

When Old Men Tell of Generations

The bow dipped and crashed. The cap came over, then the spray, and I was wet. I clung to the front railing. It had been twenty-four hours since I'd forgotten my name. The sailor yelled *bambino, scendi, scendi*. But the words I didn't speak flew over me, and another wave rose in the distance. There was more yelling as a pair of hands threw me into the pit of snaky wet nets, and the hull lurched and the spray made a corona over my head, and it all dazzled and I thought I saw him or at least felt him near. Then my stomach rolled and I crawled to the side spewing.

When I had asked the sailor why he was leaving Greece he didn't understand English, so I asked *perché perché* because I knew that much and he said *per mama*. And I told him I was leaving for something similar but he didn't speak English. He just pointed to the pit of netting and said *stay in crystal clear*. Yet they'd thrown me out at dawn on the first land we saw and that was okay—I was on the boot. I knew it. I saw the signs in their language I couldn't read, so I slept on a patch of grass next to a church and each hour its bell woke me up and each hour I slept deeper until it was dusk, and I got food at a small mart from a nice man and had to keep going.

The edge of town said *Santa Maria di Leuca* and I knew nothing except it was south, so I went north. There was the buzz of silence and the breeze as I walked the road, I never saw a car or a tractor or a person, just fields and one pheasant near day break. Once there was sun I slept under a big tree and got chewed by mosquitos so I kept going.

A man in an old Ferrari tractor pulling hay bales came by, I pointed north and he nodded and I said my *grazie* and jumped on just lying on my back and watching the sky drag by, and I thought about her, how she cried alongside me. How it all ended like the snap fall of snow. But I had to go. After three hours and a nap the man said he was routing west but I needed north so I went, and under a sign that said *Taranto* I slept for the night. The next morning in town I asked *fermata dell'autobus fermata dell'autobus* and a soft commanding hand wrapped my wrist. An old woman stopped me as she knit from a long spool of yarn. I didn't know what she said and she shook her head at my questioning. She only pointed, and I

trusted her, something in the antiquity of her stare. I turned to thank her; she had already left. And for every bus that passed I asked *vai a Grumento Nova?* They said no until one said Potenza and I was glad I had memorized a few towns because it was *vicino*, damn *vicino*. So I went with four generations on my back.

I slept the way there and woke to a scarlet sky and the bus driver shouting Potenza as I stumbled onto a quiet town. The train station spoke enough English to tell me that night had come and there were no more stops or busses. So I spent a few of the few coins I had on a roll of bread and I ate it under an overhang in an off-beaten street. The summer night awoke in lights, a warm storm with thunderous bite and rain came, and a mother called for her *figlio* and her cries rang off the stone walls. I'd forgotten my name for a long time. I couldn't help but not remember. I only heard the weeping that got me here, my mother over the phone telling me they were picking up their pennies yet they couldn't make the buck and I was stuck. And I'd miss it. The whole family would come to town and they'd stand on each other's shoulders and be bigger than they'd ever been. I wanted it to be different but it never would, my old man is dead. I was a world away. They'll bury him tomorrow and I'd forgotten even my name.

A dog that had been kicked hard and too often watched from where it sat in the rain. I'd probably taken its bed, so I put out the end of the bread and walked off. I found a dry spot under a bridge, and every time a train roared over I returned to the bow of that boat, one comfortable crash after the other. So I drifted off to a thin place, drawn back as the dog nuzzled into me and its eyes looked like his and I wondered if this was him. I didn't know, didn't know how it all worked, but I held the dog as if it was, and sleep found me as it licked my face and I cried on its tired fur. When I woke the day was hot, bright and humid and the dog was gone. I went on.

At the train station the clerk told me there were no busses and no trains, and he didn't know if anyone lived there anymore, so I went through parks, piazzas, and streets asking mute faces where to go, unsure of even the direction to wander. And by midday there was nothing, yet a young boy bolted by with a bag of oranges, one falling to the cobblestone. Once it was clear he didn't want it back, I scooped it up,

nearly colliding with an ages old woman. Thin white robes swept over her figure as she stood firmly supported by the wooden rod of her cane. She cradled my face, said wait here and he would come, and I asked her what she meant, yet she'd already walked past, waving away my words. I followed, was there really a train? A bus? She rounded a corner, not to be seen again and the unstressed strength in her command and stature made me stay.

When the sky went gold a taped-together boat-shaped bus driven by a man who smoked cigarettes in one hand and drove with the other nodded his head and opened his palm for a coin. I gave him my last. He weaved the mountain roads, bombing hills where all to be heard was the whistling air through a splintered window. In the distance the hugging intimacy of a terracotta town, its clay houses crowned the hilltop. There was still a valley between us, but that's where I needed to be.

The bus jarred right and thrill bumped in my throat as the land rode past in a gushing blur and all my family would be rising now and I'd be as close as I could. A bridge over a wide dark river was crossed with a hoot and one loud slam. The driver cackled, face shrouded by smoke. The bus crossed the valley and gunned up the coiled roads and soon the emergency brake was yanked next to a fermata dell' autobus and a small supermarket. The driver said ciao between teeth and cigarette and opened all the doors and ran out leaving me alone. And my mind wandered to her.

I'd been wrapped in her and was to stay wrapped for a month more. The haze of morning still burned off, a small breeze with pollen and leaves, the taste of coffee to the nose and a kiss, maybe, and all was broken by a dull ring. She'd asked me why I needed to leave Gaios and why I had to go on such a small fishing boat and why I had to do all I had to do, and there was something engrained on my skull like a bird who flew north. And I told her that, and she broke down crying, saying I'd lost it. So I'd thrown on my bag, and now the sign said Grumento Nova—I'd made it. And six thousand miles away, the gaping mouth of his grave, they buried him.

I tried to imagine what the town looked like a century ago as I wound through the mundane, nearly forgotten, habits of this obscure crevice of civilization. By a small bar overlooking the valley, they played cards, smoked, watched sports, and drank, as they'd been doing for decades. And it was the time of night when old men tell of generations. And on the tall hill where the town ended there was a yellow church, its doors open and empty. Next to the church was a thin cobblestone path that lead down and I was Orpheus outside of the ground beneath a netting of astral dots that splayed in a splatter of blues, purples, and hues.

The path was capped by an open wrought iron gate that didn't creak in the breeze. And the gravestones were older, some overgrown, some so blunted by time they couldn't be read, yet in the back on a polished slate of granite I found it. The man had died fifty years before I was born yet he was the father of the boy who left this town. The boy who rode a boat from Napoli to New York and bussed and trained and walked and wandered all the way to Oakland, became a man and had a son who had a son who threw me into this world, just to leave like dust out the door on a broom. Yet it was okay now, because above the granite were three dark figures and a fourth appeared, their silhouettes were a century and a half of blood and on the granite there wasn't the name of the dead but my own and I'd found it after all this hunting, but it wasn't just mine. It was theirs and it was ours. And as the four figures turned away, I knew my name now and maybe name alone was purpose to live.

Singing arrived on the breeze, helping my way back to the church where the town had filled its vacant pews. They hoisted a wooden saint decorated in pious love. I didn't know if the town even believed in the saint, what he stood for or what he saved, but he was paraded in holy songs. They were silent as they passed the saint from shoulder to altar, and sat coagulated in one big pool of blood. Yet the silence was a breath as a band rounded the corner and exploded, brass and snare and cheers and fast rhythm. Kids laughed and danced, voices broke out, the once solidified town cracked back open. I began to grin, life and names and inevitable ends were cheered on for no reason but happiness and we slid back

through the serpentine streets where night rang and couples cuddled in ill lit alleys and so much rattled with play and life blurred by in every way.