

Serene

The best way to approach Venice from the airport is to take the water taxi. It is also the most expensive. Like most things in Venice, there are convolutions before the payoff. There is no transport between the airport proper and the boat dock where the water taxis come in. You pull or carry your luggage down a long pathway, a distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile, following signs put up to encourage the traveler. This is the last direct route in Venice, the last walk on which not to get lost. At the dock, Manolo, the director of water traffic, talks endlessly into his cell phone, gesticulating about what seems to be nothing at all. He is a handsome man, taller than most Venetians, and indeed, he is not from Venice but from Naples.

The company's logo is a winged gold lion, the symbol of Venice's patron saint, the apostle Mark, who appears to the prophet Ezekiel as a lion with wings; the lion is often depicted over water, to show dominance over the seas. The story of the winged lion is a fairy tale of guilt and chicanery. In the ninth century, three avid Venetians removed the body of Saint Mark from his tomb, in Alexandria. To hide the body, they put it in a basket and covered it with herbs and pork flesh, which Muslims would not touch. As they set sail for Venice, a great storm blew up, and Saint Mark appeared to the captain, who sailed the boat to safety. The Venetians carved the likeness of the winged lion on their doorways, and kept lions as pets. One was kept in a gilded cage, in the piazza, until it died, poisoned by the gilt paint it licked off the bars. A Vene-

tian story. Lions were then forbidden in the city precincts for a hundred years.

After a long wait, water taxis arrive, and passengers board the boats in no discernible order. My suitcase is handed over. The lagoon straightens itself out briefly to a funnel as it passes San Michele, the island of the dead. The boatman knows everyone on the waterway. He raises his hand in greeting to each boat we pass. He is solicitous; if it is too windy I can go in the cabin. It is windy, but I have wound a scarf around my head. He nods, satisfied. We pass through the fog, and then, all at once, it is there: the Grand Canal, beautiful and absurd. Can there really be gondolas? There are. A little boy waves from the window of a *vaporetto*, a boy who looks exactly like the son who belongs to the face in the mirror. He keeps waving madly, all the way until the taxi turns into the landing of the hotel on the Rio di San Trovaso, right before the Ponte Accademia. For a moment it is all light and water. At the hotel, the hanging geraniums are violet, red, and pink. There is a little step down to the concierge desk, but despite the warning sign I trip.

Everyone trips. The pensione is like the water taxi, like Venice, beautiful and impossible. In the garden, bougainvillea hangs over a glider, a waiter brings you delicious snacks with your evening drink, and at breakfast there is melon the color of a sunset. But you must log on with a different password every day to use the internet, postage is noted carefully in a book, and the windows

in your room, though you have asked to have them left open, are shut up tight against the air from the lagoon, which, the chambermaid says, is not healthy for sleep: “Signora, it will give you nightmares.” *Incubi*. She makes a strangling gesture with her hands, and rolls her blue eyes like a horror-movie starlet. “You have been here before, yes?” Guido, at the desk, asks, “but with your husband, a man with silver hair?”

In a portrait of the brain made by phrenologists, the cerebral cortex, San Marco, is the location of the sublime. Venice is a city of the unconscious. Joseph Brodsky, who is buried on San Michele, wrote: “I felt I’d stepped into my own self-portrait in the cold air.” And, in the middle of a reverie about the Grand Canal:

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. . . . 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.

What is the position of my pen, writing in the garden of the Pensione Accademia, at ten in the morning in the

month of June? Venice is a city of nerves, running on harp strings, Carnevale looping into Lent. My own life, too, it seemed to me, veered between impulse and a mania for privacy and restraint, which is a way of saying that one thing I was especially chary with was the truth. I had many reasons I used to explain this away, none of them good. I slept with the windows open, inviting the incubi. In the middle of the night, a speedboat with the motor idling outside the window, although motorboats after 8 p.m. are forbidden, plays *Electric Ladyland* loud enough to wake the dead on San Michele. Behind the closed shutters, someone in Dorsoduro turns over, dreaming. A girl walks by on the strada, using her cell phone as a flashlight.

Yesterday, on the way to sit on the steps of Santa Maria della Salute, I window-shopped: velvet, glass, *marzapane* in the shape of starfish. Outside a shop selling evening clutches made of scored velvet, shining like jam studded with gold beads, a woman in tennis shoes says to another, "Very pretty but will you use it in Portsmouth?" The treasures of Venice are like dreams told before breakfast. When they leave the light of La Serenissima they turn to dross. In another shop, I see a tiny glass goblet, azure and gold. The stem is a snake, the letter s. In the middle of the night, I resolve to return to the shop and find it again—a present for Bronzino. The laptop on which I am typing here in the garden keeps New York time: it is 4:27 a.m. in the tall drafty house and on Seventy-Eighth Street, which is empty because he is

sleeping elsewhere. I am awake while almost everyone else is asleep, although an email arrives sent from Christchurch, New Zealand, dated tomorrow, from the voice on the telephone to whom I am not speaking. It does not tell me what to do next.

Roma

Shadows gathering on the bridge, dappling the bright clothes of tourists leaning over to take photographs, and the accordion player, this evening, despite the heat, inexplicably wearing a kilt. The foot traffic slowed. We made our way around the Piazza Trilussa, where in the half dark, a crowd listened to an Italian reggae band. The young woman who holds out a palm for coins at Santa Maria in Trastevere sat on the steps, her feet bare and filthy, her head under a soiled bandanna, her face turned up to the music and the moon. A little girl twirled in front of the speaker, rapt, her dress the color of a lemon candy wrapper. At the restaurant, Zi Umberto, chaos. They are overbooked, they have a table, the table for four, it is for two. The right leg was balanced on a matchbook. We sit at the table cantilevered over the cobblestones. It is ten in the evening, a couple at the next table wants only dessert. The answer is no. I am talking about the ghost, and my friend interrupts me. "You know, you'll never get over it." And then, "Have you blocked his number? That's the key thing." Around us, Roman women in various stages of undress vied for the attention of the waiters. Weeks later, when I return to New York, I will button the button of my dress I leave open in Rome.

Rome is a city of unrequited passions, of things going wrong, of streets that head nowhere that once headed somewhere, of ruins and headless statues. *La storia si ripete*, or, the story repeats itself. Or, as Bowen wrote, "Experience isn't interesting until it begins to repeat itself. In fact, till it does that, it hardly is experience." When

does one know it is time to leave, what clockface names the hour? Rome is a city of churches, but not of clock towers. It is almost impossible, as Bowen says, to make the rounds of the churches, or even to list the endless procession of saints, but it is even more impossible to do what I want, which is to know in every detail each statue, monument, piazza, stone; to be better educated in the quattrocento, or the history of the Palatine, or the different varieties of travertine.

Instead, in Rome, I lie down after lunch, there is no help for it. In the midafternoon, the gates on the shops have come down, sparrows are picking at crumbs under the tables in the trattoria while the waiters sweep up, a broom in one hand and a cigarette in the other. In bed, my arms crossed above my head, I imagine myself in a drawing by Opicinus: my forehead in the Gianicolo, my body crossing the river to the Via Nazionale, and in the valley between my knees the Borghese Gardens, where Bernini's Daphne, fleeing, is forever turning into a rustling welter of leaves, and beyond that, the Villa Ada. A map of a corporeal city, in which the body is imposed, as it traces a route around and around the piazzas, crossing and recrossing the bridges. In Rome, one is at once the spider, the web, and the fly. By four it is equally impossible not to go out again in the city, and then, by six, the day says "Enough!" The Italian, *basta*, which means so many things, including for a day, or a moment, simply the inability to go on.

And then one finds oneself in retreat to the bar under

a canopy in the Palazzo Farnese, or, better, the dim paneled recesses of the bar at the Hotel d'Inghilterra, where sixty years ago Elizabeth Bowen despaired of the dead time in the Roman afternoon, the oblivion hours when nothing can be done, or seen, or, in the torpor, even thought. At the bar on a last day in June, escaping from the heat, I settle down with my book. My only companion is a woman, dressed in denim pierced with metal studs, holding a lap dog, who spends an hour on her phone, arguing quietly with someone who seems to be her brother, about the bills he has run up at a house they share in Puglia. The aim of a day of walking is to be engulfed, a contest of wills that leaves one of the contestants vanquished. A guess to say which one. As if one could somehow wed oneself to the city. Useless, whether to a city or the beloved. Enough! But then one returns with an excuse, a lost glove, a second thought, or, barring that, one gives up, and cruises the streets like a flaneur.

A Thursday evening, 9 p.m. Almost everything is closed. Calm on the Via Giulia, which draws me almost every evening, where the lion's-head fountain spews water in the dusky twilight, steps from the arch designed by Michelangelo, an abandoned plan meant to be part of a bridge over the Tiber. Diagonally across the river is the Regina Coeli prison, used by the Nazis as an internment site, where tourists walk oblivious below the barred windows. Up the street is the church of Santa Maria dell'Ora-

zione e Morte, charged with collecting the bodies of the vagrant dead. The exterior is etched with crouching skeletons; there is a brass slot in which to leave money to bury the poor. What is it about this place that holds me, as if in the cupped palm of a hand? The oblong between the Via Giulia and where the Via di Monserrato becomes the Via dei Banchi Vecchi—what recommends it? A nameless piazza full of cars. Yet each time I pass, I stop in silence at the house fronting the street, the small one with gray shutters, as if, just there, another life, one that belonged to me, was going on under the pitched roof.

It was so difficult to give up the ghost because I thought that there was another life we were meant to live, here, perhaps, where the golden light in the evening pours out onto the candy shop, where one or two tables are usually precariously perched on the cobblestones. Closed tonight. And above it, a top floor with a round casement window, big enough for the Vitruvian man to stand upright, and a terrace above that, crowned with heliotrope, the red blossoms like trumpets. In Italy, to fail at something, to draw a blank, is *a buco nell'acqua*. A hole in the water. It is my friend's last night in Rome. At the trattoria next door, the waiter refuses us a table, even though we say, "Just one drink?" Five or six tables are unoccupied, but everything, he says, is *prenotato*. Reserved. Resigned, we find a wine bar with an empty table and two stools, and drink green *vernaccia* and gobble peanuts, brought out after a time, in a tiny dish on a tray.

On the way back to Trastevere, outside the *antimafia*

and *antiterrisimo* building, we pass a huddle of soliders in camouflage, holding semiautomatics. A few doors down, teenagers pass around a cigarette. In Rome, walking with a companion, the unspoken contest is: who knows the street better, or who loves it more? Because we think, still, that love is proprietary, despite everything we have learned from history, our own and a continent's, about vanishings, varnished until they shine. At the tiny restaurant behind the Via Garibaldi, the scatty, good-humored waitress, her platinum hair in a top-knot, forgets, in succession, to bring the water, the wine, and then forgets entirely about the second course, rabbit in garlic, which she herself has recommended. She is distracted by her boyfriend, who arrived on his motorcycle and sat down at a table marked "reserved," on whom she has been waiting hand and foot, caressing his dark head as she walks by, as he eats a plate of pasta piled high as a pyramid, not saying a word.

To E., in New York:

A note to say, well, it is still hot and getting hotter. All the keys stick in the locks. It turns out I am going to return to New York earlier than planned—this Sunday. It's a case of ladybird, ladybird, fly away home.

It's so hot that I can only walk in the morning at the Doria Pamphili, even the dogs insist on walking in the shade. And a new fad for walking with ski poles,

hilarious to anyone from a country where it actually does snow, as if they were poking their way along their own private arctic, through the dusty leaves. But as I've come to the conclusion that everyone's Rome is their own, a mapped and delineated interior city, perhaps it's par for the course—

Ci vediamo presto—

C.