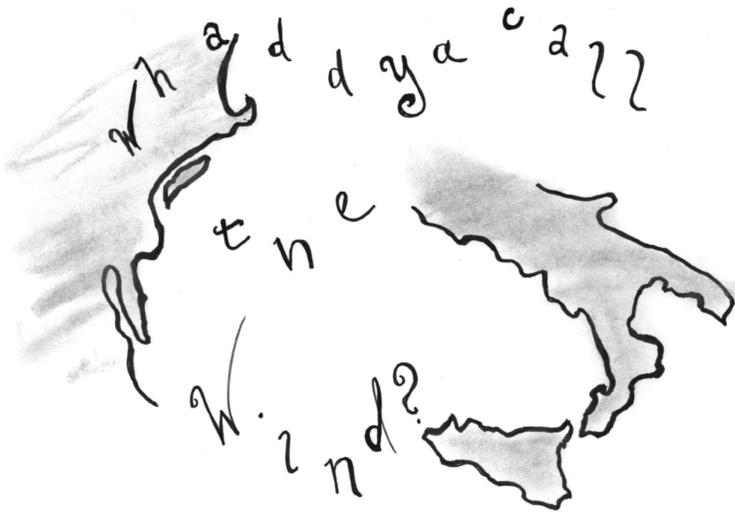


PART I
WHADDYACALL THE WIND?



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“*Boccacielo / Mouth-Heaven / Bocc’Ngjile*”

Napoli, May 22, 2018

I came to paint lemons
That’s what I told myself
To cleanse my mind
Lemon juice the years
My soul has been away

Napoli

A fait accompli

The Bronx before she went through her changes
Alleyway after alleyway wet laundry
Awnings shield from raindrops
A hand painted sign:

*ZIA ADA offre caffè, tè freddo, o limonata
—in cambio di solidarietà.
Le case per tutti.*

Aunt Ada offers coffee, iced tea, or lemonade—
in exchange for solidarity
Housing for all.

The issues are the same in cities—people priced out

I just ate *melanzane* from a jar
It sounds incongruent.
A new product the hotel is pushing
Salvo the concierge, handed me a ticket
So I could eat a jar for free
Eating from a jar, warm, like eating baby food
I put the silver spoon in my mouth
Eggplant *parmigiana*, hot melts inside me
As I melt inside swirls of mozzarella

Pomodoro around my tongue
It's nothing you want to chew, just suck
And swirl, become part of the melt
They call it *Boccacielo*, Mouth-Heaven, *Bocc'Ngjile*
Microwave or boil the jar and all
In through the mouth
One spoon at a time

“Notes from *Napoli*”

May 22, 2018

NAPOLI YOU GOTTA LAND IN WITH YOUR MOUTH. There’s no other way. As soon as the restaurants open at 8 p.m., I walk into the first open door. All the food at the buffet is laid out in ceramic dishes painted with embellishments of olive flourishes, lemons, green plumes and indigo waves. You serve yourself: *gnocchi*, zucchini flowers stuffed with *ricotta*, *insalate*, *fagiolini*, *polpette di pollo alla crema di limone*. This *gnocchi nella mia bocca*—my mouth stops in its tracks. I stop chewing and suck on each ball of potato pasta. *Gnocchi* melts in my mouth as I melt around *gnocchi*. Two big dogs, Nino and Sheila, come up and kiss me at the sidewalk table. I share my *polpette* with them. Dogs are off leash on sidewalks and in the *piazze*. Interactivity is here for the taking; dogs, people, barks and shouts, from balconies, down the street, up the street, a loud din from the sidewalk bar open all night, conversation everywhere, hands flying, a sense of freedom of expression. I am far from “personal space” and “boundaries” and “indoor voices.” I know that no one in *Napoli* will ever tell me, “Keep your voice down,” and this frees me, frees my voice. This is the chaos and interaction I’ve sought all my life. Vespas, people, the constant buzz, elders on motorized scooters. This is the loudness where I feel at home.

When I left New York yesterday, my sister Rosina cried on the phone. Aunt Grace cried when I hugged her goodbye. Faroukh cried in my arms. Friends were saying they were missing me already. What was everyone crying for? I wasn’t going back to Italy as an American tourist on a European vacation. Aunt Grace would never cry for that, she’s ninety-six, stoic and tough as nails. My sister Rosina would never cry for that, she worked all her life and now she’s retired, a grandmother, with an awakened feminist spirit. I wasn’t going back as someone on a vacation or honeymoon. These strong women wouldn’t cry for that either. Not just as an American artist on a European tour. That wouldn’t bring these strong women to tears. What was it? What was everyone crying for?

“Mother’s Breath”

MY LOVE FOR THE WIND STARTED as my mother’s breath, as a child, asthmatic, her kissing me and staying close, our faces, breath mingling. She took my temperature with her cheek on my forehead. Sometimes, especially now that she is gone, I wake up and feel her breath upon my cheek. The wind played a big part in our health. She protected me from getting draughts. Always a warning about draughts. She knew the distinction between a breeze and a draught. “Don’t catch a draught!” as she wound a scarf around and around my neck to protect me, tucking the tail in like a Gordian knot. My mother spoke of the wind as a gift, as a visitor she would walk outside to greet, “*Ahh*, there’s a fresh breeze outside.” She aired pillows out the window, knew the sun as the best disinfectant, and the wind called for her. She’d step outside on the stoop, close her eyes, tilt her face to the sun, to the wind, and breathe in the universe, bask in this moment of life. The world breathes, and we with it. *Spirare*. The world blows in, the world blows out. Mother’s breath.

As a child playing stickball in the street, wind determined our strategies. To estimate which side of the street the ball favored in the wind, I learned to stick my index finger into my mouth and pull it out with lips closed to wet the whole finger, then raise my arm high in the sky to feel which way and how forceful the wind blew. We took the wind into account when eyeing the ball, as it beveled the path of pop flies and pitches. My success as a player and respect by the boys on the block depended on me knowing the winds that swerved down our one-way street. I learned early on that cars and wind could come from either direction at any moment. After a play where the Spalden took an errant turn, we’d yell, “*Man!* Did you see how the wind carried that?” Winds that carried our home runs from the homeplate sewer cap down the block to Zerega Avenue, I call Zerega Wind.

At twenty-one, in Egypt for a semester, I experienced how winds can threaten your life, when climbing to the top of the great pyramid of Giza. Before starting the climb, we got a life-saving tip from a local who talked of the winds racing across the Sahara like a goddess whipping

in a boomerang path around the pyramids, and how she blew climbers off the sides of the pyramids where they fell to their deaths. I pictured a giant goddess blowing on the pyramids like birthday candles. He said many soldiers died this way; climbers have been swept off since the pyramids were built 4500 years ago. As my friends and I walked around the pyramid debating which side to climb, he gave us this tip—Climb up the corner, this way you can block your body from the wind in two directions, and you'll always have a rock face to shield you. He was right. Especially as we climbed the equivalent of twenty, thirty, forty stories, the winds got ferocious. I ducked this way, then that, as the wind changed course, I clung with all my might to one rock, then scooted over the ledge around the corner of the pyramid to duck the other way. I think he called the wind the Sarqiyya, but I'll call it the Breath of the Goddess Wind, as that's what it is in my body's memory.



"67th and York"

Sloan Kettering feels like a rock in the wind
tonight. A wind bites both ways

A steady stream of traffic
and the breeze stopping with the light

Red red red red everywhere
Better run with the light

"Not in Service" says the bus
Green green green green

Walking in crosswalk

Tulips red and yellow
fallen open



“Whaddyacall the wind?” I ask wherever I go. I love when the wind is talked about like an old friend with characteristic idiosyncrasies, one who gets in your ears and drives you crazy or lifts your spirits with relief or has a trickster spirit. I delight when someone knows a local nickname for a particular wind. Most of the time, people don’t have an answer. It depends where you are. I love that too, having an ancient question few today can answer. What do you call the wind?

Then, as always, we begin with an expulsion from Eden . . .

Chapter One. “Clues”

Yonkers, New York, August 2017

WOKE UP TO THE SOUND OF CHAINSAWS, squeezed my eyes tight to snap the sleep out, and scissored two fingers apart to peek through the slats of the window blinds. What was all the noise about? A man with an ax on his shoulder stood outside my window biting into a peach as big as his fist, cheek jutting out from the hunk in his mouth. Grandma Peach Tree lay on the ground, all the hard-to-reach, big-as-softballs, sun-blushed peaches at the men’s feet. Peaches and work boots. A gang of nine men stood around, chainsaws and pickaxes, biting and chewing, necks and shoulders zesting sweat. Their deed was done. The landlord chopped her down.

It was late August. Grandma was full, and I mean full of peaches, stocked to the top branches two stories high. The buzz of chainsaws cut through the trunk of my gut. I wanted to run outside and tackle one of the men. I took a breath and thought it through. If I ran out there, they would’ve shrugged—*we’re just following orders from management*, then I would’ve yelled and out of frustration might have grabbed a pickaxe and swung at somebody. I hadda get outta there. *Pronto*. In the words of Ignazio Silone, “*Che posso fare io?*”

I pulled on black dungarees, black t-shirt of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, black New Orleans Saints baseball cap with gold *fleur-de-lis*, black wrap-around sunglasses, grabbed my keychain and ran out of the building, blocking my eyesight with my right hand as I ran left to get out of the courtyard. I couldn’t bear to look and didn’t want to give the men the satisfaction of my tears. They relished the power of the kill, and were literally eating the fruits of their labor, chewing fresh peaches out in the hot open sun. I ran down the outdoor staircase cut into the hill, got into the car, growled a cry, smacked the steering wheel and sped up the street, my yells bouncing back off the windshield. Hyperventilating, I pulled over just a mile away, on Aunt Grace’s block.

Aunt Grace was the last of my mother’s like, siblings. Technically, she was my mother’s cousin, which made her my second cousin, but

since they were raised like sisters in one apartment, I called her, “Aunt,” out of respect. They were cousins twice; their mothers were sisters, and their fathers were brothers. Tradition dictated that the girls be named after their grandmothers. They each had a sister. The four girls were named: Lucia, Lucia, Rachele, Rachele. To differentiate them, they needed nicknames. My mother was called Lilly, and her cousin was called Grace.

Their mothers, the Marsico girls, were born in Acquaviva delle Fonti and their fathers, the Petruzzelli boys, just three miles away in Cassano delle Murge. One road connects the two towns through olive fields and up onto the limestone plateau called the *murge*. They met over here in *l'Amereeq*, but I always wondered if they hadn't emigrated, if they would've met anyway over there in the fields or during the evening *passaggiata* in either of the town's piazzas.

I walked up the narrow path of stones to the front door and rang Aunt Grace's bell. No response. I waited. Aunt Grace was ninety-six, it could take her a few minutes to hear the bell and come to the door. Her parents, Franco and Lucia, and my grandparents, Giuseppe and Rosa, had been part of the mass wave of post Italian unification immigration from the *Mezzogiorno* to New York. Back in the days of that first generation of immigrants, there were all kinds of relatives by blood or association, people who took care of one another and lived doubling up together to survive. My father's side of the family was larger, and it seemed there was always someone from the *paese* coming over, staying over, cousins, townspeople, you were never sure who was who or how you were related, different kinds of relatives or no relation at all. There were *paesans*, there were cousins like siblings, cousins who lived with grandmothers, *paesans* who were taken in by *paesans*—they got one another jobs and taught each other trades—cousins who married cousins, or, like all my grandparents, married *paesans* from the same province just an olive or fig field away. There were *paesans* of who it was said, “Grandma and Grandpa raised so-and-so,” or “Grandma and Grandpa took hoodycall in like a son when he came from the other side.” I innately understood though I didn't understand who was who exactly, just that there were a lot of hoodycallits around and I was required to kiss them all on the hello and the goodbye at family

gatherings. Relations and relations of relations, we were all related in some way, and all linked back to the villages where our grandparents were born and connected through adoration of local saints. They left their country behind but never gave up their hometown saints.

I rang the bell again. At the top of the towering pine tree a black branch broke off and the V-shaped branch flapped, took flight and turned into a barking crow, slow black wings slapped sky. How could the peach tree be dead and gone, felled, on the ground? That peach tree was my grandmother, Rosa Marsico Petruzzelli. For seventeen years I'd pruned her branches and harvested her peaches, seventeen years since Grandma Rose spit pits into her hand and tossed them out my mother's living room window. Grandma Rose refused to throw away any pit or seed ever, and at one hundred years old, after she died, that tree burst up through the ground. It was miraculous spirit magic, Grandma transmogrified, and for the last fifteen years of my mother's life, Easter Sundays the tree brought pink blossoms right into her window like clockwork, and by the Feast of the Assumption my mother pulled peaches from the lowest branches in through the living room window, proclaiming:

"That's Mamma feeding us."

Gone. Gone. That was it. Gone. They all were gone. The peach tree was my last root to this place.

I knocked hard on the dark red door and called, "Aunt Grace!" up at the red bricks and windows of her gingerbread house with its peaked roof and chimney. Nobody came. I walked around the side of the house over the uneven stones and tree roots and knuckle-tapped her kitchen window. There she was, washing dishes at the sink, in her hand sewn orange, green and gold paisley apron and a crisp white linen blouse with eyelets. Classical music flowed from her solid-state radio. She was startled to see me at the window, rubbed her hands in a dish towel and pointed for me to walk back around to the front of the house where she could open the door. I took off my sunglasses and walked through the doorway. Aunt Grace was alarmed to see I'd been sobbing, "*Oooh* dear, come in, come in, I'll put on a pot of coffee," she laughed a nervous chuckle, "have you had breakfast? I can make a soft-boiled egg."

I waved off the offer of the egg, dropped my keychain on the table, cupped my hands under the faucet of cold water and splashed my face. My mother instilled in me the habit of shocking my face with ice cold water to stop the sting of crying. I downed two glasses of water as if to replenish the hot tears, sat down at her kitchen table, and took a deep breath calming myself by staring at the wicker basket of plastic fruit that had mesmerized me ever since childhood with its *trompe l'oeil* plastic banana, pear, red apple, green grapes, red grapes and tomato, true enough to color to fool me the very first time and fascinate me ever since. When I was twelve and couldn't decide if the fruit was real or not, I grabbed the red apple and to my surprise, it was light as air, hollow plastic, slightly discolored to look real. The pear had lumps and brown spots on its complexion like a true pear. The green grapes, pert and tempting on browned stems, made my mouth water.

"They cut down Grandma's peach tree," I growled murderously.

Aunt Grace flashed water into the coffee pot and put it on the stove to boil. "Why'd they do that?"

"They're afraid of bees."

"*Oh, for Pete's sake.*" She took out two thick white ceramic cups and saucers.

"Who cuts down a tree full of fruit? They couldn't wait a week for all the peaches to be picked? It's out of spite. They're trying to get rid of me."

"No, they can't get rid of you," she folded a white napkin into a perfect triangle and placed it on the table. "Fruit trees are a lot of work. They just don't want them on the property."

"That's true. One tree, a thousand peaches a year. I couldn't keep up with the pruning. They like things manicured over there. I like nature wild and free."

"*My*, that's a lot of keys. You look like a jailor."

How could I explain my keychain? My need for heft? How a keychain clipped to my belt loop and a bandana tied around my head and was my style ever since I was twelve? Or that I joined my mother's keychain to my own after she died? Or that having keys to the local recording studio and a lucky key to my friend's house in New Orleans gave me the feeling I could take off at any moment

and follow my dreams of music? Or that I carried a set of keys to a friend's apartment where I could sleep over when I couldn't bear the sadness of returning to my mother's apartment so empty without her? Or my desire to get a new motorcycle and so I carried my snake lock key from the last? Or that with neuropathy I couldn't handle small keychains? Or that I tended to lose things even if they were right in front of me, so a big keychain with a steel link solved that problem? Or that a keychain clamped to your belt loop was a butch dyke signifier? Or that my keychain doubled as a weapon when I walked alone at night? Or that the more unmoored and lost I felt in the world, the more keys I wanted to carry to feel like I belonged somewhere? Or that the keychain made me feel I belonged wherever I was, as long as my hand could hold that cool nickel-brass and steel?

"What are all those keys to?"

"I dunno. Who knows?" I shrugged it off. "The managing agent wants me out, you know that bottled blonde. She wants to renovate, sell, turn the unit co-op. That's what they call homes now, units. I'm one of the last renters. They could sell it in a hot minute."

"Your mother always said she was snippy."

"Yeah, and my mother said whoever was mixing her blonde hair dye, put too much number thirty and not enough number forty. That's what she called her, "Too-Much-Thirty." Mom said she could have used more Topaz and a touch of Apricot."

"Lilly always had the knack for mixing color, ever since she was a kid."

"Yeah, whenever we were on the street, she would tell me the color combinations of people's hair dye. She was like a hunter for color. And just a couple of days after she died, Miss Too-Much-Thirty came to ask me, "How long do you plan on staying?" in that nasal tone, like a Terrier, "*Yippyipyap.*"

"You tell her, forever! Nothin' doin'. She can't put you out. You have Shangri-La over there."

"Yeah, Shangri-La. That apartment with its thousand emotional triggers from my parents' divorce. I want to be anywhere but there. Maybe Miss Too-Much-Thirty is doing me a cosmic favor, cracking my heart with chainsaws to give me the push I need to move."

“Well, you just stay put, Annie, rents are outrageous. You have two nice size rooms. Shangri-La, you remember that. You stay put.” She poured smokin’ coffee into my cup.

“Stay put? Who wants to stay put?” I pinched one of the rubber green grapes. “Thank God for the State of New York, I have rent-stabilized housing. You’re right. That is Shangri-La, a rent stabilized lease is a great inheritance. Maybe one day I’ll feel a sense of home again, but for now, I do have housing, and that is a lot.”

Aunt Grace cut up cantaloupe and arranged slices into beautiful smiles on a white china plate painted with red cherries and green leafy stems. She sat and adjusted her perfect posture so the dish towel she’d clothespinned to the lamp over the table shielded her eyes from the light bulb that hung just at the height to blind you when you sat. Aunt Grace was calm and steady, modest and precise, upright and attentive, utterly focused. She maintained her inner peace. Sunlight coming in from three directions in concert with the classical music, suffused her kitchen with a timeless serenity. She created peace of mind. Patches of rainbows popped and slid around the room onto the flowered wallpaper from a crystal hanging in a window. She meditated twice a day for decades and dished out ninety-six years of sage wisdom with absolute confidence:

“Just wait ’til next year. Things will shoot up again, I promise you. It always does. You’ll see.”

I didn’t believe anything would grow again, but Aunt Grace knew plenty I didn’t. My head shook side to side as my thoughts continued in my head: “You know,” I confided in her, “someone told me this phrase. *Adult orphan*. It’s stuck in my chest like a dart thrown. It’s shocking to find myself all alone. Like everybody left at once. Grandma, my mother, everybody. The apartment is so quiet. I wake up, I’m like—Where is everybody?”

“That’s life. At least where you are, you have sidewalks. You see a whole human being. Over here you only see people from the chest up. Here, they step outside their front door, I wave hello and they plop right into their cars. You don’t even see a whole body.” She shook her head in disgust and poured more coffee, “Do what I do. Play the classical music station. It gives you a sense of company. You’ll be surprised. It

fills the house.” She was resigned to life and was solidly equipped to deal with it. I was restless. I had my sneakers tied tight and my passport updated, ready to run, to drive into the city, to create theater, music, eat with friends, start a new chapter of life. Aunt Grace delivered an omen, no pipe dreams, “You better get used to it.”

“Get used to it? Don’t you believe I can change my life? Start over? Write a new chapter?”

“This is life. We’re born alone. We end up alone.”

To fill her lonely hours Aunt Grace kept her hands busy; cooking, cleaning, sewing, baking masterpieces like her famous chocolate roll cake, raising focaccia dough in the basement every other Friday. “Go look,” she’d tell me. “It looks like a corpse down there.” What a system she had, the biggest lasagna pan possible, filled with hot water atop the washing machine, under the pan of rising dough, covered by a stack of blankets. Dough, like me, was prone to catch a draught, to its demise.

Aunt Grace pushed down on the table to lift herself up out of her chair and pulled a stack of crossword puzzles that she’d saved for me under her seat cushion. This was one way she’d helped me grieve my mother: conversations, cups of tea and coffee, sharing mutual grief, and giving me crossword puzzles she cut out of newspapers. I flipped through the stack and saw one of the crosswords was cropped tight, just boxes. No questions.

“Hey this one’s got no questions! You cut off the questions. All I have is empty boxes. No clues.”

“*Oh, for Pete’s sake*, I’ll be darned. How’d I do that?”

“That’s exactly what life feels like. A crossword puzzle without any clues.”