

THE WEIGHT OF SURVIVAL

POEMS

TINA BIELLO

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to Pietro and Pina

Author's Note

A single quotation mark at the end of dialect words in these poems are as close to capturing the sound of our dialect, which cuts off the vowel at the end of most words. This is unlike Italian in which every word ends in a vowel. The language comes from the village Casacalenda and is simply called *dialetto di Casacalenda*, the dialect of Casacalenda. Every region in the south has their own dialect. People can tell which town you come from as soon as you speak.

It is the oral language of my ancestors and very difficult to write down. It is my rhythm, my familiar. When I hear it spoken now, it is like sitting by the fire with my dad when he would roast chestnuts in his woodstove. I miss hearing it spoken very much. Antonio Vincelli from the village wrote a dictionary called *Vocabolario ragionato del dialetto di Casacalenda* where many of the spelling ideas came from. Big thanks to him for writing the book.

Sixty-four years ago, my father did not board the boat to Halifax

Instead he grabbed an espresso at the café at the dock in Napoli,
turned and headed home.

Two-hour train ride east to his Casacalenda.

Even though he had all the paperwork, had to face his mother
who wouldn't speak to him when he left,

spent time in Rome to *pessa' a visit'*,

he could not bear the size of the boat, *La Vulcania*.

It was big, like the boat that took him,

as a prisoner, in the war.

He turned back.

Left his trunk on the platform and walked

the one hundred steps uphill to his home

with his father's initials carved over the door,

B.N.

Biello Nicola.

It was November, olive trees bursting with fruit,

the farmers of the village harvesting, houses and streets empty,

including my mother and her three

little ones.

Loading up Rondello, who lived in the stable below,

as though he never left,

the horse nuzzled him with his long nose, sniffed his jacket,

stood perfectly still for the saddle up.

And as though the tears were never shed, the cries from his eldest

quand' ce revedem'

never uttered,

he rides the twenty minutes to his farm.

Rondello holds the weight of his man,

carries him to a place they both know so well.

The Photograph on His Dresser

He is standing on a logging truck.
Tiny on these trees: cedar, hemlock, fir.
All around him, an echo, the mountain stripped.

My mom was a tree planter.
Pictures of her eight months pregnant.
On the slopes of Bald Mountain, I learned to talk tree.
Hear the forest breathe, the green.

Dad never fell trees.
He just cut their limbs off.
Fallen soldiers,
like the ones he hid under in Libya, the red
cross faded on his arm.

He didn't want his picture taken.
English so broken he thought they sent him
up to tighten the chains.
They wanted a picture of the short Italian.
The smallest man on the sort
standing on the biggest tree of the year.

The picture stayed hidden in his drawer,
an old 1x2 from the '60s, now blown up and
framed for his eightieth birthday.
He didn't say a word.
Thanked my sister for the birthday gift,
too old now to take back all the killing in his life.

Number 8, Cottonwood Street

The first time I ate
pig's brain, fried
in my mom's cast iron pan,

I thought it would make me smarter.

Nothing odd or gross, just
food from the old country in
our little house in Lake Cowichan.

One afternoon Leanne came over for lunch,
grabbed the pig's blood
in a jar, out of the fridge.
Thought it was strawberry jam.

From then on I insisted,
only twinkies and peanut butter
on white bread came to school.

My People Don't Believe in Waste

It didn't line up with the throw-away culture that surrounded us: packaged food, fast food, white bread, Spam. No, my lineage denounced such *mangia cake* notions of food. My family made everything from scratch and we never had store-bought cake for dessert.

Poverty breathed down their necks in the old country—it was a hot, suffocating wind on a southern Italian summer day. And my parents didn't forget it, no matter how long they had been here.

It never dawned on me growing up in Lake Cowichan in the '70s and '80s, that anyone had a different life than me. Perhaps that's the way it is for all children. When you're a kid, you think your life is normal, even though you are so different from all the others in your class, in your circle of friends.

I am the youngest child of immigrants. Not white, not brown, but in between, olive. I related to all the kids with immigrant parents. These kids had parents who came here from the Punjab region of India. But there were no other Italian kids my age in school. The Italian kids were all older like my siblings and not many of them, seeing as we were one of four families in the Lake that hailed from the old country.

The kids whose parents came from the Punjab region of India had many around them who were the same. The Anglo kids had many around them who were Anglo. But I had no one like me. My best friend Leanne was Indigenous and adopted by a white family. I didn't know to ask questions.

The Anglo kids couldn't answer the question, where do you come from? I knew exactly where I came from, what stories were mine and that I was Italian first, Canadian second. I thought everyone else's mom made *oyst'* and biscotti and homemade pasta noodles. I also thought everyone else had to eat homemade bread every week, along with frittata, sugo and mortadella sandwiches, my favourite. This was a rare treat as the local Co-op didn't sell it. We only had it when Dad had been to Victoria to the Italian deli. The mortadella sliced thin and wrapped in brown paper with wax lining. What a treat!

The best of them all—Nutella. Every kid must have had Nutella on a homemade white bun. Nope. Just me.

Curses, Old Country Magic 1

Te pozz' torch u mal'

May you suddenly become ill, drop down to the ground and begin a slow fever that doesn't break. Then when you think you are just about to get better, may you get sick again.

My Father's Shoes

Buckles on the right, leather straps.
Slippers with a hard sole.
A sandal for summer.

He wore them inside, all year round.
Socks on, always, summer or not.
His toes, the very few times I caught a glance—
pressed tight.
Big toe and second toe, stuck together
from the boots he wore in the war.

His feet bearing the stories his mouth wouldn't tell.
The buckle clicked when he walked.
Loose to keep his toes from suffocating.
Reminding all seven of us that at any time one could come off,
hit us in the behind.

I wish I had seen more of his feet.
I might have remembered how long the journey,
where no one speaks his language.