

Cinque Terre

Time was the five towns
Which share the sheer escarpment
Above the Mediterranean
(Leaning now forward,
Now away, like a schoolgirl who wants to kiss
But is too shy)
Were only linked by the sea.
I doubt if anyone *chose*
To live there
Until late in the last century.
The hardscrabblest place in Italy,
Vines and olive trees grow on terraces
Chiseled with pick axes
Into volcanic cliffs—
Convict work turned over, over generations,
Into convictions.
Then they chipped a precarious path
That swoons between the towns
For local trade and gossip
(You can walk that path today).
There was always fishing
And the sea stayed indigo.
Then came the train
Tunneling the towns together—
A jailbreak to nowhere.
Then came the roads,
Dropped like rescue ropes from above.
Then came the rich, the tourists, sunbathers
From every elsewhere
Who flop on the beach near
The house Montale grew up in
“In crushing isolation.”
The towns are like glacial moraines
Of stone houses
Stuck in the gullets of their declivities.
One teeters on a knoll above the sea.

This morning I'm watching the doings
In the harbor at Riomaggiore.
Young boys dangle strings with hooks
Among nonplussed
Schools of minnows—
Never any luck.
Older boys, sun-baked,
Try to impress their heartthrobs
With heart-stopping dead-drops
From a twenty-meter
Precipice into the azure water
Of their hometown harbor.
They fall faster than falling. They fall
Like arrows shot straight down
And surface grinning
And climb the cliff side
For another tilt at another fling.
I'll bet their ancestors never
Wooed that way,
The contadini who hacked
A life into the high terraces
Of their handmade Purgatory.
Fear, for them, was no bouquet.
From the tourist path,
Another path strikes straight up
Into an olive grove
Behind a hunched mesh gate
That skreeks in sea breeze.
A sign on the gate sings,
"This is not a path,"
As if that could be true.