WANDA BALZANO

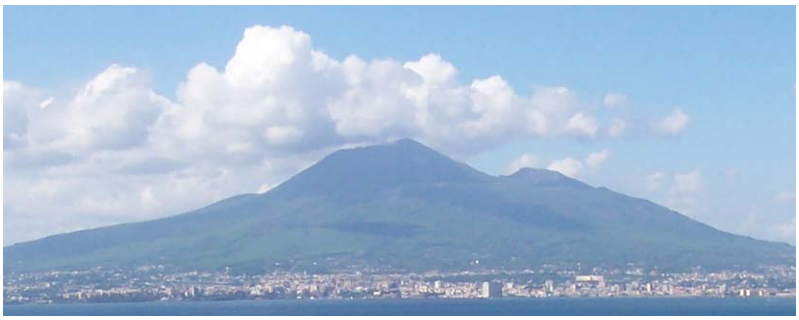
Biancheria in the Shadow of Vesuvius

Dedicated to Rosa Frigenti, Maria Frigenti, Anne Holdridge, Penny Tallarini

***Biancheria*: (Italian) Linen or cotton goods; Laundry; Table linen; Bed linen; Underclothes; Trousseau.**

Home

I am going home—or at least what home was for me in the past, and so will always be—and the first familiar sight welcoming me from the plane is the elongated blue shadow of Vesuvius, majestic, apparently impassive, but so inherently alive with danger and fertility. On the carousel we all wait for our luggage to come, patiently or impatiently; some laugh with the pleasure of homecoming, while some others—the tourists—with the promise of a new scene to own, and to remember. I can read it in the corners of their mouths. A few members of a group shout in excitement when they see their suitcases slide in their direction. I watch those bags so impossibly stuffed that a coloured piece of clothing is visible in between the two ziplets. "Italians," I think. Then, on the back of my mind, suddenly a picture of Vesuvius forms again. So naked, so forthright and clean, so true. I think of it as a body that does not need to be covered. No hats, no ties, no sheets to sleep in, no clothes. Bare and absolute. It sleeps standing, like a horse.



As soon as I leave the airport, and take the train that goes around our blue volcano, the *Circumvesuviana*, my eyes revel

in another familiar sight: hundreds of balconies with thousands of clothes-lines. Sheets, towels, tablecloths, aprons, clothes for men, for women, for babies, for sportspeople, for businesspeople, school uniforms, hospital uniforms, restaurant uniforms, fabrics of all colours like multi-coloured flags swinging in the light breeze and drying in the sun. A familiar sight. In the States, in the apartment block where I live, I am the only one who still dries the laundry in the sun. It reminds me of home, of the wind that blows through the linen, the natural rhythm of the seasons, and of the past. As a child growing up I remember playing hide-and-seek in between the sheets, or playing ghosts emerging from under the fabric, with both my arms raised. In the backstreets of Naples revolving clothes lines between houses still join families and destinies together. They seem to be the only reason for which the old buildings are still standing, exchanging all their threads of stories, and gossip and life lines from house to house. What is personal and private suddenly becomes public, what is intimate and concealed comes out of the closet to be hung on a line, shared by all. I have often thought that our volcano rules by the same principle: it keeps destinies together, all hung by the thread of its menacing presence and by the nourishment of its rich soil. Its open presence is also a barefaced warning of what it conceals.

Magmatic Exposure—Red Underwear and Black Gowns

Black is the colour of solidified magma. Red is the colour of flowing lava, of the raw material that is shown inside out, as in Andy Warhol's Vesuvius, where the river of crimson tones takes over the famous series of canvases. The laundry hung from balconies

is like the palette of a painter or an open museum with colours and patterns dangling everywhere, but in the shadow of Vesuvius black and red have a special significance. At Christmas, in particular, one sees lines of red laundry, from balcony to balcony, as a celebration of the joyous religious season—red as a sign of divinity, but also a prefiguration of the Passion yet to come. There will also be those people who will tell you that red, "Pompeian red," in fact, is the colour of fertility, and that Italians wear red underwear on New Year's Eve as a propitious wish for good health—sexual and otherwise. It is an ancient tradition, and this same wish in Southern Italy is maintained alive throughout the year by wearing a red *cuorn'* (dialect for "horn") that is an obvious

symbol for the most private male body part.

In ancient Pompeii, terracotta "horns," in the unmistakable shape of erect phalli, were mounted on the arches at the entrance of every home. Today men and women can buy a small coral and golden *cornetto* ("little horn") and have a more portable, though expensive, life-affirming red amulet. It will bring you good luck and ward off the evil eye—so the jewelry shop owners will swear.

Black, instead, is the colour of the dead, the colour of mourning, and in the patriarchal Italian South it is not uncommon to see women dressed in black after the loss of their husbands for at least a year, if not more. Of course there are some women who go all the way, and wear nothing but black for years and years after such a personal loss, when, on the contrary, men are not required to do the same. A much less conspicuous

black pin will do for them. If they forget to wear it, they will be easily forgiven. Does this note remind us of the law of the Mediterranean?—and the veiling of women, implicitly or explicitly, is a practice, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Black laundry, in my mind, is associated with a man only when he is a Catholic priest. In such a case, the black gown is taken to be more a mark of privilege than repression. Walter Benjamin recounts that when he was in Naples he heard people vehemently screaming and squabbling. A priest in a black gown was just about to be beaten because of his alleged misbehaviour. At that moment a holy procession went by and the sacred icon of the Virgin was followed by a group of devoted parishioners. As soon as the misbehaved priest stood up to bless the icon everyone knelt and the squabble came to a halt. Such is the power of the black gown in this still profoundly Catholic context.

A Three-Day-Long Affair: The Business of Washing

Doing the laundry was a class marker, and those who had the money to send women to wash their clothes did so. In Italy up until the Second World War, soap was made with Solvay soda, together with ashes made out of wood, water, and oil. When my grandmothers raised their families, washing clothes was a three-day long affair. The clothes were first washed, and then left with the soap for a whole day. The next day they were rinsed and gathered in a tub. A piece of tightly woven fabric was placed over the tub, so that it acted as a filter when a mix of hot water, bay leaves, egg shells, ashes and

lemons was carefully and slowly poured onto the clothes. They were left in this water for another day. The next day the clothes were ready to be rinsed and hung.

In Poggiomarino, a small town near Naples, where my maternal grandmother lived, and where I spent the first three years of my life, there was a river that ran along the length of the town, with one very long clothesline (it was a rope made of woven hemp) supported by fairly big wooden poles. The pegs were small pieces of reed, broken in the middle for half of their length. People used to call them *cannuoli*. When the clothes were not completely dry, but still a bit damp, they were taken inside and first stretched by hand. The hot iron was the kind that was filled with hot coal.

Of course the whole business of washing, drying, and ironing was, and still is in Southern Italy, a very social event. It is at the intersection of the intimate life with public living. One of the scenes that I treasure from childhood is at sunset—once more, the

silhouette of Vesuvius in the background. I am playing volleyball with my brother and sister over the clothesline, free from the laundry, and my aunts are talking to the neighbours with their baskets full of dry clothes. Literally, news travelled along the clotheslines. Ironically, in the pre-ipod, pre-email world, the sense of community was more intensely and tightly woven than in the contemporary globalized era, and the intermittent shadow of clotheslines concealed and at the same time revealed the complex social scene of a predominantly female universe.

Il corredo, or Trousseau

If I hope that in the remotest villages of Southern Italy some barbarous customs are no longer practised—such as the custom of exposing the sheet of the first night after the wedding in order to prove to the community that the bride's virginity no longer exists, or that it did exist—there is another form of exposure that I know of. Before the wedding, it was common practice for the mother of the bridegroom to supervise the daughter-in-law's trousseau, which she exhibited for such scrutiny. On its suitability depended the

wedding. Many women showed off their beautiful embroidered treasures, washing them and drying them, even before a suitor had come forward, as a visible guarantee of economic wealth as well as being proof of domestic skills. In many cases, however, weddings were arranged between families, as economic conditions were the main reason for which the marriage was combined and contracted. The trousseau consisted of, say, twenty-five, fifty or one hundred sets of everything needed in the future household. So many pieces were needed in a pre-industrial age because, without the washing machines, a lot of dirty laundry was accumulated before it was sent to the *lavandaie*, or washerwomen (in cases where they did not go themselves), about once a month or so.

Generally, the wealthier people in the area of Naples used to have fifty sets of sheets, pillow cases, nightgowns, towels, kitchen rags, doilies, centrepieces, handkerchiefs, tablecloths, bedspreads, and all the linen that could be used in the new household.

Among such things there used to be curious items such as pieces of cloth for the head called *scolle* that people wore while in bed in order not to stain the pillowcase with the oil that that they put on the hair. The families that wanted to show off their riches used to have up to one hundred sets of such full *corredo*.

All the items of the trousseau were embroidered in different, elaborate designs, and were embellished with borders in crochet. *Biancheria*, as the word says in Italian, was

only white before the wars. The Americans, after World War II, were generally praised for having brought colour to the biancheria.

How the War Changed the ways of *Biancheria*

Particularly after 1945, there existed a very thriving market based on the American military supplies. My uncle, who was nineteen at the time, had his first coat made, and my aunt, who was fifteen, had her first frock. Both of these were made out of blankets. American blankets. Naples was so poor that American supplies were being pilfered when not voluntarily and compassionately given away.

While, before the war, fabrics such as linen, cotton, and hempen cloth were bought at a spinning-mill close by, then to be embroidered by a member of the family or by a professional embroiderer, after the war, people were no longer able to afford these fabrics and had to invent new ways to have a trousseau, and new fabrics. Besides the wool, the American military imported into Italy such novelties as nylon and dry peas. Many

industrious people, therefore, had their *corredo* made out of the fabric for parachutes. American parachutes, of course.

Patterns

Soon after a birth, the women in the family started making the trousseau. The *biancheria* was embroidered mostly at night (after the day's work in the fields or in the house) and by candle light, as in Southern Italy electricity came only after the 1920s.

Sometimes a few girls got together and went to the most able one of them in order to have a piece of advice, or to copy a trendy pattern. Together, these women exchanged their knowledge of patterns and ideas.

Often the trousseau was a combination of old and new designs, a combination, that is, of designs that were traditionally used within the family (handed down from mother to

daughter) and more modern designs that particularly appealed to the young.

Patterns were floral, geometric,

sometimes only with the woman's initials in the centre, however elaborate.

Almost in every case, the initials were those of a woman before marriage, as often there was no way to know the name of the future husband so much in advance, when the *corredo* was being embroidered.

Therefore, women gave up their names on paper, but—indelibly—imprinted their own on fabrics.

There were many women who showed great artistry

at free hand-drawing.

Nuns were generally very well trained in the arts and crafts, and it was good practice among fairly wealthy families to send young women to the nuns in order for them to be trained in the art of embroidery, but also in painting and music.

In many cases young women were encouraged by the nuns to paint a variety of sacred icons or country scenes or flowers on cushions, table spreads, or on canvases that were framed and hung.

Birth, Death, and the Sacred

The *corredo* was also used for decorating the houses in honour of saints. In the South, for instance, the sacred icon of the Madonna belonging to the local church was kept inside a home for a night during the month of May on the occasion of the *Peregrinatio Mariae*.

Such families were also responsible for the fireworks that took place at night to celebrate the Virgin Mary.

In every town in Italy there is a patron saint, as well as a municipal feast where the sacred icon representing the saint is brought out in procession to allow everyone in the community to celebrate their patron.

So, in honor of the saint patron of the town, when the sacred icon was brought out in procession, the best and most beautifully embroidered or crocheted bedspreads were

hanging down over the balcony. This tradition is still alive today. Often people do not use such bedspreads daily, but perhaps on three occasions: one being the day to honour and mark the passage of the saint, the second, the day when they gave birth, and the third, the day when they die. In all three occasions the bedspread functions as a social marker for the tightly knit community that is an eyewitness to the riches of one's family and household. To mark a household where there has recently been a birth in the family

people hang small cushions with big ribbons—pink for a baby girl and blue for a baby boy—so that everyone knows the good news.

The priest also needed a *corredo*, and his mother was the one who made it for him. In the

church, however, it was the whole community of believers, nuns, married and unmarried women, who contributed to the embellishment of altars and the church in general.

The Visible and the Invisible

If the word *biancheria* appeared for the first time in France at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the use of intimate pieces of clothing and tablecloths and bedspreads is, of course, very old. Each piece of *biancheria* has an unusual and complex history,

with different usages in different locations. For instance, in Venice and in Genoa the prostitutes were compelled to wear big underwear, as a mark of their profession. During the French Revolution women wore a tight shirt under a flimsy dress. Later on, the bourgeoisie became obsessed with covering, wrapping, burying all nudity; but the stronger the fear of the naked body the richer, the bigger and more elaborate the underwear became, with a whole paraphernalia of busts, stockings, shirts, knots and buttons, laces and corsets, etc.—so much so that the history of underwear is parallel to the history of women's liberation. Today the invisible comes to light in a seductive manner, suggesting a secret kind of elegance. Taste has evolved, and the *biancheria* and the *corredo* have changed with the times, yet, in the shadow of Vesuvius, bare and absolute, they still continue to weave the thread, or *filo*, between the public and the private spaces, between the social and the moral dimensions, between the hidden and the open desire to weave the fabric of one's humanity.