

The Stendhal Syndrome

Beth Kalikoff

*Nevertheless, Dr. Magherini insists,
certain men and women are susceptible
to swooning in the presence of great art,
especially when far from home.*

-The New York Times, May 15, 1989

There we were in the Arctic.
Typically we were unmarried
men and women between the ages of 25 and 40
who were travelling alone or in small groups.
We did not leave home very often and were fairly
impressionable. We were none of us Italians.
Half of us had seen a therapist
once, but that's another story.
This is about Florence:

Inge was unnerved by frescoes
in the Strozzi Chapel of the Church of Santa Maria
Novella. Can you blame her? Panels of women
with pointing fingers. They were pointing
at her. Fritz stood for too long
before the Fra Angelico paintings
in the Museum of St. Mark. Withdrew
to his hotel. Stood mute in a corner.
Lucy said she saw angels.

Oh, Dr. Magherini! Had we been Japanese!
Moving in large groups. Instead,
you prescribed for us what's
sensible. Bottled water. Only
a little bit of Caravaggio a day.
Now, in the Klondike, it's darkness
visible twenty hours a day.
But in our frozen dreams
bears carve gods from bone.