

**Summer Birthday
for my father**

Home at dusk, away since dawn,
asphalt clinging to his
brown boot edges like
my Carvel cake's crunchy center.
He slowly cleans the motor oil
encased deep under each nail,
the pinky long enough to cut blood
oranges, prickly pears.

I play upstairs,
in my stifling room,
listening to the water now
tunneling through the garden,
the basilica, the pomodori,
soon to be shared with
olive oil in endless
jars of pulp and sweat.

The smell of late barbecue
and his shrill whistle
beckon me downstairs for
a bite of overly salted,
lemony steak, and some
of the knife-breaking
ice cream cake neither one of us
can eat anymore.

Commute

We head north
toward trees, cows, and lots
of space to park.

We glide over the snow-globe city,
unshaken since the
Friday rush hour.

Like a panorama six-inches high
on the desk of
an ambitious architect,

it is nestled cozy
on its island,
dreaming city dreams.

I fear that in this fragile state,
the buildings, left out overnight,
may spoil in the wet morning.

The passing cables filter Gotham
to me like a silent movie,
7:30 on a Saturday morning.

Getting the Belt

He'd pull the folded belt taut
with a deliberate snap,
my runner's pistol.
Before he'd make a move
I was locked in the safe house
of the bathroom,
a temporary salvation
that always made it worse.

I've forgiven him because
he only hit my backside,
though back then
it had no padding.
Maybe I'll understand
when I have my own kids,
but in the meantime,

when I make the request,
most of them pause,
not sure if I'm serious.
But when I bend over and
begin to direct,
it's either done with a passion
that makes me forget
I had to ask,
or a limp effort
that leaves me feeling
punished.

Making the Arrangements for Uncle Joe

I was fond of my uncle,
though we never had much to say.
I don't have many memories—
a photo I saw of him in Sicily,
holding a rifle and an upside-down rabbit.
Hours spent hunting pennies and buttons
on the floor of his basement's long closet,

the canopy of green grapes he would sit
underneath, smiling, simply,
in his corner of Astoria amongst
tomatoes on sheets, an awning
strewn with permanent Christmas lights.
A toilet seat, an empty bottle of bleach.

At a Sicilian funeral there are no
stories of rabbits, green grapes,
found treasures in the basement.
No smells of ripe tomatoes or sweat,
no scratch of his beard, no heavy-accented
questions year after year,
addressing me by my sister's name
Lisa, you finish with school yet?

A Sicilian funeral makes flowers nauseating.
Black-clad women faint, clutching tissues.
I pity the priest and the innocent bystanders.
Despite a belief in eternal life,
Sicilians fill with such grief,
they neglect the joy.

- Rita Catinella Orrell