

PART 1

Mediterranean Women in Canada



Photo: Charisse de Freitas

Trying To Make Ends Meet

An Historical Look at Italian Women, The State And Family Survival Strategies in Post-War Toronto

By Franca Iacovetta

American ethnic historian Vincenza Scarpaci has criticized the middle-class and ethnocentric biases of feminist analyses of Italian immigrant women in North America for incorrectly portraying women as passive victims of a patriarchal family with deep roots in a traditional peasant culture. While idealizing their importance as the family's self-sacrificing and all-loving "mama," cherished and adored but not obeyed, they generally ignored the variety of productive roles Italian women performed both inside and outside the family, and they failed to examine the complex character of power relations within the Italian immigrant family. Scarpaci concluded her comments on a decidedly pessimistic note, admonishing these writers for having unintentionally, yet unfairly, turned the Italian immigrant woman into "the plaything of the middle class historian."

Scarpaci's insights into the ways in which American feminists misunderstood the complex culture of Southern Italian culture is certainly valuable, and she correctly points out how scholars implicitly judged women from different cultures from their own comparatively privileged — and North American — standard. In many respects her academic critique echoed the larger, contemporary critique which immigrant women and women of colour have voiced with respect to the class and ethnic limitations of the women's movement in North America. In so doing, however, she also came dangerously close to dismissing altogether the value of feminist research on the basis of admittedly preliminary works highly flawed by their failure to under-

stand the complexities of Italian culture and the working class position of immigrant women in the new society. A feminist analysis that is sensitive to class and ethnicity or cultural background can reveal important aspects of immigrant women's experience neglected by women's historians. Moreover, it also raises central issues hitherto ignored by immigration and ethnic historians, most of whom have been male. And this includes a consideration of some of the more negative aspects of the female immigrant experience.¹

Generally speaking, most of the recent works in immigration history leave us with ultimately unsatisfying (or at least one-sided) portraits of immigrant groups triumphantly overcoming their deprived status and reaching a comfortable position of "accommodation" in the new world. Often the family history focus that predominates in much of the historical literature on immigrants is to blame: women tend to become subsumed under the rubric of the family and their activities and contributions are thereby rendered invisible. There is the implication, for example, that family decisions regarding male sojourning or family migration were harmoniously arrived at with men and women participating equally. This leaves unexamined the extent to which women influenced migration either by encouraging or discouraging husbands to migrate. It also leaves unexplored questions regarding the structural and ideological constraints imposed on women by the family and by the local economy. Relatively little is written, for example, about the "victims" of immigration — women left behind in the old village because their

husband never "called them over" or because they died in a workplace accident; immigrant women who suffered psychological or emotional turmoil from years of trying to make ends meet by combining full-time jobs with childrearing and household work and catering to their husbands; and violence against immigrant women. These issues also deserve thoughtful consideration.

Like most women, Southern Italian immigrant women were economically dependent upon their husbands in Toronto, and their freedom in the wider community was curtailed by the deep-seated patriarchal mores transplanted from the peasant towns of the Italian South. As unskilled workers their job opportunities were restricted to the poorest paid menial jobs; the demands of childbirth and childrearing similarly restricted their working lives. As immigrant mothers they were targetted by host society caretakers bent on molding them into Canadian mothers. Some women's options were directly limited by husbands who determined when and where their wives could work. And some women were abused or deserted by men frustrated by their own failures as breadwinners. To what extent these cases are representative is impossible for the historian, plagued by scattered sources, to determine. Admittedly, the written sources lead us to the disaster cases of family breakdown and mental illness. Yet, in very significant ways, even extreme cases highlight the kinds of constraints and pressures within which all Italian women daily lived their lives. This is further confirmed by oral testimonies of women who either had endured the abuse of husbands or who

spoke in hushed tones about abused female relatives.

Making use of disparate sources culled from English and Italian language newspapers, archival collections of confidential case historians of recipients of state welfare and, to a much lesser extent, oral interviews, this paper is a brief and exploratory historical look at some of the more negative features of the female immigrant experience. It considers both women's resourcefulness in coping with heavy pressures and in responding to family crises, and their victimization by the economy, the state and their own men.

In the three decades that followed the Second World War, the volume of Italian immigration to Canada was second only to that of Britain. By 1981 over half a million Italians had immigrated to cities within Canada. The overwhelming majority — approximately 70 per cent — were post-War immigrants who arrived during the fifties and sixties. Reflecting the male bias of Canada immigration policy (as well as the strong family orientation of Italian immigration), fully 50 per cent of Italian immigrants in this period came as "dependents," that is, women and children sponsored by the male head. Between 1951 and 1961, some 25 per cent of the over one million Italians who migrated overseas arrived in Canada. Some 80,000 of them were women. More than 25,000 women, many with children, came to Toronto — a city that alone attracted some 90,000 or 40 per cent of Italian immigrants in this period. Young married peasant women sponsored by husbands predominated. Anxious to escape *la miseria* (post-war poverty and over-population) of the South and, to a lesser extent, similarly deprived rural villages in North and Central Italy, they were attracted to the boom conditions of post-War Toronto and were pulled by the sponsorship chain of relatives and *paesani* (co-villagers) who came before them. The youthfulness of the Italian immigrant population was evident in the fact that the median age of Italian immigrants was 23.7. Similarly, by 1971, 26 was the median age of Toronto's Italians and almost one-quarter belonged to the 0-9 age group.²

When addressing the question of women and migration, male scholars have posited fairly simplistic consensual models of male-female relations, according to which women left behind in the *paese* (village) remained sexually faithful in exchange for their husbands' economic support — as though this involved a fair and equitable exchange of family responsibilities, freedom and power. Such a

model ignores the control men wielded over women in the hill-top towns of Southern Italy, and Southern society's severe restrictions on the choices and activities of women, even if we recognize — as we must — that women themselves considered female honour an essential component of family honour. Community surveillance of women was a central feature of life in these towns. It reflected several deep-seated patriarchal views about womanhood. Women, it was assumed, were the weaker or baser sex and, if left unguarded, they easily gave way to looser morals and promiscuity. Conversely, masculinity or male pride was linked to a man's capacity to act as the family's breadwinner and official representative with the wider community, and to control the sexual lives of his wife and daughter(s). While the double standard made it acceptable for men to engage in pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations, the "fallen" women brought shame to herself and to the whole family. This double standard was to some degree

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mediated by the fact that, like many peasant societies, Southern Italian society did tolerate the pre-marital sexual relations of young couples who were destined to be married. But the value placed on virginity and the great fear men held of being "cuckolded" and ridiculed husbands, can hardly be exaggerated. Women were far from passive, of course. They played critical productive roles on the farm economy. Many a woman acted defiantly in the company of men by nagging and shouting and making demands. They acted as the family's social convenor and exercised considerable power over their children. And a woman's culture was evident in the numerous bonds women formed with female relatives and close neighbours; in the activities of mid-wives who delivered babies and performed discreet abortions for local married and unmarried womanfolk; and in women's belief in the supernatural and their ritual-

istic powers to cure *mallocca*, or the "evil eye." The latter involved making use of an array of chants, prayers, and artifacts, including rosary beads, crosses and herbal potions. Still, few women enjoyed the comforts of socializing in the town piazza unless accompanied by male escorts and the community "eyes" ensured that, at least publicly, they would abide by the code of the double standard.³

Southern Italian women migrated to Canada under a family status category that relegated women, along with their children, to legal and social dependents of their men. Typically, they joined men who had preceded their families to Canada following a period that extended from six months to several years. The process of chain migration, then, involved the temporary breakup of families, and it left many women behind to run the farm and rear children while their husbands sought work overseas. Though accustomed to the absence of men who in the past had migrated on temporary sojourns or gone to war, those years could be lonely and hard — especially for newly married women who might see their husbands on several brief occasions as they migrated to and from different locations within Western Europe or North and South America before settling permanently in Canada.

For the most part, men left their home relatively secure in the belief that their wives would continue to run the family farm efficiently and that their relatives and the wider community would keep tabs on the women's activities. Yet the separation across the ocean did evoke in married men and fiancés deep fears that, in their absence, their women might "go astray" and thus do shame to their honour. This kind of anxiety, born of patriarchal attitudes and mistrust, had similarly plagued an earlier generation of Italian male sojourners who had temporarily worked in Canada at the turn of the century. Of course, the double standard permitted men the occasional indiscretion before their wives joined them.

In some cases, the separation of the ocean would serve to deepen — even excessively pervert — the jealousy of especially possessive men. Italian immigrant women's sexual oppression is most graphically displayed in cases when women who defied (or were thought to have defied) traditionally strict sexual taboos sparked the violent ire of their husbands. One of the most sensational cases involving violence against women occurred in St. Catharines, Ontario, in 1954: Annuziato Tripodi, a native of Bagaladi in the southern Calabrian prov-

ince of Reggio Calabria and employed as a steel worker in that city, murdered his wife on the day she and her children joined him in Canada. The event, which received widespread coverage in the Italian-language newspapers in Toronto, had been triggered by Tripodi's suspicions that his wife had committed adultery at home during the two years they had been separated. At the trial, Tripodi unsuccessfully pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, claiming that his wife's infideli-

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ties, combined with her rejection of his sexual advances when they arrived in his flat that day, had so insulted his male honour that he was thrown into a state of madness, whereupon he strangled her. 1961 saw the attempted murder of a young Canadian woman in Toronto by her estranged Italian boyfriend after she had unceremoniously dumped him because he was "too possessive." In 1962 an Italian woman living with a married sister was murdered after she repeatedly spurned the advances of a married *paesano* whose wife had not yet joined him.⁴

These men had severe psychological problems and cannot be taken as representative, and we must be careful not to give in to the stereotypes of "hot-headed Latin temperaments" evident in the English-language news coverage of these events. Furthermore, the Italian press was especially harsh on them — if also extremely patronizing towards the victims, who were generally portrayed as poor, helpless creatures who could never have fathomed such a terrible fate. Nonetheless, such examples do reveal the remarkable extent to which the Southern Italian man derived his self-esteem, not only from his capacity as chief breadwinner, but also from his ability to exercise control over his wife and daughters.

In Italy, peasant women had performed critical tasks on the family farm. In addi-

tion to the time-consuming and sometimes arduous domestic duties of washing, cooking, sewing and making preserves, the household economy also drew women outside the home to toil in the scattered hill-side plots of the family's farm, to grow vegetable gardens and to sell eggs and surplus crops to local folk. Some families also sent daughters to work in domestic service or in small garment, textile or silk factories in the region. And after World War II increasing numbers of married women engaged in part-time agricultural wage labour. Distinctions between women's and men's work had often been blurred: when men were conscripted into Mussolini's army, women ran the family farm and normally covered for men who entered the paid labour force to earn supplementary wages.

Particularly during harsh, struggling years of settlement in Toronto, Italian women coped under great duress as they juggled a variety of responsibilities. They performed crucial economic roles — stretching limited resources, cutting costs and earning extra cash. Women at home daily replenished the male breadwinner, raised children and serviced elderly relatives, and acted as the family's financial manager by allocating funds for groceries and bills and depositing savings. They cut costs by growing vegetables, and some earned extra money by taking in washing or boarders, by babysitting or bringing in homework. Part of the post-War increase of married women into paid labour, Italian women entered the workforce, many of them for the first time in their lives. By 1961 some 17,000 or nearly 40 per cent of Toronto's Italian women were working outside the home, a figure that represented 7 per cent of the city's experienced female labour force.

But while Canadian women flooded white collar clerical jobs, Italian and other immigrant women took low-skilled, low-paid jobs such as packaging, sewing, operating steampresses and food-processing machines and daytime domestic service. While some benefitted from kin networking at the workplace and worked among familiar faces, others found jobs in gender-mixed and ethnically-mixed workplaces. They worked long hours at monotonous or heavy jobs where they were subjected to the new industrial disciplines and endured workplaces with poor ventilation and high humidity, as well as speed-ups. They worked in industries characterized by large numbers of unskilled female workers and high labour turn-over rates. Familial priorities, especially childbearing, largely determined

the timing and length of their stay in the work force. Some never returned to work after they started having children. Some delayed working until their children reached school-age. Many others, however, regularly moved in and out of the workforce in between having children, tending to a family crisis or resettling the family in a new home, moving from factory job to service or vegetable and fruit-picking jobs. Others protested by quitting disagreeable jobs and seeking employ-

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ment elsewhere. Increasingly they joined unions in an effort to secure better wages and working conditions.

Still others, who would have preferred to have "helped out" the family by earning extra wages, were prevented from doing so by husbands who wanted wives at home with their children. Others gave up jobs their men disapproved of. Women's paid labours were part of a well-articulated family strategy of survival; female wages helped support families when men were unemployed, and they paid for daily living expenses so men's pay cheques could go into savings deposits and towards mortgage payments. This was especially important, given that Italian men most commonly worked out of doors and so regularly faced irregular employment and winter unemployment.

But it would be stretching matters too far to suggest that women could have supported their families on their own. On the contrary, Italian women were concentrated in the lowest paid sector of the work force. Moreover, despite the fact that they numbered among the immigrants who had been here longest, Italian women from the immigrant generation still earned among the lowest female salaries in the country. This pattern reflects their lack of access to skills and English language training facilities, and to the additional burdens imposed by their domestic duties. Working outside the home did not

reduce the burden of housework; women juggled the exhausting demands of home and work, while living in often crowded quarters, though they benefited from women kinfolk who shared babysitting and domestic chores. And retraining for immigrant women was as low a priority in the fifties and sixties — as it is today. What retraining facilities existed for Italian immigrants in the post-war period were usually restricted to injured and unemployed men who registered in pro-

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vincial trade or retraining programs. Although some women took English classes provided by various volunteer organizations or the Toronto Board of Education, their attendance was, at best, irregular due to pressing duties at home. Various immigrant aid societies, including the Italian Immigrant Aid Society, which was established in 1951 to place Italians in jobs and to provide support services, did provide industrial power sewing courses to train women for the garment factories, but this was done on quite a small scale.

Urban industrial life also evoked anxiety in women who no longer enjoyed the protection of the *paese*. They resented being stared and laughed at, worried about children at school (where squabbles were common) and feared losing them to Canadian society. They resented policemen harassing menfolk who were socializing on the streets of Little Italy, and they prayed that men would not suffer injuries at work. Given the numerous letters sent to newspapers and politicians complaining about Italian immigrants altering the British character of Toronto, and the numerous injuries and dozens of fatalities that hit Italian workers — especially construction workers on unsafe job-sites — such fears were not ill-founded. One of the most publicized disasters was the Hogs Hollow Tunnel Tragedy of March 1960, when five Italian tunnel workers working under the Don River in

Toronto's north end were accidentally killed due to unsafe working conditions. The folk memory of Italian workers is filled with painful testimonies of having witnessed the death or near-death of co-workers who fell from scaffolds or through elevator shafts or got buried in cave-ins on excavation sites.

During the difficult years of early adjustment, the injury of a male breadwinner or the extra costs of caring for sick family members could throw families that were barely surviving on a day-to-day basis into a real financial crisis. Women responded by finding jobs or taking in extra work, although the presence of sick children or elderly folk made this impossible for some. The case files of immigrants who turned to the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto, a coordinating agency of charity and social organizations with its own staff of social workers and volunteers, document how some Italian women would also help their family through a difficult period by gaining access to emergency relief. Matters became extremely difficult for one family when the wife broke her back at work and her garage mechanic husband found himself unemployed and without benefits. With two children to feed and mortgage payments due, the woman secured food and clothing until she received compensation for her injury. In 1959, a recently-arrived family of seven sought assistance when both the husband, an experienced tunnel worker, and the eldest eighteen year-old son, a factory worker, were laid off. The woman herself was at home with a newborn baby, two other young children and a sick eighty year-old mother. This left the sixteen year-old daughter, who was earning \$25 a week in a garment factory, as the family's sole breadwinner. The mother alleviated matters by securing free food and clothes and an emergency welfare cheque. Evidently she came to see the Institute as a useful vehicle for getting the family through a tight situation, for she returned there several consecutive winters. By the third winter, when the case history ends, the daughter had married and the mother was seeking paid work.⁵

Such families must have been in truly tight circumstances, for seeking aid could be a humiliating process, involving embarrassing questions and home visits by voluntary or professional workers. Notwithstanding the major improvements made to Canada's social welfare system immediately after the Second World War, state aid remained predicated upon the principles of deservability and less eligibility

— clients had to prove they were down-and-out, and relief was limited and temporary. Immigrant families were also exposed to the biases of host society caretakers. Case workers' reports sometimes reveal the intolerance of, or indifference to, immigrants' cultural background. In a revealing display of cultural chauvinism, a public health nurse running an immigrant baby clinic in the rectory basement of St. Thomas Aquinas church (an Italian parish in the north-east end) expressed her

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irritation with Italian mothers for making use of the facilities but failing to attend the volunteer nurses' prescriptive lectures on Canadian childrearing techniques. In her 1955 report the nurse wrote:

One of the concomitants we hope to put over to these immigrants, is the North American concept of unpaid, volunteer aid to others. They are completely mystified at the idea of "doing anything for nothing" and have had rather an unsettling effect on some of our volunteers... I do wish the foreign-language press was given a good briefing by someone re this old and much-respected pioneer virtue of "neighbourly aid" and not the rather patronizing attentions often given in Europe by the wealthy towards the poor... nor the cold impersonality of bureaucracy... they have left behind, and must forget... their old ideas must not infect our people; so some missionary work is needed to be done...⁶

In another case, an Institute social worker griped about an Italian mother of four receiving assistance due to her husband's illness when the woman complained about the canned food issued and requested food vouchers to purchase her own food. She was called "too choosy" and ungrateful, and, though the home visitor confirmed the woman's story about her family living in a crowded two-bedroom flat and her husband's insuffi-

cient unemployment insurance earnings, the woman was not recommended for Christmas benefits the following year. In still another case, the caseworker refused to offer any more clothing to an Italian woman who came in requesting a Christmas package for the second year in a row on the grounds that "she is fussy about old clothing." Instead they gave her some extra food coupons.

A notorious and tragic case highlighting the insensitivity of state caretakers towards immigrant women involved Gerada Trillo, a young mother of three who, along with her underemployed construction worker husband, had recently migrated to Toronto from their village south of Rome. One Saturday afternoon in mid-October 1955, Gerada and her husband left their Beatrice Street home, which they shared with relatives, to do some shopping. Later that afternoon they were arrested in a downtown department store and charged with shoplifting \$10 worth of children's clothing. Mrs. Trillo, who could not speak English, was immediately separated from her husband; at the Claremont Police Station she was locked in a deportation cell (the cells normally reserved for women were under renovation). For some time police ignored her cries of help, her pleas that she not be taken away from her children. Then the crying stopped: Gerada Trillo had hung herself from the bars of her jail cell window with the bed sheets. It was only afterwards that police learned she had children — which would have been sufficient reason not to have arrested her in the first place. Trillo's death, which received sympathetic coverage in the English press, sent shock waves through the Italian community. People sent the children clothes and a contractor hired Trillo at a decent salary. The event also generated bitter discussion regarding the exploitation of Italian workers in the unorganized residential construction industry, where substandard wages and working conditions left men like Trillo unable to support their families. Spurred on by the Hogs Hollow disaster, and led by charismatic but unorthodox labour leaders, various organizing drives eventually culminated in the dramatic and violent residential construction strikes of August 1960 and summer 1961.

Institute case files also reveal how immigration-related strains and pressures could take their toll on a woman and how her illness or absence could have severe consequences for her family. When one working woman suffered a nervous breakdown years after she and her hus-

band had arrived in Toronto, two of her children, both of whom had become discipline problems at school and home, were temporarily placed in a Catholic orphanage because her husband could not handle them. The possible link between immigrant hardships and mental illness among immigrants has not really been explored by Canadian social historians, although contemporary doctors and social workers in Toronto deal with such cases on a daily basis.⁷

And what of widows or women deserted by their husbands? Even when kinfolk provided support, they were forced to seek outside help. And they did not always find their *familiari* arrangements satisfactory. One woman I interviewed recalled with bitterness how, as a young widow, she had been expected to perform all the domestic labours in her married sister's household because it was assumed that a woman without a husband had little to do. "I was like a slave. Because I'm at home and don't have a husband I'm supposed to take care of them." Fed up, the woman, who had worked as a local seamstress out of her home in Sicily, later found work in a garment shop, moved in with her married son and, twelve years later, re-married.⁸ In another instance, the 1962 death of a husband ten years after they immigrated left a forty-nine year-old woman in serious mental turmoil, on a widow's pension with the sole responsibility for mortgage payments. Written one year later, her case worker's report reads:

[She] has trouble with nerves, being very unhappy since husband died. Affected her stomach, brains and nerves in general. Takes injections, has private medical care, but no improvement. Spends a lot of money on drugs. Married daughters do not help, one just recently married (1 month ago), the other married to a good-for-nothing. Very clean house, well looked after. Sad case, as wife cannot improve health.

Far from falling into the abyss of self-despair, however, this woman eventually recovered her health and, overcoming her painful shyness, attended English classes. By 1965 she was successfully caring for her youngest child and elderly mother.

In Italian culture on both sides of the Atlantic, family breakdown was rare. Some cases, however, reveal how the migration experience could lead to family breakdown. In one case, an underemployed construction labourer who had suffered some emotional troubles deserted his wife of thirteen years in the

winter of 1961, about five years after arriving in Canada. The Institute arranged Italian-speaking volunteers to visit the woman, who lived with her six children and relatives in a multiple household, and referred her to family and welfare services. In another case, following years of inflicting emotional and physical abuse upon his wife, including numerous affairs, a husband of twenty-two years deserted his wife, a native of Casserta province in Latina, shortly after she suffered a work-related back injury in the summer of 1963. Like most women whose self-esteem was predicated on a model of marriage and motherhood, this woman could not bring herself to take her case worker's advice and seek a legal separation — which would have qualified her for long-term welfare assistance. Fortunately she had two working boys at home who helped to support her. In another case, a Neapolitan woman left her chronically-unemployed and abusive husband. She expressed the view that "... she might never have married her husband had it not been for the social and religious pressure in her home country."

Though scattered and sometimes difficult for the historian to document, evidence, then, does exist to confirm the stories of struggle, exploitation and abuse that Italian women have revealed in their oral recollections of their early years in post-War Toronto. To date, immigration historians have neglected this "uglier" side of Italian immigration, preferring to stress the resiliency of immigrant families who confronted the new economy and society of North America. That goal, of course, is a perfectly legitimate one. So, too, is the task of mapping out the positive contributions women have made to their families in these years. Indeed, men who might express sexist views about women's rightful place in the home, often simultaneously expressed their recognition and respect for the self-sacrificing efforts of their wives, whose paid and unpaid labours throughout the post-War years made a major difference to their family's welfare. Women also derived tremendous self-satisfaction from their labours and they expressed the pride of immigrant women who saw themselves as indispensable to the family. But one cannot ignore the special strains on women's lives and the kinds of gender-specific abuse and exploitation that can wreak irreparable psychological and physical havoc on women's lives. Our discussions of successful families must recognize the important role women played in building the better life which

migration to Toronto secured for thousands of Southern Italians. Likewise, in our analyses of the resiliency of immigrant families in withstanding new world pressures and in carving out their own lives, we ought not to forget that this was sometimes achieved at great emotional cost, and that women in particular suffered emotional and psychological scars engendered by the difficult early years.

¹ Vincenza Scarpaci, "The Plaything of the Middle-Class Woman Historian," *Occasional Papers on Ethnic and Immigration Studies* (Toronto: MHSO, 1972.)

² For further statistical details see, for example, Franca Iacovetta, "From Cortadina to Worker: Southern Italian Immigrant Working Women in Toronto, 1947-62," in *Looking into My Sister's Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History*, ed. Jean Burnet (Toronto: MHSO, 1986).

³ On women in Southern Italy see, for example, Jan Brogger Montavarese, *A Study of Present Society and Culture in Southern Italy* (Oslo, 1971) Constance Cronin, *The Sting of Change: Sicilians in Sicily and Australia* (Chicago, 1971); Ann Cornelison, *Women of the Shadows: A Study of the Wives and Mothers of Southern Italy* (New York, 1970).

⁴ *Corriere Canadese; Teledominica.*

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all of the case histories have been culled from the confidential files of the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto, PAO.

⁶ Social Planning Council Records, City of Toronto Archives. A. Cecilia Pope, R.N., to Doris Clark (15 April 1958).

⁷ *Corriere Canadese; Toronto Telegram; Toronto Star; Toronto Globe and Mail* (October 1955 issues).

⁸ Interviews (confidential, names withheld).

Ave

The intelligence of hands
without books,
made thin by famine, war,
sleeping in the hay of concentration
camps,
eating hay,
the Germans raging
as the Americans ran up Italia's calf,
your father planted his body like seeds,
parts here and there on Antonella's roof
found a week after the funeral
that buried the soul of a man in a single
thigh
for the last day's rising,

Hands made plump by pasta
and the keep appetite of Canadian
winter,

working hands,
made coarse by detergents,
calloused with the friction
of assembling the wiry parts of small
appliances, the fiction
of prosperity, the car, the bungalow, the
daughter
with a university education,
the dream packaged in the potato
factory, frozen,
the chocolate factory, stale, the
home scrubbed to shining, mortgaged,
dressed in marigolds and pink asters,

the intelligence of hands,
the sharpeyed needle darning the drapes
that robe a pink future on the western
horizon,
the desire for grandchildren, a prayer,
smoking in the flames of votary
candles,
snuffed before an indifferent madonna,
a hope like the geraniums potted in the
window
which refuse to flower,
offering only brown buds to the light,

the intelligence of hands
and arms to the elbow in the blood
harvest of California grapes,
new wine in the new world,

All the shrewdness of a lioness
weaning her young
yet
pampering the self-satisfied rex,
mamma,
the reputed intelligence of your sex,
lies in the blood's eclipse of the mind,
thirty lunar months,
three other selves,
shoots of vines
for hybrid grapes.

A Strange Grace

For my father's mother

Love always dressed herself in black.
She was a fat old woman with dark
eyes.

Love always loved me best,
her golden grandchild,
the one who tried to explain herself
right into her heart
for a little chocolate cheese
gilded in foil.

She was an octogenarian, love, a
matriarch,
and her heart tracked for many miles
barefoot in its slow orbit in the space
of the chest.

Love knew the ivory limit
of her universe
and the miracle of a child's
sunrise birth, unfolding
with the first explosion of light
on the horizon, a cry ripped
out of the nurturing darkness,
a free fall with a strange grace toward
another
kind of darkness,

and the precocious day chattering and
chattering,
as if she couldn't shut up for a second,
as if she couldn't shut up for good,
as if the world could just keep busy on
the tip
of her tongue.

Love always dressed herself in black.
Posing with her seated on a white marble
bench
by the Roman gardens, as I stood on the
stone slab
our heads were level, the silver and the
gold.

My crescent arm around her neck
embracing a premature passion
deeper than forests of brazilian cocoa.

My truest, my dearest love, in the
whole of time,
in the intimacy of my innocence,
the love I left for a new world,
far away from her old country seat,

sealed in marble and invisible
love, who always loved me best.

Mary di Michele

...from *Bread and Chocolate*
(Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1980).