

# What Blooms in Winter

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

NY  
Q Books™

---

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.  
New York, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.  
P. O. Box 2015  
Old Chelsea Station  
New York, NY 10113

[www.nyq.org](http://www.nyq.org)

Copyright © 2016 by Maria Mazziotti Gillan

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

Layout and Design by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover illustration by Maria Mazziotti Gillan

Photograph of author provided by Joseph Costa | [www.LaModaStudio.com](http://www.LaModaStudio.com)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016933809

ISBN: 978-1-63045-011-3

## *Contents*

### *I. Bookbags and Galoshes*

- Seventeenth Street in Paterson, NJ / 13
- We Used to Call It Downtown, Remember? / 15
- Why I Loved the Library / 17
- Bookbags and Galoshes / 18
- In the Grammar School Graduation Photo, PS 18, Class of 1953  
Graduates / 19
- The First Day of High School / 21
- In the Blue Stamp Redemption Center / 22
- The Clothes I Wore in High School / 23
- At the Factory Where My Mother Worked / 25
- Our First TV / 26
- The First Time I Saw My Mother Cry / 28
- Miss Cherry / 29
- What I Always Wanted / 31

### *II. All We Didn't Know*

- The Burgundy Pants Suit / 35
- Trading in the VW Bus / 36
- Bell Bottoms and Platform Shoes / 37
- Under the Grape Arbor / 38
- First Communion Photo / 39
- My Mother Was a Brilliant Cook / 41
- The Day I Lost My Daughter in Macy's / 42
- I Was a Good Italian Girl / 43
- How Many Hours / 45
- Looking at Nature Through Glass / 46

What Blooms in Winter / 48  
In a Bookstore in Hobart, New York / 49  
We Thought We Were Part of This Revolution / 51  
I Tell People I've Let You Go / 53  
Nepal / 54  
Because / 55  
The Signer at Nelson Mandela's Funeral / 56  
Each Day I Try / 57  
This Is How Memory Works / 58  
The Catskills in Mid-September / 59

### ***III. A Season of Loss***

My Sister Was the One / 63  
My Sister Loved to Dance / 65  
How Sad I Am Today, How Lonely / 67  
They Say I Have My Mother's Eyes / 68  
What the Body Knows / 70  
My Daughter Forgives Her Father / 71  
My Daughter at 2 / 73  
It's My Gillan Pot Roast / 74  
What I Can't Tell My Son / 75  
In the Photograph from Summer Camp / 76  
Grief / 77  
Even Now, I See You / 78  
Christmas Eve at Our House / 79  
Oak Place, Hawthorne, NJ / 80  
The Dead Sit Calmly Among Us / 81

When I Look at the World / 83  
In the Classroom at Wayne State, Detroit / 84  
Today the Forsythia / 85  
Last Evening in Vestal, NY / 86

#### ***IV. Lemons and Roses***

I Come From / 89  
The Italian Pilgrim / 90  
Ancestors / 92  
My Father Leaves Galdo, Italy at 16 / 94  
My Father Was a Young Man Then / 96  
Laura, Today I Am in South Dakota / 98  
When I Think of This Summer / 100  
Time, a Waterfall of Minutes / 102  
Be a Human Fly / 103  
My American Grandson in Italy / 104  
Italian Summer / 105  
In Sicily / 107  
Artifacts / 108  
The Lace Tablecloth and the Patterns of Memory / 109  
My Mother Held Me / 110  
This Morning, I Want to Write a Hymn / 112  
What Is It About Morning Light? / 114  
Dream Sequence / 115  
It's been a week / 116

## In the Blue Stamp Redemption Center

My best friend, Janet, moved into town in 7th grade, and became my friend by default.

Her mother died when she was 11, and her father remarried. Her stepmother gave her a book on becoming a woman and we both read it.

In 1952, sex was a mystery, a word to be whispered. Yet, in the 8th grade Janet had a boyfriend and told me jokes about sex and Vaseline. I laughed though I didn't understand.

When we graduated, Janet and her family moved to Pompton Lakes. One time I took the bus to visit her. We sat near the brook in her backyard, ate watermelon and walked through town. Janet told me she had a new boyfriend and was in love.

The next year she came to visit me in Paterson and we went to the Blue Stamp Redemption Center to buy an iron. Her boyfriend was in the army. They were going to get married, though sometimes he didn't write for weeks and she worried.

I wanted to go to college, and after seeing Janet I knew one thing—I didn't want a life like hers of cookbooks and blue stamps, a life with this boy, who sometimes didn't write to her, a boy she needed because she thought she had nowhere else to go.

## Trading in the VW Bus

When we moved back to New Jersey,  
we bought a house without seeing it on Oak Place  
in Hawthorne across from my sister's house.  
We drove to New Jersey in our VW bus,  
and soon after we settled in,  
my sister said, "Listen, you have to get rid of that bus.  
The neighbors are talking. They think you're hippies,  
and this is not that kind of neighborhood."  
So we gave in, sold the VW camper and instead  
bought a Ford Pinto station wagon,  
dark green and sedate, unimaginative as mud.  
I loved the VW bus, the camping trips we took in it  
to Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona,  
the table that turned into a bed,  
the built-in booths that held sheets and blankets  
and pillows, the board we placed across the front seats,  
so John, who was only 4, could sleep on it,  
and the crib we placed in the back for Jennifer.  
Letting that VW bus go was an admission  
we were no longer as young as we had been,  
that we'd have to move into adulthood in a way  
we had not before, a life of suburban homeowners,  
just like that boring green Pinto, that car  
that almost shouted *we are careful, frugal adults*.  
Though we had just turned 30, we would have  
liked to pretend we were flower children forever.

## It's My Gillan Pot Roast

My daughter is working on her book, which was due at the publisher weeks ago. She has not slept in days. She tells me: "I am a Gillan. Remember grandma, and how she'd start getting ready to cook a pot roast at 8 am and by 5 pm she still wouldn't be finished? That's what I'm like with this book. It's my Gillan pot roast." We both laugh, but I hear the desperation in her voice.

I dig out my mother's rosary, begging God to send her the energy and inspiration to find her way to the end of this book. I haven't been to church in years. I don't know why God would listen to my prayers but for my daughter I am willing to try anything.

I promise all sorts of things if only God will help her get the book finished so she can move on with her life. Every day I call her. Every day she is not finished. I tell her I am praying. I can tell she is encouraged, but when more days go by, she tells me, "Forget it. I don't need a prayer. I need a miracle."

I want to say: *It's a scholarly book. Three people will read it. Why are you worrying? Just forget it.*

Instead she says: "You would have finished it months ago. You're a Mazziotti. This is my pot roast. I have to cook it the Gillan way."



## The Lace Tablecloth and the Patterns of Memory

My mother came from Italy and she brought with her a trunk full of linens she had embroidered or appliqued, lace she had crocheted into tablecloths and dresser scarves. My mother packed them in a large metal trunk and each year added sheets she bought with pennies saved from her 25 cents an hour job in the factories of Paterson. I used the tablecloths and linens in all the years of our marriage when we had company or on holidays, and after we'd eaten together in my dining room, my mother would take them home to wash and iron, and bring them back white and starched and pristine. My mother died 22 years ago; my husband in 2010. But today, I open the drawer where I keep the lace tablecloths and linens, and see my husband and me as a young couple, my husband handsome with his high cheekbones and gray eyes, my mother, father, and sister still alive and vibrant, our children and our nieces and nephews all there. I see in the lace pattern the pattern of our lives, the way it winds in and out, connecting all who came before, love and marriage and grief woven into the threads, and know that all the people I have loved are tucked away carefully in my mind, so that I can lift them out and remember and be comforted.

## It's been a week

*...of looking upward, inward, below the surface  
and back in time.* The New York Times, D3, May 5, 2013

This year has been a year like that for me,  
you, already three years dead and crossed over  
to that other place where I cannot touch you,  
and I left behind looking upward to that place  
where I imagine heaven is  
and where I hope you can feel me missing you.  
NASA announces its plans to bring a piece  
of Mars back to earth. I'd like to imagine  
I could bring back some memento of you.

I read about a 23-million-year-old insect  
of a previously unknown species found in Europe,  
so perfectly preserved in amber that each tiny digit  
of the 1.8-inch-long animal is clearly visible,  
all its soft tissue intact.

Sitting in my recliner now, in our family room  
in the evenings, my legs elevated, my eyes fixed firmly  
on the TV screen, where I watch British mysteries,  
I suddenly have an image of myself preserved  
in amber, tears on my cheeks,  
my hand clutching the TV remote.

What would the scientists of the future make of me?  
This chubby woman alone in her empty house,  
half asleep in a chair that holds her  
like a huge brown hand.  
They would stare and stare,  
but how could they know  
all the grief and longing that pulsed  
below the surface of her skin  
and in the chambers of her heart.