SICILIANAS

Poems by Suzanne Manizza Roszak

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ONE
Family Reunion

The real women in the family
all wear black.

Dead and gone, they gather
in the air like dark birds
peddling prophesies, flapping

t heir sleeves before
the family photographer

on the one day bright enough
to produce a single daguerreotype.
This one will lose a child,

that one a husband. This one
will live with her parents

through hurricanes
and disappearances, the miraculous
baby crawling

into everyone’s laps,
growing sufficiently to drink

coffee cut with milk at ten
years old—to dip toast into
tea cups like an old man.

Meanwhile, this the living women
know: that they are every one
of them short enough to see god
in the shoulders of others,
which rise above their faces

like crags on a hillside,
calling them shamelessly home.
Sea Specters

From the highest point of the top deck, they threw the babies into the sea. The air was thick with wind-salt. They threw the babies into the sea, their limbs bare so that the small bodies would tumble far and dance unhindered by linen or wool. They threw the babies just far enough into the sea that nets would catch them and they could bathe, swimming like they already knew how to do, and be reeled up babbling stories of minnows and what else they had seen. They threw the babies into the sea because they were winged babies who would only rest for a moment in the cold, sloshing water before plunging down, surging up and breaking triumphant through the surface of the ocean lapping behind the boat like an expectant dog. Later the babies would dot the sky, circling the masts
and faces of believing parents and god-
uncles before touching down, cold
and dry, salt staining their skin. They
did not throw the babies into the sea,
but there were days when it would have
seemed best, when the waters thickened
with ghosts and the boat struggled to jerk
forward or spun in unrepenting circles,
stalling itself in whorl after whorl.
Revision

I am certain that they thought of it as special, this place the older women came to know first from the mouths of harbors and then from the bellies of towns, their lips parted to receive the sweet after-breath of dreaming.

They had made plenty of plans: plans for the ice box, the shag rug, the shiny transistor. Objects that hadn’t even been invented floated before them like bubbles blown from a tube. This was before the reckonings with cold, with curved spines and broken feet, with the expansive rebellions of children—with histories of blood and complicity. None of them could quite envision a recalcitrant sun, the project of dying poor in god’s great land.
Marianna at Mrs. Astor’s

You want to be the hero who tears down the drapes, lays waste to
the tableau. Everywhere flower tops are whirling, staunchly whale-boned in the glow of velour.

The soprano’s been paid not to balk at open mouths, the pastry iced as if a behemoth winter has stormed there in a way you never knew at home.

Ridiculous, but you are small and cower in rooms filled with bodies more real to you because they eat up space stretched toward the ceiling, blonde and shimmering where you are dark.
Résumé

Of course you’d never meet
Mrs. Astor or the whalebone set,

arriving too late and too poor to
hold court in a gilded salon, admirers
crowding and crushing your dress
in the bright arboretum. You hauled
violets into steerage in trunks,
wove them through the hair of
prettier girls, hung them over
the glass in garlands like gifts
selected for a bride. At home
there were no shrines to women’s
bodies, not like in Mascalucia,
where it was a girl who pointed and
stumbled on glory, the virgin’s
face uncovered from layers
of rock. There was an ocean
you refused to ignore, casting
off layers of heat in the too-warm
air, singing devotions to yourself.
Point of Departure

I.

How and where they’d met was impossible to say. Some stories put their births in adjacent cottages, the same salt stinging their cheeks as they threw themselves down the coast. Other times they met on the ship’s deck, the cliffs receding painfully.

II.

To say he didn’t pose a danger wouldn’t be exactly right. The few words he said evaporated like water boiled too long on the stovetop, his brows arching and instantaneously returning to rest as though nothing at all had happened.

III.

Once in a town outside Modena the taps would run red with wine, delighting the tongues of incredulous villagers. In Tusa, best known for its churches, the grim stuff of households never yielded a surprise, never made them turn toward each other’s disbelief.
IV.

As it turned out, anger tasted much the same in a new place. The small girls covered their faces with aprons like their mother had taught them, chanting soundlessly to one another, it won’t be long, it won’t be long, it won’t be long.