

FRAGMENTS FROM A HOLIDAY IN ITALY (1982)

Fragment one:

The fifth *Citta del'Arte* in three days

Heads buried in guidebooks

My companions have scurried

From church to museum

From museum to palace

From palace to post-card shop

Where are we now?

Oh yes

Assisi.

I sit outside the *Chiesa di San Francesco*

One among many sitting on the parched grass

Si prega di non entrare nel prato

It says on the notice

Which no-one notices.

A week of

Dutiful, daughterly, diligence

And my patience is temporarily

Exhausted.

Rejecting Cimabue and Giotto

I watch the pilgrims

Coming and going.

How my cultural mentors would cringe

At this blasphemy.

The monks and nuns interest me most

Nuns wearing thick black tights

Even in this searing heat

Would just an inch of bare ankle

Be so provocative?

With covered heads

They look identical
How do they know each other as
Individuals?
They meet with bubbling school-girl
Excitement
Greeting each other with chaste kisses
And arms-length hugs
A great day for them
To be actually
Here
Whereas for me...
Without a cause
When does one have
A great day?

The monks are different
Bare-headed they are not anonymous
Even here the male /female discrepancies
Abound
Some are aged, rotund and homely
Others bespectacled, efficient and busy
Then come the virile so-near-and-yet-so-far
Young men.
I could be a hermit
On a lonely mountain
But to be so near the world and not
Part of it
That would be
An impossibility.

I started my observations
In an idle way
Wanting to know about
Other people's lives

But did I really want to know
Or did I just seek reassurance
About my own?
Easiness of mind
Is now destroyed
I stand up wearily
And console myself
With a
Gelato di limone.

Fragment Two:

The sun's heat
As soft and penetrating
As the inner glow
That comes from wine
Feeling it creeping over my body
Through each pore and
Into the holes and crevices
In my face and between my legs.

The body spreads in glorious indolence
It should be swelling and bloated
With the absorption of
So much pleasure
But looking down through half-closed eyes
It is taut and flat and glowing
Like a healthy child's
Skin a nutmeg brown
Hairs as blonde as the sun itself.

Lying and wallowing
The sun's rays are
Sensual not sexual
And as we drift into making love

An extension of
The heat
The haze
The moisture
That too is
Sensual not sexual
Just part of the natural world
Soft wind, swaying trees, buzzing insects
And the fluttering shadows
As our limbs move
Sometimes revealing, sometimes concealing
The sun's heat.

The sun's heat incorporates us
As if we are not separate from each other
Or the world in which we come together
And part
Day after timeless day.

Fragment Three:

Returning to the mountain
The house is still
Finally
I am alone
No connections
No interruptions
No relationships
But not lonely.

I am vaguely astonished
That only yesterday
When someone else was here
I felt such a desperation of
Loneliness.

Quietly I meander through
Necessary routines
And then just
Stop
And feel the timeless stretches of time
As the sky keeps changing
It is so still
As if all change is
External
I am merely an object
Inanimate
Immutable
The sense of
'I'
Hardly exists.

Where is the tiger?
Sloping off into the deepest wood?
Or waiting to pounce from behind a nearby bush?
Is this the solace
I have been yearning for?
This breathless sense
Of complete
Stillness?
Returning to the mountain
Here there is finally
A fragment of a moment
Of complete
Peace.