

W A T E R M A R K

J O S E P H B R O D S K Y

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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

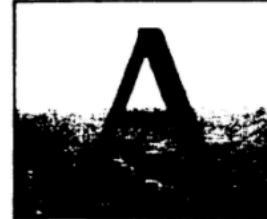
only thing I lacked, I thought, to look like a local rake or *carbonaro* was a scarf. Other than that, I felt inconspicuous and fit to merge into the background or fill the frame of a low-budget whodunit or, more likely, melodrama.



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.



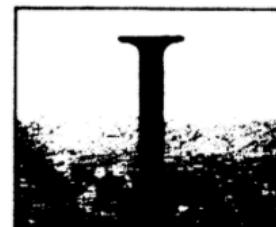
smell is, after all, a violation of oxygen balance, an invasion into it of other elements—methane? carbon? sulphur? nitrogen? Depending on that invasion's intensity, you get a scent, a smell, a stench. It is a molecular affair, and happiness, I suppose, is the moment of spotting the elements of your 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.

It 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.



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 Mayakovskyan scholar, to be precise. That nearly disqualifed

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.

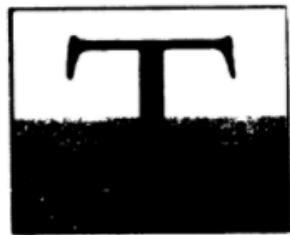


The boat's slow progress through the night was like the passage of a coherent thought through the subconscious. On both sides, knee-deep in pitch-black water, stood the enormous carved chests of dark pa-

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.

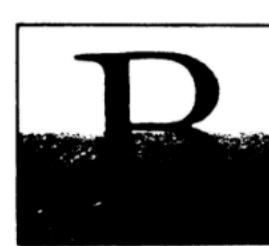
Inanimate by nature, hotel room mirrors are even further dulled by having seen so many. What they return to you is not your identity but your anonymity, especially in this city. For here yourself is the last thing you care to see. On my first sojourns I often felt surprised, catching my own frame, dressed 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 neighing 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.

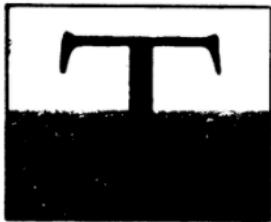
Sometime in 1966—I was twenty-six then—a friend lent me three short novels by a French writer, Henri de Régnier, translated into Russian by the wonderful Russian poet Mikhail Kuzmin. All I knew about Régnier at that time was that he was one of the last Parnassians, a good poet but no great shakes. All 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

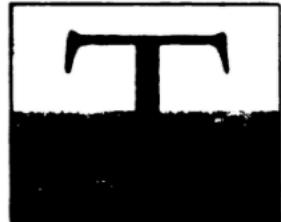
lost. The yellow arrow signs at intersections are not much help either, for they, too, curve. In fact, they don't so much help you as kelp you. And in the fluently flapping hand of the native whom you stop to ask for directions, the eye, oblivious to his sputtering *A destra, a sinistra, dritto, dritto*,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

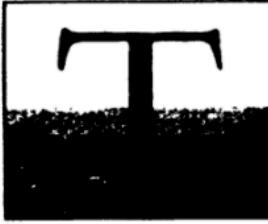
chessboard of a vast *campo*. The espresso at your cup's bottom is the one black dot in, you feel, a miles-long radius. Such are the noons here. In the morning this light breasts your windowpane and, having pried your eye open like a shell, runs ahead of you, strumming its lengthy rays—like a hot-footed 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.



At 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*

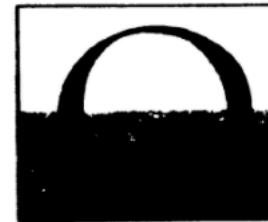
destino. (That an insurance man can tell these two apart is indeed a feat of imagination.) So, prey to tyrannical impulses, I would install some sort of flap gate to stem the sea of humanity, which has swelled in the last two decades by two billion and whose crest is its refuse. I'd freeze the industry 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.

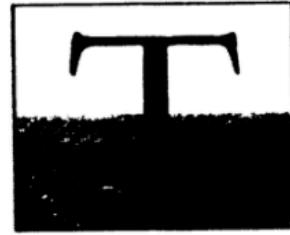
Still, had the mortician and the doctor belonged to different political parties, that would be fine, some progress could be made. In this city, they often belong to the same, and things get stalled rather early, even if the party is the PCI. In short, underneath all these squabbles, unwitting ones or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

money, a.k.a. the future, a.k.a. voluble politicos 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

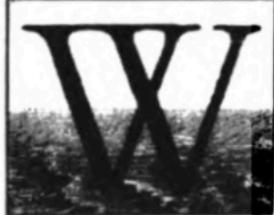
schoolteacher's salary without wincing. The sight of these decrepit Romeos and their rickety Juliets is invariably sad and embarrassing, not to say ghastly. For the young, i.e., for those for whom this sort of thing would be appropriate, a gondola is as far out of reach as a five-star hotel. Economy, 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 ti 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.

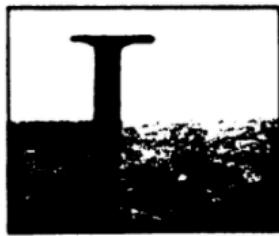


quidistant from our respective abodes, this was as good a place to disembark as any. It takes about an hour to cross this city by foot in any direction. Provided, of course, that you know your way, which by the time I stepped out of that gondola I did. We bade each other farewell and dispersed. I walked 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?



Let 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