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Travel is a Brutality

The Italian Cesare Pavese writes, “Traveling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. Nothing is yours except the essential things – air, sleep, dreams, the sea, the sky – all things tending towards the eternal or what we imagine of it.” The act of living in Italy has thrown me back on Pavese’s essential things. Off balance, I have been forced to find it anew. When surrounded by strangers, I retreat to what I know – myself – but find that self shifted by every strange, small thing encountered: the reckless machinery of Italian roads, the coffee shops named after Dante characters, the way my host mother articulates my misunderstandings with her hands. So the retreat becomes instead an advance, into a culture and what that culture makes of me.

I have always trusted words, become confident that I know English’s nuances and connotations enough to say just what I mean. But Italian betrays me, makes me insincere; I think about what I want or need to say and am forced to adjust it, to break the beauty of the language into pieces I can pronounce. I can only guess at what is lost, since it is impossible to hear what my Italian sounds like to a native speaker. Between languages all comparisons necessarily fail, yet this is precisely why we must attempt another. It is not simply a matter of being able to order dinner or ask about train times – though these are the daily successes that delight and sustain us – but of meeting a place on its own terms.

Bella, affascinante, intera: the words may not fall genuine from my tongue but they are what Florence is, untranslated and exact as words, in any language, can hope to be.

Living abroad is an act of self-education: reading Pavese's poetry, and Ungaretti's, and Erba's, lingering in Florence's famous museums and less famous bars, buying food and stamps and bus tickets, learning all that speech is incapable of – these things become compounded with classes and trips into the larger lesson, and I am augmented. “What really belongs to a man, in life,” Pavese writes, “except what he has already lived?” As people, we carry the places we have been inside us. We are made more by every opportunity. If traveling is a brutality, it is the best possible kind.