



OVUNQUE SIAMO

NEW ITALIAN-AMERICAN WRITING

[ARCHIVE](#)™

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)™

[MASTHEAD](#)

[MEATBALL AND SPAGHETTI PODCAST](#)™

[OVUNQUE SIAMO PRESS](#)™

[SPOTLIGHT](#)™

[SPRING 2023](#)™

[SUBMISSION GUIDELINES](#)



Book Reviews

Whaddyacall the Wind? By Annie Rachele Lanzillotto, Bordighera Press, 2022, pp. 196, \$24.00

VIA Folios 159

Reviewed by Mike Fiorito



Annie Rachele Lanzillotto's newest book *Whaddyacall the Wind* is a unique combination of prose, poetry, travelog, and memoir. Despite the different styles, I never lost the thread of the book. Annie's voice rings in every sentence. Annie writes like a poet and thinks like a scientist. She even did the cover illustration and other illustrations that appear throughout the book.

There are a few themes that are woven together over the course of *Whaddyacall the Wind*: illness, gay culture, and Italian American culture. All of these themes are bound together by an aspiration for more humanity, and more inclusion.

Early in *Whaddyacall the Wind*, Annie meets Faroukh. Driving into the gas station she greets Faroukh working at a pump. "I could tell he was Middle Eastern, so I tapped my horn, 'Ya habibi,' 'Yo, my love. He broke into a big laugh, not expecting some middle-aged white lady pulling up to the pump who knew even a few words of Arabic."

After some conversation, Annie exchanges numbers with Faroukh, thinking that perhaps they can exchange Arabic and English language studies. This is Annie: forever on the lookout for what she can learn, how to connect with people. Little does Faroukh know at that moment that Annie will have a profound impact on his life.

And after a day's visit to New York City with Faroukh, Annie comes home to Yonkers to discover that she is invited to a literature festival in Naples, Italy.

While the prospect of the Neapolitan literature festival looms ahead, Annie wakes up one morning with a thought to go see her friend, Timothea. This thought may have been triggered, as she says, by the recent loss of Annie's mother and the loss of her friend Athena. Having suffered numerous health issues most of her life, Annie is familiar with the contradictions and general inhumanity of the American healthcare system. "This is exactly what happens in our society if you're alone, aging, poor, and sick. Poverty is a killer that erodes you over time."

Annie and Timothea were fellows at a Rockefeller Foundation which brought together innovators from every sector, class, and race to self-organize around projects furthering democracy and social justice.

Annie tells Timothea about the harrowing process of getting Social Security Disability (SSD). "And my eyes are always red 'cause I don't have a thyroid, so they assume I'm stoned. I cough a lot cause the radiation knocked out my salivary glands and paralyzed my left vocal cord. So, I'm coughing, dropping things, and my eyes are red, and I have this Bronx accent. This doctor's looking at me like I'm a criminal Dago trying to get away with something."

As she leaves Timothea in the nursing home, Timothea repeats what she always says upon their parting, "My arms are always around you." The next day Annie receives word from a mutual friend that Timothea died later that night. I felt a pang in my stomach reading this. There was so much hope in the conversation with Timothea.

Then, sitting in her mother's apartment, now her apartment, Annie wonders about the invitation to go to Italy, remembering Athena and Timothea's voices saying, "Travel while you can. While you can breathe on your own."

Weeks later, talking on the phone with Faroukh, Annie can tell there's something wrong. He's nearly completely silent, unable to talk. She detects stress. "You gotta move in with me?" asks Annie. In a few hours, he moves in with her.

Annie decides that while she's in Italy on the literary tour, for about three months or so, Faroukh will stay at her place. But before she leaves town, Faroukh calls her with unexpected news.

"That night, as soon as he walked in the door, he stood tense with excitement as if he was ready to parachute out of an airplane. He braced himself and blurted out, 'I not told anyone in the world this, but I feel safe to tell you. I am gay. I like the boys. I am gay man,' adding, 'I was afraid to tell anybody. My family, they want me to have wife.'"

It turns out that Faroukh's dream was to walk holding hands with a man in public. Even to kiss a man in public! He has left the small village in Egypt he came from to discover himself in New York City. And once in New York City, he could never go back. He would never have the freedom to be himself back home. "He didn't know that being gay could be socially acceptable and that men could get married. He didn't know that being gay wasn't against Allah. That being gay wasn't a sin, or even a choice."

Weeks later, now in Italy, Annie makes an intention to experience everything in the here and now or as she writes to create *un momento di luce*, a moment of light and oneness. To take in all the sounds, sights, and emotions as they come.

In the chapters in Italy, we join Annie on her expedition into Italian history. Into her own history. There is a delight in Annie's curiosity and imagination. While in Italy, Annie drinks in the antiquity that surrounds her. Annie's fascination with Italy is not claustrophobic or navel-gazing. Everyone has a valid history, worthy of exploring, Annie suggests. When we do the excavation of our personal histories, we find authentic connections to our families, our nationalities, our shared humanity, and even beyond that, connections to other living beings on this planet. For Annie, we are connected by stardust—we are all from the same elemental particles.

One of the most moving sections of the book involves Annie helping her neighbor, also a Bronx native whom she calls *La Baronessa*, locate her ancestral village in Sicily. *La Baronessa* hands Annie a scrap of paper on which she's written several syllables and a few numbers, saying, "I want you to find the house for me."

Annie asks, "What's the name of the town?"

La Baronessa answers, "Cima. My father left me the house. I want you to find it."

Continuing her line of questioning, Annie asks if she's ever been there, and does she know what the house looks like. To which *La Baronessa* replies, "I saw a picture once. It's got a balcony. It's in *la provincia di Palermo*. I'll know it when I see it."

Annie pulls up a map on the Google Earth App and begins further questioning.

"How do you remember your father saying the town name?"

"Cima."

Annie makes her say it slower. Then Annie says that Cima must be a corrupted version of the actual town name. As Annie says, many of our ancestors weren't literate. They learned orally and passed words from mouth to ear. When they came to America, the words drifted even further. Annie, thinking like a scientist, analyzes the word, and, by a process of elimination, excludes certain town names. "Cima means up top, like up top of the road or top of the mountain. Whenever I drove in Italy, someone offering directions would always tell me, *Vai al cima*. Go to the top."

Annie continues asking about where the town was located. By the sea? The mountains. *La Baronessa* can't remember.

"All I know is the town is in *la provincia di Palermo*. It's two stories with a balcony. Not a big balcony."

Now Annie begins the detective work, as she calls it, scouring old and recent maps of Sicily, looking for clues. How would a town's name transform from Southern Italian, brought over to this country, spoken through a Bronx accent? She finds a town on the southeast of Palermo called Ciminna. Then she goes to Google Earth and walks through the streets of Ciminna. They take a virtual tour through streets with names like *via Paolo Borsellino*, *via Vittime*, and *via Giovanni Falcone*.

Miraculously, they eventually find the house. *La Baronessa* exclaims, "Yes! That's it! That's the house from the old pictures. There are curtains in the windows! Somebody's living there. Let me see the curtains. Can you get closer?"

They see the white curtains hanging on the windows. They even see inside the house. *La Baronessa* says that the house needs a little work.

Whaddyacall the Wind is a tour through various times and places, some ancient, some current. Annie is our Virgil, as she holds our hand guiding us every step of the way, taking us on a voyage through illness, death, and sexual identity. The shifting writing styles flow effortlessly together, lulling us to dream along with Annie, from beginning to end.