

## Donna Pucciani

### Bilingual Dictionary

Old friend, its brittle pages drift, like Dante,  
through the purgatories of language,  
or like Beatrice, who, from her cloud of love,  
opens the gate of paradise, *la porta del paradiso*.

My voice, at first a song without words,  
*una canzone senza le parole*,  
gathers syllables daily, bursts at dawn  
with alien sounds, flaps like a blackbird on a fence,  
or at nightfall, sits with the owl in a tree  
making little hoots of wonder.

In the morning, my chosen phrases  
favor light: *Dov'è la primavera?*—  
“Where is spring?”—the English  
thumps like a pair of old boots.  
I'm hungry for sun, thirsty for rain,  
the adventure of words, *l'avventura delle parole*.

Night peruses the pages  
for dark verbs stuck in the back of the throat:  
*chiudere le chiavi*, to lose the keys.  
Melancholy adjectives prevail on the tongue's tip:  
*che triste le stelle*, how sad the stars  
that light my bed with their white fire of mystery,  
*il loro fuoco bianco di mistero*.  
Before I shut off the lamp,  
without even realizing that I am in love,  
I say to the moon, *Che fa stasera?*  
What are you doing tonight?

## The Documents

The marriage certificate of my great-great-grandfather  
arrived yesterday from Cosenza.

We are all born to die.

This ink attests to the dark bliss in between.

I am happy beyond happy.

I see the bride in her homemade cotton dress  
opening like a gardenia.

Carlo Maria, the groom, stands very straight  
on the stone steps of Holy Trinity Church.

A century later, I hold this page like a relic,  
my eyes blurred over undecipherable scrawl,  
a map of the world, the geography of the heart.  
Village dust settles on my skin like a blessing.  
The hours anoint me as I sit with genealogy tomes  
and very black coffee in a cup smaller than memory.

I can decipher only a little of the ornate script.  
Words crouch on the page like nocturnal animals.  
*S* looks like *F*. *P* could be anything at all—  
a woman standing in the night, her dark hair blowing,  
or smoke from a cigar. And this word here,  
a goat grazing.

The paper becomes their skin, their scribbled hair  
the sea, the spaces in between their toothless mouths  
widening like the dark valley below the Pollino.  
Their eyes stare back from the loops of the *V*  
that is really an *R* for *Rosa*.

Raffaele Monaco witnessed the wedding.  
Another signed himself *civile*, middle-class.  
My *bis-bis-nonno* is listed *contadino*, peasant farmer.  
The parents' names are blackbirds  
with wings folded on paper for future generations.  
The *sindaco*, or mayor, is *N. Capolongo*. The rest  
are berries staining a hillside, eyelashes lowered in sleep.

I hold *i documenti* to my ear, hear the bones of my elders  
reconstituting themselves. There is dancing, loving, birthing,  
and wind coursing down the cobbles.

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When I die, their ghosts will beckon me  
from the foot of the bed, speak in a foreign tongue,  
show me, letter for letter,  
who they are.

## Geography

The reticence of sky, sheep, and heather  
belongs to those who live in brick cottages  
in the shadow of pubs, in the ruins of abbeys,  
impervious to the always rain, where hills  
yawn and swallow bells tolling Westminster,  
a monochrome gray.

This other home, where a spouse's childhood  
calls, stoic in its clipped consonants, brief vowels,  
welcomes me as stranger through the cold,  
mossed door of otherness. Cows offer me  
their souls over barbed wire at pasture's edge,  
not knowing what to do with all this wet.

In another country, my grandmother's ghost  
floats down the Amalfi coast, past Sirens  
and the bones of hapless sailors polished  
by salt and sun. This land is too hot  
for my cool skin, my gray-blue eyes unable  
to match the brilliance of black olives  
and lemons startling the trees yellow. An unknown  
language drenches my hair with mellifluous vowels,  
curls its strands through mountain roads  
that spiral down to the sea.

This Italia has cash points, internet. Young women  
flaunt acrylic nails, men sport motorbikes. Not  
Nonna's Italy, with laundry on the line, sheets  
slung over the balcony, streets rosaried with stones,  
goats, *tavernas* where men gather with cigars  
and newspapers, where women wear black  
and are born old.

Even Nonna's country was not her own, the long  
airless voyage under deck less stifling than  
the village she left. She returned only once,  
in the Depression, when the village women  
pounding underwear in the brook spat at her  
for her washing machine in New York, drove her  
back to its scalding enameled tub crowned  
with mangles.

Here, among strangers, I discover myself,

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unwrapping my body bit by bit, the white moist  
flesh shivering as a coat falls away, woolens,  
cottons, and finally silks, dropping at my feet  
like a river of memory, the chaste Baroque  
fantasy of some minor Roman god unbuttoning me  
to the Adriatic air. My grandfather once  
grew olives and figs on the buckle of the boot.  
The sun opens me now to this unfamiliar territory,  
the places of my body unfastened, dangerous.

Cobbled streets clothe me with the invisible  
robes of ancestry, sunswept. Too hot, too hot.  
I die a centigrade death, still the stranger, as  
the sky cups my breasts with burning hands,  
as cold marble saints in cathedrals swoon  
with the fire of summer and God.

Finally, dressed again in propriety, I put on  
routine like an old sweater, boarding the great  
avian, lifted to the bland predictability of Chicago,  
the heartland's relief enfolding me in corn,  
soybeans and suburbia, with a winter sun  
and a casual snowfall coloring the fields  
white and crisp and safe.

## Ghost Garden

I cannot recall my first encounter  
with any of you, what odd tunes you whistled  
like blackbirds clustered in thistle.

Why do you clamor for attention  
here among the roses?  
Some days you all talk at once,  
tugging at my sleeve with voiceless stories,  
or simply blocking my path.

More often you come at night,  
when you emerge from the corners,  
or hover at the window,  
your visages dangling like dead balloons,  
eyeless skulls landing on the pillow next to my head,  
limbs pushing under the blankets.

I am not afraid. Your hands  
have hammered nails, picked figs and grapes,  
held babies on hips, groped each other's  
flesh in the dark, and now,  
you stroke my cheek with cold fingers.  
You invade my dreams, a country  
that only the moon remembers.

Why not rest in peace?  
Return to your graves on a Calabrian hill  
behind Holy Trinity Church, where bells  
tolled your weddings and funerals.  
Go back to the boat that rocked you across  
an ocean, the tenement that held you  
in the squalor of its arms.

In the ghost garden you are sleeping.  
What I thought was a pebble, a leaf,  
a firefly, a flowering crab, is my grandfather's face.  
The rest of you are hidden in the tomatoes  
shivering in your cages, clematis climbing  
like grapevines. You were peasant farmers,  
the wind soaring in your sun-brown cheeks,  
your windburned eyes the color of the sky.

This is the garden of the dead, the cemetery

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of the sun, the mausoleum of the moon,  
star-coffins glowing in the light years it took  
for your dazzle to reach me. You are struck  
into lilies, little gaslights of cactus,  
wild mushrooms like sparks to read a map by,  
magnolias the headlights of a car  
bumping up a dirt road, and wild thyme  
rummaging on the mountain.

If you want me to discover your  
voices singing in the orchard, you must  
offer me fruit, some clues scrawled  
on a leaf, a bit of paper with a name and a date,  
to claim me as your own.

The moonflower vine, whose fragrance twines  
with evening, crawls up the trellis  
of your unambiguous love. When dawn comes,  
you will drift back to your beds,  
the dark places of pines, pockets and shoes,  
shuffling among the dry grasses,  
or drifting into the garden posing as flowers,  
and in the orchard, your breath echoes  
among blood oranges under a burning sky.

## Quantum Famiglia

I read in some science magazine or other  
that in quantum physics, minute particles  
become entangled, then for some unknown reason  
pull apart and retreat to the far ends of the solar system.

I think of my cousins in Italy  
turning up unexpectedly on the family tree,  
and how uncles and aunts, the dead and the living,  
wind around each other like gossamers,  
then vanish across oceans and centuries.

Perhaps a few retain the same smell of skin, color  
of eyes, a penchant for tennis or numbers, a turn of the head.  
Their stories become lonely trajectories,  
orbits crossed and abandoned in the dark space  
of another's visage, the blank page of a blue letter,  
the ancient language of a stranger's voice.  
Beyond hourglass, clock and calculation  
lies the paradox of far intimacy, a sundial  
with a strong, thin arm marking predictions,  
predilections and dreams. We meet *questa mattina*,  
we part *questa sera*.

Entanglement is the scientific term, oddly familiar,  
yet the intimacies of collision and rebound  
become *i momenti misteriosi*.  
What Einstein deemed the fatal mark of incompleteness  
keeps entities meeting in space, then fleeing each other.  
Only a thousand steps more  
to crack the code of mote, bone, and blood—  
the final puzzle: how closeness and separation  
converge on the horizon past the sepia image of *mio nonno*,  
into *il vicino d'amore*, bent starlight.