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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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The Seasons of an Immigrant

Angelo Salvatore Clemente

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
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ABSTRACT

The Seasons of an Immigrant

Angelo Salvatore Clemente

This thesis consists of poems, prose poems and short stories that explore the experience of the immigrant, in particular, that of the Italian immigrant and his descendents in North America.

The poems and prose poems are narrative, lyrical and dramatic explorations of the immigrant's view of the world. They are mostly motivated by the immigrant's vision of finding a better land, a better life, and the disillusionment which follows when that vision is not fulfilled.

The short stories are realistic narratives of particular immigrants who came to Montreal over the last thirty years.

The whole is intended to be a mosaic of the immigrant experience. That is, the experience of individuals who, once they have left their native land to settle in a new one, can never fully be a part of either. Individuals also, who must live among strangers speaking a strange tongue, and to whom the sun, the moon and stars remain the only familiar objects to connect them to reality.

Fields

I have walked about these fields
but human sounds are heard no more.
Grass grows out upon the road
which is all but blocked by bramble
and through the leaves is seen
what was once a farmhouse.

The stinging nettle at the main gate
grows so full
and the clay tiles from the roof
have fallen to the threshing floor.

A window bangs again and again
pierced by the wind;
the chain at the well,
rusted and broken,
holds up a pail
that bottomless and soundless,
sad and tired, swings.

Silence spreads,
the sadness of death:
perhaps it's here fate wrote
that no one will ever return.

Emilio Spensieri, "Campagne". Translated from the Italian
Vinchiaturese dialect by Angelo Salvatore Clemente.

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Ship of Forgetting

"Passa la nave mia colma d'oblio per aspra mare..." -
Petrarca, Le rime, 189

1

First the Castle of Anjou
then Naples' Stazione Marittima
and beyond the pier
in the Grotto-blue Tyrrhenian
the tall ship
stories high.

All around Alfredo
in an arc wide as the Gulf
sounds rose from the sea
where vessels anchored
he had only seen in books
and already
way below him
he could feel the deep
dark water to the shore.

On the poop deck
wider than the makeshift soccer field
back on his nonna's farm -
a vision of his friends
took him by the heart:

he heard the tall ship's horn blow
and as he turned around
he saw the shore move far away.

If only he could reach out
across the lengthening space
to touch his friends
and kiss his nonna's face
just one more time:

A hundred times
he called her name
and a hundred times
her name, drowned
between the shore and the ship
in the sea
of his tears.

2:

Gibraltar
the Azores
then endless waves and sky.
Except for his guardian
to help him through the voyage
Alfredo was alone:

Eight days

he climbed to poop deck

a seedless orange in his hand.

He would look back

and over each side

staring at endless blue,

then he would eat his orange

lick his fingers

and turn to gaze

at first-class cabins

up and west

and north.

Two days

the ship went up

and down tall waves -

"like the top of Mount Taborno

and the Valle Caudina"

he thought.

But his terror

made him forget

why he thought it.

Later

he remembered

his nonna's last embrace.

3.

A cold wind
swept over the deck
blew the jubilant cries
of those who saw land
into the icy spray.

In a light coat and scarf
Alfredo stared
far into the distance,
eyes straining to make out
the great female figure
rising out of the sea.

"It's for us
the bouquet she holds high!"

But the tall ship got closer
and the tall statue passed
without a sign of recognition.

Not so much as a nod
of the head -
just the wind and its cold breath
so different from the gentle breezes
of home: this wind pushed hard,

tried to stop him, chilling
more than his ears and cheeks:
this wind made his eyes water
and cut straight to his heart.

Forgotten Youth

On reading Alain Grandbois' "L'Enfance oubliée".

bells of Sant'Antonio echo
in child's bittersweet dream.
a poplar stands tall
against the summer rain

my mind was alive
with visions of a far-away land
where the sun shone
every single day

where I played soccer
in a courtyard free of puddles
and grandmother waited forever
by the village well
with ladlesful of cool water
to quench our thirst

at siesta sometimes
under the golden muscatel
when the sun got too hot
I'd believe my dreams
had come true

and still I sometimes hear
that cliff swallow sing
high under the clay eaves
of grandmother's farmhouse
songs that smelled of baking cornbread

Arrival

An anxious group of immigrants
filed off the "Constitution"
and Alfredo followed them
overwhelmed -

America!

He did all he could
to keep from tripping
over his own feet.

His eyes were on
the big lights
and his ears were filled
with unfamiliar sounds.

But above all else
he caught a half-forgotten voice
calling him - "Son!"

He closed his eyes
and saw himself
sitting on the granite steps
of his mother's house
in Croce Via
the day she left him.

He'd cried all day:

"Why did you leave me?"

The voice got closer
then broke into fitful whispers:

"Alfredo -
you don't recognize me,
do you?"

(Just one year had passed
since she had left.)

"No," he said,

"non sei mamma!"

At first she stared
in disbelief but then
she cupped his dark wet face
in both her hands
and as she felt his pain
and dried his tears
she held him tight.

The Long Journey Home

I do not know where I came from. We left a place in the darkness of night, and my eyes opened at sunrise to a soft wind and a burning sky. I remember my head swimming in sleep at being awakened occasionally by our car thundering along a mountain highway.

The car screeched to a sudden halt and my eyes immediately sprang open. The whole world filled with light. Slowly, out of the light, an image started to take shape, an image of a permanently parked trailer. It was bright red and immersed in greenery. I remember a fountain and a white and black poodle barking and jumping about as we drank the cool water. For a while, I was completely aware of the surroundings. As my parents lingered on with their friends, my weariness and slumber subsided and everything made a definite impression on me: the tall trees, the smell of pines. But back in the car, heading north again, the drowsiness returned and I travelled in a flickering sleep.

My mind oscillated in the twilight of awareness. My eyes opened and closed with every bump in the road. I caught passing glimpses of short poplars alongside the highway. They stood like ghosts in the eerie light.

The twilight came and went. A chill passed through my nine-year-old frame. I awoke, startled! I was surrounded by darkness, as the car edged into the night. Slowly, following the dividing line in the road, my eyes were mesmerized and drowsiness returned.

We were approaching our destination. In the distance, an arc of light started appearing. At random, first a few, and ever so gradually

hundreds and then thousands of lights exploded in the dark. As though the night were already giving way to a new day.

Montreal!

The fear of night which had welled up inside me suddenly evaporated. Drowned by a wave of familiarity, my whole being was alight!

Italian Sunset

The father is in Labrador. He's working as a cook and trying to earn enough to bring out the family someday. A home. A little garden. Perhaps in Montreal.

The mother and small daughter are in Italy. They're attending to the farm that barely yields their daily bread.

And every evening the mother rests with her child in her lap. She points to the sun and they repeat the ritual as they watch the last light disappear from the space about them:

"Now tell me, my little twig, and where does the sun go to at night, fruscolella, a do'va?"

"Va'do papà, mamma - va'do papà."

Another Country

you were a dream
when I saw you
you became love

the snow still veiled
the ground

you were like this
other country
which harbored me
and reared me
but which I knew
so little of.

it was March,
a good time
for new countries
and love

now it's April
and the rains
have come
to all roots

will you keep
your promises?

II

Here and Now

Cold snow-covered country

you have half my love

half my labors

half my life -

that is all

my heart can spare.

I have worked long years

to learn your languages

sacrificed my old country's ways

for yours

and still your people spite me

for my foreign name

(they can give you more

and better work

les gens du pays

because their names

smack of chez toi).

The other half of my love

belongs to my native land,

across the sea, the sun-

tempered fields of my youth:

a single look from a farmer

singing and wiping his brow

in my father's ancient fields
tells me his ways
and mine are oceans apart.

As I walk across your snow
I dream of the sun
and what I might have been.
I think of where I am
and what I am.

And I see I have become
as one who walks in dreams -
neither wholly here nor there:

Canadese
with an Italian name.

Alfredo

The boy stood in the corner of the school yard and shouted as loudly as he could, "Hey! Me play too?" Our eyes followed the ball in a long arc over the defenders' heads into Mario's sure hands. The game stopped.

Our eyes moved from the ball to the boy. He was short and neat. His eyes seemed to hide behind fragile, wire-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a white shirt and blue tie, a heavy woolen sweater, grey trousers, and his shoes were a polished black.

"Wow, guys," teased Nicky, a tall, muscular boy, from the opposite court, "look at the get-up!" Everyone stared and laughed.

Mario looked over to our side and sensed we did not want anyone else to join in the game. He paused for an instant. But then, just as I had done for him the first day he came to our school, he turned to the eager-looking boy on the sidelines and shouted, "Okay, join in!"

The newcomer hesitated. "Come?" he asked.

"Come on!" Mario shouted. With one hand he pressed the dodgeball to his body and with the other he motioned him to take up a position in our court.

The new boy ran to my side. "Welcome to Willie's side," I told him. He nodded his head and smiled, but said nothing.

I didn't mean to brag. We spent our lunch hours playing dodgeball, and they usually let me and Nick pick teams. Everyone looked up to us as the best players. Anyone who joined in the game late was thought of as

being a second-stringer and was not that welcome. That's the way it was for the new boy that autumn day. He was allowed to play, but not without the usual protests.

"Who needs him!" Nick yelled out.

"Hey, you need help?" teased a voice from behind a wall of laughing faces on Nicky's back line.

But even before the protests had begun to die down, we were all anxious to start playing again. Mario lofted the ball to me from the back line. We were trying to set up Nicky on the left side of the court. But he fooled us, jumping high in the air to intercept the pass. Then, all in the same motion, he whirled around and let go a powerful shot to my stomach. I doubled over from its force, gasped for breath. The new boy ran over to help me, but I waved him away. After a while, I began to recover and walked slowly to the back line. As I stood beside Mario, the cheering on the other side had still not died down.

"Don't worry, Willie," Mario said, "We'll get him!"

Meanwhile, the new boy had gathered up the ball in our court and he fired a hard, straight shot to Nicky's ankles. Nicky had no time to move. We were all amazed to see the new boy had shot him out.

Our side cheered as Nicky walked dejectedly to his back line.

"That a go!" shouted Mario. "We got him! - Only two to go!"

But the cheers were cut short because, just as soon as Mario had said that, one of the two players left on the opposing court hit one of ours as he was backing away from the center line. And now the cheering came from the other side.

Again, the new boy pounced on the ball and shot one of their players out. The ball struck the opposing player with such force that it bounced back to our side. But this time, the new boy fumbled it. It dribbled out of his reach, just past the opposing back line. Nicky quickly grabbed it and shot the new boy out. It was our last out.

The players on Nicky's side burst into cheering and enthusiastic patting on the back. But on our side, there was only silence. We were all looking at each other dejectedly when all of a sudden, we rushed to surround the new boy. We could not find anyone else to blame for the loss, so we took out our anger on him.

It was a while before Mario noticed how helpless the new boy was in trying to explain himself in broken English. When he did, I saw that he was beginning to feel as sorry for him as I did. "Mario," I said, "I think we should explain the rules to him."

Mario thought about it for a moment. "I guess we should," he said. Then he looked at me, "Sure," he said, "I'll do it - I'll teach him everything you taught me!"

He wrestled his way through the crowd that had gathered around the new boy. When he got to him, he got a hold of his arm and took him aside, away from the rest. "Come!" he said. "What's your name? - Il tuo nome!"

The new boy was almost in tears. "Alfredo," he said.

"Listen, Alfredo," Mario said, "they're all mad at you now - they lost the game. We take our games pretty seriously, you know. You've got to try to keep the ball - il pallone - in your own court, see?"

"How I know?" Alfredo said, emphasizing with both his hands, obviously angered by the way everyone had ganged up on him.

"But don't worry," Mario said, trying to calm him down, "Non pensarci - they're not so bad. You'll see - vedrai! - I'll tell you all the rules - le regole - and then you'll be a great player - un bravo giacatore: you have a fantastic shot!"

Alfredo stared into Mario's face. Then, he looked at the rest of the players before looking at him again and speaking, "Why dey act like dis, den?"

By the afternoon, everyone knew about Alfredo's mistake on the dodgeball court. They also came to know that he was an Italian and that the only words of English he knew were the ones he had learned in the few weeks he had been in Montreal.

Our teacher, Mr. Marshall, chose Mario to interpret for him. Mario was only too proud to help him and he asked to have the desk beside Alfredo's so as to do a better job. But most of the remaining members of our dodgeball team were not as generous. They were not quite ready to forgive his mistake.

Alfredo was really upset at the way everyone was carrying on. Mario, more than anyone in the class, sensed it. "Lasciali stare - forget about it," Mario kept telling him; "they're all nice guys when you get to know them - you'll see."

That afternoon, Mr. Marshall's history lesson was on the discovery of America. He loved to catch us with our homework not done, so he tested us often and was not always straightforward in his questioning.

"Who discovered Canada?" he asked. He looked around the room at the hands that were shooting up, and his eyes stopped on Alfredo. Alfredo looked toward Mario for reassurance. Mario nodded, as if to say "Go ahead!"

Finally, Alfredo built up enough courage to answer. He turned toward the teacher and said, "Cristoforo Colombo."

There were jeers and laughter from members of the dodgeball team.

"Quiet!" said Mr. Marshall firmly. "Mario, show Alfredo what part of the history book to study."

Mario was as embarrassed about the answer as Alfredo was, and he quickly got to work. As for Mr. Marshall, he carefully avoided involving Alfredo in any group work for the rest of the day.

When class was dismissed, Mario told me to wait for him downstairs while he helped Alfredo to learn the routine he had to follow while he was in school. After a tour of the school, we met in the locker hall.

Mr. Marshall had told Mario to speak to Alfredo in English as much as possible, so Mario was doing his best to obey him. As they drew near to me, Mario asked, "How are you going to get home, Alfredo?"

"Home?" Alfredo asked. He thought about the word. "Home -" he repeated, "I take seexitee-seven-e boss."

"Okay," Mario said, chuckling a little - perhaps remembering the way he used to talk not so long ago - "Willie and me'll walk you to the bus." Mario patted him on the back. Alfredo smiled. "Let's get the books."

While Alfredo put the books he needed in a neat pile, Mario called me to join them and we walked out of the school to Alfredo's bus stop.

The bus drove up as soon as we got to the stop sign, so we hardly had time to say good-bye to Alfredo before he ran up the front steps. We saw him go to a seat near the back of the bus, and he sat there with a lost look on his face. Mario and I looked at each other and wondered what had happened to change the look on his face so quickly. His eyes were staring

ahead so intently that he seemed to be miles away. He even forgot to turn and wave to us when the bus drove away.

The next morning, at recess, Alfredo was nowhere to be seen. We played a short dodgeball game, and only caught sight of him when it was time to go back to class.

It was Wednesday-- Mr. Marshall's test day for English and Arithmetic. We all managed the Arithmetic well enough, but the results of the English test turned out to be a little different. Mr. Marshall gave us the poem "Sun" to write out from memory:

Reach for a morning star
Forget the red, clouded moon
Reach out for a morning star
And all will be better soon
All will be better soon

Everyone in the class managed to write it out except me, Mario, and a few others. Even Alfredo managed to satisfy Mr. Marshall. Embarrassed, we had to stay behind while the rest of the class left for lunch and dodgeball.

By then, it was early afternoon, and Mario and I came rushing down from our detention into the warm and hazy light of the stairwell. We took a quick look out the huge windows facing the neighboring French school and came to a stop. We spotted Alfredo standing among a group of French students. In the haze, he appeared to be with the tall, slender boy that he got off the bus with that morning.

"Well!" Mario exclaimed, "Look at that!"

"Let's hurry," I said, nudging him on, "we won't have time to do anything."

We raced down the stairs and into the locker hall in the school basement. There, we slammed the locker doors open and we each gulped down a sandwich before rushing out.

It had gotten too late to join in the dodgeball game, so Mario and I decided to race over to the library of the French school across the street. It was our second-favorite lunch hour pastime. It was the only place where we could get every Popeye and Tintin comic book. While reading them, we would imagine that we were a part of every single cartoon frame.

As we got to the gate of the French school yard, I could see Mario's eyes searching for Alfredo among the many groups scattered about the yard. I pushed him on, telling him to hurry before the library closed its doors. We were from another school and non-French, so it took us a long time to get to what we wanted past the strict librarian. In the end, we only had time to choose some of our favorite books as fast as we could so as to check them out on time.

When we stepped outside the tall, heavy doors of the library, we saw that the hazy light had turned to a dense mist. The groups of students we had seen in the yard before, now appeared to be slow-moving clouds that suddenly took on eerie forms. Voices echoed off the wall of the school and the surrounding buildings before fading into unnatural silences.

It was beginning to drizzle. A group of students which we could hear was close by but which we could hardly make out, had set up a line of cans along the base of the wall of the school and each one of them was trying to prove he was the best shot by knocking over the targets with stones. We waited for a pause in the shooting to cross over to the school yard gate.

In a minute or two, the bell rang to signal the French students to return to class. "Here's our chance," shouted Mario. "Let's go!"

"Okay," I added, "now!"

We clutched our books and dashed between the group and the targets. Suddenly, I heard books flop to the ground and Mario letting out a painful-sounding "Arrrgh!". I dodged some stones to grab his arm and pulled him toward the gate. But before we got there, I, too, felt a sharp pain in my right ankle. At that moment, Mario wrenched his arm loose and groped for something to throw back. Before I could think, I had been drawn into the fight too.

"Cochons!" someone yelled out. The sound hovered in the air before deflecting off the wall, breaking up, and vanishing; but its meanness pierced my whole body and I answered it by throwing the stone I had in my hand with even more force than the first ones. "Cochons!" the voice repeated, "allez-vous en!"

"Basta!" I heard Alfredo call out. "Stop!" But none of us stopped. All that we could think of doing to keep from getting hit was to keep the opponent ducking. So we went on until each one had nothing left to throw.

When we finally managed to back into our own yard, I saw that Mario was bleeding just below the hairline. His eyes were full of pain.

We had enough time to run to the basement washroom, clean up, and get to class so that no one suspected that there had been a fight. I helped Mario put a band-aid over his cut, and then he covered it by combing his hair over it.

Once we were in the class, we quickly settled into our seats. I raised the lid of my desk to take out a notebook and stole a look in Mario's direction. Alfredo's seat was empty. I looked over to Mario, pausing at his eyes. His face was taut with anger. Out of Mr. Marshall's

view, Mario's right forearm dug into his thigh and his hand was clenched into a fist.

"Mario," called out Mr. Marshall, "where's Alfredo?"

Mario looked up, startled. "I - I don't know," he answered quickly lowering his gaze.

"Well," said Mr. Marshall as if he were thinking out loud, "sounds pretty odd." He gave the empty place one more look and turned slowly to the day's work.

The pain in my ankle returned. It started sharply and lingered but I fought to put it out of my mind and do my work so that no one would notice. Each time I felt it, I could not keep from looking Mario's way and noticing the look in his eyes and seeing that the day for him would never end.

He did not wait for me when the dismissal bell rang. His emotions shot him out the classroom door before I had time to call out his name. Trying to forget the pain, I had been gazing at the thick fog condensing on the window ledges for just a moment, and he had gone.

When I got to the basement locker hall, it was too late. Alfredo's school supplies were strewn all over the floor. His new schoolbag had been kicked in. As Mario saw me, he stepped back. Tears began to fill his eyes.

"He was on their side!" he ~~said~~ ^{screamed}. "I thought he was my friend - but he was on their side!" He turned away from me, wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Everything went so fast, Mario. He didn't have time to choose sides."

Besides, he was shouting for everybody to stop. He wasn't on their side."

But Mario, convinced that Alfredo had chosen to be on the French students' side, would not listen. "He should have been with us!" he insisted.

We had been friends from the very first time that I had welcomed him into a dodgeball game and this was the very first time that I could not think of anything comforting to say to him or anything smart to curb his stubbornness. I could think only of gathering Alfredo's school things before the whole school noticed what Mario had done.

I piled everything up out of the way, in Alfredo's locker. When I was finished, I coaxed Mario out of the locker hall into the darkening yard, past the dense fog, to the bus home.

The next morning the sun shone through unchecked, radiant. The air was charged with the shouts of different groups of friends at play. We gathered in the usual corner of the yard and Nicky and I picked teams for the day.

Off to my right, Mario was leaning against a chain-link fence, his hands buried deep in the pockets of his open windbreaker. His eyes were unusually round and big, and his face was sad. Occasionally, I looked toward him, wishing that I had the power to change the way he was feeling.

It was almost time for the bell and we were all getting our schoolbags to go in. "Come on, Mario, let's go," I said. "It's time!" I looked back and waited for him to catch up to me. But as he was getting close to me, I saw that he was looking straight past me toward the middle of the yard. I looked ahead and saw Alfredo coming toward us. He was

wearing brand new blue jeans and a plaid shirt. In his left hand was his damaged schoolbag. As he drew closer, he stopped, and I noticed that his eyes were moist.

Alfredo looked at Mario, but Mario stared at the ground. "I make meestek, Mario? ... I donta anderstend." He fixed his gaze on Mario and searched for a sign that might help him get over his confusion.

Mario's face grew longer, but he said nothing. He turned away from Alfredo and stared to the side.

Suddenly, the twinge of pain that I still felt in my ankle no longer seemed important. My mind flashed back to some of the little misunderstandings that Mario and I had had. Then I looked at both of them and I began to wonder how I could start setting things right.

"He thinks you were on their side in the fight," I said.

Alfredo shook his head. "I go see my friend there, and then I go home. Mamma want I go shopping - so I go home."

"Don't worry," I said. "It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault. Those French kids have never been nice to us. Just being with them is enough to make Mario feel you're on their side."

Mario, making believe that he could not overhear us, fidgeted with his fingers around the handle of his schoolbag and fixed his gaze away from us, on the school.

I put my arm around Alfredo. "Sorry about your things," I said. "Mario lost his head - but he'll take care of them - you'll see." As he heard that, Alfredo's eyes lit up, and they reminded me of the unusual morning sun that was shining.

Soon, the bell rang and we started toward the school building. Alfredo's steps seemed a little faster than before, but Mario's were very slow, and his gaze was fixed to the ground as he walked. As I looked back to him, I could not help wondering how long it would be before he would lift his head and see the sun too.

Aftershocks

It's a smooth ride
on the bus home.

I can read at leisure.

The stocks are up.

I have just to watch out
whenever the bus stops and starts.

Stop. I am jarred forward.

Opposite from me a lady
cradles a sleeping child.

Go. I am pushed back.

My memory is jolted back
to Naples. To a time when the earth shook

in the shadows of Mount Vesuvius
at the end of a bus line:

the mother with sleeping
child in the back
seat would not
stand

it was late and
her bones were set
from riding through
ruins

where the cracks in
the ground were big
enough to bury
yesterdays

no place to go
eyes filled with fear
song cradled in her
arms she could not
rest)

(resting
in his leather
chair the communist mayor
in his solid office

waited
not to be
too hasty to proclaim
a beaten bus "habitable"

Stop: Terminus. I am shoved forward
into a democratic city.

Me and my Gazette financial page.

I've worked all day.

but am not tired.

My city's mayor is not a communist

and I've a snug home

to welcome me.

But what have I done

for that woman and her child?

Sunday Morning

There is no fragrance of wild violets
from green roadside hedges here.
No glory in the May morning.

All is still.

As he paces through Parc Gabriel-Lalement
the old immigrant remembers
the smell of fresh bread
and the flask of red wine
tied to the hoe he shouldered
to his spring wheat fields.

Cold, he stops to rub his hands together
and he stares
at the frozen flowers
that sparkle in the sunrise
odorless amidst the dormant trees.

But he takes heart
to hear a fleeting robin sing
in his native tongue.

After the Rains

a pine cone

brittle-iced

cracks

at the touch

and tinkles

on the hard

packed snow

almond pink blossoms

breeze-soft

with beads of sunlight

glisten

after a warm rain

from the doorway

of a straw hut

a peasant's

eager look

April rain

different fields

different countries

The Good Neighbor

The clothesline ties
the telephone pole
to the lady's porch.

On the line hang
old towels, underwear
and worn socks that speak
of tired feet

Fluttering sheets
suddenly pulled taut
snap and crackle
in the wind
telling a tale
of short sleeping hours.

But the neighbor
across the alley
will not listen.

He would just as soon
make believe
the lady was not there.

The line and its garments,
like a foreign flag,
is an invasion
of his territory

The screech of pulleys
brings him out
wearing his irritation
like an assault weapon
and not even the music
of a thousand mandolins
could compose a smile
on his face.

The Back Lane

Just

an overgrown-with-weeds

dead-end city lane -

but immigrant-neighbors

fought over it

as if it were theirs:

as if it were a precious plot

in the old country

and meager lives

depended on it.

No matter

that now they owned

fifth-of-a-million-dollar homes

with each a garden

fertile enough

to feed a family year-round.

On the hottest Sundays,

as they worked their gardens

and sweat streamed down their faces,

we heard them fight the loudest.

Perhaps the wrangles
were their way
of giving Montrealers
a glimpse
of some hard, old-country life
or showing the world
that even in a new land-of-plenty
old customs
die hard.

A Maple Seed in French Canada

fathered royally by the maple
the seed

gyrates

and makes

a perfect

one-point

landing

in the lap of mother earth

in a fertile Italian garden

sun

water

sun

wind

a caring Napoletano

and the quadriglia of the seasons

nurture the seedling to a tree

years later

the scowl-eyed neighbors

perceive the poignant form

against the darkening sky

and threatening storm:

with upraised arms
and choleric tongues
they bellow their discontent:

"As if we need that, too,
to hide the sun
from our flowers and lawns!"

they are outraged

41
After the Snowfall

I open the door
to the porch
and an icy wind
pulls me out
into a freezing
world of white.

Small children run about
as if in a field
in the scorching heat
of an August sun.

I turn shivering
to look at the sun.
I remember the golden wheat fields
of my sixth summer.

A much more painful white
than the white of snow -
the sun's white pains me:

I see the arid fields
of many other summers
and my father driving
his hoe into rock-hard soil
and sweat beading
his kerchiefed head.

I can still hear
his parched throat calling
"Agostino, una goccia di vino!"

All that hard work
so his son could choose
between two shades of white.

René's Proposal

We lost the Battle
of the Plains of Abraham -
c'est bien normal (grimace) -
but we shall win the war
in the Office of the Ministry
of Culture.

I promise you,
gens du pays,
all things great
and small (shrug)
even ones you have
never dreamed of.

I promise you
the abolition of classes
(puffing on cigarette,
big cloud of smoke)
glorification
of the masses.

No more pharaohs
or philosopher-kings
emperors or czars
Trudeaus or Duces.

Québécois (pause
for applause) -
let me
lead you into war
contre ces maudits anglais!

Ah, but we "race of warriors"
(the not so silent minority)
we've heard it all before:

Even lonely Lucrezia
of Pinturicchio's fresco,
she in the red mantle
that envelops and unfolds her:
she whose father and brother
made her a prostitute
in the eyes of the world:
for still another palazzo,
another ducat.

Ville Marie

Out of the fertile earth
grew fertile farms
modest homes
tall, radiant spires.

We called the city Montreal.

Then we encased all
in concrete and skyscrapers
and we ran through them the steel wires
of the not-so-quiet revolution.

Expo '67. Terre des Hommes.

Suddenly the spires
were not so tall any more.
The peasant-immigrant
all but stopped arriving.

The international metropolis
had arrived instead.

Now the concrete and moral rubble
are in town:
the multi-class slums
the desecration of the land.

The Old ICAO Building

where once Icarus inspired men

to chart the skies

only the gnarled steel veins

remain

where once model planes hovered

in confined air

only the memory

feeds

the old building is dismembered

its bones are broken,

an arid mass of rubble

waiting for the dump

immigrant-peasants walk by

oblivious to the fall

Montreal-East Xmas

There are oil refineries to the East which burn
off harmful gases. Neither grey days nor dark
nights can obscure the glow of their flames.

for some time

my fractured fibula

has been warning me

of a strange chill

and it's there

smoke and wind-blown snow

tumble across roof-tops

swoop between rows

and rows of houses

how far East

the eye must search

to find a light beyond

a tiny man-made flame

how far away's the true star

from Xmas

this wintry season

my fractured fibula

aches for a star

like the star
we once hung
over the modest presepio
for the Kings
to find Christ

Winter Landscape

I've come to love
the gently rolling hills
with their wind-blown pines
and white winter faces

and they have come
to be home to me - it
seems - more than any
human I have known

more than any human
I have known, they
will reflect the sky
the sun the drifting clouds

and beyond all things
which claim to have
intelligence and truth
they have their majesty

Grown Up

For a better life
your father brought you
from the underworld Naples of Forcella
to an innocent Montreal.

But the old slums
were in your blood.

Just like your new city
you were not content
to lie close to the ground
solid on the rock of the island
secure in the shadow
of the mountain.

Obscure
among the nineteenth-century trees
and playgrounds
you wanted to know
to be known.

The sky was too alluring
so you grew
as you would have grown
under the old sun.

Now you are tall
and alone as your city
and the smog-clouds hide
your face.

Sunday in Parc Gabriel-Lalement

I remember the church bells resounding
and the commuter trains
making the snow tremble
in Parc Gabriel-Lalement

and children having snowball fights
in a fairy-tale setting
of maples dressed in white
and grandparents watching, spellbound

but today I walk that route
on my way to the Sunday paper
and the sound of the bells
is carried away by the rattle
of a dingy freight train

I retrace the only footsteps
across an almost treeless park
and a cold wind forces me to take
a backward look:

where is that endless train
transporting everything?

Sickle Moon

at six o'clock
in November
I step out
from my work
to an ice-lined
sidewalk
and a sickle moon
cuts down my thoughts
and reaps my dreams
as the cold wind
pierces my aching bones

it seems
like the same
sickle moon
of an April
in another land -
the moon

I always recall
lying on its back
carefree
across a cloudless sky

but this moon
does not shine
on a quiet
country road
or on my mother -
child in arms -
walking home
from the fields

this moon
is but a memory
of how long
her road was
and how hard

III

An Immigrant's Lesson

no matter

what you do

you're always

number two

number one

was born

right here

before

or after you

Dubbed

Four classes, four grade levels. We walked a kilometer in the hot sun from the village elementary school to the town theatre to see "Biancaneve e i sette nani". It was the first time Walt Disney came to our town's movie screen. The first time most of us had ever been in the theater.

I sat through two complete screenings, agape, before the Professore could find me. And when he did, I got my first ever slap across the back of the head. But all I could remember after the tears, for months after, were those magical figures moving across the screen and the sounds that seemed to come from nowhere.

A little older, I came to Canada. And there were those same characters on TV in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", heigh-ho-ing and coming from work in English. I went around telling all my friends that America was borrowing from the Italians again! No doubt this latter version had lost a great deal in the translation.

I felt this for the longest time.

And then one day I learned the truth.

To this very day, I feel as the youth jilted by his first love and forced, on the second bounce, to settle for another.

San Martino

a small town
nestles in my memory
as it nestled
in the mountains
and the valleys of my youth

I remember the sweet air
of grandmother's dark-red roses
vine leaves glistening
in the huge sun
and lazily-drawn August afternoons
long as the dirt track
to the distant villages

I recall the fresh morning taste
of its valley's peaches
and its fleshy honeyed figs

but most of all
I can't forget
the flash of its peasants' sweaty faces
and loving eyes

Immigrant Farmers

not all
left the native soil
for worldly gain

some left
that the spirit
might be free

they
whose valley acre
gave more
than it received
never had to learn
to read or write
until from Rome
the Duce ordered
war

at dawn
they sang no more
their happy farmer's song
"La Campagnola" -
the country girl
in whose "eyes
was the sun

the warmth of violets
of valleys all in flower"
whose voice, singing,
was "a harmony of peace"

to be free
to sing out loud
the sweet melodies
the blood composed
was worth seeking

another home
and so they left
and settled on another
fertile soil
forced from it all
the worldly goods
their native soil
would never yield

and they found
what they were not seeking:
people who mocked them
for their calloused hands
and the sweat on their brows
people who envied them
their homes and money

most of all
they found new languages
new customs
and family names
that would keep them apart
for generations

they
who really sought
a warm embrace
found instead
all the space
for their spirit to spread out
and sing its freedom song
but not a soul to listen

Gathering No Roses

Like all the poor farmers
rooted solidly as the oaks
in the sunny Caudina Valley,
nonna Mattia had a fault -
a dream:

She dreamt of fertile farms
in a far-off land
where feeding a family
would not be constant toil.

So one hot noon,
resting by the melon patch
in the shade of an old oak,
it was decided:

Her husband would leave for Canada.

She and their four daughters
would stay behind.

They managed well at first:
summers she hired help,
winters she tended to hogs and hens,
and all year round
there were dollars from Canada.

But the colors of the seasons faded.

The daughters left.

Nonna Mattia's dream changed -

she longed to have her husband home.

He wrote, "I, too, long

for a rest with you

under our shady oak.

Save a bottle of our red wine.

Just one more year

and I'll be home."

But the lure of the new land

was much too strong.

Many swallows came

and went.

Then one cold November

he returned:

shoulders rounded,

neck protruding -

fragile as a bird.

Just in time

for nonna Mattia's wake.

The Fire

Those green splintered logs
were once a black-cherry tree
imported from Italy
but one which never bore fruit
in this cold land.

It gave the earth
its fragrance,
its bark
black in the rain,
branches swaying
in the wind,
the sun glittering
on its leaves:
celebrating spring
or summer.

One fruitless autumn
they chopped it down.

Now it is winter
and its wood is still green.

Its juices sizzle in the fire
but there is no flame;
only when a rare air pocket explodes
a flame shoots out
and fizzles.

If it could talk
it probably would say:
"Why didn't you use me
for a table
or a bed?"

How many lives
like that tree
are wasted in a fire
they cannot feed?

Singing With the Land

Luigi loved the land.

Once he tilled his own soil

he sang all day;

then he took a peasant bride

and a refrain lodged in his heart

to fill his fields with song.

Then came the war.

Before he could sing

"La Campagnola" one more time

he found himself far

from his bride and land

in a Virginia POW camp

which was chocolates

and cigarettes

and visits from American uncles

who wrote back

to the old country:

"He's fine, niece."

But he sang no more.

His one souvenir
of the great war:
a shattered elbow
which never set right.
Still today it sticks
out from his arm -
sawed off
like the branch of a tree.

He was home,
finally
to a government job
on the Ferrovia.

But he wanted to sing:
"I want my hoe and hectares,"
he would repeat,
"that I may farm in my own time
on my own land."

He sang but the voice faltered.

The hectares did not yield
and the far-off land of plenty
beckoned.

The family went:

Luigi exchanged his hoe
for a pick and shovel in Canada.

The land was comfortable.

But the heat of the new sun
parched his tongue
and he could not sing.

The tilling of the new soil
was not home.

It was no land
for orange trees:

"I've come to die
in this glacial land,"
he would repeat each time
the winter snows would start
to fall again.

Winter, spring, winter, summer, winter.

And still

this winter

he looks out

over the fields of snow

dreaming of the fields of home,

longing for the Italian sun

to melt the farmer's songs

frozen in his heart.

Vanity

once

back in the Old Country

people fought in the streets

over what should be

or what should not

be the capital

of Reggio Calabria

and I laughed saying

vanity, vanity

at a different time

here in Canada

French and English clashed

marching in the streets

over whose language to use

to speak of love or death

while the indifferent sky

gathered clouds of pollution

to annihilate both

vanity, vanity

all is vanity

places appear
to be different
names change
vanity remains

Ode to a Dandelion

O bitter dandelion -

my nurturer -

how little

these neighboring weed-killers know

about our gastronomic pact

we are to them

but busy nuisances:

you - scattering your seeds on the wind

infesting cherished lawns

with weeds

I - leaving gaping holes

where perfect green

should be

Ah only

that I could die

and be buried in an open field

that many more of you could grow

and with the years

bear my soul

on your ruffled

skirted seeds

everywhere

on the wind

to take root

in that native-Canadian blindness

and finally

give each one of them

a crown of your fine white hairs

so light

Italia/America

Italia -

we abandoned

your fertile fields

too few to feed us

the oranges grapes olives

that now feed our memory

we buried your hot sun

under our eyelids

at night

across the dark waters

from the glowing

plums figs persimmons

of our desires

Italia -

you forced our fathers

to dream America

and now your sons wither

in the dust bowl

of their dream

America -

you lured us

from our mamma's warm arms

because her calloused hands

were empty

but no warm blood
flows in the veins
of your Lady of Liberty
hollow monument
to ~~unequal~~ opportunity

your reservations
are hiding places for genocides
your skyscrapers
are ghettos for black massacres
your people
have more gods than sense

America -
our transatlantic dream
is a lie

IV

Feast of Saint Anthony

San Martino, Valle Caudina. Feast of Saint Anthony, subsistence of a people's soul.

Townspeople, men and women, transport the statue - corpulent mulberry-wood sculpture - on their shoulders, in the brightest noon sun: shouldering the Saint is honorable, devout and hard work.

From the Franciscan monastery on the edge of town, they carry the statue across the countryside to the furthest farm. Even the poorest prepares a table with money and wine: hard-earned money for the Saint; wine to quench the thirst of his bearers.

A sparse gathering at first. But slowly, along the way, huge candles are matched for the procession, sore feet for the long march, vows made in secret: a real communion of a people putting its pains and sorrows and hopes on display: pinned to the Saint's stole.

At night, in a long row, thousands of flickering candlelights guide the Saint-bearers back to town in a rosary of light.

Montreal, Quebec. The custom is reenacted in the streets.

The fanfare drowns out the sounds of prayer.

The people still pin their hopes to the Saint's stole. But a truck transports the Saint.

At night, the candlelight is outdone by the fireworks on the man-made hill near the Madonna of Pompei and most prefer to watch the procession from their balconies.

Here. Let's ask what some people think: "Paesano, tell us, how do you like the feast this year?"

"Well! Great band. Beautiful fireworks. And all my friends are here! - What more could I ask for?"

"And you, my friend, how do you like it?"

"I think it's good. But, certainly, it is not like my home town's feast of Sant'Antonio. Nothing is missing, you understand. Yet, I do not feel completely pleased."

Soon the fireworks are over. The people disperse and each family goes home its separate way.

In San Martino, a modest fireworks display puts an end to the feast. Friends continue to mingle through the night. Some, immigrants who have returned for the joy of the long walk and rejoicing in honor of the Saint, somehow manage to make some of their last words with their friends a prayer.

Somewhere, around a corner or at someone's front door, you will always find one of the older town inhabitants. The old philosopher who only needs the slightest hint to utter a thought:

"We live in various towns, some of us live abroad: we don't write to each other often. When we run into each other, we can be, to each other, indifferent or absentminded. But a word between us is enough. Simply a word or a phrase: one of those old-fashioned phrases heard and repeated numberless times in our infancy to recapture suddenly those old relationships and youth bound permanently to those phrases, to those words."

"One of those phrases or words might help one recognize another, we brothers, in the darkness of some grotto, in the midst of millions. Those phrases are our Latin, the vocabulary of our bygone days. They are like the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians, the testimony of a vital nucleus that survives in its texts, saved from the fury of the waters, the corrosion of time. Those phrases are the foundation of the familial unity which will persist as long as we are on this globe, resurrecting in the most unlikely spots of the earth."

Correspondence

Zio Sandro had always been a private person. Until he returned to Italy after having lived in Canada for twenty years. And then something even stranger happened. That's what my father (Zio Sandro's brother) was talking about after supper one night as he raised his right hand to his head to wipe the sweat brought on by worrying and drinking of a little extra wine. Then he placed the drenched napkin on the dining room table, gently. His fingers twitched before he spoke.

"He's finally done it, Lina".

"D. what?" my mother asked looking up, startled, from her after-supper chores.

"The letter! Haven't you seen the letter from Nicola?" Mother looked puzzled. "Over there!" Father pointed to a spot by a pile of mail on a low cupboard. "Sandro's gone crazy!"

Mother left the last of the dishes in the sink and walked over to the cupboard, wiping her hands on her apron along the way. There, at the foot of a statue of St. Anthony, her home town's patron, she fumbled around for the air mail envelope and started to read. Her eyes moved very slowly. She struggled, trying to get out the first few syllables, "Ca - ri - ssi - ...". After a while, she gave up and handed it to me. "Here, Agostino, read it to me!"

After the "Carissimi" and the usual Italian weather report, I finally got to the part that I felt was making my father despair. I read on, hoping to discover that there had been some kind of mistake; but it was all there, spelled out clearly in Zio Nicola's Italian. My mother listened

anxiously as I read it to her: "Sandro has built himself a tree house in our land by the well, over the hazelnut tree. In it he spends all his time. Away from everyone, he thinks. But he is in full view of the whole masseria! He accepts hardly any food. He has become skin and bones. Luigi, I tell you that he is not at all well. We are his brothers, we must do something - and soon. But what? - He will have nothing to do with me - least of all me! Please write - maybe you can come and see for yourself. Al piu presto. Tuo fratello, Nicola."

My mother implored my father to tell her that none of what I had read to her was true, "That's not our Sandro. No! - It cannot be Luigi!" But my father only looked at her and nodded very slowly. She pulled her hair back from her face, to reveal trembling lips and despairing eyes. How could this be? She had taken such good care of him while he was in Canada, and now this?

My father moved to the window and stared out. He wiped his brow and the bald three-quarter moon which was the top of his head. Still looking out, he said, "Yes, Lina, there's no doubt. He's done it." He seemed resigned to the facts, but he could not accept what they meant. "What are we going to do? - We will be the talk of the masseria, and then San Martino, and then here, Montreal! - Sant'Antonio help us. What a dishonor!" He had had his arms in the air, but now he turned around to the table and with one hand he grasped the top of a chair and with the other he wiped the sweat from his face.

My mother sat with her hands clasped together in her lap. I watched her as she shared my father's uneasiness, as she stared at him still half-believing. My father stared out the window again, over the vegetable

garden, to the huge maple tree in the corner of the back yard. Finally, he threw his arms in the air, waving his napkin as he spoke, "What would make him do such a thing, Lina? What's happened to him?"

My mother shook her head. Then suddenly the look of despair that was in her eyes was gone. She unlocked her hands and motioned for me to come to her. "Come, Agostino. We will write to Zio Nicola. Vieni, we will write him a letter."

Poor Zio Sandro. He had always been the most generous of all my uncles. He certainly cared for everyone in the family. He was the one to buy me textbooks when my father was struggling to make ends meet and my mother was in hospital recovering from an operation.

But Zio Sandro had always been a private person. When he was living with us in Montreal, he would go out of his way not to be seen by outsiders. Some visitors to my father's house were not even aware that he was living with us. Every time that someone came, he would withdraw to his room. Sometimes one would catch a glimpse of him crossing the ill-lit corridor and questions would be asked. But that was about it. The only time he would socialize was when very close relatives came over. And even then he would remain as distant as he could without arousing curiosity.

It was almost impossible to catch him without his hat on. If he could help it, he would not be seen without it anywhere. I remember one night when my mother was still in hospital. I was on my way to the toilet. I switched on the light in the corridor and there he was, arms outstretched, walking slowly toward me. He was sleepwalking. I had to sidestep him to let him pass. He walked right past me and into his bedroom. It was during this moment that I first noticed that the top of his head was bald and

very pale in comparison with his dark complexion. On the left side of his head there was a deep scar.

The next day, when I told my father what I had seen, he made me sit down across from him at the kitchen table and he proceeded to explain to me that he had seen Zio Sandro do the exact same thing whenever something was really bothering him.

And the ugly-looking scar? "That," he sighed, "happened when we were very young. I was throwing stones into a walnut tree, trying to knock walnuts to the ground. Zio Sandro was on the other side, waiting for them to fall down and gather them. It was then that I did it to him, Agostino. You should have seen all the blood gushing out! I thought I had killed him. He was so wobbly I had to help him to the masseria. We had only Zio Nicola and my stepmother then. Your grandparents were gone, you know."

"After that accident," he continued, "Zio Sandro was not the outgoing boy everyone had known anymore. He refused to appear in public. When it came time to get himself a girl, he refused to let us buy him a suit. He would look at us and say, 'Don't get me one because I won't wear it!' Then he would grab the hat he had gotten in the habit of wearing and he would pull it down as far as it would go.

"When he was thirty, he finally built up enough courage to leave behind the land that grandfather had left us when we were very young and he came to America. He came to Montreal and worked on construction jobs. He worked hard so that he could make money and return home. All his savings were sent to Zio Nicola so that they would be deposited in an Italian bank account for him.

"Weekdays, he worked deep in the Métro. Saturdays and Sundays he worked in the Côte des Neiges Cemetery. He would come home only to eat and sleep. Work enabled him to avoid having to face people. That made him happy. It also allowed him to put aside enough money so that when he would return to Italy for good he would have as little as possible to do with people."

The letter had arrived in June. During the time that it took for the next two letters to arrive from Italy, the situation did not change. My parents were slowly coming to realize that, in spite of the great expense involved, they should go in person to see what was happening.

News came that my father's stepmother and Zio Nicola were both very ill. Zio Nicola was suffering from a recurrence of an old liver ailment which had required surgical treatment for a long time, but which he would not allow. The stepmother was confined to bed and dying of old age.

When Zio Nicola was taken to hospital in Naples, Zio Sandro finally decided to abandon his tree house. He returned to the house to take care of their stepmother. But within a matter of weeks, she died. She had always loved her own son and daughter more, but it was in Zio Sandro's arms that she took her last breath. "Perdonami, Sandro," she had told him as they were riding home from the town doctor. They had to ride in an old Fiat along a bumpy gravel road because the old doctor had refused to go to the masseria, insisting that his home-visiting days were over. "Sandro, perdonami," she had repeated. They had been her last words, whispered in a deep, regretful voice.

She was hardly in her grave when news came that Zio Nicola had also died. My parents finally decided that it was time to go.

They arrived at Zio Sandro's house and they found that he was practically his old self. The fixation which had taken hold of him at the time of Zio Nicola's first letter seemed to have released its hold on him. He had made the most expensive funeral arrangements that the town had seen in decades. However, when it came time for him to enter the Church along with my parents, he would not hear of it.

"For the love of God, Sandro," my father kept insisting, "you must come into the Church! What will everyone think?" But Zio Sandro refused to budge from the bottom of the Church steps.

"Please come, Sandro," my mother implored him.

"No. Andate. I will wait here." Zio Sandro stood firmly on the cobblestones he had occupied.

"It is no use, Lina. Andiamo," my father said, leading my mother up the steps and into the Church.

Later, at the town cemetery, Zio Sandro stood as much as he could, half-hidden by an old cypress, silent. His old black hat was firmly in place. Every once in a while, he lowered his gaze in response to someone looking his way.

It was not until after the burial that my father finally managed to get away from the townspeople. He and my mother followed Zio Sandro along the gravel road to the masseria. At one point, he could no longer stand him walking all alone up front and he lengthened his stride to catch up to him, leaving my mother behind.

He had still not caught up to him when he started talking to him. "For the love of God, Sandro, please tell me what's happening with you." They were almost side to side. "Please, Sandro. I know that you never loved the Church and those crooks that run it - those ladri. Certainly, we have not been blessed with God's best servants; but it was our brother that died. Our brother - il nostro sangue! Certainly you could have come into the church for his sake!"

Zio Sandro turned toward him, restraining himself from striking his own chest with a clenched right hand. Then, half-angrily and half-regretfully, he pronounced through his teeth, "Nostro fratello? - Don't be so kind, Luigi! May God help him - if He can!" He started walking even faster than before. My father, startled, hesitated before starting after him again.

"Ma, allora, what could he possibly have done to ..." he started to ask.

Zio Sandro stopped him short. "Si, him!" he shouted. "He lost almost everything trying to help out his friends: Vent'anni di lavoro, and what do I have to show for it? - Hardly anything but Papa's land! Only what I had when I left for that cold country."

My father grew more and more confused. "My God," he asked, "but what are you talking about, Sandro? You have the land, the harvest, a house to live in ..."

"A house? - It's falling apart. The cantina has to be fixed and in the house the plaster is falling off the ..."

"But all the money, Sandro! All the money you made in America! You have all ..."

"Si," Zio Sandro said hopelessly, "i dollari Americani! Gone! It's all gone, Luigi! - I send my money to our brother to save so I can live in peace in my own land, and he lends it out to every little businessman in the contrata - no questions asked. Do you understand, Luigi? I've gotten hardly a lira back! And there is no way to go after them, either."

"But it's not possible!"

"Si, Luigi, it's possible. Believe me, that's what happened."

"Nicola," my father mumbled.

"God help him, if He can."

"But Sandro, that's not right. It's not just!" my father said looking into his eyes. "Yet," he continued, "we can't change His will. God will provide, you will see. Dio provvederà!"

Zio Sandro was convinced, but not of what my father was saying. He looked at the gray sky turning dark, then he turned to my father saying, "Dio, Luigi? - First He creates us and then He forgets us, and in the end we must always suffer." He turned away from my father and lowering his sight, he started walking quickly ahead.

At Croce Via, a small masseria close to Zio Sandro's in the Italian countryside near Naples, they parted company for the day. My father followed my mother to her old house in Croce Via. Zio Sandro continued on his way on the dusty gravel road to his masseria.

That night, my father could not sleep. He turned to my mother in bed and said, "One's gone and the other's going to hell! What am I going to do Lina? - You could always get through to him. Please tell me you'll talk to him - tell me you'll try to talk some sense into him, Lina."

"Try to get some sleep, Luigi. He's had to go through so much in so short a time. Give him time - a chance to slow things down again to his pace. Con il tempo, he will come to his good senses again; and you, you will understand much better how he feels, too."

"Maybe you're right, Lina," my father moaned, "I hope to God you're right." Then he turned over to his other side. "My brothers - God help them both," he sighed.

She was relieved to see a small sign that my father was beginning to accept what had happened. "Grazie, Sant'Antonio," she whispered. Then she continued praying as she fell into a sleep, "And please take care of Nicola and Sandro ..."

But my father was really not one to leave something up to time when blood rushed through his veins. He tossed and turned all night. By dawn, he was already approaching Zio Sandro's masseria.

He wasted no time in walking up the long flight of stairs to his brother's second-floor room. He knocked on the door, but there was no answer. He found the door unlocked and entered. Zio Sandro was not there. He looked toward the window. A little morning light and a slow breeze came through a broken pane of glass. On the right, the back door was half-open. He looked to the bed on the far right of the room and found that it had been slept in. A corner of the blanket fell onto a cracked floor tile. Further on, he noticed other broken tiles covered with shards and splinters of plaster of paris. He followed the trail toward the back of the door and there, at the foot of the dresser, he bent down to pick up a large chunk of plaster of paris off a shattered and sunken tile. He turned it over in his hands. Its top was round and its bottom jagged. He brought it over from

behind the door into the light and whispered the words caught in his throat, "Sandro, what have you done?" For another moment he stared in disbelief at the head of the statue of Sant'Antonio - St. Anthony, protector of the town and its people. Then he placed the piece of statue on the dresser, carefully, and hurried out the back door.

Outside the door, to the right, there was a passage parallel to the back of the room and which finally led to some stairs to the ground floor. The path was made of planks of poplar and ran over the shingles of the cantina below, a dark and damp place used to store wine and various preserves. As my father started to walk on it, he noticed that some sections of it had rotted away. On a closer look, his eyes were drawn to a section of it which had caved in. The morning light centered on it and it led him to look through the opening into the space below. The breeze disturbed the dust on the shingles. The dust was then sucked into a pool of light and disappeared in the dark around the hole. Below, bits and pieces of the shingles were strewn about the dark floor and over a barrel, some demijohns, and some bottles and jars. A demijohn and some bottles were broken and their liquids mingled with the plaster and stained the shingles that had fallen from the roof. Shards of glass sparkled in the light.

As he looked into the hole, my father shaded his eyes, then squinted to get a clearer view. Soon his eyes got used to the light from below and he began to make out a bare foot stained with a dark liquid. Slowly, the picture completed itself, first another foot, then ankles, pajamas, a limp arm cut all the way across and resting on the left thigh. In the half-light my father could see the pajamas covered with dark spots, the body reclined at the base of the broken demijohn, and inevitably the head, the scarred, bald head of Zio Sandro.

"Dio mio!" my father cried, "It can't be!" But his eyes would not hide the truth from him. On the top of the head was a dark spot which glinted as he looked and the light reflected off it. It could have been wine or blood, he could not tell. "My God!" he repeated, as he stepped quickly by the side of the house and down the steps to the entrance of the cantina. All the time he was thinking, "My God, he must be badly hurt! He must have been sleepwalking again!"

When my father got to him, Zio Sandro was beginning to move but appeared to be quite groggy. My father took hold of him and said, "Calmati, Sandro, wait. Let me help you."

"Dove? - Where? ..." he mumbled incoherently.

My father helped him up and took him out into the light of the garden in the back of the house. There, he sat him on an old tree stump, then he pulled out a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the top of his head and his injured arm. When he wiped the front of his pajamas, he was somewhat relieved and exclaimed, "Vino rosso! - Thank God for that!" But Zio Sandro's arm continued to bleed. "Sandro," he said, shaking him, "Sandro! Come, andiamo!" He helped him to his feet and wrapped an arm around him to support him. "Let's get that washed and see about getting you to a doctor," he told him.

"Dottore? - No! I'll ... I'll be all right. I'll ..." Zio Sandro insisted.

"Look at the way that arm is bleeding. And you can hardly stand. We will go see a doctor, Sandro - don't make things difficult! You are going and that's that," my father said moving him along. Once he had him

sitting comfortably by the entrance to the house, he asked for a neighbor to go for a car to take Zio Sandro to town.

Two days later, in my mother's house, my father was busily puffing away at his fifth cigarette of the hour when, all of a sudden, he took the last half inch from his mouth and snuffed it out under foot. Then he called my mother to come to the kitchen. "Lina," he said, "we must do something about Sandro or he will sleepwalk his way to his grave."

"Stop worrying," my mother said, "he'll do nothing of the sort."

"Just like I was not supposed to worry about him the other night, eh?" my father said.

"All right, maybe you're right, Luigi. Maybe we should see about getting him back to Montreal with us. At least there he will be a little safer." Then she added, "I will ask him what he thinks, va bene?"

My father was relieved. "Finally," he said, "you make sense!"

"And don't worry, I will convince him," my mother continued, hoping to put my father at ease once and for all. "Maybe we can even get him interested in Graziella, eh? - He's getting old you know. He needs a good woman to look after him."

"You will never stop working on that, will you, Lina?" he asked, trying to suppress a smile. But, as he sat at the kitchen table and rested his arm on it, he was not so displeased with the idea as he was trying to show, and the smile finally crept on his lips.

"Sicuro!" my mother exclaimed. "And if it doesn't work out, he can always stay with us!"

As it turned out, Zio Sandro did not need much convincing. He had always had a soft ear for my mother and since the fall he was listening to what she had to say even more. Since the accident he had begun to tolerate having some people outside the family around. My mother had still not convinced him to take that awful old black hat off his head, "But," she said to my father, "who is perfect, Luigi?"

It took my mother a whole week to convince Zio Sandro what would be "best" for him. He agreed to go back to Montreal as soon as they could get all the papers in order for him. He even agreed to give Graziella some thought as long as "she wouldn't talk so much or ask too many questions ..."

"Ma sicuro," my mother agreed. "You'll see. She will be just perfect!"

It was settled.

It was also time for my parents to leave their land and country behind and return to Montreal. It was Sunday morning and all three of them were in town where my parents had come to rent a car to take them to the airport in Naples. While my father took care of the arrangements, my mother took advantage of the occasion to talk Zio Sandro into going into St. Anthony's Church with them before they left.

"It's for God you go to church, Sandro," my mother was saying.

But Zio Sandro would not be convinced. "And is that a good reason -" he asked, "the way He has been letting things happen?"

He was not convinced of my mother's arguments; but in the end, he went in out of respect for her, because she had always been so good to him. Yet, he insisted on remaining somewhere in the back, out of sight of the townspeople. He urged my parents to go ahead and they all went in.

My father was overjoyed at even such a small concession, so he went ahead to find a ~~paw~~ along with my mother. Zio Sandro stood behind a pillar in the back, trying to appear as if nobody were noticing him, hiding his bandaged arm with his hand.

From time to time, my father looked back to him, beaming with pride, that his brother was not hiding from people anymore. But at the same time he could see that he was very uneasy. He could see his gaze shifting from side to side. His weight, too, kept shifting first to his left foot, then to his right, then to his left again.

My father turned to my mother. "He only came in for us," he said, "didn't he, Lina?"

"A convert to the family is better than no convert at all, Luigi," my mother said. "Thank God for that, at least."

"Si. You are right, Lina," my father agreed. "Only if Sant'Antonio would grant us a favor - una piccola grazia -"

"A favor?" my mother repeated. "No, Luigi - a small miracle!"

When Mass was over, they went to Zio Sandro and walked with him past the massive oak doors and down the granite stairs to the town piazza. There, in one corner, the driver was waiting to drive them to the airport.

"Allora, Sandro," my mother told him, "we will be waiting for you in Montreal. Take good care of yourself, you hear me?" She gave him a big hug, reaching as far around him as her short arms would allow, and then kissed him on both cheeks. "Do not disappoint us, capisci!" she said. She turned away from him and took a handkerchief from the pocket of her coat all in one motion, and without making a sound or waiting for a reply, she went to sit in the back seat of the car. There, she dried her eyes.

"Don't forget to have the doctor take care of that arm, Sandro," my father warned him. "It won't be long before we are all together again - Ci penserò io - Just promise me that you won't always be by yourself in that old house."

"I can take care of myself," Zio Sandro said. "You have a good trip — and don't worry about me." They hugged each other. "Arrivederci, Luigi," he said.

They walked to the car and my father got in. Zio Sandro closed the door for him.

"Addio, Sandro," my father said.

Zio Sandro gave a long look into the car. My mother was hiding her face in her handkerchief. My father held out his hand to him "Arrivederci," they both said.

As each one waved, the car rode out of the piazza in a small cloud of dust. It had been an unusually dry and bright autumn morning.

A week later, my parents were sitting by a slow fire in the playroom. My mother had bottled the last of the tomatoes from the garden and she was being very careful to keep the water around the bottles in the pot at the right temperature. My father kept staring into the fitful flame.

"You know, Luigi," she said looking at him, "maybe it would be better if you would find a small job somewhere. You would be busy. It would take your mind off everything, help you get things sorted out."

My father turned to her very slowly, first putting his thoughts aside, then weighing what she had said. "He was really getting better, wasn't he, Lina," he said. "He was bringing flowers to their graves - he even got the priests to promise to offer a Mass in their memory - and they

didn't even make it easy for him, those priests. They're not the easiest priests, Lina." The glow of the fire lit up his face and the top of his head. The wrinkles on his forehead were more visible than ever. "I knew he wouldn't go back to that doctor," he said. "I had a feeling - maybe the doctor would have found out about the other problem and then he might have gotten well. - Povero fratello."

"Basta, Luigi - please!" my mother said. "We can't be talking about it all the time, we will go crazy thinking and talking of nothing else. There's nothing more that we can do for him - except pray for him."

"But why should God take him? He was getting better - so much better."

"It was His will, Luigi. Vieni, help me get this pot off the fire."

They moved slowly, both using old rags to protect themselves from the heat and the soot that had gathered around the pot. They took the pot from the fireplace and set it down on a piece of plywood on the floor. Hot vapors rose above the surface of the water and the sackcloth rags that covered the bottles.

My father sat by the fireplace again, hardly noticing that the fire had gone out and the charred wood was covered with ashes. My mother gathered all the used rags and placed them to soak in the water in the garage sink. Then she returned to sit by my father, letting her tired arms sag by her side and her hands lie palms up in her lap.

My father turned his gaze from the fireplace to her. "Did he call out to the people of the masseria for help, Lina?" he asked. "Do you think he did? - Why did it take so long for them to find him? - Due giorni. He must have been lying dead on the kitchen floor for two whole days, alone. He probably didn't even have the strength left to open the front door - or to call out to anyone."

"Nemmeno una parola," my mother said. "The internal bleeding, it must have started after he fell through the roof of the cantina. But he never complained of any pain - not one word!"

They sat in silence, worn out by the day's work, staring at the ash-covered charcoal.

"We are so far apart, Luigi," my mother said, breaking the silence. "There is so little we can do. We are half here and half there. The only thing to bring us a bit closer together is a letter, now and then. It's the only thing we can afford to do now - write - get some news, some answers to our questions."

My father did not answer. She untied the black handkerchief she was using to keep her hair in place and shook her hair loose. Then she wiped her face roughly and allowed the heat still coming from the fireplace to dry up the perspiration.

"You're right," my father said, finally. The fire was dying out and the room was getting cold. "He is gone - mio fratello non c'è piu, Lina, and there is so much distance between us, we don't even know how he died." He crossed his arms and rubbed the outside of their upper parts with his hands. Then he stared into my mother's face as if there he could find all the answers.

"Luigi," my mother said taking one of his hands in hers, "we'll find out everything. There's no more need to hurry now - non c'è piu bisogno." Slowly, she let go of his hand and smoothed down her dress. She could no longer bear the look on his face. "Non ti preoccupare," she told him. "I'll write to my good friend Giustina. She will let me know everything - you'll see. But please, Luigi, don't let me see you like this any more."

He nodded his head, first uncertainly, then more firmly. "Si," he said, "si!"

For the first time, she had the feeling that he was ready to accept his brother's death.

Late that afternoon, I had entered the house when my mother grabbed me by the arm and whisked me off to the kitchen table.

"Come, Agostino," she said, "come!"

I was beginning to imagine still some other unhappy event.

"Come and sit down," she insisted, not even giving me a second to put down my books somewhere.

My father was staring out the window at the bare branches of the maple tree in the garden, but when he heard us he turned around and his eyes lit up. "Agostino," he said, "you are right on time!"

I looked at my mother. "Sit down, Agostino," she said, motioning for me to sit on a chair closest to the one that she was sitting on. I passed close to the low cupboard, almost brushing with my elbow against a lighted candle in front of the statue of St. Anthony. "Agostino," my mother exclaimed, "fai attenzione!" I checked to see that I hadn't knocked anything over.

"Now sit over here," my mother said, pointing to the chair.

In front of me, the tablecloth had been folded away to make room for writing paper and air-mail envelopes.

"Siediti, Agostino," my mother said. "We will write a letter to Giustina."

Part of the Team

"I don't know, Mario. What good is anything?"

"Well, what good is a stone, Alfredo - or a star?"

"Get serious, Mario - I'm asking a serious question!"

Mario ponders the question with a very serious look on his face while he gazes at a group of stars in a cloudless sky. Then all of a sudden he's sure he's got the answer.

"I know: they communicate!"

"O come on, Mario."

"Sure - you know - they 'talk' to each other. A star and a stone: one gives out the light and the other sparkles - sort of sends it back like."

"That's not communication. Doesn't the stone have to keep the light for that? Take mamma and papà, for example. When mamma talks, papà listens. Boy, does he ever listen!"

"Well, maybe you're right, Alfredo. Then what good is anything?"

"I still don't know, Mario."

They sit on the low stone wall at the edge of the park. It's the driest spot around. A heavy rainstorm stopped barely long enough before sundown for the wind to dry off the top of the wall, whisk out a clear evening sky and then die out. The electric lights are still out from the storm. They are waiting for them to come on so their ball game can start.

Alfredo stares at the starlight playing on the wet gravel around the drinking-water fountain, pondering.

All of a sudden, the lights come on. A cry comes out from the clubhouse: "Come on guys, it's on! Let's play ball!"

Mario and Alfredo hear the team's cry and answer it by jumping off the wall, both at once. Their movements are as finely tuned as any two sharp infielders going after a double play. One after the other, they step nimbly on the sparkling gravel path to the playing field.

Rocky Bandarino

Rocky Bandarino carried
his three-hundred dollar

suit

like a bum. But

to the unsuspecting

eye

Rocky seemed the coolest.

Even his hard-times

parents

were fooled

by the great

put-on

and that is why

it was nothing

but the best

for Bandarino.

How were they to know

that giving him

the best

would make him try

the least?

They worked without complaint

he building roads,

she sewing shirts.

All they wanted

from their son

was an occasional accordion

serenade

and that one day

he'd make them proud.

For this

they gave him

what he wanted.

Rocky took all..

Gave nothing in return.

When I told

him

there was a bum

concealed in his expensive

suit

he hinted strongly

he was going to fix

this

teacher's car.

He didn't care

his marks

were the lowest

in the school.

And when I tried

to talk

about his parents

and their pride

Rocky

macho cool

replied, "So what,

man!" -

I tried so hard

to make him understand

(and Rocky

did, too!) -

But in the end

he simply couldn't make

the grade.

Years later -

at a night school -

I saw

someone in old jeans

and a logger's shirt

and he carried them

just like

Rocky Bandarino.

I ran

to catch him by the arm

and there he was -

he turned around:

"Hi, sir!"

he said. "So...

how's your car?" -

I laughed.

(Could I believe my eyes?)

"It's great to see you here,"

I said.

"Yeah!" he went on.

He arched his arms

and pressed the space

between them close

as if to force the air

in bellows out

through reeds

in sweet accordion sounds:

"Now that the old man's gone

maybe I can make

at least my mother proud."

Cristina at Sixteen.

They brought her up
to be healthy, bright, polite
and wanting nothing.

At the end
of the school year
their dream would be complete:

a final return to Campania
to the small, quiet town
of her grandparents.

But Cristina loved Canada
the place of her birth
the home of her friends
and the first love
she could not bear to leave:

in November she conceived -
a sixteen-year-old's scheme
to cross her parent's plans.

Now it's almost June
and she must remain indoors
away from friends still playing

their children's games
away from her one-time lover
she stares out
at the lilac blossoms
in the tomato garden -
innocence blown by the wind
across the dark green plants.

The Lover of Fights

it wasn't Vittorio's fault
after all
that the city streets
had given him
an alley cat's view
of the world

that good Padre Giovanni
had never taught him
to offer the other cheek

you see he says this is
more than just
my business
it's it's when I
get into the ring
oh it's so hard
to explain it's
my life

not even a locker-room evangelist
could put him on the right road
of born-again Christians

Cat with Mother

A female cat
would have licked itself clean
(alley or no alley)
but all George ever licked
was his plate.

Take the time he hobbled
out of the dying autumn light
his hazel eyes ablaze
big blood-stained
head held up high
red-white teeth
piercing fresh robin.

Old Mamma
at her autumn ritual
preserving tomatoes
took time out
to clean the bird
while eager George
thick tail triumphant
long black incurvate
forepaws extending
over the garage sink
meowed approval.

And when the job was done,

Mamma sat and marveled

as George arched his back

ate

licked his plate clean,

and was gone.

Weeks later

with the first snow

the battle-scarred veteran

returned

rank and disheveled

bird in mouth

imperialy sitting

king of the back alley

adopted lord of the garage

but the bird

held disdainfully

clawed fluttered

feathers flying

George jumped

claws darting

the bird flew free.

George turned away

sniffing

Mamma's pasta with cheese.

"Bestia ingrata!" she shouted.

"I should feed you

like those scarecrow cats

in the old country -

cornbread crusts -

then you'd be proud!"

But George

unflappable

stuck up his tail

and stalked out.

That winter came

like daggers

falling

layer upon

layer

until the back yard

was frozen silver-grey.

Past the sliding-glass doors

Mamma stared

over the packed snow

stopping her gaze

on a lonely bird.

Out of the corner of her mind's eye

George darted

across the slick icy surface

past the fence

past the alley

into the tall bushes the trees

quick as a pounce --

and he was gone.

Mamma turned her thoughts indoors

washed George's favorite plate

put it away

for his return

Sunday Morning Softball Game

even a dribbler

off the end

of the bat

is a hit

on a Sunday

in the park

and the macho

frustrated in his fire

bird and sneakers

stops

for a game

even he is one

with the team

in a catch

and a hit

in the half-fog

and drizzle

of an October morning

the players' hue and cry

echoes off the trees

like muffled balls

but I stand
behind home plate

out of place

a curiosity

in leather soccer shoes

Alfredo's Love Song

Nonna

how many times

called by the crickets' chirping

did I run to my bedroom window

and gaze out

over the sloping clay-tile roof

of your barn

up to the fixed stars

that shone on us

and our loved ones

across the sea?

The stars were our tryst

in the calm of night.

Tonight

on this side of the sea

I gaze at the same stars:

Among the ones that died

aeons ago

but whose glow still reaches us

I search for you.

Brahms' Hungarian Rhapsody

What gypsy
intoxicated with wine
and song
would allow himself
to be lured
by the more somber tones
of this Hungarian Dance
and lull his lively ways?

Dear Brahms -
are not those somber tones
a dark reflection
of your soul
which like any other soul
first come into a strange land
though it be filled with birdsong
must forever feel
like the bird that tries to sing
but whose heart is pierced
by a cat's claws?

Lengthening Days

soon the sun will warm
to the occasion, turning ice and snow
into the creeks and rivers of Spring

force

my garden's tulip bulbs
to break through caked soil

coax

the young students in my care
to test all known truths

but I

once a child of the sun
can no longer rejoice
in the sun or the rain
or the lengthening days

I've gotten used to the snow and ice
and this cold winter wind
which won't tell me why

Outside Madonna di Pompei

"Mi riconobbero, e - Ben torni omai -
bisbigliaron ver me co 'l capo chino -
Perché non scendi? Perché non ristai?" -

Giosuè Carducci, "Davanti San Guido"

no cypresses here
just young maples
neat duplexes
a schoolyard
racing cars which sometimes
come to screeching halts
at the intersection
of Sauvé and St. Michel

no soccer here
except in the Manic ads
tucked neatly on the side
of a noisy bus

the cardinal's song
is drowned out

a child cries
her hand scraped
on the concrete stairs
the mother hastens
to stop the bleeding
and dry the tears

a father swears
at the bright sky
drying beads of sweat
in the sunlight

an old couple
under the shady maple
searches for the concrete bench
no longer there

no Giousé
there are no cypresses here
beckoning into the past

maples
invite
into the future