't a local.

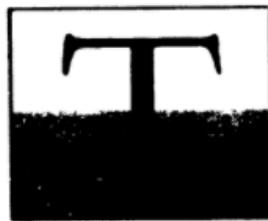


The boat's slow progress through the night was like the passage of a coherent thought through the subconscious. On both sides, knee-deep in pitch-black water, stood the enormous carved chests of dark pa-

lazzi filled with unfathomable treasures—most likely gold, judging from the low-intensity yellow electric glow emerging now and then from cracks in the shutters. The overall feeling was mythological, cyclopic, to be precise: I'd entered that infinity I beheld on the steps of the *stazione* and now was moving among its inhabitants, along the bevy of dormant cyclopses reclining in black water, now and then raising and lowering an eyelid.

The nutria-clad sight next to me began explaining in a somewhat hushed voice that she was taking me to my hotel, where she had reserved a room, that perhaps we'd meet tomorrow or the day after, that she'd like to introduce me to her husband and her sister. I liked the hush in her voice, though it fit the night more than the message, and replied in the same conspiratorial tones that it's always a pleasure to meet potential relatives. That was a bit strong for the moment, but she laughed, in the same muffled way, putting a hand in a

brown leather glove to her lips. The passengers around us, mostly dark-haired, whose number was responsible for our proximity, were immobile and equally subdued in their occasional remarks to one another, as though the content of their exchanges was also of an intimate nature. Then the sky was momentarily obscured by the huge marble parenthesis of a bridge, and suddenly everything was flooded with light. "Rialto," she said in her normal voice.



here is something primordial about traveling on water, even for short distances. You are informed that you are not supposed to be there not so much by your eyes, ears, nose, palate, or palm as by your feet, which feel odd acting as an organ of sense. Water unsettles the principle of horizontality, especially at night, when its surface resembles pavement. No matter how solid its substitute

—the deck—under your feet, on water you are somewhat more alert than ashore, your faculties are more poised. On water, for instance, you never get absentminded the way you do in the street: your legs keep you and your wits in constant check, as if you were some kind of compass. Well, perhaps what sharpens your wits while traveling on water is indeed a distant, roundabout echo of the good old chordates. At any rate, your sense of the other on water gets keener, as though heightened by a common as well as a mutual danger. The loss of direction is a psychological category as much as it is a navigational one. Be that as it may, for the next ten minutes, although we were moving in the same direction, I saw the arrow of the only person I knew in that city and mine diverge by at least 45 degrees. Most likely because this part of the Canal Grande was better lit.

We disembarked at the Accademia landing, prey to firm topography and the corresponding

moral code. After a short meander through narrow lanes, I was deposited in the lobby of a somewhat cloistered *pensione*, kissed on the cheek—more in the capacity of the Minotaur, I felt, than the valiant hero—and wished good night. Then my Ariadne vanished, leaving behind a fragrant thread of her expensive (was it Shalimar?) perfume, which quickly dissipated in the musty atmosphere of a *pensione* otherwise suffused with the faint but ubiquitous odor of pee. I stared for a while at the furniture. Then I hit the sack.



hat's how I found myself for the first time in this city. As it turned out, there was nothing particularly auspicious or ominous about this arrival of mine. If that night portended anything at all, it was that I'd never possess this city; but then I never had any such aspiration. As a beginning, I think this episode

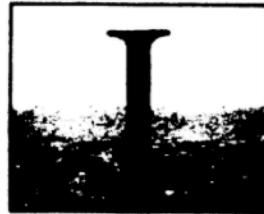
With two or three exceptions, due to heart attacks and related emergencies, mine or someone else's, every Christmas or shortly before I'd emerge from a train/plane/boat/bus and drag my bags heavy with books and typewriters to the threshold of this or that hotel, of this or that apartment. The latter would normally be courtesy of the one or two friends I'd managed to develop here in the wake of the sight's dimming. Later, I'll try to account for my timing (though such a project is tautolog-

ical to the point of reversal). For the moment, I'd like to assert that, Northerner though I am, my notion of Eden hinges on neither weather nor temperature. For that matter, I'd just as soon discard its dwellers, and eternity as well. At the risk of being charged with depravity, I confess that this notion is purely visual, has more to do with Claude than the creed, and exists only in approximations. As these go, this city is the closest. Since I'm not entitled to make a true comparison, I can permit myself to be restrictive.

I say this here and now to save the reader disillusionment. I am not a moral man (though I try to keep my conscience in balance) or a sage; I am neither an aesthete nor a philosopher. I am but a nervous man, by circumstance and by my own deeds; but I am observant. As my beloved Akutagawa Ryunosuke once said, I have no principles; all I've got is nerves. What follows, therefore, has to do with the eye rather than with convictions, including those as to

how to run a narrative. One's eye precedes one's pen, and I resolve not to let my pen lie about its position. Having risked the charge of depravity, I won't wince at that of superficiality either. Surfaces—which is what the eye registers first—are often more telling than their contents, which are provisional by definition, except, of course, in the afterlife. Scanning this city's face for seventeen winters, I should by now be capable of pulling a credible Poussin-like job: of painting this place's likeness, if not at four seasons, then at four times of day.

That's my ambition. If I get sidetracked, it is because being sidetracked is literally a matter of course here and echoes water. What lies ahead, in other words, may amount not to a story but to the flow of muddy water "at the wrong time of year." At times it looks blue, at times gray or brown; invariably it is cold and not potable. The reason I am engaged in straining it is that it contains reflections, among them my own.



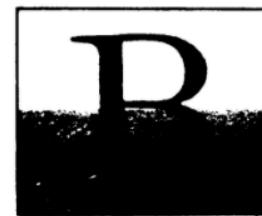
nanimate by nature, hotel room mirrors are even further dulled by having seen so many. What they return to you is not your identity but your anonymity, especially in this city. For here yourself is the last thing you care to see. On my first sojourns I often felt surprised, catching my own frame, dressed or naked, in the open wardrobe; after a while I began to wonder about this place's edenic or afterlife-like effects upon one's self-awareness. Somewhere along the line, I even developed a theory of excessive redundancy, of the mirror absorbing the body absorbing the city. The net result is, obviously, mutual negation. A reflection cannot possibly care for a reflection. The city is narcissistic enough to turn your mind into an amalgam, unburdening it of its depths. With their similar effect on your purse, hotels and *pensiones* therefore feel very congenial. After a two-week stay—even at off-season rates—you become both broke and self-

less, like a Buddhist monk. At a certain age and in a certain line of work, selflessness is welcome, not to say imperative.

Nowadays all of this is, of course, out of the question, since the clever devils shut down two-thirds of the small places in winter; the remaining third keep year round those summer rates that make you wince. If you're lucky, you may find an apartment, which, naturally, comes with the owner's personal taste in paintings, chairs, curtains, with a vague sense of illegality to your face in his bathroom mirror—in short, with precisely what you wanted to shed: yourself. Still, winter is an abstract season: it is low on colors, even in Italy, and big on the imperatives of cold and brief daylight. These things train your eye on the outside with an intensity greater than that of the electric bulb availing you of your own features in the evening. If this season doesn't necessarily quell your nerves, it still subordinates them to your instincts; beauty at low temperatures *is* beauty.



nyhow, I would never come here in summer, not even at gunpoint. I take heat very poorly; the unmitigated emissions of hydrocarbons and armpits still worse. The shorts-clad herds, especially those neighboring in German, also get on my nerves, because of the inferiority of their—anyone's—anatomy against that of the columns, pilasters, and statues; because of what their mobility—and all that fuels it—projects versus marble stasis. I guess I am one of those who prefer choice to flux, and stone is always a choice. No matter how well endowed, in this city one's body, in my view, should be obscured by cloth, if only because it moves. Clothes are perhaps our only approximation of the choice made by marble.



y profession, or rather by the cumulative effect of what I've been doing over the years, I am a writer; by trade, however, I am an academic, a teacher. The winter break at my school is five weeks long, and that's what in part explains the timing of my pilgrimages here—but only in part. What Par-

adise and vacation have in common is that you have to pay for both, and the coin is your previous life. Fittingly then, my romance with this city—with this city in this particular season—started long ago: long before I developed marketable skills, long before I could afford my passion.

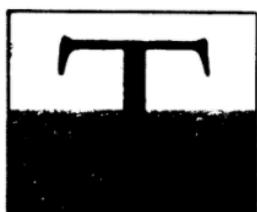
Sometime in 1966—I was twenty-six then—a friend lent me three short novels by a French writer, Henri de Régnier, translated into Russian by the wonderful Russian poet Mikhail Kuzmin. All I knew about Régnier at that time was that he was one of the last Parnassians, a good poet but no great shakes. All I knew by heart of Kuzmin was a handful of his *Alexandrian Songs* and *Clay Pigeons*—plus his reputation as a great aesthete, devout Orthodox, and avowed homosexual—I think, in that order.

By the time I'd got those novels, both their author and their translator were long dead. The books, too, were quite moribund: paperbacks, published in the late thirties, with no bindings

to speak of, disintegrating in your palm. I remember neither their titles nor their publisher; in fact, I am quite vague on their respective plots also. Somehow I am under the impression that one of them was called *Provincial Entertainments*, but I am not sure. I could double-check, of course, but then the friend who lent them to me died a year ago; and I won't.

They were a cross between picaresque and detective novels, and at least one of them, the one I call in my mind *Provincial Entertainments*, was set in Venice in winter. Its atmosphere was twilit and dangerous, its topography aggravated with mirrors; the main events were taking place on the other side of the amalgam, within some abandoned palazzo. Like many books of the twenties, it was fairly short—some two hundred pages, no more—and its pace was brisk. The subject was the usual: love and betrayal. The main thing: the book was written in short, page or page-and-a-half chapters. From their pace came the sense of damp, cold, narrow streets through which one hurries

in the evening in a state of growing apprehension, turning left, turning right. For somebody with my birthplace, the city emerging from these pages was easily recognizable and felt like Petersburg's extension into a better history, not to mention latitude. However, what mattered for me most at the impressionable stage at which I came across this novel was that it taught me the most crucial lesson in composition; namely, that what makes a narrative good is not the story itself but what follows what. Unwittingly, I came to associate this principle with Venice. If the reader now suffers, that's why.



hen one day another friend, who is still alive, brought me a disheveled issue of *Life* magazine with a stunning color photo of San Marco covered with snow. Then a bit later a girl whom I was courting at the

time made me a birthday present of an accordion set of sepia postcards her grandmother had brought from a pre-revolutionary honeymoon in Venice, and I pored over it with my magnifying glass. Then my mother produced from God knows where a small square piece of cheap tapestry, a rag really, depicting the Palazzo Ducale, and it covered the bolster on my Turkish sofa—thus contracting the history of the republic under my frame. And throw into the bargain a little copper gondola brought by my father from his tour of duty in China, which my parents kept on their dressing table, filling it with loose buttons, needles, postage stamps, and—increasingly—pills and ampoules. Then the friend who gave me Régnier's novels and who died a year ago took me to a semiofficial screening of the smuggled, and for that reason black-and-white, copy of Visconti's *Death in Venice* with Dirk Bogarde. Alas, the movie wasn't much to speak of; besides, I never liked the novel much, either.

Still, the long opening sequence with Mr. Bogarde in a deck chair aboard a steamer made me forget about the interfering credits and regret that I was not mortally ill; even today I am still capable of feeling that regret.

Then came the Veneziana. I began to feel that this city somehow was barging into focus, tottering on the verge of the three-dimensional. It was black-and-white, as befits something emerging from literature, or winter; aristocratic, darkish, cold, dimly lit, with twangs of Vivaldi and Cherubini in the background, with Bellini/Tiepolo/Titian-draped female bodies for clouds. And I vowed to myself that should I ever get out of my empire, should this eel ever escape the Baltic, the first thing I would do would be to come to Venice, rent a room on the ground floor of some palazzo so that the waves raised by passing boats would splash against my window, write a couple of elegies while extinguishing my cigarettes on the damp stony floor, cough and drink, and,

when the money got short, instead of boarding a train, buy myself a little Browning and blow my brains out on the spot, unable to die in Venice of natural causes.



perfectly decadent dream, of course; but at the age of twenty-eight everyone who's got some brains is a touch decadent. Besides, neither part of that project was feasible. So when at the age of thirty-two I all of a sudden found myself in the bowels of a different continent, in the middle of America, I used my first university salary to enact the better part of that dream and bought a round-trip ticket, Detroit–Milano–Detroit. The plane was jammed with Italians employed by Ford and Chrysler and going home for Christmas. When the duty-free opened mid-flight, all of them rushed to the plane's rear, and for a moment I had a vision of a good old 707 flying

over the Atlantic crucifix-like: wings outstretched, tail down. Then there was the train ride with the only person I knew in the city at its end. The end was cold, damp, black-and-white. The city came into focus. “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,” to quote an author who visited here before. Then there was that next morning. It was Sunday, and all the bells were chiming.



The eye in this city acquires an autonomy similar to that of a tear. The only difference is that it doesn't sever itself from the body but subordinates it totally. After a while—on the third or fourth day here—the body starts to regard itself as merely the eye's carrier, as a kind of submarine to its now di-

lating, now squinting periscope. Of course, for all its targets, its explosions are invariably self-inflicted: it's your own heart, or else your mind, that sinks; the eye pops up to the surface. This of course owes to the local topography, to the streets—narrow, meandering like eels—that finally bring you to a flounder of a *campo* with a cathedral in the middle of it, barnacled with saints and flaunting its Medusa-like cupolas. No matter what you set out for as you leave the house here, you are bound to get lost in these long, coiling lanes and passageways that beguile you to see them through, to follow them to their elusive end, which usually hits water, so that you can't even call it a cul-de-sac. On the map this city looks like two grilled fish sharing a plate, or perhaps like two nearly overlapping lobster claws (Pasternak compared it to a swollen croissant); but it has no north, south, east, or west; the only direction it has is sideways. It surrounds you like frozen seaweed, and the more you dart and dash about trying to get your bearings, the more you get

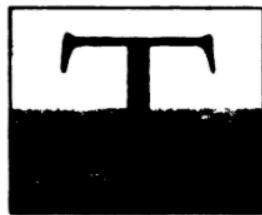
lost. The yellow arrow signs at intersections are not much help either, for they, too, curve. In fact, they don't so much help you as kelp you. And in the fluently flapping hand of the native whom you stop to ask for directions, the eye, oblivious to his sputtering *A destra, a sinistra, dritto, dritto*, readily discerns a fish.



mesh caught in frozen seaweed might be a better metaphor. Because of the scarcity of space, people exist here in cellular proximity to one another, and life evolves with the immanent logic of gossip. One's territorial imperative in this city is circumscribed by water; the window shutters bar not so much daylight or noise (which is minimal here) as what may emanate from inside. When they are opened, shutters resemble the wings of angels prying into someone's sordid affairs, and like the spacing of the statues on cornices, human interplay here takes on the

aspects of jewelry or, better yet, filigree. In these parts one is both more secretive and better informed than the police in tyrannies. No sooner do you cross the threshold of your apartment, especially in winter, than you fall prey to every conceivable surmise, fantasy, rumor. If you've got company, the next day at the grocery or newsagent you may meet a stare of biblical probing unfathomable, you would think, in a Catholic country. If you sue someone here, or vice versa, you must hire a lawyer on the outside. A traveler, of course, enjoys this sort of thing; the native doesn't. What a painter sketches, or an amateur photographs, is no fun for the citizen. Yet insinuation as a principle of city planning (which notion locally emerges only with the benefit of hindsight) is better than any modern grid and in tune with the local canals, taking their cue from water, which, like the chatter behind you, never ends. In that sense, brick is undoubtedly more potent than marble, although both are unassailable for a stranger. However, once or twice over these

seventeen years, I've managed to insinuate myself into a Venetian inner sanctum, into that beyond-the-amalgam labyrinth Régnier described in *Provincial Entertainments*. It happened in such a roundabout way that I can't even recall the details now, for I could not keep tabs on all those twists and turns that led to my passage into this labyrinth at the time. Somebody said something to somebody else, while the other person who wasn't even supposed to be there listened in and telephoned the fourth, as a result of which I'd been invited one night to a party given by the umpteenth at his palazzo.



he winter light in this city! It has the extraordinary property of enhancing your eye's power of resolution to the point of microscopic precision—the pupil, especially when it is of the gray or mustard-and-honey variety, humbles any Hasselblad lens and develops your subsequent memories to a *National Geographic* sharpness. The sky is brisk blue; the sun, escaping its golden likeness beneath the foot of San Giorgio, sashays over the countless fish scales of the *laguna*'s lapping ripples; behind you, under the colonnades of the Palazzo Ducale, a bunch of stocky fellows in fur coats are revving up *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, just for you, slumped in your white chair and squinting at the pigeons' maddening gambits on the

chessboard of a vast *campo*. The espresso at your cup's bottom is the one black dot in, you feel, a miles-long radius. Such are the noons here. In the morning this light breasts your windowpane and, having pried your eye open like a shell, runs ahead of you, strumming its lengthy rays—like a hot-footed schoolboy running his stick along the iron grate of a park or garden—along arcades, colonnades, red-brick chimneys, saints, and lions. “Depict! Depict!” it cries to you, either mistaking you for some Canaletto or Carpaccio or Guardi, or because it doesn’t trust your retina’s ability to retain what it makes available, not to mention your brain’s capacity to absorb it. Perhaps the latter explains the former. Perhaps they are synonymous. Perhaps art is simply an organism’s reaction against its retentive limitations. At any rate, you obey the command and grab your camera, supplementing both your brain cells and your pupil. Should this city ever be short of cash, it can go straight to Kodak for assistance—or else tax its products savagely.

By the same token, as long as this place exists, as long as winter light shines upon it, Kodak shares are the best investment.



**A**t sunset all cities look wonderful, but some more so than others. Reliefs become suppler, columns more rotund, capitals curlier, cornices more resolute, spires starker, niches deeper, disciples more draped, angels airborne. In the streets it gets dark, but it is still daytime for the Fondamenta and that gigantic liquid mirror where motorboats, vaporetti, gondolas, dinghies, and barges "like scattered old shoes" zealously trample Baroque and Gothic façades, not sparing your own or a passing cloud's reflection either. "Depict it," whispers the winter light, stopped flat by the brick wall of a hospital or arriving home at the paradise of San Zaccaria's *frontone* after its long passage through the cosmos. And you sense

this light's fatigue as it rests in Zaccaria's marble shells for another hour or so, while the earth is turning its other cheek to the luminary. This is the winter light at its purest. It carries no warmth or energy, having shed them and left them behind somewhere in the universe, or in the nearby cumulus. Its particles' only ambition is to reach an object and make it, big or small, visible. It's a private light, the light of Giorgione or Bellini, not the light of Tiepolo or Tintoretto. And the city lingers in it, savoring its touch, the caress of the infinity whence it came. An object, after all, is what makes infinity private.



hat's what worries the band, or more exactly, its conductors, the city fathers. According to their calculations, this city, during this century alone, has sagged twenty-three centimeters. So what appears spectacular to the tourist is a full-scale headache for the native. And if it were only a headache, that would be fine. But the headache is crowned with an increasing apprehension, not to say fear, that what lies in store for the city is the fate of Atlantis. The fear is not without foundation, and not only because the city's uniqueness does amount to a civilization of its own. The main danger is perceived to be high winter tides; the rest is done by the mainland's industry and agriculture silting the *laguna* with their chemical wastes, and by the deterioration of the city's own clogged canals. In my line of work, though, ever since the Romantics, human fault has appeared to be a likelier culprit when it comes to disaster than any *forza del*

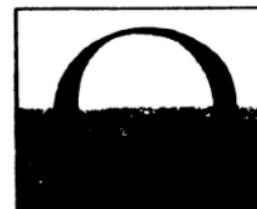
*destino*. (That an insurance man can tell these two apart is indeed a feat of imagination.) So, prey to tyrannical impulses, I would install some sort of flap gate to stem the sea of humanity, which has swelled in the last two decades by two billion and whose crest is its refuse. I'd freeze the industry and the residence in the twenty-mile zone along the northern shore of the *laguna*, drag and dredge the city's canals (I'd either use the military to carry out this operation or pay local companies double time) and seed them with fish and the right kind of bacteria to keep them clean.

I have no idea what kind of fish or bacteria these are, but I'm pretty sure they exist: tyranny is seldom synonymous with expertise. At any rate, I'd call Sweden and ask the Stockholm municipality for advice: in that city, with all its industry and population, the moment you step out of your hotel, the salmon leap out of the water to greet you. If it is the difference in temperature that does it, then one could try

dumping blocks of ice into the canals or, failing that, routinely void the natives' freezers of ice cubes, since whiskey is not very much in vogue here, not even in winter.

"Why, then, do you go there at such a season?" my editor asked me once, sitting in a Chinese restaurant in New York with his gay English charges. "Yes, why do you?" they echoed their prospective benefactor. "What is it like there in winter?" I thought of telling them about *acqua alta*; about the various shades of gray in the window as one sits at breakfast in one's hotel, enveloped by silence and the mealy morning pall of newlyweds' faces; about pigeons accentuating every curve and cornice of the local Baroque in their dormant affinity for architecture; about a lonely monument to Francesco Querini and his two huskies carved out of Istrian stone similar, I think, in its hue, to what he saw last, dying, on his ill-fated journey to the North Pole, now listening to the Giardini's rustle of evergreens in the com-

pany of Wagner and Carducci; about a brave sparrow perching on the bobbing blade of a gondola against the backdrop of a sirocco-roiled damp infinity. No, I thought, looking at their effete but eager faces; no, that won't do. "Well," I said, "it's like Greta Garbo swimming."



ver these years, during my long stays and brief sojourns here, I have been, I think, both happy and unhappy in nearly equal measure. It didn't matter which, if only because I came here not for romantic purposes but to work, to finish a piece, to translate, to write a couple of poems, provided I could be that lucky; simply to be. That is, neither for a honeymoon (the closest I ever came to that was many years ago, on the island of Ischia, or else in Siena) nor for a divorce. And so I worked. Happiness or unhappiness would simply come

in attendance, although sometimes they'd stay longer than I did, as if waiting on me. It is a virtue, I came to believe long ago, not to make a meal out of one's emotional life. There's always enough work to do, not to mention that there's world enough outside. In the end, there's always this city. As long as it exists, I don't believe that I, or, for that matter, anyone, can be mesmerized or blinded by romantic tragedy. I remember one day—the day I had to leave after a month here alone. I had just had lunch in some small trattoria on the remotest part of the Fondamente Nuove, grilled fish and half a bottle of wine. With that inside, I set out for the place I was staying, to collect my bags and catch a vaporetto. I walked a quarter of a mile along the Fondamente Nuove, a small moving dot in that gigantic watercolor, and then turned right by the hospital of Giovanni e Paolo. The day was warm, sunny, the sky blue, all lovely. And with my back to the Fondamente and San Michele, hug-

ging the wall of the hospital, almost rubbing it with my left shoulder and squinting at the sun, I suddenly felt: I am a cat. A cat that has just had fish. Had anyone addressed me at that moment, I would have meowed. I was absolutely, animally happy. Twelve hours later, of course, having landed in New York, I hit the worst possible mess in my life—or the one that appeared that way at the time. Yet the cat in me lingered; had it not been for that cat, I'd be climbing the walls now in some expensive institution.



t night, there is not much to do here. Opera and church recitals are options, of course, but they require some initiative and arrangement: tickets and schedules and so forth. I am not good at that; it's rather like fixing a three-course meal all for yourself—perhaps even lonelier. Besides, my luck is such

that whenever I considered an evening at La Fenice, they would be having a week-long run of Tchaikovsky or Wagner>equals, as far as my allergy is concerned. Never once Donizetti or Mozart! That leaves reading and strolling dully along, which is about the same, since at night these narrow stony gennels are like passages between the bookshelves of some immense, forgotten library, and equally quiet. All the “books” are shut tight, and you guess what they are about only by the names on their spines, under the doorbell. Oh, there you can find your Donizettis and Rossinis, your Lullys and Frescobaldis! Maybe even a Mozart, maybe even a Haydn. Or else these streets are like wardrobe racks: all the clothes are of dark, peeling fabric, but the lining is ruby and shimmering gold. Goethe called this place the “republic of beavers,” but perhaps Montesquieu with his resolute “*un endroit où il devrait n'avoir que des poissons*” was more on the mark. For, now and then, across the canal, two or three

well-lit, tall, rounded windows, half shaded with gauze or tulle, reveal an octopal chandelier, the lacquered fin of a grand piano, opulent bronze framing auburn or rubescence oils, the gilded rib cage of a ceiling’s beams—and you feel as though you are looking into a fish through its scales, and inside of it there’s a party.

At a distance—across a canal—you can hardly tell the guests from their hostess. With all due respect to the best available creed, I must say I don’t think this place has evolved from the famous chordate only, triumphant or not. I suspect and submit that, in the first place, it evolved from the very element that gave that chordate life and shelter and which, for me at least, is synonymous with time. The element comes in many shapes and hues, with many different properties apart from those of Aphrodite and the Redeemer: lull, storm, crest, wave, froth, ripple, etc., not to mention the marine organisms. In my mind, this city limns

all discernible patterns of the element and its contents. Splashing, glittering, glowing, glinting, the element has been casting itself upward for so long that it is not surprising that some of these aspects eventually acquired mass, flesh, and grew solid. Why it should have happened here, I have no idea. Presumably because the element here had heard Italian.



The eye is the most autonomous of our organs. It is so because the objects of its attention are inevitably situated on the outside. Except in a mirror, the eye never sees itself. It is the last to shut down when the body is falling asleep. It stays open when the body is stricken with paralysis or dead. The eye keeps registering reality even when there is no apparent reason for doing this, and under all circumstances. The question is: Why? And the answer is: Because the environment is hostile.

Eyesight is the instrument of adjustment to an environment which remains hostile no matter how well you have adjusted to it. The hostility of the environment grows proportionately to the length of your presence in it, and I am speaking not of old age only. In short, the eye is looking for safety. That explains the eye's predilection for art in general and Venetian art in particular. That explains the eye's appetite for beauty, as well as beauty's own existence. For beauty is solace, since beauty is safe. It doesn't threaten you with murder or make you sick. A statue of Apollo doesn't bite, nor will Carpaccio's poodle. When the eye fails to find beauty—alias solace—it commands the body to create it, or, failing that, adjusts itself to perceive virtue in ugliness. In the first instance, it relies on human genius; in the second, it draws on one's reservoir of humility. The latter is in greater supply, and like every majority tends to make laws. Let's have an illustration; let's take a young maiden. At a certain age one

eyes passing maidens without applied interest, without aspiring to mount them. Like a TV set left switched on in an abandoned apartment, the eye keeps sending in images of all these 5'8" miracles, complete with light chestnut hair, Perugino ovals, gazelle eyes, nurse-like bosoms, wasp waists, dark-green velvet dresses, and razor-sharp tendons. An eye may zero in on them in a church at someone's wedding or, worse still, in a bookstore's poetry section. Reasonably farsighted or resorting to the counsel of the ear, the eye may learn their identities (which come with names as breathtaking as, say, Arabella Ferri) and, alas, their dishearteningly firm romantic affiliations. Regardless of such data's uselessness, the eye keeps collecting it. In fact, the more useless the data, the sharper the focus. The question is why, and the answer is that beauty is always external; also, that it is the exception to the rule. That's what—its location and its singularity—sends the eye oscillating wildly

or—in militant humility's parlance—roving. For beauty is where the eye rests. Aesthetic sense is the twin of one's instinct for self-preservation and is more reliable than ethics. Aesthetics' main tool, the eye, is absolutely autonomous. In its autonomy, it is inferior only to a tear.



tear can be shed in this place on several occasions. Assuming that beauty is the distribution of light in the fashion most congenial to one's retina, a tear is an acknowledgment of the retina's, as well as the tear's, failure to retain beauty. On the whole, love comes with the speed of light; separation, with that of sound. It is the deterioration of the greater speed to the lesser that moistens one's eye. Because one is finite, a departure from this place always feels final; leaving it behind is leaving it forever. For leaving is a

banishment of the eye to the provinces of the other senses; at best, to the crevices and crevasses of the brain. For the eye identifies itself not with the body it belongs to but with the object of its attention. And to the eye, for purely optical reasons, departure is not the body leaving the city but the city abandoning the pupil. Likewise, disappearance of the beloved, especially a gradual one, causes grief no matter who, and for what peripatetic reason, is actually in motion. As the world goes, this city is the eye's beloved. After it, everything is a letdown. A tear is the anticipation of the eye's future.



To be sure, everybody has designs on her, on this city. Politicians and big businesses especially, for nothing has a greater future than money. It is so much so that money feels synonymous with the future

and tries to order it. Hence the wealth of frothy outpourings about revamping the city, about turning the entire province of Veneto into a gateway to Central Europe, about boosting the region's industry, expanding the harbor complex at Marghera, increasing the oil-tanker traffic in the *laguna* and deepening the *laguna* for the same purposes, about converting the Venetian Arsenale, immortalized by Dante, into the Beaubourg's spitting—literally—image for storing the most recently discharged phlegm, about housing an Expo here in the year 2000, etc. All this drivel normally gushes out of the same mouth, and often on the same breath, that blabbers about ecology, protection, restoration, cultural patrimony, and whatnot. The goal of all that is one: rape. No rapist, though, wants to regard himself as such, let alone get caught. Hence the mixture of objectives and metaphors, high rhetoric and lyrical fervor swelling the barrel chests of parliamentary deputies and *commendatore* alike.

Yet while these characters are far more dangerous—indeed more harmful—than the Turks, the Austrians, and Napoleon all lumped together, since money has more battalions than generals, in the seventeen years that I've frequented this city very little has changed here. What saves Venice, like Penelope, from her suitors is their rivalry, the competitive nature of capitalism boiled down to fat cats' blood relations to different political parties. Lobbing spanners into each other's machinery is something democracy is awfully good at, and the leapfrogging of Italian cabinets has proved to be the city's best insurance. So has the mosaic of the city's own political jigsaw. There are no doges anymore, and the 80,000 dwellers of these 118 islands are guided not by the grandeur of some particular vision but by their immediate, often nearsighted concerns, by their desire to make ends meet.

Farsightedness here, however, would be counterproductive. In a place this size, twenty or thirty people out of work are the city coun-

cil's instant headache, which, apart from islands' innate mistrust of the mainland, makes for a poor reception of the latter's blueprints, however breathtaking. Appealing as they may be elsewhere, promises of universal employment and growth make little sense in a city barely eight miles in circumference, which even at the apogee of its maritime fortunes never exceeded 200,000 souls. Such prospects may thrill a shopkeeper or perhaps a doctor; a mortician, though, would object, since the local cemeteries are jammed as it is and the dead now should be buried on the mainland. In the final analysis, that's what the mainland is good for.

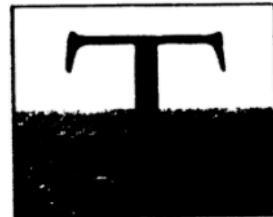
Still, had the mortician and the doctor belonged to different political parties, that would be fine, some progress could be made. In this city, they often belong to the same, and things get stalled rather early, even if the party is the PCI. In short, underneath all these squabbles, unwitting ones or otherwise, lies the simple truth that islands don't grow. That's what

money, a.k.a. the future, a.k.a. voluble politicians and fat cats, can't take, fails to grasp. What's worse, it feels defied by this place, since beauty, a *fait accompli* by definition, always defies the future, regarding it as nothing so much as an overblown, impotent present, or as its fading ground. If this place is reality (or, as some claim, the past), then the future with all its aliases is excluded from it. At best, it amounts to the present. And perhaps nothing proves this better than modern art, whose poverty alone makes it prophetic. A poor man always speaks for the present, and perhaps the sole function of collections like Peggy Guggenheim's and the similar accretions of this century's stuff habitually mounted here is to show what a cheap, self-assertive, ungenerous, one-dimensional lot we have become, to instill humility in us: there is no other outcome thinkable against the background of this Penelope of a city, weaving her patterns by day and undoing them by night, with no Ulysses in sight. Only the sea.



I think it was Hazlitt who said that the only thing that could beat this city of water would be a city built in the air. That was a Calvino-esque idea, and who knows, as an upshot of space travel, that may yet come to pass. As it is, apart from the moon landing, this century may be best remembered by leaving this place intact, by just letting it be. I, for one, would advise even against gentle interference. Of course, film festivals and book fairs are in tune with the flickering of the canals' surface, with their curlicue, sirocco-perused scribblings. And of course, turning this place into a capital of scientific research would be a palatable option, especially taking into account the likely advantages of the local phosphorus-rich diet for any mental endeavor. The same bait could be used for moving the EEC headquarters here from Brussels and the European parliament from Strasbourg. And of course, a better solution would be to give this city and some of its environs the status of a national

park. Yet I would argue that the idea of turning Venice into a museum is as absurd as the urge to revitalize it with new blood. For one thing, what passes for new blood is always in the end plain old urine. And secondly, this city doesn't qualify to be a museum, being itself a work of art, the greatest masterpiece our species produced. You don't revive a painting, let alone a statue. You leave them alone, you guard them against vandals—whose hordes may include yourself.



he one thing the locals never do is ride gondolas. To begin with, a gondola ride is pricey. Only foreign tourists, and well-off ones at that, can afford it. That's what explains the median age of gondola passengers: a septuagenarian can shell out one-tenth of a

schoolteacher's salary without wincing. The sight of these decrepit Romeos and their rickety Juliets is invariably sad and embarrassing, not to say ghastly. For the young, i.e., for those for whom this sort of thing would be appropriate, a gondola is as far out of reach as a five-star hotel. Economy, of course, reflects demography; yet that is doubly sad, because beauty, instead of promising the world, gets reduced to being its reward. That, in parenthesis, is what drives the young to nature, whose free, or, more exactly, cheap delights are free—i.e., devoid—of the meaning and invention present in art or in artifice. A landscape can be thrilling, but a façade by Lombardini tells you what you can do. And one way—the original way—of looking at such façades is from a gondola: this way you can see what the water sees. Of course, nothing could be further from the locals' agendas as they scurry and bustle about on their daily rounds, properly oblivious or even allergic to the surrounding

splendor. The closest they come to using a gondola is when they're ferried across the Grand Canal or carrying home some unwieldy purchase—a washing machine, say, or a sofa. But neither a ferryman nor a boat owner would on such occasions break into "*O sole mio.*" Perhaps the indifference of a native takes its cue from artifice's own indifference to its own reflection. That could be the locals' final argument against the gondola, except that it could be countered by the offer of a ride at nighttime, to which I once succumbed.

The night was cold, moonlit, and quiet. There were five of us in the gondola, including its owner, a local engineer who, together with his girlfriend, did all the paddling. We moseyed and zigzagged like an eel through the silent town hanging over our heads, cavernous and empty, resembling at this late hour a vast, largely rectangular coral reef or a succession of uninhabited grottoes. It was a peculiar sensation: to find yourself moving within what

you're used to glancing across—canals; it felt like acquiring an extra dimension. Presently we glided into the *laguna* and headed toward the island of the dead, toward San Michele. The moon, pitched extraordinarily high, like some mind-bogglingly sharp tip crossed by a cloud's ledger sign, was barely available to the sheet of water, and the gondola's gliding too was absolutely noiseless. In fact, there was something distinctly erotic in the noiseless and traceless passage of its lithe body upon the water—much like sliding your palm down the smooth skin of your beloved. Erotic, because there were no consequences, because the skin was infinite and almost immobile, because the caress was abstract. With us inside, the gondola was perhaps slightly heavy, and the water momentarily yielded underneath, only to close the gap the very next second. Also, powered by a man and a woman, the gondola wasn't even masculine. In fact, it was an eroticism not of genders but of elements, a perfect match of

their equally lacquered surfaces. The sensation was neutral, almost incestuous, as though you were present as a brother caressed his sister, or vice versa. In this manner we circled the island of the dead and headed back to Canareggio . . . Churches, I always thought, should stay open all night; at least the Madonna dell' Orto should—not so much because of the likely timing of the soul's agony as because of the wonderful Bellini *Madonna with Child* in it. I wanted to disembark there and steal a glance at the painting, at the inch-wide interval that separates her left palm from the Child's sole. That inch—ah, much less!—is what separates love from eroticism. Or perhaps that's the ultimate in eroticism. But the cathedral was closed and we proceeded through the tunnel of grottoes, through this abandoned, flat, moonlit Piranesian mine with its few sparkles of electric ore, to the heart of the city. Still, now I knew what water feels like being caressed by water.



e disembarked near the concrete crate of the Bauer Grünwald Hotel, rebuilt after the war, toward the end of which it was blown up by the local partisans because it housed the German command. As an eyesore, it keeps good company with the church of San Moisè—the busiest façade in town. Together, they look like Albert Speer having a pizza *capricciosa*. I've never been inside either, but I knew a German gentleman who stayed in this crate-like structure and found it very comfortable. His mother was dying while he was on vacation here and he spoke to her daily over the telephone. When she expired he convinced the management to sell him the telephone's receiver. The management understood, and the receiver was included in the bill. But then he was most likely a Protestant, while San Moisè is a Catholic church, not to mention its being closed at night.



quidistant from our respective abodes, this was as good a place to disembark as any. It takes about an hour to cross this city by foot in any direction. Provided, of course, that you know your way, which by the time I stepped out of that gondola I did. We bade each other farewell and dispersed. I walked toward my hotel, tired, not even trying to look around, mumbling to myself some odd, God-knows-from-where-dredged-up lines, like "Pillage this village," or "This city deserves no pity." That sounded like early Auden, but it wasn't. Suddenly I wanted a drink. I swerved into San Marco in the hope that Florian's was still open. It was closing; they were removing the chairs from the arcade and mounting wooden boards on the windows. A short negotiation with the waiter, who had already changed to go home but whom I knew slightly, had the desired result; and with that result in hand I stepped out from

under the arcade and scanned the piazza. It was absolutely empty, not a soul. Its four hundred rounded windows were running in their usual maddening order, like idealized waves. This sight always reminded me of the Roman Colosseum, where, in the words of a friend of mine, somebody invented the arch and couldn't stop. "Pillage this village," I was still muttering to myself. "This city deserves . . ." Fog began to engulf the piazza. It was a quiet invasion, but an invasion nonetheless. I saw its spears and lances moving silently but very fast, from the direction of the *laguna*, like foot soldiers preceding their heavy cavalry. "Silently, and very fast," I said to myself. Any time now you could anticipate their king, King Fog, appearing from around the corner in all his cumulus glory. "Silently, and very fast," I repeated to myself. Now, that was Auden's last line from his "Fall of Rome," and it was this place that was "altogether elsewhere." All of a sudden I felt he was behind me, and I

turned as fast as I could. A tall, smooth window of Florian's that was reasonably well lit and not covered with a board gleamed through the patches of fog. I walked toward it and looked inside. Inside, it was 195?. On the red plush divans, around a small marbled table with a kremlin of drinks and teapots on it, sat Wystan Auden, with his great love, Chester Kallman, Cecil Day Lewis and his wife, Stephen Spender and his. Wystan was telling some funny story and everybody was laughing. In the middle of the story, a well-built sailor passed by the window; Chester got up and, without so much as a "See you later," went in hot pursuit. "I looked at Wystan," Stephen told me years later. "He kept laughing, but a tear ran down his cheek." At this point, for me, the window had gone dark. King Fog rode into the piazza, reined in his stallion, and started to unfurl his white turban. His buskins were wet, so was his charivari; his cloak was studded with the dim, myopic jewels of burn-

ing lamps. He was dressed that way because he hadn't any idea what century it was, let alone which year. But then, being fog, how could he?



et me reiterate: Water equals time and provides beauty with its double. Part water, we serve beauty in the same fashion. By rubbing water, this city improves time's looks, beautifies the future. That's what the role of this city in the universe is. Because the city is static while we are moving. The tear is proof of that. Because we go and beauty stays. Because we are headed for the future, while beauty is the eternal present. The tear is an attempt to remain, to stay behind, to merge with the city. But that's against the rules. The tear is a throwback, a tribute of the future to the past. Or else it is the result of subtracting the greater from the

lesser: beauty from man. The same goes for love, because one's love, too, is greater than oneself.

*November 1989*

JHUMPA LAHIRI



# IN OTHER WORDS

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY ANN GOLDSTEIN



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## THE CROSSING



I want to cross a small lake. It really is small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim I'm afraid of being alone in the water, without any support.

The lake I'm talking about is in a secluded, isolated place. To get there you have to walk a short distance, through a silent wood. On the other side you can see a cottage, the only house on the shore. The lake was formed just after the last ice age, millennia ago. The water is clear but dark, heavier than salt water, with no current. Once you're in, a few yards from the shore, you can no longer see the bottom.

In the morning I observe people coming to the lake, as I do. I watch them cross it in a confident, relaxed manner, stop for some minutes in front of the cottage, then return. I count their arm strokes. I envy them. ◇

For a month I swim around the lake, never going too far out. This is a more significant distance—the circumference compared to the diameter. It takes me more than half an hour to make this circle. Yet I'm always close to the shore. I can stop, I can stand up if I'm tired. It's good exercise, but not very exciting.

Then one morning, near the end of the summer, I meet two friends at the lake. I've decided to make the crossing with them, to finally get to the cottage on the other side. I'm tired of just going along the edge.

I count the strokes. I know that my companions are in the water with me, but I know that each of us is alone. After about a hundred and fifty strokes I'm in the middle, the deepest part. I keep going. After a hundred more I see the bottom again. ◇

I arrive on the other side: I've made it with no trouble. I see the cottage, until now distant, just steps from me. I see the small, faraway silhouettes of my husband, my children. They seem unreachable, but I know they're not.

After a crossing, the known shore becomes the opposite side: here becomes there. Charged with energy, I cross the lake again. I'm elated.

For twenty years I studied Italian as if I were swimming along the edge of that lake. Always next to my dominant language, English. Always hugging that shore. It was good exercise. Beneficial for the muscles, for the brain, but not very exciting. If you study a foreign language that way, you won't drown. The other language is always there to support you, to save you. But you can't float without the possibility of drowning, of sinking. To know a new language, to immerse yourself, you have to leave the shore. Without a life vest. Without depending on solid ground.

A few weeks after crossing the small hidden lake, I make a second crossing, much longer but not at all difficult. It will be the first true departure of my life. On a ship this time, I cross the Atlantic Ocean, to live in Italy. ◇

## THE DICTIONARY



The first Italian book I buy is a pocket dictionary, with the definitions in English. It's 1994, and I'm about to go to Florence for the first time, with my sister. I go to a bookshop in Boston with an Italian name: Rizzoli. A stylish, refined bookshop, which is no longer there.

I don't buy a guidebook, even though it's my first trip to Italy, even though I know nothing about Florence. Thanks to a friend of mine, I already have the address of a hotel. I'm a student, I don't have much money. I think a dictionary is more important.

The one I choose has a green plastic cover, indestructible, impermeable. It's light, smaller than my hand. It has more or less the dimensions of a bar of soap. The back cover says that it contains around forty thousand Italian words. ◇

As we're wandering through the Uffizi, amid galleries that are almost deserted, my sister realizes that she's lost her hat. I open the dictionary. I go to the English-Italian part, to find out how to say "hat" in Italian. In some way, certainly incorrect, I tell a guard that we've lost a hat. Miraculously, he understands what I'm saying, and in a short time the hat is recovered.

Every time I've been to Italy in the many years since, I've brought this dictionary with me. I always put it in my purse. I look up words when I'm in the street, when I return to the hotel after an outing, when I try to read an article in the newspaper. It guides me, protects me, explains everything.

It becomes both a map and a compass, and without it I know I'd be lost. It becomes a kind of authoritative parent, without whom I can't go out. I consider it a sacred text, full of secrets, of revelations. ◇

On the first page, at a certain point, I write: "*provare a = cercare di*" (try to = seek to).

That random fragment, that lexical equation, might be a metaphor for the love I feel for Italian. Something that, in the end, is really a stubborn attempt,

a continuous trial.

Nearly twenty years after buying my first dictionary, I decide to move to Rome for an extended stay. Before leaving, I ask a friend of mine, who lived in Rome for many years, if an electronic Italian dictionary, like a cell phone app, would be useful, for looking up a word at any moment. ◇

He laughs. He says, "Soon you'll be living inside an Italian dictionary."

He's right. Slowly, after a couple of months in Rome, I realize that I don't check the dictionary so often. When I go out, it tends to stay in my purse, closed. As a result I start leaving it at home. I'm aware of a turning point. A sense of freedom and, at the same time, of loss. Of having grown up, at least a little.

Today I have many other larger, more substantial dictionaries on my desk. Two of them are monolingual, without a word of English. The cover of the small one seems a little faded by now, a little dirty. The pages are yellowed. Some are coming loose from the binding. ◇

It usually sits on the night table, so that I can easily look up an unknown word while I'm reading. This book allows me to read other books, to open the door of a new language. It accompanies me, even now, when I go on vacation, on trips. It has become a necessity. If, when I leave, I forget to take it with me, I feel slightly uneasy, as if I'd forgotten my toothbrush or a change of socks.

By now this small dictionary seems more like a brother than like a parent. And yet it's still useful to me, it still guides me. It remains full of secrets. This little book will always be bigger than I am.

## EXILE



**M**y relationship with Italian takes place in exile, in a state of separation.

Every language belongs to a specific place. It can migrate, it can spread. But usually it's tied to a geographical territory, a country. Italian belongs mainly to Italy, and I live on another continent, where one does not readily encounter it.

I think of Dante, who waited nine years before speaking to Beatrice. I think of Ovid, exiled from Rome to a remote place. To a linguistic outpost, surrounded by alien sounds. ◇

I think of my mother, who writes poems in Bengali, in America. Almost fifty years after moving there, she can't find a book written in her language.

In a sense I'm used to a kind of linguistic exile. My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you.

In my case there is another distance, another schism. I don't know Bengali perfectly. I don't know how to read it, or even write it. I have an accent, I speak without authority, and so I've always perceived a disjunction between it and me. As a result I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language, too. ◇

As for Italian, the exile has a different aspect. Almost as soon as we met, Italian and I were separated. My yearning seems foolish. And yet I feel it.

How is it possible to feel exiled from a language that isn't mine? That I don't know? Maybe because I'm a writer who doesn't belong completely to any language.

I buy a book. It's called *Teach Yourself Italian*. An exhortatory title, full of hope and possibility. As if it were possible to learn on your own. ◇

Having studied Latin for many years, I find the first chapters of this textbook fairly easy. I manage to memorize some conjugations, do some exercises. But I don't like the silence, the isolation of the self-teaching process. It seems detached, wrong. As if I were studying a musical instrument without ever playing it.

At the university, I decide to write my doctoral thesis on how Italian architecture influenced English playwrights of the seventeenth century. I wonder why certain playwrights decided to set their tragedies, written in English, in Italian palaces. The thesis will discuss another schism between language and environment. The subject gives me a second reason to study Italian.

I attend elementary courses. My first teacher is a Milanese woman who lives in Boston. I do the homework, I pass the tests. But when, after two years of studying, I try to read Alberto Moravia's novel *La ciociara* (*Two Women*), I barely understand it. I underline almost every word on every page. I am constantly looking in the dictionary. ◇

In the spring of 2000, six years after my trip to Florence, I go to Venice. In addition to the dictionary, I take a notebook, and on the last page I write down phrases that might be useful: *Saprebbe dirmi? Dove si trova? Come si fa per andare?* Could you tell me? Where is? How does one get to? I recall the difference between *buono* and *bello*. I feel prepared. In reality, in Venice I'm barely able to ask for directions on the street, a wake-up call at the hotel. I manage to order in a restaurant and exchange a few words with a saleswoman. Nothing else. Even though I've returned to Italy, I still feel exiled from the language.

A few months later I receive an invitation to the Mantua literary festival. There I meet my first Italian publishers. One of them is also my translator. Their publishing house has a Spanish name, Marcos y Marcos. They are Italian. Their names are Marco and Claudia.

I have to do all my interviews and presentations in English. There is always an interpreter next to me. I can more or less follow the Italian, but I can't express myself, explain myself, without English. I feel limited. What I learned in America, in the classroom, isn't sufficient. My comprehension is so meager that, here in Italy, it doesn't help me. The language still seems like a locked gate. I'm on the threshold, I can see inside, but the gate won't open. ◇

Marco and Claudia give me the key. When I mention that I've studied some Italian, and that I would like to improve it, they stop speaking to me in English. They switch to their language, although I'm able to respond only in a very simple way. In spite of all my mistakes, in spite of my not completely understanding what they say. In spite of the fact that they speak English much better than I speak Italian.

They tolerate my mistakes. They correct me, they encourage me, they provide the words I lack. They speak clearly, patiently. Just like parents with their children. The way one learns one's native language. I realize that I didn't learn English in this fashion.

Claudia and Marco, who translated and published my first book in Italian, and who were my hosts the first time I went to Italy as a writer, give me this turning point. In Mantua, thanks to them, I finally find myself inside the language. Because in the end to learn a language, to feel connected to it, you have to have a dialogue, however childlike, however imperfect. ◇

## THE CONVERSATIONS



Returning to America, I want to go on speaking Italian. But with whom? I know some people in New York who speak it perfectly. I'm embarrassed to talk to them. I need someone with whom I can struggle, and fail.

One day I go to the Casa Italiana at New York University to interview a famous Roman writer, a woman, who has won the Strega Prize. I am in an overcrowded room, where everyone but me speaks an impeccable Italian.

The director of the institute greets me. I tell him I would have liked to do the interview in Italian. That I studied the language years ago but I can't speak well. ◇

"Need practicing," I say.

"You need practice," he answers kindly.

In 2004 my husband gives me something. A piece of paper torn from a notice that he happened to see in our neighborhood, in Brooklyn. On it is written "*Imparare l'italiano*," "Learn Italian." I consider it a sign. I call the number, make an appointment. A likable, energetic woman, also from Milan, arrives at my house. She teaches in a private school, she lives in the suburbs. She asks me why I want to learn the language. ◇

I explain that I'm going to Rome in the summer to take part in another literary festival. It seems like a reasonable motivation. I don't reveal that Italian is a fancy of mine. That I nurture a hope—in fact a dream—of knowing it well. I don't tell her that I'm looking for a way to keep alive a language that has nothing to do with my life. That I am tortured, that I feel incomplete. As if Italian were a book that, no matter how hard I work, I can't write.

We meet once a week, for an hour. I'm pregnant with my daughter, who will be born in November. I try to have a conversation. At the end of every lesson the teacher gives me a long list of words that I lacked during the conversation. I review it diligently. I put it in a folder. I can't remember them.

## IMPOSSIBILITY



**R**eading an interview with the novelist Carlos Fuentes in an issue of *Nuovi Argomenti*, I find this: “It’s extremely useful to know that there are certain heights one will never be able to reach.”

Fuentes is referring to literary masterpieces—works of genius like *Don Quixote*, for example—that remain untouched. I think that these heights have a dual, and substantial, role for writers: they make us aim at perfection and remind us of our mediocrity.

As a writer, in whatever language, I have to take account of the presence of the greatest writers. I have to accept the nature of my contribution with respect to theirs. Although I know I’ll never write like Cervantes, like Dante, like Shakespeare, nevertheless I write. I have to manage the anxiety that those heights can stir up. Otherwise, I wouldn’t dare write. ◇

Now that I’m writing in Italian, Fuentes’s observation seems even more pertinent. I have to accept the impossibility of reaching the height that inspires me but at the same time pushes me into a corner. Now the height is not the work of a writer more brilliant than I am but, rather, the heart of the language itself. Although I know that I will never be securely inside that heart, I try, through writing, to reach it.

I wonder if I’m going against the current. I live in an era in which almost anything seems possible, in which no one wants to accept any limits. We can send a message in an instant, we can go from one end of the world to the other in a day. We can plainly see a person who is not with us. Thanks to technology, no waiting, no distance. That’s why we can say with assurance that the world is smaller than it used to be. We are always connected, reachable. Technology refutes distance, today more than ever.

And yet this Italian project of mine makes me acutely aware of the immense distances between languages. A foreign language can signify a total separation. It can represent, even today, the ferocity of our ignorance. To write in a

new language, to penetrate its heart, no technology helps. You can’t accelerate the process, you can’t abbreviate it. The pace is slow, hesitant, there are no shortcuts. The better I understand the language, the more confusing it is. The closer I get, the farther away. Even today the disconnect between me and Italian remains insuperable. It’s taken almost half my life to advance barely a few steps. Just to get this far. ◇

In that sense the metaphor of the small lake that I wanted to cross, with which I began this series of reflections, is wrong. Because in fact a language isn’t a small lake but an ocean. A tremendous, mysterious element, a force of nature that I have to bow before.

In Italian I lack a complete perspective. I lack the distance that would help me. I have only the distance that hinders me.

It’s impossible to see the entire landscape. I rely on certain paths, certain ways to get through. Routes I trust and probably depend on too much. I recognize certain words, certain constructions, as if they were familiar trees during a daily walk. But ultimately when I write I’m in a trench. ◇

I write on the margins, just as I’ve always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral zone where it’s impossible for me to feel rooted, but where I’m comfortable. The only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong.

I can skirt the boundary of Italian, but the interior of the language escapes me. I don’t see the secret pathways, the concealed layers. The hidden levels. The subterranean part.

At Hadrian’s Villa, in Tivoli, there is a gigantic network of streets, an impressive and imposing system that is entirely underground. This complex of passages was dug to transport goods, servants, slaves. To separate the emperor from the people. To hide the real and unruly life of the villa, just as the skin hides the unsightly but essential functions of the body. ◇

At Tivoli I understand the nature of my Italian project. Like visitors to the villa today, like Hadrian almost two millennia ago, I walk on the surface, the accessible part. But I know, as a writer, that a language exists in the bones, in the marrow. That the true life of the language, the substance, is there.

To return to Fuentes: I agree, I think that an awareness of impossibility is central to the creative impulse. In the face of everything that seems to me

unattainable, I marvel. Without a sense of marvel at things, without wonder, one can't create anything.

If everything were possible, what would be the meaning, the point of life? ◇

If it were possible to bridge the distance between me and Italian, I would stop writing in that language.

## VENICE



In this disquieting, almost dreamlike city, I discover a new way to understand my relationship with Italian. The fragmented, disorienting topography gives me another key.

It's the dialogue between the bridges and the canals. A dialogue between water and land. A dialogue that expresses a state of both separation and connection.

In Venice I can't go anywhere without crossing countless pedestrian bridges. At first, having to cross a bridge every few minutes is exhausting. Each journey seems abnormal and somewhat difficult. In a short time, though, I get used to it, and slowly this journey becomes habitual, enticing. I ascend, cross the canal, then descend on the other side. Walking through Venice means repeating this act an incalculable number of times. In the middle of every bridge I find myself suspended, neither here nor there. Writing in another language resembles a journey of this sort. ◇

My writing in Italian is, just like a bridge, something constructed, fragile. It might collapse at any moment, leaving me in danger. English flows under my feet. I'm aware of it: an undeniable presence, even if I try to avoid it. Like the water in Venice, it remains the stronger, more natural element, the element that forever threatens to swallow me. Paradoxically, I could survive without any trouble in English; I wouldn't drown. And yet, because I don't want any contact with the water, I build bridges.

I notice that in Venice almost all the elements are inverted. It's hard for me to distinguish between what exists and what seems an illusion, an apparition. Everything appears unstable, changeable. The streets aren't solid. The houses seem to float. The fog can make the architecture invisible. The high water can flood a square. The canals reflect a version of the city that doesn't exist.

The disorientation I feel in Venice is similar to what possesses me when I write in Italian. In spite of the map of the *sestieri*, I get lost. The Venetian

maze transcends its own map the way a language transcends its own grammar. Walking in Venice, like writing in Italian, is an experience that throws me off balance. I have to give in. Writing, I come up against so many dead ends, so many tight corners to get myself out of. I have to abandon certain streets. I continually have to correct myself. There are moments in Italian, just as in Venice, when I feel suffocated, distraught. Then I turn and, when I least expect it, find myself in an isolated, silent, shining place. ◇

Over the years Venice has had an increasingly unsettling impact on me. Its devastating beauty pierces me, I'm overwhelmed by the fragility of life. I'm enveloped in a passionate dream that always seems about to dissolve. A dream that's truer than life. Crossing the bridges again and again makes me think of the passage that we all make on the earth, between birth and death. Sometimes, crossing certain bridges, I fear I've already reached the beyond.

When I write in Italian, I feel the same disquiet, in spite of my love for the language. The step that I'm taking seems like a leap into the void, an inversion of myself. Like the reflections of the buildings that tremble on the surface of the Grand Canal, my writing in Italian is something impalpable. Nebulous, like the fog. I'm afraid that the bridge between me and Italian doesn't, ultimately, exist. That it will remain, at best, a chimera.

Yet both in Venice and on the page, bridges are the only way to move into a new dimension, to get past English, to arrive somewhere else. Every sentence I write in Italian is a small bridge that has to be constructed, then crossed. I do it with hesitation mixed with a persistent, inexplicable impulse. Every sentence, like every bridge, carries me from one place to another. It's an atypical, enticing path. A new rhythm. Now I'm almost used to it. ◇

## THE IMPERFECT



There are so many things that continue to confuse me in Italian. Prepositions, for example: **alla parete, per terra, dal calzolaio, in edicola** (on the wall, on the ground, at the shoemaker, at the newsstand). To review them, I could take notes **nel quaderno** or **sul taccuino** (in the exercise book or in the notebook). I have a grammar containing a series of exercises of this sort, to help foreign students: "*Mettiti miei pantaloni e prova vedere la situazione i miei occhi*" (Put yourself my clothes and try see the situation my eyes). They are tedious, but I do them anyway, if I want to master the language, there's no way out. And yet I never manage to fill in those blank spaces perfectly. Maybe this stupendous sentence from a story by Alberto Moravia would be sufficient to teach me the prepositions once and for all: "*Sbucammo finalmente su una piazza al sole, in un venticello frizzante da neve, davanti un parapetto oltre il quale non c'era che la luce di un grande panorama che non si vedeva*" ("We finally emerged onto a square in the sun, in a crisp breeze hinting at snow, in front of a parapet beyond which there was only the light of a grand panorama that couldn't be seen").

Another thorn in my side is the use of the article—it's not clear to me when you use it and when it's dropped. Why does one say *c'è vento* (it's windy), but *c'è il sole* (it's sunny)? I struggle to understand the difference between *uno stato d'animo* (a state of mind) and *una busta della spesa* (a shopping bag), *giorni di scirocco* (days of sirocco) and *la linea dell'orizzonte* (the line of the horizon). I tend to make mistakes, putting the article when there's no need (as in "*Parliamo del cinema*," instead of *di cinema*, or "*Sono venuta in Italia per cambiare la strada*," instead of *cambiare strada*; "We're talking about the movies" instead of "about movies"; "I came to Italy to change the course" instead of "to change course"), but reading Elio Vittorini I learn that you say *queste sono fandonie* (those are lies). Thanks to an advertising poster on the street, I learn that *il piacere non ha limiti* (pleasure has no limits).

## THE SECOND EXILE



After spending a year in Rome I return to America for a month. Immediately, I miss Italian. Not to be able to speak it and hear it every day distresses me. When I go to restaurants, to shops, to the beach, I'm irritated: Why aren't people speaking Italian? I don't want to interact with anyone. I have an aching sense of homesickness.

Everything I absorbed in Rome seems absent. Returning to the maternal metaphor, I think of the first times I had to leave my children at home, just after they were born. At the time, I felt a tremendous anxiety. I felt guilty, even though those brief moments of separation were normal, important both for me and for them. It was important to establish that our bodies, until then connected, were independent. And yet now, as then, I am acutely conscious of a painful physical detachment. As if a part of me were missing.

I'm aware of the distance. Of an oppressive, intolerable silence. ◇

The absence of Italian assails me more forcefully every day. I'm afraid I've already forgotten everything I learned. I'm afraid of being annihilated. I imagine a devouring vortex, all the words disappearing into the darkness. In my notebook I make a list of Italian verbs that signify the act of going away: *scomparire, svanire, sbiadire, sfumare, finire. Evaporare, svaporare, svam-pire. Perdersi, dileguarsi, dissolversi.* I know that some are synonyms of *morire, to die.*

I suffer until, one afternoon on Cape Cod, a journalist from Milan calls, to interview me. I can't wait for the phone to ring, but as I'm talking to her I'm worried that my Italian already sounds awkward, that my language is already out of practice. A foreign language is a delicate, finicky muscle. If you don't use it, it gets weak. In America, my Italian sounds jarring, transplanted. The manner of speaking, the sounds, the rhythms, the cadences seem uprooted, out of place. The words seem irrelevant, without a meaningful presence. They seem like castaways, nomads.

In America, when I was young, my parents always seemed to be in mourning for something. Now I understand: it must have been the language. Forty years ago it wasn't easy for them to talk to their families on the phone. They looked forward to the mail. They couldn't wait for a letter to arrive from Calcutta, written in Bengali. They read it a hundred times, they saved it. Those letters evoked their language and conjured a life that had disappeared. When the language one identifies with is far away, one does everything possible to keep it alive. Because words bring back everything: the place, the people, the life, the streets, the light, the sky, the flowers, the sounds. When you live without your own language you feel weightless and, at the same time, overloaded. You breathe another type of air, at a different altitude. You are always aware of the difference. ◇

After living in Italy for only a year, I feel a little like that in America. And yet something doesn't add up. I'm not Italian, I'm not even bilingual. Italian remains for me a language learned as an adult, cultivated, nurtured.

One day on Cape Cod I happen on a secondhand book sale, outside, in a small square. On the grass are a lot of folding tables piled with all types of books. They're very cheap. Usually I like rummaging for an hour or so and buying a bunch of things. This time, however, I don't want to buy anything, because all the books are in English. Feeling desperate, I look for a book in Italian. There are a few boxes devoted to foreign languages. I see a beat-up German dictionary, some tattered French novels, but nothing in Italian. The only thing that attracts me is a tourist guide to Italy written in English; it's the only thing I buy, and only because it makes me think of returning to Rome at the end of August. All the other books, even a copy of one of my own novels, leave me indifferent. As if they were written in a foreign language.

Now I feel a double crisis. On the one hand I'm aware of the ocean, in every sense, between me and Italian. On the other, of the separation between me and English. I'd already noticed it in Italy, translating myself. But I think that emotional distance is always more pronounced, more piercing, when, in spite of proximity, there remains an abyss. ◇

Why don't I feel more at home in English? How is it that the language I learned to read and write in doesn't comfort me? What happened, and what does it mean? The estrangement, the disenchantment confuses, disturbs me. I feel more than ever that I am a writer without a definitive language, without

origin, without definition. Whether it's an advantage or a disadvantage I wouldn't know.

Midway through the month I go to see my Venetian Italian teacher, in Brooklyn. This time we don't have a lesson, just a long chat. We talk about Rome, about her family and mine. I bring her a box of *biscottini*, I show her photographs of my new life. She gives me some of her books, paperbacks, taken down from the shelves: stories by Calvino, Pavese, Silvio d'Arzo. Poems of Ungaretti. It's the last time I'll come here. My teacher is about to move, she's leaving Brooklyn. She's already sold the house where she lived for many years, where we had our lessons. She is preparing to pack everything for the move. From now on, when I return to America, to Brooklyn, I won't see her.

I come home carrying a small pile of Italian books, and with these, in spite of a pervasive melancholy, I am able to calm myself. In this period of silence, of linguistic isolation, only a book can reassure me. Books are the best means—private, discreet, reliable—of overcoming reality. ◇

I read in Italian every day, but I don't write. In America I become passive. Even though I've brought the dictionaries, the exercise books, the notebooks, I can't write even a word in Italian. I describe nothing in the diary, I don't feel like it. As far as writing is concerned, I remain inactive. As if I were in a creative waiting room, all I do is wait.

Finally, at the end of August, at the airport, at the gate, I am surrounded by Italian again. I see all the Italians who are going home after their vacations in New York. I hear their chatter. At first I feel relief, joy. Immediately afterward I realize that I'm not like them. I'm different, just as I was different from my parents when we went on vacation to Calcutta. I'm not returning to Rome to rejoin my language. I'm returning to continue my courtship of another.

Those who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk. In the end I realize that it wasn't a true exile: far from it. I am exiled even from the definition of exile. ◇

## THE WALL



There is pain in every joy. In every violent passion a dark side.

The second year in Rome, after Christmas, I go with my family to see the temples at Paestum, and afterward we spend a couple of days in Salerno. There, in the center, in a shop window, I notice some nice children's clothes. I go in with my daughter. I turn to the saleswoman. I tell her I'm looking for pants for my daughter. I describe what I have in mind, suggest colors that would suit, and add that my daughter doesn't like styles that are too tight, that she would prefer something comfortable. In other words, I speak for quite a long time with this saleswoman, in an Italian that is fluent but not completely natural.

At a certain point my husband comes in with our son. Unlike me, my husband, an American, looks as if he could be Italian. He and I exchange a few words, in Italian, in front of the saleswoman. I show him a jacket on sale that I'm considering for our son. He answers in monosyllables, Sure, I like it, yes, let's see. Not even an entire sentence. My husband speaks perfect Spanish, so he tends to speak Italian with a Spanish accent. He says *sessenta y uno* instead of *sessantuno* (sixty-one), *bellessa* instead of *bellezza* (beauty), *nunca* instead of *mai* (never); our children tease him about it. My husband speaks Italian well, but he doesn't speak it better than I do. ◇

We decide to buy two pairs of pants plus the jacket. At the cash register, while I'm paying, the saleswoman asks me: "Where are you from?"

I explain that we live in Rome, that we moved to Italy last year from New York. At that point the saleswoman says: "But your husband must be Italian. He speaks perfectly, without any accent."

Here is the border that I will never manage to cross. The wall that will remain forever between me and Italian, no matter how well I learn it. My physical appearance. ◇

I feel like crying. I would like to shout: “I’m the one who desperately loves your language, not my husband. He speaks Italian only because he needs to, because he happens to live here. I’ve been studying your language for more than twenty years, he not even for two. I read only your literature. I can now speak Italian in public, do live radio interviews. I keep an Italian diary, I write stories.”

I don’t say anything to the saleswoman. I thank her, I say goodbye, then I go out. I understand that my attachment to Italian is worthless. That all my devotion, all the passion signify nothing. According to this saleswoman, my husband can speak Italian very well, he should be praised, not me. I feel humiliated, offended, envious. I’m speechless. Finally I say to my husband, in Italian, when we’re on the street, “*Sono sbalordita*” (I’m stunned).

And my husband asks me, in English, “What does *sbalordita* mean?” ◇

The episode in Salerno is only one example of the wall I face repeatedly in Italy. Because of my physical appearance, I’m seen as a foreigner. It’s true, I am. But, being a foreigner who speaks Italian well, I have two linguistic experiences, remarkably different, in this country.

Those who know me speak to me in Italian. They appreciate that I understand their language, they gladly share it with me. When I speak Italian with my Italian friends I feel immersed in the language, welcomed, accepted. I take part in the language: in the theater of spoken Italian I think that I, too, have a role, a presence. With friends I can talk for hours, at times for days, without having to rely on any English word. I’m in the middle of the lake and I’m swimming with them, in my own way.

But when I go into a shop like the one in Salerno I find myself abruptly hurled back to shore. People who don’t know me assume, looking at me, that I don’t know Italian. When I speak to them in Italian, when I ask for something (a head of garlic, a stamp, the time), they say, puzzled, “I don’t understand.” It’s always the same response, the same scowl. As if my Italian were another language. ◇

They don’t understand me because they don’t want to understand me; they don’t understand me because they don’t want to listen to me, accept me. That’s how the wall works. Someone who doesn’t understand me can ignore me, doesn’t have to take account of me. Such people look at me but don’t see me. They don’t appreciate that I am working hard to speak their language;

rather, it irritates them. Sometimes when I speak Italian in Italy, I feel reprimanded, like a child who touches an object that shouldn’t be touched. “Don’t touch our language,” some Italians seem to say to me. “It doesn’t belong to you.”

Learning a foreign language is the fundamental way to fit in with new people in a new country. It makes a relationship possible. Without language you can’t feel that you have a legitimate, respected presence. You are without a voice, without power. No chink, no point of entrance can be found in the wall. I know that if I stayed in Italy for the rest of my life, even if I were able to speak a polished, impeccable Italian, that wall, for me, would remain. I think of people who were born and grew up in Italy, who consider Italy their homeland, who speak Italian perfectly, but who, in the eyes of certain Italians, seem “foreign.”

My husband’s name is Alberto. For him, it’s enough to extend his hand, to say, “A pleasure, I’m Alberto.” Because of his looks, because of his name, everyone thinks he’s Italian. When I do the same thing, the same people say, in English, “Nice to meet you.” When I continue to speak in Italian, they ask me: “How is it that you speak Italian so well?” and I have to provide an explanation, I have to say why. The fact that I speak Italian seems to them unusual. No one asks my husband that question. ◇

One evening, I’m presenting my latest novel in a bookstore in the Flaminio neighborhood of Rome. I’ve prepared for a conversation with an Italian friend—also a writer—on various literary topics. Before the presentation begins, a man whom my husband and I have just met asks if I’m going to make the presentation in English. When I answer, in Italian, that I intend to do it in Italian, he asks if I learned the language from my husband.

In America, although I speak English like a native, although I’m considered an American writer, I meet the same wall but for different reasons. Every so often, because of my name, and my appearance, someone asks me why I chose to write in English rather than in my native language. Those who meet me for the first time—when they see me, then learn my name, then hear the way I speak English—ask me where I’m from. I have to justify the language I speak in, even though I know it perfectly. If I don’t speak, even many Americans think I’m a foreigner. I remember running into a man on the street one day who wanted to give me an advertising flyer. I was returning from a library

in Boston; at the time I was writing my doctoral thesis, on English literature in the seventeenth century. When I refused to take the flyer, the man yelled: “*What the fuck is your problem, can’t speak English?*”

I can’t avoid the wall even in India, in Calcutta, in the city of my so-called mother tongue. There, apart from my relatives who have known me forever, almost everyone thinks that, because I was born and grew up outside India, I speak only English, or that I scarcely understand Bengali. In spite of my appearance and my Indian name, they speak to me in English. When I answer in Bengali, they express the same surprise as certain Italians, certain Americans. No one, anywhere, assumes that I speak the languages that are a part of me. ◇

I’m a writer: I identify myself completely with language, I work with it. And yet the wall keeps me at a distance, separates me. The wall is inevitable. It surrounds me wherever I go, so that I wonder if perhaps the wall is me.

I write in order to break down the wall, to express myself in a pure way. When I write, my appearance, my name have nothing to do with it. I am heard without being seen, without prejudices, without a filter. I am invisible. I become my words, and the words become me.

When I write in Italian I have to accept a second wall, which is very high and even more impermeable: the wall of language itself. But from the creative point of view that linguistic wall, however exasperating, interests me, inspires me. ◇

A last example: one day in Rome I go to have lunch with my Italian publisher and his wife at the Hotel d’Inghilterra. We talk about the publication of my latest book in Italy, and about what I’m writing now, about my desire to write something about my relationship with the Italian language. We talk about Anna Maria Ortese and other Italian writers I’d like to translate. My publisher seems enthusiastic about these new projects I have in mind. He says that what I’d like to do—write, for the moment, in Italian—seems to him a good idea.

After lunch, something catches my eye in the window of a shop selling shoes and purses on Via del Corso. I go into the shop. This time I say nothing. I’m silent. But the saleswoman, seeing me, says immediately, in English, “May I help you?”—four polite words that every so often in Italy break my heart.