

Non-fiction

I have grown accustomed to eating an orange after dinner, something my host mother Mara calls an “orange experience.” Every now and then, Mara grabs an orange peel, holds it up to the light, and twists it in her hand. A lovely spritz escapes from the peel in all directions and shines in the light against the electric green of the kitchen walls.

Mara explained that oranges, along with all other citruses, have alcoholic essential oils in their peel. Naturally, the first time she told me this, I began to rub the bits of my orange peel all over my arms and accidentally sprayed some oil in my eyes, much to my host father Paolo’s amusement. His lighthearted quips and endearing giggles are one my favorite parts of having dinner with my host family.

Watching Mara spray orange essential oils in the air is hypnotic and borderline poetic. It reminds of other moments like it which have been inspiring me to write more often since coming to Florence. There is poetry in the winding cobblestone streets, felt most palpably during walks at sunrise. There are also, literally, sheets of poetry plastered throughout the city, which is like something out of my teenage fantasies. I always stop when I see these happy surprises and try to understand as much of them as I can, which is usually chunks of text such as “quando eravamo” or “e di non piangere.” The voices of these nameless poets waft through the streets and follow me on walks, like an orangey mist settling onto flower-rimmed balconies and bicycles.

I have deeply-rooted affection for my quiet walks in Florence. The city’s streets -- free of cars driving at breakneck speeds and people rushing to work, sloshing coffee in their styrofoam cups -- engender serenity and an easiness of breath. Even more so, experiencing Florence has helped me to explore and pick apart the construction and use of language. I am a first-generation American whose parents immigrated from Armenia, but I identify more as Armenian than

American because mine is a culture that has for thousands of years thwarted annihilation, and words have the power to speak forgotten truths and cultures into existence.

As much as I have always loved to write, one of the joys of being in Florence is that I have begun to cultivate a reverence for the sound of language. I do not know how to read or write in Armenian, so my knowledge of the language is colloquial and acquired through a lifetime of dinners with my family, such as the ones I have with my host family here in Florence. Just as I consciously piece together my sentences at dinner and remain absorbed by what Mara and Paolo say in return, I find myself slowing down when I speak Armenian and thinking about the words I use and the sounds they make.

Since beginning to learn Italian, and speaking it as often as possible, I feel more confident in my voice and more deliberate in my choice of words. However, I realize I am in a privileged place to live in another country, speak another language, and cross borders inaccessible to others. With the centenary of the Armenian Genocide approaching, ideas of mobility, home, and diaspora have been lingering in my mind. Florence has a sense of permanence and unshakeable history, and Florentines have a comfortable fixity in their locality. My host father, for instance, grew up one street away from my home stay -- there is beauty in this sense of belonging.

I think of Mara's and Paolo's apartment on *Via Frusa* as a home now. When I think of Mara leaning back in her chair to twist her orange peel and release bursts of sweet-smelling oils, I think about the importance of noticing the silences between words. These moments can be as powerful as when we speak, because it is during these silences that words take root in our minds. It is during moments of silence, watching orangey mists settle, that there lies the possibility of bridging cultural gaps and moving closer to mutual understanding.