

SICILIANAS

Poems by Suzanne Manizza Roszak



BORDIGHERA PRESS

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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

their 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
teacups 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.