

"worked like a man." There were no machines to do the work, so she worked with her hands.

Anna walks straight and looks much younger than her actual age. She is still healthy and robust. There are few wrinkles on her face but deep, hard lines cut across it, particularly around her eyes and mouth. Her grey, wavy hair is set in a small bun behind her head. At nineteen she married for the first time. Because her husband was a communist sympathizer, the fascists persecuted her husband and her family. Anna's husband spent more years in jail than in their own home. The only reason they did not incarcerate her was because she had to take care of the children, she says. Finally, in 1933, they murdered her husband. He was severely beaten, and unconscious, was thrown into a river. At the time of this horrible event, she had three small children and was about to give birth to her fourth. There were so many massacres committed by the fascists, Anna bitterly states. Later on, one of her children died of diarrhea at the age of two. This used to be common, she says, holding back the tears. Women had to do a lot of hard work, so there wasn't much time to spend looking after the children. Also, there was no medicine to cure even simple ailments. So many children died.

Anna did all types of work to bring food to her children. There were days, especially during the war, when they survived on a piece of hard bread a day. In good times there was more bread, potatoes and beans; meat was something that was rarely available. Anna's eyes glisten and she can no longer hold back the tears, as she tells me "a mother will do anything for her children." When she worked as a domestic, sometimes she was given some food but she brought this home to her children. Later, as her children grew, her sons left for other countries in Europe to find work. Many young men would try to cross borders illegally and were often caught and jailed. At least her sons escaped this penalty. Even though Anna was widowed at thirty and she had many proposals of marriage, she didn't want to remarry while her children were young. She was afraid that another man would not care for her children and perhaps abuse them — as was common in those times. "When I think of the past," she says, "my skin gets goosebumps, just to think of the hunger, the misery, the tragedies. But the worst was the hunger," Anna painfully remembers.

When Anna was fifty, she met and subsequently married a man who had

been living in Canada. Anna, her children and her new husband came to Canada. Finally, Anna says that she had some peace of mind. This husband was good to her and her children. But after only seven years, her second husband died from diabetes complications after a lengthy illness, during which time she took care of him. After his death, Anna lived with her children and stepchildren from her second husband. She didn't have to worry much during these times.

Anna decided to live at Villa Colombo when it first opened ten years ago. It was her own decision. She has always been used to making decisions, in crisis situations and in everyday matters. She knows what has to be done. If she had wanted to live with her children, she could have, she says. But she does not want to be a dependent on anyone. Even though she is elderly, she feels that she can still do many things. She also enjoys the company of people of her own generation. Anna is very active and takes great interest in the problems of people around her. She is a leader. She is the voice of many elderly who know her. I asked Anna what is important in her life. She says "Getting up, having a nice cup of coffee, simple things..." What worries Anna is illness, especially the mental confusion from which some elderly people suffer. She hopes she never becomes a victim of dementia.

Anna says that she is happy now. Her children are close to her. She enjoys her old age because her children care about her. Anna always resisted getting depressed in her life. She is a real survivor, one who believes that many others of her generation are not happy because they do not want to see the good changes in the world. They hold onto their unhappy memories. Anna has always had hope in the future. She believes that change is possible. Anna believes that for women, there has been progress between the generations.

The most striking aspects of all these women are their incredible resilience, their courage, and their will to survive. These women went to tremendous lengths to take care of their children, often completely on their own. They are the living witnesses of a history in some ways remote and different from the generation of women today. Yet, are their histories so different from the present day of Italian women and women in general? As a geriatric Italian social worker, I also see the children of these elderly women, as well as the grandchildren. Many traditional patterns remain.

## Enigmatico

His limpid skin is green gold as he  
reclines  
in a shade that crowns him with the  
leaves of vines.  
As smooth as the golden skinned grapes  
his firm  
thighs are about to burst their denim  
husks,  
the golden thighs of a man of bronze.

Eyes of pale amber, with the bite of  
brandy.  
Lips that kiss her lady's shoe, her knee,  
the liquid outward curve of her hip,  
lips that call her madonna,  
his dream of a bright aproned jewel for  
his  
kitchen,  
he polishes it there in the long grass of  
August  
until he rips her leisurely as a silk,

and she cries out caught  
with one bare foot in a village in the  
Abruzzi,  
the other busy with cramped English  
speaking toes in  
Toronto,  
she strides the Atlantic legs spread  
like a Colossus.

Photograph of a girl dressed as a gypsy,  
child waist pinched by a red girdle,  
for *Carnevale*,

in another world, wearing the black  
academic gown,  
a rabbit skin about her shoulders,  
she hangs on the wall of a suburban  
bungalow.

## Mary di Michele

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