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Poems

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Emilia Contessa

I don't recall my grandmother having too many saints around the house—maybe a few holy cards stapled onto the wood paneling in the back room; a small palm cross tacked onto the corner of the doorway; a Virgin on her dresser; a scapular tucked into her hair pin box; a crucifix over her bed; some rosary beads hung over the headboard; St. Christopher in her purse because none of her children would have one in their cars.

My grandmother was a Neapolitan Contessa and didn't believe in peasant ways. She dried hot red peppers to chop fine and put in the sauce, hanging them over the backyard door, where the sun and the air were good. If the Sicilians down the block chose to believe this was a charm to keep out mal occhio, she wasn't concerned. After all, if a charm is powerless to do good, it certainly couldn't hurt.

Higher Education

I'm walking on the campus and I see a flyer taped to a pole. The Drama Club is presenting an exploration of Italian-American culture. One guy is waving a gun. My life tunnels toward the flyer, my hand reaches out, keep walking, rip off the flyer, keep walking. There's another flyer on the other side of the pole, keep walking, until I get to class, until class is over, keep walking, until I get back to the flyer. But it isn't there. There must be another one like me.

I'm walking on the street in the real world, crowds of shoppers like confetti, store windows like lives I've never known or really believed. Someone wants change. Someone wants me to excuse him. Someone wants me to remove a flyer from under my nose. Italy jumps into my hand, from Italy. There must be others. They're coming to rescue me at last, take me home where I'm normal, where they know what I'm saying about men's 100% wool slacks.

Like an Italian-American

I've seen different explanations
coming from different directions
explaining different perceptions
being the same old shit. It gets
complicated and when the double-
talkers are caught they talk
about being baited. I remind you
that you don't know anything
about Italian-American history.
Your hand slaps down hard
on the table, your eyes roll,
and you say—oh, so now I don't
know anything.

But that remark alone proves
you know a whole lot about
people generally—and nothing
about Italian-Americans in
particular. How many times
do I tell you the same thing,
how many ways do I say it, how
many insults do I explain? I rely
on omertà for dignity and
self-respect and in your eyes
I see victory.

This morning I heard something
on a soap opera that reminded me
of you. A mother was telling
her friend that her son
was upset because the other
boys made fun of the way
he plays baseball. Her friend

said she understood how bad
the son must have felt. The mother
said no, a girl could never
understand how it hurts a boy
to be told he throws like a girl.

There is Nothing in this World as Wonderful as an Italian-American Lesbian

1

There is nothing in this world as wonderful
as an Italian-American lesbian
from Bensonhurst.
Watch her walk along 86 Street.
Look at the young men in white
standing outside the pizzeria
with their dark, curly hair
and long, crooked noses.
Listen to what they say as she goes by.
Now watch her stop. Watch her turn. Listen.
You have never heard so many stunning
profanities without a pause
for breath, rolling, tumbling, glorious rhythm,
accompanied by her wild, graceful, moving
hands with their strength and passion.
This is music. This is dance.
Even the young men from the pizzeria
laugh in the appreciation, proud to admit defeat
to such a brave warrior. An Italian-American
lesbian from Bensonhurst knows how to impress
with only her mouth and her hands.

2

There is nothing in this world as wonderful
as an Italian-American femme
from the Lower East Side.

Watch her walk along Second Avenue,
always looking for something to cook.

She stops at a vegetable stand, takes
a basket, stares at the zucchini, her eyes
narrow and her lips pursed. Watch her

pick up a tomato, caress it. Her long,
thin fingers curve around it, stroking,
kneading, gently squeezing. Between thumb
and forefinger, she pinches lightly the small,
dark stem, then puts the tomato into her
basket. She picks up another tomato,
caresses it just as carefully, stroking
and kneading with as much attention,
lightly pinching the small, dark stem
before putting it into her basket beside
the first, two bright, round tomatoes resting close,
waiting for her mouth.

No one knows how to cook like an Italian-American
femme from the Lower East Side.

3

There is nothing in this world as wonderful
as an Italian-American butch
from the Village.

Watch her walk along Bleecker Street,
anticipating Sunday dinner.

Look at her eyes as she thinks—the platter
of enticing antipasto; the welcome home fragrance
of provolone; the clotted, red sauce bubbling
in the pot; meatballs sizzling in the pan;
the mother's milk taste of ricotta oozing
from stuffed shells; layers and layers and
layers of lasagna, curly edges hiding
endless treasures.

Look at her shoulders. Look at her stride.
Look at the box of pastries under her arm.
Watch her slip the key in the lock.

She carries to the head of the table
not only the endurance of the Grandmother
but also the will of the Grandfather,
waiting intensely for the inescapable climax
of that merciless, necessary feast. No one
eats as well as an Italian-American
butch from the Village.

Rosa

Named for my father's father,
in the old Italian way,
my brother's name is Nicola.
My grandfather didn't believe it—
Nicholas, yes, but not Nicola.
When my grandfather saw his name
on the birth certificate,
he cried. My father was proud.

A year and a half later
I was named after my mother's mother.
This impresses my third-generation
Italian-American lesbian feminist friends,
but not by grandmother. She
was already dead when I was born.

I used to imagine her sitting in black,
with that Sicilian look in her eyes,
worried and wondering how
this grandchild could be so
inferior, so unworthy of an
Italian name, deserving only to be
exiled with an American name.

Slash

Amelia Chianese was a gloveworker
thirty years old and ugly
who sat before her machine
and dreamed of her lovers.

Sfregio is an honor to a woman's beauty.

Amelia Chianese dreamed of her lovers;
as ugly as she was, she dreamed
of her lovers who would come
as she sat before her machine.

Sfregio is an honor to a woman's beauty,
left by a man so passionately in love.

Amelia Chianese, thirty years old and
ugly, frightened children and repelled
even the ugliest young men, dreamed
all day and all night of her lovers.

Sfregio is an honor to a woman's beauty,
left by a man so passionately in love,
he hated and needed revenge.

Amelia Chianese left her machine one night
and, no long willing to dream
of the honor of a woman's beauty,
in a flash of red, created her own.

Sfregio is an honor to a woman's beauty,
left by a man so passionately in love,
he hated and needed revenge
for her dreams and her passionate love.

Amelia Chianese sat before her machine,
now with her fiery scar, no longer so
ugly. Carluccio Ziviello stood before her,
dreaming of being her lover.

Speaking Italian

Tonight I've decided I don't want
to speak Italian anymore. I don't
have to be Italian if I don't
want to. I can speak English,
scrub my forehead and
shave my chin. If I eat spaghetti,
pizza, lasagna and garlic bread,
well, so do yuppies.
I have a wasp last
name I can use, which
I got from my ex-
husband, who got it from his
family's former owners. If
he can use it, so can I. I won't have to suffer
with 34 (count them) forms for every
verb. How do you explain a people
so proud of not needing pronouns
when with six lousy pronouns
they wouldn't need 34 forms
for every damned verb?

Tonight our teacher told us
about her family in Taormina.
When she visits them they never
mention the Mafia and she
doesn't like to say anything. The whole class
goes woooooo. Never doubt the truth of
words never said. (I just made that up.

You thought it was an old Sicilian proverb.) She says her family never mentions having to pay, but that's how the city is run. Everyone has to pay a percentage, but she can't think of the word. Maybe the word is protection. Maybe the word is extortion. Maybe the word is tax. (Who can say, if it's never said?) And the whole class goes woooooo. I don't say anything about being an axe murderer or the bigots buried in my cellar.