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Pasta Fazul and Mink Bedspreads... A reading by Professor Cathy Santore

On Thursday, February 13, 2020, art historian Cathy Santore read from her memoirs at the monthly Humanities Department “Works in the Works” event. Her elegant words conjured vivid imagery of places and times. With little in the way of set-up, Santore launched into a world of boys hunting rats with sling shots, and “short, strong, strained” women, hauling sacks of coal and tubs of water. All of a sudden, we are transported to 10th avenue in Manhattan, where there was one latrine for an entire building, and a single spigot in the hallway on each floor. A mother collects buckets of water to heat on the stove, preparing the obligatory once-per-month bath for the children.

Scrumptious descriptions of red tomatoes, bursting with flavor (unlike their mealy, present-day supermarket incarnations). Characters begin to emerge, like Gennaro, who misses midnight mass and is chased by the devil, and Donato, protector and provider of siblings, who provides an abundance of chickens. Where was he getting them? His mother expressed surprise that so many would fortuitously fall off the back of trucks. Donato will later express remorse to a daughter identified only as “Jenny,” who begins to come forth from the narrative into prominence.

Without any account of the transatlantic journey, we find Donato as the anglicized “Danny,” suddenly stateside, persecuted by cruel teachers, including one who spears his lip with a poker. After he is reluctantly sent to reform school by his mother (who signs with an X), we join Jenny, sometime in the future, telling a different boy (named Andreas or “Andy”) stories about Danny. When Jenny tells Andreas a story about Danny freighthopping to Pennsylvania with some hobos, Andreas replies that he, too, had been there, except his father rented three private boxcars for his family. As Dr. Santore describes a penthouse apartment with mink bedspreads and “...gold and jeweled curios” the audience has now concluded that the child is loaded. A far cry from the tenements of 10th avenue or subsistence agriculture in the Italian countryside. Andy’s mother, Mrs. Landon, gets private showings of the latest fashions by department stores, and they own books that belonged to Napoleon (which Andy pees on!)

After the reading, the audience had a chance to get some of the back story. It turns out, “Jenny” is the author in disguise, named after another Jenny who was killed chasing a ball into the street. Donato is the author’s father, and presumably, Mrs. Landon, an employer who hired the author as an au pair for Andy. This beautifully written memoir from a master storyteller transports the reader or listener into worlds Italian and American; urban and rural; rich and poor.

Professor David Lee