

FICTION

In the early morning, before the sun's fully risen, an older woman pats her thigh distractedly and a heavy black Labrador plods towards her. As she waits, the woman brushes her hand along the pale yellow wall, sniffing disapprovingly at the loop of plain black graffiti strung across it. Every building on the block is marked in the same way, meaningless scribbles marring the paint and plaster. The woman looks up, and stares blankly at the piazza ahead of her. A circle of pollarded trees strain uselessly towards the grey sky, jagged black boughs reminding her forcefully of crabbed hands and swollen knuckles. When the Lab catches up, the woman pats him and hooks a finger through his raggedy collar; it's a cold morning, and she's ready to head home. Across the city, a thousand other dogs and owners walk the streets in silence.

In the afternoon, a young woman walks home from her first day of work, slowly, painfully. She'd come in that morning with an air of forced confidence, swinging the key of her bike lock around her finger. She came out just minutes ago, and found her bike dissected, its desecrated frame chained pointlessly to a rack. The wheels and seat are gone. She's slung the frame of the bike over her shoulders, and it digs into her neck. At first, she manages it in silence, tears slipping down her pink face and mouth clenched shut. But it was a long day, and soon she begins to cry in earnest, face crumpling and panicked thoughts flashing through her mind. She can't afford to replace this bike. She can't afford the bus. She can't afford to walk. Each step starts to burn. Strangers stare as she limps by, sobs escaping her in waves and the skeleton of her only companion slung across her back.

A little boy walks with his parents to dinner, at some restaurant with a name he can't pronounce. He doesn't know where they are, or why they've come, but the narrow

sidewalks of the Oltrarno have set him an interesting challenge—he balances along the curb, one sneaker in front of the other. When this begins to bore him, he walks with one foot on the sidewalk and one on the road. Every now and then he hits a loose paving stone and rocks it back and forth. The whole thing is extremely satisfying. Eventually, his mother puts a hand on his shoulder and shifts him back to the sidewalk as a truck rattles by. The sun blazes overhead, but it's shady here between the close-set buildings, and he shivers.

In the evening, a couple stops halfway across the Ponte Vecchio (they'd seen a picture on the back of their guidebook, and she'd clapped her hands in delight when she saw the little shops barnacled to its side). It was a good idea for a romantic trip, and the man congratulates himself as he watches his girlfriend's face light up. After a moment of silence, he wraps a hand around her waist, hinting gently that it's time for her to turn back to him. She ignores him, leaning forward until most of her body extends above the Arno. Frustrated, he laughs and pulls her back, mumbling something about safety. He doesn't like the look in her eyes, an unblinking mixture of joy and confusion. He follows her gaze east, but still doesn't understand what she's looking at. But she's frozen in odd ecstasy, staring at mountains clouded in atmosphere, because she never knew. No one ever told her that not all fantasy is fantasy. She didn't tell her boyfriend, when they were in Paris, that it was the world *behind* the Mona Lisa that captivated her. Strange blue and violet twists of rock. She doesn't tell him now, either. Eventually, they finish crossing the bridge.

There's a lot of dog crap in Florence. That's what the girl tells herself when she realizes how often she walks with her eyes on the sidewalk. A lot of crap, and its treacherous, it's a treacherous commute to school each morning. If it means she never sees

the looks that men give her, well, that's just a lucky bonus. The city becomes a grey treadmill. Her neck aches. She tries not to think about the world that's passing by her. One day, walking home, she looks up. Not as an experiment, not to see what she's missing. She simply forgot to look down. So she looks up.

Sometimes, smiles crack open, or burst through, or edge out. When she looks up, her smile blooms. The sky is clearer than any she's seen before. The pale yellow walls around her make the blue above stand out like a stamp of fresh, wet ink. Green shutters rattle in the breeze, clapping for her discovery. A white sheet unfurls from the window above her, and her heart swells with it.