

LA STRADA

Are we not always answering another's question?

You remember that spring morning in *Acquaviva Platani*? The green just coming up on our poor plot? Your clown face, your beautiful name, *Gelsomina*?

See, always there are two, outer and inner—inner carries you, the day you were born, the thumbprint of god, sunflowers crazy with light.

Oh, that house of distant spring. Swallows lifting into spangled light. A filigree of dust, also rising. Your mother, she calls you.

È uscito un po' stranosh—she came out a little strange, your mother tells the dark man, his cigarette ash falling on his chest, a torpor weighing him into

the wall he leans against. “10,000 lira.” You see, it is after the war, the one we could not recover from; and we had a new word, *sfollatidis*—displaced person.

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Your mother stands at the door of the hut. Blazing sun, the air clouded with insects. *La Moscas*. You, skinnier than in the film, hungry thin, owl eyes; blistered roads, never meant for auto or truck or tank. The silence here is heavy, another burden, you, slight as whitethorn. Threshed from your own flesh.

After this war, sea ports destroyed, damaged; even the huge clouds are stained. Boys fling themselves upon roads, hills, inside bombed-out-movie-studios.

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Manhattan, Upper West Side, two girls slip inside the Thaila Movie Theater to see *La Strada*, a film by Federico Fellini. For the younger

one, Nica, the film has within it a seed of what she already knows: some strengths are not visible, and that seeming to do something willingly, isn't the same as doing it willingly.

Carol, three years older, black eyeliner almost to her cheekbones, leads the way. The theatre is small, and dark, and this is where they go to learn on weekends, bits and pieces of other languages and other things.

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*Una dolcezza* —a sweetness—you  
stutter down the splintered road with Zampano.

Will you love him? You are full of fabulous grace.  
We are made to believe that Zampano is not able, he will never, his life  
is growl and gravel. Illiterate, desperate. He is carved  
from river banks, ditches, meagerness, war and whippings, *luce addolorata*,  
saddened light.

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The two girls are best friends. There are no others, really. Carol always goes
before, does
the hard-handed things, so Nica learns not to. They have shown each other
their breasts,
told what they could of the secrets each had tattooed on their flesh. They are
learning
the world, or a kind of world, one
that needs escaping from.

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Gelsomina, you remember, before the dark man, your mother, maybe for the first time, holds your face in her hands, and looks at you. Then the slight shove.

Trucks careen over stone roads built before Christ. Up the crusted mountain, an old man pulls a *carretta*, a sort of cart covered in tarpaulin ... a tiny woman pushes the cart from behind.

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Carol tears curtains down, deflowers her mattress. When at nine, she in the bath, her step Father, you know, and now, yes, she is crazy. Nica goes to the hospital to see her, and well, here she is, terrible, drug-faced, and slow, this wonder girl, the beautiful one, legs to die for...here.

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**PAS DE DEUX**

If I now, saw her  
in that brown second-hand  
coat, rubber boots the color  
of dirt, hair parted straight  
as a razor-blade down the center  
of her too-tight-braids bound up  
in ribbons the shade of sunlight;  
her knap-sack stuffed with pink tights, pink toe-shoes, a tutu--  
choosing to walk the snow-covered field of Central Park  
instead of riding the bus  
from east to west, trudging  
inside the white whiteness,  
I might remember  
why.

Remember  
she walks to keep  
the four-four beat  
of ballet class, the curved stairway,  
the echoing room of light,  
Mademoiselle's voice tingling with *jetté*,  
*arabesque*, *allongé*, *assemblé*, *développé*,  
the mirror the size of the one room she shares with her mother--  
Remember  
her gliding beauty as she spins to the music,  
the secret of her--  
and those tiny gods  
twirling beneath the snow's flurry and sparkle--  
through this expanse she is  
all muscle and mist, her genetics of every-day-work,  
field, farm, factory, history, strung into tendon and toe, reaching back  
to Cordova, then Crete, then Paris, then Auschwitz, the removal  
of name and language; and now this sonata of snow  
as she struggles forward into the silvery air,  
hands in her pockets;  
Yes, I remember  
this  
dancer  
and the mercy  
that made her

## **HORSES**

have you ever smelled bundled hay in a cool barn in summer  
or spoken the language of the long

ears of young horses,  
the articulation of each hoof, eye  
lashes thick as brush? or, a girl's  
hair, uncut

since birth, because...  
because as girls we are led  
like ponies to an enclosure  
carefully cuffed

this girl, a colt---long legs, flat chest  
the *mons venus* undressed  
the body hasn't taken over  
yet, no blood flow signaling

her mother's mother telling  
"horses get it too," shoving rags  
for the blood-stink  
into the cold-wash sink

that last summer, there were tufts  
of sweet lemon grass  
and buckskins and bays  
we were allowed

to ride and to touch  
their velvet and rough  
and listen to the slosh of water  
in the large tin tubs

as they drank  
their black honey eyes glistening  
the horses held inside themselves  
as those who are loved often do

her own father was dead  
that march, and here was june  
upstate new york, camp  
a light-smear'd month

and the girl, tan as the foals in the field

there was a pinto, brown and white  
the girl would curry and brush  
run her hand down the delicate legs  
pick out pebbles and drift

from the hooves; she'd bury her face  
in the pinto's splendid mane  
and the mare would stamp and ruffle  
shivering a dark kindness

Pops cleaned the stalls, and  
in the barn were stacks of hay  
rows to sit upon  
and the girl would

her new sadness plum-colored  
as the corner shadows of the barn  
her death knowledge ripening  
that womb-grief

of earth, of what disappears, as would the rivers  
we can no longer lie down near  
and drink from; the cut  
and waste, the emptiness

that fills us to the heart ---  
she'd sit on the bales of hay, Pops  
sitting beside her, close  
because she hadn't seen

hadn't anywhere to imagine--him--just  
as part of the barn  
almost one of the horses  
so when, she, poured out and wet with tears, he

held her  
down  
trembling  
the pinto kicking at her stall

the girl's purpling sorrow slowly  
grew fruit inside her  
even as the world flecked viridescent  
generous to a fault

what was unfolding in this afternoon  
was a girl's life, no  
not all of it, no  
but it was and is  
the rip and rippling of a life

a life where at least once  
an entire day will bow down  
and her dark violet sadness  
will only be

a twilight's soft blush sweeping across the field.