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STELLA AND VALERIO

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STELLA AND VALERIO

A Creative Project Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
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John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Silvia Iorio
2019

The essay of Silvia Iorio is hereby accepted:

Dr. George Bilgere

Advisor – George Bilgere

4/21/2019

Date

I certify that this is the original document:

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4/21/2019

Date



To Mommy, Daddy, and Manu. I love our story.

I have struggled harder to compose poetry this past year than at any other time in my writing career. I began thinking that I had simply used up all of my creative talents and that I lacked any subject-matter to continue writing. I had a goal in mind to write often this year but the inability to find any inspiration lingered and created a feeling of failure. Now was the perfect time to write before settling into a job post-graduation, where I would not find as much time to be able to write, but I could not find that itch that forced me to put pen to paper. I struggled finding inspiration in books or poems that had once been enough to fuel me. I tried locating moments worth writing about through conversations with various individuals, but the lights were off and it felt impossible to turn them back on. In Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, she mentions keeping a 1-inch picture frame on her desk, reminding her that even if she has no idea where to begin, she can begin with short assignments. Rather than a 1-inch picture frame, I have a quote pinned to the bulletin board right above my desk that reads, "The thing you are most afraid to write, write that." Unlike Anne Lamott, too, I have ignored this quote multiple times because I *am* afraid of writing that which I am most afraid to write about: myself.

Only in the past few years have I realized how much of who I am is because of my family and where we came from. I had written about my family in the past, of course, but I had never explored writing about us, about our story, in depth. In this current age of poets, I would now situate myself in a comfortable climate of fellow immigrant writers—weaving their way through the laborious immigration system with their families, experiencing a difficult culture, and struggling to find a way to define themselves when growing up "American," while observing foreign traditions and languages. I had to figure out a way to write my way into this room of poets with whom I felt such kinship with, but

I had to also figure out a way to do this in my own voice and my own style. A year ago, however, I had not yet discovered poets who would inspire me to. I knew which poets had brought me pleasure and which poets had urged an imitation poem out of me, but my knowledge was devoid of poets who wrote about themes I could relate to, themes like being a woman, being an immigrant, coming from a close-knit family, and dark-humor. I kept looking for a combination of these themes in poetry, but I did not have the direction needed to discover them. I needed to read more.

I took my first poetry workshop in 2016. I was fortunate enough to read the works of fellow peers while also having the chance to immerse myself in the poems written by my professor, Dr. George Bilgere. Through this course, he shared one of his favorite poets, the late Tony Hoagland. Hoagland was refreshing, amusing, and relatable. The importance of his poetry is, to me, the accessibility; he does not place himself on a pedestal and make it impossible for his readers to reach him, he does the exact opposite. In books like *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty*, I discovered poignant truths about the world around me, truths that are sometimes difficult to face, like the issue of race in this country that Hoagland describes in “Foghorn” and how he resolves the issue by saying: “Brother, lean your brown face down/ and let me look at you” (46). I also found humor and more truth in poems like “At the Galleria” where he deals with issues like consumerism in a witty manner. I admire Hoagland for his truth and the way in which he conveys these truths. I developed my own voice primarily because of Hoagland; I took small pieces and instances of daily life and fit them into a poem and became unfamiliar and inattentive to boundaries. Fast forward to 2018, and I would find this voice of truth and humor reaffirmed in George Bilgere’s *Blood Pages*, a witty

testament to age and fatherhood, totally accessible to his readers. Poems like “Living Will” separated themselves from those more comic poems and instead instilled the importance of remembering just how much of an effect parents have on us, and how their own mortality can be reduced to a single word, like a ventilator, freezing us in the tracks of life: “I wanted to stay/ inside that word for as long as I could” (7). Other poems like “Happy Hour,” “Void Unfilled,” or “The Roughs” wrestle with pictures of daily life and reenact poet as the ultimate observer. Through my independent study, I was introduced to poets like Denise Duhamel and her book *Queen for a Day*, where I found humor in prose poetry and was able to practice the joys of writing about Barbies and high school. After reading “Kinky” where “Barbie and Ken vowed to make their relationship work,” (ll. 25-26) I wanted to write my own Barbie poems, and I fell in love with doing so. I practiced imitating poets like Hoagland, Bilgere, and Duhamel and began to find my voice. These three poets reassured me that my poems had a place in the new age of poetry, with its characteristics of knowability, humor, and snapshots of daily life.

During my independent study and a poetry workshop during Graduate school, I was introduced to more poets I had not yet come across. A few of these poets would continue to transform my poetry as well as my voice. During my independent study, I read Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris*. I observed, in her poetry, images of beauty and extended metaphors, through her many vespers and visions of nature: “from the center of my life came/ a great fountain, deep blue/ shadows on azure seawater” (ll. 21-23). While I generally relied on instances in life and translated them into humorous images, I had yet to apply heartbreaking truths to paper and surround them with images of nature. I attempted to imitate Glück and found it a great challenge, and yet a great moment of

success in my writing. Trying on a different voice or a different purpose for writing had initiated a change in my writing, or rather, shone a light on what I was still capable of. Other poets shined this light on my poetry as well: Marwa Helal and Leila Chatti. Helal's *Invasive Species* examines the burdening immigration process of the U.S. and includes a lengthy abecedarian poem called "Immigration as a Second Language" that inspired me to imitate and weave my own immigration experience with my family into an abecedarian poem of my own. I related so much to instances of Helal's abecedarian poem, like the letter 'F:' "From-from?! Where *am I* from-from? Where are you *from-from?*" (ll. 1-2). I, too, often asked myself this question. Leila Chatti's *Tunisiya/Amrikiya* balances both multicultural identities as well as questions of belonging when dealing with multicultural identities. The poem "Cousins" relates Chatti's return to Tunisia in the summer and the memories she makes with her family who still live there. The poem "Homophones" shows the difficulty of the English language, and the even greater difficulty of the inability to translate certain words: "The Tunisian word/ for asleep is rek'ked,/ which sounds like wrecked" (ll. 11-13). I found questions of "who am I?" in Chatti's writing that closely resembled questions I had about myself. Helal and Chatti belong to a group of poets wrestling with identity politics, and I knew that I too belonged to that movement. These poets triggered meaning and purpose in my writing and forced me to think about how I could transform my own identity, voice, and where I come from into something bigger than a single poem. For my thesis of 25-30 poems, I wanted to make sure I was including a story and not simply 25-30 fragments of poems I had composed for the past year. There needed to be a purpose; there needed to exist a story within all of these poems and there needed to be a single thread weaving them together.

During my Independent Study, I read the work of Rita Dove. I read *Thomas and Beulah* and immediately found the idea of a narrative poetry book something I had not come across before and therefore compelling. Dove focuses on her grandparents throughout the book, but these poems do not fall in strict chronological order; instead, Dove dedicates the first half to her grandfather and the second half to her grandmother, allowing the poems to encompass different memories and renditions of a variety of occurrences in their lives. Dove's narrative about her grandparents wrestles with issues of race for African Americans, like in the poem "Nothing Down" where a "carload of white men/ halloo past them on Route 231" (ll. 50-51). The poem "Jiving" alludes to the migration of her grandparents up north: "Heading North, straw hat/ cocked on the back of his head,/ tight curls gleaming/ with brilliantine, he didn't stop" (ll. 1-4). *Thomas and Beulah* spoke to me in an unrelated way that other books had. Although I now had read several poets who I could relate to, in Dove's narrative, I found a story of my own that was waiting for someone to give it a voice, but I needed to let go of the fear. Definitions of fear often include some kind of feeling due to perceived danger or threat, but the fear that has taken hold of me for much of my life involves long-term challenges. I treat many occasions in life like an easy enough to-do list, where accomplishing goals involve short-term commitments. Whenever I find a challenge that takes too much time, I ignore it, or I consider myself unfit for taking it on. Dove's narrative convinced me that I had a story to tell and acquiring my Master's by completing a creative project seemed like the perfect opportunity to prove myself that I am capable of long-term challenges.

Much of my life has been affected by the story of my family's immigration. I experienced moments growing up where I became confused by my own identity.

Following Italian traditions and listening to the Italian language at home became blurred by wanting peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and not understanding the traditions of other American-Italians. I spent my childhood observing my father in the kitchen, and then understanding what a culinary presence he was in the city of Cleveland. I spent time wondering why my mother's accent was so heavy compared to other moms with accents, but I found that her accent existed because of her striking intelligence in both understanding two different languages, but also being able to follow the cultures of both of them. I followed in the footsteps of my parents and began working in the restaurant industry. Here, I observed so many situations that confused my identity once again. I was suffocated by rumors, compliments, moments of learning about food, and moments of teaching about food, and our culture. I learned so much about my parents that I did not have the capacity to understand when I was a child. I became interested in the story of our immigration once I began understanding how difficult the process of immigration was. I wanted to put all of this together; I wanted some kind of documented story of how much these two wonderful people had accomplished. I wanted some kind of document that I could look back on one day and live through once again. So, I needed to write the story of my parents—the story of us. I needed to share my gratitude in the best way I know how, through words woven into a poem. I needed to implement and pay homage to the voices of all of the poets I had studied through both my undergraduate career as well as my graduate career, and I knew how to do it because of Rita Dove's dedication to her grandparents. These studies and experiences with poetry have led to me to once more believe in my ability to write a story. MY story.

1996

America was, to them,
pregnant streets and automatic cars,
Gap shorts in 50 degrees,
going outside with wet hair and catching 6 different viruses
walking in a size 10 when really a size 9,
shaving arms hairs into a toothpaste stained sink
washing hair with Head & Shoulders shampoo every day,
distinguishing football from football

And it also was
convenience
applying for an American Express credit card with no assumed consequences,
houses that widened their eyes and had them dreaming for days,
smiles even when applying for a loan,
small talk and friends made on solo sushi dinners to Otani,
a pause in the parking lot to make sure they were headed the right way,
and forgiving.

Always forgiving.

Ristorante La Playa

Here in Florence, blocks from Ponte Vecchio,
Two regions meet,
Separated by a glass of something,
Something that stirs up the future between
Two twenty-somethings,
Two different guaglios.

He may have ordered a glass of red wine that would
Eventually become the fruits of their labor,
Or Dewar's on the rocks, ice breaking up the particles
Of the liquid coming from the barrel.
They'd pretend somewhere down the line that it was
His vehicle on the waters to the New World.

He looked at her and thought her tight curls
Would wrap perfectly around the finger of a baby girl,
He looked at her with his thin lips closed shut
Knowing instantly, as they all do, that she was indeed
A Sicilian--
And they never stop talking.

She thought he knew more than he said,
Sensed an intellectual in chef pants,
Choosing or not choosing, but knew nevertheless
How to cook up a good Italian meal,
Coming around her so late.

She's judging his apologetic eyes,
What does he have to be sorry about?
She'll figure it out,
She always does.

L'Accento

It's in the voice of the bank teller,
It's buried into the faces of Little Italy,
It crawls out onto the noses at the elementary school,
Worn like clothing on their kids' friends.

Distance, they were
Different.
The accents in their voices deemed them
Weird,

Stupid, maybe.
Uneducated,
Foreigners in the worst sense:
Not Allowed to be Here.

But they ignored the voices,
Turned blind to the faces,
Covered their noses,
Imagined everyone naked.

Careless, but not stupid,
Resourceful, not ignorant,
Travelers with purpose, ones who

Belonged.

Working America

pictures on the wall voluntarily shake,
they designate themselves closer to
each other as each stair below creaks
from your return from a long night
of heated kitchens.

back bent over boiling water,
those Venetian gondolas they understand
your sighs.

the mortgage, the ER bill, the snores
of the lucky ones already asleep,
tucked under blankets of 9 to 5's,
on the spring of a mattress overlooking
the shed across the backyard,
with some tired light always on like
the Fire Department's garage,

waiting on a call to bring the Wonderbread
home, putting out fires, destroying homes,

it's all work.

even the canvases there on the wall,
working to pay back the debts of some artist,
oil and water,

this too
won't be forgotten.

Two More Real Ones

The sign appeared in the rusty window of the black and white photograph--
“WonderBar,” which then became Italian Village which then became Valerio’s.
And back then the font was just like you could imagine, a WonderBar kind of font.

The same blackish awning, that looks like it’ll fall off soon-- but who knows which color
back then,
The same vestibule with the same screen door, surrounded by burnt plastic walls caving
in,
Which has only probably been replaced once in the past decade.

And I’m sure if you walked in back then, there was the same worn out black carpet and
whiteish walls,
With the same fingerprinted mirror in the back of the restaurant that covers up the fuse
box,
And the same brown rusted bar top with frustration scratched in that has probably never
been replaced since.

With the same drinks slammed on and off by real Italians--the ones right off the boat.
Drinking Peronis, Amstels, and Bud Lights, fitting in with the hard hitters,
The Dewars and water, Makers on the rocks, the Jameson shot-throwing mafia dudes.

WonderBar turned into Italian Village where pizzas filled the bar top and tables
Filled the dining room with the next generation of pepperoni-loving
Mingya-don’t-you-let-that-black-guy-around-me kind of Italian Americans who give
everyone headaches.

From the 1920s to the 1950s to 1996, years turning like pages at Ellis Island,
The cycle begins again with two more real ones, scrubbing the bar top, vacuuming that
black carpet,
And slamming drinks down till every drop became a legacy of 20 some years called
Valerio’s Restaurant.

You Look Like Your Mom

I wonder often about what my parents gave me,
What genes chose me when I came into this world--

What genes traveled through me in '95 at Santa Maria Nuova,
which ones they saw me with even when having immigrated
to new cultures and different lifestyles. What remains?

My mother's rosy Mount Everest cheekbones,
That became the origin for prepubescent acne
Or the shade of my father's thin red lips that would
send me to the principal's office in fifth grade,

My mother's weird mathematical skills that passed
trigonometry but failed geometry,
or my father's passion for cooking that burns through
my large palms when I grab salt for boiling water,

Or my mother's thirst for other people's gratitude
and the love for the phrase *thank you so much*,
or my father's careful attention to detail so that we both notice
Louis Armstrong's smile in "What a Wonderful World,"

Who we are is so much of where we come from,
of who we come from and who they came from,
anatomical similarities, intelligence, passion, gratitude & detail,
Generations of hands passing and passing and passing,

They're really saying
I love you.

I Gelsi

I still remember the sweetness of the berries,
collected in some mediocre bowl as if to suggest
they did not need to be shown off with some
flaunting presentation.

Smaller than American strawberries, unconvicted
by GMOs, they dance and burst with flavor,
they hang from trees in plain sight surrounded by
Italian verandas.

In Carbone, in Barrafranca in small *villaggi*
or Tuscan gardens throughout the peninsula
fruit speaks for itself, seamlessly releases from trees,
and then fall into a desirous hand.

Each summer mulberries or *gelsi* are pulled
from their twigs and meet my gentle caress,
the shattering flavor enters my mouth and greets
a staggering American-bred saliva.

Immigrante

Sometime while my mother was explaining
How to buy a house,
I wondered how she and my father made it here.

23 years ago they calmed down two screaming kids
On a plane to a new country,
My father claiming he knows more English
Than he probably does.
My mother, a waitress, who knows no English.

They shuffled us into an old brick house
With a family of three,
They rushed off to work and left only my
Mother's perfume behind.
I held onto it until they came home.

And somewhere in between falling
For Visa credit card scams
And an ICE visit to our front door,
My father almost declaring bankruptcy,
And my mother learning about her failure to assimilation,

We made it here.
To a home in Highland Heights
With high city taxes,
A business doing better than ever,
And my mother sitting at the kitchen table,

Explaining in perfect English
How to buy a house.

La Gelateria

“Stai attenta, stai attenta!”

My dad would shout walking down those blue concrete steps.
And I knew to be careful because I wanted to
Make it to the bottom,

To the place that would become my first job
And the place that would land my father an official
Place in Cleveland’s culinary scene,
The sweet scent of La Gelateria’s basement:

Nutella and dark chocolate shavings,
Chocolate chips and cinnamon,
Cherries, mangoes, strawberries,
Sicilian pistachios and whip cream,

And a giant cooler filled with tubs of Gelato,
Facing stainless steel countertops with
Chocolate chips running loose
Only to be caught and stuffed into my ten-year old mouth,

While I’d squint at all the white walls surrounding me,
A dessert penitentiary.
And I wanted to be convicted right here,
In this sinful scent of Italian imported sweets,

With my dad, Cleveland’s gelato-maker
And his TV static chef pants and white lab coat,
Pasteurizing cream in imported machines
Into which I’d gaze and wish to blend in my youth forever.

Gossip about Valerio's Restaurant

Nancy has no idea that I saw her say my uncle's cooking is "far more superior" to my father's while she was sipping on her extra dirty martini.

Jack does not care that he looked at me while claiming the food quality of my father's restaurant has "severely" decreased, specifically the mussels!

The tall guy with the awful breath whose name I don't know doesn't know whose daughter I am when he says that my dad is a stupid man who isn't close to what a chef is.

And when they find out that Peppe's niece is actually Valerio's daughter and proceed to choke on their heavily poured drinks of poison, and then take a deep baby-boomer breath

I smile real big with the teeth my dad paid for, busting his ass in a hot kitchen for 20 years after immigrating and pour myself a nice, tall Tanqueray and tonic, with extra limes.

Undefined

Are we American-Italians
or Italian-American?

We play with the nationalities like a deck of cards,
Swapping a pick 4 for choosing a color,
Blue, Red, Yellow, or Green?
We must choose one or do we
Reinvent the rules of the game?

We are Italian when it comes to food--
No sugar in the sauce, no cheese on the fish,
Sweets that aren't too sweet, fish caught fresh never frozen.

We are American when it comes to kindness--
Sit next to the foreigner at the sushi bar
And strike up a conversation with a stranger.

Americans let you sit in coffee shops and won't
Complain when you use the outlet for a few hours,
And sip on your black watered-down coffee.

Italians don't care what time you're arriving or when you're staying till
They sip Grappa after their four-hour Christmas Eve dinner
And feed you Espresso because you happened to drop by.

We stick up for the Americans when the Italians say they
Drive too much. We stick up for the Italians when the Americans
Call them lazy and laugh at their 2-week vacations.

Who sticks up for us (whoever we are)
when they (whoever they are)
ask us (whoever we are)
what we (whoever we are) are?

I Don't Want an American Mother

American moms pack their kids' lunches with
"Have a good day" notes and Wonderbread.
My mother used to pack my lunch with a can of imported
Genoa tuna and a can opener the size of my head,
Il tonno ti fa bene, Silvia.

American moms park their SUVs in the garage and leave
Their front doors unlocked.
My mother asks me three times or more a day if the
Doors are locked, the garage is closed, and if
Anything or anyone looked suspicious outside of our
Zero percent crime rate neighborhood.
Me scantu!

American moms encourage their kids to wear their
Pjs inside out for a snow day.
My mother makes me change them back normally,
Makes me swear I'll never put shoes on the bed,
Giving me her superstitious looks,
Di brutta fortuna.

And when it rains outside, not snows, but rains
American moms put on stylish raincoats and carry on.
My mom tells me to get under the covers,
And not to worry because everything'll be alright,
Mettiti sotto la coperta cosi non senti che piove.

Because American moms never faced the storm
*Di tutti gli sacrifici,
Della mia mamma Italiana.*

Culinary Lessons

My father is a Florentine trained chef.
I was raised by the Steve Jobs of culinary.

And yet,
When I'm alone, in the dead of the night,
I like to drive to Wendy's and order two
Crispy chicken sandwiches with 713 milligrams of sodium
While listening to sports radio,
Talking back to the commentators in between bites.

And sometimes
I like to stare with pride at a tray of my two dozen chicken wings,
Usually Mango Habanero,
And once I've devoured every bite,
I give myself a pat on the back for the glistening bones staring back at me.

Other times, I just really want Angelo's Pizza,
And I fold it up while listening to Queen,
Screaming the lyrics to "Under Pressure."

And sometimes, if I'm willing,
I like to head to the mall to order some
Asian Chao rice and probably-not-chicken to go.
And when I claim my bag and scout out an
Isolated table,
Where no one will see the daughter of the chef T
hey know so well,

I see my father,
With the probably-not-chicken.

Martes and Thursday

My mother and our cleaning lady are a riot. It's 9pm and Marlene has been cleaning our house for 10 hours. "Muy sucio," she says and my mom, in her similar thick accent says "Molto pulito adesso!" Stella, my mother, asks Marlene to come Giovedi, which is Thursday, but Marlene cannot come Thursday. Instead of saying no she says "Martes, I come Martes" and my mother says "No, Martes do not work for me, G--ioo-veedddd...you know Turrrrsday." And Marlene says, "Yes, Martes." I've had enough. I come downstairs and explain to the Italian and Venezuelan that their schedule conflicts next week. Marlene asks me to ask my mom if Sunday works. "No, Domingo es para la iglesia." Sunday is for church. And my mom understands. They agree on Thursday.

Immigrant Contest

The summer heat is an accessory to her middle-class behavior. Her obnoxious aviator sunglasses greet her rearview mirror to ensure safety as she pulls out of her cemented driveway and drives away from her cul-de-sac of Whiteford Drive.

This is America-- the smooth drive unriden by potholes and working traffic lights, the rolled down windows and cheery radio meteorologists predicting rain but hoping listeners enjoy the sunshine and summer events that the Nissan Armada in the left lane is en route to.

America is the drive to a neighbor's house and exhaust pipes polluting the air as the favored method of transportation, the errand to Huntington Bank to deposit a check one week before the mortgage is due and knowing it will get in on time because the teller will do her job.

Unless, unless the teller is Russian, a red-haired Russian with a fierce look on her face when the also immigrant customer opens her mouth and reveals her indistinguishable accent and now must make a decision as to how rude exactly she can be to prove she is the superior immigrant.

Carbone

Everything is the same in the small village of Carbone:
the dumpsters have never been repainted.

The stray cats still march through that little path--
their reigned territory.

Life expectancy is through the some three-century old roofs,
the goal posts still stand wearily on the untrimmed grass,

And Gennaro plays Springsteen every night, swearing he knows
what "I'm on Fire" means.

My grandmother still makes her *macaron* every morning,
placing her palms on dough and rolling it out.

Faster now to beat her 93 years of expected slowing down,
she lets it glide and exhales breaths of beating the odds.

Maria Grazia, who just got married, looks at Francesca's kids
who run through the same park as Maria and Francesca did 20 years ago.

She's pregnant and sips on peach tea at Gennaro's bar deciding
if she likes "My Hometown" or "Born to Run" better.

Foreign Phone Calls

I'm staring at all of my shoes in the garage,
Thinking about which ones I will slip on to
Run to my father's body lying on the ice in
The driveway.

It's 4 o'clock on a December
Morning and my dog is sitting next to my
Dad, with his massive paw on my father's
Chef pants that will later be cut open for surgery.

Some 4,000 miles away in Italy, my relatives
Are just waking up to eat their Nutella filled
Croissants.
Some are looking for jobs and some are waiting
On my mother's phone call for the morning chat.

They're not expecting us to call with bad news,
But this is what you risk, as an immigrant.
You risk slipping on the snow and breaking your
Ankle.

You risk telling your 93-year-old mother that you
Are not ok,
That your hand couldn't break your fall because
It would ruin your career.
You risk the phone calls,

Not the *how are you doing today?*
Not Facetime of your daughter's graduation,
Not the instructions on how to make Nonna's baccala.

You risk everyone knowing
The U.S. area code,
You risk understanding the six-hour time difference.

You risk the *why the hell are they calling at 4am?*

Restaurant Child

It was Barbie blankets supplied by Gordon Food Service and coconut sorbet shells for Barbie's baby's crib, black bar napkins for beach towels while Barbie laid out in the basement's sun on North Barton with her head resting on the wine cork acting as pillow, Fish containers with leftover blood acting as tupperware containers and summer cookouts supplied by Blue Ribbon meats and a domestic liquor order supplied by Golden Gate Beverage, purple wine boxes used as my eighth grade pyramid project put together by the staff on a late Sunday night and the wooden wine storage boxes serving as my fifth grade cube project put together by random customers some time in 2005, and most nights being served some warm food in a tin container to-go box as my mother and her lingering perfume drift through the garage door and she says how tired she is while she drops off the food, walks over to the TV and waits for my father to get home with the leftover fish from the weekend specials that will be our Monday night dinner.

Cavadells and MeatBawls

What they were up against was
Chicken parmesan and veal parmesan,
Spaghetti and meatballs,
Cavadells?
Shrimp and cheese linguine,
Espresso with a lemon inside of it,
Bread with something yellow that doesn't
Quite look like garlic,
Chicken on top of pasta,
Marinara with no fish swimming inside,
"Gravy" and Sunday pasta dinners.

And worst of all--
Some asshole,
Named Alfredo,
Who made it to every goddamn menu in town.

I Hear You

His cigar smoke fills the restaurant,
blends in with the black carpet as he exhales
and the Cuban rests peacefully on his cut-up cuticles.

It was a wild night of 105 covers and a short-staffed dining room,
his feet swollen from the pressure of standing for 7 hours
over a hot stove and a scalding summer night.

But this part of the night is where he imparts his wisdom,
waits for silence from the last remaining customers at 3am,
and lets his glossy brown eyes catch everybody in the room.

It's a childhood story, or an Italian proverb that fails the test
of translation, or some cliché life lesson he has learned and knows
the rest of us could really use at a time like this.

My asthma flares up from the smoke and I inhale my cigarette,
our same glossy eyes meet in the dim light and I know what's
coming, so I prepare to roll my eyes.

He leans back into the bar stool and his chef pants rise up,
he's looking at everyone but he just means to look at me,
life is such a wonderful thing, he says.

I look away and ash my cigarette on the bread plate,
take a sip of Chardonnay and wonder why I am this way,
why I cannot just say

With you it is.

On the Phone with Her Sister

Things change,
specifically phrases

now, at least once
during each long- distance phone call

he or she admits
“I don’t know how to say it” or

“I don’t know how it’s said”
because, now

it’s “hello” not “ciao”
it’s “thank you so much” not “grazie mille”

it’s called *getting used to*.
and for those who live 5,000 miles away

Getting used to
is a horrible disease.

Two Italian Restaurant Owners

walk into a Denny's at 4am.

Damn Immigrants

In 1995, my parents decided to become immigrants--
They opened a restaurant and Little Italy called them “the immigrants.”

Margaret Wong left her file in the desk sometime in ‘96,
So that evening my father became an illegal immigrant.

My mother a decade later cashes a check with the Russian at Huntington with “no sense,”
They settle on Screaming, the common language of those damn immigrants.

My fourth-grade friend tells me I came here in a box through the waters,
I still think her mom called the FBI to show up at our door, claiming us real immigrants.

In 2007 I become a naturalized citizen and we hug and kiss and cry in the Department.
I turn around and I embrace them--not strangers--not foreigners--my fellow immigrants.

In 2009 I walk into high school where a boy lets me in on some common sense:
“Romney, not Obama will protect us from the immigrants.”

It’s 2016 and the middle-aged women at the bar flash their pretty red nails and say
“Honey! Oh honey. Honey, no. Donald Trump wants to *help* you immigrants!”

School Supplies

My mother brought my pencil case to work when I was in the fourth grade. She gave me it back by the time school started on Monday. I remember sitting at my desk, ready to show Matt and John my new pens, because many nights, my parents came home and took me to CVS, and they'd always buy me an expensive pen, a Pilot or something, to make up for the babysitters. And their guilt made me the pen Queen of our fourth-grade class. So as I went to pull out my black ink G2 pen, really ready to show it off in Matt and John's faces since I'd been slacking lately, out came a wine opener. A red, stainless steel waiter wine opener with the little knife attached. "What's that!?" They were terrified. "Introducing," I said, half terrified half unsure if I would be believed, "The newest pencil sharpener."

Immigration as an Italian's Second Language

A-merica. Cugini del America. The title my cousins have chosen for my sister and I when we visit Italy each summer. This is how they describe us to their friends. A starstruck look appears in the face of said friends and I want to be a celebrity but not this kind of celebrity. We are not better because of this.

B-astards. All of them. At the BMV when I am asked how long I have lived in the U.S. and if I have a document aside from my U.S. passport that can prove my citizenship. When I inquire as to what would better prove my citizenship, she exhales and checks the clock. It seems as if we both do not have this kind of time.

C-itizen. It took us 14 years to claim this title. 14 years consisting of bringing my birth certificate and Social Security Card to enroll in school. Consisting of ICE showing up at our door. More on this at 'I.'

D-ago. The name my sister was called in her junior theology class. The name that forced her to punch Kirk in the face which prompted the principal to call my father and explain the situation, to which he asked what the problem was? She stood up for herself?

E-ventually. My parents' favorite word in the English language.

F-rench. The people who hosted the 2006 World Cup party when France lost to Italy.

G-igi. The name of our first dog, a Chocolate Labrador who almost bit our racist neighbor.

H-appy. The only word that came to mind to describe how my mother felt when they finally handed her her citizenship in 2007.

I-CE. Showed up at our door circa 2002. My mother cried.

J-oking. This is what my best friend in second grade is doing when she says I came over in a cardboard box.

K-iwi. The word that sets my father off because he can't wait to tell you that Italy is the biggest producer.

L-egislative. The branch of government my mother kept forgetting for her citizenship test.

M-eatballs. An American stereotype of what goes on pasta on Sundays.

N-onna. Two of them. Italian word for grandmother. The two most wonderful women on the planet. Silvia and Chissa.

O-cular surgery. The emergency surgery I required as a nine-month-old in the U.S. Sans health insurance=\$32,000.

P-issed. My mother's second favorite word in the English language introduced to her by me.

Q-uaderno. The Italian word for notebook or journal. The leather-bound journal that belongs to my father which will detail parts of his life and inspire me to write.

R-return policy. Especially Costco's. My mother's favorite part about the U.S.

S-icily. The one region every Italian has difficulty with when it comes to convincing an American that it's a part of Italy.

T-h. The most difficult sound to make in the English language. (Read: De most difficult..)

U-nbelievable. The only word that left my father's mouth on 9/11.

V-isa. The process which involved an interview where my sister and I gave the interviewers fake middle names because we wanted American middle names.

W-ong. Margaret Wong. The name of our immigration attorney who forgot our file in her desk the day of our court case.

X- This one's not included in the Italian alphabet.

Y-ou. A pronoun my uncle uses for everything. Including inanimate objects. Ex: talking to the espresso machine, "Why you just no work?!"

Z-aino. Italian word for bookbag. The one that gets reached into by every pick pocketeer and makes us angry at lax Italian immigration policies.

Glossary

Baccala: dried and salted cod

Della mia mamma Italian: of my Italian mother

Di brutta fortuna: of bad luck

Di tutti gli sacrifici: all of the sacrifices

Giovedì: Thursday

Grazie Mille: thank you so much

Il tonno ti fa bene: tuna is good for you

L'Accento: accent

Martes: Spanish for Tuesday

Mettiti sotto la coperta così non senti che piove: get under the blanket so you cannot hear the rain

Mi scantu: I'm scared

Molto pulito adesso: very clean now

Muy sucio: Spanish for very dirty

Tuesday: my mother's Thursday

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