

Every explorer names his island Formosa, beautiful. To him it is beautiful because, being first, he has access to it and can see it for what it is. But to no one else is it ever as beautiful—except the rare man who manages to recover it, who knows that it has to be rediscovered.

Walker Percy (1)

When you arrive at the end of August, you see everything you are supposed to see. You make pictures of the city as it has already been presented to you, over and over in iconic images. You look for all that is recognizably Florentine: the mirror-like surface of the Arno, the Ponte Vecchio and its reflection in the water joined in a pleasing, perfect oval, the Duomo, David in the Piazza della Signoria, the Brancacci Chapel and the Uffizi, the exquisite panoramic views of the city from the Boboli Gardens, Piazzale Michelangelo, and San Miniato al Monte, terra cotta tiled rooftops, window shutters, laundry hanging from the lines . . . In the Centro, you are always aware that you are surrounded by people with cameras in hand, people like you eager to capture what they recognize, and to take home a trophy, a testament to their having been here, having seen it and tasted it. They photograph you eating gelato, pantomiming a request for permission and you don't bother to correct their impression that you belong here because you already know that you do. Amused, you notice that they are making pictures of their dinners, their wine, their *zuppa*, and then posting the images on Facebook, emailing the images home . . .



Fig. 1. Summer Light, from Ponte Santa Trinità



Fig. 2. The Duomo, Santa Maria del Fiore

Because the city is so photogenic, because the famous Tuscan light is so peculiarly warm and inviting, because you are so hungry to know it and touch it, you take photo after photo, too, hundreds each day, but at night when you go through the files you're only satisfied for a minute—there's no intimacy, these are still just postcard pictures. This is just the start of a journey that will take you somewhere you can't imagine yet, but you sense it there, waiting for you. You make pictures of your apartment, your bed, your kitchen, your cups and saucers, your windows.



Fig. 3. A Window at Home

This is your way of seeing, and you let it lead you. Your terrace looks west onto Santo Spirito and the *colline*, and you make pictures of the view every day, every night. *Tell me who you are*, you whisper, and the first revelation is the sky, which brings you a new story every dawn, every sunset . . . You watch and record the changes compulsively. You feel obsessed, but you know you have to do this because something is happening . . .



Fig. 4. Sky over Santo Spirito

Sometimes it's hard to read students' essays at your desk by the window. If you look up from your work, you are lost in the sky and your need to record what it is saying because it will never be like this

again. Then you notice that the epigraph on a student's paper reads, *If you look for perfection, you'll never be content.* – Leo Tolstoy and you feel a rush of gratitude to both writers.

You find yourself drawn to the river every night at sunset. You stand there, among the tourists, the students, the couples strolling with baby carriages, the motorcycles and bicycles hurrying people home from work, and you take in the sun-streaked sky and shifting clouds, the light on the buildings that line the river, on the face of the water, the faces of people around you, and bit by bit something is revealed. It has no language yet, but it's there, turning its face to you and opening. A man rowing on the Arno creates ripples on the water, just like insect water striders on the surface of a pond back home. The river with its reflections of the sky and deepening shadows of the land all looks luminous like butterfly wings sometimes.



Fig. 5. San Frediano in Cestello at Sunset

Sometimes the scene before you looks like the shadow of another city at the turn of the last century, like Eugène Atget's photos of Paris in the winter . . .



Fig. 6. Winter Light, from Ponte Santa Trinità

This is your evening vespers, this is your communion with the city so rich with history, this is what it has to give you: a simple, clear confirmation that we are all—the urban and the natural worlds—part of a single continuum connected through time.

You travel beyond the Centro every chance you get. You make pictures while you wait for the bus in Piazza San Marco. On the face of the Università degli Studi, a banner for an exhibition reads, *Incontri Con La Città*. Yes, you think, *my encounters with the city*, and you look more closely as you point your camera.



Fig. 7. At the Piazza San Marco Bus Stop, via Giorgio La Pira

You fall in love with the Mugnone. You find egrets, herons, and ducks nesting along its waters. You wait for them patiently on the footbridges, standing there with grandparents, small children, and elderly shoppers, their grocery bags laid at their feet. You all cheer together when the birds appear.

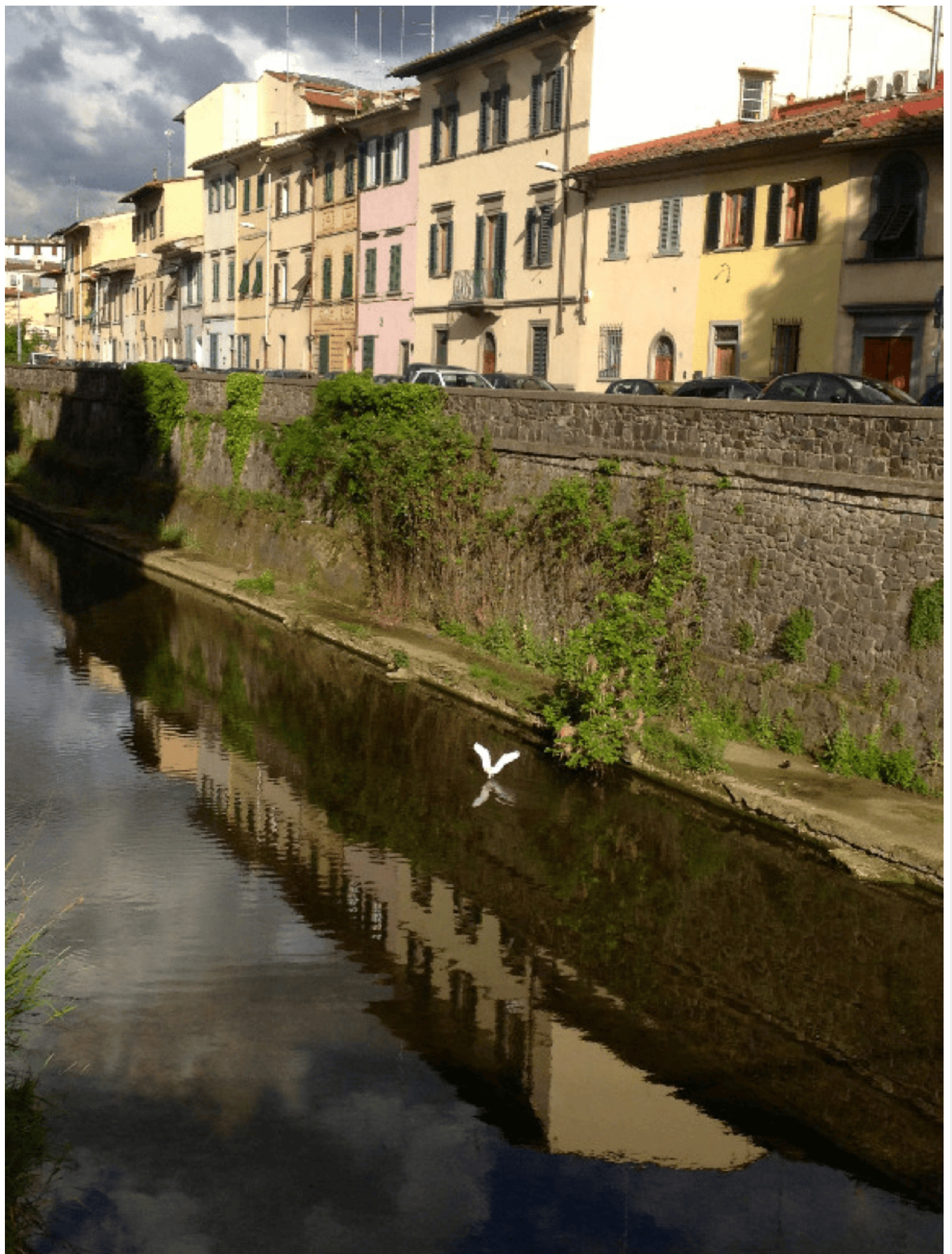


Fig. 8. An Egret in Strange Light on Il Mugnone

And Via Bolognese leads you up hills into olive groves, where the sky—it's always the sky you look to—cold and dark, blue as the rains come down, suddenly breaks open and the late afternoon sun lights a line of trees on a hill and paints the faces of the great villas and the littlest houses. It only lasts a minute or two, but you drink it in, and you know. You no longer need more than what each moment gives you, even in the early dusk and cold of the approaching winter.



Fig. 9. Umbrella Pines at Villa Natalia

In late November you follow the trail of white *ombrelli*, simple Christmas decorations that have suddenly appeared over the street on via Romana. You are trying to catch how they seem to float there, filled with the last light of day.

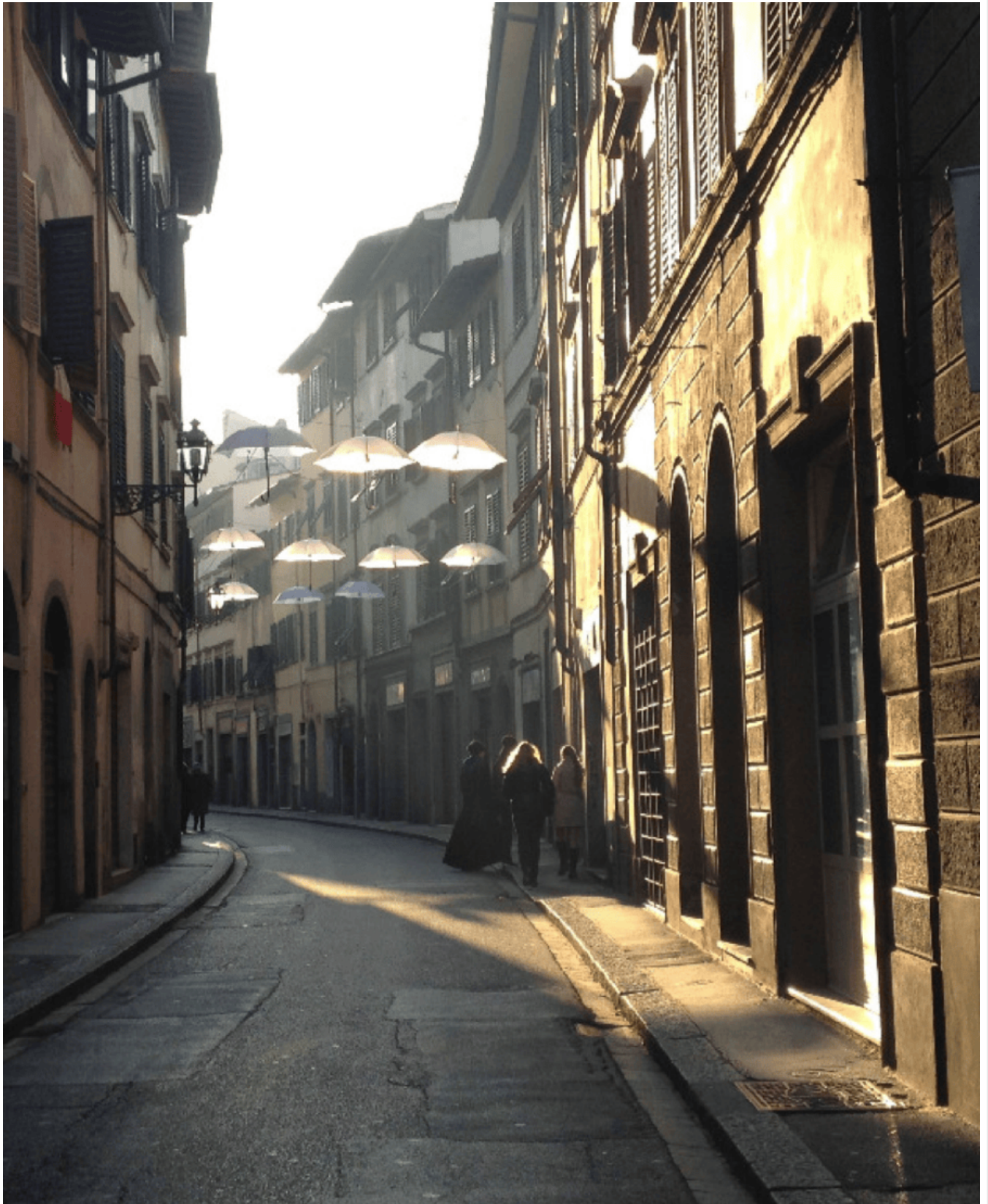


Fig. 10. Christmas Umbrellas on via Romana

The rain is beautiful.



Fig. 11. Rain

So is the night. Camera in hand, at night you walk the streets. On the Oltrarno, they are often deserted. Sometimes it's just you and a parked motorcycle, leaning alone against a battered wall, its lipstick red and chrome body gleaming under a single streetlight. Sometimes it's just the graffiti speaking to you. You see beauty there.



Fig. 12. Graffiti on via dello Sprone

You love the couples and the solitary walkers who pass by and sometimes turn their faces to you and look at you. They seem to speak to you.



Fig. 13. Nightwalkers on via di Santo Spirito



Fig. 14. Night Traffic on Via Maggio



Fig. 15. Piazza de' Frescobaldi

You begin to see conversations everywhere and you record them, too, grateful that you are beginning to understand the language—not just spoken but visual—of people speaking to each other, of the city speaking to you. You begin to understand and your heart is full every day. This is not a fullness you knew, living in New York City.



Fig. 16. Aperitivi in Piazza Santo Spirito

You have learned to pay attention. In doing so, you have learned a whole new way to love. And even when you photograph the most familiar, iconic sights, they reveal themselves to you now, and you see your heart in the pictures you make of them. Even the gondola that travels west laden with tourists, cameras in hand, now seems transformed into something eternal, something mythic.



Fig. 17. Gondola on the Arno

When your year is up, just when summer's golden light returns, you are not happy. You have just begun to know this place. You go to the river one more time, and you join the crowd to watch the sun descend. You have never felt so alone. You have also never felt so much part of everyone who has stood here before and who stands here with you now.



Fig. 18. In Quella Parte Dove Sta Memoria (2)

NOTES

1. Walker Percy, *The Loss of the Creature, The Message in the Bottle*, by Walker Percy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 46.
2. Guido Cavalcanti, "Donna Mi Prega," in *Guido Cavalcanti: The Complete Poems*, trans. Marc A. Cirigliano (New York: Italica Press, 1992), 59.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nina d'Alessandro

Nina d'Alessandro has an M.A. in Poetics from New York University, where she has taught writing, photography, 19th and 20th century art and literature, and a long-running series of seminars in jazz. Her award-winning photographs of music and musicians have been exhibited in the US, British Isles, and Europe, and have appeared in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines, including *The Village Voice*, *Jazz Times*, as well as in Penguin books, Ken Burns' 19-hour documentary *Jazz*, on cd's for SONY and Enja Records. She has published short stories and has made recordings as a singer and Juno-nominated lyricist. Teaching at NYU Florence last year, she found herself without her trusty SLR camera and, taking a cue in improvisation from the musicians she has worked with, she decided to conduct a year-long experiment using only the camera in her iPhone 4s. These are some of the results.