

Me, myself and the Other: Self-reflexivity in Travel Writing

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Volume 1: Creative work – All Autostrade Lead to Rome

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August 2017

All Autostrade Lead to Rome

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Three islands

Stresa, Lake Maggiore, Northern Italy

The street-side lemonade seller also, of course, sold tickets for the ferry. In front of them, Lake Maggiore lay snug between the Alps, and the ferry lugged tourists around the three tiny Borromean Islands scattered across the water.

Dana smiled and raised her eyebrows. “How convenient. It’s probably a scam. The ferry probably looks like the shipwrecked boat from Gilligan’s Island.”

Jeff kissed the top of her head lightly, “Sweetie, I’m sure it will be fine.”

The lemonade seller, having depleted his repertoire of English during the sale of both lemonade and tickets, continued to smile while they hovered for a moment looking for the wharf. He waved them on and encouraged them to keep walking, to the right, right, over there.

They followed the esplanade until they came to a cluster of piers, and then spotted a modern looking ferry with the logo matching their ticket.

“See, sweetie,” Jeff said, smiling, “perfectly fine.” He ran his hand lightly down her neck and the length of her back. She remained cool in the strong sunshine. Her hair fell neatly, behaving itself, tucked behind her ears. She held her frame well, like a dancer. Poised. His hand brushed her bottom and she flicked him a small smile. He pulled her closer for a soft fleeting kiss; Jeff was lanky and tall, so he had to stoop just a little to do so. His face was covered with a vague stubble – not quite a beard. His skin was noticeably white but he was already flushed in the warm mid-morning.

Jeff looked at her thoughtfully and put his free hand in his pants pocket. There he felt the square, embossed box with a diamond ring inside. The box was awkward and clunky. He felt the pressure to propose on this trip. Dana seemed to dress carefully for every dinner out and hold his hand tight on moonlit strolls they took afterwards, gazing at him expectantly. But two weeks into their three-week holiday, he still hadn't asked. They had made languid love during sweaty afternoons in good hotels with bad air conditioning. They had paused to kiss on bridges, fed each other gelato, and intertwined fingers during banal moments on metros.

Yet, although he loved her, he couldn't seem to ask her the question. The words fluttered around inside his mouth, and the appropriate phrases linked together and made sentences. But when he had to issue them, when he opened his mouth, they vanished. Instead he would take a sip of Aperol spritz, or a mouthful of gelato until the squeezing in his chest eased and the moment had passed.

In truth, a seed of doubt had lodged itself inside his stomach and now it was beginning to sprout tender tendrils that choked the trellis of his ribcage.

But perhaps the romantic Borromeo Islands could dispel the doubt.

Their ferry driver started calling for passengers to board for the first island stop: "Isola Madre! Isola Madre!" He was brown and brawny with closely-cropped grey hair.

There was a ramp leading down to the ferry but it was over to the side, out of vision. A middle-aged woman, portly with a floral shirt, bright pink lipstick and sensible sandals tried to clamber down the concrete retaining wall and slipped awkwardly. She hit the ground with a thunk and rolled, close to falling off the pier. A muffled and collective "oh" from the crowd. A few even stretched out their arms, as if to help. She might have cracked her head open on the concrete bollard, holiday over. But she clambered up awkwardly, embarrassed but cheerful. "Oopla!" The pink lipsticked mouth spread wide.

The stoic ferry driver didn't bat an eyelid but seemed to grind his teeth. He had, no doubt, witnessed this scene before. He shook his head just a little and simply pointed to the ramp, meters away. The rest of the passengers went the long way around, following the line of his finger, like sheep herded by a clever farm dog. The lady who had slipped was still smiling, still dusting herself off and dabbing carefully at the beads of sweat on her forehead, trying not to wipe off her make-up.

The motor roared and the smell of petrol fumes quickly filled the ferry cabin. The boat was full, perhaps thirty people. Jeff and Dana sat close together, just inside the doorway between the interior and the deck. The wind was brisk and spry on the water. The motor took up all the available noise. And so they sat together in silence, his arm around her shoulders, her small hand resting on his knee. Her blue skirt ruffled in the breeze. His fringe fluttered, exposing his forehead.

Isola Madre

Isola Madre was almost all garden. Over five hundred years' worth of garden. To reach the park and the fairly modest palazzo, visitors were forced to walk through the gift store first. Many lingered too long here and regretfully came away with tea towels and ceramic plates that they then had to haul around with them the rest of the day. Birds responded to the call of crackling plastic bags all over the island.

Jeff and Dana slid their arms around each other's waists and made their way around the island edge. On one side of the path was the lake, on the other side every botanic specimen imaginable from all corners of the globe – palms, hibiscus, rhododendrons, camellias, wisteria, palms. Through the shrubbery they spied bright birds and a gentle peacock. They bumped against each other, silent and content. Jeff was careful to keep Dana on the ring-free pocket side, lest she felt the sharp corners dig into her hip.

They approached the palazzo which stood in the corner of the island. For a 16th century mansion, it looked surprisingly homely and welcoming from the outside. The paintwork was peeling a little, the window shutters were a friendly blue, and there was a small balcony in a sunny spot, just right for a cup of tea and a good book. Outside the entrance was a tremendous cypress tree. It was the Kashmir Cypress – the largest in Europe and over two hundred years old. In 2006 it had been knocked down by a freak tornado. Dana and Jeff stood in front of a plaque, reading about the details of the rescue. A helicopter brought in a crane. The crane helped lift the tree. It was replanted. Quite an operation.

The tree stood bravely, bound by cabling on all sides. Hooks sunk firmly into the ground carried these cables, taut and rigid. There was no attempt to make the cabling discreet. It criss-crossed the surrounding area so that visitors had to be careful to duck under or step over as appropriate. The tree was flush with bright green new leaves, but they seemed to droop a little and rustle nervously, irritated by the slightest breeze.

Jeff and Dana stood there for some time, looking up at the tree. He admired the resilience of nature, and the clever trick of putting a fallen tree back into the soil and watering it, bringing it back to life. Eventually it would thrive again. Hopefully. There were no guarantees. But the signs were good. The branches looked frail but stable, the trunk was peeling bark but it looked solid.

Jeff stood back and carefully framed the canopy in his camera lens: click.

Dana felt differently. “What an appalling waste of money. Scandalous! It’s pretty disgusting really.” She was dismayed by the millions spent on the tree thus far, and unnerved by how many future dollars might be spent on preserving one ancient cypress tree.

Jeff was silent. There was only bird chatter and unintelligible, foreign voices having no doubt identical conversations, pointing at the same things. Pointing at the tree. Perhaps she was waiting for him to agree, to laugh, to shake his head in agreement. But instead he slipped his arm from around her waist and started towards the palazzo.

There was always some sort of discord between them, no matter how petty. He always knew this, but perhaps he was starting to understand what it meant. There was still much to admire about her straightforward attitude and her assertive nature. But that didn't always leave room for anything else. He didn't like a fuss. She was a fuss.

No photographs were allowed inside so they had to commit everything to memory, if they really wanted to. But it was impossible to register every painting, every gilded cornice, painted flower and ribbon, the parquetry, the antique furniture, the mosaic, the inlaid wood. There were rooms of antique dolls and theatre sets, macabre and dark now, when they were once used to create lightness and laughter.

Dana and Jeff wandered in and out of rooms separately, creaking across floor boards, coming together, separating again, exchanging looks and tired smiles but sharing very little else. Did they see anything? It required patience and vision. The ceiling ornaments were there for sheer beauty, just for their own sake. Did they look up? The decorations had all been built and embellished by hand. Very wealthy people had lived and entertained here.

"What a privileged and absolutely hedonistic life they led," Dana said, shaking her head. They were making their way out of the palazzo and back to the ferry, bound for the next island.

"Sure, but it still would've been a hard life," Jeff countered.

"Oh yeah? How?" Her tone was sceptical.

He didn't answer. Instead, he paused, letting her walk ahead. He held up his camera and told her to say "cheese". Looking over her shoulder she crinkled her eyes against the sun and cocked her head without smiling. Click.

Isola Bella

The palazzo on the previous island seemed quaint compared to this beast. Information sheets told Jeff and Dana that the Borromeo family had resided here for centuries. Among their members, there were a couple of bishops, cardinals, diplomats, a viceroy and even a saint. They had hosted aristocrats and kings, and once even had to accommodate Napoleon who had given very little notice of his arrival and consequently irritated everyone before he even got there.

There were four floors of baroque architecture. Tapestries, a music room, furniture, portraits. Again, the embellishments, the flourishes, the silver and gold, and the absolute excess of colour and design.

There was no reality here – no toilet, no kitchen, no toasters or kettles. Just lavish four poster beds and antique marionettes. Jeff wondered where the mundane things of life had occurred.

Other tourists around them whispered superlatives: Magnificent! Incredible! Astonishing! But Dana and Jeff wondered through blindly, untouched. Each was preoccupied with their own small and humble thoughts, and frankly they had seen half a dozen such palazzos already. Sadly, they were hard to impress.

The grotto, however, did pique their interest for a moment. Six rooms on the bottom level of the palazzo were decorated floor to ceiling with mosaics of shells, and black and white pebbles. A cool sea-themed escape for hot Italian summers. The rooms were ludicrous – perfectly silly. Vaulted ceilings, archways and columns, all picked out in

shell and pebble: underfoot, overhead. An excess of fancy quite unlike anything they had ever seen.

“Well, this is something else,” Jeff laughed.

“Certainly is!” she replied.

Surprisingly, there was just the two of them. The tour group that had dogged them throughout the palace was still swirling around upstairs. She sidled up to him and ran both hands up his chest. She said, “It is deliciously cool down here. And strangely romantic don’t you think?”

Laughing, he replied, “Erm, not really. It’s just a bit too weird. All this fake stuff made to look like it’s natural.” He fleetingly thought back to the resuscitated cypress, coaxed back into being a real living thing again. She still had her hands on his chest and reached up for a kiss. She ruffled his fringe, which he hated. He resisted the instinct to pull away sharply.

“Well,” Dana said, “it was romantic enough for a royal wedding. That was only a couple of months ago. Right here. Imagine that.”

Jeff didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. “Whose wedding?”

She hugged him close and muffled into his chest. “A Monaco minor royal and one of the island’s ancestors – something Borromeo. Imagine, this island belongs to someone and they can have parties on it whenever they choose. Well, they had the actual ceremony on another little island and the reception was in the castle in Stresa, so, not exactly right here. What an excessive life! I mean, it’s disgusting, of course. But a little bit romantic too. What a beautiful place for a wedding.” She followed that with an indulgent sigh.

She pulled away to look at him again for a moment, smiled, then kissed him again, perhaps a little more passionately than she usually did in public places. He could hear his heart beating, he caught her hands in his, to prevent them from finding the box in his

pocket. Because he distinctly did not want her to find it. He was looking intensely into her eyes. They were green, flecked with gold. They were sweet but sharp and she looked back at him with innocence and calculation. There was a shimmer of tension in her gaze.

This was her – sweet and calculating all at once. It was as though he only just realised. Even though they had had explosive battles of will throughout their relationship. Exhausting battles he always felt he'd lost, even when it was her that apologised and begged for forgiveness. He'd always loved that she was passionate and fierce, intellectual and clever. But every time they shouted and raged at each other, he thought: surely it should be easier than this. On a couple of occasions he had thought of leaving. Certainly they'd spent angry, obstinate nights apart. But somehow they always stumbled together again and then, lurching and unsteady, continued to pitch forward into the future.

And now she was fingering the lobe of his ear, mouth slightly open, breathy and sexy. She wanted something in return. But he was surprisingly unmoved.

And not here anyway. Not here. This is crazy, he thought. In a bizarre grotto, when the tour group could come gabbling through at any moment.

“Honey?” She was still smiling but she was questioning him too. “What are you thinking? You look unwell.”

“Nothing, nothing. Let's get out of here, it's creeping me out.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her swiftly to the exit. Outside in the open he took a big lung-full of air and lifted his face to the sunshine, eyes closed.

“Are you sure you're ok?” She looked concerned but annoyed at the same time.

“Yep, yep. Let's go catch the ferry to the next island. I think I'm done here.”

Isola dei Pescatori

On the ferry to the next island, there was a boy, maybe two years old, who was angelic. Caramel skin, big brown eyes, and shiny dark hair. Jeff smiled at him and the boy glanced downward, bashfully. He fidgeted with his hands, his feet rubbing against each other. His sweet face was open and utterly without guile. Suddenly, his father swept him up in a big hug, all the while tickling him on the tummy so that the boy squealed and screamed with laughter. So much so that the boy's mother hushed them both, half laughing, half annoyed.

Jeff studied the beautiful boy and his father. When he and Dana fought, when they said awful things to each other, when they poked and stabbed, tearing at each other's defences, and when he questioned the point of all this, this was one of the reasons he relented and returned – the idea that there might be a family created somewhere in the time and space between rounds. It wasn't clear how or when. But they were both already in their mid-thirties and that counted for a lot in the relationship decision-making process. Jeff wanted an angelic golden child he could scoop up in his arms and tickle on the tummy. For that, he would need to propose (she would insist). Again, he fiddled with the box.

They pulled into the small harbour. This island was touted as a fishing village retaining its original charm. What it turned out to be instead was a lunch and dinner venue. Café after restaurant after café had taken up residence in any building that might have once been a village edifice and the owners were cheerfully exploiting uncomplaining tourists who were hungry and thirsty.

Jeff and Dana strolled around the village in a perfunctory way. They held hands but that was perfunctory too. Dana still looked cool and calm. Her oversized sunglasses and large brimmed hat protected her pale skin. Jeff's cheeks were red, his neck dappled. Their palms were sweaty together and he let go of her so that he could roll up the sleeves of his

shirt. The day had started off so cool. It was still cool, but the sun in such a cloudless sky was relentless.

They found a lakeside café over on the other side of the island, where not all tourists made an effort to go, and waited to be seated.

He braced himself. Surely. Surely now was the time. Otherwise, they'd be off the island, back on the early afternoon train to Milan, and then on to Naples the next day, then later to the airport and home. Everything – the future, a marriage, the perfect child – seem to recede along kilometres of train track. Never mind the doubt, that seedling of doubt which had turned into poison ivy, clambering past his ribs, up into his throat and closing his airway.

The manager showed them to a table as close to the lake as possible. The restaurant was half empty. She tried French first, then English. She was jolly and keen to explain their specialities. Of course, the fish was fresh, without question. She smiled at each of them and took the time to ask them where they were from, and how long they were in town.

“I like her,” Jeff said as she walked off to put in their order. “She seems really nice.”

“I think she's just a good saleswoman,” Dana replied.

“No, she was interested in us. She speaks at least three languages. I wonder if she lives here or just commutes.”

“Honey, who cares?” Dana was irritable now. No denying it. And she seemed upset and annoyed, perhaps for a reason she couldn't exactly determine, or wouldn't admit to. There was a vague sense of disappointment about her. Suddenly, she appeared to be in a dark mood. Just like that.

They were silent when the antipasto arrived. Silent too, while they ate their buffalo mozzarella and prosciutto.

The manager came around again, just as their main course arrived. She put a hand on the back of Dana's chair. "All ok? Another bottle of water? How do you like the wine?" Jeff thanked her. All was well.

"See, she's lovely," he said.

"Honey, you are a tourist. She is a restaurant manager. She does not care one bit about you and whether you really like the wine or not. We'll move on shortly and we'll never come back, so whether we have a good or a bad experience is moot and she knows it." All this she threw across the table with a high-pitched voice.

"Well, if we have a bad experience, there's Trip Advisor..." he started to say, smiling slightly. But he trailed off quickly as Dana first glared at him and then coolly surveyed the lake, arms crossed. Conversation finished.

For the hundredth time he closed his hands around the box. This didn't exactly feel like the right time. The poison ivy was squeezing and choking, new fronds were unravelling and taking hold. Not even the bread would slide down his throat anymore.

Around them the restaurant was starting to fill up. He could hear the manager behind him, seating another young couple, German. "Ah, I only know a few words in German," she told them. Luckily, they were key words from the menu and they were able to order three courses with no trouble at all.

The manager glanced at Jeff and Dana as she passed by; Jeff saw it. She glanced at them and then looked at the small queue starting to form at the restaurant entrance. She frowned at them for just an instant. They had only just put their forks down but Jeff saw her nod a waiter in their direction, to clear the table.

“Nothing else?” the waiter asked. It sounded very much like a statement rather than a question.

“Two espressos please,” Dana told him, without smiling.

“Si signora, of course.” A small nod as he walked away.

He came back quickly with the two coffees. And the bill. Another small nod as he walked away.

All of a sudden Dana burst out with exasperation, “God I can’t stop thinking of those palazzos. It’s so disgusting. All that wealth, all that money, when people were dying and starving. Back then, imagine how the poor lived, how hungry and dirty they must have been. And the prince or cardinal or whoever whooping it up at that ridiculously long dining room table set with that ridiculous blue and gold dinner set.”

Now he felt sure she was just picking a fight on purpose.

“That happens today too, sweetie.”

“Not like that,” she countered. “The poor these days don’t lead such cruel and tortured lives. The rich were so self-indulgent back then!”

He thought of the very expensive, enormous diamond ring in his pocket. He looked around, taking in the idyllic view, the wine on their table. He thought of all the shopping they had done – so much Armani and Ralph Lauren that they’d had to buy another suitcase. He thought of their lavish dinners, their afternoons sipping pre-dinner gin and tonics in five-star restaurants, their constant upgrading, their expenditure on museums and galleries and exclusive tours, and he remained silent.

Jeff thought of the homeless man whose address was by the gelati shop they’d visited three times in four days back in Milan. The homeless man would sit absolutely still and quiet, hat in his hand resting casually on his leg as though it was just comfortable to sit like that. He didn’t shout, didn’t murmur anything at you, didn’t implore, didn’t ask for

anything. He sat silently gazing out at the busy street, avoiding eye contact, sitting perfectly still.

The manager could no longer remain subtle. She walked over, and with a cloying but empty smile asked them straight out: “Do you mind if I give your table to someone else?”

Jeff, surprised and somehow ashamed, responded, “Oh, yes, of course, we’re finished.” He hurriedly left the appropriate cash, with a tip, and got up to leave.

Dana, moving much more slowly, deliberately, just raised her eyebrows at him. “I told you. We are just dollar signs and we’ve outstayed our welcome.”

It was true. Jeff saw the interest extinguish in the manager’s eyes. It was ugly. She no longer looked at them but past them and certainly she had nothing else to say but a forced “Goodbye! Yes, thank you. Goodbye!” There were two people seated in their place before they had managed to clear the restaurant.

Stresa

The ring was still in his pocket. He had a strong impulse to throw it into the lake but he might need it still. Today had just not been the right day.

Their ferry was approaching the wharf back at Stresa. They sat apart now. Dana had her arms crossed. Her face was tight and her lips pursed. He sat beside her, awkward, his limbs folded up on the crowded boat. Everyone on the ferry seemed weary and quiet. There were rosy cheeks, deep contented sighs and heads resting on shoulders.

Dana turned to Jeff and told him she was just tired and over it all. It had been an exhausting holiday, packed full to the brim with activities and experiences. Yes, of course, he understood, he reassured her. Perhaps he felt the same. She tentatively took his hand and laced her fingers through his. He covered both with his other hand and gave her a brief

smile. Then they continued to look out at across the lake. It was an uneasy truce to an argument they hadn't actually voiced.

The sun glittered on the water and the surrounding peaks were dusky and close. As they neared the shore, Jeff looked again at the rundown palazzos he'd seen earlier in the day. There were two, side by side, right near the shoreline. Two stories, grand houses with tall shuttered Georgian windows, stuccoed embellishments and Romeo and Juliet balconies. But they were both abandoned, ivy growing through gaping windows that looked like open wounds. There were frescos on one of the houses, gargoyles on the other. Both houses faded and chipped. Who had lived there? Where had they gone? The contrast between the island palazzos and these poor creatures was so stark and shocking that it made Jeff sad to look at them.

They climbed off the ferry and stood on the wharf for a moment, awkward with each other.

“What shall we do now?” Jeff asked.

She considered things for a moment. “Let's just call it a day and go back to Milan.”

They arrived at the station just in time for the early train. Once again, Jeff put his hand over the box still wedged in his pocket. It was uncomfortable and pinched his leg. He would be glad to hide it in his suitcase again. He sat opposite the direction of travel, facing Dana, watching the tracks recede before him.

Travelling | Alone

Richard stood in front of me, still and careful, as though about to perform surgery and not sure where to make the first cut. He hesitated, rubbing his fingertips together. I was standing too, just out of the kitchen with a cup of tea in my hands, mid-sip. He stood there a moment more, and then said all at once, “Gabriella, I don’t think I can go to Italy with you. I mean, I don’t want to. To go. With you. Actually, I think we should break up.” He sighed, rushed a hand through his long fringe and then thrust it into his back pocket. That’s it. He seemed to have said all he intended to say. He had spoken volumes, hadn’t he? Great swathes of information.

The cup of tea was starting to burn my hand so I went back into the kitchen, put it down quickly and went out to the lounge again. He was still standing there, looking at the floor.

“Can I ask why?”

“Why I don’t want to go to Italy with you or why I think we should break up?”

That he thought “we should” break up was cowardly and I already loathed him for it. He seemed to be saying that he didn’t actually want to break up with me, but all things considered, after two years, it was the best option for both of us. He made it sound like I had input. I did not have input.

“Both. Either. Something. Anything.”

“Well, you know that I’ve been trying to focus on my poetry, on really trying to be a writer, not just talking about it. But I have nothing to write about. This life doesn’t give me anything to write about.” He started to run his fingers through his hair again, as though

trying to massage the thoughts from his head. He looked down at the floor. “In fact, I still want to go to Italy, but...,” he had the grace to hesitate, “I want to give away work and live there for a while. And I want to live there without you.”

I could only stare at him blankly, or at least at the top of his head because he couldn't face me. The tears would come later, great gulps of hysteria. Now there was non-understanding. There was incomprehension. Confusion. Blankness.

“Is there someone else?” I asked him.

He bristled, as though I had clearly understood nothing.

“No, no there isn't.” His tone was angry, petulant. “I just need to do this for me. All my life I've wanted to focus on writing, to really see if there's anything here or whether all I have is a load of rubbish that's already been said a thousand times before. It's not like I don't love you. I do! It's just that this life ... this life, with you, in this job, in this apartment ... it's, it's....”

“False? Boring? Clearly, it's uninspiring,” I offered. I fired those words but it was suicide, not murder. I wanted to be indignant and angry – I sensed those were the right emotions. But instead I only felt ashamed and sad. Rejected. Discarded. For ideals. Or the idyll? I could feel myself closing down, shutting off, and discarding connection. I stared past him and out the door, trying to escape.

“Honestly, Gabriella, I thought you might be a little happy for me. I thought I'd have your support. You know, *you know*, how much this means to me. This is such a big important moment in my life. I feel ready for it, but I've got to do this alone.” He tried to pull me close for a hug but my body stiffened and I waited passively for him to let go. He continued, “There's no reason you can't still go anyway. Take a friend. We can even catch up somewhere if you like.”

He was still talking but I no longer heard what he said. It's true that the ticket to Italy was too expensive to cancel, and the leave from work was already organised. Richard no doubt thought me passionless, boring, and lifeless – no muse at all for his creativity. But the yearning to see Italy was real enough, with or without him.

A tiny bead of anger stuck hard in my throat. I would go without him then.

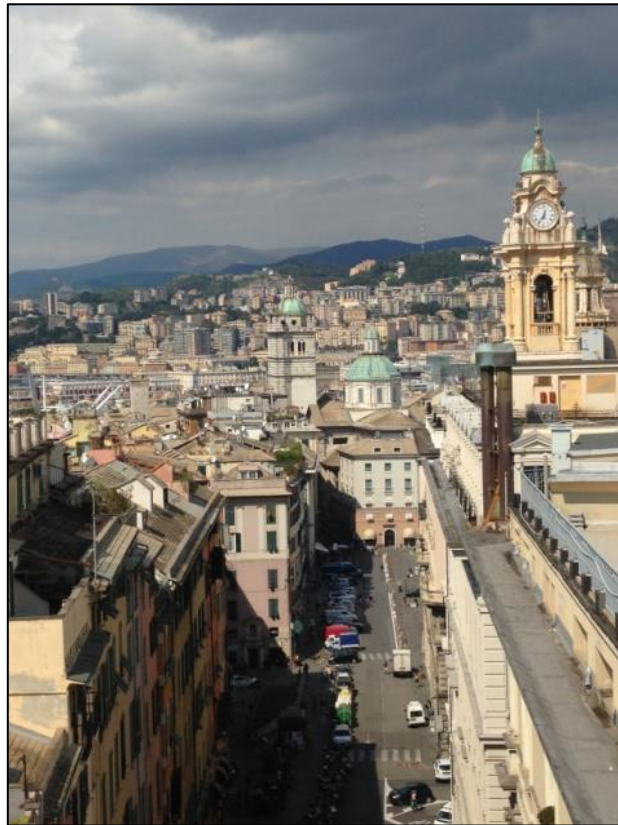
Italy travel diary, 12 August 2015

From my window seat on the plane I can watch the world from on high. I'm sure it is revolving – I've been listening carefully these last few weeks. But of course, I can't see it happening. I approach Italy frail, sad and despondent. In silence. There is no one to be excited with. Was this a good idea?

Why did Richard intimate that I was insipid and banal? Perhaps there were times I could have laughed raucously instead of just smile politely. Sometimes I let an argument slide over me without taking up the thread, without defending my point of view. I was certainly not the type to flap dramatically after departing buses but instead waited patiently for the next, even if it meant being late. I suppose some (Richard) might say that those actions lack conviction. But to sit and listen to the earth turning on its axis – that takes great fortitude and patience, and, surely, deep and resounding passion.

There's much to be said for silence. A lot of people don't understand that. The thrum of the earth turning on its axis is a powerful voice for those who stay silent long enough to listen. When confronted with rejection, I stopped to listen to the grinding gears and whirring machinations of the earth turning. Relentless, reliable, secure, eternal. Whether true or not, that's the sense the earth gave me and I thought I heard it tell me that I could also endure.

Facebook post, 14 August 2015



Isn't she beautiful? Genoa in all her pre-storm glory. #Italy #dreamcometrue

Italy travel diary, 14 August 2015

This morning I woke up in Genoa. I think she is usually, at face value, pretty and dainty, but today there are dark clouds on the horizon, like she has a big voluminous skirt on that keeps ruffling in the wind, threatening decency. I took to her at once. She tilts gently down towards the sea, crowded, ropery with winding streets and whining traffic.

I saw Christopher Columbus's house this morning. Or did I? I paid five Euro to look inside a tiny two-storey home which, if I understood correctly, might not actually be his house, but something very similar. Perhaps it's just a recreation. There's definitely three floors missing as they knocked those off – of that I'm certain. There's nothing in there. The original brickwork is plastered over (why?). One of the information posters is hanging on its last leg of blu-tak. It was hard to imagine a man gathering his belongings

and courage at dawn, ready to set sail around the world. Who did he kiss goodbye? His mother? His lover? His dog? Did he have a dog?

I used to kiss Richard goodbye, every morning. ‘Have a great day!’ Like a well-trained Disneyland employee. Perhaps I *am* that banal. Perhaps that send-off grated on his ears each time. Maybe I should have left erotic notes in his lunchbox instead. But what would I have said – I don’t think I’m terribly skilled at lewd. They would have just made him laugh instead.

Where is he, I wonder. Is he in Genoa? Would I bump into him in the street? Would he even say hello?

Facebook post, 15 August 2015



Now where did I leave my motorino? #crazyitaly #coolvespa

Italy travel diary, 15 August 2015

It’s funny what we find novel. A new thing is a foreign thing at first. There’s unfamiliarity, non-acceptance, maybe even violence, and a closure of all things previously

open. New can be shiny and exciting, like a dress or a pair of shoes, but it can be hateful and destructive, like a new habit of eating alone.

This is all new – I’ve never been to Italy, to Genoa, before. I’ve never travelled alone. I’ve never been dumped for poetry. I’ve never sat on the edge of a single bed in a foreign room and sobbed with grief and indignation, shamefully.

I don’t drink. I never have. But I’m sitting on a stool by the window in the hotel bar, and I’m drinking a gin and tonic. Something else novel. I’m waiting for the alcohol to seep into the cracks and I know it won’t take long at all to feel gently calm and vaguely bewildered. I welcome that. The bar-tender acknowledged me from yesterday’s cup of tea. Not completely anonymous then. Not banal enough to be forgotten immediately. Today was tricky. Very tricky. And long. There was a lot of aimless wandering, unproductive time spent wandering, getting lost and not enjoying that, but feeling frustrated instead. Must I feel incompetent even here? For example, circling a palazzo three times before finding the entrance and then deciding it was too late to go in anyway.

It’s just getting to dusk. Outside there are few people around – they’re further down the street, shopping. Across the road, a tourist is taking a selfie. Except that she’s taking herself and the perfectly ordinary road behind her. It is an entirely pedestrian, working street behind her with a couple of bars and shop fronts, and with absolutely no grand palazzos or historical monuments in sight. It could be any street in the whole of Western Europe. I don’t get it. She doesn’t even have that ‘Look where I am!!’ smug grin. She’s very serious. How will she caption this photo on Facebook? To me, that’s banal. *That* is banal. What would Richard make of her? Would he write a sonnet about her banality?

I’m trying. I think I’m trying.

Genoa has an ‘Old Town’ that is medieval. The streets are only wide enough for foot traffic, palazzos tower overhead and close ranks, almost shutting out the sun. There

are shopfronts like cubby houses – old fashioned barbers, cloth, shoes. And down via Maddalena prostitutes still ply their trade alongside African men sewing together kaftans, both of them running a moderate business. I've seen 500-year-old paintings with the same vivid, vibrant, multicultural scene – market day or a saint's feast. It's as though nothing at all has changed. There's a sniff of melancholy. Or do I carry that with me? Here is a town in which the very rich and the very poor brush up against each other. Here is a town where ornate museums and galleries nestle in amongst the run down and forsaken.

There are countless Catholic churches and street corner devotions. Huddled on the portico steps, or lingering underneath a statue of the Madonna, is almost always a bearded, bedraggled old man, or a tired-looking, scruffy woman, poor and hungry. There are also corpulent but apparently still hungry young people. Sometimes it's hard to tell the genuine from the opportunistic. People get mad about the dogs kept as companions. It's cruel, they say. If the homeless can't feed themselves, how can they feed their dogs? It's just for sympathy because not everyone likes a homeless person, but almost everyone loves a dog. People stop to drop money in tins for dogs. And I'm gullible so it took a cynical person, an Italian, to tell me authoritatively that for some, this street living isn't a tragic state of being, it's just a reasonable occupation.

Everyone needs a companion though, right?

Facebook post, 17 August 2015



Stunning building in the old town. They don't build them like they used to! #Icouldlivehere

Italy travel diary, 17 August 2015

I'm finding it hard to move on. From Genoa. From Richard.

"Looks like you're having a great time! I'm happy for you!" On Facebook, he 'liked' my sweet old building and wrote that comment. Two exclamation marks. It was more like obscene graffiti than a polite comment. He defiled my perfect picture.

Of course, it's my fault for agreeing that we should try to be friends. Try to be reasonable and civil. But I drew the line at meeting up in Italy. No, that won't do at all. He's here somewhere and that jars. So eager to start his new life he left weeks ago.

It's important that he believes that I'm extraordinarily happy and deeply satisfied. He needn't know that I've quietly laid down in my hotel room at night, lonely and terrified of something I can't even fathom. Feeling constantly fearful as well as melancholic and distraught. I'm angry with myself. I'm angry for not feeling euphoric, moved, transported, engaged. For being consumed by the loss of a relationship that I'm beginning to

understand, lacked some depth. Was it easier to be with Richard than be alone? Because this alone thing is harrowing. It's bitter and makes my insides churn.

I don't know what to do with them – the needy, the hungry, the unemployed. Fake or genuine. What can I do? I feel ashamed at looking away. So I've tried to look them in the eye when I say no, at least give them the dignity of existing, of being seen, instead of walked by. But is that better or worse – am I saying “I see you but I'm still going to disregard you”? I'm afraid it might be worse, much worse. I had a snack-size packet of biscuits in my bag today and reached in to get it and give it to a man sitting quietly on the ground. But I hesitated because what does he want with a tiny, measly packet of biscuits. Would I offend him? How could I offend someone who has already had their dignity compromised and relies on pity from strangers? I'm wearing good clothes and new shoes, I've travelled all the way from Australia to Italy, I've paid 4 Euro for gelati, and all I can offer is a small packet of dry biscuits. In the end I couldn't do it. I couldn't cross that invisible threshold between us. When I might have been really human and connected, all I managed was a (sym)pathetic look.

It's just getting dark and the sky is the richest blue. Warm and safe. Two birds, black against that backdrop flit in between the balconies of rich people. I saw a building foyer today, designed and painted by Strozzi. It's a private residence now but they let you take pictures. I love the Italian way of building on what already exists. Is it sound or foolish? Is it better to sweep all away and build on a solid new foundation? I haven't decided.

Later, when I checked my emails at the hotel, I did what I should have done a long while ago and deleted Richard's Facebook connection. We are no longer friends. We were never going to be friends. Only those who feel guilty ever suggest trying to remain friends.

‘What about all our history?’ he might say, slightly dismayed. ‘After all, we started out as friends, didn’t we?’ We started and now we’re ending.

Facebook post, 18 August 2015



Ancient ship in an ancient harbour. #romantic #happy

Italy travel diary, 18 August 2015

Actually, the ship is not at all ancient. It is a replica 17th century pirate ship docked at the end of a pier. It is considered an attraction for families, for young children. From far away you can stare at it dreamily, imagining romantic voyages and the discovery of tropical islands. But close up it looks cheap. It was constructed in the 1980s for a Roman Polanski pirate film. You can, instead, imagine a cantankerous movie star and compliant wenches.

I’ve found the waterfront, the Porto Antico, but it’s hard to see the water. The water is right there but I can only catch glimpses of it between overpasses, rubbish skips, restaurants and a shamble of both old and new buildings. In fact, I stumbled upon the seafront accidentally, popping out of a narrow laneway. Yesterday I had been within meters and missed it. I was expecting a serene beach, with a little kiosk selling gelato and

the sea lapping yellow sand. Completely foolish and downright stupid really, to expect a quaint little nook when this is one of the most industrialised and busy ports in the world, and has been for centuries! I just wasn't expecting the ultra modern lookout point, the Bigo – searing aluminium poles designed to replicate container cranes, and a glass elevator that ascends every 10 minutes every day of the year for a panoramic view.

But the hills still gently hover in the background, and the esplanade palazzi teeter elegantly, without effort, colourful and childlike.

I'm vaguely happier today, down by the waterfront that isn't a waterfront. I'm not good at restaurant meals on my own so now I'm in a kebab shop, trying to look as though I am just on my way to somewhere else. It's nestled into a fairly chaotic end of the esplanade where immigrants, permanent and transitory, gather round to drink and smoke and chat. Everyone's drinking beer and talking way too loud. A bottle in one hand, the other in their pockets. Slow smiles and languid stances, big laughter but tired faces. The only other women around are prostitutes. I'm not sure why I'm here. On paper, it's dangerous. But I don't feel safe these days anyway.

And despite feeling obvious, no one so much as glanced at me.

The African girl who took my order looked bitter and very surly. She almost curled at the edges she was so surly. I probably would too. The revellers immediately outside the shop, at a make-shift bar, are so loud I actually couldn't hear her speak. She seemed deeply resentful she had to work there. As I was eating my Lebanese kebab, a young, clean-cut white man, an Italian, came striding in and barked at her: "Give me a plastic plate." I couldn't hear her reply but he said, "Don't worry, I've got your money," and he showed her a Euro in the palm of his hand but didn't put it down. She tried to take it but he snatched it away. Then he slammed it on the counter top. Contemptuous. Violent. She stood there scowling and wretched. Still, she didn't want to give him the plate. She

mumbled and drooped, and I felt anxious just looking at her. Give him the plate! After a while she reluctantly fetched him a plastic plate and some change. He ignored the change and stalked out again.

She stood behind the counter fuming for a while, not touching the change, and then jerked her head derisively. I watched as she scooped up the coins, walked out of the shop, found him at the bar counter, and then placed the coins in front of him. She didn't slam them down hard, she was careful about that.

I held my breath.

For the next ten minutes, they walked in and out of the shop returning the money to each other, each time with a contemptuous comment: "Take your damn change, I don't need your money". "I paid you – la mancha, a bribe." He would throw it on the counter, she would walk over to the bar and leave it if not in front of him, then close by him, where he would see it. Making a point but being cautious about it. When he came in again and left it on a shelf near the window with one more angry glare, I was tempted to take it so that both and neither had won and lost. But sure enough she came out from behind the counter again and had the last word (or at least before I go). She leaves it at the far end of bar counter – I'm not even sure he's seen it, and I don't think she cares anymore. But she sure as hell doesn't want it.

That's fortitude and courage. I've been playing at that stuff. Faced with conflict, with arrogance, anger and violence, this girl raised herself up – quietly, without show – but with intent and purpose. She knew who she was defending. She understood who she was, how she was being treated, how to fight back. But winner take nothing.

I didn't have a clue about those things, though I was starting to learn. Time to move on from Genoa. Time to move on.

Strangers

The African man selling trinkets looks less out of place than me. In jeans and slippers he lopes over the sand, going between beachgoers calling out, “Signora, buon Prezzo”, promising a ‘good price’ in an accent that will never sound Italian. His smile is docile but nervous as he approaches three elderly Italians, plump and soft, golden and wrinkled, walking along the sand in their bikinis. He calls one of them by name. Regulars. They pluck at the jewels on offer – great hoops of gold-coloured earrings, chunks of necklaces with matching bracelets. They slip them on and turn their wrists this way and that. They gently prod each other and admire or admonish. The trinket seller senses a sale. He nods and offers other similar items. He’s gently insistent, but there are also unnerving silences that sound to me like desperate appeals for help.

One of the ladies starts to haggle over the price of a bracelet. She halves the number and he looks betrayed and disappointed. He offers her another number in return and she shakes her head. She’s starting to move away now, waving her hands dismissively. He tilts his head to one side, holding out the bracelet, willing her to take it. She hesitates and takes it in her hands again. But then she makes a decision and brusquely hands it back to him. She says once more, sternly “No”, and walks away. One of her friends lingers for a moment, still listening to his appeal, trying to be kinder and smiling at him apologetically. But then she too turns and joins the others.

He looks angrily after them, “What do you want lady? You talk and talk and talk....” He rearranges his wares, shrugging them on his shoulder, over his forearm, around

his neck, and lopes on. “Signora, buon prezzo, buon Prezzo.” The call is woeful. The sun forces him to squint as he forges on.

When he approaches me next my sympathy melts in the sun. I barely glance up from my book, my mouth a line, my eyes unsmiling, avoiding contact. When he, in English, offers me matching sets, I say no, no, several times, loudly, clearly. Annoyed. And as he walks on I’m immediately ashamed. Forgetting that in front of me was a man earning a living. A man who felt the sting of “no” like anyone else would, and who perhaps heard it ring in his ears long into the night, disturbing his sleep. I watched him move slowly down the beach, hovering gently between groups, being waved away, sent on.

Under a hat and glasses, shaded by an umbrella and mostly clothed, the trinket seller had immediately recognised me as a fellow foreigner. I am overdressed, over cautious. On my own. Pale and cloudy, not sharp and strongly outlined like the Italians. They are minimally dressed, drowsy and lolling in the direct sun – professional couples on holidays feed morsels to small dogs; couples stroll hand in hand, slick with love and affection; and teenagers scoff and jab at each other, all bluster and swagger. The murmur of the ocean is a gentle and lulling hum, still discernible over the laughter and chatter. But behind me violent cliffs loom skyward, the blue sky presses down, heavy and suffocating. I’m half way between the wide expanse of blue, both sky and sea, and the menace of the earth.

Someone asked me earlier whether my beach at home looked out to the ocean or the sea. I had no idea what he was talking about. Confused I kept asking him to repeat himself. Voices were raised. When I finally understood what he meant, I faltered – I didn’t know the answer. What does it matter? He smiled patronisingly at me: “Never mind.” But what does it matter? I want to know. He wouldn’t say.

A shadow falls over my book. Before I can even look up an elderly woman is saying, in Italian, “Scusa signorina, can you look and tell me if my ear is completely covered by the bathing cap?” She assumes I will understand, and I do understand enough. But I still stare at her for a moment, processing. That she assumes I will recognise her words, her request, pleases and puzzles me. She has a sweet face and a patient smile. She is very plump, and is very pale for an Italian. Despite her obvious age, her eyes are lit with youth. She is standing quite still, waiting for me to get up and check her bathing cap.

“No, it’s not.....,” I tell her, “wait”.

“Oh thank you. I’ve had an ear infection and my doctor said not to get water in it. But I have to go for my swim, of course.” She is serene.

The nape of her neck looks damp, threads of silver hair escape the cap. I try to tug the plastic over her ear. Her skin is soft and hot. I realise I have to tug reasonably hard and she braces herself and nods encouragingly. I touch her earlobe, brush her cheek. Then I gently nudge her to turn, so I can check the other ear. She obliges; it’s ok. She seems unmoved by the intimacy but I shiver at touching a stranger. Not in revulsion, but breathless and moved by her trust.

I tell her, “You’re ok now,” in English. She pats her covered ears, satisfied.

“Come ti chiama signorina?” she asks.

“Mi chiamo Anna.”

She nods once and smiles, “Grazie Anna.” Then turns towards the sea. I sit down again and watch as she shuffles slowly towards the water, wades in up to her thighs and then pushes herself under. I see her arms move rhythmically, her cap peaking above the gentle waves. I watch her until she becomes a pinpoint and I can no longer recognise the stranger.

Museum fatigue

“Ah I’m too old for this shit,” Alan sighed.

“This shit is older than you!” his wife Rebecca said, poking him in the arm gingerly.

“What sort of come back is that?”

“Come on, don’t sit down yet, there’s heaps more to see. Appreciate it. You might never see this again.”

“Well, maybe I don’t care if I never see another 15th century gold fork ever again. I mean, all this... all this *crap*. Plates, violins, clocks, bloody pianos, glasses, costumes, vases. Just random... *crap!*” He was practically shouting, incredulous and very clearly fed up.

“It’s not *crap!* It’s precious!” His tone was making her anxious. But it took little to make her feel anxious.

“It’s the bloody knives and forks that are killing me. Seriously, who needs to see a thousand different forks? Just put out a couple and give the rest to charity.”

“Will you listen to yourself? As if you can just give a 400-year old fork to the Salvos.” She was careful to sound playful.

“Well, why not? More useful than sitting behind a piece of glass so that people can stare it for a second before moving on to the *knives*.”

Rebecca sighed, exasperated now. Neither of them realised it, but they had come down with rather a bad case of museum fatigue – a kind of languid antipathy towards precious art and objects for which one should feel reverence, but for which one feels only

resentment. Their tour group had been let loose in the Castello Sforzesca in the heart of Milan, and given three hours to roam the corridors. After a solid hour, Alan and Rebecca had seen enough paintings of the Madonna and child to last a life time.

“Come on Alan. Use some imagination. Some rich prince probably tucked into his pheasant with that fork. Just imagine it. Probably ate off gold plates too.” Rebecca was trying. She was fighting off the malaise for the sake of their holiday. And if she was honest with herself, for the sake of her marriage too.

But Alan responded, “I reckon that rich bastard just tore apart his duck or pheasant with his hands just like everyone else. Probably threw the fork at the slave for being too slow with the booze!” At his own amusing remark, Alan finally laughed and relaxed for a moment. “It just annoys the shit out of me that because something is old, you’ve got to respect it. That’s a load of crap. I’ve got my dad’s old shovel – it’s probably a hundred years old, but I don’t think anyone’s ever going to stick it on a shelf, label it and then take a photo of it. *I* like it, but that’s because it was my dad’s! I’ve got a reason to like it. Otherwise, it’s just an old shovel.”

“Now you’re just being a cranky old bugger.” She fussed with her cardigan. “Why did we come to Italy if you didn’t want to look at old stuff? We could’ve gone to New York and looked at new stuff instead!”

Her attempt at some light banter echoed off the walls of the long stone corridors. They rambled on in sullen silence.

That they were anywhere at all was a small miracle. The holiday had been his idea, but he had quickly tired of the tour group, of the early starts and long hours on the coach. They were both looking forward to finishing up in Naples and spending a few free days doing nothing before going home. She was tired too and the Castello Sforzesca seemed to have corridors, rooms and galleries unending, all containing paintings, sculptures, armour,

furniture, and indeed forks, knives and even spoons. She was annoyed on behalf of history too, because for Alan, everything had to be in the present or it didn't really matter. He didn't realise that a history was a foundation and without it, the future was already lost.

Alan spotted a large TV screen.

“Ah, a movie. Right then, I'm going to sit here a minute.” And Alan dropped his considerable bulk onto a gallery sofa, those flat, backless affairs which are comfortable but not so as to keep people stationary too long. Rebecca could not protest. She too needed to sit down.

It was a five-minute video presentation, not about Michelangelo's last, unfinished sculpture – the Rondanini Pieta` – but about the base on which it was standing. In detail, the short documentary described the half dozen Japanese and Italian companies who worked together to build an earthquake-proof base for the statue. Months of testing included placing an exact replica of the statue, made with the same type of marble Michelangelo used, carved not by hand, but by a robot, on to the platform and shaking it hard. The test was deemed a success when the statue stayed upright, buoyed on a series of slides and suspensions. The video concluded with a reminder, perhaps to quell the tourists' fears, that it was extremely unlikely Milan would ever suffer an earthquake. The video faded to black before starting the cycle again.

Alan hooted in disbelief. “You're kidding me!” Really, Alan didn't realise how his voice projected. Rebecca winced.

“Imagine the millions they spent doing that! I bet they don't even show the real one anymore – they got that nice replica up on show and the real one packed away in sawdust. Who would know? Who would know if it was the one carved by Michelangelo or the bloody robot! And all for a city that's not going to have an earthquake any time soon.” He shook his head and wiped his hand over his face, unable to comprehend the lunacy. In

truth, Rebecca agreed with her husband. Though sometimes, like now, she kept it to herself for a moment. It was a way she could rebel without the conflict.

It did seem too much. The gallery folks in the video also discussed the absolute correct hue of white light to be used to illuminate the statue – they tried many shades before hitting just the right note of pathos and brilliance.

Pathos and brilliance.

Michelangelo's last statue of Jesus and Mary was not even finished.

“Well, let's check it out then. Better than cutlery! Shall we have a beer first?”

“A beer? Alan it's only 11.00 in the morning!” Sometimes she felt sure that Alan said things just to see what would happen, what she would say, and perhaps if it would upset her. She was never sure if she got it right. The stress of getting it wrong frayed her nerves sometimes. Alan didn't raise a hand like he did his voice but his contempt was brutal. His words lashed at her and left deep wounds. The bleeding soon stopped but the scars had kept building over the years until she had become knotty and wiry. She was never sure of herself anymore.

She looked at him petulantly – it just wouldn't do to start drinking now. They would have to face the rest of the group when they got back on the bus, smelling like beer. There would be disapproving stares. His voice would become even louder.

“We're on holidays, aren't we?” Alan said replied, belligerent.

They found the café and sat down, again with a heavy sigh. She ordered an Americano, Alan got his beer. He wiped small beads of sweat from his forehead, even though it wasn't particularly hot. He wasn't overweight, but he was a big man, unfit and exhausted by the long days. Rebecca was embarrassed and re-organised the contents of her small backpack, fidgeting with tissues and band-aids, applying the latter to her chafed

heels. They both fiddled with brochures, pretending to read them, flipping and refolding until there was nothing left to do but sip their drinks in silence.

At the next table, a young couple also sat in silence. But to Rebecca, it was a different silence. There was a complacency, a soft coat of affection covered them both. They didn't have to chat for the sake of it. They were just looking at each other, smiling vaguely. He took her hand gently, as though it too was a precious artefact. The man treasured it for a moment. She let him. Rebecca couldn't remember the last time Alan had held her hand. She looked at her hands now, splayed out in front of her, as though looking for the answer.

And then she did remember and the memory of it flickered through her like a sudden chill. She remembered him apologising, asking for forgiveness, asking her to understand that it had just been a moment of madness, a bad decision – a “fuck up”, he'd said. *That* woman meant nothing, Rebecca meant everything. Her history wobbled and shook like the Pieta` base. She would not topple over, try as he might to shake her foundations.

But then what was left? The real or the replica?

Alan had taken her hand in that moment. “Let's go on a holiday, just you and me. How long has it been?” And she had said yes because indeed they had not been on holidays for many, many years. And because, on the whole, it was easier. Maybe the present was all that mattered. Certainly, Alan never referred to the past, never considered that it threaded through every other moment since, and never gave it due respect. It was finished. Carry on, carry on.

Rebecca looked at the couple beside them again and tried to remember if she had ever occupied that existence with Alan. She stretched her memory as far as it would let her and sought out a time when she held her head high like this woman. She seemed so

composed, so sure of herself. The couple were still steadily looking at each other, but now it looked more like a challenge and it wasn't clear who was the stronger.

The woman noticed Rebecca's gaze. Caught out, Rebecca smiled at them and, flustered and faltering, asked, "Are you Australian?"

The woman smiled in reply, withdrew her hand and sat up straighter. "Yes, yes we are."

"I thought so. I'm Rebecca and this is hubby Alan. What do you reckon of this place? We were just saying it's pretty big. A bit draining after a while!" Rebecca rambled nervously, trapped into a conversation she hadn't meant to start. Alan said nothing.

The woman smiled. "Hi Rebecca, I'm Dana. I'm with you. Jeff though," she nodded to her partner, "would probably disagree. He wants to go see the Pieta, not because he likes art, but because he's a bit of nerd and wants to check out that platform."

Jeff shrugged and smiled apologetically. "Might as well take a look. We're here."

Alan rolled his eyes. "Jeez, neither of them are that interesting if you ask me."

Jeff and Dana smiled without saying anything.

Rebecca suddenly said, "Are you on your honeymoon?" and she leaned forward on her elbows, openly admiring them.

Jeff laughed nervously and shook his head, "Ha! No, no. We're just on holidays. We're not married."

Dana didn't say anything. But she folded her arms.

"Anyway," he said, "it was nice meeting you. We might see you again at the Pieta."

Jeff turned to Dana, "Honey we should go now, or we'll miss the tour of the music room."

And Dana stood up and picked up her bag without saying a word. She stood behind her chair a moment and stared at him. Then she turned to Rebecca and Alan, "Enjoy the rest of your trip."

“You too, thanks,” Rebecca said, but they were already moving away.

“You’ve always got to talk to strangers, don’t you?” Alan said, shaking his head.

“They weren’t in the slightest bit interested.’

Even more embarrassed now, Rebecca flushed pink. They seemed so lovely but then they made her feel uneasy. Like she had interrupted something, or said the wrong thing. She ended many a conversation with this sense of being scorned, of having spoken out of turn. She fussed with her tissues again and took a sip of water which caught in her throat and made her splutter.

“Alright?” Alan looked at her questioningly, almost affectionately. Almost.

“Yes, yes – just went down the wrong way.” She took a breath and steadied herself.

“Come on then, let’s go have a look at this masterpiece.”

“What – the statue or the stand it’s on?”

Rebecca sighed and shook her head once. “Oh, do give it up Alan.” It was unlike her to be snappish. He raised his eyebrows for a moment, and she bowed down, pretending to fix her shoe. She was surprised to feel the pinprick of tears.

They made their way to the Spanish Hospital where the statue was housed. At the entrance, they paused. It felt like church. The high painted ceiling of the empty room intensified every footstep, every cough. A whisper chased its tail around the room and ended up in everyone’s ears.

“Jesus,” Alan breathed.

“Alan!” Rebecca opened her eyes wide at him, begging him to be decent. All she could smell was beer.

He gave her the smallest nudge in the back, urging her in.

They walked towards the statute. The entire hall contained just this piece of artwork.

Michelangelo intended it to have a double meaning – was it Mary holding Jesus in her arms, just taken down from the cross? Or was it, in fact, Jesus carrying Mary, metaphorically, literally. Indeed, the myriad hues of white light did help convey this effect.

And who did Michelangelo tell this to?

Alan made his way to the front of the statue and peered up into their faces. The only finished, polished parts of the statue were Jesus's limbs. Their faces were just chips of marble, vague and distorted, rough and misshapen.

“Mary's a little on the ugly side though. What do you reckon?”

Rebecca looked ruffled and then quickly looked around at the handful of other tourists to see if they'd heard. But they were busy pondering reverentially, one hand on hip, head cocked to one side, a look of concentration screwing up their faces.

Rebecca stared at the lump of marble, staring into Mary's unfathomable expression and felt just like her. This sculpture was ugly. It was nothing. It was unfinished and graceless, clumsy and disproportionate. She didn't want to stare in awe at it. She didn't understand it. But it was easier to nod and smile and remark on its potential – it *could* have been his finest work, it *might* have made grown men weep. Rebecca might have been great too, and emerged beautiful and extraordinary, given the right treatment. But instead she was chipped and scarred, incomplete, and in her heart, she felt herself ugly too, carrying around her own weight of sadness and despair at what things had become. Perhaps the weight was history – her history with Alan. She had been hauling herself forward with it, hand over hand for years. Alan in contrast seemed light and spry on his feet, always ready to forget and forget and forget, without apologising and without forgiving.

They circled the statue quietly. Rebecca touched Alan's arm. “Let's go love. That's enough old stuff now.”

“Finally!” he whispered loudly. “I’ve been trying to tell you that!” He looked at her for a moment. “I’ve been trying to tell you.”

And they left the Spanish Hospital and the castle. Alan comfortably and gratefully left History behind them. Rebecca instead found herself committing Mary’s distorted face to memory, and wondering if she too was cast forever in marble, or whether it was possible to change the future.

Chiaroscuro

Even in September, the Pantheon in Rome was overcrowded. People oozed in and out, gently bumping against each other, trying not to lose loved ones in the crush. Sophia sat in a pew and surveyed the scene. She was early for her appointment with Lorenzo. He was a friend of Anna, a tour guide she had become friendly with in Naples. He wanted to improve his English and it wouldn't hurt to meet a local.

The domed arc of the ceiling, with a circular opening dead centre, was calming. The pagan temple turned Catholic church was ancient and could be forgiven for appearing fragile or battered. Instead, it was hard and enduring. Inanimate, it still managed to convey silence and strength. Stillness, despite the gaggle of foreign voices, the whining of hot children. Sophia stared at the geometric patterns on the ceiling for some time, willing the rest of the chaos to fade away so she could imagine Romans instead, nobly and quietly going about their sacred business.

She watched the huddles of American school groups, Chinese grandmothers, excitable French teenagers and English families – all of them looking but not seeing. She needed quiet in order to see. Those two senses were bound together for her. To penetrate the enormous ebony tomb of the king or admire the shining altar she needed some quiet. In the pews people chatted as though waiting for a bus into town, sipping warm water and rustling around in backpacks for packets of tissues. There was a priest at the altar but he wasn't saying mass. Unless he had a microphone, and they often did these days, no one would have heard him anyway.

The two middle-aged women in the pew in front of her caught her attention. They had Australian accents too. The blond one was still doughy white, a newcomer to summer. Her friend was a dark-haired girl, starkly thin in contrast. Sophia caught a snippet of conversation.

“Poor mum. How many candles have I lit since she died!” the blond one said.

“You did your best.”

“I don’t know if I ever told you, but you know she didn’t want to know all the details – how long, how it would happen. She wasn’t really with it enough to make any decisions anyway. We didn’t even fully explain it to her for ages. Well, anyway, she was a big fan of that soap, *The Bold and the Beautiful* and do you remember how Stefanie in that show was dying of lung cancer? Well, my mum would watch it and she’d say to me, ‘You know I think we have the symptoms. I’ve got a pain right there too. And she’s coughing like me.’ And when Stefanie died in the show, we were watching it together, and she looked at me and said ‘Am I going to die too?’ And it just broke my heart, like, it really broke my heart. I didn’t know what to say.” Here she stopped and sniffed.

The dark-haired one patted her shoulder, and murmured something consoling.

Sitting behind them, Sophia flushed hot and let her own tears fall. She wiped them away and folded her arms over her chest, embarrassed. We do our best, but they die anyway. She thought of her own mother, frail and broken at the end. Her eyes hollowed out but gazing at her with a surprising force, before she closed them and slipped into a coma. The journey had been reasonably short and the fall from normal and happy to desperate and devastated was swift for both of them. They were alone just the two of them. And now she was completely alone. Her mother made her promise she’d not dwell too long in the darkness, that she would carry on, and even give herself a holiday. “Live your life” her mother told her. “Really live it”.

But Sophia was finding it hard to come out of the darkness, and to feel too deeply about anything or anyone. Once she was passionate and vocal. She used to laugh in throaty, musical outbursts. Then for a long time her lips rested together. During the time she had cared for her dying mother she stopped laughing. She had still managed to smile, because anything placed against the backdrop of imminent death is rendered beautiful and therefore worth at least a smile. But there had been no use for laughter. Friends fell away, not because they didn't care or because she had pushed them away, but because they no longer seemed necessary. The conversations they offered were banal. Everything is banal when you're a witness to the business of dying.

Passion had fallen by the wayside too. For some, the closeness of death brings passion to the fore. Some love more fervently than before. But Sophia's love had been reduced to the familial only, and no one had stirred anything in her for some years. Even when she'd reluctantly gone on blind dates simply because everyone kept telling her she needed to be distracted (when her instinct was to be present), she felt nothing. Numb and disconnected. Floating above, indifferent and yawning. As though her heart had stopped beating and in its place rested a fossilised piece of bark. It was smoky-coloured and precious, but dead all the same.

She was trying though. In Naples there were tentative signs of unfurling, uncoiling. Antennae sensing life, had started to extend their tips towards the sun. The blue of the ocean seemed cool and sublime. The languid breeze on her hot skin had piqued and stirred. But Naples had been too overcast and humid most days, and the people in general too guarded and defensive. Men eyed her too frankly, but women regarded her scornfully as an empty threat, as though they knew she had no appetite for flirtation. Her city guide, Anna, did connect with her, and in her company, Sophia had managed to smile frequently. Now

and then, a small laugh had also escaped, awkward and out of tune. There was a small will inside her, wanting to try happiness again. It was just very hard.

Now she was escaping the Pantheon, with its soul fluttering and trapped like a butterfly, a little too touched, literally and figuratively, by humankind. She walked towards the fountain just meters away. She was to meet Lorenzo in a few minutes but had no idea yet of how she was going to recognise him. How many people would be lingering around the fountain? It seemed like hundreds.

She paused and looked around. Nervous and indecisive she frowned and held her hand up to shade her eyes against the sun. A beggar approached, ragged and stooped, draped in dark colours. She held her hands out, one crossed over the other as though about to receive Communion. The woman's face was aged and ageless, a concentration of doom and resignation all at once. Her head cocked sadly to one side, she intoned words Sophia didn't understand in a perfunctory way – words she spoke a thousand times a day to a thousand strange faces. She was so automatic and lifeless that she no longer instilled pity or even guilt. People swatted her away as they would a bug. But then she looked right into Sophia's eyes and something dark and empty made Sophia recoil. She put her hands in front of her, as though to protect herself, shaking her head. She could have been her mother's age. Did she have a daughter?

At the same time, Sophia felt someone's hand on her elbow and glanced up, startled.

“Sophia, yes?”

A man was smiling gently at her.

“How did you know?”

“I'm Lorenzo. Anna sent me your photo.” He flashed his mobile phone at her and sure enough she saw herself eating gelato on a street in Naples, standing next to Anna.

Lorenzo was lithe and wiry. Spare, polished and stylish. Ruffled curls, big elegant hands. Brown shoes and a scarf. He slid his arm behind her without actually touching her, steering her away from the begging woman who had, in any case, moved on to the next tourist.

A few meters away he stopped and faced her. His long bare brown arms were veined and strong, as he held out a hand: “Nice to meet you.” He grinned, white teeth in a bronzed face, youthful though probably in his late 30s like Sophia. He leaned in for a kiss on both cheeks. This action took place in a peculiar silence. She could think of nothing to say. Words fell away from her and she felt embarrassed without knowing why.

“So, have you seen?” he nodded towards the Pantheon.

She found some words and tried them out: “Oh yes. Yes, it’s beautiful. Really beautiful. But it’s also... full. It’s very full.” She sounded stilted.

“Ah yes, always people.” He kept grinning. It seemed to be his resting expression – a whole hearted grin. “Ok, so I show you instead, another nice church. Or maybe you see too many churches already?”

“No, I like churches, that’s fine. Thank you. Thanks for meeting me. Anna spoke very highly of you. She said you’re very clever and that you would be an excellent guide.” Success. Long sentences.

He put his hands on his chest, “Me? Really? No.” It was a long nooooo, full of expression. Full of false modesty and the pleasure of being highly spoken about. ‘But I will try’. He flashed another big grin.

They started walking away from the Pantheon, down a side street with only marginally less people.

Sophia asked, “Were you born here?”

Lorenzo shook his head, “No, I come from a town maybe two hours on the train, south. But I live here now maybe five years.”

“In the couple of days I’ve been here, whenever I’ve asked someone where they’re from, it’s somewhere else. It’s like Sydney I suppose – everyone is from somewhere else. Except in Sydney they tend to be from other countries, people here are from other towns. Is anyone actually born in Rome?”

“Ma certo! Of course!” he laughed. “Ah yes, you can tell the Romans because they have big booming voices, deep, rough. The arrogance of history.” He puffed himself up and lowered his voice, trying to be all swagger, but he was so reedy thin that it was doubly comical. “And you can tell the Northerners because they have sing-song voices.” He sang a lilting sentence. “And you can tell us Southerners because we can’t be bothered to talk at all, and we don’t finish any of the words.” He drawled some incomprehensible dialect, ending with a series of shoulder shrugs and hand movements. Then he burst into laughter which made her giggle too. It was a genuine giggle. A girlish chortle that made her crinkle her eyes and show her teeth.

“I can’t believe that Lorenzo. They’re all stereotypes!”

“Maybe,” he said mischievously, “but you listen.”

As they continued to walk, she looked at the setting around her and commented, “It’s hard to imagine people taking out rubbish, and going to the shops for milk and bread in this city.”

He stopped for a moment. A hand on her elbow. For him it was so natural to touch. For her it was such a long forgotten sensation. What should have been nothing suddenly rattled her.

He pointed at an angle in the buildings, at the stacked floors emerging at unlikely angles.

“What am I looking for?”

Outside a small window, some items of washing. “See the laundry? Someone’s clean clothes. Someone lives there. This is a real city with real people in it.” The centre of Rome seemed like a theatre set, unreal and untouchable, but here a t-shirt flapped in the breeze.

They resumed walking and he let go of her elbow. “But those people are probably very rich. The rest live in the ugly apartment blocks you see on the train into Rome. You take the train, yes?”

She nodded. Yes, she’d noted those too. Such a lack of imagination. Such a contrast. The mundane and ugly withering in the shadow of absolute beauty.

He stopped walking and pointed across the road. “Ok, here we are. La Chiesa di San Luigi dei Francesi.” He smiled, proud.

“A French church?”

“Sì, for the French. In 1500s.”

“The outside is not very beautiful, is it?”

He gave her an incredulous look. “Sophia!” She’d never heard her name spoken like that. Such a rounded ‘o’, such a happy ‘a’. “Sophia guarda! Look at this – the dragon, St Clotilde, Carlomagna – you say, Charlemagne.”

She stood on tip toe. “Ah yes, I see now. That four-wheel drive was blocking my view.” And she smirked at him. But his face was serious for an instant.

“Ah sì, I understand. You like for no modern things in Rome. Well, I’m sorry Sophia, we are not a museum. Remember the washing. Italians live here. They drive cars, not chariots.”

He sounded stern. She was worried her feeble attempt at humour had offended him. “Oh no, no it’s not that, honestly, I just couldn’t see the dragon. I probably need glasses. Let’s cross the road so I can see better.”

But she soon saw that he was not at all cross. Just expressive. The expression in his face often matched the sentiment of his words. Most people, she realised with a start, never managed this. Including her.

They crossed the road, peered at the dragon appreciatively, took an obligatory photo of St Clotilde and then wandered in.

Entering an Italian church meant crossing from street noise and light, into dimness and concentrated quiet. Sophia was always overwhelmed by the loftiness and the impression of infinite space, even when she walked out from a sunny street, into a cloistered chapel. The sense of space was always acute, perhaps precisely because it was bounded. It’s impossible to touch the sky, it’s just very difficult to touch a church ceiling.

If you put aside notions of corruption and vulgar excess, the gilded ceilings, candelabras and columns of Baroque churches are luminous and astonishing. Such a warm colour in the diffused light, rosy hued and only slightly dulled by centuries. Sophia always took a moment to stand in the centre and look down the long nave, admiring the altar and taking in the interior. She did that now. She stood there silently, gently breathing in, appreciating the relative quiet not afforded the Pantheon, and looked around. Lorenzo stood nearby, still and composed. There was something about his respectful distance that impressed her.

She smiled at him. “You could never get sick of this, surely?”

He shrugged and raised his eyebrows. “Maybe it’s too much?”

It was Sophia’s turn to raise her eyebrows but she left it at that.

They wandered down the nave, alternating their gaze from the frescoed ceiling to the patterned marble floor. It was a gentle meander that made Sophia settle into a contentment she hadn't felt for a long time. She was always comforted by the space, by the sacred, even if it wasn't a sacred she believed in. There was something inspiring in the structure that made her hush and reflect. She glanced at Lorenzo walking alongside her and admired his capacity for quiet. She had thought he might be all volume and exuberance, but now he walked thoughtfully, hands clasped easily behind his back, letting her set the pace.

At the end of the nave he gave her that infectious grin once more and said, "Here – this is what I wanted to show you." He pointed towards one of the side chapels and indeed there was a small crowd gathered in front of it. The Contarelli Chapel contained three Caravaggio paintings, one for each wall – the Calling, the Inspiration and the Martyrdom of Saint Matthew.

"You know Caravaggio?" he screwed up his face, both doubtful and hopeful.

"Yes of course."

He nodded, "Good. Then come."

They joined the back of the group but slowly and subtly, as the crowd shifted and people came and went, they worked their way to the front. Just as they did so, someone dropped some coins into a metal box and suddenly lights came on in the chapel. There was a collective and impressed "Aaahhh." Caravaggio's chiaroscuro technique — extremes of light and dark — became even more contrasting and dramatic.

Sophia couldn't repress an audible and happy gasp. "Oh!"

Lorenzo's broad smile said, "I told you so."

"They're beautiful. Really amazing."

Facing them was the Inspiration of Saint Matthew. As an old man, he teetered on the edge of a stool, only half sitting, frantically transcribing the words of an angel-messenger. At the moment of his martyrdom, he was prostrate, holding an arm out against a soldier's sword.

But it was the Calling of Saint Matthew that drew Sophia's attention. The extended hand of Jesus, reminiscent of Michelangelo's hand of God in the Sistine Chapel, summoned a young Matthew who pointed at himself as though to say, "Are you sure? Me?" An ordinary looking man was being asked to come forward and become great.

She turned to Lorenzo to say something but he motioned her not to. He was listening intently to an Italian-speaking guide who was leading a private tour (just one lucky couple). This intelligent looking young woman was also expressive and her face told a beautiful story even though Sophia couldn't understand it. The guide's eyes widened at the end of sentences, she articulated and emphasised apparently important elements, nodding deeply and occasionally pointing. All Italians spoke proprietarily of art and guarded it jealously. When the guide finished, she moved out of the way so that the couple could fully appreciate the paintings on their own.

"Ok, I tell you now." Lorenzo moved closer to her. The crowd gently jostled for position. Sophia could smell cinnamon, sandalwood and pepper and wondered vaguely if it was the church or Lorenzo. He rested his hand lightly on her back and turned her towards The Calling.

"You see the light coming in not from the window in the painting – that has been covered up – but behind Christ? But he doesn't leave a shadow. And then see – the light comes from the natural window of the church too. It makes the painting more real." His eyes glittered as he spoke. The crowd shifted again and his hip bumped against hers and stayed there. He leaned his head towards hers and continued, almost whispering,

“Matthew, see, is dressed in the clothes of Caravaggio’s time, 1500s. But Jesus is dressed in ancient robes. That is St Peter with him, also dressed in robes. The other men, see, they don’t care that someone has come in, they are just concentrating on the money. Matthew was just a tax collector. No one important, no one good. But Jesus called him, ‘Yes, you!’ and Matthew went. He had to!”

Sophia was listening but his soft murmuring near her ear inspired something quite different to pious admiration. His voice was friction against the fossilised driftwood in her chest and if she was attentive, she might have smelled smoke.

“It’s so very beautiful,” she said softly. And it was. Moving. Light and dark, a person teetering on the edge of enlightenment, about to transform and undertake a metamorphosis from ordinary to extraordinary. Lorenzo had brought the picture to life for her.

“Very, very beautiful,” he agreed, but he was looking at her and not the painting. He seemed serious even though he was still smiling. They stood for a moment longer, silently gazing at the picture. His hand still rested on her back, a small patch of his hip in contact with hers. When the lights flicked off there were more “aaahhs...”, but the disappointed kind. He dropped his arm and they wriggled their way out of the crowd. They started walking back down the aisle, side by side, almost shyly.

Outside they blinked hard against the sharp sunshine. They stood awkwardly for a moment, side by side, two strangers who didn’t feel like strangers, but weren’t anything else yet either. Nevertheless, there was something already familiar between them.

“Allora,” he said, bringing his hands together in a soft clap. “Next?”

“I don’t mind,” she answered.

“Piazza Navona is just here, in the next street. Maybe a caffè?”

“Yes. Excellent.”

“But please, no cappuccino! A real coffee!”

He opened his arms wide, indicating which direction to go. He was expressive with his whole body. Sophia’s body was gangly, unused elements were creaking open, unfolding and unwinding. A playful energy began to bubble inside her. She suddenly laughed out loud. He looked at her surprised, his expression curious and questioning: “Che c’è?” *What’s wrong?* But there was nothing at all wrong. She couldn’t stop laughing. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, breathing was hard. She shook her head; she was helpless with mirth and mischief, irony and relief. Sophie thought of her mother, willing Sophia back to happiness.

Lorenzo laughed with her, not understanding, and then he casually and naturally held out his arm to her and she tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. They started off, both chuckling at what was left unsaid, towards the Piazza.

Schrodinger's cat

How was Dana going to tell Jeff that she was pregnant?

She had only just found out. She had sent Jeff for a walk on the esplanade while she slept off a headache before dinner. But instead she had gone to the chemist, struggled to convey what she needed to non-English-speaking staff, and then confirmed the pregnancy in a public toilet. She had laughed as she mimed a big tummy and the chemist had cried out in joy, “Ah! Auguri,” even though there was nothing to celebrate yet. But Dana’s laughter had bordered on hysterical and she had struggled to keep still, overcome with the impulse to run, to flee, but from what she wasn’t even sure.

So she fled to the Gran Café Gambrinus, in the very heart of Naples. It was iconic and glitzy, but in fact, it was just expensive without the integrity. At face value, the waiters *looked* elegant with their waistcoats and bow ties. But their shoes were dusty and their shirt cuffs frayed, at odds with the high and haughty tilt of their chins. With her iced-tea came a tiny bowl of giant green olives with a stiff American paper flag lodged in the centre. She looked up to point out the error, but the waiter had already turned swiftly and fled as though from a crime. The sky was hazy, the waning sun just a vague smudge. The warm early evening, the thick air, melted the ice in her drink.

The holiday had not been a success. Their photographs and Facebook posts, and the amusing stories they would tell their loved ones would lull everyone, including Dana and Jeff themselves, into believing that it had. They would choose to remember that Italy had exceeded all expectations, sparkled with romance and magic, that the food was lush and the wine was bold. And Italy had been all those things, but there was also a parallel

undercurrent of dismay, disappointment and now shock. Dana had come to realise that Jeff was not going to propose as she thought. The thought that perhaps instead he was planning to break it off altogether sent a snicker of fear through Dana. Tomorrow they will tour Pompeii and Vesuvius and then they were bound for home. Of late, he didn't quite flinch but neither did he respond when she placed a hand on his arm. He was evasive, and she couldn't quite place why.

She needed calm and quiet for a moment but it was as though the whole of Naples had converged in front of the café. The din was terrific with shouting, laughter, and the effeminate beeping of a hundred motorini. There were the usual hordes of pale middle-aged tourists, clutching melting gelati while they took an evening stroll. There were friends strolling arm in arm, couples out for aperitivi, and the elderly picking the sweet crumbs of sfogliatelle out of the corners of their mouths. But there were also posses of local teenagers, gesticulating, frowning into the blue screen of their phones, older ones smoking cigarettes. They looked battle worn already, laughing but edgy. They smiled and sometimes appeared brash and youthful, but other times wary and guarded and much older than they were.

Dana shook herself, shivered on purpose. She took out her phone and texted Jeff:

Meet me at Gran Caffè Gambrinus for dinner after
your walk. I'm feeling better. Might as well make
our last couple of days in Italy decadent. 😊

She waited.

Dana envied the girls, the agitated teenagers, the contented couples. They all seemed brash, confident, and decisive. When she tried to be the same, she just became

taciturn, angry and heartless. And when she tried to convey those qualities to Jeff, they just sparked against him like flint but without catching fire. Things would just smoulder and smoulder, creating puffs of grey smoke, but not setting alight.

She was tired and irritable. And she was tired of avoiding all serious conversation. They had discussed Canaletto and Bramante. They had argued about gelato flavours, and they each picked a favourite church. But slowly she had realised that the future tense was missing from their conversations. They had no plans beyond the end of their holiday. It suddenly seemed as if the future was very much in doubt and she failed to understand how that happened. How this reality had strayed so far from the romantic proposal she had imagined, and the passionate declarations. Perhaps she was most upset that she'd got it all wrong and her instinct had failed her. That they argued, she couldn't deny. That now and then they were strangers to each other, and were irritated by the other's habits, she knew. But those things were normal. Was he starting to think they weren't? She sipped the last of her tea. Her nerves were already frayed. The chaos and noise were amplified further still and her headache was becoming real.

Five shabby looking men, one after the other, ran past the café. They carried flattened cardboard boxes that doubled as shop floors, their merchandise bound up safely in plastic shopping bags. They were scampering and laughing, elbows out, eyes shining, glancing over their shoulders, for all the world as if it were a game. As though constantly running from the authorities was a fun game that they were bound to always win. They were lessons in resilience and fortitude. She too would have to gather her things around her and be prepared to run, light on her feet, if she was going to survive. What would she take with her?

Jeff appeared right in front of her. He'd found her.

“Sweetie are you ok? You still look kind of green. I don’t think you’re better at all.” He stood beside her a moment, his hand on the back of her chair, so that she was forced to squint up at him. “We could just have a quiet night in, I don’t mind.”

“Hey, that was quick!” she responded. “I’m ok. Honestly, I’d rather be out here on the street than closed up in a stuffy hotel room. It’s fine. Just no wine tonight, ok?” She smiled, convincingly, but she couldn’t say who she was trying to convince.

“If you’re sure?” He hesitated.

“Sure.”

“Ok,” and he slid into the chair beside her. “I was already on my way back when you messaged.” His long fringe was tousled by the sea air, his cheeks rosy. But the sun also gave him a few more lines around his eyes, and he seemed tired. “It’s brisk on the esplanade! So many people!”

He called the waiter over and asked for more iced-teas and the menu. When they arrived, Jeff and Dana sat in silence for a moment, each appearing to read the menu. Mentally, Dana also ran scenarios, outcomes, and strategic modes of play.

What happened next then? Who was this little creature inside her that already snagged her thoughts and altered her gait, when it was nothing of any consequence yet? But, oh the consequences were great. They stretched into the future until she couldn’t even see them anymore, growing and diminishing at the same time, multiplying and collapsing into each other. What if, what if. Impossible calculations, and she was never any good at maths. Did she want Jeff to marry her under duress? Would this creature benefit from a loveless marriage? So many others had, she assumed.

The creature was like Schrodinger’s cat. It was a thought experiment. A cat in a box with radioactivity. Until the box was opened, until she told Jeff, it could exist in two

states – alive or dead. Real or not real. Observation collapses into one reality. He did not understand, but she was observant.

“So, really no wine tonight sweetie?” He raised his eyebrows at her incredulously.

She responded with a tight smile. “I don’t *have* to drink do I? You’re welcome to without me. I’m not stopping you.”

“I don’t mind. It’s just unusual…” He wore a smirk but the judgement was clear. She was annoyed. It was always a point of contention between them. But she was also afraid because it meant that she wouldn’t be able to keep up the pretence for too long.

And of course he didn’t mind. He never minded anything in particular. He wouldn’t even mind about the baby, she knew that much. She remembered for a moment the first few months of the relationship. He was always exacting and presented a blank expression in the face of drama, as though untouched and unmoved. She had admired his calm demeanour at first. His steady nature was a good foil for her own unfortunate tendency to rile up and lash out. But now, he was gazing at her fixedly and she was quite unable to ascertain a single thought. She wanted to shake him, make his teeth rattle, see if he felt pain, and if he could shout out.

The waiter came and took their order and Jeff ordered a beer. “Last chance sweetie – no prosecco? No gin and tonic?”

He smiled lightly, teasingly, but she gritted her teeth, “No. Thank you.”

“You must be unwell!” he quipped. But his light banter deflated under her glare.

At the next table, just behind Dana, two men in linen suits and expensive watches were arguing in Dutch. They were surly and bulky, and stabbed fingers at each other in accusatory tones. It was unclear who was the more threatening.

Jeff and Dana listened to the diatribe a moment, without understanding a word. Then Jeff raised his eyebrows, and chuckled. "One of them must have forgotten to hang up the wet towel this morning!"

She could only roll her eyes at him.

He pursed his lips together and looked down at the table. When the waiter arrived with their drinks Jeff took a long sip of beer.

She was too angry to play along tonight, even though she thought she was trying. Angry because despite Jeff sometimes being a fool, she wanted to marry him and start this family in the proper way. But today she wasn't even convinced that he loved her anymore, or wanted her in his life. And, instead of appealing to him, she pushed him away. She sensed herself doing it and didn't know how to stop.

They continued to sit in silence. Later, she would say that the headache made her grumpy. Another small excuse for discord and dismay.

Dana watched a young woman pass by the front of the café. She held a baby in one arm as she begged with the other. Her face was stoic and she looked forward resolutely and firmly as she walked ahead. She asked passers-by for money in a matter of fact way, not cloying or impassioned. Dana saw the beggar cross paths with a couple pushing their own baby in a pram. Dana thought she saw the mother tighten her grip on the handle, the father tighten his grip on his wife. There was scorn and judgement in their faces, but perhaps there was fear too. Why was the mother out at night? Why wasn't the mother protecting her baby? But maybe the baby was fatherless, or the father was a rapist. Maybe it was the only way the mother could prove her desperation. Or maybe the baby wasn't even hers but borrowed for the evening, just for the sympathy.

Dana put her hand on her stomach, knowing it was ridiculous gesture, and that the creature could not be felt yet. She quickly looked up to see if Jeff had noticed. But he was

still watching the arguing men behind Dana. They were becoming more aggressive. One slammed down a glass so that it almost shattered. The other thumped the table loudly. People were starting to glance in their direction.

Suddenly, one of the men pushed his chair back so that it hit the ground hard. Then he lunged forward and grabbed the other man by the collar. His face was flushed with alcohol and anger, he was spitting out hard-edged words and with his free hand he was once again stabbing the other in the chest with his finger, accusing, violent and forceful. The other was trying to free himself and also staggered to his feet, sending his chair sideways. There were fretful cries from those around them whose own tables wobbled, making the wine slosh in their glasses.

The manager started to walk over, as the waiters hung back, anxious not to enter the fray. But before he reached them, the one who had been under attack managed to get a purchase on the other's coat jacket and swung his free arm back and then drove it home with a quick sharp punch. He exhaled, satisfied as the other toppled over slowly, with flailing arms and held breath. He fell backwards, and crashed heavily into the back of Dana's chair. She in turn was bumped off her seat and fell to the ground, still clutching her iced tea which smashed into shards around her. She was stunned a moment, tipped on to her back, her long hair fanned around her. She heard a woman cry out and hands reaching forward but it was Jeff's face that appeared almost immediately beside hers.

"Sweetie are you alright!" Even prone as she was she saw the anxiety in his face. His eyes were shining as he smoothed her hair, and cleared the space around her. "Did you cut yourself, oh God, look at all this glass. Careful!" His voice was gentle and calm, but he was checking her over for blood.

She wasn't hurt. She wasn't cut. Everything had fallen around her and upset everyone else more than it had her. A man was picking a long piece of glass out of his entrée.

“Just – no! – don't put your hand down – here, take mine.” Jeff's hands were warm and strong and he lifted her up in one smooth motion. Her skirt was wet but she was just fine. The two blustering men had already been manhandled outside and sent on their way, the bill unpaid. The manager showered them with obscenities as they left, each storming off in different directions. “What a scene! You should be ashamed! Ashamed! And they say Neapolitans are heathens – look at your behaviour, just look at it! Animals! You're both animals! Bloody tourists!” He came back to Dana and Jeff and apologised profusely for an act he hadn't perpetrated. He offered them a meal on the house, wine (which Dana had to refuse once again, much to Jeff's incredulity). He ushered them to another table and pleaded with them to sit and relax.

Jeff was unsure what to do, he kept his hand firmly on Dana's back and looked into her face. “What do you want to do? Shall we just go? How's your head? Is it worse?”

Dana couldn't remember the last time she had fallen to the ground like that. As an adult it was a shock, a destabilisation. She had a flashback to childhood and how easy it had been to tumble and bounce back and not think anything of it. As an adult she felt the impact of hitting the ground, the juddering through her body. The impulse to cry. The shock of gravity.

And Jeff, comforting her, concerned, instinctively protecting her, holding her. ‘Let's sit down and catch our breath for a minute. Yes, yes, I'll have another iced tea. Fine.’ She managed to shoo away the manager who was turning the small scene into an operatic aria.

They sat down and Jeff took her hand, more relaxed now. ‘Jeez, you went flying sweetie. I was sure you’d cut yourself’. He was relieved, she could clearly see it in the twist of his mouth, in his furious blinking.

She was overwhelmed. The sudden fall, the noise, the headache both fake and real, and Jeff suddenly there, present and real. “Are we ok?” she asked him suddenly. “I mean, is everything ... are we ok?”

He cocked his head at her, not understanding. “I’m fine! It’s you I’m worried about.”

“No, I mean... us, you and me, are we ok?”

“Of course! Of course sweetie!” he answered loudly and squeezed her hand. He seemed so reassuring and she wondered whether she had just been insecure. Whether her fretfulness, her tetchy mood swings had been based on nothing more concrete than instinct.

He reached forward and kissed her forehead. “All good,” he reiterated.

But had he really understood?

As the waiters continued to fuss around them, Jeff and Dana sat quietly and watched elegant crowds start to gather at the opera house nearby. The tourists were in leather and heels, shawls and jackets, hair clips and ties. The Italians, in contrast, were dressed simply, with restraint. At the same time, homeless Africans gathered around the scaffolding shadowing the upmarket Galleria Umberto across the street, setting up shop, setting up home for the night. A bride and groom, followed by teetering bridesmaids, were shepherded by the photographer in front of Gran Caffè Gambrinus. He arranged them artfully against the twists of art deco stucco and started to take pictures. In the background, the bride and groom would never notice the foreign couple, their hands together on the table, quiet and pensive but seemingly content for now.

Vernita

Part 1: La passeggiata

My uncle warns me, “Anna, you’ll be kidnapped.” His voice is guttural and loaded with caution and menace, as though perhaps he might be the one to do the kidnapping.

I laugh, “I’m just going for a walk!”

I was the stranger in my father’s town. Even those who recognised my surname regarded me as a stranger. My visit from Australia was a curiosity. What was I doing in that small village in the hills? I was filling in with colour all the grey outlined shapes of my heritage. Those who had never ventured further than the next town found it difficult to see why it’s vital. Their heritage is tangible and constant, and has probably lived in the same house for at least two generations. Mine has a break in continuity, a voluntary exile, another language, another way of seeing the world. There are intrinsic rules I still need to learn.

I should, for example, be sleeping instead of walking after lunch. But I can’t waste sunshine like that, so I smile and nod at my uncle. He understands that I think he is being absurd, shrugs and goes to his room to lie down.

I step from the front door straight out onto the main street. The road slants upwards but I turn to follow the curve around the hill and down to the river.

I’ve been travelling through Italy for weeks but left Vernita until last. I’ve been travelling towards it slowly, cautiously. It had figured in several of my father’s recollections of the past, so I expected to find something familiar. All week I had explored the village. Is this the fountain where his mother washed their clothes? Is this the church

where he went to midnight mass at Christmas? Is this this carpenter's workshop he was apprenticed to in his youth? Can it be the very same? Can all these things still exist? Can they exist without him? I can no longer ask questions. That's when all the questions come to the fore.

In many ways, it *is* familiar, but I observe it from afar. Vernita is a movie set and I'm an audience member, rather than a cast member.

Is it dust or ash lining the streets? I can't tell. Not all my father's recollections of the town were positive. Not even the nostalgic ones. There is something disturbing about it. It isn't quaint and pretty in the way I imagined. Instead it's quiet and still. The village seems to smoulder as though it had just taken part in a medieval-style siege and perhaps come off second best. People seemed reluctant to emerge from their barn hideouts, weary and wary, still patting down their overalls. When they did emerge, they eyed you suspiciously.

I know I am observed as I set out towards the river. Some sit on their balconies and blatantly stare. Some merely creak open their windows for a better but surreptitious look. No birds twitter, no traffic stirs, no children play in the mid-afternoon sunshine of Vernita. There is just a careful, lethargic stillness.

The heat is intense and debilitating. There are beads of sweat across my forehead already and I haven't even left the grey stone buildings behind me yet. It was bloody minded of me to persist. Folly. There are valid reasons for some rules. I follow the road, plodding slowly, for half an hour. There is no footpath, just a worn bit of grass and dirt. There is no one about, no potential kidnappers. Yet I'm skittish all the same: when three sheep and a lamb clumsily step out of the long grass and cross my path it makes me stop short in surprise. They are startled too. For a moment, we all look at each other, still and pensive. Ears flick and hooves tap the ground nervously. The sheep stare at me like

everyone else has stared at me in the village. The stranger come to town. Who is she? When is she leaving? What is that God-awful Italian she's trying to speak? At least she's *trying*.

I step forward and shout at them, 'Baaahhhh!!!'

They quickly scamper away, bleating and fussy, not having any trouble with my accent.

I laugh at them but the laugh flakes and crumbles in the dry air. I walk on but pause again and step aside when I hear the sound of a car approaching. A battered old thing, music blaring, passes but then slows down. I tense. I thought I saw a couple in the front. Two children, not wearing seat belts, turn and raise themselves up on their knees so that they can glare at me incredulously from the back window. They frown at each other. There is some chat and hand gesturing. Puzzled faces. I can almost see them form the ubiquitous unspoken question in this town: "Who are you?"

My heart flickers and lurches just a little. The car idles there for at least a minute, just a few meters away.

Perhaps they were determining if they had enough rope?

I stand still, feeling vaguely panicky and silly at the same time.

But then suddenly the children plump down in their seats again, immediately bored. The driver changes gears and the car accelerates away calmly. I stand there a few long moments, staring after them. Dust scatters in their wake. Or is it ash?

The sun continues to pelt down and the relentless heat makes me sway a little. I turn to start the long walk back. Uphill. The prospect makes me sigh. No doubt this story will reach the village before me: "Would you believe it – there's a stranger going for a walk in the middle of the afternoon! It must be that foreign lady." They will roll their eyes.

I'm still learning the rules. I'm still learning that I will always be the "foreign lady," no matter how I feel inside.

Vernita, Southern Italy

Part 2: Il malocchio

My uncle isn't really my uncle. He's only "zio" out of respect. At least this rule I know. I'm staying in his house because the rest of my father's immediate family has passed away or is in Australia. Zio was a very close friend of my father's family, so I ask him, "What was he like as a kid?"

He snorts, "Spiritoso!" and I can easily imagine my father as naughty, cheeky, spirited and curious. "Once he and his brothers collected a whole bunch of fireflies in a jar, then brought them into the house and set them free. They wanted to pretend they had electric lights. Their mother was livid, but those boys laughed and thought it was wonderful." I picture the blinking lights, the soft whirr of a hundred wings, laughing children tripping over furniture, a mother shouting, exasperated.

He tells me this in Italian. I process, I understand. What I can't do easily and quickly is reply. If I do, a jumble of Italian, English and dialect comes falling out my mouth like a drunkard lurching out of a pub. I'm embarrassed by the expression on people's faces as they try in vain to understand me. Instead, I supplement a handful of broken words with exaggerated gestures.

So I simply laugh and smile broadly at Zio's story, but then I involuntarily wince too.

My aunt catches me. "What's wrong sweetie?" She cocks her head at me from across the table.

I feel hemmed in. I want to know, to see, to feel, but there are limitations and I feel their constriction, I am claustrophobic; a hand over my mouth. But I respond with:

“Headache.”

“Ah!” Zia says, “Someone must have given you the *malocchio* today, when we went to the bakery.”

The *malocchio* is a low-grade curse, a supposed stream of envy or jealousy, fired at you innocently or maliciously, but always causing harm. If you admire a baby from afar, for example, you have to go over and touch it, to dispel the *malocchio* which you might unwittingly send its way.

I am quick to smile, “Really, you think I’ve been cursed?”

“Cursed, no. I think someone admired you today, but they didn’t tell you to your face.”

“Not many people have come to say hello Zia. No one knows me or wants to know me.” There is a note of melancholy in my voice. Does anyone catch it?

Zia is thoughtful for a moment. “You’ve come a long way. That means you have money and opportunity. You speak English. You’re Italian is not too bad.” I see through that lie when she looks away for a moment. “You have prospects. Anyone can see that without even talking to you. And you’re pretty!”

I laugh at that. And wince again, at the pain in my head. So easily summed up. But I feel so much more complicated than that.

“Come on,” she says, “Maria is just next door.”

The stone steps to the entrance are absurd, made for giants when all the doorways are only tall enough for dwarves. The house itself is dark, with bright spots of 1960s furniture. Always, the smell of coffee and bread. We are warmly ushered into the kitchen and sat at the stout wooden table. Maria has doughy arms and plumped out cheeks. Under

her floral shirt, I can see that her skirt has slid up over her tummy and is tucked in under her breasts. She wears slippers and smells of yeast and lemons. She greets my Zia warmly, and exchanges a few words in a dialect that is thick and oily, oozing and running into cracks. Then she turns to me, and kisses both cheeks gently and sincerely. “Piacere,” she murmurs, and her soft hand clasps mine a moment. She smiles and her eyes crinkle kindly and sympathetically.

Zia doesn’t waste time: “Someone has given Anna the *malocchio*.”

Maria clicks her tongue and looks serious. “Let’s see.”

She pulls out a pasta plate and fills it with water. Then she asks me to look into the plate as she makes the sign of the cross over it. She pours a drop of olive oil over her little finger into the water. We all peer into the dish and when the oil drops congeal and form a big circle, I hear murmurs and more clucking: “Ohhh, look at that! Oh yes, no doubt.”

I look into the plate and see nothing but water and oil.

Maria puts her hand on my head, rubs my forehead, and makes a couple more signs of the cross. She rubs my forearms and gives each finger a tweak as if she’s trying to pull the curse out of me. For just a moment, it’s quiet and tense. Zia’s face is serious, her lips pursed.

Then it’s over. Maria takes away the plate and casually pours the water (maybe the curse, too) down the sink. We all smile at each other brightly and drink the requisite coffee. Hot and black, sugared but bitter at the same time.

After five minutes, I sit bolt upright. My headache has switched off like a light globe. Not faded away, not lessened, but switched off. I tell them, astonished, “My headache has gone!”

They both nod, satisfied, unsurprised, of course.

“Let’s just check,” Maria said.

She fetches the pasta plate back again, and carries out the same ritual. This time the drops of oil stay small and separate.

Maria nods calmly and with satisfaction, “Sì.”

I can think of nothing sensible to say but, “Thank you.” Maria smiles warmly in return.

Then she says suddenly, “I knew your father, you know. I think you’re very much like him.”

“Oh? How? What was he like?” An endless fascination with my father’s life in the place where he was born, as opposed to the place he adopted. I want to catch something. And I’m intrigued that she thinks I’m like him. I never feel quite like anyone. Not even myself.

“He was quite serious,” she said.

I thought of the chaos of fireflies.

She continues, “Oh he was a cheeky lad, and got into trouble with the rest of them. But your father was also determined about the future. He knew when he was old enough, he would leave. He had to, it was impossible to get ahead here in those days. But also, I think, because he wanted to see something other than this village.” She shrugs, “But I didn’t know him that well,” and gives me a bright smile.

I start to form a question in my mind, but by the time I’m ready to voice it in Italian, Zia is getting up from her chair, saying, “Oh, it’s late! I have to start making dinner!” And the question dissolves and a small shade of headache cast its shadow again. It’s frustrating that I can only communicate slowly in broken shards of a language I don’t know well; useless pieces that never made a whole.

We all bustle down the giant steps, sideways, carefully.

At the bottom, I turn and say to Maria, “Thank you again.”

She squeezes my hand, “Piacere, Anna.”

Vernita, Southern Italy

Part 3: La festa

Vernita is bustling with feast day celebrations for their patron saint, St Rocco. He is the patron saint of invalids, but can also be called upon to ward off pestilence and plague, when required. Entertainment has been hired from the city, the pork is starting to crackle on the spit, and towards dusk they will flick on the trellised illuminations which line the street that lead up to the church.

Zio, Zia and I crowd on to their tiny balcony to watch the procession go by. A lavishly robed priest leads the way. Four men balance a heavy ceramic statue of St Rocco, resting on a wooden platform, on their shoulders. It sways precariously, gold highlights glinting in the sun. I hold my breath but Zia reassures me that they've never dropped it. There are token donations slung around the statue, but the real offerings will be quietly stuffed into envelopes and left at the church.

A brass band follows, playing what sounds like a dirge. They play well but their uniforms look new and uncomfortable, and the musicians glance nervously at one another. Next come the devotees – men and women who honour St Rocco above all other saints. They're dressed sombrely but smartly. The music quells and as they pass, I hear the priest start up a prayer and a hundred voices respond. They're praying but they're also looking each other over, surveying the jewellery on show, the cut of suits, and whether shoes have been shined and handkerchiefs ironed. I see, among the women in particular, approving nods and scornful frowns.

We get ready for the *festa* which takes place in the town square opposite the church. The square overlooks the valley and at dusk I know the hills will twinkle with car headlights as people criss-cross the countryside scattered with villages just like this one.

It's my last night. Tomorrow I'll catch the train back to Naples, on to the airport and home. The other home. Because there's something here I'm tied to now, even if the knot is loose and needs tightening.

Zia appears at the open bathroom door. "Ready?"

"I think so."

She gives me one of those appraising looks and seems pleased. But then she says, "You need earrings. You can borrow these for tonight," and gives me some ornate gold drops she already had in her hands. They're heavy. I stand in front of the mirror, struggling to push them through the hole in my earlobe. Zia tries to help and as we struggle I suddenly feel tears track down my cheeks. I can't breathe.

"What's wrong!" she exclaims. "What is it? Don't wear the earrings if they hurt!"

I shake my head. I can't answer. I can't explain in English or Italian the overwhelming sense of nostalgia I feel for a home that isn't my home. How I've been homesick for this village all my life – a place I've never set eyes on until now – and how the prospect of leaving it is a flattening thud. I can't articulate that a part of me has been lit from inside with something that isn't Australian but can't quite be called Italian, and that it creates a sound like creaking wood in an old house, expanding and contracting, warping. I'm not sure who I am anymore. I'm not sure how to be. The context has changed. Can I be two things at once? I don't lack sincerity but I lack the capacity. I can't be Italian because I can't use the language properly, and surely that's critical? It is to them. *Them*.

And this village is where I can still find my father, even though he has long left us, and how I miss him still, terribly, and am not ready to leave it behind just yet. Who was I to him?

All these thoughts crammed inside a small bathroom with a patient aunt who puts her arm around me while she waits for me to stop crying, and says, "It's ok, shhh." She

pats my hair without understanding but without any further questions. She gazes at my reflection in the mirror, puzzled but calm.

“I’m sorry. I’m fine. Really.” I wipe away tears and straighten my dress. “I’m ready.”

Zia is understandably doubtful but she smiles at my courage in the face of who knows what and clasps my arms. “We’ll listen to some music, and joke and enjoy ourselves tonight, ok? Smile!”

“Ok. Ok,” I nod reassuringly. I take deep breaths, quashing melancholy and doubt. Now is not the time.

Zio is impatiently waiting for us downstairs and waves us out the door without even acknowledging our finery. Zia tells him off for this oversight and he grumbles and sighs as he locks the door behind him.

We promenade up the street, and meet up with other promenaders, keen on joining the festa. There are shy introductions and those who have eyed me from their windows as I head out for my afternoon walk now shake my hand and welcome me to town.

We reach the square and it is a chaos of camaraderie. Everyone is right here, right now. This is the town. People shout with laughter, or argue about politics. Children are licking sticky donut sugar from their fingers, their mothers wipe the sweetness from their faces. The square smells at once of salty rich porchetta and sickly cakes, of perfume and cigarette smoke, of beer and shoe polish. I’m overwhelmed but it’s hard to say if it’s joy or sadness. Such a fine line at times.

We find a small plastic table with chairs in a corner. From here Zio and Zia survey the crowd and accept visitors. Other chairs are dragged over and the circle grows. The elderly ask me about my impressions of Italy, the young ask me about Australia. In

everyone I see sparks of envy and scorn, of fascination and dismissal, of curiosity and boredom. At least they're talking to me now, trying to get to know me.

The hot emotion I felt in the bathroom starts to rise in me again as I struggle to answer. My heart stutters a little. I drain the beer someone has brought me, grit my teeth and try to use dialect. It's squeaky, my voice an octave higher than normal, and quiet so that people have to lean forward. I plough on, red faced and ignoring the confused and amused expressions. At least they're listening. Keep trying. What else am I to do?

Zio looks over at me, 'Goodness but you're serious. You've hardly smiled since you've been here.'

Perhaps he senses I need rescuing.

He's had a couple of beers by now, and says, "I know – she wants to dance. She's waiting for someone to ask her to dance. But the boys in this town are too slow!" He's grinning and looking around for a place to put down his drink.

Dread pours in. "Oh no, no I can't dance Zio, please, no."

"Come on!" and he takes my hand and I automatically place the other hand on his shoulder, as though I know what to do. Almost immediately we start to spin. It's a fast waltz and all I can do is hold on and move my feet and I'm moving and spinning and it's cool and wonderful and we travel far. I look up into the twilight sky, and I can't help it, I start to laugh. I shriek with laughter and my cheeks are wet with tears again. Zio responds by spinning me faster. The music is lively and buoyant, and everyone swims in the same direction, and the effort is subtle and gracefully, but boisterous too. The song ends and we come to a standstill, puffed out. People around us give us a hearty clap. I'm giggling. I hug Zio, "Thank you."

"You almost killed me!" he laughs. Then, more seriously, "There's always a place for you here," he says, "this is your home."

I smile in return. I'm more confused than ever and unconvinced about what "home" means. But for tonight at least, I'm starting to feel welcome.

The Waiter

In his youth, Carmine had been a handsome man, lean and sleek. He moved gracefully, with a potent energy. But his body, once lithe and toned, was softer now and his shoulders stooped a little. Now he was too weathered to be considered handsome. His cheeks were too hollowed out, his eyes were too often vacant. Anyone that knew him in his youth would see that clearly. But not Carmine. Yes, he was exhausted after work, and he no longer wanted to drink all night, exchanging vulgar jokes or political musings with his friends, but he still imagined himself young and attractive, and still able to draw women with little effort. Especially foreign women.

He was a waiter. A professional waiter, for life, not a student who would sooner or later go on to do something else. His hands were surprisingly calloused and rough, as though he'd done manual labour for years, instead of waiting. It was early Saturday afternoon and he was already at the restaurant, in a shirt that could not exactly be defined as white, and shoes that could have done with a polish if he'd had the desire and will. He leaned against the restaurant entrance, one knee slightly bent. And like this, he watched the street, as though it were fine to wait all morning for nothing to happen. After all, he was used to nothing happening. And the restaurant was never so busy that he didn't have time to stand around. So he watched. His arms were folded across his chest and his lips closed in a tight line. He had nothing to say. He still wore his dark hair long and tied it back with an elastic, more from necessity than style. He smelled strongly of cologne and it wasn't clear if that was his preference or because he was trying to hide the fact he hadn't showered in a couple of days. He did shave every day, but there was always a dark shadow

across his face that made him appear more mysterious and perhaps more untrustworthy than he actually was.

He always had a surly expression on his face, even when he tried to smile at tourists who expected a smile. He ought to have been grateful for their business because it kept him in a job, but the reality was that the expression on his face – especially when he had to respond to those who complained their knife wasn't clean enough, that they didn't want to pay for bottled water and that tap water was fine – said, "Listen, do me a favour, stay home and stop breaking my balls." But he never said it aloud. He only said, like a parrot, in heavily accented English, "yes," "no," "of course, sir." And in Italian, "sì", "certo," "prego signora." It was perhaps the Italians who bothered him the most. He didn't feel that same sense of obligation to be courteous. Maybe because the Italians were often more dismissive and rude than the tourists. The Italians didn't look him in the eye, he was nothing. Just the waiter. He didn't matter. He wasn't important. This is what he thought, even if perhaps it wasn't true. He loathed especially those wealthy, older Italians who thought they were rich because they could take a coastal holiday in Naples. Who were these people? No one of any consequence.

While Carmine stood in the doorway, a friend passed by on his motorino and waved at him. "Ciao Carmine! See you tomorrow!" The waiter merely nodded his head and muttered "O". Just like that. A single syllable that spoke volumes. His boss scowled at him. He didn't like Carmine's friend and suspected that he was involved in some dark and complicated business. Carmine wasn't a bad guy and his boss would hate to see him be led astray at this stage of life. Any time the friend dropped by, Carmine's boss soon moved him on, telling him to stop wasting everyone's time.

A woman approached, timid, sweet even if a little plain. She was not young but neither did she look middle-aged yet. She scanned the menu that was stuck to the window

beside the entrance. She was obviously a tourist. She was too pale, too innocent. She didn't have that arrogance that all Italian women were born with and honed until their death. The waiter liked the look of this woman and thought he would give it a crack, even though he didn't hope for much. He already sort of had a girl. She was a lazy slatternly thing, but every now and then her company did him good.

This sweet little tourist gave him a smile.

“Buon giorno,” he said rather formally.

With great concentration, slowly, she asked for a table in Italian. “Una tavola per una.” She seemed very pleased with herself. She was not wearing the tourist uniform – a t-shirt, shorts, an overfilled backpack, and horrible sandals. Instead, she wore a floral summer dress and low heels.

“Si, certo. This way miss,” he replied. He could be gallant when he wanted, when it was required. He gave her a small and absurd little bow and stretched out his arm to direct her to an empty table. Almost every table was empty because this was no hour for lunch. Only tourists ate this early.

“Signora or signorina?” he asked politely. His voice was still smooth and his tone elegant.

“Signorina,” she answered and bowed her head, embarrassed. “Actually, sorry, can I have a table for two? My friend is running an errand but hopefully will be here soon.”

He understood. Single female travellers were always talking about their “friend” who would appear soon, who was just getting something, catching a bus, getting their bags. He was not deterred. He led her to the table and pulled out her chair. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Mi chiama Sophia.”

“I speak a little English,” he told her. She didn’t need to know that his vocabulary extended only to what was required for the restaurant.

“Voglio provare a parlare in Italiano – voglio migliorare.” She wanted to practise her Italian. It took her a little while to say this. But he admired her determination. It was rare for tourists to offer more than just “grazie” or “per favour” and those words with such a heavy and disfiguring accent that he often misunderstood the first time they spoke. This lovely tourist had such a sweet and gentle face, such a happy, calm smile. Yes, he was going to try it on. Why not.

“Allora, dimmi!” he said flamboyantly. He subconsciously pulled up his trousers and prepared to take her order.

“Umm.... Hai qualche cosa senza glutine? Sono Celiaca.” Oh no. She was one of those – a coeliac who couldn’t eat gluten. These foreigners had every possible dietary malady. They were allergic to almost everything – nuts, dairy, gluten, you name it. Lucky for her she was so cute. He forgave her.

“Si, si, certo, non ti preoccupare,” he reassured her. Then he fixed her with a serious stare and lowered his voice. He stooped down a little, dropping a hand on the back of her chair, as though to whisper a secret. “Don’t worry, I understand. I’m also coeliac,” and he nodded gravely and sighed just a little, for emphasis.

She was still smiling but she narrowed her eyes a little. “Really?” she asked in a high voice. It was clear that she didn’t believe him.

“Si, si.” To convince her, he turned to the other waiter and asked him in English, “Paolo, how do I eat? Do I eat special food?” He gave Paolo a look.

Paolo stared back at him a moment, confused. “What do you mean special? You eat like everyone else,” and continued to polish cutlery.

“Come on Paolo, you know ... what sort of pasta do I eat?” he opened his eyes wide at Paolo and nodded a little towards the tourist. Paolo wasn't new at this game, he was just being a bastard.

But Paolo didn't feel like playing today. “Listen Carmine, what do you want from me? You eat pasta and pizza just like everyone else. Spaghetti, fettucine, just like everyone else.” He could be a belligerent cretin when he wanted to be. And sometimes, Carmine even got the impression that Paolo didn't like him.

The young woman observed this exchange in silence and giggled a little. She didn't even try to hide it. She had understood. “So, you're Coeliac, you say?” She smiled up at him.

Humiliated, Carmine didn't smile back. He stood up straight, cleared his throat and looked out to the street, over her head. “Ok, leave it. I give you time to look at menu. Is written on menu which is *senza glutine*.” He almost threw the menu on the table. On his way to the kitchen he snarled at Paolo, “Imbecile.” Paolo didn't even respond.

When he came out again, she was greeting a man: “Lorenzo, perfect. I just sat down.” He watched her kiss him slowly on the mouth.

“Ciao bella,” he purred back at her. “The hotel is organised. We're going to have a fantastico weekend.”

Carmine hung back at the doorway and his face quickly morphed back into its usual scowl. He gazed at them a moment, a swirl of something bitter drained through him like a strong whisky. Her friend had indeed arrived.

Virgil's tomb

Email

To: Gabriella

From: Richard

Date: Naples, September 2016

Today I finally visited Virgil's Tomb. You know how important he is to me. As he was for Boccaccio, Virgil has been my guide through the labyrinths of a kind of hell. Perhaps you'll say that 'hell' is much too strong a word. But this poet's life has been difficult, fraught with too much doubt and anguish. Sometimes *not enough* of either. Virgil was inspired here in Naples. He wrote and wrote. Allegory, instruction, and prophecy (some say). He was moved, as I expected to be. He was infected by his surroundings, the land, his compatriots, the Roman Empire. Such grand things. But when I look out to the horizon I see only traffic and the familiar profile of the tourist. And when I listen there are only incomprehensible shouts and scooter beeps. There is only chaos and noise. I have been untouched. Yesterday, I was deflated.

But today I left the Mergellina train station and wandered down a narrow, grimy street that ran alongside it. The Parco Vergiliano entrance was a gate someone had forgotten to close centuries ago. The ubiquitous cicadas and pigeons were my only company.

I followed the path to an elaborate memorial. Was this where his bones lay? I can't tell you – the inscription was in Latin. But I can tell you that thousands of others had

passed this way. Giuseppe Bora Di Biello left his name in the marble in 1790. Cadeto, Toncino, Ferdinand, Piero and even a Casper all left their graffitied names behind, to prove that they'd carried out their pilgrimage too. Boccaccio and Petrarch didn't bother – their names were etched in history instead.

Gabriella, should I have dropped to my knees and prayed? I wanted to. But I didn't know how.

But here at last was something that could potentially move me. There were ghosts in the park. The ancients, the recents, and all the layers of humanity in between. Perhaps Dante dreamt of Beatrice when he visited. Perhaps the spirits were those of the Grand Tourists, stout but hungover, dutifully marking an item off a well-worn list forever. Surely the sentimental and benign were more inclined to visit, so why did I feel a sense of dread and foreboding?

I walked on, past Leopardi's enormous bust, past the Roman tunnel connecting Naples to Pozzuoli, up the stairs, down the stairs, unnerved by rustling in the undergrowth followed by heavy silence. In such a big space, in such a big city, a profound silence. And at the top, the point where Virgil would have gazed around him at the Posillipo hills, where he should have gazed at an optimistic blue sky, a forgiving blue ocean, and that mighty volcano, I was instead confronted with smoky industry. The houses on the hills were tethered together like stray dogs. There was the metallic roof of the train station, and the trains themselves. That profound silence broken by the thundering trains, their screams and whines of what? Distress? Warning? I looked out and I shuddered and laughed at the same time. I frightened the pigeons with hysterical laughter. Feelings arriving at last but it was only *almost* anger, it was only *almost* despair. It was something but it was anguish and immobility and the sense that there was nothing worthwhile to think or write about anymore.

Gabriella, I came to visit the 'tomb' here but it's only a symbolic mausoleum. His bones are not here, not even his ashes. Instead there are only second hand memories. Where are his bones? His book of spells? I want to pay my respects. In the small domed structure, there is a tripod, blackened with age as well as smoke and fire. Who has been here before? Countless foolish poets and writers still making offerings to a god. The fear and anxieties clamour at our backs and we cannot hold them all back.

Gabriella you know I've been writing my heart out here, but my heart judders most days. It helps me write only drivel. Perhaps I have my answer then, that I am not a poet. I write pathetic and pointless poems, which are sentimental and diabolical. In three months I've scratched at paper and pawed at the keyboard. But maybe the time it takes doesn't matter? Virgil took 11 years to write the Aeneid and on his deathbed he ordered it burned, unfinished. He was denied his final wish, and I can't help being glad of that. I write, and these last two months, thousands of words have jostled for position. They swoop and dive, crash into blank pages, take up all available space in my head, in my mouth.

Gabriella, this is not a love letter. It's can't be. It's a lament. But of course I've missed you. I didn't realise how much until now. This city was made for love as well as tragedy. The seafront promenade, taking in ocean and sky, volcano and hills was made to inspire love. It frames passion. Couples press up against each on benches, they desperately clasp hands and push against the bracing breeze. But I walk with my hands clasped behind my back, chin down, watching the emerging moon gently glow and skim its light across the water. I walk on, pining, listless, failing to love. Perhaps with this too, I've made a mistake. Where are you right now? Still in Italy? Are you close?

Gabriella, perhaps I've made a mistake.

But see? See how sentimental and clichéd I'm being? The stories have all been told a thousand times before, perhaps a thousand times a day. One lover leaves the other and regrets his choice too late. Is it too late? Gabriella?

I confess I brought my sacrifice to burn in the tripod in Virgil's tomb. I carried with me a small sonnet about a woman in the square with her head in her hands, as though she were waiting to die. She was a study of impending doom. Naples too is on the cusp, like a phoenix. The ashes are swirling and in the hot and humid wind they form clouds and columns before collapsing again. Virgil ached for the Roman Empire to be great again. He was rooting for Augustus, there's no doubt. And Naples is trying too, she's trying. She's gathering her resources, warming up her voice and someday soon she'll be shouting from the rooftops. But right now she is the woman in the square, waiting for something to happen so she doesn't have to die. I too wait for something.

So I laid my sonnet gently in the tripod bowl. With a plastic lighter bought from the station shop, I set fire to a corner. I only had a minute or two before my sonnet disappeared. What did I say? How did I appeal to Virgil? I asked him to intervene. I asked him to swallow my sonnet and help me stave off death – the death of creativity, of vision, revelation. I asked him to open my eyes, to prick my skin, to help me understand. The tomb was dark and slightly damp. Outside the trains grunted and squealed. Perhaps I only added to the collection of the city's ashes, drifting down from history, from Vesuvius, from the countless tragedies through the centuries.

But Gabriella I felt something. I felt the spark catch! I shivered as my sonnet writhed and fell apart. It glowed red for a moment and the smoke filled my nostrils. My soul too, felt as though it was being scorched and scorned, goaded into action. I fled! I paused for a moment, and then I fled the dark and damp, running up the stairs and down again, pulsing through the winding path. Leopardi's bust was a blur as I hurried to the gate.

On the street again I had to catch my breath. Bent over, the blood rushed to my head, along with hundreds of words and impressions, phrases and scenes. They started to group together, the lines coalesced into verses, the verses into pages of an epic. I pulled out my notebook but my hands were shaking and I knew anyway, that what had formed had already burned its impression on my mind.

Perhaps my sacrifice worked, Gabriella. But it was you, it was you that lit that spark. Virgil stared, sombre and prophetic. But it was your green eyes that flickered at me from a warm memory and the words that tumble forward now, jostling for space, are for you.

Perhaps this is a love letter. But is it too late? Gabriella please reply.

Richard x

Vesuvius

The morning was brisk. Despite the languid heat, there was a briskness about the van which nipped around corners, climbing ever higher into Vesuvius National Park. They were a small group – only seven. During the short drive from their pick-up point in Naples they chatted quietly amongst themselves. This was Dana and Jeff’s last day in Italy. Tonight they would pack their considerable suitcases and sip their last glass of pre-dinner prosecco before an early start for the airport. They each of them now quietly stared out at the countryside. Now and then the hazy blue of the bay flickered into sight. There was a gentle calm about this morning. A white flag fluttered between them and each seemed to have accepted defeat and victory at once, which made them both content and restless.

The driver was a dark stocky man who wore slip-on sandals with short socks, his pants rolled up past his ankles. His English was all stutter and broken pieces. When another driver almost ran him off the road, he muttered darkly in dialect, “Stupid bastard. You know the person coming down gives way. You *know*.”

But only Lorenzo and Sophia understood – Lorenzo because he was from a town not far from Naples, and Sophia because she had been studying hard for the sake of Lorenzo. They smiled indulgently at each other, amused. Their hands were clasped tightly, resting on their laps but tense as though they were about to leap out together.

Richard sat opposite and observed them, an ugly grimace twisting his mouth. He looked thrown into his seat and his limbs came to rest in an untidy way. As Lorenzo and Sophia came together for a small gentle kiss, Richard sighed and folded his arms, hurling his body in the opposite direction to stare out the window instead. He frowned hard.

The driver came to a halt in the carpark where they were to meet their guide, Mirella. He got out and opened the van door for them, and they gathered together in the dusty heat. The driver put his hand up, “Wait. Wait,” staying them as though they were children who would soon dash off disobediently. He trotted off to find the guide.

Alan and Rebecca, the last couple to make up the small group, were Australian, like everyone else.

“Jesus it’s hot!” Alan had no capacity for the subtle. He found a low brick wall and eased himself down. He was already red-faced in the early morning heat. Already slightly overweight, Italy had filled out any remaining hollows. They had just finished a tour and had planned to do nothing at all. But after a day or so with only each other for company, they had decided to do the day trip to Vesuvius. “Too hard to get there by ourselves!” they told each other. They were just being practical.

Rebecca answered, “You’re right there, love!” She looked up the long path that rose steeply ahead of them. “Can’t the van keep going? Do we have to walk?” She seemed concerned but it was more for her husband than herself. She knew only that they were going to walk along the volcano crater. It never occurred to her that they would have to walk some way to get there. Almost a kilometre, in fact, of loose gravel and powdery dirt.

She turned instead towards the marquees and trestle tables laid out with beads, crystals, necklaces, figurines, and plastic fans. She fingered a blue fleecy zip-up jacket with “Italia” blazoned across the front. Without smiling, a young Italian man leaned over the table and asked, “What size?”

“Oh gosh no, it’s too hot! I don’t want one of these. It’s making me hotter just looking at it!” Rebecca replied.

He nodded in agreement. “T-shirt? What size?”

From where he sat, Alan folded his arms and shook his head, “We don’t need anything else. Come sit down.” Rebecca ruefully shrugged her shoulders at the young man and walked back to join her husband. The young man’s bored expression didn’t flicker. He sat back down again and stared at his phone.

“Buongiornooooo!” Their guide Mirella approached them with a booming voice and open arms. She was lush and healthy looking, with big sunglasses and several gold bangles which clanked together when she ran her hands through her hair. Those were the only touches of glamour. Mirella was a vulcanologist, dressed in a drab beige shirt and trousers, with sturdy hiking boots.

After some housekeeping, Mirella put her hands on her hips, and with a big childish smile, asked “Are you ready for a nice walk?” She was spare but her voice carried.

The others looked dubiously at their scuffed sneakers and battered sandals as they shuffled together.

“Head count before we start! We have one, two..... seven before we go up the volcano, and so I want seven when we come back! Otherwise, no good for me. I lose my job!” Mirella tittered with mirth, but it just made them nervous. Had she lost someone before?

“Ok, we go now! Please, follow!” Mirella led the way up the volcano.

“Ah jeez. I’m already stuffed!” Alan was the first to complain, after a couple of minutes. The sun felt closer so high up, as though just over their shoulders, waiting to pounce. His face was already red and sad circles of sweat were building under his arms. “I’ll meet you up there!” he wheezed.

“Please don’t worry, take your time. Don’t have a heart attack please!” Mirella tittered again. Her accent rounded the “p”s out to long warm embraces.

Dana and Jeff walked hand in hand for a few minutes but then each had to focus on the steep climb. Dana shifted her hands to her hips for balance. Jeff kept putting his in his pockets and then taking them out again. He was irritable this morning and vague. At breakfast, he had brooded over his espresso and left half his pastry uneaten. “All ok?” she had asked. She was still sore from the awkward landing when she was knocked off her chair last night by misbehaving tourists.

And today she felt a bit nauseous. She hadn’t told Jeff she was pregnant. She decided she would wait to see what happened when they got home. Jeff was attentive and affectionate last night, especially after her fall. They seemed to be coming together again, connecting, finding a way to each other in a way that didn’t bruise or do harm. He had brushed the hair from her face and she had smiled up at him, both of them sincere, forgiving.

“Mmm... fine,” he had responded, distracted. “Home tomorrow,” and he smiled at her, as though the thought of it gave him relief.

“Home,” she replied. As though it gave her no relief at all. What happens when we get home, she thought.

Richard puffed up alongside them both.

Jeff, to be friendly, turned to him and asked, “How are you going, ok?”

“Easy does it.” Richard glanced back when he heard Lorenzo and Sophia screeching with laughter. Sophia gave Lorenzo a playful swipe on the arm but then pulled him close. “Where do they find the energy.” He frowned and sighed at the same time.

Jeff snorted. “They must be a new couple. We don’t do that anymore, do we sweetie?” He looked at Dana who managed a small smile in return. She couldn’t tell if he was joking or complaining.

But Richard was still serious. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad they’ve found each other.” He looked anything but glad. “Love is rare. It’s a rarefied pure air that we breathe without even noticing. We drink its pure waters without realising we’re being nourished. It’s only when the well dries up and we start to thirst that we realise what we had.”

Jeff stared at him a moment, somewhat taken aback. Who spoke in such an absurd way? But he nodded, deliberately thoughtful, placating, “You might be right there Richard.” Turning to Dana he raised his eyebrows. She smirked in return. It was nice for them both, to be on the same side so effortlessly.

“I had that love once,” Richard continued. “She was pure and simple and I equated that with uninspiring. Instead her constancy was a thing of beauty itself. One that held me together, kept me sane.”

Jeff had no response to this. He dreaded to ask, knowing the answer already, but did so anyway: “And what happened?”

Richard paused for a moment and looked Jeff full in the face. His eyes were mournful. “I let her go. I let her go because I was a selfish bastard. And now I’m a wreck. I’m wrecked and frozen in agony like those poor creatures I saw in Pompei.” He walked on, stoic and heavy footed.

“You’re erm... quite the poet there Richard.”

And now he stopped abruptly and put a hand on Jeff’s arm. His face was desperate and anguished, “No, I’m not. That’s just it. I’m not any sort of poet or writer at all. I gave it a shot but frankly, I’m shit.” He let go of Jeff’s arm and somewhat embarrassed walked a little faster, away from them.

Jeff stared after him and then looked at Dana.

“What the heck was that about? That guy has issues.”

Dana had to laugh. “I don’t know but he did look really quite sad. I don’t know if it’s because of some girl, or because he is, as he so clearly points out, a shit poet.”

Jeff smiled. “You’re not very nice.”

“But you love me anyway, right?”

“Not as much as Richard loves that girl he lost!”

Jeff reached into his pocket again. He’d been at this choreography for weeks now. Put the ring in its box in his pocket. Then check it’s still there. Check again. Once more. Rearrange how it sits. Turn the box on its side. Does it lie flatter? No. turn it back. Casually, naturally. Not drawing attention.

Despite some pesky doubts, he was determined this time. Seeing Dana vulnerable last night, thinking she was sliced open by broken glass when she was pushed off her chair, made him lurch. It had startled him, how fast his heart had raced, feeling his blood swirl and pulse through his veins with panic. He looked at Richard a little further along. His head was bowed, and he looked at the dirt track instead of the ocean and sky. Jeff squeezed the ring box. Yes, this was right.

Dana walked beside Jeff, puffing and grimacing now. It wasn’t the climb that was exhausting her, it was the effort not to throw up. She had suddenly started to feel wretched, her insides tumbling, unpleasantly turning and turning. She was now delicately strung. It was best to keep quiet, look ahead and climb.

Her stance was a salute to the sun – one hand shading her eyes. No one had thought to bring hats. It was piercingly hot but the sun was fuzzy in the sky, menacing without really shining like it does during bright summer days. The sky was too humid, too smoggy, too vague. The heat was starting to pinch everyone’s nerves. Their clothes clung and folded into damp wrinkles. The only noises were heavy breathing, scuffing feet, and small coughs and stutters. The wind should have been a cool relief but instead it was a nuisance,

throwing long hair into eyes, burnishing cheeks and tickling ears. The dust snuck into their noses, stuck in their throats.

Finally, they reached the crater's edge and sat down in the shade of a meeting point, silently catching their breath. Jeff and Dana looked back down the volcano and watched as Alan struggled up the last part. He was wheezing painfully. Rebecca stayed close to him, dabbing at her forehead with a tissue, hands on hips, head down.

Richard sat on his own. Chin in hands, surly looking, casting dark glances at Sophia and Lorenzo who said nothing at all but beamed contentedly.

Mirella was waiting patiently for everyone to arrive. She looked fresh and untroubled by the climb. She smiled serenely at Alan and Rebecca as they pulled up alongside everyone else. "It's hard work huh? I do it so many times a day! Anyway, don't worry, we are almost there." Alan could not respond. He simply bent over, trying to catch his breath. He took large grateful swigs at his water bottle.

When Mirella judged they'd reached their capacity to be pushed a little further, she urged them on. "This is the good part!" she exclaimed loudly.

They all wearily got up, collecting handkerchiefs, bottles of water, pamphlets, and continued walking. They reached a point where a small steep and rocky path veered away to the left. This is where Mirella stopped. "Ok, here we are!"

Alan snorted. "What? You want us to go up there? Are you crazy?"

Mirella looked at him earnestly, "This is the crater! You want to see, you come with me. If not, you stay here and I come get you later." She put her hands on her hips.

Alan stared at her a moment. He didn't like to be challenged. Rebecca tucked her arm around his, "Of course we'll come. Alan's just resting a moment."

He untucked her arm, grit his teeth and stood up. "Right, let's go then!"

“Good! Good! Follow me everyone, follow me!” Mirella quickly scaled the steep start to the trail. They all followed with reservation but quickly noted that the path levelled out again. As soon as they found their footing, they started to gaze at the view that had suddenly opened up to them. Not only did they take in the entire crater of the volcano, but Naples and the bay. Even though they had been glancing at the view in between slogs of walking, the scene suddenly unfolded peacefully as they stood still, and they each scanned the horizon, creating panoramic memories that would refuse to be captured in exactly the same way by their cameras.

“My God it’s huge!” Jeff exclaimed.

“That’s what *she* said!” Alan guffawed. Rebecca flushed red with embarrassment and bowed her head. Nobody responded. Lorenzo looked confused, Sophia shook her head.

Mirella swept her arms across the vista and gave them historical facts and stories. She fed them in morsels and they jumped up for the scraps like eager puppies.

When she finished and they could contemplate the landscape in silence again, they realised how barren it was. So benign looking when hundreds of years ago a scene of devastation had such a long-lasting effect on the shape and course of both history and the future at once. Below them a little world still revolved around this volcano and Pompei – archaeology, , volcanology, economics, tourism, and the lives of those Neapolitans and surrounding neighbourhoods who might indeed lose their own lives and houses if it erupted again. It was a testament to human belligerence that we should not learn our lessons and instead put ourselves in harm’s way again. Defiant, courageous, stupid.

The crater was a jagged circle that arced away from them on both sides. Jeff looked down into the centre. It wasn’t what he had expected. Perhaps foolishly he had imagined darkness – the black soul of a treacherous mountain. Perhaps he had expected puffs of dangerous steam, the hissing of bubbling sulphur, and the heat from a hidden flame.

Instead, the crater was a dry, empty bed of rock and rubble, of gravel and dust. He was overwhelmed by the silence, and the stillness of such drama. Not an abyss then, but a simple depression in the landscape. Such an enormous emptiness made him mentally stagger. There was something in it that exposed the barrenness of his own life, stark and surprisingly shallow. It cemented his thoughts about Dana and creating a family, which in turn staved off his own sudden and unexpected sense of worthlessness in the face of the crater's might.

So Jeff took a deep lung-full of air. His hands started to shake but there was a sense of calm in his mind too. This was right. There was something about Richard's hopelessness, and about Lorenzo's desperate affection, something jarring about the clumsy Alan and Rebecca that made him want to protect himself and Dana too. And this gaping desolation in front of him made him feel as though he should, he *must*, take Dana's hand and hold it and hold it and keep on holding it. He faced her and grasped both of her arms lightly.

"Dana." That's all he could manage, quietly. Another lung-full of air. He was feeling light-headed. Again, "Dana."

Dana screwed up her eyes. It was possible she was about to throw up – there was no more resisting. "What's wrong Jeff? You look like you're going to pass out." He hadn't noticed she looked the same.

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the velvet box. Dana's eyes grew wide without smiling. Her mouth fell open a little and she flushed hot from head to toe.

Jeff started to bend down, forgetting his knee regularly creaked out loud at this imposition. He snort-giggled for just a moment and Dana, starting to smile, clapped her hands over her mouth, whether to cap her emotion or stop herself from vomiting, not even she could say.

But as Jeff's knee hit the hard, gravelly surface and he grimaced with pain, in his peripheral vision he spied Richard. Richard was watching Jeff and Dana, his facial expression full of repugnance. He was taking small steps backwards, as though frightened or repelled by the unfolding scene.

Jeff frowned. Richard seemed awfully close to the edge. Perhaps the crater had had the same startling effect on him – reality writ large.

Richard looked back at him, scowling with contempt and bitterness, still in backward motion.

Suddenly Jeff grabbed Dana's arms again and heaved himself up as quickly as he could. He shoved the box in her hand and brushed past her.

"Richard, wait, don't do it!" Jeff knew there had been something off-key about Richard. He leapt forward and grabbed Richard's shoulder.

"What the...?" Richard's instinct was to pull back. "Get off!" But he *was* awfully close the edge and his foot slipped on the loose gravel. He wavered sideways a moment, trying to regain his balance.

"She's not worth it!" Jeff was desperate to stop him from leaping over the edge and grabbed at him again.

Dana was waving her arms around. Mirella was walking fast towards them. "Gentlemen, ppplease be careful! It's a long way down!" She was grinning but it was a grinding of teeth and as she spoke she shook her head a little.

"What the fuck are you talking about!" Richard and Jeff were now grappling with each other, kicking up dust and beads of sweat.

Dana was trying to coalesce her almost proposal with the scene in front of her. Jeff was manhandling Richard, trying to drag him away from the edge. Richard was trying to resist, with shouts of "hey," "oi," and "listen mate." But Jeff would have none of it.

Richard suddenly shoved Jeff hard, but as he did so, the momentum sent him backwards, onto the very edge of the crater, his face was a picture of horror as he started to slide away. His instinct was to grab Jeff, and Dana watched as they both slid silently over the edge.

“Dio Madonna! Ma perche`!!” Mirella was beside herself, rushing carefully to the edge whilst pulling out her phone. She seemed furious.

Dana was beside her in an instant, breathless and shaking.

They both anxiously peered over the edge and were in time to watch Richard and Jeff gently slide to a stop at the end of a rather short slope. A slab of rocks jutting out from the cliff face, only a few meters down from the crater’s edge, halted their fall. After that ledge, there was sheer drop. There they rested, puffed out, stiff and scratched, slightly bloodied but intact and alive. Richard was clutching his ankle.

Dana’s body finally had its way and she turned aside and tried to throw up discretely.

“Don’t move!” Mirella’s voice was still surprisingly sing song and calm. “Pppplease don’t move.” She dialled a number on her phone and began a furious and animated conversation.

Richard started to moan. “Jesus, I’ve broken my ankle for sure. Shit. SHIT!” His moans and shouts gathered momentum. He managed to turn his upper body around, find Jeff beside him and punch him hard in the arm. “What the fuck were you doing? What the fuck?”

Mirella, watching them, lost her sing song voice, “Ma siete proprio imbecile! I said don’t move. Pppplease.” She threw her hands up and shook her head tersely, exasperated.

Jeff’s voice was small and tense, but it carried up to the others peering at them from the top of the crater. “I thought you were going to throw yourself into the volcano.”

“Why the fuck would you think that? Because of a girl? Oh jeez you’re an idiot. IDIOT!” He punched Jeff again.

Alan was hooting with laughter and shaking his head as he sat down on a rock. “Never in all my life...” Rebecca was almost hyperventilating, startled by the scene, by Alan’s reaction, by Mirella’s urgent foreign voice. Sophia and Lorenzo clung together as though saving each other, wide-eyed and worried.

Mirella herded them together a little way away, where the path was wider, and forced them sit down, not willing to lose another tourist. “Sit. Wait.” It was an order. A helicopter would be arriving soon to deal with Jeff and Richard, and then she would walk them back down.

Dana smiled to herself uneasily and gratefully perched on a flattened rock for a moment. She caught her breath and steadied her shaking hands. She realised she was clutching the velvet box Jeff had shoved at her. Still shaking, she opened it. Inside was a solitaire diamond of breathtaking size and sparkle. She quickly snapped the box shut and held it tight, trying to breathe more steadily.

He was alive. He was even a hero of sorts. Trying to save someone’s life. Never mind they didn’t need saving. She patted her tummy reassuringly with one hand as she wiped her mouth with the other. The baby would have both parents.

She felt lighter. Once she realised Jeff was alive and well enough, she felt euphoric and light. Everything else seemed to fall away – the anger and the tension. Doubts too, about herself, about the future, crept away, unwanted and unneeded. It was as though everything was enough for her right now, just as it was. She felt a slight shift in herself, a resettling of everything she thought she knew. This feeling would not last long, she knew. But they had come to the end of their travels two slightly different people, and their frame of self-reference had altered subtly so that neither of them would be able to say what had

changed or how. The baby would no doubt change all of that again – a different, less tangible journey. She felt full and overwhelmed but the feeling was reassuring and comforting. In fact, Dana felt enormous, as though she alone contained the universe, and there wasn't much room after that for anything, or anyone, else.

Dana got up and walked cautiously towards Mirella who was keeping an eye on Jeff and Richard. She asked Mirella, "Is it ok ...?"

Mirella understood and motioned for Dana to come closer. Still, she held her elbow and cautioned, "Close enough."

Dana looked down. The two men sat as far apart as their ledge would allow them, both terrified, contrite and awkward all at once. They were still and pensive.

"Jeff!" Dana called out tentatively.

He was sitting with his knees drawn up, his arms wrapped around them. At the sound of Dana's voice, he carefully looked up, not wanting to move too much.

"Sweetie." His voice was strained and woeful.

"How are you feeling? Ok?"

He smiled up at her ruefully. "Yep, ok, I guess!"

He had shown some passion, Dana could not deny it. "We'll be ok" she shouted down, thumbs up. She was trying to be reassuring.

But she studied him a moment and it occurred to her that he looked so small.

Me, myself and the Other: Self-reflexivity in Travel Writing

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Volume 2: Exegesis

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Abstract

This dissertation will explore self-reflexivity in travel writing. Specifically, I will present an 18th and a 20th century travel text and demonstrate that the authors undertake similar self-reflexive practices within the parameters of published travel literature, despite their different historical contexts. Hester Thrale Piozzi (*Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy and Germany*, 1789) and Jan Morris (*Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, 2001) both produced travel works on Italy and in doing so, I will argue, they also wrote about themselves in ways that are not immediately apparent. The observations they present to their reader about the “Other” requires first an examination of self or the selves that inhabit both an “insider” and “outsider” world.

Within their travel works, both authors are particularly self-reflective with regards to being an insider/outsider. Within this framework they present impressions covertly, bound by their perceived reader and the parameters of genre. Although self-reflexive, their texts must still be subservient to a readership that is interested in place and the escapism offered by travel literature.

My own collection of short stories, *All Autostrade Lead to Rome*, reflects this act of confronting the Other whilst travelling as a catalyst for self-exploration and self-revelation. I have created a set of characters and stories that reflect the ambivalent experience of self-discovery and the intense examination of self and relationships triggered by the act of locating that self in a foreign place and culture. The ten stories in the collection chart a literal journey from the North of Italy to the South, as well as an existential journey from order and routine, to disruption and chaos. The fictional travellers, taken out of their home context, are forced to reconsider and reassess themselves – their actions, their decisions, their relationships and their futures – and most of them find themselves straddling tropes of being an insider and outsider, similarly to the nonfiction of Piozzi and Morris.

This exegesis will first present an overview of self-reflexivity, particularly within the context of travel writing. Following that, I will provide a brief overview of Piozzi and Morris and their respective works (*Observations* and *Trieste*). Next, I will demonstrate how Piozzi and Morris “perform” self-reflexivity in remarkably similar ways with regard to portraying insider status, and then I will do the same regarding notions of being an outsider. In the next section, I will discuss self-reflexivity and self-exploration in my own work, and the conclusion will be presented in last section.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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**Me, Myself and the Other:
Self-reflexivity in Travel Writing**

Chapter 1: Introduction

It seems to be rather that the experience of travel allows the exposure of cracks already existing, but normally suppressed, in the concept of self, and the other is not so much examined as made to bear the projection of tensions within the subject. (Youngs 137)

Introduction

This dissertation will explore self-reflexivity in travel writing. Specifically, I will present an 18th and a 20th century travel text and demonstrate that the authors undertake similar self-reflexive practices within the parameters of published travel literature, despite their different historical contexts. Hester Thrale Piozzi (*Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy and Germany*, 1789) and Jan Morris (*Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, 2001) both produced travel works on Italy and in doing so, I will argue, they also wrote about themselves in ways that are not immediately apparent. The observations they present to their reader about the “Other” requires first an examination of self or the selves that inhabit both an “insider” and “outsider” world.

Within their travel works, both authors are particularly self-reflective with regards to being an insider/outsider. Within this framework they present impressions covertly, bound by their perceived reader and the parameters of genre. Although self-reflexive, their texts must still be subservient to a readership that is interested in place and the escapism offered by travel literature.

My own collection of short stories, *All Autostrade Lead to Rome*, reflects this act of confronting the Other whilst travelling as a catalyst for self-exploration and self-revelation. I have created a set of characters and stories that reflect the ambivalent experience of self-discovery and the intense examination of self and relationships triggered by the act of locating that self in a foreign place and culture. The ten stories in the collection chart a literal journey from the North of Italy to the South, as well as an existential journey from order and routine, to disruption and chaos. The fictional travellers, taken out of their home

context, are forced to reconsider and reassess themselves – their actions, their decisions, their relationships and their futures – and most of them find themselves straddling tropes of being an insider and outsider, similarly to the nonfiction of Piozzi and Morris.

This exegesis will first present an overview of self-reflexivity, particularly within the context of travel writing. Following that, I will provide a brief overview of Piozzi and Morris and their respective works (*Observations* and *Trieste*). Next, I will demonstrate how Piozzi and Morris “perform” self-reflexivity in remarkably similar ways with regard to portraying insider status, and then I will do the same regarding notions of being an outsider. In the next section, I will discuss self-reflexivity and self-exploration in my own work, and the conclusion will be presented in last section.

Self-reflexivity and the travel writing audience

Self-reflexive writing is not just a re-telling of events from a personal perspective, but an active process of emerging, evaluating, and constructing identity through discursive practice. This type of writing, most often associated with autobiography, is not simply a matter of recording information which is complete, whole and true (Simon-Martin 226; Smith and Watson 3). The act of autobiography in any form is a performative act that emerges together with a perception of self. The act of writing itself is a vehicle for discovery, evolution, and definition (Smith 108) and must, to some extent, be undertaken at a distance, where the subject (the author) becomes the object. Smith posits that there is no self before the act of self-narration and that there is no self to present like a final set of facts (108). Perception of self, and especially the presentation of self in written, published form is bound up with memory, with elements suppressed or brought to the fore, and with agency and social politics. The perceived reader is pivotal to this process of self-reflexivity because it is the reader who creates parameters for the published form. An author will generally only present those personal elements that they think the reader will relate to, understand, accept, and believe. The reader determines the path of self-reflexivity and forces the narrator to be self-conscious about what elements are revealed, and just as importantly, what is censored from their text. These “...gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and transgressions” (Smith 110), in particular, represent an alternative identity. Facts and impressions are deliberately omitted, skewed or repressed, depending on what the author considers as in/appropriate and un/important (Culley 218).

Travel has long been regarded as a transformative act, and an opportunity for intense self-evaluation (Blanton 2; Porter 5; Whitfield 243). Therefore, travel literature can to some extent operate in a similar way to autobiographical self-reflective writing: the author has an opportunity to construct identity through narrative, and to use the opposite, the foreign Other as a mirror through which to examine and project him or herself¹. Culley, referring to a similar autobiographical writing practice, diary keeping, states that self-reflexive writing is potentially “capable of unlocking mysteries of the human psyche and becoming the occasion of profound knowledge, growth and change” (219). Similarly, Hunter states that, like autobiographical writing, travel writing becomes entangled with identity, margin and centre, and is an attempt to “construct and confirm authority” (29). As acknowledged above, the reader’s expectations are just as critical to the reception of travel literature as they are to purely self-reflexive texts. Although constrained by different parameters, both Piozzi and Morris were similarly bound by the public’s expectations of them, particularly as, at the time of publishing their texts, they both had well-established public personae unrelated to their creative output. I posit that both authors undertook similar self-reflexive processes in their travel works, but in self-conscious, constrained ways, relevant to the historical context of each text.

Piozzi’s and Morris’s respective readerships received travel literature differently and had vastly divergent expectations with regard to just how present the narrator should be in the text. Therefore both authors necessarily manifested their self-reflexivity in nuanced ways that suited the context; however, I will demonstrate that despite the different parameters, their reflexive undertakings were still remarkably similar. In the 18th century, travel texts were predominantly epistolary or written in diary form and both were especially acceptable for women writers. Travel writing was supposed to be educational and informative, and works that were too egocentric or subjective were criticised (Kinsley 74). Readers were far less respectful towards and tolerant of female authors in general, and travel writers in particular. To some extent, Piozzi would have been aware of this and would have anticipated criticism and possibly derision for her work (Zold n.p). McCarthy states that men, in particular, were extremely resistant to the increasing number of female writers

¹ An analysis of travel writing using a self-reflective framework has been employed by other researchers, for example Abbate Badin with regard to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Kinsley with regard to women’s travel writing, Leon and Majid Jafari with regard to Naipaul, and Walchester with regard to 19th century female travellers.

during the late 1700s and early 1800s, feeling jealous and threatened by this encroachment into their field of expertise, and they were therefore patronising towards them, and trivialised their work. McCarthy states that, "... the gender revolution in authorship presented a mass of painful stimuli of the same kind that all social revolutions present: threats to existing privilege, threats to traditional social arrangements, and the horror of the new, which is commonly imagined as the 'unnatural'" (103).

Whilst in the 18th century both travel and travel writing were still in a literal and metaphorical state of exploration, in the 20th century travel writing was regarded by readers, and indeed scholars, in a completely different way. In the last fifty years in particular, travel writing has increasingly been subjected to intense critical analysis, especially within postcolonial frameworks, typified in particular by the work of Mary Louise Pratt (*Imperial Eyes*), and Edward Said (*Orientalism*). Holland and Huggan argue that travel writing could be viewed as "... an imperialist discourse through which dominant cultures (white, male, Euro-American, middle-class) seek to ingratiate themselves, often at others' expense" (xiii). Morris is an exemplary representative of modern travel literature: her works are undeniably about place, with observations and first-hand accounts of culture and manners, but the narrator is fully present and her sense of self is a strong element of the narrative. Readers expected 20th century travel writing to employ the narrative tropes of fiction to tell a story as well as represent place, and that included seeing the author as a character performing the I/eye-witness account. Unlike the readers of Piozzi's era, the 20th century readership expected the personal and intimate. It wanted to learn about a place but through impressions and the retelling of experiences, and in straightforward prose format. And, although still woefully under-represented, female authors were more easily accepted and respected.

Piozzi and Morris

Hester Piozzi and Observations

Hester Lynch Salusbury Thrale Piozzi [1741-1821] is more often recognised as a society woman and biographer of Samuel Johnson than she is author in her own right (McCarthy 100). Her home in Streatham was a haven for London's literati and highborn. Her marriage to Thrale was one of convenience, made at the insistence of her mother. Although she bore twelve children, only four girls lived to adulthood. Brownley states that Piozzi spent most

of her life trying to please others – first her parents, then her first husband, then her daughters (67). All, to some extent, took advantage of her stoic, altruistic and dutiful nature. Whilst alive, she published many works including *Florence Miscellany* (1785), *British Synonymy* (1794), and *Retrospection* (1801) as well as other travel-related works such as *Welsh Tour* (1774) and *Scotch Journey* (1789). Many of these works were highly criticised and dismissed as inconsequential and poorly executed. However, her biography of Johnson, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson During the Last Twenty Years of his Life* (1786), was well received and highly regarded and it is for this work that she is enduringly remembered. On the back of her success with *Anecdotes*, she decided to publish *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy and Germany* (1789). D'Ezio contends that it was Piozzi's conscious intention with *Observations* to stamp out a place of her own in an otherwise totally male-dominated canon ("The Advantages" 165). It was one of the first travel books to be written by a woman which was not in epistolary form.

Piozzi's reasons for travelling to Italy in the first place were highly contentious. She travelled to Italy for her honeymoon after her second marriage to an Italian singer and music teacher, Gabrielle Piozzi. The relationship and subsequent marriage was the cause of much criticism, condemnation and ridicule (D'Ezio, "The Advantages" 171). During her travels she kept extensive notes and a personal journal, and on her return, perhaps spurred by the success of *Anecdotes* and realising her potential to present a unique view of Italy, she began to collate these notes into a comprehensive narrative and eventually published it to great acclaim and commercial success. D'Ezio claims that it was with *Observations* that "a woman's travel narrative began to take the conscious form of cultured and professional prose in the field of travel writing" (Hester 69). My analysis later in the document will illuminate how *Observations* can be interpreted as a self-reflexive text rather than just another tome in the Grand Tour canon. Her observations of Italian society and femininity, and her feelings of being at once an outsider and an insider inevitably caused her to think and write reflectively about her own situation at home; however, these observations were tempered by her anticipation of a critical (and potentially volatile) readership.

Jan Morris and Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere

Jan Morris commenced her travel writing career as "James" and is arguably most famous for two matters: *his* reportage on the British conquest of Everest in the 1950s and *her* well

documented and publicised account of her gender reassignment in 1974 (recounted in her autobiography *Conundrum*). Morris is a prolific writer who has published over 40 books (mostly travel-related but also, notably, historical and fictional) as well as a number of essays, and magazine and newspaper articles. Morris's travel works can be traced in an arc from a strongly imperial to a somewhat tempered colonial position (Phillips 19).

Sometimes subtle, sometimes overt, Morris's conflicts with regards to gender and national identity (first as English, then as Welsh) are reflected in many of her travel texts. Morris goes one step further with *Trieste*, blatantly referring to it as a memoir as much as a travel book, and considering it to be a book about old age, as much as it is about the city. The slim volume traces Morris's many visits to Trieste – first as a young officer in the army, then throughout various points in *his*, then *her*, life. In her own words, Trieste is symbolic of her life, her adulthood, and her sense of in-betweenness. It is “an allegory of limbo” (*Trieste* 7) and the melancholy which permeates the city reflects her own sense of melancholy and exile, and her own grappling with identity. She indicates that it is a critically important place to her and one that reappears discreetly in many other of her works (for example, the fictional *Hav*). This is perhaps because she considers it to be “an existential sort of place, and its purpose is to be itself” (*Trieste* 116) and therefore where she feels she can most be herself – flawed, ambiguous, unapologetic.

It is worth noting here that a self-reflexive reading of *Trieste* in some ways seems obvious, as Morris states herself, “Much of this little book, then, has been self-description” (186) and the text contains many personal anecdotes and recollections. However, missing from *Trieste* are more traditional elements of memoir or autobiography, such as reference to family, friends and colleagues, and very little personal history unrelated directly to Trieste – in short, very little context. Although Morris is very much present in the text, there are surprisingly few instances of a first-person account, with much of the book in the third and even second person. Morris also says on many occasions – within the text as well as in interviews and other books – that she is concerned with allegory and the idea of any given thing or situation having more than one meaning. My analyses, therefore, will focus on what is less overt or what is missing from the text, the role of the reader and the considerations of publication, and what can be interpreted as allegorical of the self. Importantly, my analysis will also demonstrate how Morris's self-reflective practices mirror those of Piozzi's, drawing a thread of connection between two centuries of travel writing.

Chapter 2: Self-reflexivity manifested through expressions of being an insider

Despite the two hundred-year gap between their works, Piozzi's and Morris's texts operate in remarkably similar ways with regard to self-reflexivity, in particular with regard to identifying as both insider and outsider. First, I will demonstrate ways in which their works operate within similar frameworks, and then I will identify important ways in which they vary.

Establishing agency and legitimacy

Both authors use authoritative reportage to convince the reader, and perhaps themselves, of their insider perspective. Through their firsthand accounts of their travel experiences, they go some way to establish themselves as truthful and reliable narrators. More importantly, they both establish themselves as narrators with exclusive access to the host culture. Both prize their insider status and display their position at every opportunity, and both use rhetorical devices to illustrate and labour the point. Both authors use strong and unambiguous language and phrasing, and they often address the reader directly, taking the reader into their confidence. Importantly, however, in both cases the authoritative voice does not convey a sense of being accepted by Italians as an insider – it is only that Piozzi and Morris themselves feel as though they are on the inside, projecting outwards, where “outwards” in this instance is home.

Piozzi blatantly uses language to remind the reader of her authenticity – that she is in Italy, having the experiences, writing *in situ*, and telling the story from the inside: “I am come home this moment...” (*Observations* 184), “... it is no longer yesterday I was told an anecdote...” (*Observations* 189), “I have been this morning to...” (*Observations* 176). The phrasing about being told an anecdote is particularly demonstrative of her language to convey immediacy and exclusivity – she was told something, probably in Italian, that she was then going to share with the reader. Her self-awareness, her presence in the text,

reinforces this specific and deliberate appeal to the reader to not question her authority or authenticity. She also uses possessive pronouns to establish her inclusion in Italian culture: “The paving of our streets here at Milan...” (50), “Our peasant girls ...” (172). It is notable that “our” is contextual and Piozzi sometimes uses it to mean Italian, and sometimes to mean English. This ambivalent use of possessive pronouns is indicative of the cultural elements she identifies with as a demi-naturalised Italian, and those that are firmly still English; often these divides are moral and the choice to use “our” or “my” seems to be a careful and deliberate one, so as not to become too much of an outsider to her English audience so that they in fact feel as though they are the Other. The following example illustrates this point.

Piozzi offers readers an exclusive scoop with regard to the commonly accepted *cicisbeo* practice. The English were aware of this Continental practice of a wife keeping a public male companion to accompany her to social engagements and stand in for her husband, but it was not clear whether this was also a sexual relationship or just platonic. Regardless, the arrangement was regarded as highly immoral and scandalous by the English (Abbate Badin 98). Piozzi reiterates to the reader that as a woman, and as a trusted semi-Italian one, she is able to consult directly with a young Italian lady “... to know how matters really stood ...” (*Observations* 52). She then states:

Well! we will not send people to Milan to study delicacy or very refined morality to be sure; but were the crust of British affectation lifted off many a character at home, I know not whether better, that is *honester*, hearts would be found under it than that of this pretty girl. (*Observations* 52)

Here she uses “we” to indicate the English, and “home” to unambiguously mean England, so that her Italian insider position seems to be suspended for a moment. However, whilst she acknowledges that she does not necessarily agree with the practice, Piozzi still aligns herself with the Italians who, as she often remarks throughout *Observations*, with regard to romantic relationships seem to be truer to themselves and follow their passions, less concerned with rigid societal convention and opinion. Piozzi greatly admires this apparent freedom, especially the freedom of women to express themselves and acknowledge their wants and desires, and she often remarks on this throughout *Observations*. However, there is also a strong degree of anger and resentment in this language (“the crust of British affectation”), and perhaps here she alludes covertly to her own marriage. In her diaries,

published under the title *Thraliana*, she acknowledges the indiscretions of her first husband, Mr Thrale, and is resentful that society's judgement upon his character is so lenient.

This example illustrates the careful balance required to locate herself as an insider, and ironically, her insider information about and consequent perspective on this particular Italian practice in fact draws the two cultures closer together. Chard posits that Grand Tourists developed feelings of guilt and disloyalty towards their own country if they admired and lauded the Italian way of life too stridently. There was also a fear that, through travel, a person would be exposed to radical new ideas and modes of being which could irreparably influence and change them and render them unacceptable to society on their return home, and so "...expressions of pleasure are always counterbalanced by expressions of censure..." (Chard 47). Barrows says of Piozzi that visibility in English society was still important to her, and she wanted to be accepted by Italian society but also prove that her husband's position did not have a detrimental effect on her morality (xxv). Piozzi seems to be aware of the danger of her insider status alienating her from her own society – a society which is also her readership.

In the 20th century, Morris does not have the same concern and her position as insider can be displayed without the same encumbrances. If 18th century travellers feared change and influence, in the 20th century travellers were encouraged to observe and be affected by what they witnessed. Like Piozzi, Morris also uses an authoritative voice and language to convey insider status, and at the same time reflect on herself. She makes it very clear that she has a long history of visiting and living in Trieste and although in no way claiming to be "demi-naturalised", through vast accumulated experience is therefore highly qualified to speak of Trieste. Morris's language is sometimes kitsch tour guide, for example, "Take a lane into *citta vecchia*..." (*Trieste* 22) and "But if you stop, park in a lay-by and walk down a flight of steps into the woods below, you will find it a magical place" (*Trieste* 137). Morris rarely uses the "I" voice; instead she conveys intimacy through phrasing that suggests a one-on-one conversation with the reader. On the occasions in which she does use the first person, it creates a specific effect. For example, she says "I may have been wrong about ..." (*Trieste* 56) which renders her vulnerable and encourages her readership to have even more faith and trust in her text, despite the uncertainty implied by her admission. Her willingness to admit error only reiterates her honesty and truthfulness. She

also captures the reader through fictional story telling narrative devices. For example, she describes an important historical figure, Revoltella, but instead of presenting information in a factual straightforward way, she invents a lavish party peopled with high society, describing fictional conversations and events as though they were true. She then ends this with "...a century or more later you and I may think ..." (*Trieste* 41) which suggests a degree of reality, and makes the reader feel as though they too were privileged enough to be present.

Although Piozzi and Morris both use language and narrative to convey insider status, Morris positions herself differently. Morris rarely aligns herself with Italians, or identifies with their culture. In fact, *Trieste* is mostly peopled with real historical figures, like Revoltella, and also other imaginary characters. Those Italians that she does describe in the present are sometimes conveyed more as caricatures. Morris's insider mode operates in connection with her own culture. Morris conveys authority and credibility by positioning herself at a distance and then projecting herself onto her own culture. For example, Morris visits the village of Draguč, in Croatian Istria, just outside Trieste's borders but still very much connected by history and its population. She talks about a church which is decorated with the Glagolitic script – an ancient Slavic language and alphabet – and instructs the reader explicitly on how to visit. Her introduction draws the reader into an intimately exclusive experience:

This is what you must do when you arrive at the minute village of Draguč...Leave your car at the entrance of the village, which only has one narrow street, and walk between its old terraced houses to the small piazza beyond. The whole village is likely to seem utterly deserted, with not a sign of life, but if you cry a shout for assistance into the silence, four or five doors will open and four or five old ladies will simultaneously tell you where to find the key to the church of San Rocco... 'Number 24,' they will say, and sure enough there at its door you will find a sixth old lady already holding out a venerable iron key to you. Up to the very end of the village you must go... A bit of a struggle with its antique lock, a loud creak as the door opens, and before you is a glorious Istrian surprise. (*Trieste* 147)

This is one of her guidebook moments where she uses fine-grained detail in the second person to describe an experience the reader could potentially have – one that she has clearly had herself. In this passage, Morris is inclusive and draws the reader close as an

authoritative guide, offering an insider view. There is pleasure evident in her description, and a smug but benevolent willingness to share it with the uninitiated. Again, the use of second person here operates as an authoritarian command. Her insider position is cemented by the certainty of her instructions and by the consequences of actions. The reader is given no room to consider the scene in their own way – this is how it must unfold and be experienced.

This confident and certain voice is in many ways a trademark of Morris's works and operates to hone identity, both self and projected. However, the second person here could be considered to operate in two ways – in an inclusive way, taking the reader into her confidence, but also as a distancing mechanism, locating her squarely as observer and guide, othering the reader and creating a void between them. As noted earlier, *Trieste* is undeniably personal and revealing, and passages like this, which occur throughout the book, simultaneously brings the reader close and distances them, deflecting attention away from Morris as the narrator. Morris shares something intimate with the reader, but does not directly reveal anything about her feelings and impressions, pushing the alleged memoir back onto travel writing ground. Nonetheless, like Piozzi, Morris uses authoritative language and position as expert guide, and experience and intimate knowledge to declare her insider position.

Piozzi and demi-naturalisation

Whilst Piozzi and Morris use similar linguistic and narrative devices to establish authority and insider status, one way in which Piozzi differs in her self-expressive mode of insider, is that she strives to establish herself as almost Italian. This is a fraught exercise, as noted above, because of the danger of estranging herself entirely from her audience.

Nevertheless, she makes a strong case for being able to offer a unique perspective, and perhaps in doing so, establishes a new and worthy position within her own society from which she was shunned just before moving to Italy. In fact, it could be that she deliberately uses her voluntary exile to re-establish her authority at home, in readiness for her return.

From the outset, Piozzi advises her readers that they will learn something authentic about Italy because she has done her best to “assimilate” with Italians and because she is “demi-naturalised” through her marriage to Mr Piozzi. This sense of being an insider compels her to “interpret Italian culture, rather than merely record its peculiarities” (D'Ezio, *Hester* 81).

She makes it clear to the reader that she has been studying the Italian language. She spends some time with Italian aristocracy in France before arriving in Italy and notes, “The conversation [was] ...particularly pleasing; especially to me, who am naturally desirous to live as much as possible among Italians of general knowledge, good taste and polished manners, before I enter their country, where the language will be so very indispensable” (*Observations* 12). She often recounts conversations and anecdotes in Italian and then provides a translation. She also demonstrates her command of and sensibility to the language by recording at length her observations of different dialects, stating, “My knowledge of the language must remain ever too imperfect for me to depend on my own skill in it; all I can assert is, that the Florentines *appear*, as far as I have been competent to observe, to depend more on their own copious and beautiful language for expression, than the Milanese do...” (*Observations* 159). Like Morris’s example above, her apparent modesty and hesitancy only serve to ensure that the reader is utterly convinced of her honesty and authority.

However, although strident about being an insider, Piozzi never loses sight of her Englishness, and never allows the audience to lose sight of it either. The following example demonstrates how she manages to convey and retain insider status on both fronts.

The libraries here are exceedingly magnificent; and we were called just now to that which goes under Magliabechi’s name, to hear an [sic] eulogium finely pronounced upon our circumnavigator Captain Cook; whose character has attracted the attention, and extorted the esteem of every European nation: far less was the wonder that it forced my tears; they flowed from a thousand causes: my distance from England! [M]y pleasure in hearing an Englishman thus lamented in a language with which he had no acquaintance! (*Observations* 134)

Piozzi’s overt national pride is on show in this passage, and the reader could not fault such a patriotic and loyal reaction to Cook’s eulogy, nor doubt her definitive position as an English woman. At the same time, she again alludes to her expertise in language and her insider status by noting that the eulogy was written in Italian, and that not even Cook himself would have understood it. Piozzi shows a strong awareness and command of the fine line between offering her English readership something exclusive and creating too wide a distance between them.

Morris and personal connection

Whilst Morris too conveys a deep attachment to Trieste, she does not use Italian phrases and translations or demi-naturalisation to demonstrate this. Instead, she conveys this deep connection through personal history, and through having spent long periods of time there at key moments of her life, for example, as a young soldier posted there during World War Two. This operates in two ways – at a surface and deeper level. On the surface, Morris illustrates her insider position by being explicit about her fame. She constantly draws attention to her connections to wealthy, educated, influential people, and minor aristocracy, and to her own celebrity. She describes a scene in a restaurant:

... [other customers] are all clearly well known to the management. For that matter so am I, if this is, as I rather think it is, the same restaurant at whose table, in 1978, I wrote with vinous pleasure in the book I was reading ‘Am I really *paid* to do this?’

And yes, presently the proprietor, excusing himself from his conversation with the obvious Professor of Slav Linguistics eating alone at the corner table, comes over to greet me ... (*Trieste* 21).

At a deeper level, however, a life narrative must not only express the external “known” person who is recognisable to others but also the inner person, presenting “... a history of self-observation, not a history observed by others” (Smith and Watson 5). Morris establishes her deeper connection to Trieste, and consequently reveals more of herself, by identifying what it means to her personally: “... however often I go there, for more than half a century the feelings it stirs in me have remained the same, and in those moments of sudden stillness, I am not simply revisiting the place, I am re-examining myself too” (*Trieste* 3). Morris’s account of Trieste is undeniably more intimate and more overtly memoir than Piozzi’s text, but in this way, she conveys the same sense of authority and truth, and displays a readiness to share intimate knowledge of a place in a way in which no one else could.

Whilst she claims unambiguously that the book is a reflection on old age, personal and sentimental, Morris offers very few overt “memoir” moments. Throughout her career, she has been at once uninhibited and honest (for example, see *Conundrum*, her account of her sex change) but also notoriously private and guarded (for example, mostly keeping her

family and partner out of the text, even in *Conundrum*). Morris makes it clear that in writing about Trieste she also writes about herself: “Much of this little book, then, has been self-description” (*Trieste* 186). So the insider view she offers is not just of Trieste, but into her own thoughts on old age, the past, nostalgia and being an exile. The parallel creates a strong bond of trust between Morris and her readership who feel privileged to be given access to both the city and Morris herself. Smith states that the reflective consideration that precedes the autobiography deeply effects the process of storytelling (109), and Morris has clearly given considerable attention to how she as a character will appear in *Trieste*. Although ruminative and contemplative, there is a degree of complete self-assuredness and control that counters some of the moments of doubt and despair in *Trieste*. It is ultimately how she articulates insider status, offering the reader something novel and profound from an exclusive and otherwise unattainable position in both place, status, history and even gender.

Chapter 3: Self-reflexivity manifested through expressions of being an outsider

Whether male or female, the autobiographer is always a displaced person. To speak and write from the space marked self-referential is to inhabit, in ontological, epistemological and discursive terms, no place. (Brodzki 156)

As discussed, Piozzi and Morris both make strong claims of exclusivity and/or authority to identify as insiders. However, both also identify as outsiders or exiles amongst their peers and friends, and within society in general. These self-perceptions, also identified in other texts (for example *Thaliana* (Piozzi) and *Conundrum*, and *Pleasures of a Tangled Life* (Morris)) seem to be exacerbated during their travels, and, particularly for Morris, during moments of homesickness. Philips states that travel writing can be a vehicle for creating an overlapping “in between space” in which binaries are disrupted (9); Kinsley reiterates that travel can be decentring, disruptive, or require repositioning (70), and there are clear instances in both texts where interaction with the Other is critical in forcing Piozzi and Morris to confront their own identities and reassess their roles, particularly with regard to national identity and gender, and who they are not. It is important to note that the focus of their outsider feelings is generated mostly, but not entirely, in relation to their *home* society, not the *host* society.

Outsider feelings articulated through reflections on identity

Until her Italian marriage, Piozzi had been a conventional and conservative 18th century society wife and mother who was well respected and admired by both men and women. When her first husband died, she was constantly watched and judged by her own circle. In response to salacious gossip she has heard about herself, in *Thraliana* she writes, “I am sullen enough with *the Town*, for fancying me such an amorous Ideot that I am dying to enjoy every filthy fellow” (530). When she fell in love with Mr Piozzi, her children and society in general very much disapproved because he was an Italian Catholic, well beneath

her social status. She was criticised by others for not taking her daughters' futures into consideration above her own inappropriate amorous inclinations. The stress of the situation took a toll on her health, and it is only after a serious bout of illness that her daughters conceded she should marry Mr Piozzi. Her sense of being an outsider, shunned and discarded by trusted friends and family, was already strong before she left for Italy. In *Observations*, on numerous occasions Piozzi remarks on the relations between men and women, the role of wives and mothers, and on marriage itself. These frequent observations build a powerful and identifiable association with exile and exclusion, and of being an outsider.

Piozzi clearly admires Italian women and the freedom they seemed to have within society, and within their relationships. She notes in Venice that, "...Venetian ladies are amorously inclined: the truth is, no check being put upon their inclination, each acts according to immediate impulse..." (*Observations* 93). She passes no judgement on the women, only notes their sensuality, their ability to act as they wish, and perhaps the indulgence of thinking of themselves first above others. She specifically notes that there is "no check" in Italy, implying that it is an accepted cultural norm there but not in England. Here she seems to be tapping into her own inability to openly display her desires and wants in England, being made instead to feel ashamed of any sensual feelings. Chard, whilst discussing a different example of Piozzi observing a woman overcome by passionate feeling, notes that Piozzi is often quick to temper expressions of sympathy, and "In doing so, she imprints on her commentary a fear that her identification with a woman so clearly at the mercy of passion might call into question her own authority as a detached observer of manners" (Chard 167). Already considered to be an outsider for following her illogical passions instead of her familial duty, Piozzi's descriptions display a measured response to morally questionable practices.

She undeniably admires all Italians, not just women, for their evident capacity to think and speak freely without the same reticence an English person would have for fear of being publicly jeered and mocked. This point is made on many occasions throughout *Observations*. For example, she extols the Italians' virtue of "not condesend[ing] to live a lie, if now and then they scruple not to tell one" (*Observations* 130), and goes on to say:

... surely it is a choice delight to live where the everlasting scourge held over London and Bath, of *what will they think?* and *what will they say?* Has no

existence; and to reflect that I have not sojourned near two years in Italy, and scarcely can name one conceited man, or one affected woman, with whom, in any rank of life, I have been in the least connected. (*Observations* 130)

She identifies being English with being judgemental, dismissive and constricting, and as those qualities do not always align with her own, they lead to feelings of being an outsider. At times her expressions of being an outsider are, similarly to Morris, acts of voluntarily distancing herself from English restriction, and sometimes they are melancholic and wistful. She describes the Italians as having a “Candour, and a good humoured willingness to receive and reciprocate pleasure...” (*Observations* 35), something that she implies that the English are lacking, even though in this instance she does not specifically say so. Piozzi also observes the extremes of Italy in seemingly mundane things like the food and landscape, but perhaps in doing so also alludes to societal conventions which seem so much more open and given to excess. She notes admiringly that, “Here is no mediocrity in any thing, no moderate weather, no middle rank of life, no twilight; whatever is not night is day, and whatever is not love is hatred...” (*Observations* 319). She identifies with the Italians, and in doing so, once again marks herself as an outsider within her own circle.

Phillips posits that gender and imperialism are almost always foremost in Morris’s writing, most obviously in her autobiographies, but also in her travel and historical works (9). Phillips also asserts that Morris’s work has gone from being overly imperialist to slightly apologetic, but without attempting to engage in a de-colonising discourse, and goes so far as to say that Morris physically decentred herself by moving to Wales and culturally away from imperialism (Phillips 9, 11). It is the constant appearance of these two identity factors – gender and national identity – in *Trieste* that most starkly demonstrate Morris’s sense of being an outsider. Similarly to Piozzi, Morris has a highly-developed sense of national identity and connection to England and Empire, but Morris’s perspective has shifted and undergone recalibration over almost fifty years, as is illustrated throughout *Trieste*.

Morris establishes connection and sympathy with all manner of exiles in *Trieste*, including Jews. She says “...the Jews I most admired were those Jews of the diaspora who had not abandoned their pride of origin...who were essentially supra-national, extra-territorial citizens of the world” (*Trieste* 93). Throughout *Trieste* Morris writes with pride of English colonialism, but then acknowledges her Welsh ancestry (as a “racial half-breed” (*Trieste* 99)) and the decline of Empire. Towards the end of the book she then describes and lauds a

Utopian “no place” where national identity does not exist at all – a “Fourth World” where “you will not be mocked or resented, because they will not care about your race, your faith, your sex or your nationality” (*Trieste* 179). She goes on to say that in this Utopia “bigotries are usually held in check, people are generally good to each other, at least on the surface” (*Trieste* 180) (echoing almost exactly Piozzi’s words in the earlier example). All this seems to suggest a history of having experienced all those elements, of having constantly confronted criticism, judgement and exclusion, and that even whilst identifying as one nationality or another, Morris still feels like an outsider, and not only an outsider but an exile. Indeed, she goes on to say:

I write of exiles in Trieste, but I have generally felt myself in exile too. For years I felt myself an exile from normality, and now I feel myself one of those exiles from time. The past is a foreign country, but so is old age... (*Trieste* 186).

But the exile she writes about is a voluntary exile, and an existential one at that. As occurs in the writing of self, identity is constructed (Smith and Watson 33) and in *Trieste*, Morris establishes a melancholic and nostalgic theme that is entirely of her own making. Missing from the text is any acknowledgement of privilege, and that the physical travels she undertook were voyages she *chose* to undertake, at length, with and without her family, to earn a living and practice her writing craft – an aspect she shares with Piozzi who also travels because of privilege and wealth. Whilst Morris uses the device of exile and aligns herself with the dispossessed and displaced, she was never expelled from any place. The passages about exiles must be related to her sense of being an outsider to society, cultural norms and practices, traditional family structures, and traditional gender roles. Her choice of exile appears to be located in her desire to distance herself from structures and expectations to which she cannot, nor wishes to, conform.

As noted, notions of gender are also a source of conflict and displacement. Although scope does not allow a thorough discussion of gender issues in *Trieste*, it is worth noting that it is undoubtedly an ongoing preoccupation of Morris’s and one that accentuated her outsider feelings in Trieste. Interestingly, her experiences of Trieste are as both man and woman, and somewhat exaggerated versions – James was a soldier at war, Jan was a mature woman. In *Conundrum* Morris expresses remorse for lost time (143), and although never regretful about her gender reassignment, she acknowledges the loss of one identity for another, and this perspective can be traced throughout *Trieste*, especially if one interprets

the book entirely as allegory. Morris writes, “But the bay of Trieste looks a regretful bay. It can never be what it was, and reminds us from the start, as I was first reminded half a century ago, that this city was built to a lost purpose” (*Trieste* 16). Morris acknowledges her gender perspective throughout *Trieste* but not overtly, and missing are the obvious connections to gender roles such as Morris as mother/father, wife/husband and lover. Morris places herself in an ambiguous vacuum with herself as the only reference point.

Fenwick, who is otherwise mostly uncritical of Morris’s work, derides Morris’s hyper-femininity stating that she must know that she cannot really understand what it is to be female, “yet nowhere does she admit it” (78). Morris draws attention to womanly objects and situations in a way in which women generally would not find necessary (Fenwick 80), and she accepted inferior, sexist treatment during the late 1970s because if she highlighted mistreatment or inequality, it might be “interpreted as dissatisfaction with the role she had just chosen for herself” (Fenwick 81). It appears then, that Morris was always acutely aware of performing gender and enjoyed playing roles, particularly in the public domain. Again, if we read *Trieste* as allegory and autobiography, Morris plays with ideas of gender and her own unique situation. For example, she writes about border crossings thus:

I have always loved the moments of travel when, brought to a halt by a striped barrier, approached by unfamiliar uniforms, you feel yourself on the brink of somewhere unknown and possibly perilous (*Trieste* 133).

She continues to talk about the dangerous and unpredictable elements of frontiers, but with clear relish and fascination. These moments of transgression and transcendence both literally and metaphorically appear to be thrilling moments for Morris, so that we start to understand that there are other elements of being an outsider which are not repressive or melancholic for Morris, but are laced instead with pleasure and volition. This idea of crossing borders, of going from one state to another, seems to echo her transformation from man to woman, and the exciting element of crossing unknown frontiers and leading the way. In *Conundrum* she acknowledges that the Lancers (the military unit she was assigned to), “never treated me as one of themselves, and for this I was grateful: I was welcomed as a transient visitor from across some unmarked frontier, and this seemed apposite to me” (24), reiterating the idea that Morris was sometimes comfortable with being the outsider, unique and special, and that it could be a source of liberation too: “exile

can mean a new freedom, too, because most things don't matter as they used to" (*Trieste* 186).

Piozzi as an outsider to Italians

Although overwhelmingly both authors' expressions of outsider status are in relation to English society and culture, Piozzi differs from Morris in that she acknowledges that she is also an outsider to the Italians. As established earlier, Piozzi goes to great lengths to establish herself as quasi-Italian through marriage and effort; however, the effort seems to be wholly for the benefit of her readership, to communicate a sense of uniqueness and privilege. Referring to Grand Tourists, D'Ezio states, "Spatial dislocation destabilised certainties, pushing women travellers to self-discovery from the unusual angle of an outsider both to Italian culture and to their own" ("The Advantages" 160). It is possible that Piozzi's observations of and admiration for Italian society contributed to her understanding that, whilst she did not always conform to her own society's expectations, neither was she able to practice or appropriate Italian cultural practices. In the 18th century there was no context in which she could exist in one society and practice the cultural mores of another. It is arguable that she had already strayed too far from her own society, as established earlier.

Piozzi seems to be conscious of these two opposing facets of her identity. As D'Ezio notes, "At times she assumes the role of *spectator*, at others as someone who happens to be *observed* as part of the *spectacle*, a position that neither male nor female travellers before her had accomplished" (*Hester* 82). There is a telling example of Piozzi realising her true status as foreigner, and as merely one of a great line of English tourists. Of her visit to the Vatican library she writes:

... neither book nor MS. could I prevail on the librarian to shew me, except some love-letters from Henry the Eighth of England to Anne Boleyn, which he said were most likely to interest *me*: they were very gross and indecent ones to be sure; so I felt offended, and went away, in a very ill humour ... (*Observations* 279).

Suddenly her exclusive access, thus far typified by comments such as "By the indulgence of private friendship, I have now enjoyed the uncommon amusement..." (*Observations* 41), is negated. There is no exclusivity or inclusion on offer and Piozzi is firmly denied

any special regard or consideration. Not only was it common to read all available material on Italy before leaving home, but Piozzi often quotes previous authors; therefore there is no doubt that Piozzi would have been keenly aware that viewing the letters was a common trope on the Grand Tour and had been for decades, and that countless others had had the same experience. Richard Lassells made mention of the letters in *A Journey Through Italy*, Part II in 1698 (40), and so did yet another well-known Grand Tourist author, Joseph Addison, who journeyed to Italy in 1701 to 1703: “I shall conclude my observations on Rome with a letter of King Henry the eighth to Anne of Bullein, transcribed out of the famous manuscript in the Vatican...” (Addison 211). Smollett in 1765 acknowledged how usual it was to see these letters: “I saw none but such as are commonly presented to strangers of our nation...” including “...some of that prince’s [Henry the Eighth] love letters to Anne Boleyn” (Letter XXXIV).

It is not clear whether Piozzi took offence at the content of the letters or at the disregard given to her status. The incident perhaps reminded Piozzi that on the whole she was perceived as one of the many *English* tourists on a well-worn tourist path, with no particular status afforded to her Italianness. Indeed, on another occasion, speaking about her exclusion from Roman high society, she says, “... and if the Roman nobles are so haughty, who can wonder ... one can scarcely be surprised at the possessors [sic] pride, should they in contempt turn their backs upon a foreigner, whom they are early taught to consider, as the Turks consider women, creatures formed for their *use* only, or at best *amusement* ...” (*Observations* 295). Piozzi was particularly conscious of all those who had travelled and written before her and was keen to set herself apart, and she primarily tried to do so sometimes through her obviously unique gender perspective, but also through her position as quasi-Italian. When this device failed, it is possible that she experienced feelings of being an outsider to both cultures.

Morris and homesickness

Piozzi’s expressions of homesickness are sporadic throughout *Observations*, and are a more straightforward longing for the familiar and comfortable. Her comments related to homesickness rarely allude directly to notions of being an outsider. Instead, for Morris, homesickness, and to some extent nostalgia, permeate throughout *Trieste*, and is woven into contemplation of being an outsider and exile. A sense of belonging is bound up with homesickness, as Watt and Badger state, “Most importantly, homesickness is accompanied

by acute longing and intrusive thoughts about home and attachment objects” (516). Morris’s moments of self-reflexivity and homesickness are often manifested in her physical surroundings. Like Piozzi, Morris rarely mentions her family or friends, going against the common trope of memoir, which this book partially claims to be. Her longing for home is focused on mountains and landscapes, and very much on Wales as her true ancestral home. Wales is indelibly linked to Morris’s sense of identity and her self-reflexivity reveals a degree of homesickness for home but perhaps also a longing to return to the simple and original self. Symptoms of homesickness can be akin to depression (van Tilburg, Vingerhoets and Van Heck, 902) and Morris directly connects the melancholy of Trieste to the Welsh concept of *hiraeth*, which is an expression “... of bitter-sweetness and a yearning for we know not what” (*Trieste* 64), again, perhaps echoing a desire to return to a true self.

Through her recollections of her childhood home in Somerset, England, she makes a direct link between the plateau (the Karst) in Trieste, with the Mendip hills, made of the same materials and both key and enduring symbols of their countries:

The uneasy allure of the Mendips always made me think of outlaw lives, lives on the fringe, and perhaps it was a geological effect, because almost a lifetime later I am given a similar frisson by the presence of the Karst. (*Trieste* 132)

The location reminds her most of home and also of her childhood. It is also obviously an acknowledgement of being an outsider and identifying with that sensation from early life. This familiar landscape and location is comforting in some ways but alarming in others. Home here is not necessarily safe or secure. It is, instead, a reminder that she is, and has constantly been, on the fringes, and just outside of the acceptable. Morris offers an even more overt moment of memoir when she continues to discuss Somerset. She writes, “I knew it [Somerset] was my dead father’s country, and so properly mine too” (*Trieste* 143). If there was any ambiguity about the nature of her homesickness, Morris, talking about her sense of being an exile from when she was sent to boarding school, clarifies her position: “For myself, absence from place is the truest exile... because being far from the place you love can mean more than being from the people you love” (*Trieste* 75).

Chapter 4: Dentro/Fuori

The insider (*dentro*)/outside (*fuori*) polemics identified in Piozzi's and Morris's works also inhabit and influence my own creative writing. The notion of self-discovery and self-assessment triggered by the act of travelling and of confronting a cultural and contextual Other is also present in my work. This section will present a self-reflection on my creative process and output, within the framework of identity, language and influences.

In 2015, I spent five weeks travelling through Italy with my copies of Piozzi's *Observations*, and Morris's *Trieste* and, like Piozzi, I kept a journal of my thoughts, experiences and ideas. These would form the basis of my short story collection. I had been to Italy many times before, but this time I wanted to approximate a Grand Tour itinerary akin to that of Piozzi, starting in Milan (including the Lakes), and then on to Genoa, Naples (including Pompei and Vesuvius) and then backtracking to Rome. In between, I also visited family in a regional, coastal town. Within those cities, I also visited many locations noted by both Piozzi and Morris – all places still current on the tourist route. As noted already, travel, whether voluntary or not, is an opportunity for growth and self-exploration, to gaze at the Other within myself, and compare and contrast, and hopefully find connection. In my case, travel was also about further exploring my Italian heritage and identity, considering how I was perceived by Italians, how to process my own insider/outsider feelings, and how I could manifest these ideas in my fictional work. The framework of self-reflexivity that I applied to travel writing can also be applied to my creative writing with regards to the self-discovery that emerges and is produced by the act of writing. Smith talks about the autobiographical narrator becoming manifest only during the writing process, and about that self still being fluid and not whole or finished (108), and Hunt and Sampson, citing Damasio, echo this idea, stating that "...reflexivity develops as autobiographical memories accumulate and the 'core self' becomes connected to a broader canvas so that the 'sense of self in the act of knowing' Is enriched by a growing knowledge of past events and the feelings and emotions associated with them" (19). Practice-led research allowed this process to come to fruition.

My short story cycle, *All Autostrada Lead to Rome*, also follows the Grand Tour narrative, starting in the North, at Lake Maggiore, and weaving its way South to Naples. In between, there are stops in Milan, Genoa, Rome and two other nameless regional cities – one in the mountains, and one near the sea (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of Italy

Note: Researchers journey = \dashrightarrow and the Characters' journeys = \longrightarrow

The characters themselves follow a similar ideological arc from the civilised and ordered North, the known and safe, gradually gathering momentum, unravelling and becoming more chaotic the further South they travel. There are layers of unrest and dissension, of realisation and giving way to truer feelings and a more authentic self. Dana and Jeff are the key characters in this collection. They appear in three stories – at the beginning, middle and end of the collection – and they most personify the journey from the calm and collected North to the visceral and calamitous South.

Identity: Going South

I walked into a hotel in Genoa and handed over my Italian passport. I had not said a word – perhaps, “Buongiorno.” The receptionist opened my passport, looked at my name, looked at me and smiled. She said, in Italian, “Concetta Morganello. You’re Southern, right? With a name like that!” And I stared at her in amazement because until that moment, I had not realised that I was not only quasi-Italian, I was also quasi-Southern, and that came with another set of stereotypes, histories, and attitudes. And I gave myself away so easily, without even revealing my accent – just through the semantics of my name. I felt proud but uneasy because being Southern meant something different to being just Italian – Northerners still sometimes consider Southerners to be unrefined, ignorant, overly emotional and lawless. I was also thrilled at the idea that I had “tricked” an Italian into believing I was also Italian, and for a moment I could wholly inhabit that identity without any internal or external conflict.

For centuries, North and South have been Italian demarcations that have been the basis of study, conjecture and stereotyping. Although to outsiders they seem straightforward physical parameters, with Rome as the dividing point, within Italy the starting position determines what South means. A Genoese shopkeeper I spoke to referred to her Tuscan husband as a typical racist Southerner (*meridionale*). But in Puglia, for example, Tuscany is undoubtedly North. There is a long history of conflict between North and South, spanning from long before the unification of Italy in 1861. But as Pugliese points out, the North and South actually need each other to delineate their own identity (238). The North needs the corrupt, chaotic South, backward and full of criminality to reflect the opposite – progress, structure, law and order. The Southerners need the clinical and cold Northerner to reflect their warmth, humanity, generosity and geniality. So not only was I forced to identify as Southern merely because of my heritage, but I also had to explore what that meant for me personally. Often it meant existing in no fixed place, belonging to both cultures and neither at once.

I identified within myself many layers of Italian identity and constantly repositioned myself, depending on my context and location. I could sometimes choose between the cultures freely, and sometimes it was forced upon me. Sometimes I sought connection with fellow non-Italian travellers, sometimes I avoided speaking English so that I would not be identified. I could be nebulous and exist in many states at once. A sliding scale existed,

with insider and outsider at either extreme, and I found myself travelling along this scale and feeling differently about it each time. I tried to imbue my writing with this insider knowledge of the Italian culture and society. I know there was also an un/conscious sense of proving to my audience that the Italianness in my stories was authentic and genuine, because I could slip into that culture, if only for moments at a time. I particularly wanted one of the stories in my collection to reflect this ambiguity, this uneasiness with culture that would never be fixed but would remain fluid and contextual, so I created Anna and placed her in a fictional village, Vernita, and had her ask of herself the same sort of questions I had asked myself during my own travels. I deliberately chose a first person, present tense for this story to really convey the strong sense that place, time, and location are important coordinates for defining identity. I also wanted to express the possibility that the strongest sense of being an outsider could occur when in the theoretically most insider position one could hold – within one’s own family, in one’s own place of heritage. In those moments, one’s sense of self and history could collide dramatically with the present but fail to connect, and fail to coalesce into one existence. In my own case, when I travelled to my parents’ respective towns, I felt a nostalgia for something which had never existed in reality, and a confused memory of something I had never experienced.

Language: Along the sliding scale

Although I was, from the outset, keen to provide an Italian voice, the more I observed and interacted with Italy and Italians, the more I realised that I felt I could not. Like Piozzi, my “quasi” status gave me just enough insider knowledge to realise that I could not write recognisable Italian characters, *for an Italian audience*. It is possible that a non-Italian audience would be convinced, but, even though it is highly unlikely that this collection would ever be read by Italians, the fear of inauthenticity prohibited me from really being comfortable writing Italian main characters from their point of view. The stories are certainly peopled with Italians but they are on the periphery and often trigger action or reaction. Instead, all of the main characters are visitors to Italy and the stories are therefore necessarily about their transient experiences as tourists. None of the stories convey a sense of what it is like to live in Italy or what it is like to be Italian, and indeed this is appropriate for the types of stories I wanted to tell and how to tell them; that is, with the idea in mind that travel is transformative and a trigger for change and self-actualisation. Regardless, I did not feel that I had enough agency to present Italian characters within their *habitus*. I

also felt strongly that Italian stories could only be told in the Italian language, or translated at best, because of the strong cultural influences embedded in the language.

Despite fears and misgivings, I did attempt to write one of my stories in Italian (“The Waiter”) – my intention was to publish both the Italian and an English translation together – in a bid to provide one strong Italian voice. Although I had, up to that point, considered myself to be reasonably fluent in Italian, I quickly realised that I lacked the considerable skill level required to create art. My attempt was clumsy and graceless, but I sent “The Waiter” to three Italian friends (two of whom were also creative writers) for feedback anyway, perhaps because I wanted a measure of my Italianness. Even despite the language limitations, did I at least have the character right? Yes and no. One of my friends wrote to me:

*it's interesting to see how foreigners look at us.... but you aren't a foreigner!!
you are more...I think you are a mix of culture, sensations, roots, etc.
and you have more points of view to evaluate the situations that happen. (pers.
comm. 17 Jan 2017)*

Perhaps reading my work was as problematic as writing it. My friend seemed to express a frustration with both my perspective and how I conveyed it. At first, he identified me as a foreigner, but then he suggested that perhaps I was something altogether different. He also suggested that I mix languages initially, creating a sort of “pizza” which I could later refine. For him, the language was not as important as capturing the story. He also helped me realise that I had an important view to offer – one that was not necessarily Italian or Australian, but one that could potentially be accessed by both. Another friend disagreed about the importance of language, stating that although the story had potential, and the character was believable, the phrasing, the idioms, the structure, the grammar, the very quality of the language was still lacking and required a lot more attention. In other words, the natural flow of native speech was missing. She advised:

I think you need to work on the language (not just in terms of the grammar, for that I'm sure it's easy for you :), but specific Italian ways of expressing things). This is probably going to be the biggest struggle (I've been through it myself with English and Spanish). (pers. comm. 26 Jan 2017)

This constructive criticism, although helpful, was still a blow. My mastery of the language was key to my identity and was often the trigger for insider/outsider feelings. Pugliese describes similar sensations about how language played a role in that dichotomy (240). In order for him to be considered Italian in Italy, he knew he had to take on those “high” Northern traits, in terms of language, instead of using his family’s southern dialect. But this high standard Italian was also foreign to him and made him feel like an imposter. It also made it difficult to communicate with his own family who were largely uneducated and treated him as an outsider – a cultured Italian they were not familiar with and could not relate to. This sensation of being stuck in the cross-hairs is at the heart of anyone who shares more than one culture and national identity. And it is often conveyed through language. I experienced this in my mother’s hometown of Formia, on the coast between Rome and Naples (which is not as far South as my father’s hometown of Pago Veiano). I did not know how to speak to my relatives and which language I should choose. If I spoke in “correct” Italian, would I too appear haughty, an imposter? Few members of this family had ever had an education – those who had were regarded as snobs. And if I tried to speak dialect, I knew it was not a proper dialect – it was peppered with English words and quirky Australianisms and would likely also be mocked (though kindly).

There is no scope in this exegesis to explore the complex and historic connections between the Italian language and culture too deeply. However, following is a brief example of the same types of preoccupations that are going on from within Italian literature. In her well-known series *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena Ferrante constantly draws attention to language and she marks and frames social occasions with language choices and awareness. As an author, she constantly links the Neapolitan dialect to violence, aggression, arcane traditions and ignorance. Her characters use a cultivated Italian when they are in the presence of educated company, or when they need to say something significant. Her characters discuss the same sorts of conundrums I share as an Italo-Australian. One of the main characters, also called Elena, makes that connection between language choices and being an insider/outsider. This character not only has to worry about words and phrasing, but also her accent:

Language itself, in fact, had become a mark of alienation. I expressed myself in a way that was too complex for [my mother], although I made an effort to speak in dialect, and when I realised that and simplified the sentences, the simplification

made them unnatural and therefore confusing. Besides, the effort I had made to get rid of my Neapolitan accent hadn't convinced the Pisans but was convincing to her, my father, my siblings, the whole neighbourhood. (*The Story of a New Name* 437)

Interestingly, I read the first two of the four books in Ferrante's series in English, and the last two in Italian. I had initially thought that the English translation laboured over language choices with phrases such as, "She said in dialect..." but in fact, even in the Italian version, Ferrante constantly identified which language she was pointing too, even though it was self-evident in Italian. It would be interesting to consider the effect of dialect choices with her Italian readership; however, word limitations prohibit me from this exercise. In my own stories, I intentionally inserted Italian words when I felt they could be understood contextually, and when it was significant to the mood or character being portrayed. For me, the Italian characters had to use some Italian, perhaps even without translation, otherwise it felt inauthentic.

Influences: Travel–Fiction

Whilst I read much fiction, travel writing, travel fiction and short stories, and was influenced by a number of authors (for example, Elena Ferrante, Nicolo Ammaniti, Margaret Atwood), Shirley Hazzard had an overriding impact on my writing for two reasons. First, I admired and sought to mimic her distinct lyrical and gentle storytelling style, and her remarkable capacity for subtle humour and succinct but pointed descriptions of characters. Second, I appreciated her ability to make the place of the story, where the scene is set, an emotional framework upon which the narrative hangs, upfront and significant, not just as a two-dimensional backdrop.

With regard to the first element, style, I was particularly keen to distil elements that make Hazzard's stories so engaging and thought-provoking, particularly when very little action occurs, and apply them to my own stories. Her novels and her short stories are slow paced, intense studies and observations of the mechanics of relationships, with engaging and enigmatic conversations, and quiet self-realizations and developments. Similarly, the stories I wanted to tell were based on the personal – the small but cataclysmic moments that change the course of people's lives in a subtle and understated way. Hazzard writes scene after scene that build and develop into story arcs and narratives. *People in Glass Houses* is a short story collection located entirely in "The Organization" – a nameless and

bureaucratic government office, something akin to NATO. Each story is a subtle observation of that absurd and officious life, with inter-office romances, failed careers, and petty backstabbing. In one of the stories, there is a touching goodbye between two characters as they wait for a lift:

“Shall we say good-bye, then”

“Why yes,” she said, but did not say goodbye.

...

“Miss Kingslake,” Mr Willoughby said. “Miss Kingslake. Once, in this corridor, I wanted very much to kiss you.”

She stood with her back to the grey wall, as if she took from it her protective colouring.

He smiled. “We were on our way to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions”.

Now she smiled too, but sadly, clasping her fingers together over the handle of her bag. (*People in Glass Houses* 32-3)

This small scene is all the reader learns about this (non)relationship and the story ends shortly afterwards. But the phrasing and pace, and the subtle and endearing tone all convey such depth of feeling and express a volume of backstory which needs no articulation. As noted, my writing also focuses on the personal, and is less action-orientated. Therefore, I aimed to develop a similar technique of using pertinent detail to ensure that my stories, despite having often subtle and relatively flat story arcs, were still vibrant and would engage the reader.

Hazzard often uses an omniscient narrator to come at characters at oblique angles, circling them as though panning through a camera. The reader comes to learn about them through their inaction as much as their engagement, and through their reactions to the scene surrounding them. Fine-grained detail is clearly a critical element of Hazzard’s style. Hazzard’s economical capacity for description is powerful and impactful. She creates strong characters with very little description and it is these characters who drive the stories, rather than incidents and events. But the narrator is also usually a strong presence and ironic voice; for example, from *People in Glass Houses*: “Swoboda was not a brilliant man. He was a man of what used to be known as average and is now known as above average intelligence” (51), and “Mr Bekkus stared. Regaining the power of speech, he said, ‘Words fail me.’ (A poor workman will tend to blame his tools.” (56). Many of Hazzard’s

texts are poetic and lyrical, with hazy, dream-like qualities, but her dialogue is almost always sharp and concise.

The second aspect of Hazzard's writing that I particularly related to was her ability to make place a critical element of the story and not just the backdrop. Detail always lends authenticity to any writing, though it must be relevant and pertinent to the story's progression. The more detail, quirky or otherwise, about a place, and more importantly about its inhabitants, the more real and accessible it becomes to the reader. Hazzard applies this most obviously in *The Evening of the Holiday*, and *The Bay of Noon*, both set in Italy, but also in *Transit of Venus* (set in Britain). Like Ferrante, Hazzard had lived in Italy, particularly in Naples, for some years and this lived experience is evident in her work set in those places. She and her partner Francis Steegmuller later wrote a nonfiction account of Naples (*The Ancient Shore: Dispatches from Naples*) and it is clear that place impacted upon Hazzard's way of thinking, her perceptions and creativity. In *The Bay of Noon*, she writes:

I said, 'Some people do know more than others. That contributes to the impression that someone, somewhere, knows the whole thing.'

'Neapolitans know a lot,' said Gianni. 'But they know it collectively. Break them up, take them away, and they're hopeless, just as stupid as anyone else. It's the city, the phenomenon of Naples itself, that knows something. It's like an important picture, or a book – once you've taken it in, you can't believe there was a time when you didn't know it.' He turned to me. 'This will change everything for you, being here. Naples is a leap. It's through the looking glass'. And I looked out at the oval mirror of the bay. (38)

It is clear from this example that observations about Neapolitan personality, Italian life, human behaviour and interaction in general are all critical in shaping plot, character development and story arc in her books set in Italy. Although I have unambiguously produced a work of fiction, there are elements of my writing that might also be classified as a kind of travel writing. Place, also in this case Italy, is important to my narratives – landscapes and cities – and intrinsic knowledge is required to know how life functions in individual locations, whether as a foreigner or native. The following example, in "Schrodinger's Cat", demonstrates how I transformed direct observation, noted in my

journal, into a delicate drawing that locates the reader and the character squarely in a Neapolitan café:

So she fled to the Gran Café Gambrinus, in the very heart of Naples. It was iconic and glitzy, but in fact, it was just expensive without the integrity. At face value, the waiters *looked* elegant with their waistcoats and bow ties. But their shoes were dusty and their shirt cuffs frayed, at odds with the high and haughty tilt of their chins. With her iced-tea came a tiny bowl of giant green olives with a stiff American paper flag lodged in the centre. She looked up to point out the error, but the waiter had already turned swiftly and fled as though from a crime. The sky was hazy, the waning sun just a vague smudge. The warm early evening, the thick air, melted the ice in her drink.

The setting in Hazzard's books is not just in the background. The location is closely tied to the story and the characters. In both *The Bay of Noon* and the *Evening of the Holiday*, the Italian characters are distinctly so – their behaviours and personalities are distinctly different to the English characters. The place – landscape, weather, and social customs – has an impact on the characters and their interactions with each other. The main character in *The Bay of Noon*, Jenny, is obviously affected by Naples. She finds it exhilarating and inspiring and gradually tries to absorb the culture and customs of the Italians, through language and habit. She starts to understand the differences in the relationships between men and women in Italy, and she begins to understand when to behave in certain ways. The landscape of Naples and its surrounds are also key to the story. For example, Vesuvius is often invoked in the text, as though a reminder of mortality, of impending doom, of an uncertain and perhaps dangerous future. In these two books, Hazzard makes Italy key to the storyline and character development, and in fact Hazzard zooms in on key locations, such as Naples, to really underscore the impact of a specific culture, nationality and language on the main characters.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has explored the works of Piozzi and Morris through the framework of self-reflexivity and put forward an argument that, despite diverse historical and cultural contexts, they operate in remarkably similar ways. Paul Fussell defined travel books as a “subspecies of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative – unlike that in a novel or a romance – claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality” (cited in Kinsley 3). For Piozzi and Morris this is especially applicable because both use the personal, the experienced truth, to frame their journeys, and indeed Morris overtly claims that *Trieste* is a memoir. Both *Observations* and *Trieste* can be read within a self-reflexive framework, where the perceived audience influences what is revealed and what is withheld. Through their observations, Piozzi and Morris not only carry out the regular functions and tropes of travel writing, but they also use this reflection of the Other to delineate their own positions within their own worlds – as mother/father, daughter, partner, writer and public figure.

Travel is an ideal vehicle for self-reflection, growth and evolution. Although the requirements, motivations, and parameters of both travel and travel writing were different in the 18th and 20th centuries, in both time periods, the journey triggered self-reflexive practices in all types of explorers. The journey evoked a “...narrative where inner and outer worlds collide” (Blanton 3). Blanton goes on to say that this narrative of a journey is ancient and persistent, and it is usually transformative – symbolically and mentally (3). Porter agrees that travel changes a person in some way, and that he or she undertakes a self-examination and assessment spurred by foreign and foreigner (5). I have argued that Piozzi and Morris both underwent this process of self-analysis in their own travels and that their travel writing can be read as autobiography, and that they operate in similar ways with regard to notions of being an insider/outsider.

As noted, both Piozzi and Morris specifically mark and foreground their difference and uniqueness so as to offer their reader exclusive access to an observed situation, and mark

their authority at such times, elevating their self-importance. Therefore, their self-reflexive practices reveal an awkward tension between prizing their sense of exile and rueing it. They both travel along a sliding scale of insider/outsider, positioning themselves at different points depending on what they want to convey to the audience. Both use narrative devices such as language (pronouns, direct appeal to the reader, truthful and *in situ* recollection), and proof of agency (reference to unique individuals or experiences, establishing self-importance and connections to local society) to convince the reader of their insider status. Both draw attention to truthfulness and spontaneity, and temper and balance their criticisms and praise for Italy and Italians to persuade their readers of their authenticity. They both reveal much of themselves in the process, revealing to readers something about their morals, beliefs and convictions.

However, there are some important differences in their displays of insider status. For Piozzi, it is important to establish herself as “demi-naturalised”, as quasi-Italian and therefore qualified over any other Grand Tour writer thus far to write about Italian culture and society. Piozzi was keen to highlight her exclusive access and unique position. Her acceptance by Italian society is also a signal of pride and defiance, as she was roundly criticised and condemned by her own English society at the time. Morris instead offers no such connection; instead she offers the reader a long history of having travelled to and experienced Trieste. Her insider status is conveyed by the recollection of anecdotes, observations of changes in the city and, most importantly, the part Trieste has played in her life. She describes *Trieste* as a memoir and the insider element is most overtly displayed through the tight bond between city and self. Morris goes so far as to call it an allegory of old age.

Although both authors strive to convey insider status, there are many occasions in which both exhibit outsider status instead. Piozzi and Morris repeatedly describe and express admiration for events, conversations and situations which situate them squarely as insiders, but, as Novero points out, describing a cultural practice intimately and with envy also creates a disconnect and forced distance (73). Comparisons with home evokes realisations of failure to fulfil and conform to expectations. In so many areas of their lives Piozzi and Morris become conscious of their distance from their peers, especially with regards to nationality, gender roles and sexuality, and their position in society and within their own

circle of family and friends. Melancholy sometimes pervades both texts, especially Morris's, portraying a sense of listlessness, hopelessness and despair.

Whilst both authors articulate sometimes overly, sometimes as subtext, a sense of being an outsider and a type of exile, their manifestations of status are different. Piozzi conveys outsider feelings with regard to her own English background; however, at times Piozzi also acknowledges that, despite her declarations otherwise, she is an outsider to Italians as well. Despite her access and evidence that the Italians accepted her as something other than just another Englishwoman, she is still treated as a tourist and a temporary visitor. Morris, on the other hand, barely acknowledges Italians – her outsider status is displayed through homesickness and nostalgia for the past, for her childhood, and for England and Wales as physical locations. Morris acknowledges herself as an outsider more overtly than Piozzi, and reiterates her lifelong preoccupation with being an exile from some place – whether her home, school, the army, as a journalist, as a writer, as a man and then a woman.

These preoccupations with being an insider and outsider, and the effect of travel and travel writing as an exercise in self-reflexivity permeate my fiction. I have created ten short stories that travel between the polemics of insider and outsider, and focus on identity, self-discovery, evolution, self-criticism and enlightenment. They closely mirror my personal experiences of Italy, and of travelling in general, and most importantly, the act of autobiography through note taking and diary keeping. My fiction reflects some of my own grapples with identity and experiences of being an insider/outsider, particularly with regard to straddling two cultures – Australian and Italian. The sense of fiction and the purported nonfiction practice of travel writing as transformative practices are perhaps best actualised in the following quote by Margaret Atwood: “All writers are double, for the simple reason that you can never actually meet the author of the book you have just read. Too much time has elapsed between composition and publication, and the person who wrote the book is now a different person” (37).

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