

Mi Sono Perso

I am lost in the Italian hills.

Mostly, if it doesn't fit on the back of a postcard, you've said too much. This especially applies to the category of topics that includes "What I did on my summer vacation." But what if I told you Hotel La Palma didn't have a postcard? They didn't even have proper stationery, just fax face-sheets. So without the proper restraints of space, I've already said too much about the *vacanza*.

Words themselves have no survival value, I've concluded. This is based on experience. What use is speech if not for art? Consider our basic functions; eating, shopping, shitting and sex. Any of these functions can be achieved by grunting, pointing, smiling or swallowing.

I bought a leather vest in Firenze, Italia. I went into a leather shop to buy one, rather than buying from a street vendor. After a minimal amount of pointing and grunting, the young Italian sales-woman ran out of the shop. Apparently, after some grunts on the street, she came back into the shop with a perfectly fitting black vest. After I paid for it, she baaaaaaed. It was an unnecessary baa, as I didn't really care if the vest was moo-leather or baa-leather. It was warm and soft. I'd already signed the VISA slip. What if I had felt guilt for the lamb's last words being repeated to me? It's like she ran out and killed some helpless creature, or was she mocking me or just celebrating the sale? One

too many words was used. But it was an artistic expression, so I did not ask for a refund. I will now eat more lamb to justify the kill for the hide. That also means more wine to drink. Buying fancy *pena e carta* took what seemed like too much talking, and regrettably, no animal sounds; just a long, dry scratching sound like pen on paper.

I felt like a citizen of a third-world country traveling with all my goods. The Milan Central station was built in 1931 and is a fascist monument, art-deco style. It looked huge and dark like a cross between something out of a Batman comic and prewar Moscow. Trains were lined up side by side on parallel tracks. Hundreds of people hurried and whistles blew. Announcements were made, shockingly, in Italian. Long lines to buy tickets for tired travelers, but at that point, after getting on the train, and now the conductor nods as he looks at our perfect tickets with the date stamped, I knew it would be OK. The lamb and calf were lost somewhere on the subway, but we were on our way to Genova.

I tried to die crossing a street in Genova. I swear there was no traffic, so I started crossing in the middle of the street. I was swarmed by a hive of buzzing motor scooters. I didn't look at them or pause, as I know the stupid animal crossing the street has a better fate if eye contact is not made. Also, like the squirrels I run over, you only get the

thump-thump if speed is varied.

At Stressa, in our final few days in Italia, I observed a lost dog running back and forth along the boulevard. He ran faster and faster as the morning got warmer. He was lost. I recalled walking faster as well, a week earlier when I realized *mi sono perso* in a wilderness a mountain away from the Cinque Terra.

The Cinque Terra is five towns on the western Italian coast. They are linked by boat, train and trail. Grape vines and rocky ground and hills and sea air link them. It's impossible to get lost on this five-hour hike, unless, mesmerized by the most incredible natural beauty of cliffs, towns brightly painted (hanging on cliffs), lemon trees, vineyards and frightening and wonderful Catholic shrines, stations of the cross, alters, ocean breeze, sunshine and the desire to climb up over the mountain and into a fog so dense that traffic was just ...

stopped and ... crouched, like a pack of tired dogs sniffing the curb. I walked faster and higher, until near dark at a Catholic church on a Saturday night, I found water and a map. Then I got lost again. I was looking for a place to sleep in the woods. Finally a man at a dump made a sweeping motion of his hand, when I, so stupid and unable to even say I am lost, "mi sono perso," understood where Monterosso should be.

I thought that part of my walk and my life had come to an end, until Mike Backus, a friend and Eugene artist, painted it for me in oil.

I'm still lost in the hot Tuscan sun, of



course. I'm lost in the sight of Borolo venting in a fat glass and the open bottled purple label, and in dusty sandals and bleeding toes and the smell of panic in a dog lost, and grape vines running on a hill and touching my adult children and wife in a now familiar, foreign country. The painted town of Manarola on a hot spring day smells of wet oil paint.

Then to Stressa in the Italian Alps on Lake Maggiore, where I asked for a hiking map, and got 26 detailed hiking maps of the surrounding lake district and Italian Alps. I sat for three days gazing and dreaming of getting REALLY lost. **EW**

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