

Agrodolce

Poems by Luisa Maria Giulianetti



BORDIGHERA PRESS

All rights reserved. Parts of this book may be reprinted only by written permission from the author, and may not be reproduced for publication in book, magazine, or electronic media of any kind, except in quotations for purposes of literary reviews by critics.

© 2023, Luisa Maria Giulianetti

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023940206

Published by

BORDIGHERA PRESS

John D. Calandra Italian American Institute

25 W. 43rd Street, 17th Floor

New York, NY 10036

VIA Folios 163

ISBN 978-1-59954-197-6

Table of Contents

PREFACE	13
I. Passage	
Kneading	19
Serafina	20
Lezione: Brutta Figura	22
A Temporary Matter	23
Agrodolce	24
The Accidental Engineer	28
Rupture	33
Should I Not Survive the Year	34
Santi	36
The Pepper Jar	37
II. Dwelling	
What is Left	41
Lezione: In Cucina	43
Caesura	44
One of the Good Ones	45
Maria Reconceived	47
A Letter to Siena Maria	50
If These Trees Could Talk	52
Pasta con Finocchietto	54
Nonna's Pasta con Finocchietto	56
Beyond Blue	58
Mending World	59
III. Re-Membering	
Limone	63
Lezione: Sfortuna	64
Making Space	65
Salvation: A Blues	67

Sheltering with Sunflowers	68
Finding Home	70
Caponata	72
My family's Caponata	73
How to Drink Coffee Like an Italian: A Guide	75
Red, White, and Boiled	76
Within a World so Heavenly	79
Open Door	80
NOTES	83
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	85
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	87

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. Helixed 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 come together. 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.