

REVIEW OF ROSEMARY MANNO'S *MARSEILLE*

by Julien Poirier

Berkeley is on lockdown but I have *Marseille* in my hand, and its author, the poet Rosemary Manno, is across the bay in North Beach, San Francisco. At this moment she's drinking a glass of red wine with her beau, Roger; a bowl of magic soup steams at her right elbow, chive slivers boating on oily broth.

*Remember how well I knew you in Marseille
what I haven't said you already know*

And I'm trying to find some way into the Atlas Mountains—some path that opens up in a forest when the moon is shining on “a red Cadillac / along with Saints Peter and Paul”—riding shotgun to Rimbaud (this is a Manno poem, after all) away from the coronavirus: Manno's *Marseille* shoved into the pocket of my grandpa's tweed jacket

*. . . like the archway
to a world I'm waiting to meet*

I pass a shepherd boy on the way up, his raving sheepdog nipping at my belt while I swear hysterically in broken French. Shall I smack him on the nose with *Marseille*, published by Barncott Press last year so long ago? At one time Jack Hirschman was going to edit, which would have been appropriate since Manno is a poet of the perpetually nocturnal Berlin-underworld handbill-crammed alleys of a deathless bohemian North Beach. She has been boating those alleys since 1983, and the first poems in this book go back that far. But all of that timekeeping feels redundant today. Or, as Manno puts it: “Memory lane is a con.” Only the poems remain.

I grab her book on my way out the door and Manno throws me a long scarf. I stuff *Marseille* and a stack of small blank notebooks into my pocket; Blaise Cendrars's *Collected*, some Lorca, pencils and a sharpener on a string around my neck. I need her with me because she knows “What the Beatniks Saw in North Beach,” and how they got there:

*Like an old Roman road
Grant Avenue
one morning*

and what they touched there:

*sheets of dry dough on the marble table
dusted with flour*

and who they met there, and where, while the fog came in and they drank to that—

*immigrants and bohemians
the lights of Alameda*

the bridge to the east . . .

She may call herself a Luddite whose “spontaneous scrawl gestates haphazard amount of time” (“Process of a Luddite”) but she’s something else: Still a kid lying in her dark bed listening to Bob Dylan on a “turquoise transistor radio” while simultaneously flapping her hands to conjure empathy for birds in cages at a half-built hotel on top of the Atlas Mountains, in the Dadés Gorge; still the poet sitting next to me at the big round mosaic table at Café Trieste where she and Gregory Corso were hanging out when Bobby Yarra, soon to be Corso’s travel companion, walked through the front door and Corso said,

“Your face isn’t like the map of Israel!”

There’s something confidential about Rosemary in person, as there often is (a confidential air) around people who aren’t afraid to tell other people, people they love, off for disappointing them, in love or in poetry. And the poems in Marseille have a tough but supple quality like really fine sheets sundrying in a cool breeze, or those clean sheets in old North Beach SRO’s. From “Birth of a Novel at San Blas”:

*handsome holy roller wears heavy woolen suit
he belts it out in the wet heat*

Or, from “Two Women”:

*Liana Pagano, as good as bread,
made doe-skin gloves to sell in the via Roma.
She wore no makeup and picked apples at harvest.*

And here’s the whole of “Roads to Freedom”:

*At the corner of Green and Mason
a starry summer night in mid November
cats on razor wire
half-truths and wild rumors
the false power of a lie
the way things look on the surface
the cracked veneer disappears
hello stranger*

*The dye had burned my scalp every three months
grey hair is another liberation
I had the power to end the pain
vanity remains*

Technically? Most of the poems in Marseille are short, one page or two, made of short lines. While evaporating they sing as if the poet spoke them in her mind before she wrote them, declamatory rather than conversational. The poet is always there, never not: The “I” in these

poems is Manno herself, unabashedly. No attempt at formal invention is recorded in this book. Rather there's a sense of unrushed urgency—a quality that the poet makes feel anything but contradictory by constantly grounding her poems in her presence. The poems are inviting even as they voice disappointment, political commitment and candid takedown.

San Francisco is definitely the soul substance of Manno's poem. I say this is *definite* despite the fact that a young Manno could be seen bending blades from Buffalo to Ashville to the Chelsea Hotel; despite her late youth in Manhattan and regular trips to India; despite those times she folded her wings in Geneva, Algiers and Paris before being lured to North Beach in 1983, "trapped by cheap rent" in hotels that changed their linen every week. That's where she wrote the earliest poems in *Marseille* while working at the Shlock Shop with pretty much every once-and-future luminary of Barbary Coast poetry: Neeli Cherkovski, Tisa Walden, Jack Mueller, Jeffrey Grossman. "Everyone who wrote a line of verse worked there," says Manno. Its owner Avrum Rubenstein "would only hire poets." Meanwhile, Bobby Yarra kept urging her to move back to New York (this was before Yarra himself became a radio star and immigration lawyer in Fresno) but: "I was deeply involved with the poetry scene here."

This involvement included close relationships with Corso, and the young poet Eric Walker, whose incandescent talent shook the scene. (Walker died in his cell at the Humboldt County Jail in 1994, at age 29.) In the 80s, Tisa Walden's Deep Forest imprint published her chapbooks, but today Manno calls those juvenilia. "It was the bell and the calling and the song—but I was no Rimbaud." Still, many of Manno's poems from the decade shimmer in *Marseille*. Over coffee she describes hauling all of her poems, "every piece" to an apartment in Montparnasse, Paris—"Glorious hours making my songs"—and the headspinning joy that crosses her face is a familiar sight to every poet ever bitten by the bug. "If you have a poetic sensibility there can't be anything more depressing than a life without the pleasure principle—a life of drudgery."

From "Semana Santa":

*Transform the pain
to endure would be cowardice
retreat might bring a new thing
a different cast
I have nothing to say to myself
how can I speak to you?*

Manno played piano as a kid and sometimes her lines have the block movement of hands moving on the keys. Ask her how she arranged such a complex sweep of time—from 1983 to 2017—into such a trim vessel, as kinetic as an aria, she'll tell you:

"I got real super high . . . I used the floor, spread out all my poems . . . let it gestate for a couple of days. *It felt fine.*"

Right—exactly; or just like she says in "Process of a Luddite," after taking a bath "where most epiphanies are born," "I might move section around with scissors, tape, a stapler." But to this reader it feels like she's really moving around staircases . . . old black dresses bathed by long

dead streetlights . . . slices of whitewashed garage door on Telegraph Hill . . . pieces of the most fragile sections of the sky . . . bends in Che Guevara's cigar smoke (his picture is on the wall in the sunroom where she works in the North Beach apartment, the great editor and polyglot George Scrivani is over to dinner, a second bottle of red wine is making its way around the small room, now all of us are digging into the tomato salad with fresh basil). Manno's contribution to a sane day on earth is to make all of this construction feel *friendly*—or is “loyal” a better word: loyal to the reading friend.

she lives for the words that won't lie

And the words in *Marseille* were all double-checked by her extra sharp, big eyes and given a pass by her ear, shrewd but forgiving, and her line's breath smells just a little like the occasional unfiltered cigarette.

So yes I took this book up to the top of the Atlas Mountains where I could look down over all the great infested western cities that the poet visits. There were finally no planes in the sky and even though I felt even more sad and scared than I normally do when I feel like I'm hallucinating but know I'm not, having it in my pocket helped me. It drove home that the life force continues after death, at least in the form of poems. It made me want to hang out with Rosemary Manno as soon as possible, and though I couldn't do so her poems took a little bit of the sting out of this quarantine. They're as good as a nice drink and a long sleep. Call me up and I'll read some in your ear.

(Written during the Coronavirus quarantine, March 20, 2020)