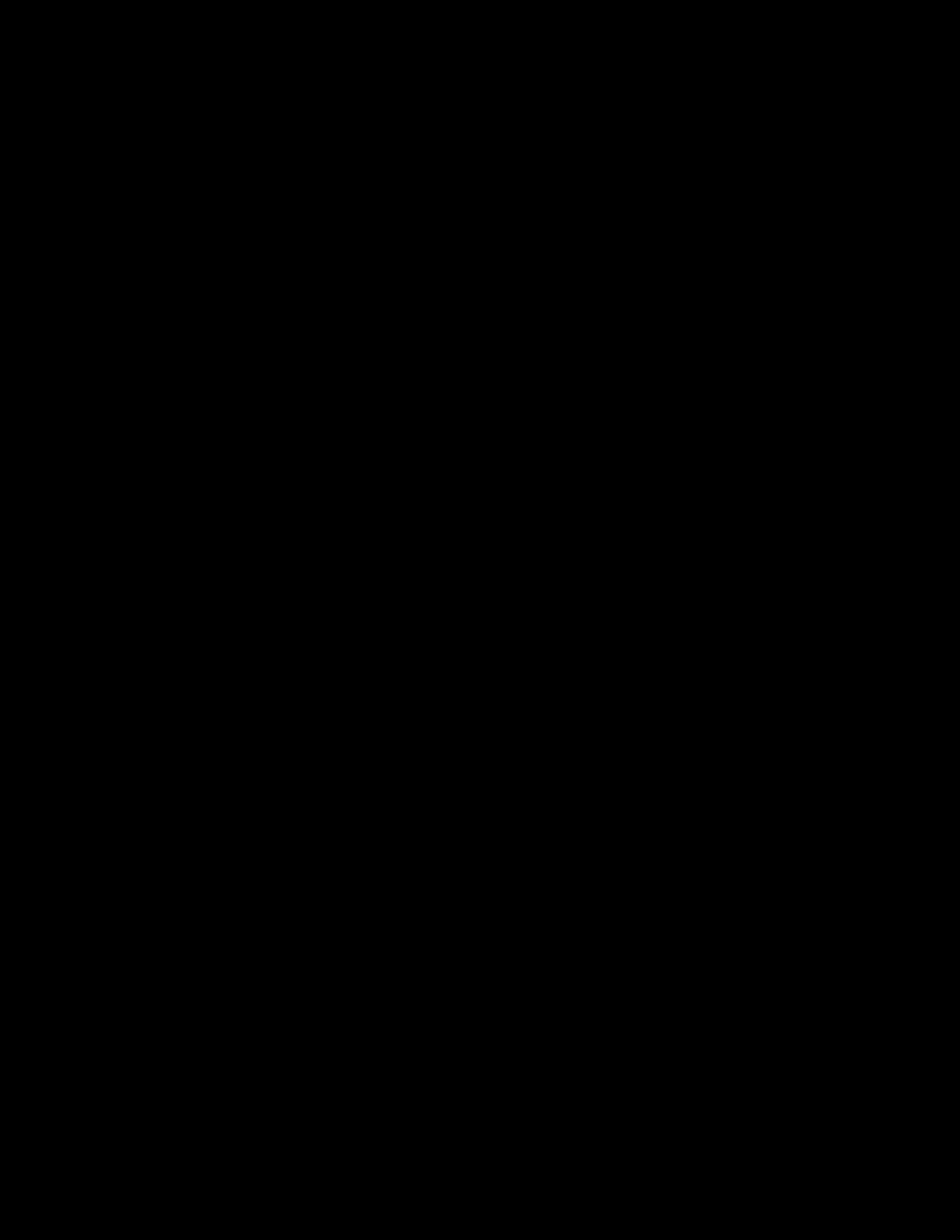




i



DENNIS LETBETTER



Florence







































































































































Eye Level

Il mondo visto dall'altezza degli occhi, a circa un metro e mezzo dal suolo, non è il vero mondo. Quello che noi chiamiamo mondo è solo una imprecisa, soggettiva e probabilmente fuorviante percezione del mondo. Forse il mondo potrebbe essere inteso nella sua essenza solo in una impossibile concezione cubista, non certo attraverso una vista prospettica primitiva o umanistica, romana o rinascimentale, indiana o giapponese. Queste sono solo rappresentazioni, non il vero mondo. D'altra parte non ci è concesso che concepire il mondo altrimenti che come rappresentazione, come immagine fisica e mentale che si rivela a noi sotto forma di sensazioni di spazi, volumi, luci, rumori.

Vedo, ascolto, sento con gli occhi, gli orecchi e la pelle ciò che chiamo Firenze. La rivivo attraverso la memoria stimolata da un pensiero, da un'immagine. La fotografia di una strada mi fa rivedere tutte le strade di Firenze; quelle luci, mi dico, le conosco, le osservo ogni giorno andando all'ufficio postale, a comprare qualcosa, a trovare un collega. Quelle insegne le vedo quando cammino sfiorando i muri o mentre ascolto il ritmo dei passi sui marciapiedi. Sono i segni di una città che conosco, così come riconoscerei immediatamente i tratti di un viso di un amico, di un figlio.

Allora mi chiedo: in cosa consiste la Firenze che conosco e che queste fotografie mi riportano alla mente. E' una città fatta di strade e piazze circondate da muri, di muri tagliati da porte, finestre, logge e balconi ; è quella luce inconfondibile che disegna sul muro l'ombra di un lampione di ferro battuto, è la silhouette di uno sconosciuto che entra nei cortili dei palazzi, penetra nelle case, sale le scale, va a sedersi a un tavolo per mangiare con la sua famiglia, a dormire su un letto sospeso su un pavimento, sospeso su altri pavimenti, su altre vite, sospese anch'esse nell'aria, in un edificio affacciato su una strada.

La città dell'immagine fotografica è una città silenziosa. Ma il rumore è nella mente di chi guarda l'immagine: nel fruscio della ruota di bicicletta, nel sibilo acuto di un motorino, nella serranda di un negozio mentre si chiude. Le immagini non sono rumori ma li implicano. Non sono nemmeno la luce che cambia a ogni istante, che dà vita alle cose, ma rigidi simulacri che si esprimono con minime variazioni tonali. E tra il bianco assoluto e il nero assoluto sta tutta la realtà visibile del mondo. Tra il

Eye Level

The world seen at eye level, about a meter and a half from the ground, is not the real world. What we call the world is just an imprecise, subjective, and probably misleading perception of the world. Maybe the world could be understood in its essence only in an impossible Cubist conception, certainly not through a primitive or humanist, Roman, Renaissance, Indian or Japanese perspectival view. These are only representations, not the real world. Besides, it is not given to us to conceive the world any other way than as representation, as a physical and mental image that reveals itself to us in the form of sensations of space, volume, light, sound.

I see, hear, feel with my eyes, ears, skin what I call Florence. I relive it through memory stimulated by a thought, an image. The photograph of a street makes me see again all the streets of Florence: those lights, I say to myself, I know them, I look at them every day going to the post office, to buy something, to meet a colleague. Those signs, I see them when I walk along grazing the walls or while I listen to the rhythm of steps on the sidewalks. They are the signs of a city I know, just as I would recognize immediately the facial features of a friend, of my son.

So then I ask myself, what makes up the Florence I know and which these photographs bring back to my mind. It is a city made of streets and squares encircled by walls, of walls pierced by doors, windows, porches and balconies: it is that unmistakable light that draws on the wall the shadow of a wrought-iron streetlamp, the silhouette of an unidentified person entering the courtyards of buildings, penetrating into the homes, climbing the stairs, sitting down at the table to eat with his family, to sleep on a bed suspended over a floor, suspended over other floors, other lives, they too suspended in the air, in a building looking onto another street.

The city of a photographic image is a silent city. But the noise is in the mind of the person looking at the image: in the swish of a bicycle wheel, the shrill whine of a motorbike, the rolling shutter of a shop being pulled down. Images are not sounds, but they imply them. Nor are they the light that changes every instant, that gives life to things, but are stiff likenesses that express themselves with minimal tonal variations. And between absolute white and absolute black lies all the visible reality of the world. Between absolute silence and the most deafening noise lie all

silenzio assoluto e il rumore più assordante stanno tutti i rumori, le voci della nostra esistenza.

Vago con la mente e rivedo la città e le sue strade. Da un metro e mezzo da terra leggo il menù nella vetrina di un ristorante, il nome su un campanello. Da questa umana altezza mando la voce all'amico che incrocio camminando. La mia voce rimbalza sui muri delle case, arriva ai suoi orecchi, il mio sguardo incontra i suoi occhi all'altezza dei miei. Osservo le linee della pietra che sfilano in prospettiva e intuisco che quelle linee vanno a incontrarsi in un punto di fuga. Allora penso a Brunelleschi intento a fermare nel disegno, come in una macchina fotografica *ante litteram*, l'immagine di Palazzo Vecchio con i suoi profili che vanno a incontrarsi in due opposti punti di fuga situati su un immaginario orizzonte posto a un metro e mezzo di altezza, all'altezza degli occhi.

Mi fermo su un'immagine e rifletto sul significato dei ricordi. Guardo le strisce di marmo della chiesa di Santa Maria Novella bianche, nere, grigie e rievoco tempi che non ho mai vissuto, a me sconosciuti, irreali, impossibili da afferrare anche solo col pensiero. E immagino che in quei tempi un monaco domenicano le ha sfiorate con il suo saio, che accanto a queste strisce ha camminato Leonardo e Lorenzo, un loro servo, un loro compagno, e chissà quanti altre migliaia di uomini e donne: molti le hanno toccate, hanno sentito il calore della pietra riscaldata dal sole, qualcuno ha pensato, come me, che quel marmo è solo un minuscolo frammento di una montagna vicina, scavato, tagliato e trasportato fin qui per essere sistemato e levigato con cura da qualche scalpellino venuto da chissà dove.

Guardo la fotografia della facciata policroma di questa chiesa e so che anch'essa è un dettaglio ritagliato da un fotografo che come uno scalpellino o un maestro muratore ha scelto solo un frammento per suggerire una visione più ampia, che la sua è stata una scelta presa nell'istante in cui ha scattato la foto, che ha poi elaborato decidendo di mantenerla in un lungo rettangolo orizzontale o verticale. Il fotografo ha creato una finestra nella sua mente, una finestra allungata come per dire quanto avrebbe voluto includere tutta la realtà a sua disposizione e, contraddicendosi, quanto piacere abbia sentito nello scegliere solo un pezzo di questa realtà, incorniciarla, darle le giuste proporzioni per meglio apprezzarla, per darle un sigillo di personale intimità e renderla sua.

the sounds, the voice of our existence.

I wander with my mind and see again the city and its streets. At a meter and a half from the ground, I read the menu in a restaurant window, the name on a doorbell. From this human height I call out to a friend I meet as I walk along. My voice bounces off the walls of the houses, reaches his ears; my eyes meet his at my eye level. I observe the lines of the stones that stretch away in perspective and intuit that these lines will meet at a vanishing point. Then I think of Brunelleschi intent on freezing in a drawing, like with a camera *ante litteram*, the image of Palazzo Vecchio with its outlines meeting in two opposing vanishing points placed on an imaginary horizon set a meter and a half from the ground, at eye level.

I dwell on an image and reflect on the meaning of memories. I look at the stripes of marble on the church of Santa Maria Novella, white, black, and gray, and evoke times that I never lived, times unknown to me, unreal, impossible to grasp even just in thought. I imagine that in those times a Dominican monk grazed them with his habit, that alongside those stripes walked Leonardo and Lorenzo, one of their servants, a friend of theirs, and who knows how many other thousands of men and women. Many have touched them, have felt the warmth of the stone heated by the sun; someone has thought, like I have, that this marble is just a minuscule fragment of a nearby mountain, dug out, cut, and transported this far to be trimmed and polished carefully by a stonecutter come from who knows where.

I look at the photo of the polychrome façade of this church and I know that this too is a detail trimmed by a photographer who like a stonecutter or master mason has chosen just one fragment to suggest a fuller vision, that his was a choice made in the instant when he snapped the picture, which he later worked on, deciding whether to keep it in a long horizontal or vertical rectangle. The photographer has created a window into his mind, an elongated window as though to say how much he would have wanted to include all of the reality available to him and, contradicting himself, how much pleasure he felt in choosing just one piece of this reality, framing it, giving it the right proportions to appreciate it best, to give it the seal of personal intimacy and make it his.

Seen through an abstract horizontal window, the street or an intersection of streets, with in the distance the hint of a building or a garden,

Vista attraverso una astratta finestra orizzontale la strada o l'incrocio di strade, con in distanza l'accento a un palazzo o un giardino, suggeriscono possibili scoperte e riscoperte. La strada diventa uno spazio nuovo, da esplorare, perché anche se già vissuto centinaia di volte, la realtà è sempre inedita. Attraverso l'immagine tocchiamo con gli occhi quel dettaglio nascosto tra i tetti, un portale o un cancello che fanno capolino dietro un monumento e riconosciamo in questa fotografia uno stimolo a scoprire ciò che sembra evidente, senza mai davvero esserlo, ciò che è nascosto, rendendolo immaginabile.

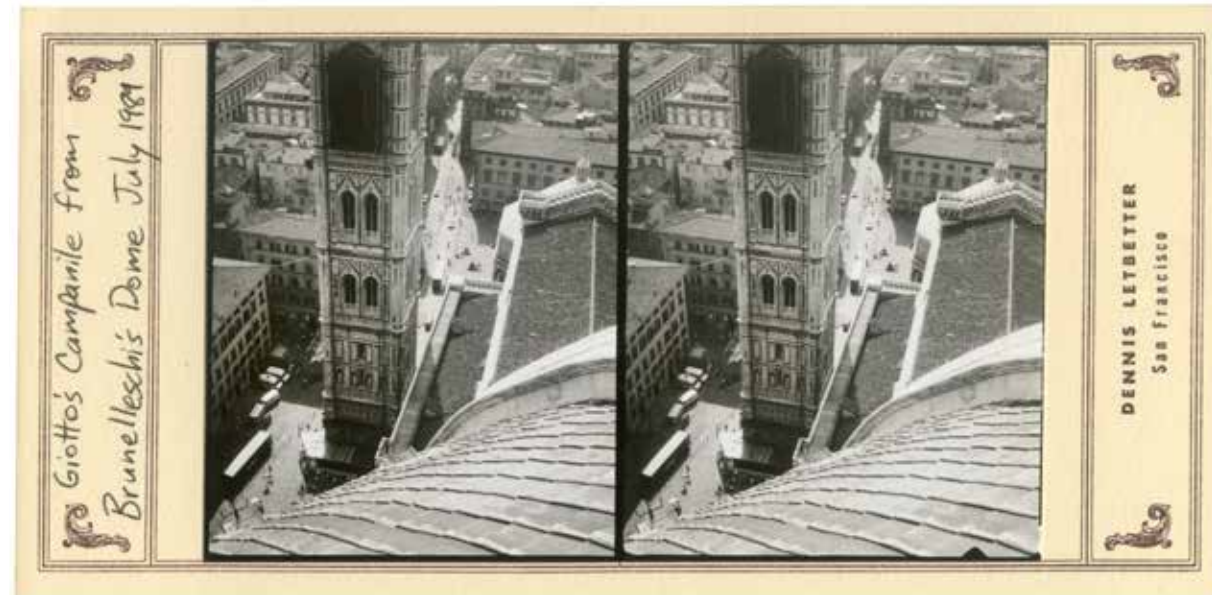
I profili dei tetti incorniciano il cielo. Dall'altezza dei miei occhi non posso toccare il cielo ma un piccolo movimento del collo mi concede di guardarlo. Tra due palazzi la strada va finalmente ad aprirsi nel vasto spazio sul fiume. Riconosco i profili della mia città mentre le nuvole scorrono come se il cielo fosse acqua immateriale. Distratto o forse attento a non inciampare, guardo stupefatto questo mare di aria, solcato da nuvole il cui biancore si riflette sulla superficie del fiume. Come per il caro poeta Leopardi, anch'io vorrei sperdermi nel cielo, naufragare nella sua infinita natura sempre eguale a se stessa eppure sempre diversa. Ma allo stesso tempo vorrei anche lasciarmi cullare da questo pensiero, mentre assorto me ne sto nella intimità di una stanza, in una casa che si affaccia in compagnia di tante altre case su una strada, affollata, silenziosa, luminosa o oscura di questa città.

Andrea Ponsi
14 May 2015

suggest possible discoveries and rediscoveries. The street becomes a new space to be explored, because even if it has already been lived hundreds of times, reality is always something new. Through an image we touch with our eyes that detail hidden among the roofs, a portal or a gate peeping out behind a monument, and we recognize in that photo a stimulus to discover what seems evident, without ever really being so, what is hidden, making it imaginable.

The outlines of the roofs frame the sky. From my eye level I cannot touch the sky, but a small movement of my neck lets me look at it. Between two buildings the street finally opens up into the vast space over the river. I recognize the outlines of my city while the clouds flow past as though the sky were immaterial water. Distractedly, or perhaps being careful not to trip, I look in amazement at this sea of air, sliced through by clouds whose whiteness is reflected in the surface of the river. Like the beloved poet Leopardi, I too would like to lose myself in the sky, to sink into the depths of its infinite nature that is always the same yet always different. But at the same time I want also to let myself be lulled by this thought, while lost in thought I remain by myself in the intimacy of a room, in a house that looks, in the company of many other houses, onto a street, crowded or silent, luminous or dark, of this city.

Andrea Ponsi
14 May 2015
translation by Susan Scott



Bonfires

Apart from the tragic damage to Cimabue, works on paper, manuscripts and books, Florence has made a fair recovery from the flood in 1966. The unrelenting flood of tourism is ultimately much more damaging to its delicate balance and seemingly will never recede as the Arno once did. My friend René Fontaine said to me before my first trip to Paris, "Don't judge Paris by the people who are living there now". I would apply the same to Florence. There are cities full of pedestrians; others full of tourists posing as locals. Florence has become a museum city repurposed in the last few decades as a tourist destination and home for international university campuses, more available to Prada and gelaterias than Fra Angelico. But then one enters a breathlessly treasured cathedral or Medici palace and the sense of the place all becomes clear.

Florence is a city of canyons, of more than narrow sidewalks, lending a near claustrophobia, born of unsympathetic fortresses with towering stone facades.

The sidewalks are mere tilted rims skirting the building fronts; if you meet a person coming towards you, you must swerve into the street; if you step backward onto the pavement to look up at a palace, you will probably be run over.

Mary McCarthy, *The Stones of Florence*

It is small, available to one's feet, yet impenetrable culturally in trying to connect as an outsider on a convincing local level. It is not a secret that in Italy there is the apparent and elected government (61 since 1945) and the permanent functioning one, likely improperly derided as corruption. There are parallel systems at play: the formal public one and the subterranean system, known only to locals, that makes things work. The real Florence and its workings are always beyond the reach of the visitor.

Do we always seek the eternal in a city, seeing the contemporary people passing as inconvenient, transient shadows? We seem to prefer old spaces, old walls, rooms that breathe, paving stones that know, towers which have seen and speak to us of imagined stories; stories we might have known properly if we'd stayed awake in history. Do spaces exude warmth and humanity, do they whisper ancient conversations, or do we just wish it so? The specific dates of important events never seem

to matter when we are in a romantic fog of what Renaissance Florence might have been. The true substance of quotidian history hundreds of years ago can only be dimly surmised from contemporary accounts no matter how specific. It doesn't matter which Bonfire of the Vanities, 1495 or otherwise, happened where we are now standing. Savonarola be damned in the Piazza della Signoria. Even the detailed knowledge of a Florentine scholar steeped in historical accounts is poor preparation for the stones of Florence. Neither erudition nor romantic fantasy can help us penetrate the city past or present.

It is so much more interesting to let the world come to you than to imagine it possible to go out and conquer. A camera is everything but prescient. Some cities want to be seen in color, some in black and white and, given the 6 x 7 format I use, some are best seen horizontally and others, such as Florence with its narrow canyon like streets, are best seen vertically. I believe pictures take themselves. One learns to see the way one's camera allows. There is an imposed limitation with any camera, though adverts for the latest digital cameras would suggest otherwise. Having every possibility is a horror in the guise of a gift. Format, speed of film, black and white or color, weight or portability of the camera. all inform and wonderfully limit.

Photography is easy if one gets out of the way and listens and responds to what one was born responding to, naturally recognizing, being intrigued by. Some respond to order, others to chaos; some to lyrical natural forms and others to staid geometrical forms; some to spontaneity, others to the considered nature morte. We don't choose what we respond to: our apparent choices are themselves based on proclivities that we did not choose. I naturally respond to blue, but I have not chosen to prefer blue. Anyone honest is a fatalist.

Accepting this, I try to see without filter, without thought. It is something of an improvisation, preparing and preparing and then letting go and trusting that one has done enough. One must have one's technique in very solid order and a formal structure from which to knowingly stray. As Picasso said, "Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working". And Borges has described the absurdity of engaging with free verse before embarking on a twenty-year embrace of the sonnet form. One problem with everyone being a photographer now is that people do not know the core of the structure from which they deviate.

When the camera is an integrated extension of the hand and eye, seeing through it with a natural grace becomes a possibility. I am very far from encouraging anyone to embark on a life with a camera in hand, especially now when seemingly everyone is doing so, creating a world full of "thoughtful", "reflective", self critical and discriminating photographers. The first world has been overtaken by image making and sharing. Yet despite the crowds of people looking, most are less equipped than ever to see serious photography, or to see at all.

Dennis Letbetter



Sogno di San Domenico

Fra Angelico, 1430

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DENNIS LETBETTER

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At this high moment ability
failed my capacity to describe.

Dante Alighieri