

On Perseus' Wings

Therese Wolfe

There is such a thing as a lightness of thoughtfulness, just as we know that there is a lightness of frivolity. In fact, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy.
~Italo Calvino

Tonight, New Years Eve, from the window of this tiny apartment in Florence, I can see the upper half of the Basilica di Santa Croce and the bell tower beside it, the facade lit from below like the faces and bodies in the paintings by Caravaggio. I arrived in Florence that afternoon and I loved the apartment immediately: one large room with a low dividing wall behind which is a large bed, on the other side a dining table, small couch and refrigerator. There is a minuscule space cut out for a kitchen sink and hot plate and a small bathroom with a shower.

The old apartment building is situated between the Basilica di Santa Croce and the Piazza della Signoria, which is near the Ponte Vecchio and the Uffizi Gallery. Standing at the window at midnight with the fireworks lighting the night sky above the church, the church bells clamoring loudly thirteen times, I say goodbye. Goodbye 2012. Goodbye, goodbye, I say gladly in my heart as I welcome 2013. I'm holding my breath---will this year be different from the last?

It's eight-thirty in the evening on the second day of the new year. My sleeping patterns are a mess; jet lag is real. My body thinks it is noon and I'm wide-awake. I had been napping; in fact, I just woke out of a dream where I was sitting comfortably next to Pete, my first love. He was holding two paperback books (I don't remember him ever liking to read). He held them humbly as if to show me that he, too, liked to read books. He smelled faintly like sweat and pot. I'd like to think Pete is resting in a state of peace. He died about twenty years ago, in his thirties, news I'd learned from a mutual friend shortly after his death, so it was all the more poignant that he came to me in my dream. Taking refuge in the warmth of his embrace, it was comforting to see him, to be near him. I had not thought of Pete in a very long time, had forgotten about raging hormones, supreme awkwardness bordering on multiple personalities, the pains and joys of adolescence and first love. Now I think, how much life has changed.

This afternoon I need comforting; I am lonely and exhausted. And it's raining. Not good for someone like me who needs to sit down often to rest her legs. Living with multiple sclerosis is living with unpredictability. One day my legs feel strong, the next, like sap. My legs are sore and weak from the walking done earlier in the day and yesterday. I almost didn't make it to the church and back to the apartment.

Walking, walking, walking. I can still say it, and that matters. I sometimes command myself to do it, to make sure, the actual action of it proof that I am not disabled. How could I have ever taken walking for granted? And yet why wouldn't I? Without the limitations of this disease, how could I have known to appreciate the carefree and unburdened act of simply taking steps?

I walk slowly towards the piazza on the stone paved streets. Nearing the city square, I hear it teeming with screaming children. I imagine it with lovers freely grabbing at each other and families leaping wildly into the air with happiness taking pictures of each other and the church. Steadying myself with a hand on a railing or a wall, I am like a crawling wounded beetle, head bent down gazing at my feet. To look around with curiosity and wonder means to forsake balance, the concentration needed to take each step, at times an endlessly enduring moment. This is not the time to be run over by a maniacal taxi driver or to be hit by a racing scooter. Conservation of energy is foremost on my mind, it's what my life is, one slow step at a time. I stop at the corner of two buildings and brace myself with one hand on the stone wall---everything stone---durable, hard, timeless stone. I lift my head to have a look around the piazza and the basilica majestically stationed at the far end. The piazza is just as I had visualized: a palpable, vibrant, ongoing feast of movement, with me stuck to the wall, now like a flattened wounded beetle.

I rest, witnessing the boundless energy in the piazza, and consider going into the basilica, imposing in its grandeur, its majesty. But the long lines: daunting. I think it might be too strenuous to visit, but I'm stubborn; I have a hard head like those durable stones. I unstick myself from the corner and walk the remaining few hundred yards to the church with hopeful curiosity to have a closer look at the lines. I sit down on a stone step under the lintel of a closed bike shop across from the church, mapping out the situation like a mountaineer surveying the facade of a mountain for the easiest route to the top. The stairs, a climb upwards to the entrance, seem monumental, the long line of tourists intimidating. The fact that it's raining doesn't help. Oh, I have my umbrella, I have time, but I don't have the strength to make the journey. Then again, the Italians are most sympathetic to someone like myself. If I could get to the head of the line and explain my situation, a gentle man or woman would take my arm and say, "Vieni con me", and let me in ahead of the others. I love the Italians for many reasons, not the least of which is their unbounded tenderness. I might brave it tomorrow but today is not the day. In solemn resignation, but not unhappy, I decide to have lunch at the Trattoria Francescano right next door to the bike shop, not a bad alternative on a rainy day. There, I can sit down in a clean, well-lighted place, like Hemingway's deaf old man in his famous 1933 short story of that title.

It is the story of a deaf old man sitting in a cafe late at night drinking brandy. He's actually sitting outside in front of the cafe where there are *shadows of the leaves*. The two waiters, one old, the other young, converse about the old man while they are cleaning up to close the cafe, beginning with the subject of his recent suicide attempt. The younger waiter is impatient and wishes for their old customer to leave so he can go home to his wife. The older waiter is more conciliatory; he understands despair and loneliness. He is not in a hurry to kick the old man out because he himself needs a clean, well-lit cafe to stave off his loneliness. The younger waiter, on the other hand, is impatient, not lonely. He says of the deaf old man: *He's lonely. I'm*

not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for me. He seems to think money and a wife can annul loneliness. The old man motions for another brandy. The younger waiter finally refuses his request: The old man stood up, slowly counted the saucers, took a leather coin purse from his pocket and paid for the drinks, leaving half a peseta tip. The waiter watched him go down the street, a very old man walking unsteadily but with dignity.

I see myself as a character in a story, one with an illness who wishes to stand tall and dignified. I am that old man, living on the periphery of a culture that would marginalize illness, that would lose patience and shove me out of the way because I am slow as a slug and the world is in a very big hurry, one that would not make eye contact for fear I am contagious. Hemingway's deaf old man is for me a symbol of loneliness in the face of the incomprehension of illness that health itself can engender. That Hemingway gives dignity and generosity to a drunk, deaf old man moves me.

I feel the vitality in the people around me: I am not skipping rope or clutching the fine ass of a young man while he passionately kisses me. I don't move speedily, don't dress like I used to in hip tight jeans, for that would mean buttons, zippers, and flaps that hinder my numb, unwieldy fingers when I suddenly need to urinate (my compromised neuromuscular connections lead to incontinence). Often I don't make it to a toilet in time; I wet my pants in public spaces—like piazzas, museums, even in churches (obviously, I can't worry about impiety). And I don't feel sexy, can't wear high heels like the beautiful Italian women who walk like panthers, graceful and provocative in their dark beauty, and not a stumble to be seen. I try not to feel sorry for myself.

Dignity: that quality or state of being worthy. Yes, I want dignity and I want it badly. I'm staying alone in Florence for three days without my companion while he teaches yoga in a small town in Umbria where the two of us once lived. I want to test my character alone and witness myself face the myriad challenges presented in this country I love. Since my last relapse in 2012, with its exacerbation of symptoms, which has presented new difficulties with walking and balance, I beg Italy to take me as I am.

With book and umbrella, I gather myself up from the step and walk slowly into the bustling trattoria, the refuge I seek. Like being wrapped in Pete's arms in the dream, I find warmth and comfort here. The headwaiter nods to me, pointing to a small table for two by the espresso bar. There is no shame in dining alone in Italy: you simply merge and participate as one of the whole; you become, for a few hours, a member of a large family. I turn down the waiter's offer for wine and order a small bottle of *aqua frizzante*, then am left alone to study the menu. No matter the hour, no matter how busy the trattorias and restaurants, the Italians never rush your dining experience to make room for newly arriving diners. Dining in Italy is slow, sacrosanct. Interacting with the Italians is a great pleasure. They are animated, full of an unbroken, triumphant spirit, overflowing with affection. I order the fish: a delicately prepared filet of cod with leeks and zucchini, and a *contorno*, a side order of spinach sautéed in *olio and aglio*. Upon taking the first bite, I smile and shake my head, acknowledging the deliciousness of the perfectly cooked dishes, simple as they are. "Italia," I whisper, as if in delightful conspiracy with the other diners.

I open a slim black hardback on Dostoevsky, borrowed from the library back home. It was written by Andre Gide in 1925, based on lectures he had given on the masterful Russian novelist who suffered from epilepsy. Apart from his gigantic singular genius and astonishing literary powers, his soulful commitment to the Russian people, and his ability to take me to unimaginable psychological depths, before Freud—Nietzsche once described Dostoevsky as “the only person who has ever taught me anything about psychology,”—apart from all that, he suffered enormously. From his four-year imprisonment in Siberia for a political crime he did not commit, a lifetime of penury, overwhelming grief for the death of two of his four children, to the recurring, racking epileptic fits, his triumph, in spite of and in the face of suffering, is one of the greatest examples in literary history of self-overcoming. I have kept Dostoevsky close to my heart as an example of tremendous endurance and courage, as a great teacher of the soul. He helps me navigate limitations and obstacles and reminds me that suffering can be transcended and transformed, even, into joy.

Books are a refuge that offer not only comfort but an internal landscape in which I never have to navigate my body physically, but where I navigate a different kind of journey, one that doesn't involve the gravity of corporeality, but the weightlessness of the imagination. My imagination can journey endless distances without ever having to get in a car to go somewhere. This is a great consolation amidst the chaos and mad rush of a hustling, bustling world, amidst what, at times, is an inconsolable thrashing from the pressure of having to keep up. Unlike those hard durable stones, the printed words on the page are light as feathers, and I become a bird, the winged messenger of the good news of a book.

Therese Wolfe is a writer and painter. She has traveled extensively in Italy and lived there for five years. She is currently planning to return there permanently in 2022 with her dog, Gertrude.

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