CREATIVE SECTION
Salvatore Pappalardo

El llanto de las estrellas

Azafrán es la arena
agua de papel
il a mangé chez moi aujourd’hui
fahler Wissensdurst
in den nasskalten Gewändern
as-tu voulu rédiger ce voyage
wie Heilige schweben wir über die Toten hinweg
tiens mon médaillon basque
sai straniero la notte del deserto
è spina di rosa
kein Gottesgericht genehmigt
recitami la poesia curda
fragmento de alba
el llanto de las estrellas
despiertan la misma imagen divina
der Sohnemann des Mujaheddin
vielleicht ist er Gast
zeigt stolz sein Bilderbuch
parlami con lingua madre
impasta domani le mie ossa
nel fiume di fuoco
Sindbad the Sailor woher hast du das
Zuflucht in den Spuren Christ
el niño pregunta
a donde lleva mi palabra eterna
abitai presso i figli del Dio d’Israele
trading travellers told me tales
about rising prices
dreams of global economy
their long way home
curò le mie ferite il calore di Allah
a thirty days’ walk
trocken und grob
bitt’re Tränen trinken
zerstreute Phönixasche
Paul D’Agostino

Legerdemain and Not

She hated raisins in cereal yet liked them in cookies.

And as I sift, I recall the calamity.

Just a useless, tragic calamity.

That’s what she called it, anyway. Maybe not in so many words, but maybe so. I recall tragic. And I recall just. I recall useless. And I most certainly recall calamity.

Calamity.

Makes disasters sound nearly comical.

Or not. I’ve pondered that word for a long time.

So associative.

Fields, homes, wood, jokes, fish, tricks, magic, knives. Astuteness, wit, cards, swiftness, fires, sleights of hand, applause.

Arrest the present and you might arrest reason. And woe. And that’s what’s important right now.

Mirrors and wires, but not really.

A harmonica played a big role.

He called it something different.

It happened lifetimes ago.

My true calling was to be a magician.

My greatest desire, as far back as today will allow me to remember, was to execute dazzling, stupefying acts. I wanted to stun, to amaze, to blow minds, to bow before awe-stricken faces.

I wanted to be smooth and quick. To divert attention and place it elsewhere. To make onlookers feel confused, deceived, violated. And I would have rather liked having a lovely assistant to present, command, saw in half, shower with cutlery.

Knife throwers don’t necessarily rank as magicians. But I once learned that they are part of a common struggle.
Parallel tangents.

Sometimes. With circumstance.

Struggle aside, I’ve long wondered where my place might have been in the magic industry. The industry into whose door I was forbidden to set foot.

In order to make amends, to reverse a pattern.

This magic is in my blood.

It courses through my imaginarily varicose veins.

My tender years passed by.

Warned never to seize.

So on occasion things come together.

Looking back through sifts and funnels.

A skinny old man with a crumpled face used to live down the street from my grandfather, a short and stout old man with a crumpled face. Since they were both old men with crumpled faces and I was a naïve boy lacking in world experience, I always assumed they were friends. They talked to one another sometimes. They knew some of the same people. Their small houses were nearly identical. They both wore thick, square-like glasses and were quite nearly deaf. They emitted the same uric odor of advanced senescence. They both had large, hearing-aid-laden ears.

And they both had heavy Old World accents. Most of my older relatives and their friends and acquaintances did as well. The people I saw at funerals.

So I assumed that all old people with crumpled faces spoke like that.

I once asked my father if that was true.

All those assumptions of youth.

He said sometimes, yes.

More evidence, perhaps, that they were friends.

So I asked my father if they were.

He said yes, I guess you could say that.

I was young.

The truth would come out later.
The first morning of the first summer I ever spent with my grandfather. The summer my mother passed away.

Really, she didn’t pass away.

She died. Was killed.

I know too well the difference.

She was tapped from behind, that car got slammed into, a gas tank was ruptured, cars went up in flames. Two out of three. A pickup truck and my mother’s sedan. She was still inside.

On her way home from the grocery store after work. Late March.

School got out in June and I was at my grandfather’s a week later. Three states away. Several generations away. Different place, different lifestyle, mildly different climate.

All supposed to help me forget, move on, suppress, deal. My father dropped me off.

My grandfather’s neighborhood had a fabricated lake. He brought me there to fish. I had never done that before. I preferred sports that required running and hitting and kicking and scores. But I paid close attention as he taught me. I cast out my first line excitedly.

Little kids, it takes so little.

He told me I was good so I believed him.

And I liked it right off.

I also liked pinching the little weights around the line. Attaching the plastic bobs. Sometimes balling up bread to put on the hook, though I’d usually eat most of it before using it as bait.

Once I nipped my finger with the hook’s barb and soaked up the blood with a ball of bread. I held it there for a while. Then I ate it. No one saw me.

I also liked the elusive mushiness of the fake worms. Their slimy stench.

And I liked the patterns. The patterns I observed and participated in throughout the course of that first morning, the ones that became ritual after only a few days. The season was quickly endowed with consistency, purpose, schedule.

I had a routine.

Like any good little boy mimicking an old man.

Old men.

And I liked to stick to it.

Like anyone.
But routine can make life easy, static, awful.

Regretting the undone is no better than its contrary.

Every day, bright and early. Still sort of dark outside.

I’d wake up, pick my nose, eat cereal, pee, eat more cereal, maybe pee again, fetch my homemade bamboo fishing rod, strut proudly over to the lake.

Thinking what an angler I’d become.

It was always cool and warm and kind of muggy at that hour, and I liked being awake then. It was the time of day that adults were awake. Having breakfast and reading newspapers and holding coffee mugs and talking about the weather, usually. Sometimes about other things I didn’t care so much about. Anniversaries and birthdays, people moving away. And dying. Not so much about getting killed.

So it was a mature thing, I thought, to be awake so early. I was a promising young fisherman with clean nostrils and a belly full of sugary whole grains. Ready to take on my scaled challengers and take them home in a bucket.

A big, heavy white bucket.

Full of water and a few fish.

My grandfather accompanied me the first morning, but after that he only came occasionally. In the afternoon, primarily, because sometimes I’d go back.

So I often went alone and met other old men with crumpled faces. Their names were George, Harold, Bill, Raymond. Those are the ones I was most friendly with. And I remember thinking it was a strange and new thing to call old people by their first names without preceding them with uncle or aunt, grandma or grandpa. It was like they were my pals, my peers. Like I had a head start on being a man because they had taken me into their fold. They greeted one another by nodding heads in the other’s direction and saying one another’s names. Like a statement, a confirmation. In lieu of how are you, how is she, how are they. The questions old men have a right not to ask or answer.

I could be really quiet, so they liked me.

They let me fish with them, sit with them, chat with them if they ever did. And we always shared bait. They had strong hands and thick old fingers with hard, spotty skin and thick, yellow, rugged fingernails. They helped me handle hooks and lures. They never bled but I did. They did things slowly, but they never had to do them twice.

And they all had Old World accents. So I tried to have one too.

One time I brought them jelly sandwiches for a snack and they thanked me with throaty chuckles and shook my hand. And I thought it was kind of funny, the way they took small bites using their lips and not their teeth. That’s what it looked like. My dad took really big bites of food so I thought that’s what I was supposed to do.
Another adult thing. Sometimes I didn’t even chew before swallowing.

But my father wasn’t around. And old men were different.

So I tried.

The skinny old man who lived down the street from my grandfather never went fishing with the others. To my knowledge he never went fishing at all, though it seemed that’s what old men did. But they all talked kind of the same. Old World accents and crumply mouths. So all things considered, I was pretty sure they were friends.

That theory.

So I wondered why he never fished. He lived close to the spot.

I’d see him in his yard on my way back from the lake, usually sometime around late morning. He’d be cutting the grass or trimming the hedges or relocating a sprinkler or two. Sometimes he would just be standing there, all tall and skinny and old with his crumpled face, with his hands held together behind him and his torso arched backward ever so slightly. It seemed like a proud way to stand, and he usually looked content as he gazed at the greenery and other more colorful elements of homespun landscaping that decorated his small stretch of land, a quarter acre at most. Maybe not even that. But it seemed sufficient.

His domain. His kingdom. His land.

His wife had died many years before.

Sometimes my grandfather stood like that too, especially when he was just staring at something or, presumably, thinking about things. Those other old guys stood like that as well.

So I thought that was another thing old men did.

But I never asked anyone.

Another thing adults did.

Adults, men.

Though my father didn’t. He wasn’t around then anyway.

So I just started standing like that.

At the lake. In the yard. Wherever.

Hoping I looked as proud as they.

I met the skinny old man with the crumpled face on one of those days that was so sweltering that people talked to one another just to comment on how hot it was.
Even my grandfather, despite that he wasn’t much of a conversationalist. He was old and hearing-impaired, after all, and although he was never a very bitter man, neither was he really jovial. He just kind of kept to himself and smiled and said hello. Some of his neighbors talked all the time, sometimes to him even though he rarely engaged himself much. Sometimes they’d talk to me, too. But I never had anything to say to them.

Everyone in the neighborhood was old.

Strange to think that now.

It was one of those neighborhoods.

I lived there five summers in a row.

Things happened and didn’t.

That day, however, they talked.

And I listened.

His name was Silvio.

Family lore regarding my grandfather is that he left his hometown in Italy to work in Germany between the wars. He was a welder and a smelter in several different steel factories, and he was making enough money to be able to send a bit to his extensive and strapped family on the Adriatic coast.

Nonetheless, it seems he didn’t get on too well in Germany. He stayed only a few years before packing up his migratory chest of mixed belongings in hopes of tapping into all the hopes and dreams of which the New World outspokenly boasted.

It was the outset of the twentieth century. It was still okay to hope and dream. He didn’t know a word of English and had never completed fourth grade. He was seventeen.

All his time in Germany and he knew almost no German.

And yet he hoped and dreamed and longed. For what now seems like nothing much. A good job, a steady income. A decent meal everyday. A new place to live and maybe a new family.

All the standards.

Supposedly.

In reality he got involved in other things.

I’ve never heard the whole story.
An ignorant and hardnosed Italian immigrant working in German steel factories. He was nearly there for all that other stuff, too. The 1930’s. Yet it wasn’t politics or aggression that chased him away.

He left behind a girlfriend with whom he never truly spoke.

He told me that one day and smiled strangely.

Crumpled faces are sometimes hard to read.

If a street performer is good enough and willing to exchange stability and security for doing something he really wants to do, he can make his way. He might even do better than that. It depends on where he sets up shop.

And when. Time of year.

And for what. Type of act.

Those kinds of things matter a lot.

But not if your act is the proverbial greatest of all.

The magic.

Anytime, anyplace. If you’re good, it always works.

Old men told me that with crumply seriousness. Then they dashed my hopes.

My grandfather had been obsessed with the circus as a child. It would come through town once a year and, though he enjoyed the animals, acrobats and freakish characters that furnished the thrust of the entertainment, what he really loved were the magic acts. But unless they were well-funded and had performed all over, they were often relegated to the periphery of all the activity. That’s how they did it over there.

Nonetheless, magicians and other sorts of marginalized performers had their followers.

My grandfather was among them.

My father told me about this stuff too, sometimes. I was nine when I first heard it.

So those acts were something of an afterthought, especially the ones that accompanied the small-scale bigtop that passed through my grandfather’s hometown. The bigger magic acts were mainstage at bigger circuses, but those are the ones that only passed through bigger towns with bigger audiences and bigger billfolds.

My grandfather’s town was a humble lot. Skinny shoreside pines decorated its otherwise unadorned coast. The homes were small, quaint, old. No business was unnecessary. Everything had its function. And everyone.
Families were large and got by with what they had. The minimum, presumably. Then passed it on so that the next generation might do a bit better.

All those forgotten lifetimes. Handfuls of cracked photos to document them all.

Few images, few adventures, few major events, no fluff.

So we think as we envision them romantically.

If only they knew.

Maybe they did.

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Silvio was born in Portugal. His parents got sick and coughed up blood until they died, leaving behind him and his older sister. She was sixteen at the time. He was ten. They supported themselves for nine months on what she earned helping out at a friend’s bakery. Then she married her friend’s brother and secured herself a sort of future.

Young Silvio fell out of the picture soon thereafter. One week after his eleventh birthday, bearing no more than the clothes on his back and a lucky harmonica, he left his hometown squalor in exchange for an itinerant one. Somewhat accidentally, however.

The circus was on its way out of town.

And he had made some friends.

Like my grandfather, Silvio was enamored of the circus. And like my grandfather, his favorite acts were those marginalized ones. The somewhat less-than-death-defying fortune-tellers, one-man-bands, ventriloquists, strongmen. The rather death-defying knife throwers. At the circus that passed through his town, like at the one that passed through my grandfather’s, they were all housed outside the bigtop. But they did indeed attract a crowd.

Little Silvio in the midst.

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I heard the first part of the story on that hot summer day when my grandfather and I were making our way back to his house. We had been at the lake, where I had gone swimming, not fishing, for the hotter hours of the early afternoon. My grandfather brought a small folding chair with him and sat in the spotty shade of a tall birch tree the whole time, mostly staring at the water and making sure to nod his head and smile whenever I looked over to wave at him while wading around. I’d wave and laugh and splash like an idiot, and I thought it amused him.

I was in the water all alone and fancied myself to be some form of entertainment. I now know that his smiling nod was just the easiest way to acknowledge my antics without really approving or disapproving or participating.

The things that must have been going through his mind. He was still pretty lucid. The thoughts that please or plague you as you get older.

Or maybe you finally figure out how to ignore them. How to not think.
It would be a blessing.

My grandfather was a widower and a light smoker, and he never ate dessert. Sometimes he’d have a few sips of red wine in the afternoon and take a nap. I’d sit next to him on the couch and watch baseball and eat peaches, wondering how it was that I was so young and he was so old, yet he wasn’t a whole lot bigger. I also wondered how he was able to take naps sitting up.

That hot day at the lake, maybe he was sleeping for part of it.

On our way back to his house he was in good spirits and smiled at me as he constantly wiped his brow and neck with a handkerchief. He was forced to smile at me, really, because every time he drew the handkerchief from his pocket he had to let go of my hand, which alerted me to look up at him as he wiped, to which a smile was his ready response.

I’d smile back and wipe my head with my hand as he wiped his with a piece of fabric. Then I’d grab his hand once it was free again and stick my other hand in the webby inside part of my bathing suit to scratch my butt or touch my testicles. I did that regularly even though it was rarely necessary. It just seemed like a good place to rest one of my hands. The elastic held it there. My dad always told me to cut it out when he saw me do it.

My grandfather didn’t care. So I did it all the time.

He saw me doing it once and laughed.

Probably did look funny.

I passed the first few minutes at the foot of Silvio’s driveway wiping sand away from the upper crease of my butt crack. Then left my hand there. Put the other one there too.

Then Silvio invited us to have a look around at all his precious plants and shrubs and trees and things. He also showed us his small garden, which I had never seen before because it was on the other side of his house.

I liked how it smelled so I stuck my face in and breathed deep.

Within seconds a bee stung my eyebrow.

It swelled up big so we went inside.

Silvio gave me lemonade and showed me the disappearing thumb trick as my grandfather removed the stinger. He had two ways to make his thumb look chopped off.

Then he showed me a few card tricks.

My grandfather did some too.

Then Silvio’s harmonica.

And that’s what got them talking.
I’ve never heard the whole story. Maybe no one has. Both my grandfather and Silvio passed away eleven years ago, and they were of course the primary sources. But they were always reluctant to go into too many details. There was always a point.

For them, part of the story was very painful.

Both widowers as a result.

So I tried never to insist.

And no one else in my family really tried much at all.

But desperation is a good motive.

A search for meaning. Occasional results.

So the odds have been rather against me. But my recollection of references and anecdotes has allowed me to piece together a nearly functional narrative.

There are many holes. It flows poorly. The meaty part is missing. And there are many points where I can only say that I’m pretty sure.

Certainty isn’t always so good.

Less room to get lost.

And getting lost is good.

Bides the time until not thinking sets in.

If it ever does.

Before that other thing comes along.

Never fancied myself a storyteller anyway.

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It was Silvio’s first summer as an orphan when he met the knife thrower and the strongman. They had both lost their lovely assistants to bigger circus acts as they made their way southwest through Spain en route to a cluster of small towns outside of Porto in northwest Portugal.

Lovely assistants came and went regularly, I was told. As my grandfather would confirm, he wound up living with a nice one in Germany.

She was deaf. There’s more to that.

A raucous crowd had gathered outside the bigtop to watch the magician’s performance, but the knife thrower and strongman were to come on first. As they had both lost their assistants, they decided to combine their acts for the evening and to ask for a volunteer from the crowd. Silvio was right up front and hopped onto the stage before they had a chance to choose someone.
Aware of it or not, he had little to lose. And there wasn’t time to question the propriety. So Silvio did as he was told and secured the padlock on the strongman’s chains, then beat on a drum as his circumstantial master flexed his chest big enough to send links flying into the crowd.

Silvio was then fastened cruciform to a wall and outlined in knives. He supposedly smiled cheerfully as the blades came flying at him.

So perhaps he knew how little he had to lose.

As the knife thrower and strongman took their bows and collected far more coinage than they had expected without the accompaniment of lovely women, Silvio drew his harmonica from his pocket and adorned the moment with a little dance and a snappy tune.

Everyone was impressed. More coins were tossed onto the stage.

Silvio was a hit.

He told the knife thrower and the strongmen that he had no family, so they brought him to Salamanca, Toledo, Sevilla, Malaga. Through some towns outside of Valencia and Barcelona, up through Toulouse, Grenoble and the rest of France.

He had become one of them. That was only his first month.

And on the road, the magician taught him a thing or two.

He told little Silvio that he was good, so Silvio believed him. But he couldn’t believe his good fortune.

He’d play his harmonica and dance around.

Fairy tales used to happen.

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Five years later. Sometime in the late twenties.

A small town outside of Essen, Germany.

Late summer.

My grandfather had spent an entire Saturday watching the circus get set up. They pitched their tents and rolled out game booths. Installed stages and poles and ropes and pulleys. Washed themselves and some belongings in a nearby creek. Set up laundry lines and hung things out to dry. Strolled around and chatted and stretched.

Sequestered in makeshift pens, their colleagues from the animal kingdom did the same.

I’ve heard a lot about that day. From my grandfather, from my father. From others who’ve heard the story.

She found out that my grandfather got to pet the tiger. I never heard that one.
The circus was far bigger than the one that used to pass through his hometown.

He met Silvio that afternoon. He heard him playing the harmonica and sought out the source. They blew out tunes for one another and kicked a ball around. Both happy to have encountered a mate. They were more or less the same age. And when they spoke to one another, they could more or less understand.

They only had to say so much.

Then he met several others.

The knife thrower, the strongman, some jugglers.

And the magician.

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Despite their language barrier, my grandfather and his girlfriend, Karin, had been together for quite a while. About two years by the time he met Silvio. He lived with her and her mother, Katja, who for some reason was well-versed in card tricks and other modes of craftiness. He had yet to find out her story.

She was the deaf one.

She showed him tricks.

And he watched her hands so closely.

Her eyes, too. Just as crucial.

Before long, he learned them all and coined many more.

He showed them to Silvio, the knife thrower, the strongman, the jugglers, the magician. They said he was good so he believed them.

Actually, they called him a natural.

It had been years since he’d felt such joy.

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The joy of it all was short-lived.

Having a talented young man on stage had done wonders for his colleagues, so the magician asked my grandfather to perform with him that very night. They went on after the strongman and the knife thrower, both of whom still employed Silvio even though they had acquired new lovely ladies when traversing the Bordeaux region of France the previous autumn.

They weren’t really there voluntarily. I don’t know the details.

Silvio had started working with the magician a bit. Handling props, mainly. Not performing any tricks. Not yet. He was still perfecting the few he’d been taught.
So my grandfather had really impressed his new peers.

And the audience adored him.

It was a lucrative evening before it became tragic.

Karin came to the show that night. Katja thought better and stayed home.

But Karin was enough. She looked just like her mother.

The knife thrower’s assistant who had gotten away.

They figured a deaf girl would never flinch.

The strongman took notice of Karin.

The knife thrower was informed.

Some madness ensued.

A big fire broke out.

The magician died.

This is the part of the story I’ve never heard in full. It’s also the part of the story that leaves me with so few tales of my own.

After that night’s strange and, in their minds, inexplicable melee, my grandfather and Silvio wound up stranded. The fire had broken out in a dry field, so it spread quickly and sent everyone scattering.

The two new friends were lost and left behind. No one was left when they got back to the spot. Everything charred, dead animals in cages. Embers still burning here and there.

So they fled.

They weren’t little boys any longer. And they’d both known life’s difficulties. So they traveled north into Denmark, working odd jobs here and there to make enough money to go far away. By then, they said, everyone had heard that America held futures for young men like themselves whose lives, for whatever reason, had gone astray. Going over with families was surely a different story.

My grandfather still had one but he overlooked it. Silvio disregarded his sister.

So they were both essentially without.

Free to go and recreate themselves.
November 23rd, 1929. They shored up without papers, malnourished, confused, cold. Wet snow was falling on the docks. Uniformed men were there taking names for something or other. Hundreds of hopeuls swarmed off the boat.

While coming over, my grandfather and Silvio kept hearing something about a place called Ellis Island. They had never even heard of it.

When they got off the boat, they weren’t sure if they were there.

The chaos of immigration. Its own form of circus.

It took them months to get on their feet. But by springtime they had working papers, a roof over their heads, enough to eat and a sense of accomplishment. It was easy to get work in the mills and factories that sprung up everywhere, especially if you were willing to work harder than the next guy. And without a family to support, you could really make things work.

My grandfather and Silvio looked out for one another. And they collaborated as street performers at night or whenever they could. All of a sudden, it seemed, they had gone from young fans of the circus on one side of an ocean to mainstage performers on the other. Because although their acts didn’t constitute a circus, and although they didn’t have a real stage, their whole ramshackle neighborhood gathered around to watch them perform and shock and stun and amaze. They played music and told jokes and danced, too. And they got better all the time.

The ladies loved them.

They loved them back.

The details end here.

Because then they found girlfriends, and their girlfriends soon became their wives. Each couple had a child. They all shared the second floor of a decent-sized house. They got it for next to nothing because it had been partially destroyed in a blaze.

So it should have been no surprise that it collapsed one night.

Their babies somehow survived. Their wives somehow did not.

My grandfather and Silvio had been out in the square performing when it happened. They got to the site far too late. All those amazing things they could do, all that magic. Yet nothing could bring back their wives.

They quit performing, saved up again, parted ways and moved on.

So it was by chance that they wound up down the street from one another.

In a neighborhood full of retirees.

Grandparents and great-grandparents, uncles and aunts, old friends and new friends, sickness, health. Calm and quietude and collective pasts.
That day I got stung by the bee. It was one of maybe a dozen times my grandfather and Silvio ever
told those stories together. In one another’s company, anyway. Ever since.

Until my mother was killed, my father had been a magician as well.

The family dynasty into which I was denied entry.

Yet in the end she died early anyway. Died. Wasn’t killed.

Today marks a year.

My wife, she called it a calamity.

Called them all calamities.

My grandfather and Silvio, they called it life.

So I’m sifting through cereal to remember.

Sifting through memories to forget.

Old stories of old men long etched in my mind. The tragedy and charm of their lives. Their pride
and accomplishments and fairy tales. Their strong leather hands and Old World accents. They
suffered through a lot but at least they lived.

I’ve been almost nowhere. And never done magic.

My father shut me out. For my sake and yet ultimately not.

And Silvana made me continue to stay away.

Silvio’s daughter, she was my wife. She too lost her grandmother to trickery. To that useless, tragic
calamity.

That disaster we never knew in full. Yet it seemed we knew enough.

So we sought out lives with no texture. Routine and stasis to calm the past. We never had children
because we were never sure. So many reasons to do, not do.

A life with no magic and she died just the same. Diseases, slow-motion tragedies.

My mother when I was eight, my father when I was nineteen. My wife last year and what now,
really. Another young widower trying to think it all away.

A life without risk. Encompassed by death. At thirty-seven, I’m the oldest man I’ve ever met.
Wondering if memories are sweet for a reason.

Waiting for my face to crumple.
Picking out the raisins and putting them aside. The sugar-coating makes them easier to find. She hated them in cereal yet liked them in cookies. We came up with the sifting thing together. A frugal trick to get raisins for free.

Not much of a trick. Not considering. Now I just do it to think and not think.

The self-marginalized spectacle of reverie. I might rekindle the torch I carry.

Sifting through memories, funneling them together.

I think the sugar retains their moisture.

Ensures soft, fresh, sweet.
Elizabeth Carter

Offering
Elizabeth Carter

Italy