

Dar a Luz, a chapbook

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Paula Brancato was one of the first women executives on Wall Street, a music producer in Hollywood and a strategic planner for The World Bank, all of which have contributed to her unique voice.

A poet and filmmaker, Brancato's literary awards include National Screenwriters, Organization of Black Screenwriters, WINFEMME, Chesterfield H. Jones Foundation, Poetry Guild, Faulkner, Asheville Writers Workshop, Pacific Northwest Writers, The Karlovy Vary Film Festival (Czech Republic), Houston Remi and Angelciti Film Festival awards. She has twice been a Sundance finalist.

Brancato has also been published by *GSU Review*, *Georgetown Review*, *Natchez Anthology*, *The Writers Place Anthology*, *Litchfield Review*, *Rattle Magazine*, *Cycle Life Poetry*, *Southern California Anthology*, *Disconnections*, and *Lilly Press*. She is a current nominee for Best of the Internet 2007 and a commissioned writer for artist Michael David's Greenhouse Project.

Brancato teaches screenwriting and poetry at the University of Southern California's Master of Professional Writing program. She earned her M.B.A. at the Harvard Business School and is a graduate of Hunter College and the Los Angeles Film School. She would like to thank poets Mary Stewart Hammond and Frazier Russell, playwright Spence Porter and husband Michael David for their encouragement and support.

Dar a Luz

They've been going at it for days,
for hours, for months, for years. He's on top
whispering, weeping. She's tracing,
scoring his cheek. He's breathing her lips.
She's pinning her lips to his brow.
It is nightfall. It is dawn. He turns
his back to the wall. She raises
her fists. He catches her wrists. She is
withered, old. He is lime shell,
bone, sucking, releasing her folds. She
sips his scent. He splits her
heart. She paints his face with a rose.

* *Dar a Luz, dare alla luce, means to give to the light, i.e. to give birth.*

She Is

... a tramp in Beijing, a lady
in Brussels, a red-lipped Burma bargirl
in Patpong, a beggar-woman, tin
cup tinkling on the brick outskirts of Rome.
In Belize, in Cancun, she saunters past
cardboard houses. She strips chile peppers,
kicks stinking Mexican dogs. She wears
bright shoes, no socks, no stockings. She wears
no shoes, just socks, just stockings. She
wears nothing, nothing at all. Her face is plain.
Her face is pain. She wraps herself
in his clothes. Her name is Leigh. Her name
is Fiona. Her name is First Fine Moon.
She prays. She loves. She weeps. She keeps.
She holds men's hips, feeds frail lips,
gives suckle by the light of her womb...

El Mozote Massacre, El Salvador

My name is Paolo. And I saw the soldiers -- taking the women first. Rags and all. Especially the young ones. The long-haired witches. Bending them over, raping them, the one we called the countess singing. Crooning through her locks. Alto voce to the end. The chorus of battered screams echoing in the cauldron.

At the parched oak table, I whittled a stick of pine. I was nine and pretended I had not lied, for I did not want to be left behind.

Carlos the Roman, my father's wrong-sided brother said, I do not want to kill the children. I watched him empty his magazine. Fool, said Rufino the cobbler, as he covered his ears. He danced like a madman in leathers, bare-toed, hopping toward the corner with a small boy, smaller than I. They will kill us all, Rufino admonished, chortling, pointing to Carlos. No beat missed, to the door Rufino strutted, pushing the laughing child into the ropes of the night, where already hung his mother and his father. Fool, he whispered then, grabbing the three-year-old by the waist, tossing him into the air, impaling him deftly on his bayonet. There was no blood, only the silent O of the child's white lips parting, like the skin of a fig. I watched him dancing, the boy's back arched in the moonlight, a soft breeze blowing aside the curtains.

Paolo! they called to me then, and my heart flipped-flopped, the sweet air stinking. Someone slapped my shoulder. Bring us a beer! they yammered. Let us see what they have to eat here. Rufino entered and I started to rise, but Carlos the Roman, weary-eyed, put a callused hand on mine and covered it. Leave him be, he cried, stopping my carving knife, the scalpel sinking deep, a gash of yellow for the figurine's slim face. After the last hungry man departed, he took me aside. Your father, he said -- that was all -- then he wiped his eyes.

We reached my new village in half a fortnight's time.

Mistaken Identity

I dialed your number by accident.
At first I didn't recognize your voice.
It sounded happy.
You were never happy.
What a surprise, you said, to hear from you,
and then I knew who it was,
and laughed a bit,
asked how our script was coming,
the only asset we had in common.
You wanted to talk. I didn't.
You asked about my business.
I'm a filmmaker now, I said.
You had finally taken that law job.
I found myself loving the sound
of your voice,
the memories
of the way you watched me ,
naked, wanting,
waiting for the flush.
Oh, yes! We could have had that baby.
I was climbing trees, hanging roses, swinging on vines.
I was Eve
before eating the apple
in the land of never apart.

Friend

making love to my almost
husband

I
imagined you
though we've never
made love
you stood in the room
watching my un-
doing
him inside me

me pretending

desire I

so

wanted

friend

to once

call out

your name

Snarky Aside

We are sitting up in bed,
you and I,
after a long week
of fights and recriminations.
I am wearing the blue terrycloth robe I bought you.
You are wirelessly connected to the Internet,
surfing for apartments to buy.
We are talking money.
I want yours, you want mine.
Both of us want everything and nothing.
There is enough for everything
but not nearly enough
for both of us, which is enough
to finish everything. I hunker down
curl up on my side,
face buried in pillow,
when you make that snarky
comment meant to teach me
not to have
the feeling I am having.
I long for the connection
of your body, at least,
but that too is denied.

September 11th

Where did you go?

I rang your office on the 94th floor.

My heels used to catch just there, where we traded and kissed
hip to hip, wrist to wrist.

A hole in the city half a mile wide.

Where?

Then you called.

I shook so hard I could not hold
the phone.

Gloria

Today, watching the news on television,
too tired to get out of bed,
I got it,

that you were dead,
buried these six or seven years, dead
in your prime. You,

I said to myself, died,
are dead,
your body decomposing

in a coffin,
under the earth, really
dead.

I mean really, really dead
like maybe you could be only half dead
or partially dead

or not really dead at all
just a little bit dead or sleeping
like my memories of you

from years ago: pink lips, blond
flowing hair,
those sixties Pucci gowns you

used to wear twirling
like a diva, the gravelly lilt
of your voice.

So beautiful, so mockingly alive.

Nothing more to say

Colin finds me

at a gallery opening.

I'm still

hurting, but I am also glad
to see

Colin. He sticks to his "I don't want to sleep with anyone

I don't like sex"

mode. I say to him: What is it then
you actually liked about me? You don't like
sex and

you don't like closeness
and you don't like
talking and you don't
like feelings or my job or apartment or even
that I loved you.

You don't seem to "like" anything at all
about me.

I am yelling.

You don't like me, Colin. You never
liked me. You may have fallen

in love with me,
but you

don't

like

me!

I don't know what he is yelling back,
except it's not to say I am wrong,

only to say how hurt he
feels that I would say such a thing,

because it is all about him now while I
am completely

heart

bro

ken.

A SHORT FILM IN 6 ACTS

1. INT. Bedroom - Dawn

I wake without you.
Cirrus clouds erase red skies.
Rain pounds everything.

I cling to pillows,
burrow into comforter,
sheets, stick feet outside.

2. INT. Kitchen - Day

A cup of coffee
chills on my windowsill
near Bill Lambért, my bear.

I draw African
daisies. Endangered
falcons. Sunny Central Park.

3. EXT. Central Park - Dusk

Church bells ring, sirens
wail, streets fill with passersby.
My brush lies quiet.

I would paint the sky
if it held you, dark clouds
struck with purple moonlight.

4. EXT. Building – Night

Urban surf wanes and
waxes. Taxis shuttle by,
yellow beaked, black-footed.

I am crafting blocks
stacking towers, stippling tanks,
I can save cities.

5. INT. Head Shot – Paula's

Buildings topple fast.
You run towards me, turn

back, slip through a side window.

In the funhouse
our heartbeats split, spin,
flatline. You are gone.

6. INT. Ceramic soup bowl - Dawn

In thirty days it
will be a new routine.
Being without you.

Only oatmeal works.
I tongue me off the clean cold spoon,
curved, slick, seamless.

Nana Rose

Before I could walk Rose, my grandmother,
taught me how to cook pasta sauce in her
kitchen next door. I remember my grandmother

bent over boiling pots, large as her
hips, wooden spoons stained red, her arms stirring,
letting me climb on the stool and kneel, tall as her,

to hold her hand -- her emerald ring -- still stirring.
Sometimes she would say, "We need more basil,
Po-la-la", or oregano, stirring

the lamb, the sausage, the pork chop and basil
into the foaming broth. Rose made soups too, lentil,
chicken, green pea, letting me slice in basil

along with tiny strips of mint, red lentil
beans, torn green scallion and thick crushed carrot.
The octopus was what I liked most, near the lentil

bag from Gristede's in the bath - not to rot,
the bathroom had no plumbing. The octopus'
neck and arms draped over the shower bar. "Buffo",

my cousins would call, and she was, the octopus,
a harlequin, her specked gray tent door swinging.
When I was twelve I made Christmas dinner, octopus

and six other fish, each dish Sicilian, swinging
my hips like my grandmother. I cut cakes
at the table, dinner ended, my right hand swinging

the butter knife, sinking it straight into a cake's
soft core, while Nana Rose sang Italian
praises of banana chocolate sauce and the cake's

sweet marble folds. Now the plum-green Italian
hothouse tomatoes I planted late last summer,
blossom overgrown. Only the Italian

melody of her voice from that warm, summer
corner remains, cracked ruby-robin on old
cassette tape - my interview her last summer.

"In heaven?" she says, "Bah! I'm not so old!
There is no heaven, Po-la-la! I tell you."
Bending, I uproot an asparagus shoot, an old

stalk gone to seed. "To sew, you sew. To cook, you
cook," Nana Rose's voice cracks. I unweave
the asparagus crowding my lemon basil. "You

roll," she says, "the ravioli shells flat, then weave
in each a spit of water." Here her inflection
rises and a sharp knife clicks through the weave

of kitchen clatter. "Salt", she mutters, her inflection
sharp. "Basta, Po-la-la! Basta!" She cupped her
hand over mine, I remember. She tastes in reflection.

She sniffs. She weighs. Only silence from my recorder.
"A bay leaf," she snaps, "and green pepper,
Po-la-la. The way your grandpapa ordered."