

Capriccio

"...southern-born, one-hundred-percent Venetian."

—Donald Justice

In this city where every thing moves
By foot or by water,

Silence is a currency, a fog
Rolled off the Adriatic, a night

Like this one when
Along one of the narrow quays

The footsteps of summer's last tourist
Echo on the facades of somber palazzi,

Their inner rooms damp,
Their tapestries fading to the wan grays

Of the off-season.
From somewhere in the mist that swirls behind,

As if from the great wounded
Maw of the sea itself, a voice, rising in song.

It grows louder, wending its way
Through the canals of the sleeping city, the crooked *calle*,

Until the tourist pauses, turns to see
The boat's beaked prow glide smoothly by, the singer

Sprawled on its figured carpets, among tasseled throws.
Mid-phrase, he stops,

Looks over his shoulder to the gondolier
Who stands in the stern listening, his head cocked to one side.

The boatman nods.
But it is as a shadow might nod,

Slowly, with a touch of bemusement.
His oar dips in. The gondola glides swiftly forward

And vanishes suddenly beyond a bridge arched quay to quay,
A confection of marble spindles and salt-crusted shells.

All of it happening
So quickly that the tourist might be forgiven

For thinking this a vision brought on
By the oily fish at supper, the overpriced wine.

Yet didn't she see roses scattered on the carpet, as if flung in after,
And one, an especially dark one,

Pinned to the singer's rumpled lapel? There—
From the distances beyond the bridge and wayward mist,

The song floats up again, its phrases shaped to breathe
Declarative among the silences.

—*Clare Rossini*