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Myth & Memory

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Silvia Falsaperla

A Siren's Song

(a poem for Sicily)

Three-legged island rising out of the sea,
you take me back as I cross the waves at the Strait of Messina.
I see you bright and extended, the rounded flanks of madre mia.

Let me speak my salty dialect,
see fish dance in the wine-dark hands of fishermen,
hide under the wooden planks of a beachside cabin as in my tender years.

Let me roam your three corners like my great-uncle Ulysses,
I'll blind the Cyclops, dissuade Circe,
free Persephone, console Ceres.

The myths are etched on my skin.

Why must I leave the land I alight on, the oleanders
bougainvillea, lemon trees?

You are the mother I couldn't keep,
the woman who appeared in dream standing at the doorway
with a smile on her face and a bowl of peppers on the table;
the old shawled woman who turns her back to the sun
at the market cathedral with its buried saints,
emptied of its day.

Hotel Flora

Decrepit by the roadside in postcard Versilia, a hole in the shingled roof,
Vine-covered windows with half-closed shutters, one open window
that I look into.

I see the skeletal remains of a canopied bed, its tattered drapery
 The dress of an old woman who was once beautiful and pursued,
 The garden wild with bushes and tall dried grass,
 Stray cats asleep on the gravel.
 This is the hotel that I have come to as by genetic memory, The Hotel
 Flora
 in the crumble of Mussolini's Italy. You are a soldier, Giuà, on a few
 days' leave.
 You had stopped me in the night among a throng of strangers in the
 famous piazza of
 Perseus and David,
 And this is our summer night inside the sheets of a wrought-iron bed
 below the
 cross of Jesus on the wall, your soldier's hat on the chair.
 You will take me down to your native town in the dry interior of the
 South
 And let me dine at the table of Princess Costanza outside with a view
 of hills, seated with
 Peasant women and men.
 You, son of the South, with your thick accent and coffee-stained teeth,
 Your peasant hands hold me as they might hold the trunk of a fruit
 tree.
 You will take me down to your hill town as Italy crumbles, as you are
 there now, eating at
 The family table, down to this memory, a film reel of 1943, of women
 smiling at the bristly
 Faces of men, salty love and despair,
 And introduce me, the lost daughter of an immigrant family, peering
 from a seaside balcony
 As the waves every summer across the road hit the shore.

Futa-Pass

Lithe boy in a straw hat,
 you lead me to this cemetery up on a hill,
 to myriad stones that mark the names of German soldiers:
 Johann, Otto, Kurt, Heinrich...
 You are excited because they were soldiers.

(if you dig with a shovel, you will find their bones, mommy...)

They are not heroes, but sons of women
lost to a war we have inherited as history;
Or that the soldiers didn't even understand, young and scared as they
were.

(A German soldier lay on the ground, legs severed by a bomb blast,
and with last breath from scorched lips gasped *acqua, acqua*, to my
mother, a thirteen-year-old girl)

It is so silent here, so utterly peaceful
in Toscana, their land of summer holidays and wine,
30,000 soldiers that had walked on muddy, rain-soaked ground in a
song my mother sang to me.

*(Addio piccina, dolce amor...
Tutte le notti sogno allor
di ritornar, di riposar
Con te Lili Marlen...)*

Luckily, you don't understand all this, as you try to catch a butterfly
landed on stunted flowers, jumping over the gravestones as in a play-
ground.
Perhaps the German soldiers don't mind, because they too had legs
once like you, and caught butterflies.