

I am from Francesco Ragone and Carrie daughter of Anna Curcio turned Krutz by the Ellis Island guards who could not say her name.

I am from Pietro Paulo Fabiano, who worked on the transcontinental railroad, for passage to bring Eugenia Mancuso, his wife, my father, Giuseppe (age 9), Aunt Michelina and Aunt Carmela to America.

I am from Calabria, Catanzaro, Carlopoli, Abruzzi, the Altamonte, groves of castanos—why did my father not tell me about the mountains and chestnut groves he came from?

My roots are tangled in the flowered wall paper of 923 Island Avenue, where on hot summer nights, we sat outside on the glider and watched the traffic snake in a long line from Neville Island, cross the McKees Rocks Bridge to the Bottoms or over to the North Side. Don't try to cross the street when the mills let out.

I am from a bedroom where St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin watched over my sleep and rosaries hanging from bedposts protected me till morning's light.

I am from overstuffed furniture with prickly upholstery. There on the chair laid the pillow I embroidered with the words: *Sleep is sweet to the laboring man*. Every night after Huntley and Brinkley, my father proved it right.

I am from a kitchen where stale bread had a place of respect, tucked way back in the bread drawer in an old Mancini's Bread wrapper. Soaked into chunky pieces, it became the secret of the world's best meatballs. Ground to a fine crumble, it coated the arrancini rice balls. Broken into bits and tossed out on the hill behind our house, the birds flocked around it and fought over it till it was gone.

I am from the sound of my father pounding on the dining room table—sitting there in the dark, listening to the radio and his Pirates getting a hit, not getting hit; it didn't matter. He pounded.

I am from dad coming home from work with bloody bruised shins from "climbing steel" or a wild cat strike—dents in his Iron City work boots marking the passage of 42 years in the mills.

I am from sitting on the cellar steps talking to my mom in the coolest part of the house as she ironed everything—dad's underwear, the sheets, yes, the sheets—everything.

I am from her soft soft hands and long long nails that washed floors and clothes and dusted and vacuumed and cooked and scrubbed in endless cycles of repetition. Those hands loved to draw or doodle as she called it. Annie, what would you have become if you had choices, if you had the chance?

I am from polenta, pizellis, and ricotta pie and thousands of cookies at every wedding and wake.

I am from where the Monongahela River meets the Allegheny to form the mighty Ohio. I am from the Golden Triangle, Roberto Clemente, Franco Harris, Terry Bradshaw--the town where the Steelers rule.

I am from the Rox—if you are from Pittsburgh, you know what that means. If you are not, there's no point trying to explain. There were 16,000 people there when I was growing up; now there are 6,222.

I am from Miss Chalevich, Miss Goriup, Mr. Ritenour, Mr. Gianni, Mr. Zafferopolois, Miss Rose, and Miss Artuso—Mary Artuso who could speak in Latin and was sure I should go to college as she had done against the wishes of her father. Is she where I first got the idea that I could go?

I am from “who do you think you are” and “get that college bullshit out of your head...you can go to secretarial school.”

I am from never knowing what enough of anything was: enough food, enough work, enough money...what would enough look like, feel like?

I am from the fierce determination of “Oh, yes, I can,” standing in opposition to “No, you can't.”

I am from a time when higher education was considered a right...when all of us kids of steel workers, bridge builders, tug boat welders, and foundry workers went to Pitt and didn't even know we were “first generation.” I am from “going to college” and the sweet smell of the books in the library of the Cathedral of Learning.

I am from November 22, 1963 and Chaucer class and Professor Markham: Ladies and gentleman of the University of Pittsburgh. I regret to tell you that the President of the United States has been shot in Dallas and that he is dead. He is dead. He is dead. No, no, no—stop the glass from shattering; stop the dream from dying. John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy—dead before the dream could be real. I have been forever changed and I didn't even know it.

I am from University of Wisconsin and the bombing of Sterling Hall. Vietnam and tanks rolling into our college town, tanks rolling into Chicago, tanks rolling into Watts and Newark. Students dead at Kent State. Students' voices, students' thinking, students' striking. Where am I from?

*One pill makes you larger
And one pill makes you small
And the ones that mother gives you
Don't do anything at all
Go ask Alice
When she's ten feet tall.*

I am 27 years old...tick tock tick tock—time for Italian girls to get married and get real. Get a house, get a job, settle down. But what about these women in my life? There's something about the women in my life.

I am from crawling out from my deepest fears of *really* knowing where I am from. I am from giving birth to myself, cracking the shell of fear and coming out into truth.

I am from a world of women so brave and so strong that they help me find that the way back home to myself was the road I took to them.

I am a scholar from the working class—from universities and unions—from dissertations and rusted steel mills. I belong in both and neither world, a stranger in a strange land to those who know me best and to those who think they know me.

I am from grandpa Ragone who worried out loud in broken English that my head would get so stuffed with education that it would explode.

I am from “You’re a doctor? A doctor of what? Can you make me feel better? What kind of doctor are you? Oh, that’s great; that’s great. Come here—meet your cousin Patty, she’s a doctor.”

I am from olive skin—neither white nor black.

I am from an unquenched thirst to know more, to know how, to know when, to know why.

I am from wanting the world to be fair and knowing that it is not. I am from the Serenity Prayer accepting what I cannot change and changing what I can, but I never seem to know the difference.

I am from wanting to give everything I have of any value to you and you and you so that you might hope and grow the dream and be courageous and be kind to me when you are running my nursing home.

I am from the wings of birds—chickadees, towhees, nuthatches, finches, woodpeckers, ravens, herons—you lift me up and help me see the world in new ways again and again. I am from the breathing of the northwest woods and the wetness of the stones after yet another rain. Like the moss, I thrive in this mist.

I am a Fabiano, a girl from the Rox; I know how to keep on keeping on. I do not let go of what I want, and I want to leave this world a better place for my having been here. I am from my reach exceeding my grasp, from this poem being a forever work in progress. Where I dwell is always “under construction.”