Alfred Agostinelli (See also Giotto.)

The following may be a recollection of a congratulatory note that Proust received from Agostinelli, after the publication of Swann’s Way:

I received another letter as well as Mme Goupil’s, but the name of the writer, Sanilon, was unknown to me. It was in a plebeian hand and a charming style. I was distressed not to be able to discover who had written to me. [He later learns that the sender was Theodore Sanilon, the grocer’s son at Combray.] —The Fugitive 5: 799

Carpaccio and Fortuny Gowns

Carpaccio, as it happens, who was the painter we visited most readily when I was not working in St Mark’s, almost succeeded one day in reviving my love for Albertine. I was seeing for the first time The Patriarch of Grado exorcising a demoniac. On the back of one of the Compagni della Calza . . . I had just recognized the cloak which Albertine had put on to come with me to Versailles . . . on the evening when I so little suspected that scarcely fifteen hours separated me from the moment of her departure from my house. Always ready for anything, when I asked her to come out with me on that melancholy occasion which she was to describe in her last letter as “a double twilight since night was falling and we were about to part,” she had flung over her shoulders a Fortuny cloak which she had taken away with her next day and which I had never thought of since. It was from this Carpaccio picture that the inspired son of Venice . . . had removed it in order to drape it over the shoulders of so many Parisian women who were certainly unaware, as I had been until then, that the model for it existed in a group of noblemen in the foreground of the Patriarch of Grado in a room in the Academia in Venice. I had recognized it down to the last detail, and, that forgotten cloak having restored to me as I looked at it the eyes and the heart of him who had set out that evening with Albertine for Versailles, I was overcome for a few moments by a vague and soon dissipated feeling of desire and melancholy. —The Fugitive 5: 876-78
The Deligny Baths

The fear of losing his mother in the underwater depths of the Deligny baths is based on a real fear that Proust had as a child when he accompanied his mother to the baths. Here is an excerpt from my biography:

On occasion, he accompanied his mother in Paris to the Deligny Baths, a large wooden structure anchored in the Seine near the Concorde Bridge. Jeanne, seeking relief for health problems, regularly bathed in the cold water. After waiting in a cubicle for her to change into her swimming costume, Marcel would emerge to find Jeanne already bathing. The wooden platform, on which he stood to watch her and the other swimmers, rose and fell with the current of the river. Amazed and frightened, he imagined that this strange, watery cavern was the entrance to the underworld. In Jean Santeuil, Proust depicted Jean’s mother “splashing and laughing there, blowing him kisses and climbing again ashore, looking so lovely in her dripping rubber helmet, he would not have felt surprised had he been told that he was the son of a goddess. . . .” (Jean Santeuil 125) Beautiful, yes, and powerful, too, but would she emerge safely from the dark, deep water? Would she remain with him or leave through an underground passage with one of the male bathers, abandoning her child forever as she pursued unknown, forbidden pleasures?

The child Marcel, in his constant fear of being abandoned by his mother and suffocating to death, sensed that we are always walking on thin ice. Just below the surface of what appears to be a solid, lovely world—Paris, and later Venice—churn the dark, icy waters of solitude and death. By the time Proust wrote In Search of Lost Time, his mother’s loveliness and mythological attributes at the Deligny baths have vanished. The memory has darkened even more and the Narrator speaks of what he dreaded most, being abandoned by his mother. The scene, now set in the watery city of Venice, describes the Narrator’s refusal, at the appointed time, to depart with his mother, who leaves for the train station without him. As he sits contemplating what to do next, the view of the dock basin of the Arsenal filled him with that “blend of distaste and alarm which I had felt as a child when I first accompanied my mother to the Deligny baths, where, in that weird setting of a pool of water reflecting neither sky nor sun . . . I had asked myself whether those depths . . . were not the entry to Arctic seas . . .” A gondolier begins singing in the distance and “in this lonely, unreal, icy, unfriendly setting in which I was going to be left alone, the strains of O sole mio, rising like a dirge . . . seemed to bear witness to my misery.”
Here is the version in *The Fugitive*, when Venice no longer seems real to Marcel but rather an alien place:

So it was with the palaces, the canal, the Rialto, divested of the idea that constituted their reality and dissolved into their vulgar material elements. But at the same time this mediocre place seemed distant to me. In the dock basin of the Arsenal, because of an element which itself also was scientific, namely latitude, there was that singularity in things whereby, even when similar in appearance to those of our own land, they reveal themselves to be alien, in exile beneath other skies; I felt that that horizon so close at hand, which I could have reached in an hour by boat, was a curvature of the earth quite different from that of France, a distant curvature which, by the artifice of travel, happened to be moored close to where I was; so that the dock basin of the Arsenal, at once insignificant and remote, filled me with that blend of distaste and alarm which I had felt as a child when I first accompanied my mother to the Deligny baths, where, in that weird setting of a pool of water reflecting neither sky nor sun, which nevertheless amid its fringe of cabins one felt to be in communication with invisible depths crowded with human bodies in swimming trunks, I had asked myself whether those depths, concealed from mortal eyes by hutments which made their existence impossible to divine from the streets, were not the entry to arctic seas which began at that point, in which the poles were comprised, and whether that narrow space was not indeed the open water that surrounds the pole; and in this lonely, unreal, icy, unfriendly setting in which I was going to be left alone, the strains of *O sole mio*, rising like a dirge for the Venice I had known, seemed to bear witness to my misery. —*The Fugitive* 5: 885-86

**Giotto’s angels as airplanes flown by students of Roland Garros:**

At Padua, the angels painted by Giotto, are compared to airplane pilots trained by Roland Garros. This is one of many passages illustrating Proust’s fascination with the modern inventions. The year 1913 is known in French aviation history as the “Glorious Year.” French flyers flew nonstop from Nancy to Cairo, and Roland Garros, on September 23, became the first aviator to fly across the Mediterranean. Agostinelli was able to take flying lessons at Buc, near Paris, where Roland Garros had an aviation
school. It is likely that Proust went to the airfield and observed Garros’s students performing their flying stunts.

There were days when my mother and I were not content with visiting the museums and churches of Venice only, and once, when the weather was particularly fine, in order to see the “Virtues” and “Vices” of which M. Swann had given me reproductions that were probably still hanging on the wall of the schoolroom at Combray, we went as far afield as Padua. After walking across the garden of the Arena in the glare of the sun, I entered the Giotto chapel, the entire ceiling of which and the background of the frescoes are so blue that it seems as though the radiant daylight has crossed the threshold with the human visitor in order to give its pure sky a momentary breather in the coolness and shade, a sky merely of a slightly deeper blue now that it is rid of the glitter of the sunlight, as in those brief moments of respite when, though no cloud is to be seen, the sun has turned its gaze elsewhere and the azure, softer still, grows deeper. This sky transplanted on to the blue-washed stone was peopled with flying angels which I was seeing for the first time, for M. Swann had given me reproductions only of the Vices and Virtues and not of the frescoes depicting the life of the Virgin and of Christ. Watching the flight of these angels, I had the same impression of actual movement, literally real activity, that the gestures of Charity and Envy had given me. For all the celestial fervor, or at least the childlike obedience and application, with which their minuscule hands are joined, they are represented in the Arena chapel as winged creatures of a particular species that had really existed, that must have figured in the natural history of biblical and apostolic times. Constantly flitting about above the saints whenever the latter walk abroad, these little beings, since they are real creatures with a genuine power of flight, can be seen soaring upwards, describing curves, “looping the loop,” diving earthwards head first, with the aid of wings which enable them to support themselves in positions that defy the laws of gravity, and are far more reminiscent of an extinct species of bird, or of young pupils of Garros practicing gliding, than of the angels of the Renaissance and later periods whose wings have become no more than emblems and whose deportment is generally the same as that of heavenly beings who are not winged. —The Fugitive 5: 878-879