L’inedito

John Paul Russo

Introduction

In January 2011, responding to a request by *RSAJournal* for an *inedito*, Lucia Perillo sent a poem, "My Father Kept the TV On," "from the new manuscript about my father, since he's from the Italian strain of my family. I hope it suits your needs."[1]

Since 1989 Lucia Perillo has published six books of poetry and has established a strong reputation for writing on a broad variety of topics, from contemporary anodynes to the "wisdom of Sicilian great-aunts," though certain themes stand out: the natural environment, violence and victimage, illness and disability.[2] Her popular website, "Lucia's Anthology: Great Poems Known and Unknown," presents her selection of "memory poems, forgotten poems, never even remembered poems, unanthologized poems," each briefly introduced. Thus, May 18, 2011, Arthur Vogelsang's "Help," a poem about a pet wolf: "I've finally allowed myself to accept my tastes in poetry, which are somewhat old-fashioned and perhaps put too much emphasis on intelligibility." The emphasis bespeaks the highly argued quality of her poems, while her close knowledge of wildlife provides the largest sector of her imagistic world. Yet Perillo's animal, like Dürer's rabbit or a Quattrocento artist's dog, is not symbolic; it is meaningful, in ways evoked by its own qualities within the poetic context. Her animals are diverse natural particulars, the significant fact of salmon, manatee, jelly fish, turtle, catfish, medusa, elephants, raccoons, wolves, foxes, sheep, frogs, alligators, coyotes, rats, and many more, but especially birds: crows, shrikes, blue herons, white owls, passenger pigeons, geese, starlings, egrets, sandpipers, doves, avocets, black birds, chickadees, grackles, woodpeckers, even the so-called original bird archaeopteryx, even the bird spied by the hunter in the famous engraving of John James Audubon, with whom she has formed an ekphrastic, intertextual kinship.[3] When Perillo publishes her collected poems, it will resemble Noah's Ark.

"My Father Kept the TV On" continues the line of ironic reminiscence established in a series of elegiac poems over the past decade or so.[4] Born in the Bronx, Robert Mario Perillo served in India and China in World War II

("Conscription Papers"); was a foreman in construction ("Job Site, 1967"); and had four children ("Compulsory Travel"). Perillo's portrait supplies evidence for a type of second-generation Italian-American father described by sociologists and psychologists such as Irvin Child (71-16), Anne Parsons (135-36), Herbert Gans (62-64), James Crispino (27-30), and Richard Alba (92-95). In the main these fathers were steady men on the job and responsible providers ("routine-seekers," to cite Gans 28-29); had between two and four children (Alba 94); were mild, "impulsive" disciplinarians ("Compulsory Travel")[5]; suspicious of state authority ("The Afterlife of the Fifties Dads"); and not particularly religious ("Book of Bob 3."). In a peer group society, "the men would socialize primarily with people of their own age and sex," in local clubs, at poker nights, etc.; "husbands and wives had distinct, nonoverlapping roles"; "even their friendships were largely separate" (Gans 43, 47; Alba 93). After World War II, as these men approached middle age, they moved to the suburbs with their growing families and carved out a private space in the home where they could "escape us" ("My Father Kept the TV On"). They illustrate the "characteristic reserve of Italian-American men" (Alba 94), what Richard Gambino calls *l'uomo di panza*, "literally a man of belly, meaning a man who knew how to keep things to himself – in his guts, as it were" (129-30).

The secret of what her father might have kept to himself is the subject of Perillo's poem. As if in self-protection, he leaves the television "on" to drown out other noise and ward off interruptions. He further defends himself by books, "open," half-browsed, "face-down," not one, but many, as if one were insufficient to distract him. They surround him like turtles placidly sunning themselves around a pond. Grammatically, the poem's title is simultaneously the first line, one slipping into the other, just as the father dozes off to sleep reading a book and listening to TV (or not reading and not listening), sleep and dreams being the ultimate defense. In this semi-conscious zone, the books appear hyperreal: "hunched" or bent up in the middle, which is right-side up for the turtles; the hump in the hunch or the book's spine that rises from the pressure of being opened face-down. Perillo focuses upon the book as a physical entity, examined in technical detail down to a call number, subjected to biological scrutiny, opened and dissected like the turtle in "The Turtle's Heart" (*Inseminating the Elephant* 15). Seen in this light, by the end of the

verse-paragraph, the book looks as strange as the turtles in the living room to which they were originally likened.

The first stanza opens with "while"; the second, with "Meanwhile." Simultaneously, as the father falls asleep, the TV programming ends. In the early era of television, the channels stopped transmitting at midnight or one o'clock. "The flag then" refers to the icon of the American flag that flashed on the screen, along with the playing of *The Star Spangled Banner* to conclude transmission: this was the height of the Cold War. The "snow" is the static on a TV screen that has remained "on"; it would remain so until transmission began again in the morning, say, at 6 a.m.[6] The imagistic and chronological precision ("while," "Meanwhile," "then," "Then") impresses an almost clinical objectivity that Perillo retained from her studies in biology and is characteristic of her work as a whole.

In the opening verse-paragraph, Perillo is a first-person narrator describing a childhood memory; in the second she becomes an omniscient narrator penetrating the barriers of consciousness. If her father were awake, he might turn off the television and go to bed. But he has fallen asleep in his chair. Television tubes were then, and until quite recently, of a bulbous shape that resembled an eyeball. Perillo imagines it looking at viewers as from the corporate headquarters of the TV station. In her poem titled "Transcendentalism," she recalls one of her college professors drawing a "giant eyeball to depict the Over-soul," upon which he commented by reading from his book on Emerson: "snoozefest," it put Perillo to sleep (*Inseminating the Elephant* 42-43). In a curious parallel identification, both father and daughter fall asleep with the eyeball staring at them; both are, in their own way, dreamers. For Emerson, the "transparent eyeball" is the most spiritual element in the universe: it is exemplified by the individual "I" who, forgetting the self, undergoes the mystical apprehension of experience itself. "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" (24). In the poem, however, the television as eyeball reduces Emerson's exalted concept to an instrument of corporate control in consumer society. So much for the currents of Universal Being hijacked by the communications media. The "consciousness" of the corporate eyeball is the static "snow": cold, grayish, dead, awaiting the next advertisement in the morning to bring it back to "life."

The television eye sees nothing: it is a metaphor, like the camera's eye. But Perillo invests the eyeball and the night with the mysterious power of seeing her father and other fathers, the mass "*them*," like her friend's father, another reader. He too might be dozing off in a drunken stupor, carelessly using his swizzle stick (for mixing drinks) as a bookmark instead of leaving the books face-down on the floor. Still, he is enough of a routine-seeker to go on "Thursdays" to get the "new arrivals" from the library for weekend reading. Like Perillo's father, a new member of the middle class, he borrows the recently published novels to spare expenses.

The poem unfolds in three verse-paragraphs, each slightly longer than the one before (8, 9, 13 lines), expanding in length and substance on the previous one. The third verse-paragraph has a reflective tone, as if the narrator were viewing things from the present. It opens on a lofty note, nostalgically apostrophizing the "green republic," the ideal of Crevecoeur, Emerson and Thoreau, and the contemporary Eco-poets. Though Perillo grew up with the belief in the pilgrims as "first fathers," surely an undercurrent of irony informs the passage, given the state of the environment. As a classical figure, apostrophe makes vividly present some one or some thing that is absent. The "green republic" lies not only in the past; it exists as an as yet unrealized ideal.

The period between the birth dates of John LeCarré (1931) and Philip Roth (1933) on the one hand and the lithium battery (the 1970s) on the other constitutes the prime of her father's life (and toward the close, her own childhood). The lithium battery ended the early TV era because, long-lasting and lightweight, it permitted smaller, portable televisions. Moreover, "lithium battery" adds another technical image – and two perfect dactyls. Neither high-brow nor low, the novels are middle-brow fiction, "thick" 1950s novels in which the imagination could luxuriate for weeks on end, and be "overdue" at the library.[7] Yet if Perillo's "plodding" father fits the profile of Gans's "routine-seeker," he exhibits elements of Gans's second most prominent category, the "action-seekers," with its sexual, transgressive connotations (29). War veterans, who have outlived the life of action and retired to their space within the home, indulge their fantasies over novels and television – the Cary Grant thief, the noirish *femme fatale*. Yet if Perillo subjects the fathers to the satiric reduction of "courting danger in their underwear," she also joins the fellowship that

opts for "Books" over the television. The book is not on the floor, but inside, the real book, in the imagination. It is also Perillo's poem.

Notes

[1] "The whole manuscript is not about my father … it comes from a new manuscript that includes some poems about my heritage, both on the Italian and Croatian sides." Personal communication from the author, January 6, 2011. "My Father Kept the TV on" is published by permission of Copper Canyon Press.

Born in 1958, Lucia Perillo grew up in the New York suburbs ("outer-borough homelands / of shoe repair and autobody shops") ("Wormhole Theory," *Inseminating the Elephant* 36). She studied wildlife management at McGill University, and in 1980 she found a job with the Denver Wildlife Research Center studying ways to prevent predators from killing livestock or destroying crops. "I graduated with this degree in wildlife biology," she said, "and I end up killing wildlife": "a troubling year in my life" (McLeod). The following year the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge hired her and she led tours around the southern Bay. After receiving an MA in English at Syracuse University, she taught at Saint Martin's College in Olympia, Washington, and worked weekends as a ranger for the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Mount Rainer National Park. In 1988 she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, on which she has written in her poetry and her non-fiction *I've Heard the Vultures Singing* (2007). After teaching in the creative writing program at Southern Illinois University for almost a decade, she won a MacArthur Foundation Award in 2000. She now resides in Olympia.

[2] *Dangerous Life* (1989); *The Oldest Map with the Name America* (1999); "wisdom …," "Cairn for Future Travel," *The Body Mutinies* 87; *Luck Is Luck* (2005); and *Inseminating the Elephant* (2010).

[3] "White Bird/Black Drop," *Luck Is Luck* 29-37.

[4] The father poems include "Compulsory Travel," "Rutter's Field," *The Body Mutinies*, 45, 49; "Book of Bob" (in seven parts), "My Eulogy Was Deemed Too Strange," "Conscription Papers," "The Afterlife of the Fifties Dad," *Luck Is Luck*, 73, 80, 82, 84; "Job Site, 1967," "Wormhole Theory," *Inseminating the Elephant*, 27, 36. Perillo dedicated *Luck Is Luck* to her recently deceased father. She participated in a reading entitled "Poems for Fathers" over Station KUOW, Seattle, Washington, November 6, 2007.

[5] Gans 57. As Alba writes, "Children were expected to behave in accordance with adult wishes … These expectations seem descended from the foreshortened childhood of the Mezzogiorno. Childrearing, moreover, was 'impulsive,' to use Gans's word. Parents were not concerned with being consistent toward their children or with guiding them toward some predetermined future goal, as contemporary American middle-class parents would" (94). Cf. Perillo, "Compulsory Travel," *The Body Mutinies*, 45: "Back then a sock in the jaw could set anyone straight."

[6] Personal communication from the author, October 12, 2011.

[7] One would normally get a week or at most two for borrowing a "new arrival," much in demand. Apropos the popularity of middle-brow novels, the Victorian scholar Coral Lansbury, who also wrote "Victorian novels," once met an elderly woman in a train reading a huge novel. Lansbury asked her why she liked such "thick" novels, and the woman answered, "I don't like to change books often." In the period of which Perillo writes, there were innumerable novels of this type, by such authors as Herman Wouk, Irwin B. Shaw, Frances Parkinson Keyes, Taylor Caldwell, James Jones, James Gould Cozzens, Thomas B. Costain, and many more.

Works cited

Alba, Richard D. *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1985.

Child, Irvin Long. *Italian or American? The Second Generation in Conflict*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1943.

Crispino, James A. *The Assimilation of Ethnic Groups: The Italian Case*. Staten Island: Center for Migration Studies, 1980.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature*. 1836. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen W. Whicher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.

Gambino, Richard. *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1974.

Gans, Herbert. *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. 1962. Updated ed. New York: Free P, 1982.

McLeod, Maria. "An Interview with Lucia Perillo," http://www.poem of the week.org/id287.html.

Parsons, Anne. *Belief, Magic, and Anomie: Essays in Psychosocial Anthropology*. New York: Free P, 1969.

Perillo, Lucia. *Dangerous Life*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989.

—. *I've Heard the Vultures Singing: Field Notes on Poetry, Illness, and Nature*. San Antonio: Trinity UP, 2007.

—. *Inseminating the Elephant*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon P, 2009.

—. *Luck Is Luck: Poems*. New York: Random House, 2005.

—. *On the Spectrum of Possible Deaths*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon P, 2012.

—. *The Body Mutinies*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1996.

—. *The Oldest Map with the Name America: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Random House, 1999.