

2019 Wind & Water Writing Contest

2nd Place Winner

Life Changing Events That Never Happen by Gabriele Cole

Genre: Non-Fiction

Within the gilded walls of Rome's Borghese Museum, I stand in worship of fingers and toes. Slowly circling Bernini's masterpiece Daphne and Apollo, shuttering out the comments of passing tourists, I revel in life coaxed from marble. Delicate branches and leaves bloom thickly from her fingertips, alluding to the instant that Daphne - desperate to escape Apollo's pursuit - is turned into a laurel tree. I retreat to a corner to sketch agony in sweeping movement.

This is a planned perfect moment, one of many that have been neatly slotted into a schedule months in the making; a meticulous time-table so finely honed that a week's worth of activities are executed in 48 hours.

For hours, only the thin strip of cheaply soled sandals separated my feet from ancient city streets. Bypassing long lines of tourists waiting desperately to purchase tickets, I paced the interior of the Colosseum, straining to hear the cheering of crowds and the clash of metal on metal. I traced paths of philosophers, sketching views witnessed by emperors, made a wish in the Trevi Fountain, climbed the Spanish Steps, wandered narrow streets entranced by musicians, circumvented the Parthenon, travelled across sculpture-lined bridges and under the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. All this is not simply tourism. It is more than an art history graduate trying to see all she once studied. I am searching.

There is a story lodged in the back of my mind. A story shared long ago in a darkened art class. Every time I travel, the story creeps to the front of my brain and sits there, expectantly.

It is the story of abstract artist Mark Rothko and the affect his work has on those who view it. Rothko created giant, consuming abstracts consisting of large fields of colour that blend together in a fashion that makes them appear as if they are glowing. His technique often leads people to describe his work as floating, humming. When you sit down in front of one of these paintings, it overtakes your vision. You become immersed in a sea of deep reds so pure that everything in your periphery is blurred. Yellows and oranges vibrate against one another. As viewers sit with the work, they are overcome with a deep sense of emotion; some have described it as a religious experience. There are instances when people have openly wept before these paintings.

Hearing this story has removed me from the experience. It is anticipated, and therefore would be forced. Yet I long for such a feeling to overcome me, so I have travelled to Italy so that I might find an instant that makes me feel more than just alive. I crave a connection that is deeper than my studious past - something that stops not just this incessant buzzing in my mind but can take me out of the world I know. Simple enough, sure! However - based on my inability to leave anything to chance - it might prove impossible.

So the story, held captive in my brain expectant of triumph, paces. It waits, perks up occasionally, only to slump back when the corner we've turned in heightened anticipation has not yielded the desired result.

Taking the train from Rome, I head north. I slow down and traverse the undulating hills of Tuscany. From a small villa I meander through olive orchards, down dusty roads, past churches whose bells toll hourly, towards a town that clings desperately to the side of a steep hill. On this walk to Castiglion Fiorentino, I pass a building so impossibly close to the winding road that its

corner has been eroded away by passing cars. Tiny red poppies delicately scatter the roadside as the sun sets behind a city so invested in its ancestry that, in a few days time, the citizens will dress in the colours of their family crests and parade through the town to perform a boisterous, synchronized flag show. The locals are so passionate you can feel it pulsing through you. During these moments, my brain perks up, it takes notice and waits for a feeling it is yet unfamiliar with. It is left wanting.

In Florence, my brain and I take the steps up to the Piazzale Michelangelo two at a time to see the light change over the Duomo with its extravagant details, rising above the tightly-packed city with its radiating bridges.

Venice proves no more helpful as I attempt to get lost in an effort to find myself. My brain discovers that our phone's GPS works even when it is in airplane mode. Confident in my ability to navigate with ease, I see more of Venice than I thought possible, eating clam pasta along a canal and drinking cappuccinos before towering cathedral. Dear brain, why isn't this enough for you?!

One might argue that planning each moment might prevent magic finding its way in. You will never know if that thing you need most was on the train leaving the station as you arrived. Yet, here, artistic genius is inescapable. The sudden urge to duck into an unassuming brick church could lead to a surprise mural by Botticelli. You don't need magic here. Still, my brain waited, so sure it knew what it was looking for.

And then, there it was - in the city that had once captured my youthful adoration. In Verona, where we lay our scene, I found it. Unexpected, as it should be.

The alleyway to the home of the Capulets is thick with overlapping graffiti. Promises in initials added together to equal love for all time. A courtyard, hung heavy with love locks and a bronze statue of Juliet, right breast shining from the rub of good luck, lacked the romanticism that the story had evoked in my adolescence. On the other side of town, more initials were repeated inside her tomb by people desperate to take a piece of history for themselves and add their name to it, unearned as it might be. Uninspired, we moved on.

I had been circumventing a Roman amphitheatre all day in my search for Shakespearean lore, inadvertently making my way towards its entrance. In the evenings this ancient building known as the Verona Arena is now host to extravagant operatic performances. It is the third-largest amphitheatre in the world, a smaller version of the famous Colosseum. At the time of my arrival, the crew was in the process of setting up *Tosca* and tearing down *Aida*.

The parking lot is replete with faux history. The set of *Aida* is packed in long rows awaiting its removal to storage. I delight in the irony of Egyptian statuary in this Italian town made famous by an English playwright. A few years ago, I watched *Aida* from the very top box of the Metropolitan Opera in Manhattan, unable to view the colossal monuments the opera is known for. Too high up then to see any of the set, it now towers above me. And in my youth, the onset of a life-long illness struck me down the day I was to purchase tickets for a trip to Egypt – a post-graduation gift. Am I awe-struck? Yes. Ecstatic? Definitely. Life, changed? Sweet brain, why dost thou forsake me thus?!

I have tickets to see *Tosca* in a few days at the famous La Scala opera house in Milan, so am curious to see the set. Verona's open-air theatre is approached through a long corridor opening into a large archway. The archway was designed for large crowds to pass through and, today, it

offers me an expansive view of the oval arena in full sunlight with a stage in the distance. The set is unlike anything I have ever seen, with the head and hand of Apollo, so massive it could crush the men setting it into place. A single finger is larger than the man guiding it into place.

I am awestruck. Held in place within the shadows of the archway. *Is this it?*

I pause but then am forced to take a step back as a group of silver haired women, laden with heavy purses, surround me. I am desperate to hold onto this expanding feeling. It is so agonizingly close. With a deep breath, I isolate myself from their voices. In an effort to keep my reaction separate in a way I couldn't at the museums, I wait for them to pass. One of the women lingers behind with me. Is she having the same reaction? My brain begs her to keep moving; we don't want to share this moment with anyone else.

A silence has expanded around me, slowing time so that each movement can be recorded with distinct accuracy. With its arrival, the promise of tears begins to sting my eyes. I struggle to let go so that the experience can build more. Yet I don't want to remove myself too much so that this moment can be defined.

And then from this silence a loud sound rips the air. Beside me, the tourist - having hidden her face from her friends - strides forward confidently out into the sunlight.