Agrodolce

Poems by Luisa Maria Giulianetti

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Sheltering with Sunflowers
Finding Home
Caponata
My family’s Caponata
How to Drink Coffee Like an Italian: A Guide
Red, White, and Boiled
Within a World so Heavenly
Open Door

NOTES
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
For my parents
Chi si volta, e chi si gira,
sempre a casa va finire.

No matter where you go or turn,
you will always end up at home.

ITALIAN PROVERB
This poem is a gesture toward home, a request for passage to the hillsides above Lucca, Mount Etna’s base, South Brooklyn and North Chicago. It moves among ghosts, lingers in enameled pots and cast-iron skillets. In the lees of the vinegar jug. Helix’d stories, strands passed mother to daughter, before the bleeding starts, as bread rises. It resides in silences. Weighty. In blue notes. On funeral cards.

This book raises the dead. Shakes from their bones tales of grief and romance. Re-members his spine arching the spike maul hers bowed over a sewing machine. Palms clasped for the tarantella. Palms clasped in prayer.

On its back, it carries the ruins I was willed. Starlight gifted. I tend it like I do my daughter’s labored breath old-world seeds that vine in my new world beds.
agro (sour) • dolce (sweet)

1. Italian for a sauce made by reducing sweet and sour elements. Its contrasting flavors are intense and well-balanced. A signature flavor in Sicilian cooking.

2. When grief and joy comingle. When the pang of loss is tempered by the sweetness of remembering.
I. Passage

Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.

James Baldwin, Giovanni’s Room
Kneading

Nonna Maria Grazia

Burying three children and a young husband
shapes a woman, shrinks the world to a room.
Ghosts share space, hide in book spines.
She measures the survivors, their breaths
like handfuls of flour added to proofed yeast.
Kneading oxygen, she pushes supple dough,
pulls it in. Folds seams of memory and kin.
Scored loaves left to rise under baby quilts.

She washes bowls and scours pans.
Dresses baked bread with oil. Soup
awaits their arrival. Serving slow time
she bargains with saints for safe passage.

A century of waiting: dough to rise, doors
to open. Love knots what it cannot free.
Serafina

The day your family left
for America, you were alone
for the first time. In the house
of your birth, where you birthed
and buried children. Stone-still
in widow’s black.

You rose: to mix, knead
and proof. Forced to wed
the icy-eyed stranger you never
loved. To leave the boy you did.
When you broke it off, he cut
you, left you below the fig tree.

They say you never complained.
Loyal, ardent servant, caretaker
of fire, after the Seraphim, god’s
watchful six-winged guardian
angels. Two wings hide their faces,
two cover their feet. A pair for flight.

Your swollen legs
throbbed against heavy wool
as you swept and dusted. Washed
scrubbed, wrung, dried. Pressed.
Tears mended. Tended the flame.
You never complained.

You ached sugar like tides ache
moon. Hid dried figs, mostarda,
frutta martorana in the suitcase
atop the armoire, unable to resist
their pull, even after you spiraled into a near coma.

*Sei così debole.* He blamed you for losing the boys—
the baby to measles, the older to cancer. *Vecchia malvagia!*
Mocked your grief and failing kidneys. You genuflected.

Yet, you taught Maria to bloom yeast, bake loaves, candy orange peel. To settle her stomach with bay leaf. Weave Palm Sunday fronds into crosses to hang above her bed.

You’d trade the kingdom for Seraphim wings, fan them wide and soar. Snag a hidden sweet, cross oceans. Return to the day when his kiss, not his knife, blazed you.