UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Castelliri Poems

by

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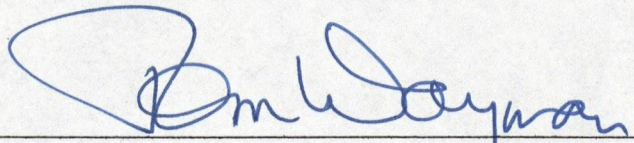

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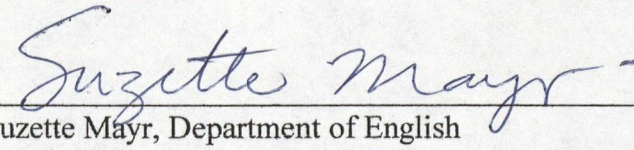

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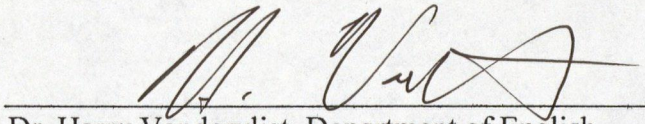

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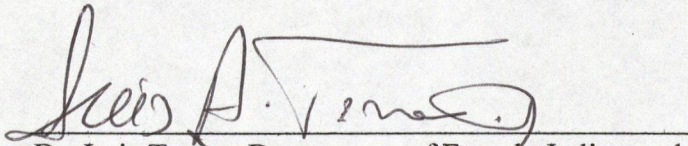

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Abstract

Castelliri Poems is a collection of poetry about my paternal family's place of origin: the small town of Castelliri in south-central Italy. Section one,"A Visit", documents in a predominantly lyric mode my experiences while in Castelliri. Section two, "The Giovannones", is narrative and constructs family history in prose as well as in an experimental poetic form that involves the extensive use of Italian and Latin terms in English. Section three, "Sources", is a poetic rewriting of historical documents about Castelliri incorporating computer translation. A critical introduction situates the collection in the context of Italian-Canadian writing while distinguishing it from prevailing definitions of what constitutes the Italian-Canadian experience.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Tom Wayman for his support and encouragement during the writing of this thesis. Special thanks also to Christian Bök, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco and Jordan Scott for their friendship and feedback. I owe my sanity during the winter months to my roommates and the community of writers in the Kensington area. (You know who you are). Vorrei anche ringraziare i miei parenti a Castelliri che mi hanno fatto loro figlio e fratello: Zia Bianca, Zio Lodovico, Valeria e Mara, Zia Amerina, Zio Domenico, Stefano e Laura, Gina, Pasquale, Roberto e Paolo. Ringrazio pure gli amici di piazza che mi hanno imparato a parlare il vero *ciociaro*: Giampaolo, Clementino, Alighiero, Luca, Antonio, Luciano e Sandro. To my Italian family in Canada, especially Zia Ada, Zio Bob and Zio Carlo, thank you for being here. And what goes too often without saying, a special thanks to my mother, Margaret Griffiths.

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Introduction

Joseph Pivato locates the beginning of Italian-Canadian literature in the appearance of Roman Candles, an anthology of Italian-Canadian poetry edited by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco in 1978 (Pivato, Anthology 12). Prior to Roman Candles, Italian-Canadian writers had been producing texts in isolation, largely unaware of other writers in Canada of their same ethnic background. The appearance of this anthology proved an act of self-definition for the Italian-Canadian literary community and sparked a flurry of activity from its contributors, many of whom, such as Mary di Michele and Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, have since gone on to successful literary careers.

This generation of Italian-Canadians, largely the sons and daughters of first-generation immigrants, had been brought up and educated in Canada. They were generally the children of labourers and factory workers and were the first Italian-Canadians to have access to higher education. It has largely been up to this generation of writers and academics to define Italian-Canadian literature. While I place my poetry in this Italian-Canadian context, I do so with certain ambivalences, and with the necessary recognition of both a generational and cultural gap between myself and those writers who emerged in the 1970s.

Susan Iannucci discusses the work of this first-generation of Italian-Canadian writers in "Contemporary Italo-Canadian Literature". This literature, she states:

> is produced by writers who have at least one parent of Italian origin. These writers are, almost without exception, the second generation, the children of parents who made the decision to emigrate. . .Their works treat certain themes which characterize it as Italo-Canadian, the most prominent of which is a sense of "wandering between two worlds, one dead / the other powerless to be born." Clustered about this central theme are others like relationships within the

> family, generally between parents and children; nostalgia for an idealized past in Italy; a return to Italy that results in the conviction that Canada is home after all; a rejection of ethnic stereotypes as impediments to true integration. . . (Iannucci 224)

What I find contentious about Iannucci's thematic definition vis-à-vis my poetry are the assumptions she makes about the Italian-Canadian subjectivity. In certain ways I fit the author she defines. I have "at least one parent of Italian origin." My father came to Canada in 1969 as an immigrant from Castelliri, a small town in south-central Italy, in the province of Frosinone, region of Lazio. This technically makes me one of the children of immigrants that she identifies as the Italian-Canadian writer, but I find that her definition fails to explain my writing. This is because Iannucci implies what Dana Gioia makes explicit when, in an Italian-American context, he calls "the concept of the Italian-American poet most useful to describe first and second-generation writers *raised in the immigrant subculture*" (emphasis added, 3). This definition requires that the author has a certain cultural experience based on his or her genealogy, namely, that the first familial and linguistic experience is Italian, and that the North American experience comes after.

My identity as an Italian-Canadian differs significantly from that assumed by Italian-Canadian literary criticism. While my father was in fact an Italian immigrant, he was largely absent in my upbringing. As a child and adolescent I had little-to-no interaction with my Italian family, either in Canada or Italy. I was raised by my mother and my maternal grandparents, a family of predominantly British ancestry several generations removed from the act of immigration. Until the age of nineteen I was a monolingual Anglophone. When I did acquire a second language at university it was French. I didn't understand, speak, read or write any Italian until the age of twenty-

three, when an aborted attempt to settle in Paris landed me at my aunt's house in Castelliri.

Perhaps I need to demonstrate how far removed my experience of the return journey was from that mentioned by Iannucci and often related by Italian-Canadian authors. In his introduction to Roman Candles, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco explains his impetus to compile such an anthology:

> In 1974 I returned to Italy for the first time in twenty-odd years. I went, biased against a legacy that had made growing up in North America a difficult but not impossible chore (or so I thought). I went out of curiousity, and came back to Canada conscious of the fact that I'd been a man without a country for most of my life. And I became bitter at the thought that most people carry on day after day deeply aware that they do so on the land upon which they were born. . . [The poets in this anthology] are in the fortunate and tragic position of having to live with two cultures, one more exterior than the other. (9)

Whereas Di Cicco laments the difficulties of growing up as an Italian in North America, my ethnicity played little part in my childhood. I never thought of myself as Italian, and nor did I feel that my ethnicity complicated my social interactions with the dominant culture in Canada. This fact made my "return trip" to Italy really no return at all. My language and culture meant that I was no better equipped to deal with Italy than your average North American tourist. What I did have to help me, however, was the recent fact of immigration, if only because it meant that I had family still resident in Italy who would take care of me.

All this is not to say that I didn't feel welcome in Castelliri. When I walked off the train in Italy, I entered a space that knew exactly what to do with me, despite the fact that I hardly knew what to do with myself. I was truly unprepared for my aunt's

generous and unconditional welcome, and I was extremely attracted to the identity that genealogy guaranteed me there as a "returning son", an identity that was secure if I could somehow occupy it. I studiously and self-consciously went about becoming Italian: I immersed myself in the language, read the literature, studied the history and hung out with friends I met in town. *Italianitá* for me, was not a return but something to be newly acquired, and this, I felt, was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Iannucci concludes her essay on Italian-Canadian writing by stating: "Italy filters through in past tenses; their present is Canadian" (225). With such a statement she assumes a movement away from Italian culture towards Canadian culture that will finally result in the realization that "Canada is home after all" (Iannucci 224). I, however, have always felt comfortable in Canada and have always considered it home. I have therefore started at the point of assimilation that Iannucci posits as the end of Italian-Canadian literature. This fact leads me to the key difference between what Iannucci assumes to be the Italian-Canadian experience and my own situation: I do not have an Italian past. My poetry is, rather, an attempt to construct an Italian present. The very project of Castelliri, which articulates ties with a place, its residents and its history, belies Iannucci's assumptions that Italy for Italian-Canadians is past and dead.

Given this central difference it is perhaps no surprise that the characteristics of Italian-Canadian literature Iannucci lists are largely inaccurate when applied to my work. While in my poems there is sometimes the sense of being in between two places, Iannucci's main theme of "wandering between two worlds, one dead / the other powerless to be born" does not find such tragic overtones in my work (224). I render my presence in Castelliri through poems that articulate immediate sensual encounters and establish historical ties with the place. While many of my poems are about "relationships within the family," as Iannucci states, they are not about relationships

between "parents and children" (224). In my poetry the direct genealogical link to Italy is absent. Family relationships are therefore not articulated with the directness or the necessity of blood ties, but are chosen and self-consciously constructed. Because of the newness of my Italian experience, furthermore, my poetry is largely void of the "nostalgia for an idealized past in Italy" that Iannucci describes as a feature of Italian-Canadian writing (225). Finally Iannucci states that Italian-Canadian literature involves a "rejection of ethnic stereotypes". In section two of my thesis, however, we will see how stereotypes are wilfully, if ironically, inhabited through the extensive use of Italian and Latin.

The placement of my poetry in this Italian-Canadian context intends to expand and update Ianucci's definition of Italian-Canadian literature. Anthony J. Tamburri, while working in an Italian-American context, insists that we should "stretch" our reading strategies of Italian-American art forms (194). By doing so, Tamburri proposes to make the term inclusive of the work of later generations of Italian-Americans for whom "ethnicity is not a fixed essence passed down from one generation to the next" (194). Here Tamburri follows Michael Fischer in observing that ethnicity is not an inherited set of characteristics, but is, rather, "something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual, finding a voice or style that does not violate one's several components of identity" (qtd. in Tamburri 194). In the following pages, then, I offer a reading of my poetry that reconsiders Iannucci's defintion of Italian-Canadian literature in the light of a more recent Italian-Canadian literary production.

A close reading of some of my poems will demonstrate how I articulate my Italian-Canadian identity in ways differing from Iannucci's definition. In "Santa Restituta Decapitated Today", a communal celebration becomes an opportunity to

connect with a place and its history. This connection is not established through genealogy but rather through scholarship and common sensual experiences of the place. Alone in the crowd of locals celebrating the martyrdom of the town's patron Saint Restituta, the speaker imagines a connection to the past through a parallelism between himself and Cirillo, one of the saint's ancient devotees. The setting sun that "halos the mountain" (1) and the "bright festival arches glow[ing] overhead" (4) recall Restituta's dazzling arrival to the town in the third century A.D. The town band that "wails" for the speaker (3) is like Restituta's voice heard by Cirillo "clear as a trumpet" (19). The quotations in the poem from historical sources reveal that this connection has been researched and lend a learned authority to the imagined historic scene. While the speaker is alienated from the crowd of residents, a kinship between himself and Cirillo is established when their two perspectives finally merge in their common gazing on the spectacle of the Saint's severed head: "And there, where I'm looking / he found it" (23-24). This is a fulfillment of community and historic continuity that the ritual of the *festa* celebrates. Here Italy is not the "dead" world that Iannucci claims it to be (224). Instead, this poem is a re-enactment of history that links the past with the living present of the speaker.

In the three-part poem "Mark", an Austrian deserter who briefly joins the household becomes a means for the speaker to insert himself in the family history he is creating. As a foreigner who nonetheless enters the family structure, Mark becomes something of a forefather to the speaker. In part one Mark "materializes" (3) before a mother whose son had "dissolved into the hills" (9), thus filling a gap in the family structure. In part two the narrator establishes a link to his aunt and uncle through the stories he gleans from them. He inherits and assimilates their contradictory accounts about Mark and expresses them in his own text. In part three Mark becomes

spontaneously prophetic in overtly stylized language: "De Gasperis, Zampa Corta / in the bosco keep your beasts / and your children in the grotto / where no blue eye enters" (4-7). This prepares for the Austrian's exit from the narrative as the poet himself arrives to take up Mark's position in the family: "My eyes blink awake. / I squint at the cave's mouth / and Mark disappears into the blurred light" (14-16) While there is evidently a preoccupation with family relationships in this poem, these relationships are not articulated as blood ties but are self-consciously constructed.

Similarly, the "nostalgia for an idealized past in Italy" that Iannucci puts forth as a characteristic of Italian-Canadian writing, or the "death in nostalgia" that Pivato observes ("Oral Roots" 91), finds a different expression in the ode "To My Friends". Here the speaker tries to reinhabit a space and time when he was with his friends by resuming his position in a photograph. The time and place of the act of writing melds with the time and place of the photograph: "I'm still here with you / in this picture under my desk lamp / the night before I left" (1-3). This brief reunion takes place in what William Boelhower calls a "hyperspace" that the ethnic subject inhabits, a "nowhere and everywhere" (232). Such a non-descript place is void of any but the barest essentials: a border that delineates the space (the frame the picture implies) and a light to see it with (the desk lamp). Once the speaker tries to bring the photograph to life by describing it in detail, however, a distance inserts itself. The very act of description involves a necessary distance between the here-and-now of the speaking subject and what he sees in the photograph. The failure of this nostalgic mode to achieve community forces the speaker back into a self-reflexive present when he describes himself in the act of writing and muses about the poem's failure : "I'm staring at the computer, / writing to you my friends/ wondering what good is this poem" (13-15). The poem's final movement is a rejection of nostalgia as it moves away from the

picture to an imagined scene where his friends' lives continue, even though it means his own exclusion from their community.

Before moving on to treat other sections of my thesis, I would like to stop here briefly to discuss the style of the poems in section one. These are lyric poems, with an identifiable speaker, generally an "I" or sometimes a "we", that express a mood or feeling of the speaker (Baldick 125) in a confrontation with Italy. The use of a two or three line stanza is generally consistent throughout an individual poem, as is the use of a regular left margin. This regularity gives the poems a tight, formal quality. Modernist aesthetics certainly influence these poems. Ezra Pound's exhortation to direct treatment and to "use no superfluous word" in the creation of an image echoes through this work (357).

This lyric form changes in section two of my thesis, entitled "The Giovannones". This section takes on a much more narrative dimension because it is concerned with relating the events of a family history. The first part of this section is the short prose narrative entitled "Emma Belforte" , the result of an amalgamation of various written and oral sources about my great-grandfather Raffaele Giovannone. This is obviously an engagement with family history, but it is told by a narrator who is not part of that family. She is part of the community who is more interested in the historical and entertainment value of Raffaele's story. In her narrative, Raffaele throws endless parties for *bella figura* (to make a good impression) but actually comes off as something of a clown who entertains the town at his own expense. After his disappearance and for many years later Raffaele's story still circulates as joke, which "has become history" (34). In "Emma Belforte", then, a male family history is established. From its outsider's perspective, however, Raffaele lacks interiority and exists by virture of his excessive public performances.

This is a tradition of performance that I take up in the two poems that follow "Emma Belforte". They are poetic narrative pieces that tell the history of the two male ancestors mentioned in the previous story, Raffaele and his father Luigi. They do so, however, according to a formal constraint: every noun is an Italian or Latin word that has been officially accepted into the English lexicon[1]. A form of this sort inevitably highlights the authorial performance. It indulges the aesthetic of *difficulté vaincue* by showing off the author's ability to surmount the difficulty that such a form imposes (Motte 11). These two poems, in fact, go on to formalize what was only a theme in "Emma Belforte". Raffaele's concern for *bella figura* means that he impresses others while neglecting himself and his family. This text perhaps does something similar: it privileges its own performance to the point of allowing its formal properties, the writerliness of it, to overwhelm both the narrative content and authorial subjectivity. In any case, in these poems we see the story that Emma Belforte tells poeticized through the application of the constraint. These poems, then, re-appropriate the family-history for the poetic speaking subject who retells it in his own voice and form.

This form intends to bring a number of benefits to the text. Firstly, there is the purely aesthetic. I want to maximize the use of Italian and Latin so as to exploit the musicality of these languages. There is, furthermore, the very seductive guarantee of the unity of form and content. Immigrant stories are related in a language that itself has immigrated into the English lexicon. There are also cultural and political implications in the exploration of this linguistic territory where English, Italian and Latin meet. While it is a language that in some ways dramatizes the assimilative power of English, the systematic use of the foreign terms creates an obscurity that also demonstrates the

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[1] I take as my authority The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English. Jennifer Speake and Mark LaFlaur, eds. American ed. (New York: Berkley P., 1999).

languages' resistance to easy assimilation. In Italian-Canadian criticism, the Italian word is often treated as "a stone", a protrusion or a stumbling block within the English text that is used when there is no English equivalent possible (Canton 144 ; Loriggio 35). This poetry might very well be experienced as a series of such stumbling blocks: the attempt to squeeze Italian and Latin vocabulary into English grammatical forms creates a bumpy textual surface that continually keeps the reader off-kilter. But despite the difficulty such a text presents to an English reader, the fact remains that it is all officially English.

By restricting myself to the use of Italian and Latin words that have been officially accepted in the English lexicon, I am forced to write within the discursive registers of food, art, architecture, crime, fashion, etc., where such words are most commonly found. What occurs, therefore, is the wilful inhabitation of cultural stereotypes that exist in this language. This is yet another difference between my text and Iannucci's assertion that Italian-Canadian literature "rejects stereotypes" (225). Here the embrace of stereotypes is a kind of "play" inherent to such experimental poetics (Motte 22). This light-heartedness is possible because I am not threatened by the stereotyped language with which I write. The obvious performativity with which I adopt such an affected language, furthermore, belies the authenticity of the stereotypes carried in that language.

Despite the formal constraint, this poetry is informed by some of the same stylistic principles mentioned earlier. Directness and brevity are privileged as I strive to create a tight, formal effect. Here, this is also reflected in the typography. The large white margins create a framing effect that focuses a reader's attention on the text in the middle of the page.

The third and final section of the thesis "Sources" is a re-writing of various historical documents about Castelliri. Here I try to assimilate the knowledge of my precursors who also document the town. But while I inherit their work, I do not preserve it as is. Like Fischer's "reinvent[ion] and reinterpretat[ion]" of ethnic identity (qtd. in Tamburri 194), I translate and poeticize these historical documents so that they express my own sense of history in my own voice. Here the process of composition began with computer translations of Italian texts that I then edited for interesting vocabulary and phrases. I used these fragments, influenced by my own reading of the original texts, to generate the poems in this section.

While in this section the diction continues to be highly Latinate and Italianate (though not exclusively so), this text is not narrative. Here I try to create a lyrical collage in which each sentence and phrase is crafted for its own semantic and sonorous qualities but is also related to those around it. As an example, here are a few sentences from "President of the Republic": "We hung the Duce from the infrastructure. The necrosis falls off. We strophe and antistrophe. Poppies flip-flop in the bora. Wild strawberry lapidifes" (58). The political context of the title carries through to the first sentence about the "Duce". His swaying movement and decay is a "necrosis" put on public display, a movement that continues in the next sentence with the dramatic and communal "strophe and antistrophe". This action, transported to a natural scene, is taken up in the politically-suffused term "flip-flop". The back-and-forth movement is finally frozen in the lapidified strawberry. The intention then is not just to create imagistic and sonorous fragments, but also to make them contribute to a particular ambience. This ambience is not produced through narrative but rather through the layering and cumulative effect of lyrical fragments.

Collage is useful to describe my thesis as a whole. A variety of approaches are used to describe my encounter with Castelliri, its residents and its history, and each approach lends the project a different perspective. I think of Castelliri Poems as something of an apprenticeship in different types of poetry. It is also, however, an attempt to articulate my identity as an Italian-Canadian and as an individual. It is a purpose best achieved, in my opinion, by the diverse poetic modes employed here.

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SECTION ONE: **A VISIT**

Morning

The complete black in my room
thick with heat.

The sheet clings to me.
Sweat buds on my forehead

as the swallows' song amplifies.
Bare foot on cool marble.

Blinds clatter up
I blink into the ten am sun.

Balcony vista

Biscotti swell in milk.
I put the coffee on and wander outside

where the valley spreads
beneath my eyes:

Fallows and olive-green swaths
Ash, elm, oak spondees

Tile-red roofs on
rose, azure, lily villas.

All around me wave-edged
pink petunias limn the railing.

White-star jasmine
windmills aroma on a trellis

and yellow tomato blossoms
pulsate towards red

Bee-weight wavers
into flower slouch.

The coffee steams inside.

This Afternoon

I'm bloated on the floor
like I swallowed lunch whole.
I'm a breathing speed bump.

My head lolls.
In the TV's radiance
the weather girl

mouths a heat wave
that receeds and advances
on the fan's oscillation.

It buzzes
like my scooter.
I wince into the slipstream.

"You have to be careful at this hour"
Zia's voice pipes in
"the vipers come out"

and she's right.
I don't see the snake
as it suns itself on the road.

I straighten in surprise
at the bump under the tire

slow and rubber-neck
my eyes widening to watch it

flagellate the empty afternoon.

Restituta Frangipane Decapitated Today

The sun on its descent
halos the mountain
and the town band wails in procession.

Bright festival arches glow overhead
and I'm jostled in the crowd
flowing over the bridge.

A warm bora breathes on me.

Santa Restituta dazzled them
when she came down from the night sky

like a girandole spewing
"eloquence and marvelous beauty".

Cirillo felt his leprosy fall away
when he looked at her

and he hung a garland
of frangipani around her neck.

Later, after the crowd had thrown her head
from the bridge "in meal to the fish"

he saw Restituta in an effulgence
her voice clear as a trumpet in his ear:

"Go to where they martyred me.
On the shore you will find my head
borne on the waves of God's will".

And there, where I'm looking
he found it.

Feast Day

Clementino, Giampaolo and me

with the spectrum of festival lamps
strung across our eyes

and the basso profondo of the band
beating in our chests.

We mill among the constellations of girls
their galaxies of diamonds

and the silver half-moons
dangling from lobes.

We look. They look
at us looking

as we follow our orbit
to the darkest reaches of the corso

where the cold tramontana
blows through us

and we go back again.

Italian Popular Song

Questà non è la verità
Vieni a vedere perché

whispered as the sirocco through
my room, turning pages.

Here I have the silent words but

the gramophones of Zia's petunias
announce their nectar to the bumblebees

and a cube van mounted with speakers
rolls by booming an ad for fresh flowers.

This is strange, I think

When a scooter rumbles past
going to join the piazza buzz

where women tic-tac
in stillettos on cobblestone

and the young men laugh off
the machine roar of their factory shifts.

My work is quiet.
I don't want to hear them

so I crank the volume
my song steadily coming through:

But this isn't the truth
Come to me and find out why

Nonna Lidia

i.

Nonna Lidia is a paralyzed glyph.
Synapses flame and extinguish

and her mouth gapes a black hole.
Who knows what goes on in her head.

I pull the balcony doors open.

Outside the jasmine
hoists its aroma on a trellis

and I pour my thoughts over
the hills of golden dry hay.

When I come back in
Nonna's eyes are wide open.

The afternoon gleam
mirrors my smile in them.

ii. Photos

Her head emerges from the white
of a studio portrait
staring

and rotates into cameo
to gaze at her husband's bust
floating in a nimbus.

It is winter and she grows round
in a barren courtyard
surrounded by her satellite children.

Here she steps out of the blue *Ape,*
a motorized box she rode to market
every morning to sell chicory

and reappears in her daughter's mirror
on her wedding day.
The static touch between them

like years ago beside a bed
when Nonna touched her own
paralyzed mother's face

and turned it to the camera.

Mark

i.

A weeping seeps
from the orchard shade

and the Austrian soldier materializes
under an olive bough.

Nonna Faustina stops with her empty basket.
There is no surprise in her eyes
when she sees him

a hulk, like her son Pietro
whose silhouette had dissolved into the hills.

Mark opens his mouth, but his breath cannot
fill out words.

Faustina squeezes his arm.
His shoulders in her son's coat
will stretch it taut.

ii.

Zia Rosina sighs.
That's not right, says Zio Renato

then Mark shrinks to a speck at the horizon
as the ruins of Cassino smoulder behind him.

When he approaches their house
Nonno Silvio darkens the threshold
and points to the grotto.

> In the spring sun of Rosina's mind
> Mark stretches for high early plums

but in the cave of Renato's memory
it is winter
and Mark hunkers asleep.

iii.

The bombers roaring
overhead shake Mark awake
out of a dream rhythm:

> "De Gasperis, Zampa Corta
> in the bosco keep your beasts
> and your wine in the grotto
> where no blue eye enters."

They herd sheep into the trees
and hide cows in the shallows
of the Forma.

The children huddle that night with Mark
pillage echoing in their ears.

The sound of English in the morning.

My eyes blink awake.
I squint at the cave's mouth
and Mark disappears into the blurred light.

Morning in the Piazza del Duomo : Milan

I creep from my bunk early
in the dark

and doze in the warm lullaby
of the subway.

I emerge in the haze
floating in the piazza

and sit on the cool stone steps
of the cathedral.

A caffé americano
steams under my lips.

Out there, in the white
I hear the city's din:

car horns, motor echos,
angry shouting

and closer, quieter,
the steps of men and women

their voices in conversation.
Above me the cathedral's pinnacles

pierce the fog and disappear.
Everything waits to be born.

Honeymoon 1972

Margaret and Frank pressed together
in a current of sweltering tourists

that flows and jams in the duomo's portal
and heaves them inside.

At the threshold, they leave the afternoon heat
for a looming cool

and disperse, two particles
dissolved in the soft thrum of the crowd.

I don't know if Frank ever surfaces.
I give up waiting.

Margaret, however, rides a pew
gazes down to her wriggling toes in sandals

and up, into the glittering expanse
of vaulted ceiling, that rises and swells.

She waits for him. She waits for him.
The future is crystalline in her mind.

Waterfall: Isola del Liri

My scooter bumps
over cobblestone

and rattles
into the roar.

Mist glazes my visor.
A picture.

I want to see through to
that summer

when we stood quietly in the café
and watched the rain.

The curtain of water
pixellates as I zoom in.

The flux thickens.

To My Friends

I'm still here with you
in this picture under my desk lamp
the night before I left.

Our smiles flash on tanned faces
We're in t-shirts
Inter and Roma jerseys

We drape our arms over each other's shoulders.
Its like a photo of a soccer team
before the game that didn't matter.

From behind us the halogen sign
of the *Bar Muraglione* blurs
over my forehead, and it's late

I'm staring at the computer screen
writing to you, my friends
wondering what good is this poem

when you still buy each other coffee
and argue over soccer scores.
When every night

you call goodbye to each other
across the square
and disappear from under street lamps.

1 May

Aaron:
I'm at the kitchen table with my cousins: Mara, Valeria and Stefano. Zia Bianca is here too. We are eating melon. I am happy.

Valeria:
Aaron is tired because last night he came home at 3:00!!! He went out to drink and got drunk.

Stefano:
I'm here at Zia Bianca's house with my cousins Aron Mara and Valeria. Aron expected me to be different *[illegible]* that I haven't seen him.

Zia Bianca:
I am so happy to be here with my treasures, and those who are not here I carry with me in my heart.

Mara:
These years I thought about you a lot. I missed you!!!
When I saw the videotape you sent from Canada I was so happy because you thought about me too. Now that you're here it's like you never left.
I love you
Kisses
Mara

SECTION TWO : **THE GIOVANNONES**

Emma Belforte

In those days the mayor of the town was Raffaele Giovannone "Uiline"[1], the richest man in Castelliri and its largest landowner. When he was still young Raffaele had inherited a huge estate from his father Luigi, a labourer who had been in America during the war and had returned to Italy extremely rich. Luigi had used this money to build "Srgeet"[2], a huge stucco villa surrounded by olive orchards and vineyards, perched high on a hill above the town. I remember clearly standing at the end of Raffaele's laneway as a little girl and looking up through the bars of the elaborately-wrought iron gate that made a creaking sound in the wind. Among other features of the estate was a vast subterranean network of vats and pipes dedicated solely to the production of wine, part of which was converted for use in a swimming pool by subsequent owners.

Here Raffaele loved to throw lavish parties for the townspeople, with full five-course meals and accordion music afterwards: "Alla casa éua sempe n'arracéle"[3] as my mother used to say. Raffaele's wife Annuccia always appeared at these events in a gown of a different colour, and his three daughters were even more elegantly dressed than their mother. The Uiline girls enjoyed attention and weren't particularly discriminating: they would dance with the poorest *contadino* boy that asked them, even those who shuffled across the floor in *cioce*[4].

My mother, in recounting this parable to me, insisted that Raffaele was not a very well-liked man. He became surly when he drank grappa and had offended many people. At one of his parties Raffaele had responded to a young man's complaint about

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[1] Ciociaro dialect: "Violin"
[2] Ciociaro dialect: "A small mouse"
[3] Ciociaro dialect: "There was a constant confusion at his house"
[4] A traditional footwear of the Ciociaria region

the steak by tottering onto the table, dropping his pants and pissing in his plate. My mother swears to having witnessed this. Raffaele's looks, furthermore, did not make up for his poor etiquette. He was shortish and rather frail, due to, as some people speculated, an aversion to eating meat.

Neither did Raffaele have the cardinal gift of a good politician: the gab. During a debate Raffaele would lean heavily on the podium and respond to questions in a meandering, groggy way that both exasperated his opponent and made everyone believe he had been drinking. He tended to forget his speeches and usually finished his address to the audience by inviting everyone to his house for drinks afterwards.

But if the people of Castelliri had many reasons not to make Raffaele their mayor, they also had two good reasons to do so: fear and hope. The townspeople feared that a loss in the election would discourage Raffaele from throwing the parties they had all grown so accustomed to. Conversely, they hoped that a victory would have the opposite effect.

As hoped, Mayor Uiline's parties increased both in size and frequency after the election. Any given day of the week, Srgeet could be seen up on the hill with its windows glowing into the earliest hours of the morning. A rarer sight, however, was Raffaele at city hall. Thankfully for our town Raffaele's tenure as mayor was short-lived. As Mayor Uiline's feasts continued bigger and brighter than ever, a black hole of debt deepened in inverse proportion beneath him. There was no more hiding the issue when one morning Raffaele's creditor, a bald man in glasses from Arpino, rode up to the house in the company of the sheriff. Raffaele, still in his pygamas, reached his hand through the gate to take the paper. The town's ever-peeled eyes saw this and the secret that the Mayor was broke quickly spread through the piazza as such gossip

always does. "E' remaste a'ccomme a Don Falucce che na'mane annanze i una arréte"[5] is what the adults said about him. That night, for the first time in months, Srgeet was dark.

We only saw Mayor Uiline once more after that day. It was late afternoon and he was waiting in the hot sun outside his gate, with two sea chests in the dust on either side of him. A wagon came by and he got on. We later found out that he took the train to Naples and made the crossing to America.

Annuccia and the children stayed on at Srgeet without their father for another couple of years. There was even a brief renaissance at the estate about a year after the Mayor's departure, when it once again flourished with festivity and Annuccia and the girls reappeared in new gowns and elegant shoes. It's not clear where Annuccia got the money to resume her former lifestyle, but some speculate that the Mayor, working in America, sent it to her. In any case, these parties stopped after a few months when the creditor took possession of Srgeet and the family was forced to move down the hill. They took up residence with Annuccia's father, a kindly old man we all called Papa Ncinc, who had a modest house on the plain. The Uilines lived there until the old man died and they inherited the property. Srgeet remained boarded up and neglected for years, during which time the gate rusted and fell off its hinges. The house was eventually bought by Signor Ferri and his brother Angelo the gunsmith, and the olive orchards and vineyards sold off in pieces to various others.

Even though Raffaele Uiline's tenure as mayor was short-lived, he managed to leave an indelible mark on the civic life of our town. You can still hear the mischievous old-timers in the piazza retelling an anecdote about him. When the

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[5] Ciociaro expression: "He was left as Don Falucce, with one hand in front and one behind;" i.e. to cover his nakedness

National government was installing sewers in our town, the State engineers held a town hall meeting to discuss their construction plans. When they mentioned a need for a ninety horsepower engine to power the pumps and explained the cost to the municipality, Mayor Uiline was quoted as saying: "Ninety horsepower? Couldn't we just use ninety donkeys? They eat less and work more." This has become history.

LUIGI

Luigi Uiline hotfoots it from America big-rich as Amerigo Vespucci. In the US sacro egoismo tatooed him guinea, gumba and dago. In New York, he nomadized like a lazzarro among anglos. The vista shimmered with liras, but nostalgia for his patria and amore for his carissima caused

him nausea and delirium. Now on a mesa above Castelliri, he initiates a vita nuova. He plows the postbellico valuta of the lira back into terra firma. He sinks the onus of radix malorum at Srgeet. He upraises a palazzo with terrazzo on the piano nobile, with giallo antico ovolos and tondinos around an oculus. Paisans traipse through

the propylaeum famous for its pulvino with panthera leos, moulded with maestria'. They perambulate in sotto-porticos with the padrone, now the primus inter pares, and sip capuccinos under the loggia. Luigi's bambino, Raffaele, tarantellas in an apparatus for pressing various vinos. Later he dreams under a leafy pergola of

being doge, duce, condottiere, and generalissimo.

RAFFAELE

Signore Raffaele Violino dozes on the capo's sedile. A situla sloshes vino cotto on the motto in opus sectile: NIL RESEDIT VENENO. Aqua vitae liquify his cerebrum in a sparkling arpeggio. At the podium grappa clogs his glottis; he slobbers and lapses in lapsus linguae.

Raffaele's consigliere, Silvio Cancelliere, councils panem et circenses, a quid pro quo with the municipio. So rich-rich, Raff plays impresario and splurges on galas at Srgeet.

The villa relumes to the ghettos below. Raff kindles candelebra in the penumbra; aureolas float around millefiore

glass. A basso continuo calandos to the piazza. The mosso echo of vino rosso pours over the campagna at crepusculum. It floods the hollow cranium of an automaton contadino. The chroma deepens in his iris. Bimbos intonaco and impasto facial superfacies like frescos. They trick out in Prada and Bruno Magli, Miu Miu

and Parasuco. Signorinas pretty up in mascara and tiaras like prima ballerinas, but totter on stillettos. Literati abandon their stanzas in studios. Mafiosos unload luparas and cache them in cassones, then bundle berettas in Dolce and Gabbana bandanas. Padrones padlock pizzerias and shutter up salumerias. The Castellucciani

swarm in the Corso and surge up the mesa to the casa at Srgeet. They pour through the portico. They swamp the piano nobile and whirlpool in the cortile. Raff stands still in the alluvium.

He grips a panino and andantinos: "Take this, tutti quanti, and pig out. This is

my prosciutto, that will be given up for you." He uncorks a Chianti and croons:

"Take a tazza and guzzle it. This is the plasma of my paterfamilias. Do this and renominate me."

SECTION THREE : **SOURCES**

KING UMBERTO I

Father you doomed me, a synapse of the anima mundi. Your nimbus replicates in the stratosphere. Our genealogy schematizes the weather. In a frayed nexus, the vox popoli blows a scintilla. Tectonic shocks induce my arthymia. Our xeroxed

face modulates in the impluvium. Our servant pours the river Liri from her clay amphora and this castle washes up. *We have decreed and we decree:* Castelliri.

GIUSTINIANO NICOLUCCI

Lithospheric activity in my mind's eye. The prima materia writhes just below my feet. A tumulus swells among hillocks. An os sacrum pulsates in a sepulchral cluster. The night sky of silver nitrate glints on a marble slate. A smashed urn puffs an ash

nebula. The camera obscura of this sarcophogus projects my dead self. My fingers crook in iron-age orbitals.

The grotto swallowed her whole skeleton. Under a dolorous oak, I shade myself in the ignorance of farmers. A stream glissades over obsidian. The

paleolithic torrent branches in an antler. Cervidae molars grind shale in the fiumara. A cuspid tip pierces my thumb. A tusk of elephas antiquus hyperbolas to the vanishing plane.

My thoughtful hands clear away the ether. A pre-Roman pagus accrues in my

cerebellum. A restive neurogram bolts from its niche. Wild thyme runs its fingers over a Volscian vase. Zarcons wink in a gravel quarry. The Cabinet of Anthropology in Naples rebuilds wrongly, lacking parts.

FERNANDO PISTILLI

The tenement Earth leans towards the levant. Madrepore coral grows on mandible and clavicle. Roman hemaglobin clots in terra rossa. A castrum crescendos a tower. The Via Latina sotto voces. Your

lesioned foot in ruins of the monastery.

We unearthed this canto under ivy:

CHRYSANTHEMUM VÉIL

VELLUM LIMESTONE

YOUR PYROLYSIS

PIOUS DAUGHTER

Here a cousin of Pompei scattered broken columns, of which we have no memories. An arch vaults the Liri.

A vexillum ripples in the sirocco. A papal brigade overbrims the muraglione. The angelus bell thrums halos in Fibonacci numbers. A cannonade blows open the

mezzogiorno gate. In *Sacred Italy* we read
that all barons knocked down their towers.
I breach the vestige of a garland.

THE PRESIDENT

OF THE REPUBLIC

R.R. D.D. 1943. We hung the Duce from the infrastructure. The necrosis falls off. We strophe and antistrophe. Poppies flip-flop in the bora. Wild strawberry lapidifies. On the proposal of the Prime

Minister, I assembled the Bureau of Heraldry in pietra dura. In the rain, the Piazza del Principe shimmers a Fermi surface. The citizens glisten in an opus Alexandrinum.

COAT OF ARMS: Morning glory and woodbine reticello a silver turret.

Inside a calyx supernovas. The embrasures seep a merlot plenum. A dragon-satellite hovers at its apogee in alto-relievo. In his mouth, infra-red flames fulminate like maffei galaxies. The riven tip of his tail hefts in your

hands. The maxim, in stone: NIL RESEDIT VENENO.