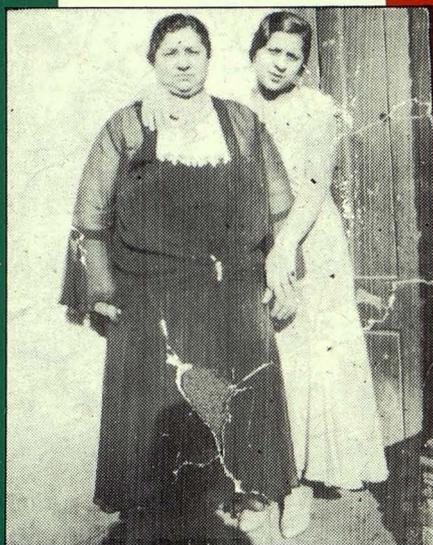
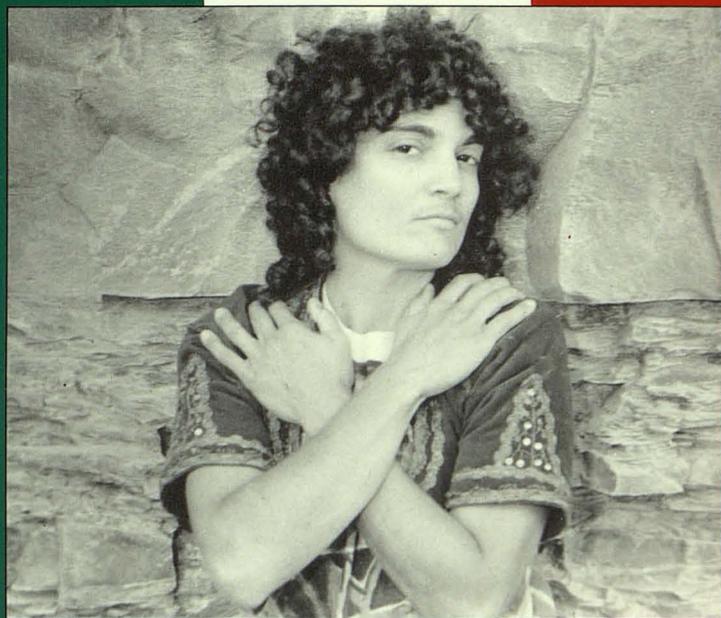


**sinister wisdom 41**



**il viaggio delle donne**





## Sinister Wisdom 41 Summer/Fall 1990

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in the Arts and Politics

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## Il Viaggio Delle Donne: Italian-American Women Reach Shore

Looking back, it feels like no surprise that the California earthquake of '89 happened while Denise Leto and I were on the phone in Oakland discussing *Sinister Wisdom's* Italian-American issue. It was a profound shift, the earth taking care of herself, readjusting, and in the process readjusting the priorities and values of us humans living on top of her. During those intense 15 seconds, I remember standing under my doorway yelling my head off, realizing with fear and excitement that I was witnessing something in motion that was much more powerful than myself. With the publication of this issue, a profound shift has also taken place for me, and I believe, for Italian/Sicilian-descended women in general. With this new collection of works, the geography changes — for us, as a group, and within our women's and lesbian communities. As the title suggests *we have arrived*. We move from relative obscurity as ethnic American women, to greater visibility, always an exciting and frightening thing.

It's Italian to acknowledge and show respect to one's forebears, those who have preceded us and somehow made our lives more possible. It would be impossible to name them all in a few lines, but it's in this spirit that I want to recognize and appreciate Helen Barolini's *The Dream Book*, an anthology of writings by Italian-American women, published in 1985. Through her inspiring and direly needed effort, a precedent was set. A silence was broken for the first time, the literary silence enshrouding us for decades as Italian-American women in this country. Barolini's contribution was a heroic affirmation, and did much to begin to establish us as ethnic American women with a unique and authentic body of writings long deserving of recognition in North American literature.

Now, with this *Sinister Wisdom* issue, another silence is broken, not only for Italian/Sicilian-descended women, but for Italian/Sicilian-descended lesbians, which this collection primarily focuses on. In this sense, this anthology is the first of its kind to exist. Now, the lesbians can hear each other's voices too,

read each other's words, and get a clearer image of ourselves in the process.

Why a focus on lesbians? As lesbian women, we often have a different and sometimes more difficult relationship to our birth families. Many of us have had to leave our families of origin in order to come out. This leave-taking is never without pain and loss of some sort. What has this meant for us? What impact has it had on our understanding of our culture and ethnicity? Did we lose track of our Italianness along the way? If so, it's clear to me, *paesane mie*, that we need each other all the more! We cannot reclaim our culture in isolation! And, in so doing, I think we are finding that it's possible to be Italian/Sicilian-identified *and* lesbian at the same time. What a concept! What a relief!

In a similar spirit, I also welcome the work we've included by the non-lesbian women writers and artists of Italian/Sicilian descent, who bring their special richness and Italian-rootedness to this issue. We need you as well, *paesane* — your voices and your clarity. Finally, I want to acknowledge that we're also blessed with one contribution from a writer of Sicilian-Canadian descent, who provides us with her particular and unique vantage point.

In closing, I want to say that I'm left still hungry. (Oh for shame, to go around not feeling thoroughly and completely fed! How un-Italian!) I want more. *We* need more. Certainly we need more books. But, an Italian cannot survive on books alone, as wonderful and enriching as they are. We need more community and family. (That's another thing that earthquakes really clarify!) We need conferences, workshops, support groups, writing groups, and lots and lots of pasta dinners together. We need more Italian/Sicilian-descended women in our daily lives. Only in these ways can we renew and reclaim that sense of family so central to our culture.

It's my belief that with this issue, we are on a threshold, we are standing in a doorway, witnessing something large and powerful in motion. I hope that as you read these pages you are howling your head off: with excitement, with wonder, with a sense of validation and celebration, and no doubt at least a little fear.

— Janet Capone

**FOR A YEAR AND A HALF**, Janet and I have been pounding the pavement. Calling people, corresponding, researching, making connections, and breaking open the vaults in our own minds and hearts in order to find what had been hidden away, silenced, oppressed. We found a meaning that transcended our own individual family experience; we found a voice within ourselves deeply resonant of our ancestors; we found validation through the exploration of our herstory, Sicilian, Italian and Italian-American; we found that our own pain and joy in being Italian-American lesbians was echoed by the many women with whom we came in contact. Finding this gave us the strength to keep the vision burning even through our own resistance and fear. Networking they call it. Or more often than not, working without a net. Creating it as we went along. Cultural acrobats walking the tightrope of our ethnicity, our voice, our dream. Improvising, trusting — trusting that what we were doing mattered. That a piece of our experience could be revealed and received. That there was a context, however new and fragile. That if we fell, there would be some place to land.

Now we are here and what has been brewing in my own pot for years finally has a home. All the memories, all the isolated bits and pieces becoming connected; finally resting in a rich, diverse, thematic cultural mosaic.

In 1989 my Grandma died. My work took on a sense of urgency and sadness. I had to call on the strength of the Sicilian- and Italian-American women poets, artists and writers who came before, who have paved the way. I wanted to claim my ethnicity and my love of women even more proudly and boldly. But the conflict felt great, and the cost high. Who am I to be doing this, I thought? To immerse myself, to take this risk? I am someone who wants to raise the voices of the immigrants, of Italian-American dykes — to embrace them and then set them free with the full timbre and space they deserve. I am someone who believes our survival depends on our ability to reassemble, to reclaim, and to remember. I am someone who believes that lesbians continually break new ground, not to bury differences, but to bring them to life in all their diversity, controversy, and wonder.

Why an Italian-American women's issue? To give us the opportunity to speak, to reach out to one another, to connect, to raise

consciousness about the issues Italian- and Sicilian-American lesbians face. To have fun, to have a feast, to celebrate who we are. To begin to preserve our voice, not yet entirely lost or silenced. And this is but one jewel of the journey. My greatest hope is that others will pick it up, gather more momentum until an artistic and literary context for Italian- and Sicilian-American lesbians is no longer a leap of faith but a concrete multi-faceted reality.

Each word, each image in this issue is an act of courage. Each contributor gave yet another perspective, another beautiful truth to savor. Molto grazie to *Sinister Wisdom* for taking the risk with us, for providing this space for us to flourish. What a gift it has been to work on this issue. What an exhilarating, grueling, transforming journey. Each step took faith. Faith that our Sicilian- and Italian-American sisters would have the strength and vision to speak, to create, to respond and faith that our non-Italian sisters would have the openness and willingness to listen. And this special issue is for us all.

If *Sinister Wisdom* is a country — and I believe it is — then welcome to this particular place on the map. The building of a context is delicate and the magnitude of the task breathtaking. For the first time a place like this exists for Italian- and Sicilian-American lesbians and women to gather, to reminisce, to recognize, to share, to spark each other. This is a beginning. One more step in “il viaggio delle donne.”

— Denise Leto

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We'd like to say molto grazie to our incredible staff and the women and organizations without whom this issue would not have been possible:

Carol Andolina, Mary Andolina, Cinzia Biagiotti, Siobhan Briley, Antoinette Capone, Anna Cusenza, Judy Freespirit, Nancy Gagnon, Judy Grahn, Mary Gemini, Susanjill Kahn, Julie Lavezzo, Ann Leto-Villa, Martha Leto, Susan Levinkind, Michelle Marchioli, Mary Morales, Lori Newman, Val Ramirez, Ixchel Rosal, Elena Rossi, Linda Scaparotti, Pam Scola, Valerie Stoehr, Margaret Tedesco, Cristina Valleau, Jennifer Wilson, Angela Zawadski.

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We want to thank all the women who sent us their manuscripts and art work. You have enriched our understanding, our appreciation and our ability to articulate our ethnicity and culture. Grazie...



CREDIT: STACY RAYE

Top photo: B.A.S.I.L (Bay Area Sicilian/Italian Lesbians) march in the Lesbian Gay Pride Parade for the first time, June 1989, San Francisco. L to R: Guest editors Janet Capone and Denise Leto, and Carrie Gagliardi, Lori Donna, Carla Trettin, Rosemary Zappulla, Mary DeLorenzo Pelc. Bottom photo: a few B.A.S.I.L. members. L to R: Rosemary Zappulla, Marisa Francesca Leto, Denise Leto, Deana Morello, Janet Capone.



CREDIT: ANNA CUSENZA

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

## Public School No. 18: Paterson, New Jersey

Miss Wilson's eyes, opaque  
as blue glass, fix on me:  
"We must speak English.  
We're in America now."  
I want to say, "I am American,"  
but the evidence is stacked against me.

My mother scrubs my scalp raw, wraps  
my shining hair in white rags  
to make it curl; Miss Wilson  
drags me to the window, checks my hair  
for lice. My face wants to hide.

At home, my words smooth in my mouth  
I chatter and am proud. In school,  
I am silent; I grope for the right English  
words, fear the Italian word will sprout  
from my mouth like a rose.

I fear the progression of teachers  
in their sprigged dresses,  
their Anglo-Saxon faces.

Without words, they tell me  
to be ashamed.

I am.

I deny that booted country  
even from myself,  
want to be still  
and untouchable  
as these women  
who teach me to hate myself.

---

Previously printed in *Winter Light*, 1985

Years later, in a white  
Kansas City house,  
the psychology professor tells me  
I remind him of the Mafia leader  
on the cover of *Time* magazine.  
My anger spits  
venomous from my mouth:

I am proud of my mother,  
dressed all in black,  
proud of my father  
with his broken tongue,  
proud of the laughter  
and noise of our house.

Remember me, ladies,  
the silent one?  
I have found my voice  
and my rage will blow  
your house down.

## La Mia Polenta

Lately, feelings have been bubbling up, like the fat, thick bubbles in a slow cooking polenta, puffing to the top with purpose, force, intention. Feelings about my Italian self, about my lesbianism, about how the two mix, blend, separate, mix again.

I am first of all an Italian, 100%. My grandparents came from Italy, the northern regions — squat, strong, heavy-boned peasants. As a child, I would struggle to interpret their words, understanding little of what they said. I was being “protected” from their rich culture by a generation of parents who believed it best to assimilate, to americanize, to WASP it up. I resented that for years, until I realized that my mother and father were only trying to keep me from the pain that they had suffered as a result of being Italian in a community that did not tolerate differences.

Yet, I was not encouraged to deny who I truly was on a very deep level. Cuddled up in my Nonna Mariannina’s feather bed, I would listen to her stories of a beautiful country far across the ocean. It was a place that she told me she missed terribly, one that I must go to, one that she would never see again.

I was raised with a deep respect for my grandparents, my Nonni. They had suffered the loss of their homes, their culture and their families to better the lives of their children. Only one grandmother remains alive today, and although age has faded her memory and she rarely leaves the small stone house that my Nonno built for her, she remains a constant source of spiritual inspiration and courage for me. I see myself in her eyes and in her hands.

The feelings continue to rise up, softly, the polenta cooks, the feelings heat. Anger pushes at me. Daily I witness the ridiculous stereotypes of Italians: Italians do nothing but cook pasta; Italians speak slowly, unable to form complete sentences in English; Italians are all “mafia,” and have no morals; Italians are stupid, inferior, to be consulted only for the purpose of cooking or killing. I find myself turning away from the patriarchal culture, turning towards the lesbians, hoping it will be different.

And often it is, within the lesbian community I have been able to find some comfort and pride. I have been able to develop *family*, the very core of what being Italian has meant to me. With lesbians I have been able to celebrate my Italian self, cooking gnocchi and risotto, cooking to my heart's content, cooking more than enough, gathering my friends to eat. With lesbians I celebrate my Italian self, the importance and depth of family, commitment to home, to safety, to loyalty amongst friends.

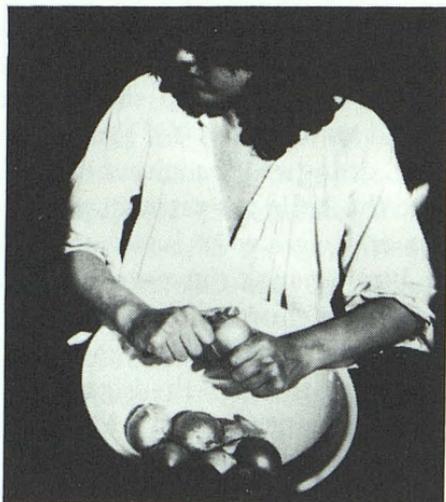
And as the pot cools, the polenta sticks together, hardens, my feelings congeal, they are ready, done. I reflect on my relationship with my blood family. My mother and grandmothers have ingrained in me a tenacious will to survive. They have encouraged me to take risks and they have never shunned me when I have appeared too Dykey. (In 1979 my Nonna told me that she had no idea as to why I would want to shave my head, but that it was okay with her nonetheless.) My family has accepted me as a lesbian, has welcomed my lover and me into their homes, and although it is not discussed openly often, my mother has said that she will always love me and will struggle to both accept and respect the choices I have made in my life including that of being a lesbian.

I stand back and wonder how it all blends together; my love of womyn, my love of home, my need for family, my respect for culture, tradition, and my lesbianism. I find myself often drawn to Jewish womyn — our common threads of culture, ritual, family and food bind us together. Yet I see also that I deny parts of my Italian self in doing so. Somehow I have felt it politically correct to celebrate the holidays associated with the Jewish culture, but have chosen to ignore those associated with my Italian culture. Without buying into the patriarchal garbage aligned with the roman catholic church, I have only just begun to "reclaim" the rituals which I so joyously shared with my family as a child. I am remembering through these rituals much of what the heart of being Italian has meant to me. Making holiday cookies, prepared only once a year — the Biscotti and Crustoli — the smell of anise baking. Ravioli rolled out on sheets of wax paper, enough to cover the kitchen floor. Aunts, Nonne, sisters, Mom, all assigned a task, laughing as we cover ourselves with white baking flour, powdering our hair. This was not about nativity scenes or

gifts. This was about closeness, familiarity, and tradition.

Still, I often feel misunderstood. In the lesbian community the stereotypes often thrive. I find myself hiding, keeping secrets about my cultural identity, afraid someone will make a comment about a "hot" Italian or the mafia. I am afraid that if I point out an offensive remark, I will seem petty or too sensitive. I find myself wondering if non-Italian womyn are as committed to informing themselves about my cultural traditions as I have been to finding out about theirs. I even question my subtle resistance to attending monthly meetings of Italian and Sicilian Lesbians, perhaps I have internalized too much. Perhaps now is the time to begin embracing all of who I am, Italian Dyke.

I bite into the rich yellow softness of the polenta, savor the smooth texture, the fine taste of romano cheese cooked with the cornmeal. I realize parts of me are just surfacing, pieces of this puzzle are just finding their place. My pride wells up in me as I write. I make a quiet vow to become more of who my Nonna already is — strong, Italian, determined not to be oppressed, proud.



*Untitled*, from the series "When girls become women"  
Vincenza Petrilli

## We Do the Best I Can: A Series of Portraits

### I. Maria Lafatta

It is 1969  
every weekend the family  
visits Aunt Maria  
her dog Leo barks  
as we approach  
we coo at him but he ignores us  
he only responds to Sicilian  
Aunt Maria yells a command  
he backs off obediently  
we are in Little Italy  
on Columbia street in San Diego  
people sit on their porches  
basil grows in pots & trays  
kids play in the street  
hot peppers fry in olive oil  
the smell unfurls in our hair

Aunt Maria gives us  
melted hershey bars  
I go to my favorite place to eat mine  
her garden in the backyard  
she has herbs growing and peppers  
and zucchini and prickly pears  
that she picks with her bare hands  
peels & gives out to the kids  
they are bright pink & orange  
I think all children eat this cactus fruit  
have spaghetti & meatballs  
and great Aunts with rough hands

Aunt Maria used to talk  
while working in the garden  
her wide mouth twirling  
the occasional english word around like spit

her small thick hands  
moving quickly through her stories  
she moved them not to ornament  
but because she had to  
to turn the earth into food  
to pass on what she knew

Women from all over the neighborhood  
would come over to her house  
and speak rapidly in a language I couldn't understand  
my sisters and I would mimic the sounds  
and laugh together  
not understanding then that what we heard  
was the sound of our culture  
slipping away with her generation  
now we take Italian classes  
the accent coming easily like memories  
but the language itself comes only with difficulty  
as in the understanding of the memories

Maria Lafatta,  
when I was little I thought you ran the world  
for 60 years you refused to speak english  
while my parents refused to teach me Italian  
and I lived in the middle  
stuck in the crack between two worlds  
today the porches in Little Italy fall like dust  
perky office buildings take their place  
I would give anything to go back  
find you there sitting on the porch  
rocking back and forth  
I must have come to you as such a little american then  
a stranger balancing on the abyss of assimilation  
now I invoke your spirit  
speak to you in endangered tones  
ancient incantations  
now I am filled with the part of you that lives in me  
and like a flame  
my eyes burn with the vision of you  
brave as a blessing.

## II. Mary Leto

Grandma Leto  
immigrated  
fled, escaped  
but did not travel  
she did not take a trip  
she left everything  
she stepped off the ship  
not a boat  
on legs bent  
with confinement and grief  
not joy  
was herded  
not escorted  
to the side  
they put a sign  
not a bunch of flowers  
in her hand  
W.O.P.  
in big letters  
without papers  
Grandma stared  
straight ahead  
yes & shut-up  
were her only  
english words for years

she visited us  
in California from back east  
made hot pepper sandwiches  
that sent us scalding  
to the drinking fountain  
then home from school  
mouths round & open with heat  
Mom knew from our faces what had happened  
the clash between the immigrant  
and the second generation Italian-American  
was about to begin  
we hid under the couch

knowing that these matriarchs could throw  
power into words with staggering aim  
though we never knew who won  
next day Grandma  
would make peanut butter & jelly sandwiches  
gripping the knife with a fierceness  
that belied the task  
she would pull the sliced bread apart  
with distaste  
Bread, this?  
she would stand over it  
making it look  
small & contemptible,  
who won?

Years later  
my sister and I visited her  
travelled  
to Indiana  
stepped into her apartment  
legs bent  
to hug & kiss her  
she told us a story  
of the evil eye  
& how it almost killed her  
saved only by a spirit  
in the form of a woman in black  
who knocked on her door  
in the middle of the night  
and in whispered words  
gave her a remedy to ward off malocchio  
and then swiftly disappeared  
we listened  
heard more than her voice  
felt the room grow smaller  
& I remembered her journey,  
her loss, her legacy, her faith  
her power took hold  
rooted there

we held it  
like a warning  
like a jewel  
to be worn constantly.

### III. Teresa Colone

I don't know you  
but I keep your picture with me  
in it you are standing  
with high laced black boots on  
holding a cane and wearing a hat  
you look stern & radiant  
it is an old picture  
they say I look like you  
relatives weep upon seeing me  
struck by the resemblance  
they grab my cheeks  
hold me close speak your name  
over & over again in my ear

I don't know you  
great grandmother  
I cannot even find out much about you  
the family wrapped in a shroud of omertà  
but I live knowing  
at least this  
everytime I stare at the picture  
looking into your face  
the silence is broken  
and I remember  
where I come from.

### IV. Fanny Sacco

Aunt Fanny  
had no fingernails  
she worked full time  
at the cannery  
and at home

in her spare time  
she took care of six kids  
the house  
the gardens  
the animals  
the bills  
the neighborhood  
the laundry  
the sewing  
the food  
her apron was always  
splattered with sauce  
when I was little  
I thought it looked like a map  
each stain a different country  
I remember when they used to laugh  
at her "broken english"  
but it was the Italian  
that was left unwhole  
to be understood  
in the way  
her eyes fought  
in the way  
she walked  
filling up space  
as if it were nothing  
in the way  
she sat at the end of the day  
with the women in the family  
folding her hands  
on her lap  
as if resting sacred tools  
on a shelf  
making it whole again  
she'd sigh and say,  
"ahh, we do da best I can."

## Francesa Ranieri Tramontana, 1887-1963

**M**y name sake, my maternal grandmother, was born in Gallico Marina, Reggio Calabria, Italy on December 23, 1887. She died in Brooklyn, New York on September 7, 1963. She married my grandfather, Antonio, when she was seventeen. He had already been to the United States. He returned to Italy to marry my grandmother. They came here together and settled in Brooklyn.

Grandma bore five children, one son and four daughters. My grandparents, in my mind, did not perfectly fit the immigrant mold. Grandpa was very lucky to get a fine job on the docks. He estimated the cost for ship repairs and worked successfully in a supervisory capacity until he retired due to heart problems.

Their first and only son, Dominic, became a medical doctor. The daughters, Antoinette, Frances, Stella and Laura were all high school graduates. Although encouraged to go on to college, none of them did. As for the 13 grandchildren, grandma saw education as equally important for males and females. No profession was too good for us. However, for the granddaughters, beyond education she envisioned marriage. We were taught that ultimate happiness would be in marriage.

When I think about grandma and I often do, there are moments frozen in time which come back in memory. I know that she was not a well woman. She had diabetes. She had to give herself insulin injections everyday. It was complications from the diabetes that eventually caused her death. Every week she visited her son's office for her checkups. More often than not she came home in tears and would stop in our apartment to share her hurt with my mom, Antoinette. My uncle would become angry with her if she did not follow her diet. He could be very unkind. Yet he was her "SON" and his unacceptable behavior was tolerated. Freeing him from the responsibility of doctoring to the family was never addressed as an option. Such a choice might have spared all of us a great deal of pain.

It would be impossible to write about grandma without remembering her in the kitchen cooking. She cooked three hot

meals a day for her and my grandfather. Always a table cloth on the kitchen table. Always serving my grandfather first, even pouring the glass of wine for him before she sat down to her own meal. She was a wonderful cook! One of her specialities was homemade, from scratch, sausage. Grandma would hand mix all the ingredients and stuff the casings into uniform links. One day when I was alone she called me. I went up the stairs toward her apartment and there she sat on the steps waiting for me with a plate on her lap filled with the freshly made sausage. The holidays were a time for feasting. The legendary tales are all true. On Christmas Eve, with the help of her daughters, she would prepare a table laden with lobster, shrimp, baked clams, octopus and calamari. If we were with her on New Year's Eve, after dinner, close to midnight, grandma would hand us the pots and pans to bang out the windows at the stroke of twelve. In her broken English she would lead us in a chorus of "Happa New Year!"

Grandma, we are told, was a financial wiz. She and my grandfather managed several properties. During the Depression she defied my grandfather and bought yet another apartment house. She ran a candy store as a way to raise the mortgage monies. They did not incur any losses during those very lean years. Today, three of her daughters live in separate apartments in those same dwellings.

Grandma missed Italy, and her descriptions of it made it sound like paradise. For all the stories and sweet memories, she never did go back home to see her family. Letters would bring grandma the news from her home. She grieved the death of her parents from thousands of miles away. Her loved ones were always close to her heart. Grandma collected the out grown and no longer wanted clothes of both her children and grandchildren. They became part of the packages she sent to her family in Italy. I would watch her work at the kitchen table. She would neatly fold the clothes into the white cloth bundles. She would hand stitch the seams of the bundles with strong white thread and then tie them tightly with sturdy string. Someone would take the bundles to the post office for her. Whatever her family needed they received. Included were coats, dresses, suits, shoes, wedding dresses and, it is our suspicion, that among the treasures were gifts she received from us but never wore.

Grandma was a seamstress, too. My mom recently gave me linen sheets, pillow cases and towels which grandma made by hand. Perhaps she found the time to create these heirlooms while she listened to the opera on Saturday afternoons. She loved the opera and every Saturday at 2pm she would tune into the live broadcasts from NY Metropolitan Opera House. She not only listened — she knew the arias by heart and she sang every word. It was generally understood that those hours on Saturday were hers. Grandma was rarely interrupted when we heard the opera on the radio.

Grandma was a woman of faith, but she was not religious. The Catholic rituals were important to her, but I never had the impression that she paid much attention to the priests. In fact, my mom told me that when Grandma had a tubular pregnancy, she had an abortion. And since grandma and grandpa limited their family to five children born in a fourteen year time span, my assumption is that they practiced some form of birth control.

Sometimes my daughter Sarah asks me about my grandmother. At those times I feel very sad. My grandma died when I was in college. She would have loved my children. Sarah and grandma would have been a sight to behold. I know that as clearly as the memories I cherish.



*Mamma Cu i Favi*  
Anna Cusenza

## Madeline

She makes Pasqua  
Easter bread with whole  
brown speckled  
eggs almost translucent  
braided into dough

She slaps dough down  
on the chipped ceramic top  
of that wooden table  
serpents spiral  
around each of its carved legs  
sun filters in through winter-  
spare grape vines

Her tiny hands conduct  
an opera over dough  
in her kitchen yeast  
and basilico  
and frying onions

She prepares spring food  
buys finnochio  
dips its feathery leaves  
into holy water  
blesses the children  
at her feet

Her eggs bake set  
in a mass of twisted dough  
that pulls apart  
unbraids in steamy swirls  
as if unwinding  
a long knot

Kathy Freeperson

## The DeCristo Girls

(This is an abridged version of a chapter from *The Biography Of Ramona DeCristo*, a young adult novel in progress.)

One day the phone rang and Gramma answered it. I knew she was talking to Mommy. She always called her "Bambina Mia" and referred to my dad as "Antonio."

The four of us were home with the chicken pox playing checkers, except Pauline, who kept drooling on the game board. Samantha was getting mad when she could not beat Elena and me. I hated games, but we were tired of TV. We wanted to help Gramma make some pizza fritta, put sugar on it and have Italian coffee.

Instead, the phone interrupted us. Gramma was talking, and after a few minutes, handed it to me. I said hello into the receiver.

"Hello Ramona." It was Mom at the hospital. She sounded so far away. I almost cried for missing her and worrying. "Well, your father had his operation."

"Yes Mom," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

"And he will be OK. So, tell your sisters, and be good until I get there. Dad will have to stay in the hospital for a few more weeks."

I let out my breath and said quickly "Did they cut out his throat Mom?" She sounded like she was starting to cry. The phone was snapping and crackling because she was far away I guess. "How will he talk?" I asked her.

"He'll have to learn to talk all over again," she said.

All afternoon without talking to anyone, I looked in the Pictorial Guide for Modern Medicine, a huge book on Mom's shelf. I couldn't find anything about cancer or getting your throat cut out. Guess Mom was right about it being a new thing.

About eleven o'clock the next morning, we heard someone coming up the stairs. Gramma, Elena, and Pauline and I went to see who. I pressed my nose against the cold glass window, mashed my face into it and crossed my eyes to scare away any robbers, but there was my mom coming up the stairs.

"Hi, Mom!" I hugged and kissed her. She looked smaller than when she left and a lot more tired. She hugged all three of us, said hello to Gramma in Italian, and asked where Samantha was. Gramma told her in Italian that Samantha had gone to school. They talked to each other some more. I knew enough about Italian to know they were worried about money. Mom asked me about the woman from Welfare.

"She hasn't come yet," I said. Mom looked very sad. A week before she and Dad left for the hospital, a woman in a suit had come to our place, looked around, and asked all these questions about us and if we were hungry. Dad had been out looking for another job because he got laid off again from his construction job even though he was sick and kept losing his voice. Mom had told us the lady came to see if we were lying about needing help. Mom was mad at her and kind of talked to her through her teeth. I asked Mom why she didn't just tell her off and Mom said we had to swallow our pride or starve.

"Why does she have to come again Mom?" I asked her now. "Can't she believe us the first time?"

"Well dear, the Welfare people think some people lie to get their food."

I looked in the cupboard at the cans of pork we had and the dry milk and powdered eggs we had waited in a long line at the fire station to get. "You mean some people really want this food when they can buy real food?" Mom laughed. I was happy I could make her laugh in this time of worry. She worried about money so much sometimes she would sit there holding up her head with her hand and be off somewhere drinking her coffee very slowly. She didn't know how we would make it. All of us ate one meal a day and some things from Gramma's garden.

Gramma said the depression was much worse than this. She called it "La fame," or "the hunger," in Italian. When you mentioned being broke to Gramma she would tell you how it was for her, with thirteen children during the depression. She liked to tell us stories of Grandpa trying to get work, not being able to speak English, and making a lot of trouble in the factory. She told us about the time he swore at his boss and almost beat him up when the guy wouldn't pay him very much. Gramma said she mixed up flour and water to make lots of things. She said because of La

fame, the boys, her sons, never got any education. They went out and worked when they were twelve or fourteen at whatever jobs they could get. Some of them even worked scrounging around with Sammy Bisciglio, the dirty old junk man.

"What makes a depression, Gramma?" I would ask her.

"The government," she'd always say, in Italian. I believed Gramma knew just about everything even though she couldn't write or read or speak English too well. When you hugged Gramma, she smelled of hair gel and felt big, round, and warm. She said "Embah!" a lot which was like when Jack Benny, the comedian on TV, looked at the camera with his arms folded and said "Well!" I loved Gramma a lot because she listened to my stories and would never let anyone hurt me. She said if anyone was mean to me, she would get her axe out of the back kitchen and get them. I believed her. I'd seen her kill the chickens we used to eat in tomato sauce for Sunday dinner before we went broke.

On Saturday afternoon we heard a knock at the door. The lady from the Welfare Department was standing there. I thought it might be the paperboy. She had shown me a little card through the glass window of the door. I opened it and let her in. Mom always tells me to see who it is before I open the door to anyone.

The woman was carrying a big black box with a suitcase handle on it. She thumped it down on the table. She wore a big double gold ring and smelled of some perfume mixed with outdoor fall wind. She looked at me for a long time and I felt like I needed to tell a sin in Confession, when I hadn't done a thing. She puckered her face and said "Is your mother Jennifer DeCristo here?" She acted as if I was hiding my mother from her.

"Yes ma'am. Do you want her?" I started for the bedroom, where Mom was still asleep. She usually never slept late, but today all of us girls were playing quietly, letting her rest from her trip and worrying about Daddy and money and bills. I went to Mom's room to get her.

"Mrs. DeCristo," said the Welfare lady, "I'm here for a home visit, as you remember. I'm Mrs. Lysinski from the Welfare Department."

"Yes, what is it?" Mom snarled a little as she came into the room. But then she added "Well, go ahead, look around. Help yourself," trying to sound nice. But I know Mom didn't want this

lady looking inside everything and upsetting everybody. Mrs. Lysinski didn't care. She snooped in everything as if we were hiding somebody in the place. She looked in all the rooms, the cupboards, all the drawers, including the one in our roll-top desk where Pauline had hid an Easter egg. It still smelled bad. The closet in the bedroom was stuffed so full she couldn't really see the back.

When she finished looking at everything she asked us if we were hungry. Then she packed up her papers and told Mom we would hear in two weeks about receiving aid. I think she meant money to pay rent and bills. As soon as she left, Mom started to cry a little and then stopped and started cursing the government from the president to the governor to the mayor. I guess they had sent Mrs. Lysinski, but I hoped she never came back to our house again.

Mom said "If it wasn't for you kids, I'd tell that woman right where to put her welfare and surplus food!" I hated Mrs. Lysinski for making Mom feel so bad.

"STAND IN LINE!" the man was yelling at us. "STAND IN LINE!" The line was long and there were a lot of black people in it in front of us. We hardly ever saw black people except when we visited my aunt and uncle who lived in Liberty Garden Apartments on the other side of town. Everyone in the family was always cracking jokes about black people. I never laughed at them because I felt bad about the jokes. Everybody always says I'm too serious, but I don't like calling people names just 'cause they're different from you. Anyway, all the people in line looked bad. Not like on T.V., where everyone wears nice clothes, is white, and smiling as they chew gum. In this line, lots of kids were crying. Their moms tried to keep them quiet. I wondered if they were hungry like me. Even though I was always being called fat, my stomach felt like it was stuck to the back wall of me. It was growling so loud I felt the whole place could hear it.

The man giving out food scowled as if he smelled something bad. "Have your cards ready to stamp. Have your cards out." He kept saying things like: "I don't know why they bring all their damn kids. If they could only have as much money as they have kids." He looked at all of us and for some reason, even though in

church they tell you to love everybody, I hated that man then. I wanted to kick him. It made me feel bad to be alive when he looked at us that way.

Way at the front of the line, a woman was leaving with a big box of food. Her two sons and husband were helping her. As soon as she got to the front door of the warehouse, the man yelled for her to stop. "Mrs. Williams, Clareth Williams, stop right there!" Three of the men handing out food ran as the woman tried to leave. "Get her! Get her!" they yelled, and as her children and husband ran with the big box, the three men grabbed her by the skirt. She stood there terrified and shaking. Then she started to yell at them. They yelled back at her. Finally they let her go.

Later on, I heard the men talking. "Yeah, Jake, her card was stamped real light and the bitch took off. What if she gets two supplies of food this month?"

"What I can't figure out," said the other man, who had real white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes, "is why don't they get themselves a damn job and stop living off welfare." I wondered if these creepy men were somehow connected to Mrs. Lysinski. They didn't think anyone was honest either.

When we got to the front of the line, they were a little nicer to us than they were to the black people, but they still looked at us a little funny, like we shouldn't be there. I wondered if it was their food they were giving away. The containers they gave us were white or silver with big black letters that said you couldn't sell them. I remember thinking that life was grey with black letters stamped on it when your family was broke: grey with a big black heavy hurtful government stamp.

The canned meat was very greasy. As Mom fried it in the big black cast iron skillet, its smell filled our apartment. We set the table and got ready for a meal. Pauline was trying to get the empty can out of the trash bag and we had to stop her. She was learning to talk more, and saying sentences like "Pauline hungry Mama." Elena was pretending she was a queen or getting married. She had pinned a pillow case on her head with bobby pins and carried a prayer book in her hands. At least she kept us cheered up. Me, I was in an angry mood. I didn't like to wait when I was hungry, especially when T.V. showed such good things to eat and we could smell the meals cooking from the neighbors' apartments.

Mom explained that this box of food was our food for the whole month, unless we found some money from somewhere. She said she and Dad hadn't made any money in two months because Dad was so sick.

Soon we ate the greasy pork very quickly. It made us burp. Afterward, we played hospital and everyone had the same problem. Elena was the doctor.

Later, Mom called a family meeting. As was our habit, we all sat around the big formica kitchen table. With its metal edges, it felt cold and smooth when you sat there on one of the stuffed chairs covered with plastic.

"Girls," Mom began, "your father will be home from the hospital next week." Four pairs of chubby hands clapped together and every one of us squealed with glee. "Now I want you girls to be really nice to Daddy, as I know you will be. He's been in the hospital and has been very sick, but at least he's alive."

"Mom," I said, "explain to the girls about his throat." I didn't want to have to tell them myself because I was so afraid I would get sick when I saw it.

"Your father had his voice box removed." We all looked at her. All I could think of was Pauline's toy Jack-in-the-box popping up silent.

"Oh no!" Samantha clamped her hands over her mouth and started to cry.

"How will he talk, Mommy? Doesn't your throat let you talk?" Elena asked. She sang Fa So La Ti Do, like Uncle Jim had taught us. Then she mouthed the same scales with no sound coming out. Normally we would have laughed, but not tonight.

"Well, he'll be writing things down for the first few weeks or so but he will learn to talk again a different way."

"Will he talk like a baby again?" I asked.

"No, dear."

"Will he have blood all over him like Jesus?" asked Samantha. She looked worried.

"No, he won't have blood on him. Just make sure we all help Daddy as best we can because he feels bad and misses his throat. If you help him, he'll know you love him. I have to go to the bank now and ask the man for a loan so we can stay alive while Daddy gets well. His operation costs a fortune. We'll have to pay back the

hospital and doctors for the rest of our lives, but at least your father is alive."

We finished our meeting as usual with complaints we wanted settled. Elena complained that Pauline was pounding on the bathroom door as a joke to make her get out before she was dry from her bath. The floor always got all wet. We worked out the rest of our complaints together under the strong, peaceful guidance of Mom. We were still worried about Daddy, but the weekly meeting made us feel better. I was worried most of all. I wanted Dad to feel O.K., but what if I got sick when I saw him? I'd never been around someone with no throat.

Finally next week arrived. We were all in the house when we heard Dad coming up the stairs. "He's here! He's here! Get the things ready." Pauline got out the picture all of us drew in crayon on a paper bag for Daddy. It showed us all saying hello to him. In addition, I would present my gift to him. I had taken an empty surplus food can and decorated it with some old Christmas wrapping paper. Daddy could keep his pencils and pens in it. He would need them to write notes to us. Elena had made some milk for him from our surplus powdered milk. The surplus milk was nasty stuff but an act of love since you had to beat it and beat it for an hour or more and make it real cold before you could stand the taste of it. Gramma was making sauce, spaghetti dinner and homemade Italian bread for all of us. Daddy had only eaten hospital food for so long. Mom and Gramma stood with us around the door. We were all excited that he was coming home.

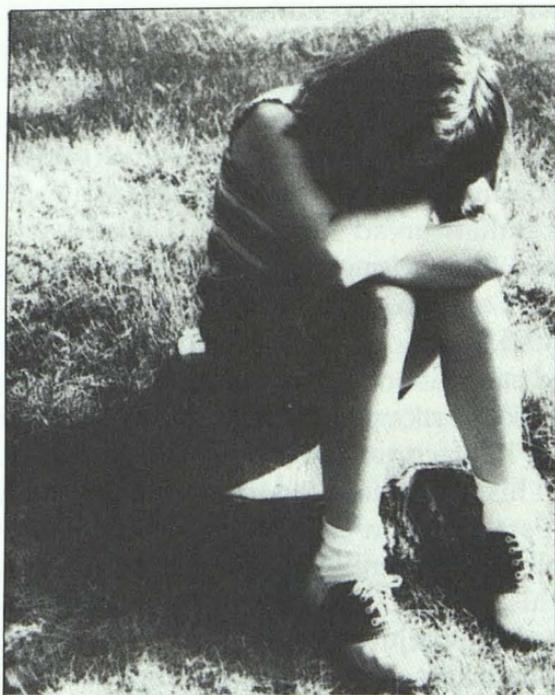
He opened the door. I held my breath. Mom ran to him and they hugged each other hard, something we never had seen them do before. Next, he scooped Pauline up in his arms. He looked the same, except his face was a little slack. He was wearing a little skirt around his neck. It reminded me of a tiny curtain, like on an auditorium stage. Mom called this his bib. The end of it was tucked into his shirt. Smiling at me, he sat on his haunches and showed us his throat. I was nervous I would be sick, but it really wasn't so bad. It was just a round hole right in the middle of his neck above his chest. It was dark in there but it didn't look too scary.

Dad took our presents, kissed us all on the cheek, and wrote me a note which read: "Ramona, since you read the best, I can talk

to you." His writing was scribbly, so I took my time and read each word to all of us. I was happy Mom had taught me to read and print before I went to school.

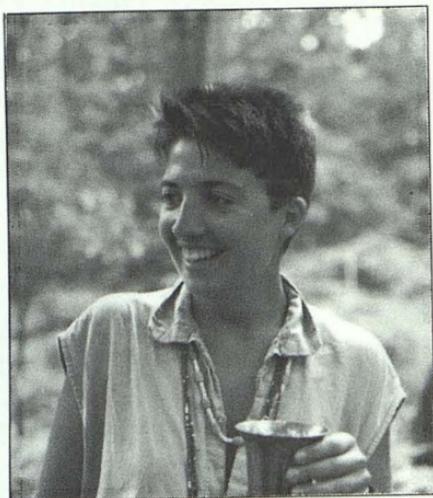
Dad wrote: "I'll have to write you notes for a while but I am going to learn to talk again very soon. See if I don't get back to work and get well real quick so I can get you all the things you need."

I stared at Daddy for a moment. I didn't know if you lost your voice if you could still hear all right. "Welcome Home Dad!" I yelled. Everyone jumped, including Dad. The girls started to giggle. I took a quick look at Dad to see if that had embarrassed him. He was smiling at me. He jotted down: "I'm not deaf." I read it out loud quickly and we all laughed. Pauline was laughing because all of us were laughing, for the first time since Daddy had to go away. We all felt better, and went downstairs to eat Gramma's spaghetti dinner. Things would be all right after all.



*Untitled*, from the series "When girls become women"  
Vincenza Petrilli

Photographs of four contributors



Top: Mary Russo Demetrick and Maria Mazziotti Gillan  
(photo by Laura Boss)

Bottom: Patrizia Tavormina (photo by Diane Heffernan)  
and Chris Cuomo (photo by Jo Lo Curto)

## Connections

Some days, when the world  
seems to be chasing me  
with an axe and I'm driving along,  
on the way home from work,  
or to the post office or some other  
ordinary place, I find myself  
pulling into my mother's driveway  
almost as though the car  
decided, incredibly, to drive  
toward there instead of heading  
for home where the clothes wait  
to be washed and the dinner cooked  
and my poems wait to be placed  
in clean white envelopes  
and sent out to editors.  
Anyway there I am, without  
intending to be, knocking  
on my mother's door and  
she is there. She welcomes me,  
smiling and criticizing  
glad to see me  
even though she tells me  
my hair does not look right  
and why don't I wear some make up  
and if she doesn't tell me,  
who will? She cleans off  
the already clean white table  
in the basement kitchen  
where she does all her cooking  
(the first floor kitchen  
is never used, and looks  
showroom new) and takes out a cup  
and pours me an espresso

without even asking and looks  
in the refrigerator to see if there is anything  
else that I want. She asks  
about each item, warms up  
some pasta and fasoli or some lentils and rice,  
and sits down to talk. I marvel  
at how small she is when she sits down,  
her hands delicate,  
with tiny bones, and her body compact.

Looking at her face, I realize,  
suddenly, that she could die,  
that if she were not here  
for me, I would have no one  
to go to for sustenance,  
as I come to her, looking  
for the food that satisfies  
all hunger, knowing that no matter what,  
she is there for me, and that I need  
to have her there, as though  
the world were a quaking bog  
and she, the only solid place  
on which to stand.



*Woman with her Daughters*, photographer unknown  
Contributed by Mary and Carol Andolina

## The Accordion

The day I came home to discover that Mama had hocked my gold and white accordion was the same day I had decided, probably in a fit of confused sexuality, to practice for hours every day, until maybe I could get on Ed Sullivan or Arthur Godfrey, some new way to get rich and get out of the house on Trenton Avenue, away from my father's yelling in the night about money or work or me.

I had hated the accordion, hated the man who gave me lessons in a little cubicle at Robbie Music downtown Paterson. Most of the time, Pop dropped me off while he went and hung out with Uncle Marty Longo at the gas station, or sometimes he went down to the Buffalo Bar and Grill and talked with Rocco Bazzi about the numbers. Sometimes I took the bus and more often than not got vaguely sick from the smell of the fumes. I wanted to be at the Paterson Public Library, where the smell of the old and musty books was exciting to me, like the smell of a parade, and where the librarians were mostly women who talked in soft tones, and had thoughtful-looking glasses, and whose hands, when they brushed mine as I checked out my books felt soft, the kind of hands that used cold creme, or hand creme, which were magical words to me, never having used it, nor had my mother. Both of us had hands that were red, rough, and wrinkly-looking, the hands of peasants working the fields in Sicily instead of packing meat at the A & P which is what my mother did, or reading books or playing the accordion, which is what I did. I was twelve when my mother hocked the accordion with its sparkly gold buttons and the one, the c-button, with its smooth, pearly, sexual indentation was what I missed most about it being gone. I remember that it was early spring, and as I walked the ten blocks home from school I could hear birds singing and I smelled the earth, awakening like I was. There was a boy named Rico with blazing eyes, and another, Mario Octavio who I had met at the Italian Social Club the Friday before. The following Sunday my mother made me take the accordion to my cousin Sammy's birthday party so I could play happy birthday while all the other

cousins sang. "Happy Birthday" and "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes" were the only two songs I ever really learned to play.

So as I walked home thinking about Rico, Mario, and that little indented button on my accordion, I guess I made the decision to put all my sexual feeling into making music, and walked into the house, my pants damp with arousal beneath the blue plaid skirt of St. Victory's School uniform. I could feel the wetness as I went to the closet to get the accordion.

Mama looked at me funny the second I got in the house — I must have seemed so directed in my actions, walking in and heading straight for the closet. Usually I got something to eat, an orange or a peach, and talked to Mama till it was time for American Bandstand. We always watched it together, and when it was over, Mama would get up and start fixing supper. But this day I strode in full of purpose, and probably a little too passionate about the accordion, and Mama's face took on a fearful kind of look, sort of like a bird or a small animal being threatened.

"Where's my accordion, Mama?" The closet where I kept it had a big clean spot in the shape of the accordion case on the floor.

"You haven't touched it in weeks," Mama said, avoiding my eyes.

"I know, but I'll be better from now on. Where is it?" I looked up at Mama; she fidgeted with her pale blue house dress, ran her short rough fingers through her black hair. She looked at me, her eyes nervous, and kind of sad too.

"It's gone, Maria."

"What do you mean, 'gone,' gone where? Did you loan it to Cousin Mickey?"

"I hocked it."

"What does that mean, Mama?"

"It means I took it to a little store downtown to get some money to pay for your glasses."

"My accordion? Can we get it back?"

"Probably not. Don't tell your father."

Like I would. I had learned long ago there were certain things you didn't tell Pop; most things, in fact, because he had one of two reactions: scorn or rage. The night before I had heard them having one of their whispered fights in the kitchen in the middle of the night. I had heard the word glasses so I knew it was about me: the

week before I had an argument with Pop; he ended it with a backhand across my face, breaking my glasses. For the last few days I wore them taped across the bridge, but yesterday, Sister John Frances, the school nurse, called Mama about them. I hated her because once in fourth grade she asked everybody what they had for breakfast. I told her it depended on what we had for supper the night before, a dish of macaroni, or maybe cabbage and noodles; sometimes we had apple pie if we were lucky, and a lot of time we had minute rice with butter and milk. The last two were my favorites, and Sister John had come right to our house and talked to Mama about our "eating habits." I remember Mama's face as she listened to Sister John; it looked sad and ashamed, the way it did today, when I asked her about the accordion.

In school today, Sister Frances asked me how my new glasses were. "Fine," I had answered, proud that she saw them, new and untaped. Now, thinking about Sister, I wanted to punch her stomach, the soft part hidden under the brown habit.

I cried a little, thinking about the round little button, and the sparkly gold keys, and especially for Mama having to hock one thing for another, and they both had to do with me. I could picture Mama, by herself, lugging the huge, heavy accordion on the bus, walking into the store to get money for it, and coming back home, lighter but sadder somehow. I went outside in the small backyard where a few years earlier I tried to convince myself I had a religious call by seeing if I could fly off the sloped, tar-papered walls of the shed. I looked at it now and laughed: it was only three feet off the ground. I was glad that even as a little kid I hadn't wanted to risk even such a short distance for any convent, any sacrifice that had to do with nuns like Sister John Frances.

Now I went off further back in the yard, where the tomatoes were staked, and sat for a second there, smelling them, before I got down on my hands and knees, still in my uniform, looking for something, some small, familiar indentation in the ground. I made one, a small pocket of earth near the tomatoes and basilico and scraped till I had it just the way I wanted it. I ran my middle finger over and over the small spot, chanting a kind of litany, promising I'd get the accordion back for Mama, and for me, and I swore I would someday get even with Sister John Frances. After

about fifteen minutes, I stood up and felt holy, like a little breeze of cleanliness had come up out of the little circle of earth I had made, where my outrage was buried now, and where I could get back to it whenever I wanted to. I picked a handful of basilico and put it in my pocket, and on my way back inside I held my hands cupped under my nose, smelling the garden, the fresh Italian herb, the life I wanted.

I went back inside. It was Thursday, and we were having fusilli for supper. Mama's sauce smelled good, familiar, like her smile after someone hurt my feelings by accident. From my uniform pocket I took the handful of basilico I'd picked in the garden for Mama to add to the sauce. I pushed my new glasses up on my sweat shiny nose, and took two meatballs from the big pot, put them in one dish, got two forks from the silverware drawer, and then me and Mama went and watched them dance on American Bandstand, far away from accordions or hock shops, and where people like Sister John Frances could never go. But it was where me and Mama went every day after I came home from school, knowing the dancing and the music belonged to us and nobody could shame either of us as we sat eating meatballs, side by side on the old mohair couch, giving up nothing but objects like accordions or glasses, and holding always the scent of each other, like the little garden, between us, cupped in our hands and sacred.

Rachel Guido deVries

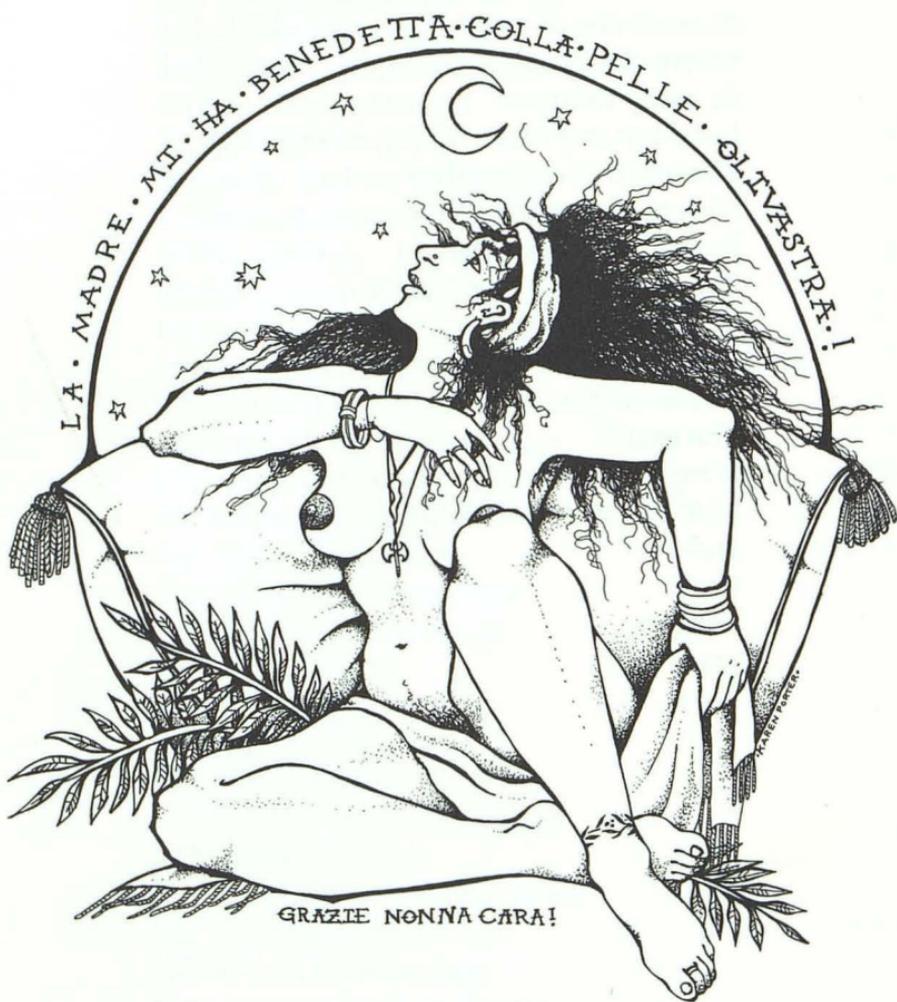
## Litany on the Equinox

The Earth is my mother  
she maketh me in her image  
I shall always want  
her voice wind thru trees  
in fall rush of waves  
at midnight or dawn  
the earth dark as the lover  
I dream of on the eve  
of the equinox big breasted  
woman, mountains rosy tipped  
as sunrise above the hills  
and streams of my body  
The earth is my mother  
she maketh me in her image  
I shall always want  
her storms raging  
her volcanos' roiling  
the eyes of her hurricanes  
her tornadoes' warnings  
her center deeper  
than any canyon  
or black hole shows  
The earth is my mother  
She maketh me in her image  
I shall always want  
her stars, her moons, her suns,  
her galaxies, her universe  
I shall be a star floating  
thru heaven ready to burst  
new light  
The earth is my mother

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Previously published in *la bella figura*, issue 3, fall 1988

She maketh me in her image  
I shall always want  
her gorges for my own  
her waterfalls, her whirlpools,  
her underground caves, her sea caves  
where the light is blue  
and she waits in a shape  
of anemone or gnome  
where she speaks  
in many tongues  
I want as my own  
The earth is my mother  
I am made in her image  
bones like trees, flesh  
like clay, blood like rivers,  
sex like the ocean  
eyes that burn in the center  
of wanting to be  
The earth  
is my mother  
I am made in her image  
and I  
shall  
always  
want



*La Madre Mi Ha Benedetta Colla Pelle Olivastra*  
Karen Marie Porter

## Turning Away from Secrets & Shame

**T**hen

Hands held firmly in each others', two young women walk leisurely up the street. Heading toward us, they exchange smiles and confidences which seem to mirror the warmth and clarity of the bright spring day.

"*Che vergogna,*" my mother says to me. "What shame."

"*È vero,*" I respond quietly. "It's true."

We have these conversations, often, my mother and I. She thinks she has an eye for spotting "those lesbians" and is always quick to proclaim their shame. But her eyes are "*non troppo bene,*" not very good, because she can't see that her only daughter is one of those women too.

### Explanation

Before learning to speak English, my mother spoke Italian. Consequently, she remains a bit uncomfortable negotiating between the two languages. When it comes to expressing horror, however, she reverts back to her native tongue. I follow suit because I need my mother's language to hide my otherness. You see, I've never been able to admit it to myself, in Italian or English.

### Background

In my mind, it began seven years ago. In my heart, though, a date is hard to pin down. We were best friends. We nurtured each other, held each other, and listened to each other. I heard about her past relationships with men; she listened compassionately to stories of my difficult family life.

One night she turned to me and said that she didn't want to be friends anymore. I was confused until she announced that she wanted to be lovers, that we could not get any closer or love any deeper without changing our relationship. I was no longer confused but, to my current shame, I was horrified. I had spent several successful years running away from my sexuality; suddenly I had to face it.

From my earliest childhood, I was lectured to about sex. Sex was good, but only under one condition. My mother had learned

through her religion and immigrant parents that sex had only one valid arena: the marriage bed. When your ethnic heritage is Italian you may also inherit Catholicism; for me, the two intertwined and told me to forget about sex until the proper time. "Avoid occasions or near occasions of sin," my mother would say. Since I was a faithful child, I grew up dutifully avoiding dating, masturbating, experimenting. If I behaved long enough, God would reward me with a man. This man would love me, marry me, and stay with me forever. Sounds pathetic, you're probably thinking, but I believed what I was told and didn't question.

By the time the issue became real for me, I was in love with and loving a woman. My horror turned to clever rationalization as I decided, well, here is the person I love, I can't possibly marry her, so I couldn't possibly wait to have a sexual relationship with her after marriage, so therefore it's okay.

### **Commitment**

We became lovers.

### **Understatement**

It has not been easy.

### **Reality**

My lover and I have made some mistakes. We both internalized romantic heterosexual norms, namely: (1) love conquers all; and (2) you're not a complete, good person unless a man loves you and commits that love to you forever. In order to side-step such norms, we tried to love in a vacuum. Fearing we would receive condemnation instead of validation from family and friends, we told neither. But I think we may have pretended as much for their benefit as for ours. We, too, were homophobic.

I pretended that being in this relationship was a kind of temporary state. If I had to categorize myself, then I must be bisexual. After all, I liked men. However, I continued to dishonor the fact that I had never been sexually involved with a man and that my chief desire to be with one resulted from a need for social approval.

My lover and I weren't getting such approval from friends or family, so I sought sole legitimization of self through her. But she was suffering too under the weight of pretense, pressure, and the threat of non-acceptance. Instead of facing our own fears about

living a lesbian life, we cultivated denial. It seemed so natural to be lovers; it seemed so necessary to deny it.

## Home

Back home, family members were getting married with the usual frequency and fan-fare. I would go to wedding after wedding, either unescorted or with a fake date, and hear the relatives question, "You're such a nice girl; why don't you find a nice Italian boy and settle down?" My mother would rescue me by saying that I was too involved with my career right now. At the same time, she would shove me on the dance floor to catch the coveted bouquet. I would oblige and jump for it if it came my way; it seemed just another one of those things that single Italian women learned to do. We learned to cook, to shop, to take pride in our appearance, to be emotional, to yell, to cry, and most of all to love — ultimately — to love a man and cater to his needs while we sacrifice our own. I always thought this list only had to do with my Italian heritage; I'm discovering that first it has everything to do with patriarchal oppression.

## Telling

After five years, my lover and I began to resent each other. Neither one of us was happy in the relationship. I decided that if we told other people about our secret, we wouldn't be so hard on each other, nor so claustrophobically dependent.

I decided to tell my best friend from college. It was a summer night in 1988, and we had gone to the beach. I made her guess about my lover because I was too afraid to say the truth outloud, especially in public. She said she wasn't surprised and knowing about it only made her understand and love me more.

I was angry. I had expected rejection. If it was this easy to tell someone, why did we keep it a secret for so long? Well, it must not be so easy; in the interim two years, I've only told three more people. My lover recently told two.

## Now

My lover doesn't want to be with me anymore. She has slept with someone else, a man, and no longer feels the same about me. After almost seven years, she has gone off to start another relationship, and I am left alone. I'm writing to you now because I don't know what to do. I am mad at my lover. She told me she had

to leave because she would only continue to sabotage the relationship. She was afraid to let it make her happy; she was afraid she would want to stay with me forever, and staying would mean having to tell everyone.

I'm also mad at myself. I feel inadequate. I hear voices; heterosexism and homophobia shout I should never have loved and been in love with a woman. Patriarchy professes I will never be valued as much as a man, and no woman will ever want to stay with me.

And now, now that I feel my whole world crumbling, my lover gone, I want to turn my back to family, to a stable cultural identity for support. I've discovered that in response to our dominant, denying culture, the culture that doesn't want women to love or live in peace, I have denied my own peace, my own love. I gave up my Catholicism, shed my Italian sense of self, distanced myself from my family because I couldn't deal with my own "vergogna" — shame about my lesbianism.

Now, with my lover gone, I have no support, except perhaps from you, if you're still reading this. I just need to figure out how to accept myself and not to pretend anymore. As Dove Gambill and Rachel Guido deVries say, I need to "rediscover the heart" of who I am<sup>1</sup>. For the lesbian heart is not static; like the mind, it develops over time, through experience. Rediscovery, for me, necessitates a dedication to appreciating myself and my beginnings. I need to forge a language and a life that allows for change and growth and self-acceptance. I need to find a safe place to say that I am an Italian-American lesbian; that I have loved a woman and she me with all our hearts; that I want to love again, only this time more honestly.

It will be a long road to travel but maybe you can help. Accept the pain of my lesbianism as I come out to you; read my words in sisterhood and not in condemnation. For now when I feel most lonely, I need you to care that I do not remain alone. I need to say — no more will I feel ashamed, in any language<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Gambill, Sue Dove & Rachel Guido deVries. "Rediscovering the Heart." *Sinister Wisdom* 24 (1983): 41-55.

2. Portions of this work were first written for a seminar on Feminist theory taught by Adrienne Rich at Stanford University. I am grateful to her for validating autobiographical writing in an academic setting.

## Mixed Blood

My blood is not that pure.

I am the child of two peoples who  
talked with their hands

who spoke loud in public, who made  
scenes, who asked that we Eat Eat again  
and again till we were fit to bursting

My blood is not pure. It  
has been poisoned by betrayals:

My grandmother (my father's mother) fleeing  
her Russian Jewish parents  
for the arms of an Italian man;  
that Italian, my grandfather, betraying  
her, fathering a child with another woman.

My Russian mother  
who an uncle crudely called  
"Italian by injection"  
cooking bowl after bowl of pasta  
until we — my father and three children,  
should have become completely Italian  
by ingestion.

My blood is not that pure: I am a mongrel,  
an Italian and a Russian,  
who bays at the moon,  
who laments the deaths  
of my people from Nazi ovens and  
Russian guns, who knows little of what  
drove my father's father's people here:  
the Italians, the ones who arrived sooner,  
the ones who laughed louder,  
the ones who drank freer and cursed and  
kissed with more passion.

the child of two peoples  
who would hate the lesbian I am,  
and call me a betrayer of my people  
because I won't reproduce the Jews or the Italians,  
because my blood flows freely  
into the mouths of women

A woman of mixed blood  
who suffers the silence  
of my gay people, who saddens at how we're  
cast aside from all countries;  
who weeps at how I have cast aside  
all my nations,  
to be the lesbian, the amazon, the stranger

A woman — a Jew — a Russian — an Italian  
who talks loud when I'm with family,  
and softer with these lesbians who  
seem distant from the ways of my people

a woman who makes scenes  
in the silence of darkness  
who kisses sooner  
and with more sorrow

whose face shines with the black eyes  
of the South of Italy, framed  
by the dark circles of the Russian ghetto

who screams  
who loves the forest

who bays at the moon

## Italy

(An excerpt from a novel in progress)

Angela Cannellini sped down Telegraph Avenue at 90 miles per hour, Mario Lanza's baritone trailing from her car window. He was screaming Torna Surriento. It was spring time in Sorrento and his lover was leaving him. She turned toward Berkeley, her home, the solid tones of his voice clearing her way, making everything in their path Italian. The transition was definitely in progress. Italian things jumped out at her from every corner. Today she counted 55 pizzerias, 43 delis, and more than 60 ristoranti. Up from the day before by 25%. Either she was on her way to Italy, or Italy was on its way to her. The green white and red jumped at her from every magazine cover, storefront, or bumper sticker. At first she resisted believing it. But, how could anyone refuse that much indisputable evidence?

Her entire world was changing. What happened? Before, she had been bogged down in her job and in her life. She was too self-absorbed to have any lovers. One by one they all left, exasperated. She felt stuck in a pothole on the road to nowhere, her soul's engine sputtering on bad gas. She was a snivelling, sniffing shadow of a girl, a shrunken soul, penniless, pathetic fraction, ethnically unspecified freak fragmented and in so much pain. She, like Langston Hughes, wondered what happens to a dream deferred. It keels over like a dead bird, or waits to be squashed like a turd. "Italy!" she would cry, turning in her insomniac stupors night after night in her bed, but to no avail. She craved that dark, rocky soil her ancestors tread, the sweet, red tomatoes their children were fed. She tasted it in her mouth, felt it in her blood, held it, captured in her head. But she was stuck, half-dead, a drooling dog chained to a miserable existence, floundering and alone in un-Italian Berkeley, a flopping fish hung from a New Age New Wave hook. She was stuck.

Angela Cannellini had no money to speak of, no paid vacation from life. Third generation melting pot survivor, granddaughter of illiterate peasants, she was a pawn in the big game of American capitalism, chopped like zucchini in the gnashing machine, crammed in like a sardine with the other grandkids of

immigrants, Italy bleeding out of them with every passing year. She was sheer pulp, skinless and boiled alive in the melting pot till she almost forgot who she was. A week before payday at the ATM, the screen flashed "insufficient funds" and dissolved back to blank stinginess, a faceless, mechanized proxy, the perfect American-made civil servant: functional, but without identity. "Disgusting thing!" she spat, pounding the plastic casing. "I'll smash your face to smithereens!" That face was the only thing that stood between her and Italy, that miserly machine with the blank face, hoarding money. If it wasn't for that face, she'd be on her way to Italy, sipping wine in a first class window seat. Standing there sweating, one day it occurred to her. What they were really after were her atoms, her bodily molecules, her Italian chromosomes. She borrowed them a long time ago. Now, she was in default. Italy was summoning her genes. America was freezing her assets. She was neither Italian enough, nor American enough. Besides that, or because of that, she was broke. Angela Cannellini was in a crack. It was her atoms bouncing, along with her checks, and it was only a matter of time before they nabbed her.

At her job, she endured. She dressed white-skinned mannicans for success in Macys, grinding her teeth. Red, white, or navy brassieres, silk shirts and jackets. Every day she folded underwear on countertops. Around her, the shoppers seethed in nervous herds. She barely made eye contact. Consumers annoyed her, their penny-pinching attitudes, their middle class appetite for frivolous junk festered in her guts. She squirmed with jealousy and rage week after week as she rung up thousands of their dollars. Their hoity toity hotsy totsy poopsie woopsie taste made her puke. She spoke to no one. She only had conversations with herself, in her mind. There she came to her best conclusions. For example, it was a lie, what they taught her in school. All lies! She remembered a visit to the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor at age 10. She saw the ferry, a boat different from the ones her grandparents came on. She saw herself, and two lines of 4th grade children holding hands behind their teacher, climbing the steps inside the Gateway to Liberty and Hope. "Give me your poor, tired, huddled masses yearning to be free..." said the inscription. "I'll bash their illiterate brains in," Angela, now 32, revised the poem. "Give me your huddled masses, vulnerable in their poverty, cut off from family, forgotten and left for dead by the

government of their mother country. I'll re-constitute their lives like Minute Made Orange Juice. In two generations time, their offspring will be cultural voids, unable to integrate their thoughts, feelings and behavior, amnesiacs straddling two worlds. Food?" said the statue, shrugging. (Angela suspected she was really a man in drag, not female at all.) "Let them eat Big Macs, of course." Angela snarled. "Damn those bastards, lying to children!"

Eaten with envy, week after week, ringing up other people's thousands, Angela had only herself to talk with, in her mind. It was there that she came to her best and her worst conclusions. She worried at times about her health. "When will I be so at peace with life and with people, I'll accept everything that's said and done with calmness?" When you're dead! a voice inside her snickered. When you step on a plane for Italy! said another, more optimistic one. To be true, Mother Italy was her one and only interest in life, her obsessive desire, her alcoholic's bottle. She idolized it beyond all reasonable proportion, fantasized her homecoming, a long lost hero, survivor of the melting pot, welcomed by short, dark women shaped like meatballs with beefy arms and dark mustaches. Oh the feasts of pasta, bread, and wine!

Ringling up purchases for the multitudes day in, day out, in the throes of one of her Italian fantasies, Angela stood stonefaced at the cash register one day as a middle aged man in an Oakland A's cap put his purchases down to pay. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bulging wallet. Vaguely, she sifted through his items and rung them up: one lace, see-through women's nightie and three pairs of bikini underwear. A voice inside her scowled "Sexist frivolities!" He leered at her, peeled off three easy 50's and paid. When he walked away, Angela eyed the wad of cash he stuffed back in his pocket. She was thinking again about Italy.

At night she went to psychic classes. Slowly she was recovering her psychic and spiritual abilities. In particular, she was strengthening her skills at transmutation, the art of changing one form into another. She knew she came from a long line of Southern Italian peasant witches and had only to recover her lost skills.

Weekends she visited her acupuncturist herbologist rolfer. Ten months of treatments, and she was still sick and tired. She had given up on Western medicine, but she didn't quite trust other approaches, yet another crack she felt stuck in. At first they said her problems were PMS. Her blood cycle shook her inside

out, hit her with bouts of pointless laughter or sudden tears. Then they thought it was CFS, chronic fatigue syndrome. Life was a job she was chronically exhausted with. They considered IBS, Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Her bowels were not among her more user friendly organs. Recently, they settled on PSS, profound sensitivity syndrome. It seemed like, ever since she was little, she'd had no peace of mind. Every little thing anybody ever said annoyed her beyond belief. They said this was a symptom of advanced PSS. "I can't find a thing wrong with you!" doctors would always say (which annoyed her). "You're fit as a fiddle." PMS, CFS, IBS, PSS, Angela knew there was something wrong, something deeply wrong.

Recently, she was prescribed some herbal pills to strengthen her immune system. She took 12 a day. They seemed to be working. She had to develop a strong barrier to the assaults happening to her on every level, the terrorist attacks, the velvet-gloved threats, the invitations seducing her to sell out her culture and become another Big Mac-eating American, functional, but without identity, without culture or history, soul-murdered clone punching a time clock, depositing money into the Bank of America. Well *she* wasn't banking on America. Third generation melting pot survivor, granddaughter of illiterate peasants, she was but a pee-on in the big game of American capitalism, chopped like zucchini in the gnashing machine, crammed in like a sardine with the other grandkids of immigrants, Italy bleeding out, Italy squeezing out of them with every passing year. She was a bloody pulp, skinless and boiled alive in the melting pot till she almost forgot — but hell no, she *didn't!* Not all the way. *She* wasn't banking on America. She gulped 12 pills a day to strengthen her immune system, Chinese pills to make her more Italian.

At night, after a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs, she closed her bedroom door. She lit candles and burned incense. She opened her curtains and let the full light of the moon shine into her room. There she invoked the goddess Diana. "Beautiful Diana! Give me one glorious wish!" she crooned, "that I may someday walk through the South of Italy, home of my dear departed Neopolitan foremothers!" At midnight her roommates could still hear her rhythmic chants.

She studied the map of Italy laid across her altar, and the 3 whole basil leaves arranged side by side, representing 3,000 dol-

lars, representing green. She studied the huge bulbs of garlic piled high, the skin on the cloves representing white, representing what grows in bulbous abundance. She studied the bowl of wine, representing red, representing her grape-stomping Neopolitan ancestors. Green white and red. She studied the dead, laid out in tattered photographs. She studied her silver, glinting knife, representing freedom, representing her slicing through the webs of her assimilated condition. She studied the map of Italy, the boot. Italy the boot. She wore her boots when she chanted, black suede zippered things she got in a second hand store. She wore her boots when she chanted, stomping her feet, stomping the grapes, intoning in her clearest voice:

Blessed be the candle, blessed be the flame

Blessed be all women, who call on Italy's name

Stomping in the darkness she intoned:

Diana! Italia!

Diana! Italia!

Diana! Italia!

Then the next day came and she was back at Macys folding underwear. Every day that passed her chromosomes howled louder and she prayed for patience.

One day, when her genes screamed particularly loudly, the man who bought the underwear came back. It seemed like, the louder her genes raged, the more often he shopped at Macys. His name was Harry. She saw it on his credit card. He put his purchases down on the counter, the see-through lace nighties and bikini underwear. He wore the same Oakland A's cap. He pulled out the same wad of cash and paid. Always there were 50's on top. Were those his smallest bills? She rung up his items and bagged them, eyeing the wad of dough he stuffed back into his pocket. Who is this guy? she wondered. Where does he get his moulah? She remembered a National Enquirer article on Jim Bakker, the PTL t.v. evangelist. He had a vast wardrobe of clothes, owning over 250 suits. When asked where he got all his wealth, he replied. "Stupid people keep sending me money." What was Harry's story? All that cash. There were possibly thousands of dollars in his chunk of bills, just begging to be spent on something more significant than underwear. Or so Angela reasoned, everything of course being measured against her one and only yardstick, passage back to Italy, her ancestral land, where she would be

welcomed by feasts of pasta, bread, and wine, feasts prepared by short, round women dressed in black. Short, round women with thick arms and dark mustaches who would feed her, nourish that dying spark of Naples back to a roaring flame. "Che cosa è, cara mia?" they would say, holding her limp in their arms, a female Pieta. They would look at her with their dark brown eyes, knowing exactly what she needed. "Stà ammalata? Poverina! Non mangia abbastanza!" So she would eat, Italy filling her up, filling her out. Italy slowly seeping back into her vacuoles, those cellular cavities squeezed and flattened for so many years, popped like toothpaste tubes under a steam roller, squeezed and flattened and stamped with a pattern particularly American. Choo choo. Look out for the American Express! Chugga chugga chugga. In her dreams, she would hear the machine. In her dreams, she would be mowed down by the machine, a dark gray train of multiple steel cars flattening her body. Then, she would be chased by fascists of the American variety. They would stampede, chasing her from all corners. Ollie North fascists marching in lines on her head. Fascist terrorists coming at her. "You're dead, you little fuck! Grab her! Squeeze the oil outta her, goddamn little green olive! You're dead!"

So she would eat, stuffing herself, especially after payday. At home, she would eat green olives and black olives and peperocini and pickled eggplant. She would eat for her life: artichoke hearts marinated in olive oil. She would fold pink slices of prosciutto over pale green melon, open her mouth, and swallow. She would nibble garlic bread, waiting for her pasta to boil. For years she had stockpiled pasta in her kitchen, jars and jars of it. She had separate jars for every type: fusilli, the curly spaghetti, rigatoni, the large, ribbed cylinders, farfallette, the small ribbon bows, ziti, the plain tubular pasta, spaghetti, the stick straight noodles. There was ditalini, lasagne, mostaccioli, and conchiglie, the shells. She stockpiled pasta in her kitchen; Italy, captured in a jar. In this way, she fed herself well, keeping the fascists at bay, reviving her Italianness day by day.

Much to the dread and fury of the fascists, she had long since healed herself of some of the more vulgar American rituals. Gone were the days when she would lust after chicken MacNuggets, a Big Mac, and fries. Gone were the days when she would sit in front of the t.v., spreading an altar of ethnically unidentifiable,

nutritionally bankrupt food before her in styrofoam vessels, performing nightly rituals to the God of Assimilation. Gone were the days when she would rot her teeth with Pepsi, blacken her lungs with Camels, perk up her overperked system with percolated coffee and sugar. Gone were the days when she prowled shopping malls, spending money like water, consuming everything advertised on t.v. Because these days of flagrant Americana were gone, the fascists came in droves in her dreams. They threatened her, clutched at her. "Italy? You want Italy, you little shit macaroni!" they shrieked, throwing cans of Spaghetti O's and Chef Boy-ardee at her head. "Here's your Italy!" they snorted, chasing her down. She ran for her life as bottles of Ragu splattered in thin red blotches at her feet.

She'd wake in a state of dread, get up and click on her cassette player to clear her head. "Mandolini Napoletani" worked the best for her nightmares. The high-pitched, melodic vibrations of the strumming mandolins dispelled her terrors and calmed her. Sometimes nothing but Giulietta Sacco would work, her mournful serenate taking Angela back to 5 years of age, when she would sit in her grandmother's kitchen on Sunday morning, feet dangling from the chair, her legs too short to reach the floor. She would sing in Neopolitan to the music her grandmother always played, sing and inhale the tomato sauce bubbling on the stove. The windows steamed up with her grandmother's busy movements. Morning became afternoon, and her family would sit down to a much-anticipated midday meal of pasta, meatballs, braciole and sweet sausage with delicious fennel seeds inside.

It was this memory, one morning after terrifying nightmares rivetting her to her bed, the memory of herself at age 5 singing in Neopolitan, a language and dialect she no longer knew how to speak, let alone sing, that finally pushed her over the edge. After waking from a particularly gruesome dream, it was this childhood memory, combined with the image of herself today sitting in her language class at age 32, her tongue struggling over "chi che ci," that finally crystallized her resolve. It made her willing to pick up the knife. By any means necessary, she swore, thinking of Malcolm X's uncompromising demand for Afro-American freedom. She was going to Italy, by any means necessary.

America was ruthless, so she would be ruthless. She would ruthlessly reclaim her rightful Italian heritage.

Mary Russo Demetrick

## The Legacy

They say the first time the grandmother saw the baby, she spat, on the ground, making loud noises to keep away spirits. The mother had never seen this custom. She was offended — her baby daughter spat at; she had waited so long for a child, praying to the patron saints, making novenas.

The grandmother said the custom was part of a tradition of the mountains in the old country. A brutal country where life and death are edges of the same cliff. There air cuts like flight feathers of circling hawks. Curses as brutal as the wind, direct and brisk, affect generations.

The mother thought the grandmother's knowledge of folk tales was eerie. The grandmother's trade was birthing. Born in the mountains of this new country, she learned secrets from the old ones, who learned the magic from the foremothers in the old world. At each birth she held the baby and whispered into its ear, "Life is sweet, life is dear, hang on to it like gold." She said this under her breath, so it was often thought to be in a magical and mysterious language.

The mother knew some old world ways, but she never saw this ritual. *She* worried about malocchio and learned a prayer to ward off spirits. Saying this prayer while sprinkling olive oil drops in water released spirits from a child who cried all night. Or, if someone praised the child's dark, curly hair, the mother immediately used the prayer and oil and water. No chance to allow the spirits to affect her baby with loose praise. Spirits are cunning and know how easy it is for mortals to be swayed and seduced, and once an opening exists, they move in causing illness and unexplained problems.

The grandmother died young with these words on her lips, "Do not forget the old ways." Her daughter died young, and her daughter after her. The ways had not been taught to any of them. The mother remembered the stories and retold them to her children. They are reborn through witches and midwives of the past and in bloodlines. They visit me in the dark as I sleep.

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Previously printed in *la bella figura* #3

## Rose

We sat in the anteroom of the funeral home feeling the silence. We sat on small hard chairs, speaking small words. The body, encased in soft satin sheets and heavy wood, lay in the next room, a pink dress draping its lifeless limbs, a rosary placed in its frozen hands. We sat, gathered to mourn the body in ritual now, although my grandmother had truly left us the year before.

*Rose, you with the sharp tongue and the heavy accent  
Rose, ruler of your kitchen throne, always making sauce,  
frying peppers*

*Rose, saying "mangia, mangia, have some more" as we sat  
before you with laden plates.*

Two years before, when Gabriel, her husband died, she had started to fade. I remember the week of mourning for my grandfather. As we got ready to go to the wake, she asked, "Where's Pop?" "He's dead." She would start crying, tears running down her face, through her clenched fists, onto her dress. We dried her face, recombed her hair and took her to the service. Later, the same night after we had come back from the funeral parlor. "Where's Pop?" "He's dead." Her tears again would spill out. We watched, not knowing what to do. The next day, she said, "Where's Pop? I fried him sausage and green peppers for lunch." "He's dead." Each time one of us told her was the first time. She could not grasp the finality of his death, or perhaps, she could not face her loss. Eventually, we started lying to her, unable to bear the bad news one more time. "Where's Pop?" "He's at work now."

*Don't leave, Rose, you can go on without him. I know  
you've lain together since you were seventeen  
Don't leave, Rose, you fought with him every single day  
Don't leave, Rose, you don't even believe in love.  
Marriage was your duty. Now your duty ends.*

The family tried to cope. My aunt, who lived with her, listened to her ravings with great patience. My mother ferried her

to doctors and took care of all her business in the world. Other relatives came to visit, holding her hand and bringing food.

One day she chased my aunt around the house wielding a butcher knife and shouting curses in English. She scared my aunt badly and shocked us all. The curses startling from her lips, where had she learned those words?

*Grandma Rossetti, you were the card shark cleaning up  
every time we played pinnocle*

*Grandma Rossetti, you managed to live with a foot in  
two worlds, lapsing into Italian for the gossip  
we shouldn't hear*

*Grandma Rossetti, you were the strong one running us all,  
your mood clock on the kitchen wall set to warn us  
when you were angry.*

The painful decision was made to put her in a nursing home. There she went steadily downhill; shedding pounds until she was as thin as she had been as a girl, fifty years ago in her wedding dress. She got to the point where she did not recognize anyone, not even my aunt or mother. She didn't recognize her grandchildren but she had always mixed us up. I can remember so many times standing before her waiting, as she fumbled through the litany of our names until she found the right one. "Carol, Barbara, Pam, oh Jeanie, bring the bread to the table."

In the nursing home, they x-rayed her brain, finding an ominous cloud covering half of it. Nothing could be done. She spent her days lying on a hospital bed, waiting. She seemed dead to me then, but one couldn't mourn while the body yet breathed.

*Don't die, old woman, you who loved to brag of the  
accomplishments of your grandchildren to others and  
to badger us in private about our failures to marry  
and produce great-grandchildren*

*Don't die, old woman, you stubborn mule who vented your  
frustrations on us*

*Don't die, old woman, I know you were taught to serve men  
but you were never meant for it.*

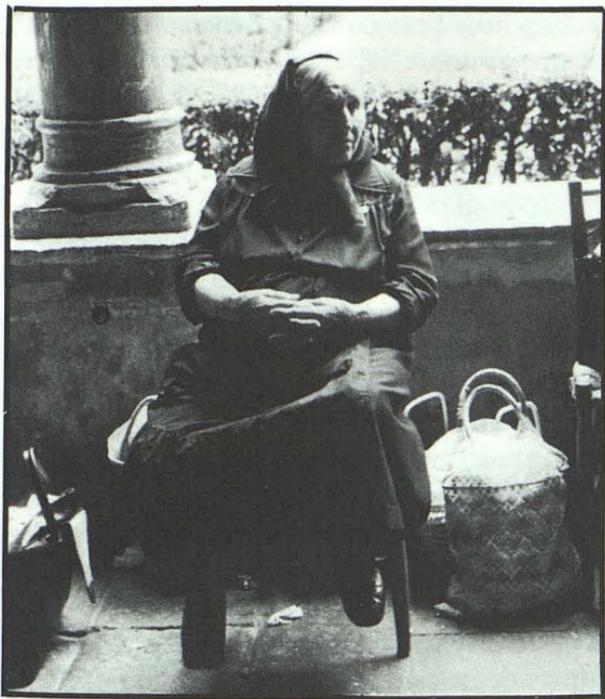
Now we sat a year later on the hard chairs of the funeral parlor, mourning the death of her body. The antiquated Catholic ceremonies were observed. We listened to the great aunts say,

"Doesn't she look good," as if it mattered.

One had to approach the body and kneel before it to say a prayer. The ones from the old country did pray, believing still with a touching faith. We grandchildren, mostly disbelievers, were awkward, not knowing how much to go along with, how much to be ourselves. We sat in the anteroom feeling the silence move in and spoke little words .

We sat in the silence, remembering her, a difficult woman to love, a hard woman to accept. We sat in the silence not knowing how to mourn her, or whether to forgive her. Even the little words died.

*Don't die, old woman, you are unique  
Don't die, Rose, we need to fight with you  
Don't die, grandma, we will miss you,  
You showed us strength within the limits of the possible.*



*A Tribute to Grandma Antoinetta, Padua, Italy 1978*  
Francesca Forté

## Legacy

For as long as I can remember, something deep inside of me has been slowly dying. Flashes of insight, age and countless funerals have revealed that moribund "something" to be my culture. Perhaps it is the same for any third generation ethnic group in this country, struggling with or against assimilation as we must do. In America I am "white" and I know all the privilege that label carries with it. My blood though is Mediterranean, the blood of poor, proud Italian immigrants and whether it's obvious or not, I am Italian. The youngest grandchild of Anthony Mattioli, I am the last to hold the Mattioli surname and with me the passing of this name ceases.

Sometimes I am overwhelmed by the weight of my own name. I question how I can continue to breath life into it when my own breath grows more labored with each dying relative. Exhausted by the act of resuscitation, I sit silently at my desk, holding this pen and counting the dead.

When I was young my culture was more visible to me and more clearly defined. I lived it then as children do, without the kind of awareness that now haunts me. I learned as much from the kids on the street who were not Italian as I did from my family. Somehow being Italian made me different. Daily, my friend Joey told me that I was a greasy dago. Shaking one lone finger at me, my ma would rumble, "Don't bring that filth in my house," each time I asked her what such phrases meant. Joey also said we were Wops and spaghetti benders. In Junior High School I encountered Ron Fisher, a squinty eyed beak nosed little kid whose only words to me each time we met in the hallway were "Hey Mattioli, how'd your day go, dago?" Most often my ma would just make the sign of the cross and whisper, "Gesù Cristo Mio," when she couldn't listen to any more street slang. She'd heard it all many times over and never wanted to talk about any of it, not the street talk, not the Mafia, the black hand, La Cosa Nostra. Not any of it. Everything was kept hidden, unspoken. All burdens carried in silence. The oath of omertà, the oath of silence was always in

effect at our house, especially when anyone who was not Italian came around. My ma stood most fiercely on this oath whenever the subject of pa's work was raised. That was truly none of my business and to this day I know very little about his 38 years as a police officer in the same town.

Though the details of his work remain a mystery, I vividly recall him in uniform. Majestic in navy blue shirt, light blue trousers, decorated with leather and gold, he always appeared larger than life to me. The clash of Old Spice after shave and Dutch Master's cigar smoke is forever imprinted on my olfactory memory. And underneath all the regalia, the handcuffs, badges bars to denote rank, patches, pens, flashlight, nightstick, bullets, pistol and holster, a heart as wide as the sky. My sister's children called him Captain grandpa.

My pa was the sort of man who never missed a day of work in his life, happy and healthy most of the time. He grew tomatoes and pepperoncini in the garden, made salad with the dandelions in the backyard and worked off his anger by going down into the basement and pounding nails into a 2x4. I quickly learned not to ask, "what's pa building downstairs?" but rather "what's pa so mad about?" Frequently he was mad about the promotions given to others less qualified than he simply because names like Hall and Peters fit more neatly on a name badge than names like Gagliardi, Montemurro or Potenziani.

The same hands that pounded nails in anger could be as soft as pillows when cupped to hold my face in them. My memory of these hands is always of their strength and gentleness, for with the exception of one half-hearted whack on the ass, with me flying past him at full speed, he never used them against me.

My knowledge of our family history is sketchy at best. The only grandparent I actually knew was my father's father, Tony, and he died when I was a child. The others all died young from some dreadful thing or another. Tony however, lived well into his eighties, probably because he was too stubborn to get sick and die. He rode a balloon tire, "girl's" bike with a basket and handbell everywhere he needed to go. I remember the ringing of that bell as he approached our house, signaling us to prepare to receive the family patriarch. I prepared by hiding, for his broken English intimidated me and he seemed so very old. I regret that

I never really knew him.

Tony left northern Italy at the age of 18 to settle in Chicago. There he married and had his only son, my father, Dominic. Rumor has it that he fled Chicago in the early 1920's to avoid paying "protection" money to the local Mafioso. Addendums to that rumor also say his refusal to pay was not for reasons of honor and justice, but because he was cheap. I make the sign of the cross myself as I write this just in case I am eventually reunited with any dead paternal relative.

My ma's family was from Calabria, southern Italy, the poorest and most climatically difficult area in which to live. Her mother and father, Angela and Joseph Bilotti came to this country to flee the abject poverty of the south but Angela died at the age of 42 during the 1918 influenza epidemic, leaving 4 children without a mother. When Joseph returned to Italy to find another bride, all of the children were abandoned to different homes. My mother Josephine was 8 years old when she saw her own mother die and her family disintegrate in less than 6 months.

Josephine, and her three sisters, Minnie, Emma and Mary were a micro-study in the struggle of southern Italian immigrant women in this country. Minnie and Emma were born in Calabria and arrived here as children. The early influence of the old world shaped their lives unalterably. Aunt Minnie's house frightened me with its heaviness. The rooms were filled with massive pieces of wooden furniture, all stained too darkly. Heavy tables were draped in cloth, rugs old and lifeless. The house never seemed to get any sunlight, but how could it through the shroud like draperies? Everywhere I looked there appeared a statue of the virgin Mary, a cross of wood, plastic, silver or palm leaf, holy pictures and rosary beads. Never though, would I find a speck of dust in Aunt Minnie's house. It was always sterilized with the sweat of work done on hands and knees.

Minnie had carried the weight of poverty and despair from her home in Italy to her home in America and although time changed many things it never changed her. A short round woman with black eyes and hair, she carried this poverty in her body as well. In her own home she looked perfectly appropriate. Thick black shoes, stockings with heavy seams running up the back, black dress and sweater all blended characteristically with the

ambiance of her home. She wore no makeup — ever! It was out-of-doors in the sunlight that I could see the greater picture, the silent pain.

Aunt Emma was shorter and less round than Minnie, but in dress and home decor, they were twins. At the age of 14, she married and remained unquestionably so to the same little man until his death more than 50 years later. She too radiated the hypoxic effects of her Calabrian birth, an impoverishment of the spirit which she dragged about like a large wooden cross. Both Minnie and Emma kept their lives private, kept their culture alive by blocking out the world around them. They did not care to mix or blend, nor did they care for the language or the customs of this country. They had their own. The neighborhood was Italian, the merchants and priests Italian. They kept their money in cash, in old socks or in the smallest of change purses tucked neatly into their apron pockets. They made stuffed ravioli on holidays, danced the tarantella on occasion, cried when Father Tagliavia died and prayed for early entrance into the kingdom of heaven. This life was purgatory to them.

In contrast to Minnie and Emma, the two youngest Bilotti girls, Josephine and Mary wanted what America had promised them. Born here, they were tempted to believe the “huddled masses” propaganda. The reality they encountered though, was no less harsh than the one they escaped in Calabria. Back there only one set of rules applied. Here they would wrestle with two languages, one spoken in the home, the other, the dominant language spoken everywhere else. They would struggle with the meeting of two cultures and in the ensuing conflict they would always be defeated. Victory was not possible for they could never align with either side. They were the mediators between two opposing forces that would never co-exist, not as long as the sole purpose of one opponent was to crush the life out of the other. The outcome was pre-determined in this cultural dual to the death.

What Josephine and Mary did not know was that their work was nothing more than an exercise in planned obsolescence. They were raised to do as they were told and in America they were told to lie themselves down with the monster called assimilation. But would they have chosen this bed if they had known it meant they were to be eaten alive, leaving no trace of their existence, except

perhaps for a folktale here, a recipe there? Would they have spent their lives cleaning the house, washing the clothes, cooking the meals, bearing the children, licking the wounds, wiping the ass of the beast that would swallow them whole? Would they have raised their children to be American first if they had known it meant we could no longer be Italian at all; raised us in semi-ignorance of our heritage, discouraged us from learning our own language, cooked us our traditional foods only on federally approved holidays, ensuring that our culture would die with them? Perhaps the greatest irony lies in their conviction that sacrificing themselves would guarantee a better life for their children.

As a child, I could feel the confusion and conflict in the worlds around me. It was disturbing to step from our house, with all of my ma's attempts at modernization to the homes of any of the women and men from the old country. Literally, it was two different realities and I could not reconcile the differences in my mind. These realities intersected frequently though at weddings, baptisms, first holy communions and of course at funerals. I always resisted attending these functions, wanting only to be left at home with Howdy Doody, someone whose language I understood and whose cowboy appearance I could emulate.

I preferred Salerno butter cookies to Aunt Mary's canoli and Oscar Mayer wieners to Aunt Emma's sweet Italian sausage bombers. My greatest sin was my distaste for garlic. "Hey Domenico! Whatsa matta for you kid? She no eata the food." Comments by the elders spoken in broken English were always meant to poke at the grandchildren, since we had developed quite an antagonistic relationship between us. To us, they represented everything old and rigid. To them, we represented everything modern and confusing. Yet despite this friction and on some unconscious level, we recognized that something greater was at stake here. If they knew what it actually was, they never spoke about it to their children or grandchildren, and in that silence they sealed the fate of generations to come.

While I tried with every ounce of my youthful ingenuity to keep away from most of these generational imbroglios, I was drawn wholeheartedly to picnics, for I knew that no outdoor gathering would be complete without the traditional game of bocce. Although I have witnessed some stiff competitive egos in

action, bocce is more a folk ballet than a game. It is a traditional sport similar to lawn bowling. Two teams, each with four small wooden balls stand at one end of a long stretch of grass. An even smaller wooden ball, the pallina, is thrown out to the other end of the field. The object of the game, then, is for each team to throw more of its balls closer to the pallina than the other team. Since the game itself is so simple, the challenge lies in developing one's own unique style of throwing. Beautifully choreographed dances make this game a work of art. One could not simply roll the ball through the grass and expect to gain any respect, even if your ball ended up kissing the pallina. You had to dance! Perhaps the most impressive form I recall was developed by my Uncle Gratz. He needed quite a bit of space for his approach which involved a running, hopping type maneuver. At the same time he would loft the ball high into the air, land on one foot and one bended knee and never lose the ash on his cigar. The ball would land, ker-plop, somewhere down field and never roll an inch. This, he took pride in saying, was due to some precise wrist twisting motion he had secretly developed.

No matter how heated the game or how close the score, if I stood at the sidelines long enough my pa would eventually hold a ball out to me and say, "This looks like your shot." Holding the ball with both hands and trying to make my pa proud of me, I took on the men. It never mattered where the ball landed, only that I was the only girl to try. Through the cheers and laughter I would hear, "Hey Dominic, she's getting better than you." My pa always cupped his hand to my face and smiled, each of us enjoying the moment fully.

Nothing was more fascinating at these gatherings though, than the clash of cultures, the three generational contrast. The old country, represented by the last living immigrants of our clan, brought tradition, pride and history to the picnic. They brought the gnocchi and the Chianti. They wore the baggy trousers, white shirts and suspenders, carried the starched white handkerchiefs. The second generation, the first children to be born in America brought confusion, the bleeding wounds of the battle with assimilation, the burden of carrying first the young and now the very old on their shoulders. They brought the crock pots of baked beans, the jello salads with floated fruit cocktail. They wore the

polyester pants, the dacron shirts the lipstick and hairspray. And the third generation, the grandchildren brought the tools necessary to complete the annihilation. They brought indifference, disrespect, shame and ignorance. Picnic after picnic, it was apparent that sharing the same bloodline was not nearly enough to save us from what was happening, even though it was our blood in which the warning was written.

Not surprisingly, it was because of the funerals that the puzzle pieces finally fit together. I grew up on funerals. They were as much a part of my daily life as frosted flakes. Over dinner my ma would say, "My cousin Johnny died yesterday, so we will be going to the funeral home tomorrow night." "Who?" I'd always ask wondering how I could slip the peas off my plate and into my pocket without being seen. It seemed that a favorite pastime of the Bilotti sisters was sitting at the kitchen table naming the dead, some sort of paying of tribute, honoring of contribution, or perhaps merely acknowledging past existence. To me they remain faceless names, a means by which I marked the passing of my time. Aunt Meena died when I was six. Cousin Rita died when I made my first holy communion. Uncle Lou died when I moved out of the house.

It wasn't until the death of my own parents that I began to personalize the loss and grief which was so pervasive in my life. I was 21 when my mother died, an event for which I was in no way prepared, even though I knew for months that it would happen. The trauma of her death was heightened by the grueling funeral ritual that we were forced to endure. Now in retrospect and gratitude, the precise details of her funeral escape me. My father died only four years after my mother and in my memory their wakes ooze into each other. Both were three day marathons, seemingly endless lines of viewers reciting the rosary, muttering to each other in Italian. Both elicit memories of rows of old women in dark clothing, black lace veils hiding their eyes, black handkerchiefs muffling their cries and catching their tears. Some sat stone faced, hands folded in silent prayer while others wailed shamelessly. Occasionally several of the women would rush to assist a fainter in the third row.

Because of my father's visibility as a police officer, everyone in town came to the funeral. I wanted to scream at everyone to go

home and leave us alone. At one point the entire uniformed police force filed in; solemn, restrained, to show their respect. One by one they shook my hand, expressed their sorrow, some mechanically, others with genuine feeling, then silently filed back out again. "That's all?" I screamed inside. "Thirty eight years of my pa's life with you jerks and all you can say is that you're sorry!" The rage helped to divert my attention from the pain that was boring its way through my chest and momentarily allowed me to feel something other than anguish. It was fortunate that my mother died first for I know she could not have endured my father's funeral.

It was just after these two funerals that I began to see the connection between the individual deaths and the dying of a way of life. With the passage of enough time it became possible for me to recall my parents with broader awareness, paying more attention to the context of our lives together and less to the feelings of personal abandonment. Yet even after the frank pain had subsided and I had befriended the permanent, subtle pain, I continued to feel a gnawing inside of me that did not arise from the loss of a parent. It was the dawning recognition of a loss much greater than any I had ever known and the writing of this piece is only one unsteady step in the process of learning to walk with my grief. Mourning, I have come to understand, has a life of its own.

Now, as my mother's daughter, I too join in the ceremonious naming of the dead, insuring that no one ever forgets those who have given up so much more than their own lives. As my father's daughter, I sit quietly at my desk and cup my hands to my own face, seeking and finding a familiar comfort that remains very much alive in me.

Kathy Freeperson

## Munda The Italian Witch Rome, New York

She was old as dried hot peppers  
strung in the hallway  
we watched her through high grass  
on our eleven year old bellies  
trying not to breathe or laugh  
fearing her witch's powers dark  
secret musty like old widows' black  
dresses stored in moth balls  
in mahogany cedar chests.  
Fear and respect like old brick streets  
for a woman who brought the newborn Italian babies  
peppercorns in gold to pin  
to diapers like tiny protections  
from the evil eye, or malocchio.  
Munda's thick glasses  
like the bottoms of beer mugs  
scanned the herb garden in her dark backyard  
strident voice rattling off and on  
in Italian and a touch of English  
using eyes and wrists, fingers  
for emphasis  
while our bellies on the cool grass  
full of pasta from some "Welfare dish"  
Gramma made, were pillows on the earth  
we watched the Italian witch on First  
Street through grape vines  
grown from grafted pieces brought over  
on the boat from Naples, Sicily and parts  
South, rule her family manless

## Shadow Sister

She is my friend.

The dark woman,  
whose family came from Sicily,  
is the sister I never had.

While the music plays,  
she dances seductively, provocatively before me,  
waving her slinky, snaky arms through the air  
with absolutely no sense of shame.

She is Kali, Shiva, Medusa.

I stare at her, the snake, with my wide, brown bird eyes.  
I am frozen with fascination and fear.

"It's sex," she says...

"I act out that which is denied ... "

My mind meets her shameless sexual energy  
with familiar judgment.

Generations of Northern Italian immigrants cringe in horror  
as I gaze upon my shadow —  
that disowned part of myself:

the dark side,

the earth,

the snake,

the female,

the *unbound* female.

The voices of my Northern Italian ancestors  
take over my head and call her silent names:

"bad woman" ... "peasant" ... "pagan" ... "cheap" ... "tramp"  
... "Southern Italian."

She is not wholesome and clean.

She comes from the South, the hot country,  
where people are uncultured, sweaty and lazy,

where food is too spicy and greasy,  
where gangsters give us all a bad name here in America.

"You are not supposed to have a pussy!" she says.

"Don't talk like that," I reply.

"Don't dance like that," I think.

"It's not right," I judge.

For I am a good, obsessive compulsive, Italian girl  
raised on the shores — the North shores — of Long Island,  
escaped from the debutante cotillions of New York,  
to settle in the North of California.

My people take pride in being subtle and refined.

We do not bring Mafia to America;

we bring culture: Verdi, Puccini, Michelangelo ...

fine cuisine delicately flavored with basil,

porcini mushrooms and sweet butter.

We speak only the "purest" Italian.

Let me be clear about this:

We do *not* eat oregano.

We do *not* dance the tarantella.

We do *not* sing "O solo mio."

We do *not* play mandolins.

We do *not* have cats in our houses.

We have pedigree dogs.

We trust them more,

probably because we can control them.

From my earliest years I was taught  
that the land south of Rome was reserved for barbarians,  
and that unbridled lust came from that "dark, hot, greasy land."

"Do *not* touch yourself down there!" they told me.

Oh, how my family triumphed  
when this third generation Italian girl  
gained entry to the Junior League of New York.  
We had finally been accepted by Anglo society!  
In my corset, strapless gown, high heels and long, white gloves  
I proved to all what I had been told since a child:

We are *not* Italians,  
We are Americans.  
We are *not* hotblooded and swarthy,  
We are white.

Over six-course sumptuous meals, my parents  
would remind me that  
our ancestors came to America from Northern Italian mountains,  
to become the owners of successful family businesses  
of which their daughters,  
now married to stockbrokers and attorneys,  
are the major stockholders.  
They are proud that their daughters do not work,  
and they show them off in all their refined elegance  
as evidence of their success  
in America.

We are *not* Italians,  
We are Americans.

And on this day when my beloved Sicilian sister  
danced before me,  
veils lifted from my eyes,  
and I saw in a profound way,  
that I *was used* to prove,  
and that I *have used* my whole life proving  
that I am a brown-eyed, white, Anglo American —  
that this was my family destiny from before birth.

To think that I, a feminist,  
theoretically a lover of women,  
do not respect the female,  
the *unbound* female!  
I was systematically trained to fear  
the earth, my genitals, and my body ...

I am a third generation daughter  
of Northern Italian immigrants  
who came to America  
and made good

... and made good girls  
... with no bodies.

And all these years I have been wanting to know something.  
What has kept me so lonely and isolated?

Answer: No deep personal contact.

For contact is timeless and sensual,  
sometimes it is even sexual.

*It requires a body.*

We cannot feel each other in *any* way  
if we don't have bodies.

But still those voices of fear rage in my head:

Godforbid we might really feel each other,  
our bodies, our pussies, and our love.

Godforbid we might go out of control,  
break some rules...

disgrace ourselves, our mothers and fathers,  
and generations of Northern Italians  
intent on proving that they are *not*  
Southern Italians  
with bodies.

Godforbid!

Godforbid!

## Omertà



Sun dried & wind bitter  
Sicily of my mind's eye  
impoverished by mayhem 2000 years  
& three continents  
of liberator/conquerors  
of historical contributions  
(to call colonizing brutality  
by its civilized name)  
now subject to North American  
paternalism where international  
lies make screaming silence  
the rule of racial survival  
Sicily the changeling  
you are no secret on my lips.

*Dodici Azpadu holding  
her doll "Palermo"*

## Passion, Danger, Freedom

“They are on the whole a simple-minded race, primitive in their emotions and passions ... easily lead by their feelings.”<sup>1</sup>

### I. Passion

next to abstraction  
we must appear  
too real  
or worse,  
caricatures  
displayed against  
the borders  
of red, white & blue  
rationalism

a sea of people  
threatening the order  
of things neatly put  
in their place  
plastic over the sofa  
antiseptic food  
manicured lawns  
certain ways of being  
“I pledge allegiance to the...”

thin authoritative knives  
reaching into  
our guts  
pulling up  
the pieces  
to say look  
look how simple they are

with our insides  
all strewn about  
it is nothing  
but murder  
& brutality to the spirit  
can kill for generations  
& who wouldn't cry  
who wouldn't cry loudly  
for this cultural massacre

in such a place as this  
it is dangerous  
to feel  
in such a place as this  
feeling is all we have left,  
next to abstraction  
passion is the first resistance.

What does it sound like when shit hits the wall? WOP!"<sup>2</sup>

## II. Danger

Shit  
is not my relative  
not even a distant cousin  
in fact no one I know  
sounds quite like that  
& the real danger  
is in one of our voices  
calling out to another  
because what isn't funny  
can change the way  
we speak  
to each other  
forever.

"Southern Italians are considered biologically inferior beings  
...semi-barbarians or complete barbarians by natural destiny."<sup>3</sup>

## III. Freedom

Is it because  
we are too hairy  
too dark  
do we smell  
of rough cheese  
and old caves  
do we ignore  
your institutions  
sweat at all  
the wrong moments  
howl in the  
middle of the night  
at the divinity  
everywhere in everything

or is it because  
we eat heavily  
and love it  
is it because we have different  
accents  
mustaches, hips  
or is it because we dig  
forever digging the dirt  
scratching out our life  
among the worms  
in the soil  
  
are we so barbaric  
that your renaissance  
borrowed our images

painted them freely  
to claim our beauty  
for your own  
then buried our real bodies  
letting them rot in the sun  
a poor, hungry, rough  
backward region  
a thorn in the side  
of such civilized tastes  
an uncouth opera  
at the bottom of the boot

or is it because  
successful exploitation  
depends on this  
this view of us  
of our culture  
our hertory  
our lives

because where you see worms  
I see sacred  
rituals working  
underneath it all  
slowly, steadily  
spinning, digging, dancing  
unearthing the layers;  
where you see worms  
I see prayer in motion  
slithering, spiraling, toppling  
there is dirt  
under my fingernails,  
Destiny,  
as I lift this life  
out from under  
your civilization —  
putting a garden  
in its place  
is hard work.

- 
1. Johnson, L. Colleen. 1985. "Growing Up and Growing Old in Italian-American Families." Rutgers University Press, 27.
  2. Frequently heard anti-Italian joke.
  3. Gramsci, Antonio as quoted by Birnbaum, Chiavola Lucia. 1986. "liberazione della donna: feminism in Italy." Wesleyan University Press, xvii.

## Living As A Sicilian Dyke

Carrying around Cheryl Clarke's book of poetry, and flashing its vibrant pink cover is always good for a laugh as people focus on the bold black title *Living As A Lesbian*, and then me. My long, dark hair and feminine gestures don't fit their stereotype of a lesbian. I'm not a closet dyke. I'm a first generation Canadian dyke of Sicilian origin. In Montreal, with a conservative Italian community stranded in a time warp between 1950's Italy and 1990 Canada, lesbian life stands little chance.

When Italian immigrants first arrived in Montreal, not speaking a word of French or English and struggling to build a better life, they depended on one another for survival. Having created an almost self-sufficient enclave over the years, most of the Italians here today live in the northeast end, or central north end of the city. Because all neighbourhood services are Italian-run, Italian immigrants have practically sealed themselves off from modern day influences. While this insularity is an important way that Italians have resisted assimilation, one result of it has been that the feminist and lesbian movement completely bypassed this Italian community, and they have held on to the sexist, and heterosexist values their parents taught them back in rural Italy during the '50s. First generation Italian-Canadian lesbians and women grow up against such a backdrop, a life system akin to the early 1900's when women were lawfully not considered persons, and when lesbians were not considered.

In almost all aspects, growing up female in the Italian community means strong adherence to the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality. Subservience, femininity, passivity, and dependence are highly valued. Basically the female role assumes marriage to Italian men, jobs as secretaries or hairdressers, and of course housewifery and mothering. Because women and lesbians are kept under lock and key, they usually fulfill their parents' archaic expectations. As a child, I watched my uncle beat my 12 year old cousin because she dared to run and play with us. I was spared a beating because I had not reached puberty yet. For

Italians, puberty marks the final stages of a girl's training in heterosexual womanhood. Instead of playing, my cousin could only occasionally sit on the balcony. At 16 her parents arranged her marriage, passing on the lock and key to her husband.

As teenagers, Italian girls are not only forbidden to play sports (a masculine endeavor), we can rarely sleep over at a girlfriend's place, attend dances or hang out after class, the underlying reasons being that nice girls (marriageable girls) do not stray from the home. Simply sleeping over at a friend's means acting independently from the family. Such initiative on the part of a female, an obvious claim to male privileges, must in every way be discouraged. We are taught to walk, talk, eat and think like heterosexual women. Throughout high school, my Italian girlfriends lied innovatively and incessantly to gain some freedom. I personally fought my mother tooth and nail for permission to play basketball, and assuredly had my father been around, my fate would have been that of my cousin's.

If the Italian community exists with such traditional values, and rigidly defined sex roles, where in such a penis-ruling culture can dykes possibly survive? The only other Italian lesbian I know is emotionally disturbed at 22 years of age; undoubtedly due to a lifetime of physical and psychological imprisonment. An Anglo-Saxon acquaintance once expressed how, reading her students' journals, she was overwhelmed at the outpouring of distress from Italian females as they described their compulsory daily routines of housework and womanly duties, as well as their frustration at the double standard played out between them and their brothers or husbands. However few the rights of contemporary lesbians are today, the young Italian-Canadian lesbian undergoes tremendous stress in trying to reconcile her repressive living conditions with the basic human rights enjoyed by her peers.

The only solution for many Italian lesbians, as with most other lesbians, is to leave home. However, in the Italian culture, leaving home is the ultimate sin. A female who leaves her parents home prior to marriage is considered unchaste, a harlot, and dishonours her family. Whereas most lesbians experience ostracization by coming out to their family, an Italian dyke is treated as such by simply moving out.

An Italian lesbian seeking independence loses her cultural

identity if her family ostracizes her. She cannot strengthen her identity as an Italian and a lesbian with other Italian-Canadian lesbians because so few of us survive our sexist and heterosexist upbringing to dykehood. Many Italian-Canadian lesbians marry or remain married to men, become spinsters, or live closeted lesbian lives. This feeling of cultural isolation is compounded for me as a Sicilian, because I speak a dialect very distinct from standard Italian. Even if I met Italian dykes, I would uncomfortably stutter and struggle to speak an Italian unfamiliar to me. This barrier is exacerbated by the fact that "Siciliano," viewed in Italy as a dirty dialect, is also a dying one. The chances of meeting Sicilian-speaking dykes decrease as more and more Sicilians now speak only standard Italian.

Since I've yet to share my experiences with other first generation Italian or Sicilian dykes, I'm not sure what powers we can generate from uniting, nor what customs we could reclaim. Certainly, I miss the strong female-bonding characteristic of Italians. It's so natural for me to waltz with my mother, sister, aunts, or to walk arm in arm with female cousins. Such expression of affection, and dancing between females is taboo in many other cultures. But, because Italians segregate the sexes, close female bonding inevitably develops. In addition, Italians have a wonderful appreciation of food. North Americans are too thin-conscious to appreciate the joys of eating, but Italians have the same attitude towards food that they have towards bodies: the more, the merrier. In a think-slim society, it's refreshing to see both food and voluptuous females still highly adored amongst many Italians.

On the other hand, this quest to reclaim Italian culture can prove problematic in that catholicism, a religion full of racist, classist, sexist and heterosexist aspects, is imbedded in my identity as an Italian. Unable to see where my Italian culture begins and catholicism ends, I sometimes almost deny my Italian heritage. Living as a Sicilian dyke means I'm constantly at odds with a culture that I desire and inherit, while at the same time, feel repulsed by.

Nevertheless, recently I've transformed a few Sicilian customs to be in keeping with my lesbian culture. When my mother cooks "springi" (sweet rice balls) in October to celebrate San Martino, I celebrate National Coming Out Day on the 11th, and

when we cook "cubata" (honey-coated almonds) at Christmas, I celebrate Solstice. Such food traditions carry deep importance. My aunts and mother have lived such harsh lives as immigrant women that having food on the table represented survival, the strength to carry on through another day. As a lesbian in a heterosexist world, I relate strongly to this determination to survive.

I have difficulty describing what it means to be born the non-immigrant daughter of an immigrant mother. Obviously, I live privileges my mother will never live, such as acquiring an education past grade 5 or having career choices beyond that of a back-breaking, underpaid sewing machine operator. The institutionalized racism that confines immigrant women to the cheap female labor needs of capitalism has assured me, a white, educated, non-immigrant, easier access towards a middle class lifestyle. Along with my more privileged position comes a guilt and anger at knowing that that Sicilian woman who stepped off the boat at 20 could easily have been me. This feeling of guilt re-occurs every time I look into my mother's eyes and witness the hardships she has lived. In my fight for lesbian rights, I continuously attempt to summon within myself the strength and relentless stamina of that immigrant amazon who, barely capable of uttering one word of her new country's tongue, courageously threw out an abusive husband and worked 18 hour days legally and illegally to raise 5 children. When I speak to you as a Sicilian dyke, I bring all of this with me: the pain, anger, and defeats, but also the struggles, culture, herstory, love and survival.

I'd like to think that the Italian community in Montreal is gradually changing as second and third generation Italian-Canadians grow distant from the sexist and heterosexist aspects of their Italian roots. Certainly, my family, although first generation Canadian, has rejected most conservative Italian prejudices. Then again, we exceptionally (and thankfully) were raised without the grand patriarch, but instead with a strong female head of the family. Perhaps, in searching to unite Italian or Sicilian dykes, I seek to affirm my own existence: the recognition that others know where I've come from, what I may have had to give up, and how hard I've had to fight as a Sicilian, to be lesbian.

Review of *The Dream Book:  
an Anthology of Writings by  
Italian American Women* (Schocken Books, 1985)

*The Dream Book*, edited and with an introduction by Helen Barolini, creates a painting of rich colors, textures and moods that picked me up and swept me along forgotten memories and feelings, and through the pain of my own ancestors. It's an emotional journey, the dream of the daughters and granddaughters.

In her introduction, Barolini says the oppression of Italian-Americans is a direct cause for the "literary silence" among Italian-American women. The immigrants to this country were largely people who weren't "valued or wanted" in their own land. Their visions of escaping oppression to have a better life here were met with the same devaluation and oppression. She explains: "When your frame of reference is a deep distrust of education because it is an attribute of the very classes who have exploited you....then you do not encourage a reverence for books among your children. You teach them the practical arts not the imaginative ones."

A deep adherence to the old ways of the Italian family is also an important reason for this literary silence. As Barolini says, "Italian women who came to this country did so as part of a family, as daughter, wife, sister, or 'on consignment' ... but always in the context of a family situation. ... For an uneducated Italian woman could not exist economically or socially outside the family institution which defined her life and gave it its whole meaning. She came almost as an indentured servant, bonded to her traditional role." She had no choice but to remain totally dependent on men. Women who did manage to hold onto some level of social or economic independence were considered deviant, evil, outsiders from the community who were looked upon with suspicion as "prime casters of the evil eye." This did not foster for them an atmosphere conducive to pursuing creative

interests or self-expression. It's the age-old story of women kept uneducated, dependent, frightened and subservient, who have no glimmer of, no chance for, personal freedom or self-identification.

Family was the most important Italian institution, and the women's role as center of the family was crucial. The responsibility to keep the family together was placed totally on her and she was most often the one denied a chance for an education.

"In America, schools were not always regarded as the road to a better future; more often they were seen as a threat to the family because they stressed assimilation. ... Reading was ridiculed as too private ... free time should be spent with the family group ... Here as in Italy, the top goal was survival of the family as the chief bulwark against an alien nation." The woman was to remain "permanently accessible and permanently unchanging." She could not be an individual with her own dreams and needs; this would undermine the family structure.

It's easy to see with these rigid roles and economic and social restraints why Italian-American women have a hard time exploring creative expression and why our literary silence was so pervasive. We are part of a huge oppressive machine built on racism, illiteracy, suspicion and a rigid patriarchal social structure.

Our silence is broken with this anthology and it's broken with the musical names of the women that appear in it: Maniscalco, Carmellino, Iezzoni, Benasutti, Scalapino, Segale, DiSanto, Valentino, etc.; the names of Italian-American daughters and granddaughters celebrating who they are through the written word.

Divided into memoirs, non-fiction, fiction, drama and poetry, *The Dream Book* is a diverse collection of our experiences, mixed, blended, simmered, and served up like my nonna's most famous in the whole world spaghetti sauce.

The memoirs are a moving testimonial to the strength and resilience of Italian women, such as Rosa Cassettari, whose *The Life of an Italian Immigrant* chronicles the joys and hardships of living in Chicago around the turn of the century. Her style is so matter-of-fact and passionate that I felt propelled back to my childhood, sitting around the kitchen table with my aunts as they told stories of their youth. The fiction was my favorite section.

Many of the stories are written about or from a child's point of view. One of the best was *Zio*, by Alma Vanek, the story of a young girl's experiences around the death of a close family friend. Lynette Iezzoni's *Window Seat*, is a haunting story about a mother's "transformation" from neighborhood Betty Crocker to dissatisfied and disconnected wife and mother as seen through the eyes of her daughter. The fiction section is the largest part of the book, with stories that are well-crafted and enjoyable.

The poetry was also quite good. Poems by Kathy Freeperson, Ann Bart, and Grace DiSanto were particularly moving and timely for me. Having recently lost my nonna, Grace DiSanto's "Last Supper" really hit home. It's written in memory of her grandparents. She reminisces about good meals and good times with them, and how as children we never think about those we love being absent from our lives. She laments the loss of innocence. "I ache to genuflect, kiss their hands, but then I realize that supper, the bread and wine of childhood, was long ago consumed." Again, as with the other sections of this anthology, much of the poetry reflects the rituals and traditions of growing up Italian, reflections complete with pain and joy.

The Italian tradition of "omertà," or cultural silence, was very strong within my family. It said "What I don't know won't hurt me"; it said, "See nothing, say nothing, hear nothing." It led others to refer to me as "secretive," "withholding," "distant," "cold." I unwittingly carried on the traditions of my ancestors, as women before me had done, my mother, her mother and her mother before her. We were betraying each other, allowing our heritage to be buried alive. This anthology gives me great hope that "omertà" is disintegrating, that the voices of Italian-American women will be heard, that our experiences will be taken seriously, that we will begin to identify ourselves to ourselves and to others as we write our own dream books, and songs and poems, and paint our own dream paintings.

## Commari: Excerpts of a Dialogue

*Commare is an Italian term for the godparent of a child. It also functions as a connector to bring outsiders into the family and give them honorary membership in it. The term also connotes a close family friend. It is used to bond. In the course of talking with one another about our Italian heritage we came to feel like commari.*

**Angie:** Talking about this has helped me get in touch with my Italianness, and we have both gotten in touch with how we grew up. For me it has been how I experienced oppression because of being Italian and how I identified as “other,” and for you, Demetria, how within your Italian-American community you were taught to look down on the immigrants, to look down on the “other” because of a strong pressure to assimilate.

**Demetria:** Growing up, I was taught that I was better because I was born here. We used derogatory labels against the immigrants like “greaseballs, and “d.p.’s” (displaced persons). Because we were already here, we looked down upon those Italians who had recently arrived. What seems clear about you and me, is that we were both deeply affected by anti-Italian prejudice, though in different ways.

**A:** But you didn’t completely buy into it.

**D:** No, I found a very safe corner within myself to escape from it. I certainly didn’t get any support socially for not completely internalizing it, really. It was hard to keep open and I did not understand my family’s own prejudices. I was so confused about why they told me I was better than someone who had lived in a different country and spoke a different language.

**A:** My experience in Belgium was one of oppression. I was the “other.” We lived in our community, but we were teased, we were poked fun at, we were battered and discriminated against.

**D:** That is what would have happened to you had you lived in my community, too, I’m sorry to admit.

**A:** If I had lived in your community I would have felt the prejudice and fear from my own people, the Italians, as well as

non-Italians. I am trying to remember the feelings that I had on the playground the first couple of weeks in America. My name was changed from Angelina to Angie, within two days. I became Americanized. I felt like a piece to be exhibited. Kids would come to look at me like animals at the zoo. The feeling of being "other" became much more ingrained and internalized.

**D:** When I went into a Catholic convent at age 18, I walked into a middle class, predominantly Irish setting. I felt really different then. That was the first time in my life that I ever got "described" to anyone else as being *so* Italian. When I talk with other Italians, I don't feel very Italian because I don't speak the language, nor do I know the culture or the history well. I feel like an imposter at times. I feel most Italian when I'm with other Italian-Americans, with the people I grew up with in our Italian Community, and within my extended family.

**A:** I do know the Italian language and the culture and the history, but I am not proud of being an Italian-American. I have internalized being "different" as being negative.

**D:** I think I've always been proud of being Italian-American, yet I have felt outside of mainstream America. Not always because I was Italian-American. My feeling of being different was more class-based. I grew up in a working class environment. To me, it's class rather than ethnicity that gave me the clearest awareness of being "other" and "different." I remember when I was 21 someone gave me a book about my neighborhood called *The Social Order of the Slum* by Gerald Suttles. I read it and was appalled that here was some scholar saying I lived in a "slum" and that I was "culturally deprived." I was working class, but that didn't mean I was culturally deprived. And then in the convent at 18 I was surrounded by middle class Irish girls. I felt so different. I felt closest to the Irish girls who also had working class backgrounds.

**A:** You talk about being aware of your "otherness" at 18. I was five years old when I was jeered at for having my head shaved and for being Italian. My head was shaved because it was thought I had lice, which I didn't. I remember going to the convent-school and trying to convince the nuns that I was old enough and smart enough to go to kindergarten, because my parents needed me out of the house. The nuns said "Well, we don't know if she'll be able to understand us or if she can do the work." That really had an

effect on me. I always felt different. I had that feeling of being other, of being discriminated against. Only for me it was for everything — because of my language, my culture and my skin color. And teachers felt sorry for me, pitied me, yet at the same time told me I would never “make it.”

**D:** I grew up being the rebel in my family and community and I liked that. In school my sense of rebellion made me value being smart. In my community of friends, I valued being different. In the convent I valued being Italian. When I was teaching I came to value my working class background. When I was coming out, this sense of otherness enabled me to express that difference in the fullness that it is — being a lesbian.

**A:** I had different goals, different values, different pressures. I wanted to be a teacher, I wanted to get educated. As a result I didn't feel like I belonged. I didn't want to have a husband. And yet I remember at 13 I was pushed to have a husband. So I started running away from the culture, not wearing the same clothes as the people in the culture.

**D:** When I was growing up, my parents never taught us anything about the culture or how to speak Italian. Instead, they would use it to communicate what they didn't want us to hear. So I had a limited vocabulary of nouns and some slang terms that my grandmother would teach us children to use. And after I graduated college I decided to study Italian so I could talk to my Sicilian grandmother. But, ha, within one or two classes I realized that if I tried to learn anything in school to talk to my Sicilian grandmother about, she'd slap me. She'd be very insulted because I was learning to speak the upper class Tuscano dialect, not the peasant class Sicilian she spoke. So I never got to talk Italian with my maternal grandmother. There are so many things that get lost or are unconscious. Even while I was in the convent, I didn't realize how my being Italian was related to how expressive I was physically — with my voice and my face and my hands and my body. And now, I love those parts of me. I think that that expressiveness in me is part of what makes me excellent as a teacher.

**A:** Me, too. I am able to teach with my whole body in it, not just my voice, but my feet, my butt, my hands, my everything, you know.

**D:** And I remember my friends teasing me that if they put my hands behind my back, I'd be unable to talk. And they were right. I couldn't have talked. In terms of language, most of the Italians I lived near spoke with a west side Italian Chicago accent, pronouncing these, them and those as "dese," "dem" and "dose." I learned quickly in high school when to use that adaptation of a Sicilian dialect and when I was expected to speak "good" English.

**A:** The Italians do take the English language and make it their own. I remember my grandmother talking about the hot house, for what was, in reality, an out house. I knew it was pidgin English. Even at 13, the only two words I knew in English were "okay" and "jackass." Our primary language structure is the way we organize our thoughts and our words. If your primary language is Italian and then you take English and try to put it over it, you're going to have to change the shape of it so that it fits within the structure of the first language. I want to say to the English language and to all these people who have been telling me how awkward I am, "fuck you." But I live in an English speaking world and so I'm using English words, with my primary language being Italian — it becomes very convoluted.

**D:** I wish my family had taught me to speak Italian. When I went to Naples, I met a Neapolitan woman who asked me, in Italian, if I understood Italian. And I said yes, a little bit. And so, again in Italian, she said to me "I don't understand. Your mother is Sicilian, your father is Neapolitan, so how come you don't speak Italian?" And I felt so guilty. She was right. I have two parents who both spoke the language and I didn't get it. So in a sense I feel cheated.

**A:** For me, all my life I've been running away from being Italian. And yet not being able to run away because I *am* Italian. I ran away from the language, the emotionalism. I wanted to be different from what I am. I think you're more accepting of your Italianness than I am.

**D:** While there are some things we have in common — we're both Italian-American, lesbians, teachers — our experiences growing up were really different. I grew up with a sense of being an Italian-American, the third generation in my family. I felt connected here. And one of the things I really like about my Italian heritage is that my sisters and brothers and I were all named in an Italian

tradition — even though it is very patriarchal. The custom is that the first male and female children are named after the husband's parents, and the second male and female children are named after the wife's parents. That custom gave me Demetria, my mother's mother's name. "Demetria" turned out to have a lot of meaning for me. Especially when I felt how much it helped me bond to my grandmother who was this Sicilian peasant woman. And then when I realized that its origin was the goddess Demeter, I felt so much more connected to a tradition of strong women.

**A:** My name, too. I'm the eldest daughter and am named after my father's mother, Angelina.

I want to talk a little about women's friendship, because I think that's real important in the Italian culture. I think Italian women get much of their needs met by other women, including physical needs. They sit on each other's laps when they're young. They walk arm in arm and they hold each other.

**D:** That was not my experience here. I knew that in Italy it was okay for two young women to walk down the street, hand in hand. And I remember when my mother died in 1981, I was not out to my family or my neighborhood, and I was grieving, I was distraught. And my brothers and sisters could bring their partners to support them in their grief, but I couldn't bring my lover. And that was really difficult. But, I have a childhood girlfriend. We grew up in the same neighborhood. She's also Italian-American, and because people knew we were friends, she and I could walk arm in arm holding hands and hugging each other for a couple of hours through the neighborhood, and nobody thought twice about it. That reminded me of what it might have been like in Italy.

**A:** And it is. From the time I was a child until I came to America at 13, I was predominantly surrounded by women. Even my father was in the periphery, all men were. I feel special that I come from a woman-centered culture, where women receive most of their needs from other women. In my community it was acceptable, for instance, for my aunts never to marry. In their villages they are seen as crones. I think one of my Aunts who never married is a lesbian.

**D:** Lesbian as we define it — sexually and emotionally, primarily connected with women?

A: I think sexually if she had the chance. Emotionally, definitely. But if we just define lesbian emotionally, I think a lot of Italian women are emotionally lesbian. But sexually they might not be.

D: I know that my woman-centeredness comes from my family. My mother was always with her three sisters, we called them the Big Four. They made the decisions for the family, they planned the holidays. Every summer my maternal extended family lived together. There were men there, but they were always on the periphery. The women were in charge. The women bonded together and the women made the decisions. And I saw that. I feel that my whole life is women-centered and it always has been.

A: Right. I think for you that's because you chose not to get married and you chose not to accept the female role. But for many Italian women, even though their lives are centered around women, because of patriarchal oppression, they can be very passive. And they take care of men, very much so. So, at some levels, I accepted that part of the Italian woman's role.

D: I didn't.

A: Yes, but that may be because you were born here. I had so many strikes against me when I came to the States that I felt that I had to somehow try to conform. I tried so hard to fit in with the new American society by getting married.

D: The pressure to conform and assimilate must have been overwhelming. And I do feel special that I grew up in a woman-centered culture and community—surrounded by women whose primary emotional and intimate relationships were with women. Some of them were sexual, but when they were, sadly enough, we didn't talk about it. Growing up, everybody had a "commare." My mother called her good friends "commari."

A: Using "commare" is a way of tying it all in and making friends part of our family, so that there is this intense bond that happens between the women.

I felt that when I went back to Italy. And I went back to heal, because I had been taken away, I think, at a critical, developmental time in my life. And so for me to go back, it had to be in such a way that I would get to know where I came from and be able to see what it looked like. I went back to my elementary school. I went back to the town where I was born. I met the midwife who helped my mother give birth to me. I was able to reconnect and

in the process start to heal. By going back, I regained my roots.

**D:** As you talk about it, I think about identity being a merging and identifying with the earth, becoming rooted in the land.

**A:** While you were already developed, meaning adult, when you left.

**D:** And you were still a child. That's so interesting to me, because when I think of going back to the Italian community in which I grew up, I don't really want to. My experience of the community is an old memory. Though I'm aware of some of the physical changes which have occurred through urban renewal, I still have this idea that the attitudes and values of the community's Italian residents are unchanged from my childhood years. And I feel that I've outgrown those or left them a long, long time ago. I feel it's been a gift that I've had two worlds, so to speak, to grow up in, and I don't want to go back to living in my first one again.

**A:** My first world was torn away from me and it was something to be able to go back and say this is really mine, and accept that part of me. But I don't want to go back, completely, either. Have you ever been to Sicily?

**D:** No . It would be interesting to go back as a lesbian. There's probably a lesbian community there, if we could just find ways of contacting them. And I'm sure we could.

**A:** What a homecoming that would be! You know, Demetria, talking together like this has been a very healing experience for me. It's helped me reconnect with my past and to integrate all those parts of myself that have felt unconnected until now.

**D:** Me too, commare. It's so wonderful to find another woman with whom I can share so many dimensions of who I am and how I got to this place in my life. I honor the bonds we've realized and the connections we've made with one another.

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This conversation was excerpted from a 23 page dialogue.



Photographs contributed by Mary and Carol Andolina  
photographers unknown

## Photographs of Home

“Tell ‘em you’re a goddamned American,” he bellowed across the room. I jiggled from one leg to another and continued to plead.

“But where did my grandparents come from?” I whined.

“What does it matter,” my mother asked. “You wanna know where your grandparents came from? Well listen: you’re English, Irish, French, Italian, German, and Scotch ... you’re a mutt.”

“No...” I persisted, “just my grandparents. I need to know for school. I hafta tell them.”

“What the hell difference does it make? If you go back far enough we’re all related to the same person. Everybody,” he yelled from the other room.

The blister of tears over my eyes burst. I dropped to the floor and pounded the carpet.

“Susie’s grandparents come from Ireland.” I screamed. “where are mine from?” I flung myself face down on the rug and cried frantically.

“For Christ’s sake.” My father collapsed his newspaper.

“Get up off of the floor,” my mother hissed, “Quick get up. You’re making your father upset. You don’t want the belt. Get up.”

The room swirled. Life was hopeless.

“Get up,” she whispered as my father rose, “Come with me and I’ll tell you where they came from.”

“It’s OK. It’s OK, she’s getting up. Aren’t you honey? Yes, she’s going to help me in the garden. Stop that crying. See she’s stopped.”

“It’s a helluva way to spend a goddamned Sunday afternoon. What are they trying to do to these kids anyway. I was born here. We’re goddamned American and that teacher’s trying to teach them different.”

“Come on.” She gave me a final nudge and I followed her.

In the garden we wandered among the fuzzy green fragrance of tomatoes, past the cucumber patch exploding over yet another mound to the stalks of corn that my father said would never grow.

Here among the stalks that grew beyond my reach but never yielded an ear of corn, I asked.

"Are we Italian?"

"NO!" Her voice was desperately truthful. I knew she was lying. "Who told you that? Your brother, huh? Didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's not true."

"Then why did he say it?"

"Cause he's a dumbshit. He don't know everything. I'll tell you. The reason he got confused is because of this: you're French."

"Huh?"

"Well. Your grandparents....your FATHER'S parents were born over there. But there were a lot of wars. One day it was France; one day it was Italy. So what are you? It was France when they were born there but then the borders changed. All their lives the borders changed. So are you French or Italian?"

I was baffled.

"See. It's not easy."

"So I guess we could say we're Italian like..."

"Don't you EVER say you are Italian! Never. Your father will kill you. You hear me? Kill you dead."

I splintered a thick leaf from the corn stalk. My parents built lies like brick walls. I started to cry again.

"Cut that out. You gotta toughen-up girl; this world will wear you down. So listen. You wanna know, I'm gonna tell you. Stop that goddamned cryin'. My parents are German. My mother spoke a little English; my father spoke broken English. But they don't talk about being German cause they're American now. My father got arrested during the war for playing German music. When you leave a country you leave that behind. So there. Now you know. Are you happy?"

"Where are my grandparents?"

"They're gone."

"Are they dead?"

"No. They aren't dead. They're gone. So now you know you can tell your teacher."

"I'm German and..." I waited.

"You tell your teacher that you are German, English, Irish, French and Scotch."

"Mom." I whined.

"OK, then tell her that you are German, English, Irish and French. You got four grandparents don't you? She'll understand. If she don't, tell her to call me."

Fifteen years later I pieced together the puzzle. Both my parents were first generation American. I don't recall ever having met my grandparents. Both sets of grandparents disowned my parents: my mother's family disowned her for marrying an Italian; my father's family disowned him for marrying a "slum girl." We were raised to be American. This meant that I learned the stereotypes about my heritage before I learned anything else.

Every summer, my mother and I washed windows together. She carried the bucket of vinegar water and a ladder; I lugged the rags. We wandered around the house, inside and out every few weeks. During these times, with a voice of concern, she taught me brutal stereotypes:

"You're gonna be fat. All Italians are fat. Big hips and fat thighs; that's what all Italian women look like. Not me. I got legs like a race horse. They always said women are like horses, you can tell their breeding by their legs. I got good legs but you, kid, you're gonna have trouble. I'm tellin' you these things now so you can watch out."

At age six I worried about my weight and began to diet. This, I thought, must be the curse of Italians; this must be why we say we are French. I learned to sneak-eat and to never speak of Italians.

The word "Italian" never passed over my father's lips. Never. He had other derogatory words about Italians, but he didn't use them in reference to us. He always swore we were not Italian.

I was an adult before I heard that Italians could not get work in Pittsburgh during my father's childhood. My grandparents had decided to pass as French in a world that knew only caricatures of cultures. "You wanna be Italian? Go to Italy. Here, we're American." Everyone struggled to Americanize. Being an American was synonymous with being wealthy and safe. They believed that everyone made it in America.

They bought a poverty-line legacy with silence, denial, fears

no one named, and loss, tremendous loss. I want to look back and find myself in a family history but cannot. There are no stories, no photographs. I have inherited gravestones scattered across nameless fields. My cultural heritage, though Italian and German, is one of countless new beginnings, not tradition. My grandparents and parents looked forward to a day when the colors of their lives would be bleached to match the concrete office buildings of America.

I dream of going to Italy, of speaking Italian; in the dreams someone calls my name and I am recognized as a long lost relative. I am welcomed home. But in reality there is no "unmelting" from the melting pot. I now have more in common with my American counterparts than with Italians or Germans. There can only be a reclaiming, a struggle to know my Italian culture, and to know the culture of the Italians who tried to Americanize. I work to piece together fragments of a story so that those who come after me will inherit more than office buildings, more than tombstones.



*Untitled* (mixed media collage)  
Sheri Tornatore

Mary Anne Bella Mirabella

## Connections

I wrote this when I first began to think about my place in America and what it means to be an Italian-American. Since then I have thought a good deal more about this issue, and since then I have returned to Italy and to the villages that were the birthplaces of my grandparents.

It was seven years ago that Lenny and I drove along the treacherously winding curves of the Amalfi Drive to the village of the same name. I knew there would be no relatives left for me to meet. I had always heard how Grandma Capasso and her brothers and sister had left Amalfi. Some to go to the United States and some to southern parts of Italy where they settled in Calabria and Sicily. Grandma, only a young woman of fifteen, had come to the United States.

I had not expected to meet any relatives, but I also did not expect the beauty of Amalfi. The village, clear and sparkling above the Mediterranean, climbs up the mountainside. It seems to cling to the mountain, perhaps protecting itself from the sea which had at one time been the livelihood of Amalfi. Now the village seems to thrive on tourists. Perhaps some of the tourists are like myself and come to see if there is any connection between themselves and that exquisite place.

Faced with the serene beauty of Amalfi I could not but wonder how my family must have felt to leave such a magnificent haven, to have left a place of such loveliness and peace for the eastern United States. But more importantly I wondered how they felt leaving their history, their culture, their community.

Grandma Capasso had often talked of Amalfi. Often she talked of La Chiesa di San'Andrea, St. Andrew's Church, and its huge stretch of stairs that leads up to the Church doors and a view of the village and the sea below. The Church plays a very important role in my family's legends; legends about Great Grandma and her assignations with the spirits. The story goes

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that Great Grandma went to early mass each morning. One morning the peasant woman made her way through the narrow, twisting streets of Amalfi to San'Andrea's. The morning was quiet and though quite dark, she noticed that a black dog, *il cane nero*, was walking behind her. The *cane nero* even followed her to the church and up the many stairs. As Great Grandma made her way up, she turned to look at the dog and the stairs below; she and the dog were completely alone. She went up the last few steps and waited there for the church to open. But when she turned again the *cane nero* was no longer there. In the animal's place was a lovely woman, a woman of radiance and peace, a woman who, according to Grandma Capasso and any other relative who knows the story, was the Virgin Mary. This is how I recall hearing the story from Grandma Capasso, but my Italian relatives added that Great Grandma entered the church with the *cane nero*. In the church were all the people she had known who had died. When she turned from this scene, she saw the Virgin in place of the dog.

I went to the Church of San'Andrea. On my way I walked past walls laden with bougainvillaea, past an open kitchen door with a chicken calmly resting next to a washing machine; I walked under laundry hanging from windows above and through narrow streets wondering if I was passing some ancestral home. I did not see the *cane nero*, but I felt I had somehow touched my past by being in that beautiful village above the sea and in that church that has held such an important place in our family mythology.

After Amalfi we journeyed south to Calabria. We were not even certain of the name of the town from where my father's family had come — it was either Montalta or Altamonte. Besides this confused name, we had another fact my father gave us that he had heard from his father: the town was the highest spot in the region, it was so high that, although you were in the mountains, you could see the ocean. Keeping this in mind and after seeing the village of Altamonte on a modern and ancient map in the Vatican, we decided Altamonte was the right place.

My thoughts during the trip to Altamonte were different than the thoughts I had as I drove along the Amalfi Drive. In Altamonte there was a good chance that we would find relatives. This idea was unsettling. After all, what would I say? What would they say when we showed up? My Grandfather Mirabella had left

his home at the end of the last century; he never returned and the family no longer communicated with us.

We drove east straight from the sea, into the mountains. We drove for miles with no village in sight. It got later and later, and after what seemed like hours we saw a walled mountain village in the distance; that was Altamonte. We came to two roads and an old gentleman walking along.

"Which is the best road to Altamonte?" we asked. He paused, stamped his feet to test the surface of the road, and then said matter-of-factly, "*É uguale*" — "They are the same." We continued on.

It was another man we met along the way who turned out to be quite important. His car had broken down and he hailed us as we rode by. "Where are you going?" he asked. "Altamonte," we replied. "Good, I'll go with you; my car is not working." We tried to avoid taking him; hadn't everyone in the North warned us of wily robbers behind every tree and down every street in the South? But before we could say a word he was in the car. Chattering away in a mixture of Italian and French he asked "Why are you going to Altamonte?" "To see if my relatives still live there," I replied.

In the town, which was ancient, its church from the twelfth century and a bit run down, we parked our car. Our passenger insisted we go to a local bar and have a coffee. The café was tiny, it had just enough room for a small bar and a square table in the corner where a few old men were playing cards. As we stood at the bar and sipped our espresso the bartender asked our hitchhiker who we were. "They are looking for their *parenti*,"—relatives — he replied. That was really how the whole thing happened. Once I said the name Mirabella, which is Mirabelli in Italy, the bar came alive. The owner knew Mirabelli; they lived on via Balbia. "I remember Michele," one man said. "He married Josephine Speranno and moved to the United States," another said. They were talking about my grandparents; my grandmother had also come from Altamonte. Then an amazing thing occurred. One of the old men shuffled over, took my hand and said "*Conosce* New Rochelle?"—"Do you know New Rochelle?" Now this is the place where I was born and where most of my relatives still live. The coincidence of this moment shocked me.

As the old gentlemen explained, he had in his earlier years gone to New Rochelle to find work, but unlike my grandfather, he had returned to Altamonte. We learned that villagers often chose the same place in the United States to seek work, in this way they would have friends and family awaiting them.

Our hitchhiker decided to return our kindness by taking us to via Balbia and the home of Vincenzo Mirabelli. I had actually traveled thousands of miles for this moment but now that I was about to meet these people I had thought about for so long, I was terrified. Would these relatives be awful? Would my Italian fail me? I had not learned Italian at home, but had to study it at school. My family had lost the language. I was not only about to meet people I had never seen, but speak to them in a language I had taught myself.

When the hitchhiker knocked on the door and no one answered, I suggested we leave. "*Dorme,*" he replied. "He's sleeping." It was four o'clock in the afternoon and most of the village was sleeping except for a few people, including the old man and woman, still wearing the traditional wide-legged black velvet pants and dress of long ago, who came out to see what the knocking was. The green shutters above opened out. A man in his late sixties with grey hair stuck his head out of the window and looked down at the three strangers below. "It's your relatives from the United States!" yelled our hitchhiker. In a few moments Vincenzo Mirabelli opened the door. He shook our hands and kissed us. He embraced us as if he had always known us. It was only later sitting at the kitchen table and drinking grappa that we learned that Vincenzo was my father's first cousin; we were actually related. Although I had mumbled in those first moments that I was the granddaughter of Michele Mirabelli, Vincenzo had no idea who we were. He had just welcomed us in because he thought we were relatives. This was all he needed to know.

During our visit, as we sat chatting over huge bowls of pasta and drinking wine, we learned more about each other and tried to fill in what had happened over so many years. In all our time together (we have been there twice) we were always made to feel at home. I particularly recall one meal with cousins who lived in the countryside outside of Altamonte. The meal took hours to prepare and we sat and talked while Rozina and Catarina rolled

individual pastas out on a board they held between them on their laps. We were sitting in a summer kitchen away from the house and everywhere around us was the flowering broom, the fields and the hills of Calabria.

This kindness, hospitality and instant recognition of our bond, as if we had never lost touch, was repeated on our trip to Acireale in Sicily. Here we met the relatives of my mother's mother who had left Amalfi for the south. They settled in Sicily on the sea south of Taormina very close to the spot where Odysseus fought the Cyclops. They expected us. A cousin in California had always kept in touch with this part of the family. So we had written and they had said, "Come."

When we arrived, the two families were waiting to greet us. Clotilda had baked miniature cream puffs and we ate and sipped espresso while they showed us photographs. Some of the pictures were very old; one was of my great grandparents, another of my grandmother Rosa dressed as a girl of the Edwardian era, surrounded by her parents, brothers and sister. Soon after this photograph was made Rosa left Italy and never returned.

We spent days with our family in Acireale. They showed us Catania, Aetna, the markets; and they fed us foods we had never eaten. These connections, these bonds, these are the things that we have lost in the United States. It did not happen right away. I remember when Grandma Capasso was alive we had enormous Christmas dinners with thirty relatives and food, especially desserts, for a hundred. I recall that in my childhood I was always surrounded by relatives. Now almost all my aunts and uncles are dead, but even when they were alive the individual families began to spend holidays alone. Today the extended family only gets together at weddings and funerals.

Many of my relatives have little interest in Italy, some do not even know from which province their family originally came. Although we all grew up in the Italian section of New Rochelle, only one uncle lives there now. Sociologists will say this is assimilation, that we have all learned to become part of the American culture. I am not convinced that this is a good conclusion. If immigrants cut themselves off from the land and culture they have left, they cut themselves off from their history. My history in the United States begins at the close of the last century.

But what of all the centuries before, what of all the other people, what of their accomplishments, struggles, fears, their hatreds and loves? What happens to all this, this life, this heritage?

With the denial of this heritage often comes self-loathing. I grew up embarrassed to be Italian. When I saw those new Italian immigrants, I wanted nothing to do with them. They looked sad, miserable and afraid standing there in short woolen jackets buttoned up tight and their hair cut short. I hated them for looking sad and miserable. I was better than they were; I was an American; they were not. What did they know? Nothing. They could not speak the language; they did not know how to behave; they did not belong. What I did not realize then, was that in rejecting them I was rejecting myself. After all, they were just like my grandparents fifty years earlier. These new immigrants were experiencing what my own ancestors had experienced. Would the newcomers abandon the land of their birth too?

My grandparents tried to hold on to their culture, but my parents' generation could not. They realized that the predominant culture here did not think too highly of Italians or for that matter of any group which stood out and was different. So my parents assimilated. They did not speak Italian, dressed as American as they could, and left the old neighborhood.

I recall one incident of stereotyping that shocked me in my early years. One of my sister's high school friends thought that because we were Italian our home should resemble the set for an Italian comedy. Our mother, short and fat with a bun at the back of her neck, could always be found in the kitchen perpetually preparing tomato sauce; above her head hung the required sausages, garlic and tomatoes. My father, of course, had a shape similar to mother, only with a large mustache and made his own wine. When my sister's friend visited, she was shocked to find my "all-American" looking mom in her "all-American" kitchen.

I have always laughed at the foolishness of this story and I still recognize and reject the narrow-mindedness of the stereotype. I also mourn the loss of those sausages and tomatoes hanging in the kitchen. I mourn the loss of those touches that said this place was a bit different from the rest of the world outside. They said that this place had a special tradition, something to be proud of. These touches reminded me that being Italian meant that a rich

culture was behind me, that I could embrace my historical past, not shun it.

Obviously these are symbols of a previous way of life, but the loss of these symbols signals the loss of a more complex and precious thing — the loss of the cultural tie. Before my trip to Calabria I do not think I would have acted like Vincenzo Mirabelli. I would not have opened my door, my arms and my heart, if a stranger had knocked at my door one afternoon and said, "Hello, I am your cousin from Italy."

I realize that people must, to some extent, adjust to the new country to which they have moved. But it seems that some kind of balance is needed, a balance which will allow people to keep some of their old culture and history while learning about the new.

I think I have found some of that balance. The family here, the ethnic connection may still be fragmented, but we always love to see one another on those rare occasions. However, I do feel a real connection to Italy and my family there and that in itself diminishes the sense of being so cut off from the past. Now when I think of that "long, stretching generation of Italians," I see my role in it. But my role is to be played here; I am not in Italy. I can carry with me the memories and thoughts of "the old country" and all those people I never met.

And as far as all that knowledge goes — I do not think it is useless. That knowledge got me to this typewriter and to the moment of thinking about my past and my ethnicity. I know my relatives in Italy will be pleased that I have written about this, and maybe even my relatives here will too.

## The Italian Jewish Connection, or, The History of America

My maternal grandmother was the fourth child born to a family of Italian Jews, and their first child born in this country. In 1899 my great-grandparents Fortunata and Abramo Piperno emigrated here from Livorno, a city on the northwest coast of Italy. As the story goes, my bisnonna Fortunata was so elated to be here that she kissed the ground upon disembarkation. "America" is the name she swore she would give her next child, and so it was, and still is. My grandmother America Zerga was born on Jan. 8, 1900, and is a spirited 90 year old today. This year the family threw her a surprise 90th birthday party, and what an event it was!

But, to back up just a little ... As Sephardic Jews in Italy, my great-grandparents (the Piperno family) represented one aspect of 2000 years of Italian Jewry. This history originated in the first century when the Romans returned from Palestine with Jews as slaves<sup>1</sup>. Sephardic Jews, however, trace ancestry to medieval Spain. ("Sefarad" in Hebrew means Spanish.) When in 1492 monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain, many resettled in Italy and other Mediterranean countries. Indeed, the word "ghetto" is Italian, referring to the restricted neighborhood in Venice where these immigrants were required to live.

Culturally, Sephardic Jews differ in many ways from Ashkenazic Jews, who trace their ancestry to central or eastern Europe. Language (the Ladino vernacular vs. Yiddish), food, customs and religious practices vary greatly between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. In this country most Jews are Ashkenazic, so that their culture is the dominant influence on American Jewish life. This distinction is important to remember when following the story of the Piperno family in America.

My great-grandparents Fortunata and Abramo settled in an Italian neighborhood in New York City. They raised five children, all of whom were ultimately given "American" names. Hence Vasco, Giulio, Egle, America and Quinto (the 5th!) became Harry, Alfred, Mary, America and Bill. Partially because other Italian Jews were scarce, the eldest three grew to marry Ashkena-

zic Jews: Harry and Alfred to Russians and Egle to a Hungarian. An obstacle arose, however, when Egle's Ashkenazic mother-in-law refused to believe an Italian could also be Jewish. Consequently it was required that Egle submit to the traditional process of "converting" to Judaism for the marriage to proceed.

This brings us to America. At 13, her first boyfriend, Charlie Frascati, was Catholic. At that time she worked in a garment factory, where she eventually fell in love with the elevator operator. This was George Zerga, another Italian Catholic. This tendency in their daughter was definitely a problem for Fortunata and Abramo. After 5 years of courtship with George, America ended the relationship because of parental pressure to marry a Jew. She submitted to an arranged marriage with an Ashkenazic man, which was soon thereafter annulled due to issues of fraud. This unfortunate incident led Fortunata and Abramo to succumb to their daughter's original wishes. She was allowed to marry George Zerga, my grandfather. This conflict of America's youth was resolved finally to her heart's delight.

What is significant about this radical turn of events and unorthodox shift in protocol is that, whereas religious ties were perhaps weakened by the marriage of George and America, the Italian ethnicity was reinforced. They then raised two daughters of their own. My mother Luisa and aunt Gloria grew up in an Italian neighborhood with an Italian Jewish mother and an Italian Catholic father. Although educated as Jews, perhaps this profound precedent set by their own mother makes it not surprising that both girls also grew to marry Italian Catholics.

Luisa married Mansueto Capra, my father. As a child I remember his mother, my nonna Rosa, once said to me in a tone of approval: "Your mother is a good mother ... ." As young as I was, I knew somehow that the unspoken remainder of this comment was "... even though she's a Jew."

The ways in which this history has affected me are multi-faceted. Ethnically I feel strongly Italian identified and much less American(ized) than my cousins, descended from mixed Ashkenazic and Sephardic parentage. Although not exposed to much Hebrew, I knew enough Italian to understand a Holocaust<sup>2</sup> story told to me in Italy by my grandmother's cousin Eglina, who spoke no English. A very short version is as follows: Mussolini's men had raided a Piperno family birthday party with orders to arrest

everyone there. Instead, these men were "simpatico" enough to take away only 2 of the 14 family members present. In response to the shock, the family split up and, with the help of Catholic priests, hid in small mountain towns until the war was over. I considered it one of the most valuable experiences of my life that I was able to hear and understand this story.

Living in New York City as I do now enables me to absorb the benefits of strong Jewish and Italian communities. In 1986, the City University of New York sponsored the conference "Italy and the Jews," focussing on the role of Jews in 20th century Italy. Recently the Jewish Museum of New York presented "Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy," which illuminated 2000 years of the aesthetic synthesis of two rich cultures. Another international conference occurred in conjunction with this striking exhibit: "The Cultural Legacy of Italian Jewry." The accessibility of such events provides continuing self-education, the value of which was always highly stressed by both my parents.

Today I am also fortunate to live in the same neighborhood where my mother and grandmother were raised. It is still an Italian neighborhood where I hear Italian spoken every day and where every day pasta, pane, formaggio and dolci are made fresh! On the ground floor of my apartment building my bisnonno Abramo once ran a used furniture store. In fact I live in the same apartment where America's first boyfriend lived in 1913. It gives me great pleasure to know that he would hang out my bedroom window and call to her across the courtyards as she hung out hers from around the corner.

In my experience with American lesbian communities I have found it necessary to describe my heritage to Italian Catholics and Ashkenazic Jews, as well as to others. Indeed this article is an effort to that end. However in the last several years I have been fortunate to participate in three separate Italian-American lesbian groups (in San Diego, S. F., and N.Y.C.). The deep strength of bonds formed amongst friends from these groups fulfills a two-fold longing for "family": Italian and lesbian, amiche lesbiche. Though others of my lesbian friends are Ashkenazic, I feel less drawn to Jewish-identified groups, partially because of general Ashkenazic ignorance of the Sephardic culture and presence. Once in the company of Ashkenazic lesbians, a woman jokingly referred to my "Latin" features with the presumption that I was

not Jewish. On a more personal level, however, my lover is Jewish (Ashkenazic), and this is an important connection for me.

Within my traditional family, it has been fascinating to experience the myriad effects of the Sephardic/Ashkenazic/Catholic conglomerate. Once I witnessed my grandmother America and her sister Egle, both in their 80's, arguing over the spaghetti pot. Egle, who had learned to cook for her Hungarian husband, preferred mushy pasta. America insisted on "al dente."<sup>3</sup> Egle was the bigger and older one. She placed herself solidly between the stove and my grandmother's advance.

"What are you doing?" my Gram said. "It's done, it's time to turn it off."

"What are *you* doing?" Egle said "It's not done, not yet."

"What's wrong with you?" Gram said. "You want it to over-cook?"

"What's wrong with *you*?" Egle said. "You want it to under-cook?" They danced around each other, determined to defend what they knew to be right. As precious moments passed, however, America was quickly losing the fight for al dente.

It has also been exciting to observe my grandmother's increasingly engaged reactions as I worked on this piece. Not one to dwell on the past and with a faded 90 year old memory, at first she was reluctant and mildly exasperated. "What do you want to know all this for? Are you writing a book?" Later I overheard her say to my aunt: "Is she getting this publicated?" Then as she peeked over my shoulder at my scribblings, she asked, "Is all this about me? Are you going to get money for this book? If you get money, you have to split it with me." Eventually I found her attempting to piece together my notes from out of the trash. "Oooh, these people are going to turn over in their graves!" When she finally decided she might in fact like all this attention, her face lit up and she came out with "Just like on the TV show: This Is Your Life, America Zerga!"

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1. *The History of the Jews of Italy*, Cecil Roth, 1946.

2. *The Italians and the Holocaust*, Susan Zuccotti, 1988

3. *The Classic Cuisine of the Italian Jews*, Edda Servi Machlin, 1981.

Also see: *The Ghetto of Venice*, Riccardo Calimani, 1987; *Mussolini and the Jews*, Meir Michaelis, 1978; *Storia degli ebrei in Italia* by Attilio Milano, 1963.

## On Being Italian-American: An Introspection

I grew up in a small, working class town in upstate New York during the fifties and sixties, a second generation Italian-American. Both sets of my grandparents immigrated to the United States after World War I, and both had raised their children to be loyal American citizens. Their allegiance to their new homeland was strong. They refused to eulogize the poverty they left behind in their mother country. America promised a better life. Even if it didn't always deliver riches, it always delivered the hope of riches, and that was reason enough for them to leave all they knew, cross an ocean, and embrace a land whose customs and language were strange to them.

To my parents, being Italian was second nature, like being right-handed, a happenstance of biology. As first generation Americans, they spoke English, the tongue of their native land. Italian, the language of the "old country" as they called it, was only used to communicate with their fathers and mothers, and then only until their parents' English improved. My parents thought like Americans, talked like Americans, dreamed like Americans. They never taught us kids to speak Italian.

But the town I grew up in had an undeniable Italian influence. The immigrants settled in waves throughout the early part of this century, until finally, the town was a transplanted "little Italy" brimming with a hodgepodge of northern, southern and central Italian men and women.

Storefronts with names like Caruso's, Calarco's, Romeo's and Bove & Sons graced the streets of downtown. The "Tastee Freeze" ice cream stand served spaghetti and meatballs. And the local A & P grocery sold provolone cheese, genoa salami and fresh, imported parmesan. Dark-haired, olive-skinned Americans were as common as garlic, pasta and olive oil.

But while the town was blatantly Italian, in some ways I didn't know that I was Italian — or more rightly I didn't know that

everyone else in the entire world wasn't also Italian, because almost everyone around me was. Likewise, nearly everyone was Catholic. In fact, I didn't know a non-Catholic person until I moved to Minnesota in 1967. And I only knew a handful of non-Italians, mainly because they happened to live right next door and across the street from my family.

I was insulated in my ethnicity. I lived my Italian-American childhood unaware of the cultural and religious diversity that existed outside my hometown. We lived a hybrid version of America, a blend of customs from the old country and traditions from the new. We took what fit and discarded what didn't. Names like Petrosino, Suffradini, Vergamini, Govianni, DeSarro and Saracino were American names to me. I was American. It was my grandparents who were Italian, not me. I had no name at that young age for assimilation, no language for the way America sucked clean my ethnic bones leaving them to brittle under the blinding white Anglo-Saxon protestant sun.

As I grew older I was exposed to a wider definition of "American" culture through the media, through school, through the millions of subtle little ways that the message forms into consciousness. This is how I began to feel my difference and define myself as an Italian-American.

I saw that I wasn't the same as the people on TV, in magazines, in my school textbooks. I had no sense of ethnic pride. Italians, like other peoples kept on the outside, were footnotes in the annals of American history, mentioned briefly in lesson plans about "The Land of Immigrants," or in Art History class when discussing Renaissance music and art. What I didn't have, and wasn't taught, were the tools to connect that those were my people, that was my culture, too. America's "melting pot" homogenized its immigrants.

What I came to know, melting pot theory notwithstanding, was that the homogenized "stew" had a distinct flavor: WASP. Someone else was calling the shots about what's okay and what's not in America — the socially acceptable rules of behavior, the norms that try to standardize us all. Anglo-Saxon patriarchs were stirring the "melting pot."

I can't remember when I started judging myself through Anglo eyes, seeing myself the way they saw us. Italians are loud,

and emotional. We interrupt at will. We do not fit into "polite" social situations. We laugh when something is funny. We cry or rage when something is sad. We openly display affection, hugging, kissing and carrying on. We don't politely pass the food around the dinner table, observing social etiquette. We reach over each other's plates to grab more meatballs, or sausage, and then belch at the table when the meal is over. We have funny superstitions, like praying to a blue-clad Virgin Mother, and a fierce allegiance to family, which means of course that we're all crooks, killers, and Mafiosos. We smell like garlic and have too many kids. We eat funny food, "noodles," non-Italians call them, and we give them funny little names like, spaghetti, rigatoni, mostaccioli, ziti.

Maybe it was an accident of biology, but I couldn't be like the white Anglo-Saxon protestant gatekeepers. If I were lucky, I might be able to unlearn my "Italian behaviors," dress myself up and pretend to be like them, but I could never erase the physical evidence that I was not a WASP fairy princess. It hit me every time I looked in the mirror.

As a kid, I hated the way I looked. I wanted blue eyes, blond hair and a button nose. My coarse, thick dark hair exploded around my skinny, pale face. Long brown lashes covered my cool brown eyes. And my nose never, ever turned up.

I used to lay in bed at night, face pressed sideways into my pillow trying to rearrange my nose, make it flip up at the end like a ski jump, like the movie star noses and the noses of glamorous women I'd seen on TV and at the movies. When that method failed, I turned to prayer, beseeching the Blessed Virgin Mother to transform my face into a shining vision of American beauty. I hated the bump on the bridge of my nose. I would have given anything to have it "fixed." I hated my small lopsided mouth, my full lower lip nearly swallowed its thin upper half. Even at the age of ten, I knew a woman's worth rested in the curve of her nose, the full pout of her lips, the clear blue of her eyes, the silky golden hue of her hair. To be gorgeous in America was not to look like me. As far as I knew, no Italian-American ever won the Miss America pageant.

I grew up valuing light, hating dark. I fell in love with blue-eyed, blond-haired movie star idols because that's who the WASP

world told me was worthy of love. Certainly every little American girl of the fifties and sixties was brainwashed to think she had to look like those white, blond-haired beauties. But the cost to some is more dear. The gap between physical and cultural reality can be too wide to bridge.

Ironically, my first movie star idol crush was on Connie Stevens. She had the prerequisite dainty, upturned features and when I read in the fan magazines that she was half Italian, I was at once elated and confused. I reasoned that her non-Italian genes must have softened her into beauty. She was a living breathing oxymoron: two things that didn't fit — Italian blood lines with Anglo beauty. I forgave her being Italian because of that face, while simultaneously clinging to the hope that, perhaps, even an Italian woman could be as gorgeous as Julie Andrews, Katherine Hepburn, or Julie Christie.

I wasn't the only one in my family who'd bought the WASP version of beauty. Although my Italian-American father had married my Italian-American mother, my four older brothers never missed the opportunity to tell me that Italian women were ugly. They got fat and grew mustaches when they got older, and who wanted to kiss a fat, mustached woman anyway. They vowed never to marry one. With the odds of defining ourselves as desirable stacked against us, my two sisters and I accepted the "fact" that no self respecting Italian man would ever marry us. Things like that mattered to me, then. Until I came out as a lesbian at seventeen.

But while the self-hating messages were ever-present, all around me were images of strong Italian women. My grandmothers, my mother, my aunts, making ravioli in the kitchen, laughing as they rolled the dough over floured boards. The intense dark eyes, the flash of white teeth through full lips, the strong hands gestured in the air to make a point, or express a feeling. These women with their brown hair, their olive skin, their long bumpy noses taught me how to roll the dough, make the red sauce, bake the bread. Some were fat, some were thin, some even had mustaches. But they all taught me about survival in an Anglo-centric world. And that was true beauty. Maybe my brothers were wrong.

We moved to Minnesota when I was thirteen and I came face to face with ethnic prejudice in my day-to-day life. I felt my

Italianness on another whole level. In Minnesota, my physical differences were very conspicuous. My brown-haired soul had been dropped, without a parachute, into the middle of enemy territory. More blond hair and blues eyes per capita than any other state in the union, except maybe California. It was a nightmare. I thought all the Italians in America had been exiled from Minnesota, kept out by some gubernatorial decree. It was a fluke that they ever let my family over the border.

Everywhere I went, everyone I met was either a Johnson, Hagen, Swenson, Erickson, or Olson. Not an Italian nose in the bunch. It wasn't just that I was different, it was that my difference mattered so much. To me and to them. The cruel, careless jokes about my "hawk" nose by the Swedish-American boy in my eighth grade, suburban junior high science class. The blue eyes that peered from every face in the halls between classes; the fair hair and fair complexions. Having to pronounce and spell my name over and over because they couldn't wrap their unfamiliar tongues around all those vowels. I felt like a teenaged mutant Southern European, a freak of nature, banished to live among evolution's perfected race.

I felt so exposed in Junior High that I asked my mother to kill me and put me out of my misery. Somehow being different gave them the right to see into my mind and grab a chunk of my soul. They could own me, these Scandinavians. They owned the whole place. I was too loud for their parties, too emotional for their silence. Too ugly compared to their picture perfect faces. They made the rules, taught the classes, selected the prom queen, defined reality. And it wasn't my version.

It wasn't until I got to high school that I finally met another Italian student. She introduced me to St. Paul's Italian neighborhoods and a world, quite similar to the one I'd grown up in, opened to me. The store fronts, the beautiful musical names, the dark hair and eyes. I looked in the mirror and, this time, smiled at my own coffee-colored irises. This is what I am, I found myself saying, like an amnesiac claiming her identity. This is good, true, right, me.

I spent a lot of time, during high school, at Carbone's grocery store and Cossetta's Deli excavating my cultural ruins. I bought, cooked and ate real Italian food — not mushy Creamette noodles,

but robust garlic, fresh oregano, homemade, warm Italian bread. Real Italian pasta, real Italian sausage, pungent black olives that reminded me of Sunday dinners at my grandmother's house in upstate New York. During high school, I slowly began to reteach myself that, even in exile, I had a voice, a language my soul needed to articulate.

Coming out as a lesbian was the final stretch of my journey home. That I was able to name that part of myself in the midst of what felt to me like Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian "headquarters" is still a puzzle to me. Getting to that essential core takes an immense amount of determination, a willingness to cherish yourself in the face of heterosexist, ethnocentric hatred, and say you are more important than some arbitrary rule about the way human beings should be. Maybe everything in my past had prepared me after all. I fell in love with my high school best friend, a German-Norwegian American Lutheran girl, who was as opposite me as could possibly be. Sandy blond hair and, yes, blue eyes. But, I learned to acknowledge my own beauty, while accepting hers. In honoring her, I honored myself.

It took a trip to North Dakota and fifteen years of waiting to find another Italian lesbian. She was a friend of a woman I was dating. We met in a packed, smoky bar in Fargo. I easily picked her out of the fair-haired crowd. When we saw each other, we laughed. The thick, dark hair, the brown eyes, the long nose. I hugged her like a sister, like a reunion. We spoke fluent Italian-lesbian. I didn't have to translate. I could, at last, speak my own dialect. Without explanation. Without excuses.

Somewhere in the passage from childhood to adulthood I learned the value of self-definition and the folly of the "one type fits all" WASP beauty. Being dark-haired and Italian-nosed isn't a death sentence. I have come to value, even in Minnesota, the gift of being Italian. The pride of ethnicity is a statement of diversity. Perhaps the American standard bearers assumed that, we on the outside, would never embrace the power of our difference, or realize the truth of our own beauty. To "come out" as a feminist, as a lesbian, as an Italian-American, I had to peel back the thick layers of cultural lies. What remains at the core is just me, reconciled from the inside out.

## I Capelli Moltissimi

**M**y father's father was Sicilian. And I am a woman with a lot of hair. Actually, I do not have more hair than many women. It's just that I don't bleach it, pluck it, or otherwise remove or disguise it, and it happens to be dark. I think people forget that we come like this, soft and furry, embellished with lines and swirls of hair and fuzz and bristle.

My own relationship with my hair is a constantly evolving process. Just when I forget, myself, that I am a hairy woman, someone reminds me. And it is more often than not someone who should best be able to relate to their own glorious fuzz who gets up in arms, often in subtle ways, about my own.

When my leg hairs, my armpit hairs, and my facial hairs began to show up, dark and bold, it was my father who told me I looked like a gorilla. Of course he was also the one who said, in response to my repeated borrowing of his clothes, loose-fitting jackets, sweaters, shirts, wacky '70s ties, that he thought I should stop wearing "men's" clothes, because if I wore "women's" clothes, he could be more sure how I would turn out. I suppose that went for body hair too. The unspoken word then, of course, was lesbian. Somehow wearing clothes that he associated with what a woman should look like would ensure that I would not be a lesbian. By the same token, I suppose, removing my body hair, as though it were not a natural, inherently female thing, would equally ensure my heterosexuality. Well, perhaps he was right, because I neither removed my body hair, nor stopped wearing "men's" clothes, and lo and behold, I am a lesbian.

Not that it was always as easy as it is now. When I was in high school, I did a lot of theater. Once, while during a rehearsal, I was alone on the stage with the entire cast in the audience watching, and my little blond brother came skipping down the aisle, paused in front of the interrupted rehearsal and called up to me "gee, Tash, I wish I had a mustache like yours." Strangely, I was both embarrassed and proud to have my mustache pointed out. I got so that I commented on my mustache, or whatever body hair was

obvious at the time, to make other people confront it, admit its existence. Because my leg hair could not be seen from the audience, I used to joke that I should put mascara on it to bring it out, as we all did to our eyelashes.

While other girls plucked at and tortured their tender eyelid skin, I argued with my mother, who brandished tweezers whenever she got me alone in a small room. And once, years later, I met my father at a subway stop to go for supper. He smiled and put his arm around me, then started squinting at my face. He brushed the little hairs between my eyebrows with his finger, and said "you know, you really should get rid of that hair between your eyebrows." I greeted him cheerfully back by saying "you know dad, you should really get rid of the hairs between *your* eyebrows." He laughed, and said "no really." "No really," I said.

But the biggest invasion happened in Italy. I went to visit some relatives I barely knew and hadn't seen in many years. I spoke almost no Italian, and for nearly a week, found myself in the middle of huge extended family arguments over whose house I should stay at, which cousin I should go out with, or where my next meal would come from. These discussions were punctuated with aunts and uncles grabbing my cheeks or pulling my hair and exclaiming over how "bella" I was, and with plates of food shoved in front of me to tide me over. One afternoon, Aunt Carmella and a cousin grabbed my shoulders, turned me toward them, and smeared something on my upper lip, all the while smiling and chattering. To my efforts at questioning what they were doing, they shushed me and explained about women things to the other relatives in the room. Some time later, they took my hand and led me into the bathroom where they painfully wiped off the cream, leaving a puckered, raw, pink and very bald space where my mustache had been. Uncles and cousins continued to smile and grab my cheeks and exclaim over how "bella" I was. But I was traumatized. Upon my return to France, my closest friend took one look at me and stared and stared, saying that something had changed but she couldn't figure out what. Finally I told her, and she cried. It was a part of me, seared off.

My hair has been short for several years. At least one out of every two white men who don't know me greets me as "sir." Now I live in the south, and my hair is longer, on one side of my head,

I still get called sir, this time by both men and women, but only if they are looking me in the face, or from the short side of my head. I respond by calling the men "ma'am," or with a smile and a long look, right in the eye. Southern graciousness doesn't know what to do with mistaken gender, not to mention direct eye contact.

It was only a few years ago that my chin hairs began to come in. They are black and curly, and not too numerous. But for two years in a row, my sister, much blonder than I, has taken it upon herself to comment, seemingly without judgment, "gee, Tash, I never noticed you had so much hair under your chin." Well, clearly, she had.

I love the lines my eyebrows and mustache create on my face, horizontal breaks in the vertical lines of my narrow jaw, long straight nose, straight dark hair. Like smiles, resting, waiting for my mouth to follow suit. I love the feeling of the soft curls of one leg's hair against the other leg. I cannot imagine brushing against the stubble of mine or another woman's shaven body. A 4-year-old, blond, blue eyed boy, with a blond, blue eyed mother, reached up to my face recently, and touched my cheek with his fingertips, staring at my mustache, and said, inquisitively and softly, "you are so brown." I am not very brown, but he is not used to seeing shadow and darkness from hair on the faces of women. It was loving and tender, and made me very happy. My step-sister, when very young, chose games to play with me in which one of us thought of a part of the body and the other asked questions until she guessed which part. She repeatedly chose mustache, armpit hair, leg hair or eyebrows, focusing very intently on my uncovered and unashamed body.

## The Wax Problem

The first time I think I used wax  
The wax came in a pink box labeled  
ZIP  
Fast Easy Effective  
I melted the hard puke green substance  
in a little double boiler until it was liquid  
And I let the green stuff cool a bit  
And when it began to thicken  
I scooped some of it up  
with the enclosed popsicle stick  
provided just for that purpose

So I painted the hairs above my mouth  
with the burning substance  
It cooled hard and fast  
Easy Effective  
My face in the mirror  
had a hard green mustache  
and resembled a child  
whose runny nose had gotten  
way out of hand

When the wax had cooled completely  
Eyes tearing  
Forehead straining  
I grasped at the edge of the lump  
and tried to tear it away from my face  
ZIP ZIP

This was not easy  
Effective Fast  
The brain cannot tell the hand  
PULL THE HAIR FROM THE FLESH  
While the lip tells the brain  
THIS PAIN MUST STOP NOW

Without ample meditation on  
and dedication to  
the given act

Of course  
I could only pull that wax off  
bit by bit  
So I stood in front of the mirror  
with half of a green wax snot mustache  
and a piece of hairy wax  
hanging from my burned lip  
ZIP ZIP ZIP  
Praying  
that I would not get caught



*Nuda*  
elizabeth fides

Darci Cataldo

## Two Kinds of People in the World

When my grandmother died a few years ago, I dreamed she would come back taller and richer, flippant and flamboyant. She would wear big earrings and fancy stockings. Her life had been everything opposite of fancy or flippant.

Like all her sisters, her name was Mary. Mary Josephine. Seventeen to twenty-two sisters and brothers depending on who told the story. She had nine kids of her own. My dad was one of the youngest. She and my grandfather were from the same small mountain town east of Naples. My grandfather immigrated alone as a teenager. They were married in rural New York.

My grandmother was a small woman. She slept on the floor a lot — those nights my grandfather had no use for her. She plowed the land they homesteaded without a horse. She tended a flower garden in her yard. Her house was old, big, and not clean. She cooked as if obsessed: noodles all over the house and chairs, and the smell of sauce, yet most of her life she wasn't allowed to eat at the table with the men.

My grandmother was old, tired, and angry long before I was born. Poverty, racism and sexism had snatched away any softness from her. I remember her as a coarse woman who walked heavily, without grace. Not a movement wasted on style. Every second of life was toward survival; nothing was left over.

My grandmother saw only two kinds of people — Italian and non-Italian. What then did she think of me? Half Anglo, half Italian, a young girl who was thin and tall, but who looked back at her with her own brown eyes.

I see things a lot like my grandmother would. I see Italian people and non-Italian people. I always notice. I always know. My early ideas about being Italian were drawn mostly from her — strong, loyal, powerful, yet tragic and isolated. Later I began to see being Italian as somewhat hidden, secret. No one ever talked about it. At times, my dad would take my brothers and me to an Italian-American Club picnic. There he'd be very animated and comfortable, laughing, speaking Italian, eating, playing bocce

ball and miniature golf. When we went home, it was like leaving one world to enter another. Being Italian became hidden and unspoken.

Away from other Italians, my dad has always seemed humiliated by his history. When I was about seven, I asked him to teach me Italian. He replied very angrily that it was not something I needed to know. I believe now that my dad was trying to shelter me from the shame and poverty he associates with being unable to speak English. I think he was relieved that his kids were tall, thin, and fair, like his wife, yet I have also felt his disappointment at my not being Italian enough. And, I have often felt like an outsider, like the other people, the non-Italians.

The feeling of what being Italian means to me has been broadening. This change started many years ago. At sixteen I fell in love with a beautiful young Italian woman who had that sense of humor that is particularly Italian (non-Italians sure don't have it!). She accepted my half-Italianness with open arms. I found a home with her that I didn't have before, a place to be all of me. With her came a different image of being Italian-American. It's not just about silence, isolation, or what I eat on Sundays. It's about the passions I feel, the way I hold my hands, the way I look at the world, and the way the world sees me. It's about voicing my heart and spirit. Today I feel so much more of who I am, although I still struggle with not feeling enough of one or the other. I don't speak Italian, can't cook to save my life, and look half Italian, not Italian. Yet when I sit in a room with Italians, hear an Italian name, or see an Italian feature or gesture, I feel home. I feel a wholeness about me.

Inside me, I carry my grandmother. I hold her in the way I move or glance at the world. I remember the power of her presence. She worked like a servant and was treated like a farm animal. Yet when she walked into a room, something changed. She possessed something powerful. Perhaps it was from the Old World. Whatever it was, it sustained her. I wonder if it will sustain me. I have her eyes. They look back at me from the mirror. In the world, I, like her, notice and remember people as Italian or non-Italian. And I am both.

## To Grandmother's Bed

Remember the times you silently led  
me to grandmother's bed  
to grandmother's bed

grandma, little old grey-haired woman  
with her anger, her  
italian accented anger.

most of the time i didn't like her  
'cause she picked on us girls  
and idolized you  
"Your brother's the man of the house."  
Jackie, Jackie, wonderful Jackie.

i could have admired her qualities.  
she would knit and crochet for hours  
turning out beautiful afghans, sweaters  
and lace.

i could have admired those colorful afghans  
had i not the memory of the woolen squares  
scratchy beneath your weight on me  
on her bed when she went to visit our aunt  
who lived in Brooklyn.

you thief  
you stole my childhood, my precious adolescence,  
my attitudes, my undeveloped beauty.

you thief  
you robbed me of my grandma,  
that i must link the memories  
of the mother of my mother  
to your unholy deeds.

i speak to her directly now.  
i know that she is with me now.  
you hold no place of honor.  
you have no more power over me.

Make the Sign of the Cross: In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



How to Say My Little Rosary



(1) While holding the Crucifix in the hand, recite the Apostles' Creed.



(6) On the ten small beads, recite the Hail Mary, keeping in mind the mystery.



OUR FATHER, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. Amen.

M. Tedesco '88  
"everlasting, Amen."

"Everlasting, Amen"  
Margaret Tedesco

## Baccalà

I remember what had been soaking in a big pot in the bathtub for several days before it was made into three or four different dishes to eat on Christmas Eve. My father would get it at the fish store a week ahead of time. It looked so weird because it was salted and dried. Out would come the biggest pot we had. Take it to the bathroom and fill it up in the tub. In would go the dried up pieces of flesh to soften and stink for the next 5 or 6 days. We'd keep the door closed but there was no avoiding going in there.

Everyone would complain loudly about how bad it smelled except for my grandmother. She loved it. It made her laugh to hear the rest of us. I can see her sitting in the kitchen laughing her toothless grin, her belly bouncing up and down under her crossed arms.

What a relief when Christmas Eve finally came. The smelly stuff was transformed into a delicious meal. My favorite was the deep-fried patties so crisp and greasy. Then there was the salad with flaked fish, lemon, parsley, garlic and oil. And from the oven would come the tomato version with pignoli nuts and raisins which went over spaghetti. We'd all agree it was worth the agony. What a tradition. We loved it. We called it Baccalà.

## Salsa di Pomodoro

4 tablespoons olive oil  
2 tablespoons butter  
1 medium onion, peeled and thinly sliced  
1 carrot, chopped  
1 celery stalk, chopped  
3 or 4 fresh parsley sprigs, coarsely chopped  
3 or 4 basil leaves, coarsely chopped  
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano  
4 tablespoons tomato paste  
1 cup vegetable broth  
1 large can peeled tomatoes  
freshly ground pepper and salt to taste

Heat the oil and butter in a big saucepan. When they begin to sizzle, add onions and sauté for about 5 minutes. Then add the herbs and vegetables. Sauté a few more minutes.

Dissolve the tomato paste in the vegetable broth, add to onion mixture and cook for 10 minutes. Stir frequently to prevent the sauce from sticking to the pan.

Add the peeled tomatoes and blend well with the rest of the mixture. Cook 45 minutes on low heat. Put the whole mixture through a food mill or sieve. If the sauce seems too runny after being sieved, return it to the heat and simmer until thick. Serves 6. Brava! Mangiamo!

Janet Capone

## In Answer to Their Questions

At the lesbian feminist writers' meeting,  
the ones spoken with only an eyebrow, a look:  
"Not that you don't deserve the space, but what  
would you write about being Italian-American?"

In answer to his question  
in line at the bank  
"Capone? Are you from Chicago?"

In answer to their undisguised guffaw at the Gay Pride March  
"Bay Area Sicilian & Italian-American Lesbians!  
That's pushing it, isn't it?"

In answer to the guy reading my flier over my shoulder  
at Copymat:  
"Now that's a specialized group!" (as if WASP  
ruling class male is not)  
"Yes," I said, going for the stereotype, "we specialize in  
machine guns."

In answer to the queries, guffaws, blank stares,  
nonchalant hateful slips, historically incorrect power trips,  
but mostly for myself and my commare lesbiche  
per la maggior parte per noi

Italian  
is where I'm understood,  
loved, and included,  
where aglio e olio  
is Neopolitan  
for soul food.

Italian means my living habits  
are not quirks,  
but ceremonies filled with tradition  
mostly invisible  
to your non-Italian eye.

My skin color is olive, not white  
and the hair spreading down my arms and legs and over  
the top of my lip  
is a dense garden cultivated for centuries  
by Neopolitan peasants  
bending, digging, dropping their sweat  
into the soil like seeds,  
passing down their genes  
subsisting, resisting their own extinction  
down there nel mezzogiorno,  
the land of the forgotten,  
so low and indestructible,  
they clung like cockroaches to life.

My skin is olive, like theirs,  
and the dark hair, spreading down my arms and legs and over  
the top of my lip  
grows thicker and thicker  
the more black pepper I shake  
over my spaghetti.

Italian  
means the boat  
from the boot-shaped country  
The immigrants teeming like lentil beans  
in New York Harbor  
Exhausted and sick, crammed in thick  
below the decks  
to make a three week passage  
over icy water.

They watched their dead heaved overboard by authorities  
who altered passenger lists,  
removing Italian lives like lint  
from old clothing.

Italian  
meant whole families herded in line  
for a doctor's exam,  
la tua nonna singled out  
as defective, sent back,  
Italian, in fact

were the syllables and vowels  
of our long and tuberous family names  
lopped off on Ellis Island,  
our bloodlines stopped  
like zucchini chopped in a Cusinart,  
the original American Express.

Because Italian meant  
a country divided,  
the Northerner's boot in Sicily's ass  
the Neopolitan shit on  
a country torn, and half  
living in miserable squalor  
taxed to the point of starvation  
by the affluent North.

Italian  
meant my Neopolitan grandparents  
losing family one by one  
to starvation and disease  
finally forced to leave  
one by one, eldest sons  
first in line for the boat  
taking them to a land of plenty  
whose streets are lined with silver and gold

Italian  
meant my grandfathers Dominic and Donato,  
supporting their wives and children  
by sweeping the streets of New York,  
the custodians, but never the beneficiaries  
of that wealth.

Because Italian meant  
you do what you must to survive  
You keep your mouth shut  
Celebrate what you got  
and thank God you're alive

It meant one generation later  
five kids draped on couch and chairs  
TV blares, Sinatra sings while the phone rings

and my mother finally flings her hands in the air  
invoking the Goddess "Madonna!  
Give me one hour of peace. *One hour!*"

Italian-American  
meant our neighborhood  
laid out like a village in Naples:  
Ambrosio, Iovino, Capone, Barone, Nardone, Cerbone,  
Luisi, Marconi, Mastrianni, Bonavitacola,  
the "Americans"  
living side by side  
with "those guinea straight off the boat."

Italian  
meant Sunday morning sausage and meatballs  
foaming in oil,  
a pot of pasta water set to boil  
and the hollow tap  
of a wooden spoon

or Mrs. Nardone chasing us with the broom  
her tomato plants flattened  
by mean-mouthed kids  
who mimicked her broken English  
with "up-your-ass" gestures  
that crossed an ocean  
to roost on our hands,  
olive-skinned American kids  
who didn't know  
what the hell we were saying  
or to whom.

Italian meant the old men  
playing bocce ball  
in Hartley Park,  
Mr. Bonavitacola roasting peppers  
in his backyard,  
and every nose in the neighborhood  
inhaling the aroma.

Italian  
was the horn honk

of Ambrosio's red convertible  
parading up and down the street  
on Saturday afternoon  
his comings and goings announced  
with a musical toot  
that never would suit his more Americanized  
Italian neighbors.

Italian  
were the yellow patties of polenta  
frying in a pan,  
a pot full of escarole greens  
or Ma spreading the lentil beans  
on the kitchen table,  
talking to me  
after I'm home from school  
sorting the good from the bad,  
the good from the bad,  
at the kitchen table.

Or my sister Lisa  
pouring salt into a flat saucer on the table  
and telling us: "Here's the white people,"  
pouring pepper over them, "And here's the black people,"  
pouring olive oil over them, "And here come the Italians!"  
and us squealing with laughter  
as the oil bubbles slither and slide  
over the salt and pepper,  
retaining their distinct  
and voluptuous identity.

But Italian also means  
those dagos, garlic breath bastards, stupid wops

My guinea nose and greasy skin  
Ginzos straight off the boat  
Slick-haired, like vermin, they bring disease

Italian means the entire Mafia  
looking over my shoulder  
whenever I cash a check  
"Capone? She's from Chicago!"

and their laughter  
because they associate my Italianness  
first and foremost with a killer  
and hardened criminal.

But, second generation American-Italian  
also means I do what I must to survive,  
means I won't keep my mouth shut,  
won't shrink to fit  
someone else's definition of our lives

Italian-American  
means my living habits  
are cultural ceremonies, not quirks  
My skin is olive  
And the hair spreading down my arms and legs and over  
the top of my lip  
grows thicker and thicker  
the more I resist,  
the more I insist  
on possessing  
entirely who I am.



*Self Portrait*  
Anna Cusenza

**Angie Angela** is an Italian-American lesbian, born in Italy, of Neapolitan and Sicilian heritage. Her parents emigrated to Belgium when she was five, and to America when she was 13. Angie has an M.A. in Social Science with a concentration in Women's Studies.

**Dodici Azpadu** has published two novels. *Saturday Night in the Prime of Life* is about Sicilian-Americans, and no one shoots anyone. The same cannot be said for her novel *Goat Song*. Her mother's people were from the Kalso, an Arab ghetto in Palermo. Her father's people were from Genoa. She has been active in women of color groups in Iowa City, San Francisco, and Albuquerque, where she now lives.

**Tasha Belfiore** — I am from Washington D.C., where I have been involved in many kinds of lesbian & feminist politics. Currently I am a graduate student in zoology, living in the south, getting used to the slower pace, & the available time & energy to write & take pictures.

**Janet Capone** was raised in N.Y. Her grandparents came from villages near Naples around 1900. It took her longer to come out as a Neopolitan-American than it did for any of her other identities: lesbian separatist, feminist, revolutionary, community activist, poet, and fiction writer. She has writing in: *Lesbian Ethics, Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, and *la bella figura*, and is at work on her first novel.

**Joan Capra** is a professional violinist who loves living in New York City.

**Darci Cataldo** is a second generation Neopolitan-American. She lives in Oakland and works doing research in immunology.

**Chris Cuomo:** These days I'm working on my PhD in philosophy, teaching environmental ethics, and moving my body around as much as possible. I am a lesbian separatist living in a Midwestern town where all the food in the grocery store is wrapped in plastic.

**Anna Cusenza** is a first generation Sicilian-American lesbian visual artist and poet living in San Francisco. Her work has appeared nationally and internationally.

**Mary Russo Demetrick** — my works have been published in *Plains-woman, la bella figura*, forthcoming in *Voices in Italian Americana*, and elsewhere. I look to my Italian heritage for inspiration and strength.

**Rachel Guido deVries**, poet and novelist, co-founded and directs The Community Writers' Project in Syracuse. Her novel *Tender Warriors* was published in 1986; fiction editor of *Ikon*, her work has appeared in *Yellow Silk, Voices in Italian Americana, Ikon, Conditions*, and *Sinister Wisdom*.

**Marée Dzian Ecrevan:** I am a 47 year old fat Italian dyke. At 36, I acknowledged my childhood victimization for the first time. At 47, I am closer than ever to a guiltless resolve and a measurable peace. I owe this to the support I've gleaned from my sisters, who courageously tell the truth, when and if they can.

**elizabeth fides** — i live happily in oakland, ca. with my partner. i am an artist, vegetarian, gardener and i teach deaf children. in tutti i miei lavori mi piace molto usare le mani, e credo profondamente nelle donne e nella sopravvivenza della nostra pianeta bellissima.

**Francesca Forté** (Fran Roccaforte, "Francesca") — born 1956, 2nd generation ex-Brooklynite Neapolitan/Sicilian with MUCH COLOR. Bay area photographer-artist healer, videographer/poet N.Y. (S.V.A.) art schooled, CA (Laney) videoed, exhibited widely & published too. Loves to dance, create masterpieces on film & honeymoon in Venezia.

**Kathy Freeperson** was born Kathy Telesco in Rome, N.Y., 1947. After receiving formal education in schools and colleges, escaping the iron mills from her working class Italian-American family, she struggles to write and live with as much dignity as possible. After being ray-gunned for years she is now bushed. She lives with her two four-legged best friends in Gainesville, Fla., and dreams of funding for her writing as well as activism.

**Diane Gravenites** is an Italian-American woman living in Sonoma County, Ca. In her profession as a psychotherapist, she helps people find and love their lost bodies. In doing so, her woundedness is healed, and she creates some intimacy along the way.

**Maria Mazziotti Gillan** books include *Winter Light* (Chantry Press, 1985), *Luce D'Inverno* (Bi-lingual) and *The Weather of Old Seasons*. She is the editor of *Footwork: The Paterson Literary Review*. She lives with her husband Dennis in Hawthorne, New Jersey.

**Demetria Iazzetto** is a 3rd generation Italian-American lesbian. Her mother's family came from Sicily and her father's parents came from Naples. She grew up in a working-class, Catholic, Italian-American community on Chicago's near west side. She has a Ph.D. in Women's Studies.

**Denise Leto** — I am a half Sicilian, half Southern Italian-American poet and performer. One day, while letting my imagination run away with me, I found myself on a most astounding journey of which this issue is but a dazzling beginning. Credo nelle nostre voci. Benedette sono le donne di coraggio.

**Laurie Mattioli** lives in the Bay Area. Recently, she stopped checking the box marked "white" on ethnic data questions and started creating a box marked "Italian-American." She is kept busy trying to memorize the names of all the different styles of pasta. However, Rigatoni and Rigoletti still confuse the hell out of her.

**Mary Anne Bella Mirabella** is an associate professor of Humanities in the Gallatin division of New York University. She lives in New York City with her husband & two children.

**Celine-Marie Pascale** is author of two books, numerous poems, short stories and essays. She writes with feline patience while earning a living as a textbook production service. She is bisexual.

**Frances Tramontana Patchett** is a community education specialist for Fairfax Public Schools. Fran facilitates reading seminars & presents workshops on "Women & Understudied Groups in the Curriculum." She lives in Burke, VA with her husband Jay & their two children.

**Mary DeLorenzo Pelc:** I am a half Italian, half Gypsy, butch lesbian, musician, playwright, a cultural archaeologist of sorts, digging and sifting through years of silence and assimilation to excavate and keep alive the passions, emotions and dreams of my people.

**Vincenza Petrilli** photographs memories from her Southern Italian-American girlhood. She and Bill live in S.F. and often dream of moving to Cleveland. Together they balance work, art and being parents to Damico.

**Karen Marie Porter** — Sicilian-American womon-loving-leo-feminist-witch. I'm currently writing/ illustrating a children's book of poetry & learning to tattoo. This is my first published piece. Anyone need an ambitious, unjaded illustrator? Write P.O. Box 5545, Atlanta GA 30307. Molto Grazie, cara Nonna & Nonno.

**Jean Rietshel** — I live in the Pacific Northwest and earn my living as an attorney. I grew up in New York amidst a large extended Italian-American family. My piece is largely factual although I'm sure any of my relatives would tell it differently.

**Stacie Samson** is a writer, storyteller and ex-tenant activist, trying to make sense of reality in Cambridge, MA. She can often be found seated pensively at a café, notebook in hand. After many months of covering lesbian events for a local gay paper, she has sworn off women's music concerts. Her favorite place in the world is the city of Montreal.

**Mary Saracino** is a full-blooded, second generation Italian-American. She grew up in the Finger Lakes region of western New York State and currently lives, with her partner, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. A freelance

marketing/advertising writer, she also writes fiction and is currently working on her first novel.

**Rosanna Sorella** was born and raised in the Bay Area. She hopes one day to finish a Ph.D. in something, welcomes suggestions as to just what. In the meantime, she earns her living by teaching college English.

**Diana Souza** is a graphic interpreter of visions & dreams who has illustrated & designed many books on feminist & spiritual subjects. Diana is also a photographer. The photo shown here was taken in Ithaca, New York.

**Patrizia Tavormina:** I am a 23 year old radical Sicilian-Canadian dyke, and fight for lesbian rights wherever I go. For the past year and a half, I have worked with a lesbian group to eradicate heterosexism in academia, and to implement a Lesbian Studies programme at my university. I am also active in recording Lesbian Herstory in Quebec. I have never published anything before this.

**Margaret Tedesco** has been doing performance work for fifteen years. She also does some visual art. She moved to San Francisco 1 1/2 years ago. Her background is Calabrese/Barese.

**Sheri Tornatore** is an Italian-American Lesbian Artist living in Austin, Texas. She is the co-founder and co-director of Acme Art Cooperative Gallery. She is a multi-media artist whose last project was a mural in Austin.

**Aro Venio** — I am a 2nd generation Italian/American Lesbian who writes music, does carpentry, pottery, embroidery, crochet, massage and gardening. I love the world in its natural state. More than anything, I want to live self-sufficiently and to see the end of the monetary system.

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## Books Received

*My Jewish Face & Other Stories* chronicles the coming of age and coming out of a daughter of the Jewish Left and former *Sinister Wisdom* editor Melanie Kaye Kantrowitz. 1990, \$9.95, an Aunt Lute Foundation book, Spinsters/Aunt Lute Press, PO Box 410687, S.F., CA 94141.

*Speaking for Ourselves — Short Stories by Jewish Lesbians* (inc. many *Sinister Wisdom* contributors), edited by Irene Zahava. 1990, \$8.95, The Crossing Press, PO Box 1048, Freedom, CA 95019.

*Finding The Lesbians — Personal Accounts From Around The World — 29* dykes tell tales of quest and discovery, with an intro. by Alix Dobkin, edited by Julia Penelope and Sarah Valentine. 1990, \$10.95, Crossing.

*All Women Are Healers — A Comprehensive Guide to Natural Healing*, includes stones & crystals, Reiki, Chinese healing, acupressure, reflexology, pendulums, herbs, homeopathy, flower remedies and more with specific instructions, by Diane Stein. 1990, \$12.95, Crossing.

*Crime Against Nature* — brilliant lesbian poetry from the viewpoint of a lesbian mother of sons by Minnie Bruce Pratt, 1989 Lamont Poetry Selection. 1990, \$8.95, Firebrand, 141 The Commons, Ithaca, NY 14850.

*Movement in Black* — Pat Parker's signature volume of poetry, originally published in 1978, in a new edition with foreword by Audre Lorde. 1990, \$8.95, Firebrand.

*New, Improved! Dykes To Watch Out For* — the fantastic and funny cartoons of Alison Bechdel. 1990, \$7.95, Firebrand.

*Jewish Women's Call for Peace — A Handbook for Jewish Women on the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict* is a handbook for understanding and organizing, edited by Rita Falbel, Irena Klepfisz, and Donna Nevel with a preface by Grace Paley. 1990, \$4.95, Firebrand.

*exile in the promised land* is the memoir of 14 years in Israel as a feminist leader, elected member of Knesset, militant peace activist and lesbian by Marcia Freedman, 1990, \$8.95, Firebrand.

*Simple Songs*, stories set in a variety of Native American/white childhood and adult lesbian contexts by Vickie Sears. 1990, \$8.95, Firebrand.

*Because of India — New and Selected Poems* by wonderful, funny and incisive lesbian poet Suniti Namjoshi. 1989, \$8.95, Onlywomen Press, 38 Mt. Pleasant, London WC1X 0AP England.

*Stranger Than Fish*, lesbian feminist short stories by J.E. Hardy. 1989, \$8.95, Onlywomen Press.

*Crazy* — a novel in which a lesbian librarian and writer gets locked up and finds the road to self reclamation by Carolyn Weathers. 1989, \$8.95, Clothespin Fever Press, 5529 N. Figueroa, LA, CA 90042.

*Lesbian Lists* numbers us from actresses and scholars to those who died young — a great bathroom book by Dell Richards. 1990, \$8.95, Alyson Publications, 40 Plympton St., Boston, MA 02118.

*A Week Like Any Other — Novellas & Stories* of women's lives in the Soviet Union by Natalya Baranskaya, trans. from Russian by Pieta Monks. 1990, \$9.95, The Seal Press, PO Box 13, Seattle, WA 98111.

*The Haunted House* a first novel about the repercussions of growing up in an alcoholic family by Rebecca Brown. 1990, \$8.95, The Seal Press.

*Murder by the Book* is lesbian Helen Black's first mystery caper, by Pat Walsh. 1990, \$8.95, Naiad Press, PO Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302.

*Berrigan* is a reprint of Vicki P. (Gingerlox) McConnell's first lesbian novel, set at college in the '70s. 1990 (1978), \$8.95, Naiad.

*Lesbians in Germany: 1890's-1920's* — fiction, poetry, essays and historical commentary, edited by Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson. 1990 (orig. pub. in 1980), \$8.95, Naiad.

*Lifestyles*, wherein a dyke and straight woman, fall in love at a resort and deal with each other's lives, by Jack Calhoun. 1990, \$8.95, Naiad.

*The Chesapeake Project*, a first mystery/suspense/romance lesbian novel set among the crabbers by Phyllis Horn. 1990, \$8.95, Naiad.

*Montana Feathers*, a lesbian Western of the late 1800s by *Yellowthroat* author Penny Hayes, 1990, \$8.95, Naiad.

*Death Down Under*, #3 of the Detective Inspector Carol Ashton mystery series takes place in Australia, by Claire McNab. 1990, \$8.95, Naiad.

*(EX)TENSIONS — Re-Figuring Feminist Criticism* explores the political nature of identity through analyzing women's literature. 1990, \$10.95, Univ. of Ill. Press, 54 East Gregory Drive, Champaign, IL 61820.

*My Life A Loaded Gun — Dickinson, Plath, Rich & Female Creativity*, literary thought by Paula Bennet. 1990, \$12.95, Univ. of Ill. Press.

*Love and Politics: Radical Feminist and Lesbian Theories*, survey & discussion of radical thought in the 2nd wave by Carol Anne Douglas, an editor of *Off Our Backs*. 1990, \$12, Ism Press, PO Box 12447, S.F., CA 94112.

*Sarah's Daughters Sing — A Sampler of Poems by Jewish Women* is a rich collection — something wonderful for everyone, ed. by Henny Wenkart. 1990, \$11.95, KTAV Publishing House, 900 Jefferson St., Box 6249, Hoboken, NJ 07030-7205.

*The Spectral Mother — Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* — new theory on Freud by Madelon Sprengnether. 1990, Cornell University Press, 124 Roberts Place, Ithaca, NY 14850.

*The Green Dream* is Olga Cabral's 7th book of poetry, with art by Grambs Miller. 1990, \$5, Contact II, Box 451 Bowling Green NY, NY 10004.

*Inessential Woman — Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* — an argument against white, middle-class bias in theory by Elizabeth V. Spelman. 1990, \$11.95, Beacon Press, 25 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02108.

*The Global Ecology Handbook — What You Can Do About the Environmental Crisis*, instructions by Global Tomorrow Coalition. 1990, \$16.95, Beacon.

*Beyond Oppression — Feminist Theory and Political Strategy*, which includes a call for women to be 50% of all governing officials as a constitutional amendment, by M.E. Hawkesworth. 1990, \$22.95 (cloth), Continuum, 370 Lexington Ave., NY, NY 10017.

*Gertrude Stein*, a biography in the Literature and Life: American Writers series, by Bettina L. Knapp. 1990, \$18.95 (cloth), Continuum Press.

*Recollecting Our Lives — Women's Experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 25 interviews with survivors and mothers of survivors by the Women's Research Centre. 1989, \$14.95 (Canadian), Press Gang Publishers, 603 Powell Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6A 1H2.

*Silverleaf's Choice: An Anthology of Lesbian Humor* includes short stories, essays, poems and cartoons, edited by Ann E. Larson and Carole A. Carr. 1990, \$8.95, Silverleaf Press, PO Box 70189, Seattle, WA 98107.

*The Courage to Heal Workbook For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* — a companion to *The Courage to Heal*, by one of its' co-authors, Laura Davis. 1990, \$18.95, Harper & Row, 10 E. 53rd St., NY, NY 10022.

**The following books** are from Gynergy Press, Box 132, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, C1A 7K2 Canada, distributors of Ragweed, Jezebel and L'Essentielle, éditrices books. Hard to find in the U.S. — write for a catalog of these engaging, thoughtful and thoughtfully made books.

*Under Tongue / Sous La Langue* is a beautiful, lesbic prose/poem letterpress chapbook by Nicole Brossard, trans. by Susanne de Lorbinière-Harwood, 1987, L'Essentielle, éditrices.

*Flesh and Paper*, dialogues and collaboration in verse by the poets, friends and lovers Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe, 1986, Jezebel.

*The Fat Woman Measures Up* — poems about the body, by Christine Donald, 1986, Ragweed Press.

*The Breaking Up Poems*, Christine Donald's second book of lesbian poems, 1988, Gynergy Books.

*unnatural acts*, poems by Marg Yeo which remind her "that they, and i, owe everything we are to other women," 1987, Gynergy Books.

*Double Negative* — poems, dialogue, prose/poems written on/as a journey by Daphne Marlatt & Betsy Warland, 1988, Gynergy Books.

*By Word Of Mouth* — lesbians write the erotic, a collection of prose and poetry, edited by Lee Fleming, 1989, Gynergy Books.

## Announcements and Classified Ads

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### PUBLICATIONS/PERIODICALS

*OUT/INSIDE*, A Women's Newsjournal Focusing on Lesbian Prisoners. Barbara Ruth, ed. \$6/yr, \$1.50 sample (+50¢ postage). PO Box 2821, Oakland, CA 94609.

*HIKANÉ: THE CAPABLE WOMON* — disabled wimmin's newsletter for lesbians and our wimmin friends. Available in print or cassette. \$4 sample, \$14 indiv. subscription, \$24 inst., sliding scale available, free to wimmin in prison. Hikané, PO Box C-9, Hillsdale, NY 12529.

*BRIDGES: A Journal for Jewish feminists and our friends* has published its premier issue. Editors include: Ruth Atkin, Elly Bulkin, Rita Falbel, Clare Kinberg, Ruth Kraut, Adrienne Rich and Laurie White. \$7.50 an issue, \$15 year sub. (2 issues). PO Box 18437, Seattle, WA 98118.

*LESBIAN ETHICS* — Special issues on CLASS (deadline: Aug. 15) and OUR MOTHERS (deadline Dec. 31/90). Send queries and original, descriptive work that links these issues with life in dyke communities to: PO Box 4723, Albuquerque, NM 87196.

*TRIVIA* — *A Journal of Ideas*, seeks all radical, creative feminist thought in all forms (except poetry) for double-issue on BREAKING FORMS. Query or submit to PO Box 606, N. Amherst, MA 01059 by Aug. 15.

*HURRICANE ALICE*'s fall 1990 issue will be on "Families, Old & New." Submit any form, up to 3,000 words, deadline: Aug. 15 to: Hurricane Alice, 207 Lind Hall 207 Church Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55404.

*WORDS OF OUR OWN (W.O.O.)* a new lesbian quarterly from the bible belt, emphasizing fiction, is seeking submissions and subscribers. \$13.50 for 4 issues, \$4.50 single. WOO, PO Box 52721, Knoxville, TN 37950.

### CALLS FOR SUBMISSION

WHAT IS LESBIAN COMMUNITY? New Canadian Anthology of Lesbian Short Stories seeks work describing turning points in our lesbian identities/communities. Submit or query w/SASE: Lee Fleming, gynergy books, Box 2023, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada, C1A 7N7.

CATHOLIC GIRLS — all forms for an anthology reflecting diversity of culture, ethnicity, age on the experience of Catholic girlhood. Submissions w/ SASE: Patrice Vecchione/Amber Coverdale Sumrall, PO Box 61, Capitola, CA 95010. Deadline: Nov. 1, 1990.

SEVERED TIES: LESBIANS LOSING FAMILY, LOSING FRIENDS — anthology of losses incurred by coming out. Send submissions or queries to Lynne D'Orsay, PO Box 332, Portsmouth, NH 03801.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE BUTCH/FEMME — all forms and artwork for a lesbian anthology to be published by new gay and lesbian publishing house. Send submissions or queries to Multiple Dimensions, attn: Caryn Goldberg, 1604 Vista Del Mar Ave., Hollywood, CA 90028.

CATS (AND THEIR DYKES) anthology deadline has been extended to October 1. All forms from analysis to love stories, artwork and photos. HerBooks, PO Box 7467, Santa Cruz, CA.

LESBIAN VISUAL ART AND ARTISTS — ideas, articles, work for review (slides or xeroxes) sought by Tee Corinne for a series of lectures and possible book. Send SASE with submission or for more info to POB 278, Wolf Creek, OR 97497-0278.

CANADIAN WOMEN AND AIDS seeks all forms of work by HIV-positive women and women with AIDS and any women involved with them, in English or French. Send to Jacquie Manthorne, ed. Les Éditions Communiqu'Elles, 3585 St-Urbain, Montréal, Québec, H2X 2N6; fax: 514-842-1067. Deadline: September 1, 1990.

WORD OF MOUTH: SHORT-STORIES BY WOMEN VOL. II, max. length 500 words, send no more than six stories with SASE to Irene Zahava, 307 W. State St., Ithaca, NY 14850. Deadline: August 30, 1990.

## CONFERENCES

NATIONAL LESBIAN CONFERENCE, spring 1991 in Atlanta, Georgia. Local organizing and national meetings are happening around the U.S. now. For more info, write: PO Box 3057, Albany, NY 12203.

THE THIRD ANNUAL LESBIAN SEPARATIST CONFERENCE AND GATHERING will be held in southeastern Wisconsin, August 30 through September 2, 1990. Play, talk, argue, spark new friendships, renew old connections, and have fun for a change! Sliding scale registration fee: \$85-150. For more information, contact: Burning Bush, PO Box 3056, Madison, WI 53704-0065, USA.

THE 5TH ANNUAL WOMYN & WITCHCRAFT: DEVELOPING DIANIC WICCA CONFERENCE, Aug. 30-Sept. 2, 1990 in Wisconsin. Wheelchair access. For reg., or more info, write: DDW5 Conf., c/o RCG, Box 6021, Madison, WI 53716.

## GENERAL

EARTH LIGHT VISUAL PRODUCTIONS — specializing in video and photography. Write or call for rates and special projects. Francesca Forté, PO Box 1151, Oakland, CA 94611, 415-531-2309.

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## TRIPS

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## SUPPORT

THE LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES NEEDS A BUILDING! For 16 years the Archives has been housed in a NYC apartment and must move. Wouldn't it help you sleep at night to know there's a lesbian building where our work is cherished? Can we raise \$1,000,000? If every lesbian who reads *SW* got 10 friends to send \$10 we'd raise over \$300,000. Let's do it! Send donations to: LHEF, PO Box 1258, NYC, NY 10116.

WOMEN IN ISRAEL SPEAK: RELIGION, ACTION AND POLITICS will be a book of interviews, photos, poetry compiled by Batya Weinbaum. Contributions needed to finish. Send checks payable to: New Israel Fund, 111 W. 40th St., NY, NY 10018, marked Women in Israel Speak Project, donor advised Isha L'Isha, or send SASE for more info.

"WHEN WAR IS TOLD THROUGH THE MOUTHS OF WOMEN, it is a different kind of war story." National Emmy Award-winning Tina DiFelicianantonio & producer Jane Wagner are fundraising for their feature length documentary film: *Una Donna*, about an Italian immigrant woman raped by Allied soldiers in Italy, 1944. For more info: Naked Eye Productions, 347 Dolores St., suite 111, S.F., CA.94110, (415) 558-9558.

## RESOURCES

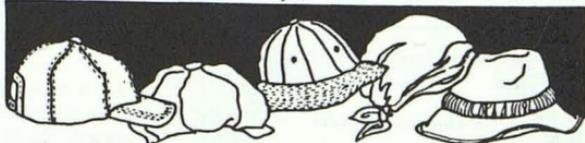
ITALIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITER'S NETWORK: If you're interested in joining a newly formed network of Italian-American women writers, please send name, address, phone, type of writing you do, whether or not you've been published and where. It's time for our voices to be heard! E. Nole, 39 Glenorchy Road, New Rochelle, New York 10804.

NATIONAL WOMEN'S STUDIES ASSOC. SCHOLARSHIPS for 1991 include awards for book-length ms., graduate interdisciplinary and Women's Studies work, graduate work in Jewish Women's Studies, Lesbian Studies, the Pat Parker Poetry Award, and a fellowship to a visiting Chinese scholar for research on women. Deadlines in Feb., 1991. For more info: NWSA, Univ. of Maryland, College Park, MD 20842-1325.

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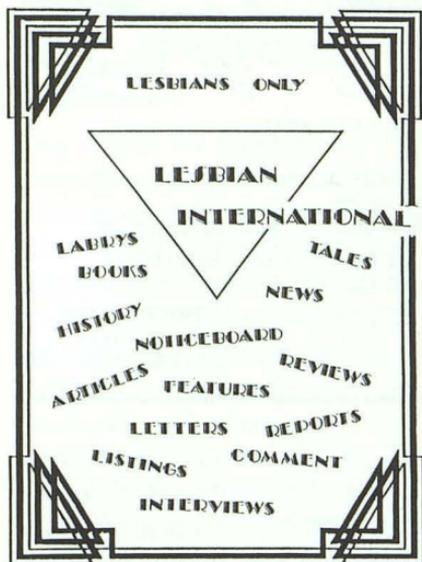
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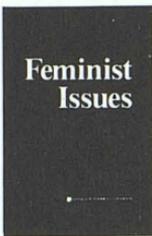
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- Where Does a Black Teenage Mother Turn?
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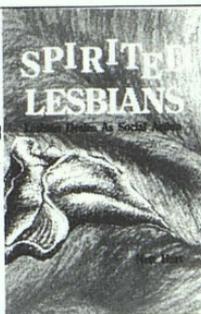
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## Notes on the Themes

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#42 is an **open** issue — we have many varied and wonderful dyke writings lined up! Due out in early December.

#43/44 will be our **15th anniversary retrospective** issue. We're going to particularly focus on publishing work from the early out-of-print *Sinister Wisdoms*. If you have any favorites from issues 1-20, let us know and we'll try to include them. Due out in May/June, 1991.

#45 **Lesbians & Class** is the next issue to which you can contribute. We want to focus on lies about money — in our editorial group we acknowledged that we had all lied about money, though how and why varied dramatically by class. Where do the lies come from? How do we deal with our shame? Our anger? Our bitterness? Are there communities where dykes are actively redistributing resources? After twenty years of personal discussion around class in the lesbian and women's movements, have we found any ways to really change the class set-ups we're born into? We urge middle-class and wealthy lesbians to remember that an embarrassment of riches is not the same as the shame of poverty. This issue will particularly address the concerns of working class and poor lesbians and will be primarily composed of their work. *Lesbian Ethics* will be putting out an issue on class as well (see Announcements) — we hope it appears before our deadline so we have the opportunity to continue discussions started there, as well as present new perspectives. Deadline: June 1, 1991.

*See inside back cover for details on how to send us your work.*

# *sinister wisdom*

## Current & Back Issues (partial list of contents)

- #40/Special Focus on Friendship.** Essays, fiction, editorial discussion transcript.  
• de la Peña, Hardy, Svirsky, Gray, Stinson, Dambroff, Mi Ok Bruining, Hauptman •
- #39/Special Focus on Disability.** Testimony in all forms by disabled womyn.  
• Freespirit, Winnow, Sorella, Edgington, Rome, Lauby, Folyan, Koolish, Cardea •
- #38/Emphasis on Lesbian Relationships.** Fiction and poetry.  
• Jewell, Clarke, Anzaldúa, Gage, Schaffer, Spisak, Taraba, Devora, Louise, Knight •
- #37/Emphasis on Lesbian Theory.** With work on consumerism, spirituality, political theory, children, racism, anti-Semitism, lesbians in prison.  
• Lee, Tallen, Evans, Pratt, Robson, Quinlan, Livia, Hardy, Gray, Green, Justicz •
- #36/Special Focus on Surviving Psychiatric Assault/Creating Emotional Well Being in our Communities.** Includes testimony, prose, poetry and essays on getting locked up, getting out, community, therapy and therapism.  
• Hope, Aal, Caicedo, thundercloud, Robson, Sien, Moran, Ward, NiHera, Willcox •
- #35/Special Focus on Passing.** Includes work on/by Black, Jewish, Native American, Latina, Italian, White, disabled, working class, butch, fem lesbians.  
• Jewell, Frye, Pratt, Rosales, Bogus, Ruth, Gage, Barrington, Davis, JEB, Romano •
- #34/Special Focus on Lesbian Visions, Fantasy, SciFi.** Includes work on Separatism, Disability, Building and Transformation.  
• Katz, Ortiz Taylor, Hoagland, Allegra, Livia, Louise, Ríos, Danaan, Marah •
- #33/Special Focus on Wisdom.** Lesbians of Color, Non-violence, War Stories, Incest, Leaving a Will, Assimilation, Fat Poems, Coming to Terms.  
• Anzaldúa, Ruth, Rich, Chrystos, Kaye/Kantrowitz, Hardy, Gilmore, Brody, Rakusin •
- #32/Special Focus on Illness, Death, Mourning, Healing, the Disappeared, Hunting Season, Dealing with Suicide, Cancer, New Ritual Observances.**  
• Maia, Allegra, Sears, McDonald, Waters, Hansell, Rosenblum, Butler, Stinson •
- #31/Special Focus on Sex and Fiction, Coming out in the South, Found Goddesses, Waiting, BoBe Mayse, Sex and Socialist Feminism.**  
• Smukler, Blackwomyn, Romano, Davenport, Dykewomyn, McNaron •
- #28/Special Focus on Women & Work; Body Image, Size & Eating, Aging, Comedy about Outlaw Lesbian Communities, Courage, PC/PI, Letter on #26.**  
• Clarke, Heather, Klepfisz, Sturgis, Gould, Boucher, Gomez, Sardella, Moran •
- #27/Special Focus on Girlhood, Sexuality and Violence, Office Work, Navy Dykes, White Trash, Women of Color/Women in Israel/Women in Lebanon.**  
• Adnan, Felman, Grahn, Schalet, Bogus, HaMa'avak Touch, Quintanales, Anzaldúa •
- #26/Special Issue: *To Go To Berbir* by Jill Drew, a book-length journal written by an American nurse working in Beirut during the 1982 Israeli invasion.**
- #25/Butch/Fem in the 50's, Native American Roots of White Feminism, Haitian, Palestinian, Puerto Rican Struggles, Jewish Radical Identity, Welfare Life.**  
• Allen, Cotrell, Root, Stecenko, Love, Paz, Smukler, Hall, Lipstadt, Brant •
- #21/Separatism Revisited, Jewish Survival & Defiance, Black Lesbian Writing, Photos of Dykes in Drag, Suicide, Bars, Letters about Anti-Semitism.**  
• Klepfisz, Arobateau, Segrest, Simpson, Tornes, Addison, justice, Foley, Crawford •

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All written work should be mailed flat (not folded) and SUBMITTED IN DUPLICATE. Submissions may be in any style or form, or combination of forms. Five poems or two stories maximum submission per issue. We may return longer submissions. We prefer you type (or send your work on Macintosh discs with 2 printouts). Legible handwritten work accepted, tapes accepted from print-impaired womyn. All submissions must be on white paper, with the author's name on each page. SASE MUST BE ENCLOSED. *Selection may take up to nine months.* If you want acknowledgement of receipt, enclose a separate, stamped postcard. GRAPHIC ARTISTS should send B&W photos, stats, or other duplicates of their work. Let us know if we can keep artwork on file for future use.

We are particularly interested in work that reflects the diversity of our experiences: as lesbians of color, ethnic lesbians, Third World, Jewish, old, young, working class, poor, disabled, fat. We will not print anything that is oppressive or demeaning to lesbians or women, or which perpetuates negative stereotypes. We do intend to keep an open and critical dialogue on all the issues that affect our work, joy and survival. See p.142 for details on upcoming issues. The themes are intended as guidelines, not as rigid categories. If you have work that doesn't fit an upcoming theme, but belongs in *Sinister Wisdom*, don't hesitate to submit it.

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**BOOK ORDERS: SINISTER WISDOM BOOKS IS NO LONGER IN BUSINESS.**

- All orders for *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, edited by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, should be sent to Beacon Press, 25 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02108. This is a new, expanded edition of *Dina*, retailing for \$12.95.
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