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Lessons in Tourism

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Lessons in Tourism

Abstract

A section poem in four parts that examines a number of experiences from the perspective of a female traveler, addressing themes such as dislocation of self, the remaking of identity, and the nature of female otherness within the global community.

Keywords

poetry, travel writing, art, Florence, Zulauf Poetry Prize

Disciplines

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | Poetry

Comments

Winner of the 2014 Marion Zulauf Poetry Prize

Lessons in Tourism

i. *At the Center*

I remember the first night
we saw the grand Duomo,
how brilliantly the street lamps
gave the piazza its sheen,
how the shadows carved every
intricacy of the façade—
but it was the crowd that lit
the streets ablaze, as if to
say to the baptistery,
We made you. We define you.
We sat on the steps, a crowd,
our backs to the cathedral,
not one of us gazing at
the dome, none of us praising
the herring-bone brick,
the pink and green stonework,
the marble faces of the saints.
We had become tourists, simply,
living here, yet not living,
seeing things, whilst not seeing,
praying to the majesty
of vendors with light-up trinkets,
as gypsies thrust stemfuls of roses
into our American hands.

ii. *While Learning to Cook Gnocchi*

He shows us how to peel
the boiled potatoes

in one smooth motion, brown skin
shrugging off the precious white meat

like a chrysalis.

The bare oval is soft and sacred
in my palm, pillow of an egg ready

to hatch into a delicacy
we've waited months to prepare,

the way the desire to become Italians

has somehow become the desire

to cook like Italians,
the overwhelming foreignness

and sweetness of our new diet
making us forget the language

of American cuisine—
we seek only the words

of pasta and prosciutto,
mozzarella, gorgonzola.

We squeeze spaghetti-like tendrils

from the potatoes with an iron-
cast grater tool we've never

seen before, clamping the metal
handle down on each orb to press

the softness through.
So many we mash—

when we finish, there is
a mountain on the table—

and so the chef tells us
to knead the mound *just so*.

So we stuff our hands in,
feeling warmth and softness,

and we let it seep into our flesh.
We caress vegetable-meat as dough—

kneading “the wrong way”—
then try to knead like

Italians, pushing from
the top (not folding out).

At last we tenderly
chop the dough into its

tiny, almond-shaped bits,
brush the bits with the scrape

of our fork, drop the bits
into boiling water.

We wait for our potato-pasta
to rise to the top, for we think it means

we, too, have been cooked;
we are finally shedding

our American skins,
molding our ideal

Italian selves, the simple recipe
of flour and potato.

iii. After Giambologna's Sculpture "Rape of the Sabine Women," in the Loggia dei Lanzi

A foreign woman must never be alone in Florence,
but the Italian woman knows how to behave,

with her proud neck, stern stare, emotionless stride,
repelling the hungers of male passersby.

Botticelli painted his Renaissance woman in a box,
hand on her frame with a slight door in the background,

a grey portal of receding space,
her home, an entryway without exit,

muddled colors of brown and white and black
furnishing a domestic prison.

Filippo Lippi gave her confessional without grace,
a captor's face pressing through the window,

(more of a square hole in the wall)—
occupied online by that singular profile,

her husband, her only link to a world outside,
peering in with a yellow-and-black crest of lineage

in his hand, passing the symbol through the hole,
reminding her of her duty inside, the laws she must obey

as a lady of the home, forbidden from seeing
the brilliant hues beyond her walls.

Only the easels of men linger
in these modern streets—

watercolors-in-progress sold beside posters
of Mona Lisa and the Birth of Venus.

Should a female *artista* pass by,
she may glance at his fine work,

but must hurry, return to her haven of privacy
to paint in secret, confined still

by the brushes of Renaissance fathers—
and so I watch from the steps with my sketchpad,

wondering still how the curves of the marble figure
seem to breathe in its steadfast, permanent quiet,

the Sabine woman forever barren in the grasp of her Roman,
who clutches her white back with the grip of a master.

iv. At the Conservation Demo

Today rabbit-skin glues are still used for restoring art objects and paintings.

The conservator paints spots on a canvas
with animal glue, as if it were salve of aloe,
healing scabs of bare, ripe linen
with the medicine of chemistry.

A poco a poco, little by little,
an Umbrian halo is reborn,
alchemized by the blessing of the sacred hare.