

L'Estraneo

In Florence, this past summer, I woke up
Early one Saturday and found myself
Walking on the *lungarno* to the south
With no real destination in my mind,
So when I'd reached the Ponte Grazie
I made a right on Via San Niccolo
And followed sunlit cobblestones uphill
To climb the thousand ancient stairs
That lead to San Miniato on the mountain.
I couldn't say what made me go that way
Of all the possible ways I might have gone.
(My analyst suggests a fear of death
Disguised as a desire to remain youthful,
Or maybe Masochism, but that's not it
So much as there was something eerie
About the way the Arno held the light
That morning; it reminded me of how
The singers at the Badia harmonize
Around a note, and how their hymns will rise
In calcareous light slanted from high windows,
The echoes like the incense hanging there
In whirled clouds. But I can't explain it now.
Just something about music and altitude.)

Anyway, that walk's rough, with the uneven
Stone of the stairs ascending endlessly,
It seems, gray stone on gray stone, up and up,
Relentlessly, almost vindictively,
And as I lumbered up, sweaty and winded,
Wondering why I didn't just turn back,
My quads and hamstrings burning with the effort,
I got the feeling I was being followed,
The way you feel when someone's in the room,
Or you wake up if thieves break in your house,
Even if you can't hear them: you just know
Someone is there. That's sort of how it was.
I'd stop, turn. No one would be there behind me,
And I'd keep going, then I'd stop and turn
Again, and still nobody would be there,
And I'd go on, but there was this excitement,
This thrill of terror mixed with eagerness,
Like just before you ask your boyhood crush out,

Or that split-second just before a punch
Gets thrown, almost a sense of trespassing,
Of having crossed a boundary, of being
An interloper in a stranger world
Where you've committed some crime unknowingly.
So I kept walking, for whatever reason,
And tried to distract myself from that sensation,
Admiring the shadow-play along the walk
The black-green boughs of overhanging trees
Put on, and how, along the stone wall there
On the left, roses hang, caught in the air
Like spume from a red wave breaking against a levy,
Or like kids, suspended in mid-vault above
A fence they're leaping to escape some vicious
Neighbor or dog chasing them from the garden.
Finally I reached the Piazzale Michelangelo,
Where that fake David gazes down on Florence
As if he were staring down some invisible
Giant from Gath in the Valley of Elah,
And I was following his gaze and trying to see
The way he saw when, amid the crowd
Of tourists snapping selfies in the square,
I saw a face I recognized, although
To say I recognized it isn't quite true.
It was a face I knew I'd seen before,
A man's face, nothing much about it special,
Except it found a kind of answer within me
When not one of the other faces did,
An answer like a note subsumed in its chord,
Like someone kneeling down in front of a stream
In which his own reflection's waiting for him,
And has been waiting, though he didn't know it,
And will be there still, even when he's gone.

Who was he? No clue. Didn't know a soul
In Italy. In fact, I'd fled the dissolution
Of my second marriage, and the desolation
Of its sequel, in Florence to avoid the painful
Encountering of familiar faces,
The way that, after putting on some weight,
You hide the scale from yourself, or that you stop,
As you get older, looking in the mirror
When you stand at the sink to brush your teeth,
Or that you don't much want to think of death
While in the midst of sex. Anyway,
I wasn't crazy about anyone
I'd left behind back in the States, since most

Everyone sided with my wife, not me,
And normally, however much my friends
Annoy me, they're a thousand times more pleasant
To be around than any stranger is.
(I'm terrified of strangers, terrified,
The type that, at the office party, hides
Inside the closet just to keep from talking
To vague acquaintances and unknown drunks
Who think, mistakenly, that their own wish
To talk engendereth your wish to listen.)
And yet, I walked up to this man, not knowing
What I would say, or how, but somehow knowing
I had to try to find out who he was.
The really weird thing is he seemed to know me.
When I had walked up to him, his eyes brightened
With recognition, and he clasped my shoulder
With his right hand, and kind of shook me amicably,
Like we were old friends, and he smiled at me.
But when I tried to talk to him, he just wagged
His head apologetically and mumbled
Solo Italiano. I don't have much
Italian, and it was quickly clear he had
Even less English. Still, he clasped my shoulder
Again, and smiled, and then turned and walked away,
As if he were my father, and we'd spoken
Intimately for some time, or we now shared
Some understanding I didn't know about.
I stood there stunned. There's no way we could've known
Each other, yet we recognized each other.
How can you know a person you don't know?
I've not known people whom I thought I knew,
But this was even more mysterious,
Like walking in a house in a new town
Where you have never been before, and feeling
Like you grew up inside its foreign rooms,
Flooded with memories that never happened.

The square had emptied out a little bit,
So I just stood there, looking at the sky,
A clear sort of electric cobalt color,
The light like gold-flecks woven in the blue,
As if the sky's blue and the sunlight were
The same thing, which, I guess, in some ways, they are,
Although we are accustomed to seeing them
Separately, blind as we are to the mysterious
Transition of a light into the colors
Of objects, that invisible shift that makes

The things of this world visible to us.
But as I stood there, looking down at Florence,
Rufous and khaki and brown like tesserae
In a mosaic with an abstruse pattern,
I had the sudden impulse to follow him,
This man I didn't know, this total stranger,
And took off up the path to San Miniato.
I ran. I ran a way I hadn't run
Since I was still a boy back in Poughkeepsie,
And pretty soon I spotted him ahead
Of me about a hundred yards or so,
A white shirt and a pair of khaki pants
Like half the men out there, but it was him,
I knew. I couldn't even see his face,
But I could tell. To get to him was tougher.
The lovers and the families and the cyclists
Were all out, and the path was crowded like
The crush of people when a 5k starts,
And it was hard to keep up with his pace,
But I did what I could to keep him in sight.
At San Miniato, just as I had reached
The stairs I saw him enter in the church
Above, and so I rushed up those last flights
Of stairs and stood in front of that holy place,
Green and white like snowfall over cedars,
Where Dante had studied as a young man.

Then what? Then nothing. Nothing, anyway,
I can explain. He simply wasn't there.
I wandered through the church, and through the crypt,
And through the graveyard with its crumbling stones
That mark where monks and holy men are buried.
No sign of him. I browsed around the gift-shop.
Haec est porta coeli: so I read
On a medallion there, the monastery's
Slogan. Maybe it is, I thought. Maybe
He simply passed on through that door, unseen.
Who knows? I walked back down the mountainside.

But maybe I should add another thing.
See, when I reached the square again, I heard
A tune I recognized, coming from within
A little restaurant. It was the tune
The DJ played for the last dance at our wedding.
I sat down at a table to cool off
And listened while I drank a glass of water,

And thought about my bride, warm in my arms,
How we had spun in those slow, loving circles
Out on the dance floor, all our friends surrounding
Us and spinning in their circles too,
Like planets orbiting a sun, or like
Electrons' frenzied cloud around a nucleus,
Our union holding all of them in place
For a little while, as if our love somehow
Exerted some Venusian gravity,
And I thought how our lives had come together,
How she had brought a fresh vitality
Into my days, how I had lurched toward her
The way a wasted continent will heave
Its poisoned bulk up to the verge of the sea,
How with my head upon her chest at night
I'd heard that sea flow through her veins, white birds
Winging on brisk gusts in the surf of her sighs,
Our love like that littoral, that brief shoal
On which the first impossible fish nosed up
Into the muck, set pale foot on the sand,
And vanished in the green interior.
How strange to think that such a thing had ended...
I was, I admit it, on the edge of tears,
And then I saw the man again. At least,
I thought I did. I can't be sure. He passed
Right by the restaurant and started down
The thousand stairs. I paid as fast as I could
And rushed out after him. It was too late.
He was gone. I never saw him again. Maybe
Because I flew home to my wife that night.
She even let me stay, although she said,
At first, she almost didn't recognize me.