

The Bread We Ate by Rina Ferrarelli. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2012. 71pp.

A photograph of a group of women of different ages, posing before a camera in Italy ca. 1935, graces the cover of Rina Ferrarelli's latest collection. Its opening poem, "Framed by Walls," provides insights into the lives of these women and the central theme of the book, emigration:

Neighbor women, all dead now,
grouped on the stone street
of the old quarter, before

emigration scatters them, changes
their clothes and customs,
the sureness of their speech,
before grief
dulls the shine of their eyes. (7)

A fine, attentive poet, Ferrarelli continues the work she had begun in her previous two collections, *Dreamsearch* and *Home is a Foreign Country*, that of chronicling the life of Italian immigrants leaving their homeland to start life over again in the 'New' World. A first-generation Italian immigrant herself, Ferrarelli left Calabria and arrived in the US at the age of fifteen. She worked as a professor of English and translation studies at the University of Pittsburgh, devoting part of her time to writing poetry that would honor the lives of those who had arrived long before her.

Combining memory and fantasy, real historical events and personal life-stories, Ferrarelli recounts in great detail and with deep humanity the hardships, broken dreams, and sense of loss but also the resistance, generosity, and simplicity of Italian immigrants—both men and women—struggling to find their place in America. "From Steerage to Ellis Island to..." illuminates the tribulations endured on the journey across the ocean, as individuals traveled cramped and sleeping

on triple bunks
pushed close together,
iron cots with canvas
stretched across them. (25)

Ferrarelli denounces the brutality of the medical examination and the cruelty of certain discriminatory practices to which the immigrants were subjected on arrival in Ellis Island: "Anyone who coughed, / wheezed, limped or shuffled, / got a strike against him" (26). She scrupulously registers the dehumanization on their journey through the administration, indirectly hinting at the difficulties and isolation they will encounter later on: "Iron bars in their line of vision, / iron bars above their hands, they waited in the *pens* like *cattle*, like animals in their *cages*" (26, emphasis in the original).

Ferrarelli's portraits of ordinary people challenge geographical and temporal boundaries, endowing migrants with a mythical, almost epic aura. Bricklayers are described as "descendants of an ancient people / who made roads and aqueducts / for the Romans, and paths / that others would follow" (17); neighborly women are captured while posing for their men in front of the camera and dreaming about that far-away country called America (7); a carpenter is praised for his capacity to bring a dead piece of wood back to life—"and the wood, once a living thing, / begins to live again, / out of the mind of one, into the hands / of few, the eyes of many, / a thing of beauty, true / from the inside out" (37). Ferrarelli pays her tributes, documenting lives filled with grief, melancholy, and simple joys. She also celebrates the immigrants' capacity to move between cultures and their strenuous attempts to maintain and cultivate their attachments, be it to their personal past or community of origin. Further she alludes to the restlessness, uncertainty, and precariousness that characterize the life of the immigrant, who advances on a shifting terrain and clings onto a fragile community. Accordingly, in "An Immigrant's House," the poet writes: "We travel between languages, / between countries, holding tight / as the boundaries shift under us" (34).

Close observation falls upon the everyday life of the Italian immigrants: bananas, dates, blood oranges; mushrooms that become shrines of an ancestral knowledge now lost; an old picture portraying the speaker's father "sit[ting] in the middle, solid, / swung as a patriarch, black moustache, / tips humorously curled, / hanging over his mouth, legs spread / to gather the littlest one" (35); the freshly baked and still fragrant bread that the speaker and her family used to break into pieces and pass around the table ("The Bread Wreath" pp.40-1). In the

poem that gives the title to the entire collection—"The Bread We Ate"—bread becomes the symbol of communal life in which bonds are tight and knowledge is handed down from one generation to the other:

She used a starter
from an earlier batch,
an inheritance
received and passed on
like a blessing. (42)

In Ferrarelli's collection, even the smallest of things is invested with a sacred aura and becomes a nodal point from which a whole set of relations radiate. Her poems have a magical quality: they bring back to life what we thought was lost forever. In "This Other World" the poet is walking in her childhood village and finds that all—the narrow *vicoli*, the *centro storico*, and the speaker's childhood friend—has remained the same: "Came back, and miracle of miracles,/found you the same, us the same" (51).

Marked by ancestral customs and populated by simple, wise, and unpretentious women and men full of dignity, the world that emerges is a familiar place (or a place made familiar by her art) where a tent raised to celebrate the Festa Italiana turns into "a stately ballroom, marble/and chandeliers" with the older couples losing themselves in their embrace, dancing "as they danced/the very first time they met over fifty/years ago, and there they are, doing it still" (58). By seizing the magic of those fleeting moments, Ferrarelli preserves and celebrates the life of the immigrant with its hardships, broken dreams but also unexpected and ephemeral joys, thereby reconnecting him/her again to humanity as a whole.

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