

Nerina

Nerina slid right up to my leg
a little black cat, up the part of the mountain
known as *San Gregorio* between Messina and Palermo.
Nerina lived on a dirt road without a name
houses built right into the mountainside
olive trees growing up the steep rise.

When *Nerina* was born,
they thought he was a girl,
so they named him the feminine *Nerina*, Little Black.
In time they saw he was a boy
but by then the name stuck.

Nerina visits neighbors and *paisane*
across the road and up the hill.
He lives with Felicia and Zeus the dog
and Felicia's son's family.
Felicia I met for one hour in life.
She was ninety-four and it took me half my life
to get to *Sicilia* and up her side of the mountain.
Life is one brief visit
and we both knew it.
We greeted each other that way
and said good bye that way.
Felicia winked with her one good eye
and in that wink, we shared all this:
 "Enjoy life my friend. How blessed I feel
 to have met you for this one hour, how lucky.
 You are so beautiful and I will treasure this visit.
 This is an hour never to be forgotten.
 You smile, in my heart now."
She handed me a giant zucchini from her *giardino*
and I went on my way, back down the mountain,
although I would have loved to stay forever,
for her to take me in, like *Nerina*.

Nerina visits Stefania the neighbor, who says:
 "*Fuori! Fuori!*" when he climbs the fence.
"Outside! Outside!"

*“Si vieni dentro, vuoi il latte,
si offro il latte, vuoi cibo,
si offro cibo, sempre ritornerà!”*

“If you come inside, you want milk,
if I give milk, you want food,
if I give food, you will return forever.”

How much I feel like *Nerina!*
Strangers call me “Sir” though I am a girl.
Children refer to me as “he.”
So quickly they are conditioned
as to what a girl should present like,
and I do not look to them this way.
But when the word “he” is spoken in a child’s voice,
I can’t help but feel they perceive my true nature.

I am not feral.
I am not stray.
Like *Nerina*, I too have a name.
I used to live in a house with a family
but that is all in the past
Now
the people have died or moved on
and I walk alone in this world.

I have keys to a door.
The windows I leave open so a wind can enter
and shake me loose.
From place to place I wander
into friends’ houses, where I sit at tables
and visit with their families.
My species organizes themselves
into these tiny groupings called families.
Perhaps I need to change species.
Find one that organizes more broadly.

An unlocked door, warmth inside emanating from the hearth,
a woman who waves me in, saying:
“Come in. Take off your shoes.
We’ve been waiting for you.
The kettle’s on. Stay as long as you like.

There's a job you can do.
You are one of us now. This is your hive."
This is what I dream of. To belong. To have a role.
Friends welcome me, but the clock too
is always always there and the calendar tallying goodbyes.
I sleep on couches and floors, on porches and in beds
in spare rooms. I am offered basements and attics.
But something always gives.

Like *Nerina*, I sidle up to places and people
hoping someone someplace sticks.