

**Featured Poet Ned Balbo**  
**“The Song I Sing and the Book I Read”:**  
**Becoming Italian American**

In “My Father’s Music” (*Our Roots Are Deep with Passion: Creative Nonfiction Collects New Essays by Italian-American Writers*, Other Press, 2006), I examined the history of my adoptive father Carmine’s favorite songs and performers, plus the reasons why, prior to my teen years, I’d never felt his heritage was my own. One reason was how I looked: my German-Polish features are hard to construe as southern Italian; by contrast, Dad (whose forebears originated in Salerno) looked like a less severe version of the actor Dominic Chianese (whose roots are also in Campania, the Internet informs me). But another reason was the woman I knew as my mother: Betty, the daughter of Polish immigrants and the subject of two poems in this issue.

My adoptive parents viewed ethnicity, including their own respective backgrounds, like many of their generation: unthinkingly, through the lens of stereotypes. Born in the New York area roughly a century ago (see “For a Mother Born During the Great War”) and older than most parents I knew, the couple had met at a gas station while Harry Truman was president. Neither had attended high school, but it was Carmine who struggled to tame unstable letters, words, and numerals. A plumber by profession and an undiagnosed dyslexic, he’d lament, “I’m not a bookkeeper,” his personal shorthand for the deficits that limited his advancement.

To discourage me from identifying as Italian, Betty told me that I looked like *her* side of the family, expressed repugnance for certain foods (*aglio olio* in particular—this from someone who cheerfully served up dinners of pigs’ feet or pigs’ knuckles), and otherwise implied that “Italians” were coarse or vulgar. Trivial quarrels had estranged her from her husband’s family, so for several crucial years, I didn’t see them at all. But regardless of these factors, I didn’t feel Polish either—especially when she and my grandmother vanished into their common tongue, sharing secrets that shut out Carmine and myself. (“A New Moon for Neptune” looks at the violence and abandonment in Betty’s early life.)

In Carmine’s family, there was no Jennifer Melfi (the fictional psychiatrist portrayed by Lorraine Bracco on *The Sopranos*)—no polished professional drawn into dinnertime debate over Italian American stereotypes. My father’s six siblings were earthy, working-class people: friendly, loud, funny, argumentative, and welcoming, the brothers prone to years-long feuds in ever-shifting permutations; still, they never conveyed the tensions rippling from my mother’s side. Though born in the US, they spiced their talk with Old World slang, the distortions of dialect and distance

baffling me for years: *mannaggia*, *madonn*,<sup>7</sup> *cafone* and other expressions, quite a few ill-suited for inclusion here. I learned early—from Carmine *and* Betty, who picked up some of her husband's phrases—that I was a total *capo tost*<sup>8</sup> when I set my mind to something: utterly stubborn in my refusal to take advice or change direction. In this way, Italian American culture (the blue-collar variety) found its way into the atmosphere around me.

So did Italian music. When Uncle Joe installed an eight-track tape deck in Dad's car, it meant that every time we rode together, I heard his favorite artists: the big bands, of course, but also Al Martino, Jerry Vale, and, especially, Tony Bennett. Dad played the organetto, the diatonic button accordion of southern Italian tradition, so all my life, unwittingly, I'd listened to Italian music ("The Woodpecker Song"—"Reginella Campagnola" or "Little Country Queen"—was my favorite as a kid; Dad's was "You're My Everything," a song first recorded by the Victor Arden-Phil Ohman Orchestra in 1931 and often covered by other artists, including pianist Carmen Cavallero). A poem in my first book, *Galileo's Banquet*, recounts a dream that Carmine had about playing with Glenn Miller (oddly, the trumpet, not the accordion), and in "A Word the Romans Used," a poem that appears in the August 2016 issue of *First Things*, I wrote once more about Dad's playing, his family nickname ("Carmen"), and his affection for Saint Thérèse as the saint to whom he prayed.

Years after those tape deck days, I would realize that Betty's wish for me to embrace her Polish background arose because she was raising the son of her half-sister Elaine: Betty felt more like my "real" mother by selectively reinforcing one part of my *actual* heritage: the part we shared. In college, my view of Italian culture widened. I would discover John Ciardi's translation of *The Divine Comedy*. I would view Italian Renaissance paintings in reproductions or at the Met. I would see films by Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Fellini. Yet my deepest connection to Italy is the memory of Carmine, featured in three poems that first appeared in *Italian Americana*, including "The Sugar Thief," currently posted at the Poetry Foundation website.

Thank you, Maria Terrone, and former poetry editors Dana Gioia and Michael Palma, for welcoming my work to these pages.

The following three poems are by Featured Poet Ned Balbo

## **For a Mother Born During the Great War**

Too soon they leave us. But, in time, our dead,  
lives measured by the anniversaries  
we honor or forget, accept release  
and offer it to us. One day, instead  
of adding one more year to those they had,  
wishing them back to life, we realize  
the sum exceeds a lifetime; and we freeze  
at what we've always known: life's limited,  
and less than what we're owed, or think we're owed.

I hear you sometimes—do you hear me, too?  
—Voices reciprocal, lost time renewed  
as if, still at the woods' edge, out of view,  
I heard you call at midday from the flood  
of all that followed, and I answered you.

## A New Moon for Neptune

“Every pupil should keep the weekly lessons in a note book.”

—From inside the cover designed to hold issues of  
*The News Outline (My Weekly Reader)*, 1929-1930

One night you must have looked up at the sky,  
still wide awake, fourteen, surprised to find  
yourself revisiting *The Weekly Reader*'s  
news of what was orbiting the sun.  
The thought, *There's more out there? How much, how far?*  
had touched you even in a spartan schoolroom  
where the three R's ruled and you excelled,  
though history had seemed a waste of time—  
“Who wants to learn about dead people?” you'd scoffed  
once to your teacher, pleased to recollect  
how your rebellion only made her laugh.  
Mostly, she loved you, and, mostly, you were good,  
or so your school year's store of weekly issues,  
saved for forty years, seemed to suggest,  
bound in the pamphlet cover you'd unfastened  
every week to add the new week's news.

You first produced this relic of your youth  
when I rushed in, surprised at time's long arc,  
to tell you Pluto wasn't always known,  
some reference guide or world almanac  
my source for facts and sudden revelation.

\*

That's why today's news makes me think of you:  
a new moon makes its bow—not ours but Neptune's:  
distant blue-green giant, satellite-ringed  
by fourteen moons, one more than glimpsed before—  
another errant traveler in the sky  
sifted from space debris and Hubble-glare,  
anonymous for now, though not for long.  
But who'll decide?

Halfway across the world,  
an Oxford schoolgirl younger than you were  
imagined Planet X a kind of hell—  
distant, devoid of joy. She said to Granddad,  
bookish don, friend to astronomers,  
“Why don't they call it ‘Pluto’?” and they did.

More than an ocean separated you—  
In time, she grew up, wed, became a teacher,  
who'd have been displeased to hear a pupil  
scoff at history's reach.

Now I think:  
another forty years have come and gone,  
but who will hear *your* story, listen close,  
or scoff because the dead don't matter now?  
The same girl who looked up one night, alone—  
that teenage girl whose hand touched every page—  
from German airships to Mount Rushmore's granite  
drilled and dynamited, taking shape—  
couldn't let go of time preserved in newsprint:  
proof of who she'd been before time's passing  
changed her into you...

\*

That sleepless night  
you sat alone, the stars framed by a window,  
in this "home" lost in Long Island's dark—  
No home for you among those daughters orphaned  
or discarded for some petty crime,  
brief lapse, unwanted pregnancy, or worse—  
the violence some had suffered and survived  
(how often, then and now, are victims punished,  
children shed?), your own mother's betrayal  
when you dared to speak of your assault—

And yet, you knew the world outside held more—  
its lunar light and blackness filled with planets,  
stars, and yet, not filled, the space so vast  
and dark, planets could hide there—Pluto, too—  
and all seemed charged with wonder, light revealed  
when, finally, you were free to learn which joys  
awaited you and which you'd never know,  
the treasured keepsake open in your hands,  
your childhood kept close on each fragile leaf  
where time stopped, yet resumed each time you read  
those pages to become yourself, again.

For Betty, 1916-1977

## Wren

Ames, Iowa

The countdown's under way, your flight's departure  
sooner than we'd like, but our routine's  
small pleasures shape our days...And so, returned  
from one last grocery trip, I turn the key

when you glimpse, down the hall, a small winged creature  
trapped against bright glass. What led this wren's  
dead reckoning astray? Tiny, determined  
to escape, he flutters, falls away,

caught in the stairwell window where the future  
seals him, stuck in place. Now we're his means  
to freedom, maybe, if he's not too stunned.  
I curl my palm around him, very gently

lift him from the sill. No blood or fracture  
evident, he squirms, uneasy, tense—  
like us, when after jobless months I found  
work out of state. We don't know if I'll stay

or when I'll leave, the fragile architecture  
of our lives in doubt, like all our plans—  
We're traveling through unfamiliar land,  
and yet, we're lucky, like this wren today,

rescued when he resigned himself to capture—  
Frail, rust-brown, he'll have a second chance.  
But as we reach the lobby, one split-second  
from the door, he makes his getaway,

slips from the grasp he simply can't endure,  
scrapes tile, then takes flight through the open entrance—  
thankless, free. Must every visit end  
sadly, too soon? Our wren crashed helplessly,

unharmd, on unseen glass, a force of nature  
furious, compressed...If there are omens,  
signs it's possible to understand,  
we'll watch for them: together, separately.