

"Bronx Grotto" premiered as a performance piece at the series Bronx Bards, curated Urayoán Noel. Performed with Rose Imperato on sax, and the Throwdown Chorus - neighborhood children playing at Target Bronx Community Garden: Muhammad, Kadijab, Aisha, Gibreel, Malo, Joseph, Alana Moye. Bronx Bards was produced by New York Restoration Project and The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, New York 2015.

"Bronx Grotto"

Go down tree fo' blocks, take a left on Allerton, a right on Matthews
and ya right there at the corner of Mace.
Dey got everything ova dey
whateva dey got in France at Lourdes we got right ova hey
Saint Lucy with her two sets of eyes balls
yeah two on a plate, two in the head
drippin' wet Madonnas we got, fagetaboutit
all the saints - you name 'em they're standing dere
but ya gotta get dere early ta wash ya car
it's late now, ya gotta wait on da line
faget the feast days – then ya really wait
ya got a coupla of buckets, basins what-have-you?
Otherwise ya gotta go back n' fort' and wait on da line all over again.
If ya continue on Allerton and hook around on Mace
dere's da johnnypump dere, ya can pull over right dere or double park
dat's where da line forms, ya better off
then ya go in behind da gate wit' ya buckets
and fill up on da Holy Water coming down da rocks.
You'll see it. Folla' the pilgrims dere.
Take all da Holy Water ya want.
Ya gotta drink seven glasses ta cure anythin'
Oh sure dere's lots a stories.
Who couldn't walk walks. Who couldn't see sees. Who couldn't talk talks.
One lady I know started gettin' letters from her husband who was killed overseas.
Yeah, when I ain't thinkin' straight, I put my whole head under the water.
Stay there an hour. Drink seven glasses.
Ah what's the sense of talkin' - when I was younger
at night I hopped the fence a coupla' times my old man was botherin' me
and slept among the saints. It felt wonderful.
Man I looked up, dere's Saint Michael with his sword keepin' guard over me.
Dere's the Blessed Virgin with da full moon around her like a stole. Beautiful.
The howlin' dog feedin Saint Rocco a hunk a Italian bread.
Ya feel protected ya know?
Like ya got body guards galore. Spirit guards.
San'Antonio. San'Francesco. San'Giuda.
Dose my three point guards.
Dey take care a everything. But we got everybody dere, whoever ya like.
Da Monsignor Pasquale saw to it. And Gino cut all da rock himself.
I pray to dem too, dese guys, dey made all dis for all a us.
Once a year I climb da Holy Stairs on my bleedin' knees,
La Scala Sancta. Dat's another story.
What? I'm gonna live and die by what da surgeon says? I don't think so.
I go to my grotto. Leave nuttin' to chance. Remember seven glasses.

Somethin' about dat flowin' water-
takes care a everything—
flowin' through da Bronx rocks.

"What Saint is that"

side saddle on a white horse?

What saint is that

her arms open to the sky

three gold shoots coming

out of her head?

What saint is that with the halo hovering

while she holds an open book of light?

Who's the saint in the white suit?

Who's the saint all bejeweled and robed?

How many robes is she wearing and why does she wear a crown?

Who's the saint holding the baby?

Who's the saint with the sword and shield?

Why does she have light pouring from her palms?

Who's the tall one with the beads?

Who's the one with the white book?

And her with the visible heart

is she looking at me?

Salùt! was originally published in the Paterson Literary Review (PLR) #44,
Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Executive Director and Editor,
The Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College,
Paterson, New Jersey, 2016.

"Salùt!"

I am grappa
People can only take me in small doses
a coupla drops in a glass the width of their thumbs

I am grappa
Around me
they start acting crazy
the three year old drunkenly spansks the parmigian' shaker
the bull charges me across the beach
the baritone dog barks endlessly
the six year old yells a free-fall scream into the telephone
the catatonic bursts into song

I am grappa
The love of my life can only take me once a week
Otherwise she starts bangin' her head into walls

I am grappa
clear as water
but watch out

I am grappa
Crowds pay to hear me for an hour on stage
knowing they'll be the stronger for it

I am grappa
Vinaccia distilled in *il bagnomaria*
skins pulp seeds stems

I am grappa
Made from scrap

*"Butch for Hire" premiered as a performance
at BAAD: Bronx Academy of Art and Dance, BAAD!ASS Women Festival,
curated by Arthur Aviles and Charles Rice-Gonzalez,
Bronx, New York March 20, 2015.*

"Butch for Hire"

If I was a little old lady,

I'd want a butch caregiver.

Butches are vigilant as German Shepherds

they sleep with their ears cocked, on call 24/7

they follow you to the bathroom in the middle of the night

clear your path. You are Queen.

A butch will tuck you in at night with a well-spread blanket

say prayers in whatever language you speak

hug you, rub your back and feet

keep your toes from curling up on one another

straighten each toe, kiss you on the forehead

get up the moment you awaken

cover your shoulders when the blanket wanders low at 2:43 a.m.

offer a strong arm for you to hold onto, to walk, to stand

be your walker, tote your oxygen tank

support you out to the car, help you breathe

Open the windows, open the jars, take out trash

coax you to eat, make coffee, toast your raisin bread, close the windows

deflate and pull out the old catheter

surprise you with early morning pancakes, organize your meds

adjust your BIPAP mask so it doesn't cut the roof skin of your nose

beg your permission then make the decision to call the ambulance

when all you say is, "Just hold me. I don't want to go anywhere."

coordinate your doctor appointments

decant your oxygen, humidify your room air, uncork your red wine

fluff up the pillows under your neck and legs, keep your feet higher than your heart,

turn you side to side, revive you with peppermint

lotion on the soles of your feet

administer Sub Q injections in the early morning wearing a head lamp
while you sleep undisturbed

A butch has the know-how to schmooze with your docs' secretaries
and bull through their red-tape circumlocution
when they blindfold and spin you around three times with paperwork.

A butch will take you to all the doctors and celebrate each day
wait for you to apply your lipstick, stir the oatmeal. Escort, Chauffer, Chef

A butch will stuff your peppers!

And butches do wound care.

A butch will walk
in front of you
when you're coming
down
the
stairs

behind you when you're walking up
on the curb side when you're next to the street
and switch side to
side
when you're in a big parking lot.

A butch will hold your hand
tell you your gorgeous
warm up the car
have a wool lap blanket
in your favorite color
on the passenger seat
click your seatbelt for you
scent the car with rosewater
play Sinatra "Lady Luck"
and cruise you all around town.

A butch's car is your private bassinet.

Butches cook and clean as good as any femme
do windows - white vinegar'd newspapers crumpled in fist
open doors
garden
make chicken soup
give baths
get the water the right temperature
scrub your head and all you need
use Cream of Tartar to get the porcelain to gleam

A butch has access to women's bathrooms
but will usher you into the men's room without thinking twice.

A butch knows all the shortcuts
can drive any kind of vehicle with wheels, wings, sails, motors.

Butches are good with drills, saws, shovels, picks, awls,
screwdrivers, hammers, nuts and bolts, needle-nose pliers,
all kinds of wrenches.

Butches will let you try to teach them to sew, knit, crochet, iron!
A butch will watch *The Price is Right* with you.
Keep the conversation light, play cards.

A butch will catch you when you fall.

Yes, if I was a little old lady I'd want a butch caregiver.
And I'd give my butch time off, a door to close,
a day to stay
under the covers
to cry and just feel safe

Caregiver. Caretaker. Caretaker's a telling word.
There's the one who gives care then there's all the takers.
Vultures on the sidelines, ready to swoop down to pick the carcass of the house,
the plot, the very gneiss you built your life upon
antiques, rings, charm bracelets, Lionel trains, Hummel statuettes,
pennies in tin Band-Aid containers.

Butches give.

And a butch comes equipped.
Their belts double
as harnesses
to support you when you walk
catch you when you fall.
as weapons
to keep your attackers at bay,
as flags if you ever get lost
as perimeter setters for when you need space to
breathe

A butch can snap you back to the present moment
when you lose your train of thought
or are tempted to float away away

Bottle openers on their key chains, pocketknives, all in one tools.
Some go further –with belt loop clip-on brass Emergency Trach Kits.

A butch will open an airway
when you can't breathe,
screw the two brass fittings together,
wipe a little spit or Betadine
puncture the crichothyroid cartilage, then blow.
You should all know where this place is.

can save your life.
apple. Just below there's an indentation. This is where you go in. This is where your life will be saved.

A little piece of cartilage the puncturing of which
Feel for your Adam's
Hand sanitizer is just the beginning.
A butch can break a pill exactly in half
and carries pink pills to settle
blue pills to lift your
green

your nerves
spirits
herbs to open your lungs
sterile oxygen tubing
keys to open all oxygen tanks
flu masks for when you're around anyone who coughs.

universal
yellow

And butches do wound care.

A butch will catch you when you fall.

Shut off the T.V. Yes Death is when you shut off the T.V.
Stand behind you on your deathbed,

Call and sing the "Ave Maria"

palms open
as your skull portal opens
and your soul revs and spirals
the silver helix soul!
soul pull soul pull soul pull

And call your name
when your last breath's gone.

Call your name

when your last breath's gone

through the Bronx

you

leave

behind

Villanelle 1: "Tip the Pallbearers"

Tip the pallbearers and the gravediggers and the priest
Away from the grave walk last
Hallelujah soul's released

Bow your head when the casket is lowered then go to the feast
Drink to the dead! To all who have passed!
Tip the pallbearers and the gravediggers and the priest

Laugh with the living as if your days will never cease
Answer all the children's questions whatever they ask
Hallelujah soul's released

Laugh for the skeletons wearing their favorite hats in peace
Pray for those left standing their hearts' pain vast
Tip the pallbearers and the gravediggers and the priest

Nights say thank you, I'm sorry, I love you, forgive me please
Applaud setting suns, free souls paint pastel contrast
Hallelujah souls released

Head impetuous into the wind, pursue caprice
Laugh. Cry. Love. Breathe deep to the last
Tip the pallbearers and the gravediggers and the priest
Hallelujah souls released

Villanelle 2: "Church Bells & Block Ice"

*dedicated to two Bronx lovers, my parents,
Rachele Clare Petruzzelli Lanzillotto and Giuseppe Rocco Lanzillotto*

Church bells at Melrose and Ahun-fiftieth ring, "Here Comes The Bride"
Same as eighty years ago when The Smiling Iceman was a boy
Block ice down splintered wooden chutes slide

Wagon of ice the white horse pulled down Melrose with her jutting stride
The Smiling Iceman at eight, was old enough for his father to employ
Church bells at Melrose and Ahun-fiftieth ring, "Here Comes The Bride"

In '41, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, over two thousand died
The Smiling Iceman at eighteen was a Marine waitin' to deploy
Block ice down splintered wooden chutes slide

He kissed a Grand Concourse beautician, two Bronx hearts did collide
Two years she waited to walk down the aisle full of joy
Church bells at Melrose and Ahun-fiftieth ring, "Here Comes The Bride"

Perfumed letters in foxholes, her photo he passed 'round with pride
The Smiling Iceman came home from war, shell shocked vicious paranoid
Block ice down splintered wooden chutes slide

War was declared over but in his grey matter the enemy did hide
Their house, kids and marriage his rage would destroy
Church bells at Melrose and Ahun-fiftieth ring, "Here Comes The Bride"
Block ice down splintered wooden chutes slide

"My Grandmother's Handwriting"

I went to the National Archives, 201 Varick Street, New York City
to find my grandmother's naturalization papers.
When the clerk handed the paper to me and I saw her
original signature, I cried.
She'd passed a few years before and the sight of her signature in blue ink
by her hand, the fact that she had signed this piece of paper,
eighty-seven years before
pressing the pen sure and hard
the sight of her inked lines and shaky letters opened my heart.
My grandmother's handwriting has a special effect on me.
She wrote slowly and deliberately with one hand steadying the paper
the other hand guiding the pen – this American gadget.
Who knew when she first encountered a pen?
She'd gone to grade school up to the second grade,
in *Acquaviva delle Fonti, provincia di Bari, Italia*.
She told me that at eight years old she'd learned enough,
she had to help the family work the land.
They didn't own land, they worked the fields owned by a *padrone*.
This is a common story. How the *padrone* squeezes the workers of the land
to produce crops, how there is not enough access to water for the crops,
how the field hands' goats get taxed more than the cattle of the *padrone*.
How the *padrone* extorts gifts and favors from the field workers.
I don't wonder why my grandmother wanted to take a chance, get on a boat
come to *L'America*. I do replay the scenes in my mind.
Scene one: Her mother looks over her eight children and tells the youngest,
my grandmother Rosina, that she will go instead of her older sister Maria.
Scene two: Maria alone. She capishes The Great War is now over
and in the interim, she lost her chance to go to *L'America*.
Now she is twenty-one, too old to start a new life.
Her mother confirms this conclusion.
Scene three: Grandma Rosina is nineteen. She nods
when her mother Rachele tells her she will go instead of Maria.
Scene four: Rosina says "Goodbye" to her mother and siblings and
cousins and friends and Aunts and Uncles and grandparents, goats and land.
I don't know how she does this. She says goodbye to Maria last.
Scene five: Her last sight of Italy from the boat.
The Neapolitan coast. A crowd in a blur. She looks away.
She looks at the sky, then ahead
the endless water.
Scene six: Sick on the boat. Nausea. Tears.
Scene seven: She meets a *paesana* on the boat
who shows her photos of her brothers in Massachusetts.
She chooses one to marry and taps his face on the photo.

I asked Grandma many questions when she was alive
but she always wanted to get back to the present moment.
She rather cook and sew and shop and chop and eat
rather than talk about the past.
She rather twist her shoemaker's knife into the earth
and fill her bags with wild *cicoria*.

She rather sew socks, crochet a new dress for the doll
that stands in the extra roll of toilet paper up on the tank.
She rather fix, mend, make everything thing "nice'a nice."

I remember once a neighbor of ours lost her husband
and went into a depression, crying constantly.
After months of this, my grandmother grabbed her
by the shoulders and shook her hard and said,
"You have to be here now. For your children. For yourself."

That's how she shook trees to make crab apples fall.

Grandma lived to a hundred and a half.
When she died, a peach tree sprouted where she spit out pits
and tossed them out my mother's window.
That's one thing I learned from her
never throw a pit in the garbage.
Give it a chance to live a life.
Throw pits out the window into soil.
Where Grandma spit pits at the earth, trees grew,
and from those trees other trees,
the birds now spread her pits.
Every fall I give away baby peach trees.
"La vita è dolcissima." That is her message.
Life is sweet truly, very very sweet,
green, sweet,
and the sweet sap rises up out of the earth
and down from the sky
and up through the trees
bulging into fruits we can take
into our own skin.
It's skin that covers the sweetness of peaches
and all souls.

