

ANNIE RACHELE LANZILLOTTO. *WHADDYACALL THE WIND?* NEW YORK: BORDIGHERA PRESS, 2022.

A warm ocean breeze fills the room when I open *Whaddyacall the Wind?* by Annie Rachele Lanzillotto. As I turn page after page, a sankofa bird circles in my mind, broad wings floating on the wind. The sankofa bird is a West African symbol: the bird stands with its head looking backward and its feet facing forward.

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Sankofa means "go back and get it," and the idea is to look back at the past in order to move forward into the future. "I too," Lanzillotto writes, "am always...going backward to go forward, looking to the past." The past and the present, Lanzillotto shows us through her storytelling, are not opposites we need to travel between, but parts of one whole we have the power to unite within ourselves.

Whaddyacall the Wind? seeks to answer the following question: "What did it mean to return to the villages where my grandparents had little choice but to leave a century ago?" Lanzillotto travels from the Bronx to her ancestral homelands in Italy, but this is not the typical feel-good story you might expect. It has become almost clichéd for us Italian-Americans to trace our roots back across the ocean, seemingly stepping into a simpler past populated by simpler people. In those stories, the plot goes something like this: woman is incomplete, woman travels to Italy, woman becomes whole. But that simplistic narrative is not what you will find in Lanzillotto's book. Instead, she gives us truth: a story more complicated, more magical, more heartbreaking, and more healing.

When I read great writing, I experience the feeling of recognizing a part of myself that has been hidden, as if the writer has led me to a new room within my own heart. Lanzillotto does just that when she hits on this profound truth: ancestral connection is inextricable from ancestral pain. Ancestral connection is found in heartwarming meals and magical moments on ancient streets: "they could have eaten here," "they built these walls." But ancestral connection is also found in the pain we feel entrenched in our bones, our profound loneliness, and the suffering we survive: "once we starved right here." Lanzillotto does not recoil; instead, she embraces this duality. Describing a trip

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to *Museo Laboratorio della Civiltà Contadina* (Museum Workshop of Peasant Culture), which is located inside a cave in Matera and run by the poet Donato Cascione, Lanzillotto writes:

Drinking the sugared lemon water allowed our tears to flow through centuries, swallowing the reality of the harshness of life for the ones who had come before us. In my cave of hearts I felt *capeeshed* It was a relief to be in a place where suffering was communally acknowledged.

Instead of being hurt by the pain of her ancestors, she feels understood and supported. She understands that love, joy, and connection cannot be separated from pain, isolation, and despair – these too are our inheritance.

Lanzillotto does not become spontaneously whole and healed by her visit to Italy. Instead, she comes to understand that duality is not a problem to be fixed. “In the *paese*, I picked up some pieces of myself that have long eluded me, found some errant puzzle pieces, and realized that the picture is complete as it is, with pieces missing.” That is not to say the pain of separation is resolved. On the very next page, she writes, “A part of me is lost forever...a part of me, I can spend my whole life searching to retrieve.” She resists a tidy ending. She does not wrap the story up in a bow for us to take home as a souvenir. She is not describing an epiphany but a way of living among the cyclical tensions of loneliness and connection, looking back and moving forward, part old world and part new world – tensions all children of diaspora will recognize as the messy truth. Healing happens in the attempt to integrate these opposing forces, and it happens every day.

The structure of *Whaddyacall the Wind?* also unites opposing forces. It is part memoir, part poetry, but even the memoir chapters have the effect of poetry. I often found myself looking up from the page, looking out the window, taking a moment to let the words sink in. If you are familiar with Lanzillotto's extensive body of work (and if you're not, you should be), then you know to expect bold prose crafted from the sounds of Spaldeens on pavement and children yelling up to second-story windows. This book has all the spunk I love about Lanzillotto's work, yet it is achingly tender and vulnerable too.

It is also an act of scholarship. Lanzillotto writes about artists she has met, collaborated with, and learned from throughout their life and travels. In a world where women artists are often overlooked, excluded, and forgotten – "All history is women's history erased" – this act of record-keeping is a radical act of preservation and community-building. It is an acknowledgement of the isolation that women often feel when searching for artistic ancestors. Lanzillotto compiles those artists here for us and for future generations.

In the poem titled "Church Bells and Fishermen Yells," Lanzillotto reflects on the purple pom-poms her mother used to make. The pom-poms brightened the world and fortified loved ones against darkness "so we overcame our own volcano dust/that settles after internal explosions."

With this book, Lanzillotto achieves the same effect. She reminds us that we are whole, broken as we may be. She harnesses the wind to lift us up and help us see, like the soaring sankofa bird, the view from on high: a view in which Italy and the Bronx, the dead and the living, the past and the present, all fit within one frame. Lanzillotto urges us to look not only at the

shining sea but at the bodies on its floor, not only at the love of our ancestors but at their pain. This book is a guide and a gift. Read it and feel "capeeshed."

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