

Walking through thyme



*A sequence of poems based on
emigration from the hill villages of the
Comino Valley in Lazio, Italy*

*By
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*Top photo – the De Luca family house in Atina, built in the 1920s
Bottom photo – view of Atina*

*For my husband's family
with respect & love*

By the same author

Voes & Sounds	<i>The Shetland Library, 1994</i>
Wast wi da Valkyries	<i>The Shetland Library, 1997</i>
Plain Song	<i>The Shetland Library, 2002</i>
Drops in Time's Ocean	<i>Hansel, 2004</i>

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Cover photo: street scene in Picinisco

Keeping body and soul together

Atina, Italy 1930

Women are up before sunrise, climb a mountain path
in long skirts of dawn. They cut and bind bundles of sticks
slide them downslope, carry them balanced on their heads.
Their stoves will be lit before their children rise.

A posse of boys packs sandwiches: cheese, pepperoni.
They will spend all day in the mountains checking snares.
Dusk will bring them home with a rabbit for the pot
a slow dangle of larks and dusty starlings.

Reapers arrive early: labourers for a day's pay, a day's food.
They sing as they sickle, to an earthed rhythm. Wheat bristles,
falls under their spell. The valley rings with their song.
They bind biblical sheaves, stack them up bold as brass.

The sun climbs, the thresher comes: a throb of metal, a slap
of leather belts. It thwacks sheaves over and over
till they spill sacks of grain and a circle of stacked straw.
There will be bread and pasta and fresh mattresses.

Elbow-deep in the baking cabinet: some loaves to knead
with pliant oil, a day's anointing. They plump with yeast
to be carried, head-high, on a wooden board: a sacrifice
from the woman to the hot hands of the village baker.

A man sits by the sultry roadside. He cracks white stones
with his hammer, shovels rubble on a Roman road.
Mule carts with iron wheels crush and powder it
as they spin downhill, sieving clouds of white dust.

Nothing stirs as thunder rumbles round humid hills,
an afternoon storm in the Comino valley.
Gutters gurgle limey-white. Shutters are closed.
Dogs hide. Children nap. The cicali fall silent.

After the storm women meet at the hillfoot well.
The water has a blessing carried from the mountain.
They laugh and chatter, lift tilting water in brass pots
to each other's heads, then climb steeply.

Their men gather in the steady air of a dark *cantina*,
taste new wine from sombre casks. For them it is
an unspoken competition. The glasses swirl
a whole summer of sun-waiting, of careful husbandry.

Two niches in the village cemetery to fill before dusk:
a young mother and her infant, *nata e morta*.
On All Souls' Night the village will come, keep vigil
with the gathered centuries of remembrance.

But tomorrow, an exodus to the festal feet of a black Madonna,
goddess of mountain springs. For her children she will crack
open water melons in her icy water, slip glitters into bottles.
Night will be a bivouac under cut branches and crystal stars.

Walking through thyme

Comino Valley, Italy

1900

Shepherds on Monte Marro lace *ciocie*,
crush sage and glistening thistle as they climb.
Their dogs wear iron collars, guard sheepfolds.
Bones lie stone-weathered on treeless slopes.
Below, in Casalvieri, houses hunch inwards, lurch
above the valley. The church, heavy-doored,
has sheltered and nourished generations,
sanctified their wheat, their vine.

Survival is land. Sons of the mountains leave
one by one. There is no land left to divide
among them. They peddle pots and pans,
gasp at tales of lands with moist soil,
a thickening of cities. The young of Comino
leave to the tears of the old. They send home
good news with tea leaves in an envelope.
With each generation, roots loosen

1999

Wealth returns. New houses with
slight foundations are taller than oak tree,
wider than the plot that grew a family
On the terraces below Montattico
stones lie unlifted. A bell rings for mass.

There are barely enough faithful
to baptise a child. Bread and wine
no longer taste of turned earth.

On Monte Marro a herdsman calls
his cows to a stone cistern. Their bells
clang melodiously. He moves
through thistle and thyme. His cows
sway unhurriedly, drink deeply.

*ciocie: characteristic sandals made by farmers and shepherds which gave the name
'Ciociaria' to the region*

Wrapping the last supper

We look well set up, the pair of us.
The best photographer of course.
Our two sons; and the girls in their finery.
Between us all we must have wrapped
a million suppers in the local news.
How classy our girls looked. No one
would believe how hard they worked.
I see in each of them your face
as it was when we left Atina, hill town
of generations. What a walk that was.
What dreams we had. Remember
the tears of our mothers as we left,
food pressed on us for the journey?

Togli st pan; toglie le cashe.

Me with my mandolin, you with
your sewing things. Each river crossing,
a blessing: shade, while the clothes
you slapped against flat stones dried
in the sun. The moment we stepped
into France, eager, fearful; when finally
we left Italy behind. *Nun cabisc.*

Our *Paesano*: how comfortable it was
but shrinking, worthless.

That grape harvest was kind to us, slow
in its move north, keeping pace with us.
Ah, then we were in our first pressing,
full-bodied. How many barns did we rest in?
At last the Channel, and its air with the cut
of vinegar. We must have had some money

for the crossing. All those strange sounds
the red brick, the greyness. Just walking,
walking. I remember so little of that journey
except the flocks on the moors when I felt
homesick for the ways of shepherding.
Then I would play the mandolin and
we would sing and round off
our melancholy. Remember how they
threw farthings at us. Now we could
throw sovereigns at the best of them.

See how big our feet look in the photo
and our hands. We have walked
or carried or stood all our lives.
But you have a maid now to scrub the steps,
blacken the range. Who would have thought?
Your big hands are soft now. You do not
even need to thread a needle. You can dress
the girls from Jenners. How elegant they are.
They will marry good Italian boys.

How the years have flown. It is up to
the young ones now. I have wrapped
my last supper, laid by good money.
We will spend summers in Atina, travel
home by train, watch the vineyards
of France slip past. So many return
like the birds. It will be like old times.
I will play my mandolin under the vine.
You will show off our grand-daughter.
Parla ben l'Inglese.

A child's calendar of feasts

Lazio, Italy 1930

January

Run to the market for a piece of *baccalà* to soak for tomorrow's soup.

February

Fetch jars of peppers and tomatoes from the cellar. Lent is upon us.

March

We will break our fast with fine *vermicelli*, with bitter anchovies and oil.

April

I cannescioni for Eastertime. Can you taste the hot pepper and parmesan?

May

For breakfast there's *ricotta* from the mountain, *del pane dall'arca*.

June

What will you have? Spinach? Aubergine? Tomato? We will bottle them soon or they will go to waste.

July

A red pepper for you. Take the top off: some oil, a drop of vinegar. Now dunk your bread in it.

August

See that hen: she hasn't laid an egg all week! She'll be in the pot before nightfall.

September

Peel some hazelnuts while they're still green. Our grapes can hang another day.

October

Take these walnuts next door. Tell them we will kill the black pig tomorrow. *Prosciutto* and sausages will hang above the stove. (All those acorns you gathered to fill its belly!)

November

A slice of *polenta* will warm you. It is rich with beans and *sugo*. The sun is dropping like a stone.

December

Wait till the chestnuts are roasted and the *crostole* are cool enough to sugar. What a feast we will have!

baccalà: salt cod; *I cannescioni*: pastries baked with cheese, pepper and egg; *del pane dall'arca*: bread from the baking cabinet; *polenta*: thick porridge made with maize flour; *sugo*: rich tomato sauce; *crostole*: deep fried strips of fresh pasta, tied in bows, sugared and served as a treat

A child's calendar of feasts

Shetland 1930

January

We'll hae a tee o reestit mutton for New'er Day; kale soup an bannocks.

February

Du'll hae brose for dy supper dis Candlemas, or a mellie puddin.

March

Fetch a daffik o water fae da well. Dis dried tusk 'll pit a trist apö wis.

April

Wir hens is laid lik horro. Der'll be paes-eggs da moarn.

May

Here's a hansel o herrin fae da wastird, fat an foo o raans. Tak twartree neist door afore we saat dem doon.

June

Wir coo is calved for Johnsmas. Hae du dy myl-gruel afore du gengs ta scöl. Der'll be beest for when du comes haem.

July

Pit crowdie an rhubarb jam apö dy scone. Hill berries is fine but dey'll no hadd dy haert.

August

A fried sillock an stap for dy supper dis Lammas. Du'll sleep lik a selkie.

September

We'll hae sookit piltocks, fresh butter an a plate o
mellie tatties: whit better?

October

Tastes-du da hedder i dis hill lamb? A'll mak dee
sheep's puddins da moarn.

November

Wir grice is hed his day. We'll swee him an cure him
for Hallowmas. Der'll be naethin wasted, sparl an aa.

December

Dat cockerel 'll craa his last apö Tammmas. Dy uncle
is browt dee an orange fae da sooth. Whitna Yöl we sal
hae!

tee o reesit mutton: *leg of smoke-dried mutton*; brose: *oatmeal dish*; Candlemas: *a quarter day, 2nd February*; mellie puddin: *oatmeal-based sausage*; daffik: *small wooden bucket*; tusk: *type of cod*; trist: *thirst*; apö: *on*; wis: *us*; wir: *our*; laid lik horro: *(hens) laid profusely*; paes eggs: *Easter eggs*; da moarn: *tomorrow*; hansel: *a gift to mark a beginning*; da wastird: *the west*; foo: *full*; raans: *fish roes*; twartree: *a few*; neist: *next*; saat: *salt*; coo: *cow*; Johnsmas: *24th June*; du: *you (familiar)*; myl-gruel: *milky porridge*; scöb: *school*; beest: *cheese made from first milk of newly calved cow*; haem: *home*; dy: *your (familiar)*; hadd dy haert: *give sustenance*; sillock: *young coalfish*; stap: *fish mixed with fish livers*; Lammas: *1st August*; selkie: *seal*; sookit piltocks: *wind dried coalfish*; mellie tatties: *floury potatoes*; hedder: *heather*; i: *in*; dis: *this*; sheep's puddins: *fruit dumpling boiled in sheep's intestine, sliced and fried*; grice: *pig*; swee: *singe*; Hallowmas: *1st November*; sparl: *anal passage (turned inside out and stuffed with oatmeal)*; dat: *that*; craa: *crow*; Tammmas: *21st December*; browt: *brought*; dee: *you (familiar, objective)*; whitna: *what a*; Yöl: *Christmas*



Street scene in Picinisco