

Joan E. Bauer

Where I'm From

I'm from Bixby Knowles Hospital in Long Beach
& creamed spinach at Dinah's on Sepulveda.

I'm from Jesus Saves! & A-bomb drills,
Chaucer & the chatter of UCLA's Royce Hall.

I'm from coveted books at Dutton's off Magnolia
& the matzo at Junior's Deli in Westwood.

From my mother's sun hats & *Reader's Digests*
& 'Some Enchanted Evening' on the phonograph.

I'm from my zig & zag commute on Laurel Canyon
to teach news-writing, James Baldwin & Tolstoy.

I'm from my grandparents' dining room mahogany
which some damn interloper painted over.

I'm from El Cholo on Western, Ross MacDonald mysteries
& my first apartment blocks from the Rampart station.

From *Mars, the Red Planet* & the missile design
my dad retrieved perilously from a firestorm.

I'm from the dinosaurs & tarpits on La Brea
& the mad prophesies of Joan Didion & Mike Davis.

I'm from palm trees, the calming scent of eucalyptus,
& a magic tunnel that opens to the gleaming Pacific.

Booker T. Washington in Sicily, 1910

What brought him to the yellow sulphur mines
of Campofranco, stories of the 'negro-like' people

in a lawless underworld south of Palermo.
Told he'd encounter 'inferior race' brigands,

unsuitable for the 'uplift through work & thrift'
he espoused, instead he found:

landless families living in 'dirt, poverty & squalor'
in single rooms, no chimney for cooking.

Straw beds. A flour paste used to fill gaps
in the walls. He found the *carusi*, sold by their families

to overseers, children who grew old quickly
or died young. He found peasants crushed by overseers,

taxes & the *omertà*, the conspiracy of silence enforced
by a Mafia that reminded him of the Klan.

He found the mine workers 'hospitable'
though they worked in hellish, suffocating fumes,

naked underground. At 100 per cent humidity,
110 degrees Fahrenheit, the body can't survive clothed.

Washington confessed: he was 'perplexed' by Sicily.

The vice-grip of church & gentry. Villages 'saturated
by antiquity.' A treeless land with exhausted soil.

Dull-eyed children carrying back-breaking bundles
of sulphur to be shipped to America: for gunpowder.

Washington would remember the sulphur mines of Sicily
as 'the nearest thing to hell I expect to see in this life.'

The Sicilian Detective

When Andrea Camilleri at 60 began writing mysteries set in the fictional Sicilian port city of Vigàta,

he was a director, screenwriter & professor steeped in Pirandello, Samuel Beckett & Georges Simenon.

His protagonist, Inspector Montalbano, while cultured & *molto simpatico*, can be moody & impatient.

He has his problems: bumbling subordinates, the sluggish *burocrazia* & the hazards of doing the right thing

on an island hobbled by crime & corruption, brutality & intrigue. Montalbano takes solace in books, banter,

his late-night swim, the sun-drenched days. He's also devoted to striped mullet & pasta with black ink sauce.

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Camilleri's plots often turn on the fate of immigrants, as his fast-cut narratives delight us with comedic dialog

& heaping portions of Sicilian cuisine. A leftist & atheist, Camilleri is especially sympathetic to the immigrants

from Tunisia, Bangladesh, Libya, Egypt & so we witness fishermen rescuing migrants at sea, regardless of homeland.

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In Camilleri's novels, Inspector Montalbano remains an honorable man & 'good wins out.'

Not so in Mediterranean Noir, the work of younger writers like Massimo Carlotto, who himself served time.

In their taut & bloody tales, everyone's compromised
as fiction reveals the gruesome reality journalism cannot.

Camilleri was asked, did he fear the Mafia?
'They kill journalists, not novelists.'