

The Place I Call Home

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My Brother Stands in the Snow, 1947, Paterson, NJ

Fifty years later, my brother is still my baby brother.
I imagine him in his woolen winter coat, tan-colored,
that with his sallow face made him look dead,
and his woolen hat that matched the coat. It had ear
flaps that snapped under his chin. He is about four
and looks wide-eyed and sweet and even then,
self-contained. I can see him standing in the snow.

It is 1947, that huge snowstorm where the snow is piled
almost to my chest. Even fifty years later, my brother
who has now been a doctor for more than thirty years,
is still my baby brother. Though he is my doctor, though I
admire and love him, though his hair has turned gray,
I can hear my mother's voice telling me to watch out
for him, as my sister watched out for me,
so that even today, I can't help worrying about him,

can't help reaching up to smooth down his thinning gray
hair when it is ruffled and fly-away, as though he were still
that little boy whose hair I combed so carefully, wetting
the comb first and parting the hair as my mother taught me
so he'd look good when people saw him on the street
where I dragged him behind me, held his hand
and scolded him as we walked.

My Mother Only Went to Third Grade in San Mauro

My mother only went to the third grade in Italy. In 1921, that was when public education ended. In America, she wanted to go to night school but my father said, “No, women don’t need to go to school.”

My mother was ashamed that she never learned to read English, but she was the one we all came to for help, the woman who could figure out any problem in a minute and a half, the woman who

always seemed huge and powerful in our eyes, though she was only four foot eleven. When she was dying, she talked about how much she wanted to go to school, in her voice, regret and longing. She always seemed

so competent, able to figure out how to pave the driveway or build the front steps or cure a broken heart. When I was young, she couldn’t help me with homework but she made a space for me where I could do my work, let me read

at the dinner table because I couldn’t bear to be parted from my books, allowed me to walk alone four blocks uphill to the local library each week though my mother didn’t like me to wander farther than the front steps, encouraged my ambitions even when she thought they were impractical for the daughter of immigrants

who needed to be able to support herself, bought me a Smith Corona portable typewriter in a pink case so that I could be the writer

I said I wanted to be.

The Other Night, You Came Home

The other night you came home from the church
where your friend took you to have your picture taken
for the parish book, I hear the scritch scritch of your wheelchair
on the kitchen tiles and then, you are next
to me, handing me a sheaf of photos. “I really look sick,

don’t I?” you ask, and I scan the pictures and know
the camera has captured what neither one of us lets ourselves see,
that your illness is progressing so quickly that now even your face
looks delicate, the skin drawn

so tightly over the bones of your head that it’s almost transparent,
your neck so thin it cannot support your head. Your eyes fix on me
and I know you need me to say it’s not so bad. And I do, of course,
but the pictures offer such

solid evidence. How much of our conversation now
is based on lies, the lies I tell you so you won’t know how you look;
the lies I tell myself so I won’t have to know
how much worse you are now than even six months ago.

How complex it all is, how sometimes I want to excuse
my own desire to run away, to keep myself so busy I won’t have time
to think about anything. I drag out things
you did to me forty years ago so I can be angry with you,

to excuse my own need, sometimes, to get in my car
and drive away from you, you in your electric wheelchair, you who
insist you can walk and fall so your legs and arms are marked by
bruises and scars, the way you scatter food

off your fork onto the floor, the slowness of each movement,
the excruciatingly long time it takes you to eat your dinner,
the way, sometimes, my impatience is an itch I can’t scratch
for fear of hurting you, and the lies

have become the crutch I use to get through each day, the face
in my own mirror, one I can no longer stand to see.