

University of Sydney

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The twelfth taxi ride

Biographical note:

Sue Woolfe is the author of many stories, including the novels *Painted Woman* (also a play performed on the professional stage), *Leaning Towards Infinity* (also produced as a professionally-performed play), *The Secret Cure* (currently being adapted for an opera) and *The Oldest Song in the World*.

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For Sue B

I must admit it to myself now, I tell myself, as I ride in the back seat of a taxi to my friend's apartment: I came to this city because of my yearning.

I had no right to the yearning. I'd known forever that my dull life was my own fault for gazing out the window in school rather than concentrating on what my teachers were saying. I was always being accused of daydreaming, which was true, though what the daydreams were about, I couldn't say, except that I was impatient with ordinary things, as if I wasn't ordinary. I felt that everyone was ignoring something mysterious and incandescent that slipped behind the shadows and under the surfaces. My home life seemed mired in the practical. My father owned a corner shop where I had to serve behind the counter and get the prices right. However, my brother inherited it and made it into a restaurant, where I became the kitchen hand. Then I inherited it, along with his half-grown children when he was suddenly killed in a car accident. Ironically, I had no choice but to become a practical person.

I loved the children, and despite me, the restaurant prospered, and I should've been reconciled to my lot.

But I wasn't. I secretly wanted more. I came to think of it as the wanting that you feel when you listen to the end of a piece of music and something seems left out. The notes break in mid-air, lopped off. And because they're not finished, you have a hole inside you. A hole in your soul.

I never knew how to ask people if they felt the same. At the restaurant, we talked about how to make a custard fragrant or where to source fresher greens and, at home, children, even when they're grown up, need cossetting and comforting. I became a churchgoer in the hope that someone there would feel lopped off like me, but the faces of the congregation and the priests were round with satisfaction. At three o'clock in the morning in my lonely bed, my lopped-off feeling grew like a potato plant under the black soil, until one Christmas in the Cathedral, during the reading from the Old Testament, a poet spoke to me as if we were kindred souls, though separated by several thousand years. 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings,' he'd written. It wasn't exactly a whisper, read as it was by the priest's voice as fat and thick and gold-trimmed as his rich garments, but the line leaped through the air in a shiny bubble like the ones the children used to blow, bubbles slicked with rainbows. A line from a fellow yearner.

For the first time ever, I thought that somewhere else in the world there might be yearners like me – and surely they'd know what to do with this emptiness. Then a customer showed me pictures of her apartment and its neighbourhood in Florence, and I knew where to find them.

I'd taken to talking to my rheumy old dog, also a yearner though easily satisfied by a strip of bacon. I showed her the pictures I'd discovered on the Internet.

Look, I said to her. All of them, the statues and paintings, the decorations and the curlicues – what do they say? Look at the naked cupids reaching out to something, look at the holy men turning their pale, shining faces to something, look at the Madonnas with closed lips barely suppressing their joy about something, not to mention those ragged shepherds and no doubt smelly stable-hands – they're all openly yearning, they're not ashamed of the holes in their hearts, indeed it seems a common assumption amongst the artists who made them that of course there's a hole in everyone's heart. And since the pictures and statues are old, surely by now the people of Florence would know what to do about holes in hearts.

I didn't exactly speak those words to my dog, but I sent my thought to her, the way the poet had sent his thought to me. She licked her old droopy jowls. The next day, she died.

I told my customer I needed a break and asked if I could rent her apartment in Florence. She imagined I wanted a rest. But, though I'd been busy, I'd rested, in a way, all my life.

So after I buried my dog, I left for Florence.

I wandered through galleries and cathedrals, amongst a noisy mob of fellow yearners oddly clad in spotted sun frocks or loose yellow shirts patterned with palm trees, as if they weren't pre-occupied by their emptiness. But they responded as much as me to Florence's yearning. It was all around us as I knew it would be, calling out to us, yearning along with us: all the statues, the alter pieces, the very walls, they all unashamedly, even flagrantly yearned with us; there were meandering narrow streets with buildings almost toppling into them, such was their yearning – why even at night the river Arno coiled with a pleading light through the darkened city. It didn't hurl itself in a drench of sand and sunshine like our toiling, triumphant oceans. Once in a hushed cathedral, a man in the congregation began to sing of his desire, and it was just like mine, I wanted to go up to him and hold his hand and sing with him but of course I didn't, I can't hold a tune and I didn't know what words to sing, there never seem to be the right words, but his pleading gusted like a wind through the empty spaces inside us as we stood with upturned faces waiting for the vaulted arches to crack open and give us – what – what would united yearning give us? For the first time in my life I was with soul mates, and from then on in Florence I trod more stoutly.

I can never go home, I thought. I must stay here with my soul mates. But time was running out, my friend needed her apartment back, my restaurant and the children needed me back.

Then one muddy afternoon on a bus back to the city from Scandici, I found a ridiculously simple solution. A Florentine man, surely with yearning rampant in his blood, in his very

DNA, a man with palely lidded orange eyes – I'd seen those pale eyelids without eyelashes a hundred times in renaissance paintings – directed his gaze at me. It came to me, his gaze, in a fierce beam of orange light. That's how it felt, twin torches burning orange through the grey, slippery day. When I met his gaze, he stepped out of the frame of the renaissance painting, pursed his lips into a kiss, lowered his eyelids as if he was swooning, then rolled his eyes back into his head, and entered what seemed to be a state of bliss.

I looked behind me to see what god or goddess had occasioned this. There was only the dismal afternoon falling away against the foggy window glass. I counted to seven, a propitious number according to one of my guidebooks, and turned back. His gaze was still on me. He went through the act again, then un-pursed his lips and smiled. So I had no choice but to admit the impossible.

He was suggesting bliss to me. Sexual bliss.

Of course, you'd think it obvious, the notion that yearning could be fulfilled by sex, but I'd assumed I needed something extraordinary. If a man in my country had done what he had, it would mean nothing but his wish for sex, he'd be just a disappointing predator. Not that I'd had many of those, I'm not a pretty woman that men notice, I am what used to be called large-boned, with a long thin face and a prominent nose. Against my better judgment, my heart gave a little lurch of joy at being noticed – but more, noticed by a Florentine, surely a fellow yearner.

I dared another look. He was shaven-headed, ear-ringed, leather-jacketed – cream and black, far too fancy for a man in my country. Even his jacket claimed he was a man from the land of the yearners. There were no lines on his face, no sags under his eyes.

A matron rustled her plastic shopping bag and in the sound I came to my senses. All the warnings my mother had given me, that I've given my brother's children: never trust strangers, always run from them, especially strange strangers.

I wriggled away between the soft matronly bodies to the far end of the bus where I held onto a pole near the driver, my skin wrinkling around the base of my fingers like a tide ebbing out past gnarled rocks. As the concrete apartment blocks slid by, I struggled to accept that there were, after all, compensations in my life. The children remembering to ring me up every so often, the customers staying back after hours serenading each other and sometimes me; the camaraderie with my chef who's a friend from schooldays; our little experiments with recipes – and then unbidden, there popped into my mind the new regular who'd prop a book against his wine glass and catch my eye whenever I emerged from the kitchen to see if the diners were pleased – as if he was waiting for me. His face with its muscles and crinkles broke into many surfaces when he smiled, so I thought of his face as made of crushed velvet. I'd never stopped to chat with him because I was intimidated by his constant books. He'd find out I didn't read. He always left his dog tied up outside and many times I'd wondered if I should put out a bowl of water for it, but

what if all the diners took it into their heads to bring their dogs? The restaurant would be ringed around with dogs. My brother would turn in his grave.

Suddenly, there was a firm male body pressing against me. I had forgotten male firmness. It came back to me from my youth, when I'd sometimes danced with men in the town hall that has now become a disco. I'd had few partners, only boys who knew my father and were obliged to do a round with me. Apart from a few unsatisfactory sexual encounters, soon over, I hadn't known men.

A large, olive-skinned hand gripped the pole I was holding, and slid down onto my fingers and covered them, and then the hand slid down to become a bracelet on my wrist. Or a handcuff. I swayed to the rhythm of the bus, not moving my arm, not looking up. The world narrowed. There was only the old man's catarrh of the motor and the warmth encircling my wrist. There were no tumbling cupids or upturned faces lit by a beam from a crack in the heavens, but nevertheless the circle of sexual warmth stilled my thoughts.

After a long while – funny how time's arrows suddenly cartwheel, and could that mean I was experiencing the timelessness of ecstasy? – something, perhaps politeness, demanded I follow with my eyes the man's arm, the bunched out shoulders of his cream and black leather coat, the glinting, cheeky diamond in his ear, and when I dared, his orange eyes. I didn't free my hand.

'I'm the one who can give you what you seek', said his orange eyes.

If the soft-bodied matrons pursed their lips in scorn, if they made faces to each other of contempt, I didn't see, as the Madonnas in paintings nearing a state of bliss don't see. Their eyes accept the exalted moment. So I saw nothing, nobody, only him, for his eyes were repeating, 'I am what you came for'.

It couldn't last. He took his hand away, and suddenly my wrist was damp and cold. He turned, the cream and black jacket crackling. My hope got off the bus.

I had no choice. I plunged between the women and the plastic bags and the children, and with the superhuman strength of the stricken, I forced open the closing doors, so I could get off too.

He strode down a street. I walked behind. A café beckoned relief, all bright lights and glinting glasses, just like my restaurant back home. Home washed over me, the warm bathwater of ordinariness. I remembered the curious sense of harmony when we get the menu right so we begin to think what we do has an importance beyond food, I remembered the orderly lines of tables just before we opened for the evening, with the plates reflecting the paleness of peace, I remembered the crushed velvet face of the new regular whose dog waits for him outside. He's not my sort of man, being small and spindly, but there was something soothing about his velvety gaze. He mightn't mind that I'm not a reader.

I turned like the dumbly respectable person I am, and went inside the cafe, leaving behind this wild Florentine and my foolish moment. I sat at a table. After all, I told myself – I

still sent my thoughts to the ghost of my dog, though I was trying to give up that habit – envy is a sin and it's just envy making you desire what you haven't had, what you weren't meant to have.

I hailed a waiter.

But it was the man who loomed. He stood gazing down at me, while I could only gaze down at the table top. But he sat opposite.

'Come to my home', he said in perfect English, overly perfect.

Then the waiter appeared.

'Madam?' he asked.

There's never anyone handy to advise you what to do.

'A short black', I said.

We sat in silence for several minutes until my coffee arrived.

I broke the silence.

'I didn't come to Florence for sex', I managed to say.

He shrugged.

'I'm after', I said, stumbled, and then suddenly found the words, 'someone who knows what this city is saying. So I feel I'm not alone'.

He sat up so straight, proud and tall, his shoulders could lift the entirety of the chandelier-hung ceiling.

'I am a man of this city', he said. 'You are with the right man.'

I could scarcely look at him then. When I managed a glance, to my surprise he wasn't looking into a mysterious distance, he was only examining the bar with its array of bottles.

I wondered if I should suggest a drink, but no, he was our leader.

He said, 'Shall we go?'

'First', my voice said, playing for time, trying for decorum though decorum so far hadn't stood me in good stead but at least there was dignity in decorum, perhaps even nobility – this voice of mine didn't belong to me anymore, it was high, silly, almost a squeak – for my secret had now been revealed. He knew what I needed as no one anywhere else in the world had known, it was clear to Florentines, why even the waiter slopping my expensive water on the table knew of my emptiness. They were, after all, Florentines.

'First', this thing my voice squeaked, 'we must have three meetings'.

I hoped that in three – again a propitious number – I'd be able to explain to him that despite my acceptance, perhaps, of mere sex, I was actually seeking out what Florence knows. The sacred knowledge that yearners share and receive.

He bowed his head. It seemed like assent.

I went back to my friend's apartment, and tried to ponder what to do. One moment my pondering told me to go home before anything happened and that seemed the perfect solution, and then, after I'd had a coffee in the sun on the piazza, my pondering told me to take this chance, and that seemed the perfect solution as well.

On the first two of our outings, we scarcely spoke. It was not the fault of my stumbling Italian, learned largely from recipes, nor of his perfect English, with even an Oxford accent, because he'd been sent away by his mother many times to stay with a family in London.

'The family was as chilly as the country', he said in an unusual burst of loquacity, 'but they spoke well. Families do that here, send their sons away to get the right accent'.

That hung in the air, against the screams of an espresso machine. Clearly my Australian accent wasn't right.

Sitting across from each other in little cafés, he was as preoccupied as a philosopher working on a conundrum. I'd known no one like that and tried to be a companion to his silences. Dozens of times in my head I composed a speech to further explain myself, but the speech became smaller and smaller until it was a crouching, curled up thing he could flick onto a dusty floor.

During both meetings, I'd announce, over the cooling dregs of our coffees, that I must go home. It was the only moment when I was an authoritative person who knows what's what, someone who's on top of things. He'd suddenly come to life, ringing a taxi for me on his mobile, speaking in Italian too rapid for me, joking with the man on the other end of the line. He always forgot my address, or perhaps he assumed I had no continuing abode.

'To - ?', he'd ask again.

I'd say it again, 'Via del Paradiso'.

He'd repeat it to the taxi company, but in English, laughing, 'She is bound for the Street of Paradise'.

Even the name of my street was absurd.

At the third meeting, we went to a movie in a cinema, but he pulled at my hand just after the opening credits.

'It's time', he said.

I stood up. I didn't complain that I still hadn't explained myself. This affair, I now knew, was not about words. I whispered to the ghost of my dog - I still permitted that habit in emergencies - that he seemed too refined to be a murderer, and besides, isn't this what

I'd longed for? Hadn't I sought the bliss his clumsy pantomime had suggested, by now I could admit that it had been clumsy, and was my life at home ever going to give me what I needed?

He strode impatiently through streets I didn't know. Again, I followed, though I comforted myself by promising that I'd turn back at the next statue, I'd turn back at the next fountain. I broke all my promises.

'My home', he announced at last, slowing down so I could catch up.

We were in a piazza. On two sides were expensive shops that in the day would've glowed in gold and crimson like the frescoes in the Cathedrals, but now they were ominous shadows, as if the sacrament was over forever. On a third side was a church spire that poked around hopefully at a starless sky. And on the fourth was a grand house with a porch, crowded with a beggar and his dogs.

'Give him nothing', my lover said when he saw me looking. 'Let's not encourage them.'

There were five dogs, the largest, a collie, was at one end, and a little dachshund crouched under the beggar's feet. Two dogs lay on either side of him and my favourite, a mongrel, balanced on his chest, its front paws nestled at the man's chin, its little body rising and falling with his breath. It was the hour of the *passeggiata*, and the dogs smiled at the elegant crowds in a stately way as if they weren't beggars at all. I didn't say it to my lover, but the dogs made it more possible for me to follow the cream and black jacket inside. Behind his back, I flung them a secret smile. I was only visiting a friend's house, my smile said. But then I wondered, would they hear me if I screamed? Yet, like a woman deranged, I followed him.

I felt no lust. I certainly felt no love. All I felt, like the suck of a tide I couldn't begin to fight against, was dull determination. I must see what might be given.

The street door opened directly onto a vast white room that in earlier days might've hosted grand ceremonies, but now there was only the man and I, and a deep stillness under the forbiddingly high ceiling. It was as if the room's past was there with us, observing me, half-knowing I'd disappoint it. Over in a shadowy corner was a heavy, ornate wardrobe that was already engaged in mocking me, and a bed that perhaps he'd made up for my arrival, with a dark blue velvet cover and blue cushions stamped with an important gold crest. Perhaps someone else had made up the bed. He wasn't the bed-making sort.

'Our family', he said, seeing me look at the crest, 'from the thirteenth century'.

There were three doors in the room, I noted, suddenly aware I might have to escape – one, the street door through which we'd come; another, a small modern door:

'The bathroom', he said. 'My mother permitted an ensuite'.

But the third. The third door was ornate, surrounded by a wide oak frame on which half a dozens snarling lions competed to impress me.

‘A portal,’ I murmured, for I’d heard the term and remembered that they’re often the entrance to exalted places.

‘It goes to the rest of the house’, he said.

I struggled with disbelief.

‘Who lives there?’ I asked.

‘Just me and my sister’.

I should’ve noticed the way his voice thickened. My voice never thickens when I mention my brother.

I should’ve asked further. But all I said was, ‘And your mother?’

He shrugged.

‘Away.’

On the wall above the bed was a patch of faded fresco. He followed my gaze.

‘When my mother is gone, I’ll have it painted out,’ he said. ‘I’m bored with age.’

‘But you’re a man steeped in this city’, I said.

It came to me that he might be one of a race of interlopers who had nothing to do with the grand passion of Florence. But he certainly wasn’t a new arrival.

‘This is my great-great-great-great-great grandfather’s house’ – to be honest, he listed so many greats, I lost count.

‘When my mother dies, the house will be mine.’

‘Will it belong to your sister as well?’, I asked.

He didn’t answer.

Undressing seemed called for. I went to a dark corner so I wouldn’t bore him with my age as I pulled off gloves, scarf, thick coat, boots, trousers, thermal tights, woolly jumper, skivvy, thermal singlet, bra. But I didn’t need to hide from his gaze. He was too busy shedding skins of his own, throwing them off so they skidded across the tiled floor, making splashes of unwanted colour like stains.

Then he was lying on the bed. Against the blue velvet, his orange eyes startled me all over again. To escape them, I lay down beside him.

‘Just one moment’, he said. He swung his muscled legs off the bed and strode across the floor and threw open the portal.

‘Why?’, I asked.

‘The heating is overpowering’, he said.

‘But your sister might come in. Is she in the house?’ I asked.

He put his hand over my mouth.

We made love, and though I’m not experienced enough to judge, it seemed banal. I almost slept through it and afterwards, I felt my disappointing self. Perhaps patience was required. But as I lay there I realized that the imposing room was silent in the way memories make rooms silent, so that there’s almost a whirring in the air of memories, on the other side of silence. Just beyond and above his face, itself a sculpture, was the patch of fresco that he’d have painted out. It depicted an angel, not an entire angel, just one shoulder with one white wing jutting out. The shoulder was like his, the same sharp almost right angle, no gentle curvature down to the arms.

‘Was your great-great-great-great-great-grandfather the model for the shoulder?’, I asked when he woke.

He corrected the number of greats, but that was all. When I shut my eyes again, I had an after-image of angel’s wings.

We made love for ten nights afterwards, always on the blue velvet under the snarling lions, always for me with the same puff of disappointment. We’d meet first, eat dinner in a little restaurant nearby, always the same restaurant, then we’d go to his house, always entering his room from the street door. We never went through the house from the other side, though every night the heating irritated him, he said, and he’d fling open the portal that was apparently no portal at all.

Once, during our lovemaking, it seemed to me that we were wrapped around with the angel’s one wing. I tried to tell him this, because it might be a sign though of what I didn’t know, but he wasn’t interested in signs.

Each time, more and more, I saw the angel’s wing the way he did, as something that added nothing to the city’s passion, but just as a dreary, drooping thing stuck on a shoulder in a desultory, almost sulky way, bereft of visible feathers, somewhat like the machine-like wings in Da Vinci’s *The Annunciation*. But Da Vinci, I remembered, had believed in the possibilities of angelic flight. When Da Vinci was painting it, if his brush had wandered a little further, the wing might’ve become a helicopter. Whereas the artist employed by the great-great-great-great grandfather – I still couldn’t get the number of grandfathers right – obviously believed in neither flight nor angels, judging by the wing. He’d been pleased, I could imagine, that the model was side-on so he didn’t have to bother with a second wing. Perhaps his patron had required as much, not wishing his left shoulder to be immortalized. Perhaps that left shoulder had been wizened by an illness forgotten by us now, something that reminded the great aristocrat of his ordinariness.

Perhaps it had been ruined in battle. However, the good shoulder could've supported a dozen magnificent wings. The painter seemed not to believe in wings, only in shoulders.

I asked, after one of our nights of love – still disappointing but I was too polite to show it – if I could see the rest of the house.

'Why?' he asked.

'To understand you more', I said.

There was a long pause.

'My house' – he paused again – 'is irrelevant to us.'

I was comforted that he said Us. It kept me returning a little longer.

Perhaps I'll achieve it next time, I said to myself, though by now I had no idea what 'it' was. I just seemed to be waiting like the room, without will or mind, waiting on the desires and needs of another. Nothing in my life had told me how to be other than someone who waits.

On the sixth night, over dinner, I asked the orange-eyed man what he did during the day.

'I look after the library', he said.

'Which library?' I asked.

When he said nothing, I added that it might be one that the guidebooks had recommended.

'My family's library', he said. 'My mother pays me to do this'.

I told him that I have a shelf-full of books, old recipe books given to me by my customers – *Keys to The Pantry*, *When Mother Lets Us Cook*, *A Cookbook of American Negro Recipes*, *Fine Old Dixie Recipes*, *Favourite Recipes of Famous Musicians*, and a well-thumbed old *Commonsense Cookery* book of my brother's with a quaint emphasis on milky recipes for invalids and an underlying belief in the healing power of onions.

He said after another silence, 'Our library is manuscripts. Illuminated manuscripts from the fourteenth century'.

On the seventh night I asked where his sister was. We were having dinner in the usual restaurant. I was comforted at how we'd developed a routine. At the mention of her, he became unexpectedly vivacious. He told me that she works like me in a restaurant, 'til well past midnight,' he added quickly. She sleeps till lunch and then visits friends until she's due at the restaurant.

Talking about her eased something in him. His skin glowed as if it had been basted. I wanted his vivacity to continue, so I tried to encourage more talk:

‘What does she do in the restaurant?’, I asked.

A wrong move. He paused. His willingness to talk ceased.

‘Women’s work’, he said. ‘She feeds’.

I was curious to see and hear her, to observe what they’d both inherited from their grand ancestors.

‘Let’s go to her restaurant’, I urged. ‘Tomorrow night?’

‘Perhaps I can’t find it’, he said.

On the tenth night, from deep in the ancient house, I heard ... what did I hear? Was it an ancestor, breathing so close? Was it the grandfather of the magnificently squared right shoulder? I held my breath, to hear again. But my lover contrarily didn’t hold his. He breathed heavily into my ear. He shouted in his orgasm, and subsided. Afterwards, there was only silence, the sound of a house settling into night.

‘Was it good for you?’, he asked.

He was always a man for the ceremonies.

He fell asleep before I could answer.

On the eleventh night, while I sat on the bed waiting for the taxi, I asked him, ‘Do you have a pet?’

His orange eyes as he lay on his blue velvet swiveled to me.

‘No’, he said.

‘Nothing at all?’ I asked.

‘Why these questions?’ he said irritably.

But because the taxi took its time, he eventually answered, ‘My sister has a fish’.

He became animated.

‘It comes from the Red Sea, it’s called a Lion fish although it’s small and white. It has many flowing gills behind it, like trailing wings. In the Red Sea it would grow huge, but here in her small fish tank, it will never grow.’

‘Should you set it free?’, I asked.

He didn’t answer.

After a while, he added, ‘I bought it for her. Neither of us care about it. But that’s fine. She was offered a dog but I wouldn’t let her take it. It would possess her. Take her love away from me’.

I felt I was moving to the heart of the matter.

‘You’re very close, your sister and you?’

‘At times’, he said.

Then on my twelfth night, tonight, after I’d lain down beside him, he turned to me and took off my watch. It had been my father’s watch, overly large on my wrist and with cranky angles that are always catching in things, and it needs winding every night, but I’d worn it since the day of his death. It times my life, when I open up the restaurant, when we close it. I thought he would ask me about the watch, and then I could’ve told him at last something about my life, but he pushed it under a cushion. I felt bereft.

He got up and strode to the portal. We were back to the usual ceremonies. Just then, the angel’s wing fluttered – no, that’s not possible, it was the fluttering of something else in the room, a movement that seemed like sound. My mind stood on its toes and pointed out at last what I should’ve seen all along – that the artist had painted such a perfunctory wing because the great-great-whatever grandfather had had no soul, not even one perforated with emptiness like mine. The artist had been commissioned to add that wing and he’d done so reluctantly, just for the money, for he knew that shoulders don’t support wings. Soul do.

At that moment, I stood too, and snatched at my clothes. They were tangled, turned upside down and inside out, I buttoned them up wrongly but I didn’t care. I reached out to grab my father’s watch as I rang the taxi’s number on my own mobile.

‘Why?’ he asked, startled.

I pulled on my coat, grotesque with its bunches of gloves bulging the pockets, and headed for the street door.

‘Why?’ he asked again.

‘The sound I heard was weeping.’

He said nothing.

‘It’s your sister!’ I said.

I was only guessing, hoping I was wrong, but he blinked and as the orange lights momentarily dimmed, his spell over me broke.

‘Your sister is in the house. She’s been there every time’.

He had the grace to look down, bunching the royal blue coverlet between his fingers, holding onto it.

‘That’s why you picked me up’.

I wanted him to deny it, but his breathing seemed to quicken.

‘To torment her’.

He wasn't someone to be accused.

'Every summer', he spat. 'You tourists come like pilgrims, and demand that Florence live up to your fantasies. You think you can get from us what's necessary for living. But we send you home with nothing'.

'You've done this before, many times, haven't you?', I said. 'Picked up a woman, so you can torment your sister'.

I let myself out the street door.

'Nothing', he called after me, because it was important to have the last word.

By that hour the piazza was deserted except for the wind whisking ice-cream wrappers into the chilly air. The taxi lights illuminated the sleeping group of the beggar and his dogs wreathed in black plastic bags. I tucked money into one of them, and the mongrel, my favourite, opened an eye like a pleased old man, and wriggled its tail up and down, encouraged.

Now as I think about all of this, the taxi turns into the Ponte Grazie, to cross the Arno. The waters seem to dawdle there, accumulating a silent strength underneath before they can tumble over the weir, and return to black silence.

I wind down my window. The driver turns around and shouts that I must shut it. But I need air, space, my country, the smell of rustling gum leaves in the midday sun, the silky steaminess of a damp Australian summer. I hang my head out into the air but it's the wrong air, the wrong temperature, the wrong smells. Then a full moon slides out from behind a cloud and lights the water, which flashes and winks.

'Go home', says the winking river to me. 'Take your yearning home. There are others who yearn there.'

The driver, swerving dangerously, reaches back and winds up my window himself. But the ancient river keeps talking through the finger-smearred pane of glass, talking as it must've done over the years to many bewildered pilgrims.

'The new regular, for instance,' it says. 'Ask him about his book when he looks up and smiles at you. And give his dog a bowl'.

Research statement

Research background

The field of this work is Creative Writing. The area of investigation is what happens when one attempts to locate, understand and hold onto the ineffable. The research question is: how is an author to write about this exploration? The output is in the form of a short story. In it, I isolate an individual who makes this attempt, and document her journey.

Research contribution

The story addresses the research question as outlined above by describing my female, contemporary, and uneducated protagonist and most importantly, her yearning for an extraordinary experience and going to great pains to seek it out. The knowledge gap is that a woman's desire for the ineffable is seldom explored in literature – men, and particularly educated men, are usually such protagonists. I am thus exploring the particular qualities of a female contemporary pilgrimage.

Research significance

TEXT journal considers my story significant enough to wish to publish it in a creative writing as research themed issue.