

ARIANNA FARINELLI



GOTICO AMERICANO

ROMANZO

Ti ho seguito
fin dentro alla pancia della balena,
sotto tre strati di oscurità.

**BOMPIANI
MUNIZIONI**

COLLANA DIRETTA DA
ROBERTO SAVIANO





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AMERICAN GOTHIC

translated from the Italian
by Julia MacGibbon

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BOMPIANI

“The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*.
And I mean that very seriously.
You must accept them and accept them with love.”

James Baldwin
The Fire Next Time, 1962

For Joseph, who still lives in the whale's belly

CHAPTER 1
BENEATH THREE LAYERS OF DARKNESS

The inhabitants of the city of Nineveh were idolaters and the life they lived was dissolute. So Allah chose to send the prophet Yunus to enjoin them to convert. But the inhabitants of Nineveh had no desire to listen. “We, and our fathers before us, have always worshipped these gods and no harm has ever come of it.” Although Yunus sought to convince them of the vanity of their idolatry and the beauty of Allah’s laws, they continued to ignore him. Yunus admonished them, warning that should they continue to worship false gods, Allah’s rod would be upon them. But instead of fearing Allah’s wrath, they replied that they were not afraid of His threats. “Let him punish us,” they said. And so the angered prophet chose to leave them to their fate and set out from Nineveh, fearing that Allah’s retribution would be swift to follow. In the words of the Quran, forget not Yunus who left in anger, believing that Allah would not punish him. How many woes befell him!

Yunus had not long left the city when the colour of the sky began to change, as though it were alight with flames. At that sight, the inhabitants of Nineveh began to tremble. Well they knew the fate which had befallen the people of Ad, Thamud and Noah. Was theirs to be a kindred destiny? Slowly, faith reached

into their hearts. And so they climbed the mountain and began to pray for Allah's mercy and His pardon. The mountain echoed their cries. Allah saw that their repentance was sincere, and His wrath was quelled and He sent them His blessing. The tempest that bore down on them began to move away. The inhabitants of Nineveh prayed, as one, that Yunus might return and guide them on the path to rectitude.

Meanwhile, Yunus had climbed into a small boat and had sailed all day in calm waters, in the company of other passengers. As night fell, the sea abruptly changed. A terrible storm beset the boat, threatening to rip it to pieces. Behind the boat, a great whale cut through the waves with its mouth. Allah had commanded her to emerge from the depths of the sea and follow the barque. The tempest raged and the captain ordered his crew to jettison the ballast. They threw their goods into the sea but that did not suffice. So they resolved to lighten the boat's load by tossing one of the passengers into the brine. This way, they thought, the gods' ire would be placated. "Let us draw lots to choose the name of he who will be thrown into the swell," said the captain.

Even Yunus, who did not believe in such superstitions, was obliged to take part in the drawing of lots and his was the first name to be called. The captain and his crew were loath to consign Yunus to the depths. They knew he was the most righteous man among them. And so they decided to draw lots a second time and a third, but Yunus's name was always chosen. The decision, therefore, was made. Yunus must be thrown into the sea. So the prophet climbed onto the deck of the boat and looked into the furious tempest raging before him. It was dark. The stars hid behind a black mist. All at once, the

prophet understood that Allah's hand moved all of this. Yunus had abandoned his mission without consent. And so, accepting Allah's will and invoking His name, Yunus threw himself into the tempest-riven waves and disappeared among them. At that very moment the whale arrived and swallowed him. Her great ivory teeth closed around him like the bars of a gaol. The whale dived down to the bottom of the sea, down into the dark abyss. Three layers of darkness instantly wrapped themselves around Yunus, one on top of another. The darkness of the belly of the whale, the darkness of the sea, and the darkness of the night. At first, Yunus believed himself dead, but then found he could move. His thoughts turned to Allah and he invoked His name. "There is no god but God. All praise belongs to Him. I have indeed wronged my soul." Yunus continued to pray to Allah, repeating the invocation. Hearing his prayers, the whale came to understand that she had swallowed the prophet. Allah, too, heard Yunus's prayer and saw that his remorse was sincere. And so He ordered the whale to rise to the surface and to expel Yunus from her belly.

The prophet was thrown hard out of the belly of the whale and fell onto a remote island. He was saved but he suffered. His body was covered with bile from the fish's stomach and as the sun rose high into the sky his skin began to burn. Yunus continued to repeat his invocations. Wherefore Allah ordered a gourd plant to grow so that Yunus might have shade in which to hide from the sun and his suffering might be eased. Allah made known to Yunus that, had it not been for his prayers, he should have remained in the belly of the fish until Judgement Day. Yunus returned to Nineveh and his people welcomed him

with joy, and together they thanked God for His mercy. The Prophet Mohammed has said, “Let no man ever say I am better than Yunus.”

“The story’s finished. Time to sleep.”

Bruna bows over her son and kisses his eyelids, as she does every evening. With one hand, she strokes his damp brow. She caresses the curl-crowned head and blows a little air into his ruffled hair. Mario has decided to stop cutting it and over the last few months it has grown to shoulder length. Brunna tucks him in and begins to stand up but her son grabs a hand to hold her back.

“Stay a bit longer.”

Bruna is tired and would like to be alone but nevertheless sits back down on the edge of the bed. Minerva is sleeping on her side, her back to them, locks of black hair coiled on her pillow like serpents in a snake charmer’s basket. The book she’d been reading must have slipped from her fingers and lies open at an unchosen page, more or less midway through.

“I’ll stay awake and wait for you, so you can tell me what it was like on television.”

But Brunna had come in late. Midtown was paralysed with traffic from the election night parties for the two candidates, both of whom waited with acceptance speeches in their hands. And Minerva had fallen asleep. Brunna’s husband had stayed out to eat with a group of colleagues from the hospital. The children had eaten alone. Minerva had heated up the chicken soup, tidied the kitchen and forced her brother to brush his teeth. Then she’d sat down in front of CNN to watch the results come

in. Mario had been leafing through a book of photographs by Irving Penn and had fallen asleep on the rug, his face squashing a portrait of Pablo Picasso who seemed to observe him from underneath his hair.

It’s getting late. On CNN Pennsylvania has changed colour, from white to pink. Ohio turned red an hour ago, as did North Carolina. Florida is anxiously awaited. But Florida, that vast flaccid penis caressed by the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, that immense waiting room in which millions of America’s pensioners prepare for the hereafter, Florida too, like most of the country, will soon turn red. On CNN, Van Jones’s jovial face, with its lovely corolla of shining teeth, is becoming ever grimmer. Before the programme ends, the political commentator will weep in front of the camera, asking himself – between one hiccup and the next – how he is going to explain this to his children.

As she had promised her mother, Minerva had switched off the television at precisely eleven o’clock and had taken her brother off to bed. Tomorrow she has a history quiz on the Civil War. However, Minerva is in no doubt: at school they will talk of nothing but the surprising result of these elections.

“Is it a true story?” Mario asks her.

“It’s a story written in the Quran and also in the Bible where Yunus is the prophet Jonah.”

“So Yunus really existed?”

“It’s possible. Or maybe it’s just a metaphor for how everything in life can change suddenly.”

Bruna lowers her eyes and clutches at the seam of her black silk skirt. She begins to twist it.

“I had a student whose name was Yunus,” she says, struggling to steady her voice, “and he left for Nineveh, just like the prophet in the Quran.”

“And did he end up in the belly of the whale beneath three layers of darkness?”

“Yes, he did.”

“And was he saved by God who commanded the whale to let him go because he was a righteous man?”

Bruna attempts to reply but the words die, strangled, in her throat. Her legs have begun to tremble. With one fist, she continues to squeeze the strip of black silk as though she were trying to crush that darkness. Then Mario takes her face in his hands and gently strokes her cheeks, where tears have started to dig lighter-coloured rivulets into the heavy television makeup.

Bruna bites her lips, hating herself for having fallen apart this way, in front of her son. Then she twists round towards Minerva's bed to check that her daughter hasn't woken up. Brunna knows that Minerva wouldn't leave this unchallenged. But the regular rhythm of her breathing doesn't change. Minerva is asleep.

Bruna turns back to kiss her son's eyelids once again. Then he circles her neck with his arms in order to pull her closer. He kisses her lips, where she's bitten herself and the blood has rushed up to heal the wound.

“Go to sleep,” she says, tucking his covers back over him, “it'll soon be tomorrow.” She stands up and switches off the red lamp that her son keeps beside his bed. Like a little one-eyed alien, every night it promises to watch over her sleeping children.

The house is dim and silent. And Brunna senses that she, too, is enveloped in three layers of darkness. The protective darkness

of the house, where only the tenacity of wooden shutters ensures that the sleepless brightness of the streets is kept outside. The indifferent darkness of the building in which she lives. Two hundred apartments and more than five hundred residents of whom Brunna, after many years, knows barely anything. And finally, the darkness beyond. That darkness which slips free of the blinding lights of this city where it seems to be daytime even by night. The sidereal glow of the skyscrapers. The seductive blaze of the bars and nightclubs. The hypnotic lights of the electronic billboards. Below the Dunkin' Donuts coffee cup, the Nasdaq quotes advance triumphantly. They're good. Really good. Incredibly good. The Dow is set to break all records. 18,000 points before the election, 24,000 a year later. Less taxation, less regulation. What's good for Wall Street is good for Main Street.

But the darkness doesn't relent. It resists. It lurks in the narrow alleyways between public housing units. In vacant shops, shut in behind the rusting blinds. Below the highway overpass, among the cardboard boxes of the homeless. In the Belmont Park ravines, amid the used syringes.

“People say it doesn't exist / 'Cause no one would like to admit / That there is a city underground.”

It is dark in the now-empty studio apartment that Yunus had shared with his friend Mohammad. Yellow police tape bars the front door. Caution. Police line.

“They both seemed such nice kids,” a neighbour had said to the reporter from Channel 7. “The taller one, Yunus, was very sweet.”

“And you never suspected anything?” insisted the reporter, pushing his microphone nearer her mouth.

“Thinking back on it, that boy was too kind. Always too careful. I guess that’s the reason I never trusted him. I never was convinced.”

The Prophet Mohammed has said, let no man ever say I am better than Yunus.

“His daddy ended up on Rikers Island. That was a nasty story,” explains Yunus’s landlord. “He never made it out alive. It wasn’t ever clear what happened. I don’t know if heaven exists, but Rikers sure is hell.”

“Poor boy,” continued his wife, “he was twelve when Social Services came for him. I thought he’d put that troubled childhood behind him and moved on. Clearly I was wrong. The sons will always pay for the sins of their fathers.”

“And for that reason, a ban on immigration from Muslim countries is essential,” the White House Press Secretary will say a day later, commenting on the affair. “We must prevent radicalised individuals from entering the country, ready to perpetrate terrorist attacks on American soil or recruiting naive young men and the mentally unsound for the Jihad.”

It is dark in Yunus’s apartment. The second-hand college text books are scattered across the floor together with photos, papers, clothes. The computer has been taken away by the police. Mohammad’s was never found. There’s a sneaker

without its companion. The torn Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie poster hangs loose from the wall above the bed. Yunus’s trumpet is still on the kitchen table, dust collecting inside it. Coating the brass bell. Choking the pistons’ cylinders. The smoky melody of “My Melancholy Baby” will remain forever imprisoned; from now on Yunus’s trumpet will sing only of silence.

*Day is done, Gone the sun,
All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.*

There’s still a copy of *Giovanni’s Room* under Yunus’s pillow. It’s a first edition, from 1956, that Bruna had unearthed in an old bookstore in the Village. A little shop in the basement of a building that smelled of mould and cat urine. The big chains have swallowed up almost every one of the city’s independent booksellers and now, one by one, Amazon is swallowing up all the big chains. And who knows, Bruna thinks, maybe one day an even bigger fish will come along and swallow all of us. Inside Baldwin’s book there’s a photograph of Josephine Baker, in 1927, dancing at the Folies Bergère and wearing nothing but a skirt made of bananas.

Her rebellious dance wrapped in the potent embrace of his words.

“This was but one tiny aspect of the dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever.”

Yunus’s room is too small for two people. Over the past few months Yunus has attempted to make it more comfortable. He

has repainted the yellowing walls. He has laid carpeting over the linoleum flooring. He and Mohammad have turned an alcove into a prayer room, in which Yunus has laid out a little Afghan rug found in a Harlem thrift store. On a tiny table he has placed a copy of the Quran, in English. In Arabic, a black cloth hanging on the wall bears the words, "There is no god but God. All praise belongs to Him. I have indeed wronged my soul."

Yunus's room is on the second floor of an old redbrick building on the corner of 138th and Malcom X. The windows look onto a small inner courtyard. Children go there, in the afternoon, to play. "Let's play Suicide!" they scream happily, while bouncing a little rubber ball against the wall. One of them catches the airborne ball and aims it accurately at the wall-bound friend running beside him. His friend falls over.

"I pegged you. You're out!"

"Not true! I touched the wall before you hit me. I'm free!" A clear untruth.

One by one the players are eliminated until only the winner remains.

The young maple in the courtyard appears to watch them from above. In a few years' time they'll still be hitting the ground, but it won't be a game.

Yunus's maple has lost nearly all of its leaves. It seems younger and thinner when it's naked like this, its black branches pummelled by the wind.

"You know why the leaves turn red in the fall?" Yunus had asked her before he left. "They pass all the nutrients to the tree before letting go."

Bruna enters her own room and lies down on the bed fully clothed. She hadn't even pulled her overcoat off, on coming home. She'd gone straight to the children's room because, hearing her arrive, Mario had called out to her. She closes her eyes, hoping to sleep, but she's restive. There is an incessant noise in her head. The wail of the sirens heard throughout the city, day and night. The rumble of the drill rigs that excavate foundations and of the mixers that regurgitate cement. So Bruna rolls onto her back and opens her eyes. She studies the cracks on the ceiling, which open, inexorably, at the end of every summer when the building's cement contracts with the arrival of cooler weather. Bruna waits for her husband. She has decided to tell him the truth.

It is late fall. The warm humid air of this year's Indian summer, which was, once again, particularly generous, has now made way for a stream of colder air coming from Canada. The cold has traversed the grandeur of Lake Erie, the modest peaks of the Adirondacks and the lovely valley of the Hudson – by now almost bare of leaves –, and has arrived in the city. Now it blows across the gentle, tidy waters of the Hudson and the choppy salty waters of the East River. Now it creeps in under the windowsill, lifting dust from the books that cram Bruna's room.

Bruna listens to the nervous clatter of the river that runs past her home. For the entire length of its course, the East River is at the mercy of the tides. Masses of water which move upstream and down, pushing the river to and fro. For this reason, sometimes the river runs from north to south, from Long Island Sound into

New York Bay and out into the ocean. At other times it travels the same route in the opposite direction. The East River is not, strictly speaking, a river, but a tidal strait between two stretches of salt water engaged in a perennial battle. Between one tide and the next there is always an armed truce. A few minutes of slack waters during which the forces of nature finally allow the water to pause and catch its breath. At that point, the river stretches out in its bed. Bruna likes to watch it when it's like this, slow and tired. She finds peace in it.

Of all the city's inhabitants, only the river concedes himself a truce. While the rest of them run, sweat, pant, compete, chase, elbow, brawl, fall and rise, he halts, breathes, thinks. The peace, however, never lasts long. Soon the impetuous currents of the Long Island Sound will begin to convulse the water once again. A river within the river. And now they collide with the currents of the Harlem River at a point, a couple of miles away, called Hell Gate. There the waves seem to trip over themselves, incapable of advancing in the direction the current pushes them in. Her husband Tom has told her that in the seventeenth century a Dutch explorer had discovered the channel, which allowed ships to reach Boston via the calmer waters of the bay. A waterway that had, for centuries, been one of the most important trading routes in North America, until the railroads came along. The explorer had named the stretch of river Hellegat – bright opening. And effectively, at certain times of day, that piece of river does become a great glittering mirror.

City of hurried and sparkling waters.

But, translated into English, Hellegat had become Hell Gate. It wasn't a simple case of mistranslation. The passage did in fact

conceal insidious perils. Right there, at Hell Gate, navigation was made mightily difficult by the violent meeting of the currents, which created sudden whirlpools, and by jagged rocks that emerged from the waters to bite at the gravid bellies of the ships.

City of spires and masts.

Over the centuries sailors had given those rocks fanciful names. Some of them inexplicably benevolent, such as Hen and Chicken or Bread and Cheese. Others more alarming, such as Nigger Head. In that stretch of river, over the centuries, hundreds of ships had foundered. During the War of Independence, the HMS *Hussar*, an English frigate carrying gold and silver to pay the troops stationed in Manhattan, was wrecked right there at Hell Gate. Gold hunters had been looking for her ever since.

"There's a priceless treasure down there," she had once been told by an old fisherman who spent his days on the riverbank, his rod propped against the iron railings. Bruna had wondered whether the man was referring to the gold aboard the sunken ships or the seabass which used to abound in that stretch of river. The story she finds most upsetting is that of the *General Slocum*, a steamboat laden with German immigrants, parishioners of the Lutheran church of St Mark. They had set off from Little Germany on the Lower East Side for a Sunday picnic on Long Island. Hundreds of women and children on board. The boat had caught fire right there, approaching Hell Gate, and had sunk a few miles further north, tipping more than a thousand souls into the water. Blackened bodies and living passengers were dragged along for miles by the river's raging currents. Only a handful survived.

In the late nineteenth century, the city of New York had decided to dynamite those jagged rocks which made the passage through Hell Gate all the more perilous – a process that would take over seventy years. One of the first to explode was Nigger Head, to the general satisfaction of a small crowd who had gathered at the river's edge to watch the event.

Bruna shudders and pushes her hands into her coat pockets. One of the two had come unstitched a few days earlier and now her hand slips straight through it. She resolves, again, to stitch it back together in the morning, although she never has learned to sew.

Where is Tom? Why isn't he back?

Bruna often thinks of her marriage as a pair of legs that have, for years, walked together, side by side. Only one of them, however, has really taken the weight and prevented both from coming to a halt and perhaps even collapsing. The other has simply allowed itself to be carried along, partly out of laziness and partly because it wasn't entirely convinced of the need to walk. Right now Brunna asks herself if, lately, that leg hasn't perhaps been her. If she and Tom haven't ended up switching roles. He bearing the weight and she being dragged along.

With Tom, to begin with, she was happy. In order to be with him, she had moved to the United States. For his sake she had begun her doctorate in Boston and finished it in New York, where Tom had moved to complete his endocrinology

fellowship. For his sake, she had learned to survive America's snowy winters and American small talk. For his sake, she had learned to greet strangers with an infinitely polite and equally sterile "How are you?"

Soon, however, it had become harder. Brunna had frequently begun to find herself at odds with Tom's family. They took decisions and laid down the law in the expectation that she would comply. Tom, after all, had always complied. They planned weekends and vacations without even asking. They turned up at the apartment unexpectedly with a thousand excuses. They demanded that Brunna and Tom find a boyfriend for their daughter Laura who was always unattached.

For Tom this was all normal. This was his family. He'd known nothing else. In any case, he had never rebelled, not even in adolescence – a phase meaningless without confrontation. Had never raised his voice. Had never threatened to leave home. Had never uttered a healthy, liberating, "Fuck you, Mom and Dad!"

But Brunna was different: she wouldn't be bowed. She said what she thought. She wasn't shy to criticise. She didn't weigh her words. She had always, after all, done as she pleased. Had never listened to anyone, not even her own parents. Had grown up independent and with a certain taste for polemics.

One evening over supper, Sal Bene, Tom's father, had asked her if she would be happy to spend the rest of her life in the USA. Evidently not a casual question but an issue of some importance that had been worrying him for a while and regarding which his wife Amanda had asked him to set things straight as soon as possible. Brunna had answered candidly that,

once they'd graduated, she would like to live in Europe with Tom. A possibility the two of them had discussed many times but that Tom, in reality, had never taken very seriously.

She had answered honestly, knowing it would irk them, but never imagining the rage her words would unleash. It was as though a pebble thrown against an unstable cliff had broken the banks of a long-swollen river.

Sal Bene's face had turned purple. He had flared his nostrils as if to suck in more air, and had grabbed the table by its edges, pushing it away from his body with violence. His wife Amanda had, as ever, been right. That girl had to be put in her place.

"Goddammit!" he had thundered. "This family will stay united! And I... And we," he had corrected himself, having caught his wife's eye, "didn't invest nigh on a million dollars in private schools, college, master's degrees," here he caught his breath, "and four years of medicine at one of the country's leading universities, to see our son leave America. And to live where? In Italy, let's say? A place that's on its last legs, practically falling apart? A nation tens of thousands of young adults run away from every year?"

Words hurled out with all the fury that, in this family, only Sal could muster. Words that were, however, anything but improvised given that, as always, Amanda had elaborated the entire discourse before sending in her husband to do the dirty work for both of them. A dynamic Bruna had learned to recognise just recently.

"Tom needs to be here in America if he's to have a brilliant future," Amanda had continued in a level tone that scarcely concealed her glee. She had, as ever, joined the conversation at just the right point to allow Sal the time he needed to catch his

breath, but also to inform the startled interlocutor – be he or she one of the children, a relative, a neighbour, or the hospital director who, before retiring, had blocked Sal's promotion in favour of another colleague who, like him, happened to be Jewish – that she espoused the views but not the manners of her husband, and that with her, and her alone, could the conversation reacquire any civility. "He'll make plenty of money and you'll be able to live very comfortably. You'll never earn a decent salary as an adjunct professor. Believe me, I've been there."

Tom had nodded sadly, comprehending the inevitability of this confrontation between parents and future wife, a confrontation which had already, and entirely fortuitously, been forestalled too many times. After months of frustration, Bruna had instead seized the opportunity to let rip at her future in-laws. Out came phrases that Tom had never imagined anyone – least of all a young woman he had decided to marry – would aim at his parents. After many years of work and sacrifice, Doctor and Professor Bene had become the family's twin pillars of authority. They had achieved a degree of education and financial stability unequalled among their friends and relatives. Nowadays no member of the family dared contradict them. They were the American dream made flesh.

"It's up to us, and us alone, to choose where we live, and you'd be better off not interfering. And Italy's no longer the country your grandparents ran away from, fleeing poverty. And it wasn't me who landed at Ellis Island carrying a cardboard suitcase held together with pieces of string!" She did, though, immediately regret this final sentence.

With every word Bruna uttered, with each frown of defiance, with every rise in the pitch of her voice, Tom had shrunk. He had hunched his shoulders, dropped his chin so low that it grazed his chest, buried his arms in the space between his knees and thighs. It was a position he always adopted when he felt he needed shelter from the fury of others, like a tortoise shrinking into its shell. And the fury, yet again, was not slow to materialise. In a blind rage with which Tom was all too familiar, Sal disregarded Bruna entirely and addressed his son.

“The day of your wedding’ll be the day of your funeral,” he had snarled, pummelling the table with his fists and capsizing a jug of water. “If you marry her, you needn’t consider yourself our son!”

At that point Amanda had risen from the table and moved over to the couch. Her hands had visibly started to tremble. Her legs were giving way. She said she felt she was about to faint. Tom had witnessed this scene many times. And yet, repetitive and manifestly exaggerated as it was, his mother’s anguish never failed to move him, and Amanda was well aware of that. He, too, rose from the table and joined her on the couch. She had taken his hands in hers and, between sobs, had reminded him that he was her only boy and that he mustn’t leave her. And then, her voice momentarily reacquiring steadiness, she had told Bruna that she herself had always been respectful and supportive of her parents-in-law, of Sal’s parents. It was she who had looked after them when they old and ailing, “even though they had two daughters of their own!” Tom knew that this was not exactly how things had gone. His mother couldn’t stand her husband’s parents whom she found coarse and invasive. But that, like all

the rest, was a point on which he had never dared take her up. Amanda had always preferred her own version of family events to the reality.

Then his mother had suddenly stopped speaking. She had thrown her head back and clenched her eyes shut. Malicious and manipulative. She looked dead.

“Look what you’ve done to your mother,” Sal had screamed.

That evening Tom had told Bruna that, without his parents’ blessing, he couldn’t marry her.

So Bruna began to understand that America was not the land of freedom and emancipation that she had imagined. And yet this was the birthplace of the youth movement and women’s rights. Weren’t Tom’s parents’ generation the protagonists of that period of progress and change? And weren’t Tom’s parents – those two successful professionals – among the best-educated representatives of that generation? The reality, as Bruna would come to understand many years later, was that, despite the stereotype of the impassioned rebel youth of the 1960s, only a part of that generation had marched in favour of civil rights and against the Vietnam War. The others, as is true for every generation, had been carbon copies of their own parents and had contributed nothing to any change or progress.

But Tom’s parents were well-educated. Coming from a family in which no one had ever been to college, Bruna had always assumed that culture opened minds. She had evidently overestimated the cathartic power of books. Or perhaps, in the Benes – who in this were far from exceptional –, being cultured had created a sense of superiority and a disinterest in others that not even the blindest ignorance could have produced.

Bruna realised that here in America there were rules and cultural mores of which she knew nothing. Ways of thinking that she, in her naivety and inexperience, had thought belonged to a different era, different generations, other countries. Several years later she happened to read an account of life in the Italian-American community of East Harlem in the 1940s, before the neighbourhood became predominantly Puerto Rican. Before “Cara Harlem” became today’s El Barrio. The very place in which Sal’s parents had been born.

The essay was entitled “The Madonna of 115th Street” and the author discussed the unwritten laws that governed family ties and relationships in the Italian-American community. Brunna had been particularly struck by four of them:

1. Every member of the community must always side with their own relatives, whether right or wrong.
2. A marriage is not merely the union of two people but a union of two kin groups.
3. Children must always respect the person and opinions of their parents’ friends and relatives.
4. Married couples must never cut ties with their birth families.

Over the course of her marriage with Tom, Brunna had at first derided, then rejected and violated every one of the four.

Clearly America preserved customs and traditions that, in the Italy of her experience, were long dead. Her father, too, had not been loved by her maternal grandparents, but her mother had married him anyway. Her parents, too, had funded her education, albeit spending a fraction of the sum Tom’s family had provided, but they had never insisted she remain in Italy in payment for the sacrifices made. Although, her family was

perhaps, as Tom often pointed out, unusual. Just out of his teens, her papà had thrown his own violent father out of the house, and once married, had often argued with his wife’s parents who were, in many ways, much like Tom’s. Brunna had grown up believing that her grandparents’ bigotry was evil incarnate, and it seemed absurd that her wry reward should be to rediscover it right here in America. And yet, Tom’s parents were so much younger and better educated than her grandparents, who’d been born peasants in the closing years of the First World War and hadn’t, any of them, completed elementary school.

But wasn’t America the nation where kids left home at eighteen and parents refused to bankroll adult children? To Brunna, it seemed the Americans wanted their offspring to behave like adults when it came to work and money, but be babied in everything else. Perhaps it was precisely because they left home so young that, in their parents’ eyes, they were forever children.

Remembering that Barry Cohen had killed himself, Brunna had entered the Dean’s office. There was a man in a grey suit sitting in front of the Dean’s desk: he had cavernous cheeks and a prominent jaw and a long nose that veered off to one side exactly halfway down – with powerful-looking nostrils. And little eyes, like bullet holes.

“Ah, here you are at last, Brunna,” had said the Dean, dabbing at his brow and neck with a paper handkerchief. “This is Special Agent McGhillan from the FBI.”

“Good morning Professor,” the man said tonelessly, proffering a cold, bony hand. “Please sit down. I’d like to ask you some questions.”

Bruna had taken a seat, definitively pushing aside the thought of Cohen launching himself from the fourteenth floor of his building.

“We understand that James Brown, known as Yunus, is a student of yours.”

“Yes,” she had murmured, still uncomprehending.

“When was the last time you saw or spoke to him?”

“In class,” she had answered, “last week.”

“And you haven’t heard from him since?”

“No, I don’t believe so.”

“You don’t believe so or you know so?”

“I’m certain of it. But why are you asking me these questions?”

“See, Professor, it’s our understanding that between you and Brown there was more than a student-teacher relationship.”

At that point, Bruna had felt the Dean’s gaze fall on her in judgement. This would probably turn out to be her last semester at the university; the Dean was a good man, but knowing what he now did, he couldn’t renew her contract. Bruna had lowered her eyes. With her teeth, she had detached a flap of skin that hung loose from one side of her middle finger nail. The finger had started to bleed.

The last occasion on which she had seen Yunus had not – contrary to what she had told the investigator – been in class. The last mental image she had of Yunus was of him rising from her bed to put his clothes on. In the mellow afternoon light, his sweat-damp back had shone. He had moved over

to the window to watch the river; the slack tide had ended and the current was convulsing the waters once again. For the last time, Yunus had scanned the river, looking down towards the railway bridge which, from where he stood, was almost entirely hidden by the mass of steel and concrete that made up the Triborough Bridge. His gaze had lingered on the railway bridge’s lovely aureole, its once-red spokes now partially exfoliated, and its heavy stone towers that are said to be haunted. Under that bridge, he had once told her, he and Mohammad – still teenagers – had been chased by the police. Under that bridge, he had converted to Islam. Then Yunus had looked out towards the horizon and had, inwardly, reached the island in the middle of the river where his incarcerated father had died eight years earlier. At that point he had closed his eyes and taken a deep breath. There, on the river, his entire life had coursed along together with the waters. Yunus had moved away from the window and dressed, hurriedly. Bruna’s children would soon be back from school and he had to leave. He had pulled the black hoodie on, over still-damp skin. The muscles of his arms had contracted and relaxed with that simple harmonious gesture which Bruna found wondrous, every time. Yunus had moved back towards her bed, one last time, before leaving. He had looked at her thoughtfully and, with one hand, had stroked the big white breasts of which she had always been so ashamed. He had leaned down to kiss them and had pricked her with the hairs of the beard he’d been growing in recent weeks. Bruna had been embarrassed and had pulled the bedsheet over her chest. Her young lover had then gathered up his bag, text books, trumpet case. “I’ll call you

later,” he had said, smiling. But Bruna hadn’t heard from him. It was Thursday. On Fridays they usually didn’t meet because, for Yunus, it was a day of prayer. At weekends they avoided texting or calling one another. Yunus knew Bruna’s husband would be at home. Then Monday had arrived. Bruna had rung him several times but he’d never answered. That Tuesday he hadn’t come to class.

“Why are you asking me these personal questions? I don’t believe these things concern you in any way.”

“It all concerns us, Professor. Anything that can help us reconstruct what happened.”

“Why? What has happened? Is Yunus in trouble, by any chance?” Bruna had immediately thought of Mohammad. He must have dragged him into something. “Yunus is a good kid. He’s expecting to graduate early.”

The investigator had eyed her coldly. His eyes had become even smaller. He was about to strike.

“Yunus Brown and Mohammad Saiid left New York three days ago and flew to Turkey. They then crossed the southern border into Syria. We have reason to believe that the pair of them are heading for Mosul, to defend the besieged city. Were you aware of their plans?”

“That is not possible! Yunus has nothing to do with it! He would never do it!” Bruna had felt her stomach contract and bile rising up through her oesophagus. She needed to vomit.

“This is not an isolated case, Professor Bianchi. There are hundreds of cases of young Americans who have joined Isis over the last few years. Most of them aren’t planning terrorist attacks here in America, as the European jihadists do in London or

Paris or Brussels. Instead they travel to Syria or Iraq to become foreign fighters. Right now, Isis is under siege in Mosul, the Islamic State’s Iraqi capital. We have reason to believe that the two young men will be sent there once they’ve finished their military training in Raqqa, Syria.”

As he spoke, it occurred to Bruna that it had been right there, in Mosul, the ancient city of Nineveh, that the tomb of the prophet Yunus had stood – until Isis had decided to blow it heavenward.

“Yunus is religious but he’s not a radical,” she had answered, looking directly into the investigator’s eyes. “If he’d had fundamentalist beliefs, he’d have told me. I would have known.”

“That, Professor, is the kind of incredulous reaction these young men’s friends and families frequently manifest. The terrorists indoctrinate our youngsters over the space of a few months, usually online. They hit on the most vulnerable. Those who’ve lived the most troubled lives. We understand both Saiid and Brown were orphans. Saiid’s father left home when he was still an infant, and died of alcoholism. Brown’s father, on the other hand, killed himself on Rikers Island.”

Yunus had always told her he’d been beaten to death by the guards.

“Saiid had, for some time, been frequenting a mosque in New Jersey where, in recent months, they have been hosting a radical imam. We’d been keeping an eye on the imam for a while and we discovered that Mohammad paid him regular visits. We don’t know about Yunus. We didn’t find anything about Isis on his computer. Just college notes and a few political essays. Oh, and a document.” The investigator pulled out his case notes.

“It’s a form of diary in which, among other things, the boy talks about you. It’s titled ‘American Gothic’.”

The centre of Bruna’s chest contracted with pain. As though her heart, for an instant, had refused to pump blood.

“But Yunus,” the investigator had continued, “lived with Mohammad, and it is therefore conceivable that he was indoctrinated by his housemate.”

Bruna wants to tell her husband all of this. But she doesn’t speak; she continues to weep. Tom finishes cleaning the bathroom floor. He throws down some bleach, to disinfect it. Bruna has always been struck by his extraordinary practicality.

“Are you feeling better now?” he asks, moving towards the bed.

He had first met Ellie a year before, on an overcast day just like this one. It was still hot and, despite the heavy clouds, the heavens stubbornly refused to open and throw down a little water. Mario was sitting on the swing. He pushed himself lazily with the tips of his toes. There weren’t many people in the park because it was Labor Day and most New Yorkers were still away on vacation. His holidays, though, were already over. He had spent yet another summer in Italy with his maternal grandparents, in the little house on the Roman coast that they always rented in August. Mario had seen his seaside friends who, truth be told, were more Minerva’s friends than they were his. They had played together on the beach and had spent hours splashing about in the coast’s dusky waters.

Mario always stuck close to the beach; he was barely capable of staying afloat. As he did every year, his father had joined them for his birthday and, that summer, Mario had finally learned to ride a bicycle without training wheels.

One day, after lunch, when everyone in the house was dozing, Mario had gone down to the beach on his own. He was wearing one of his sister’s bikinis, his favourite, the white one with red cherries and a bandeau top that formed a bow round the back. He had slipped on the heart-shaped sunglasses and the glittery flip-flops, and had gone out into the street, into the jaundiced afternoon light. No one on the beach had recognised him. Not even Riccardo and his mother who ate their lunch in the shade of the beach umbrella and never took a siesta. Not even Signora Zerilli who had known him since birth and was the tannest person on the beach because she spent all day in the sun. Not even Signor Romano who had been the lifeguard on that beach forever and the year before had taught him to float without water wings.

Mario had headed for the water and had cautiously immersed his feet. He didn’t enjoy being disobedient. His grandmother was anxious that he should wait at least three hours before swimming when he had a full stomach. Many years ago one of his mother’s cousins had died of indigestion after swimming on a full stomach. His father, Tom, was of the opinion that there was no scientific basis for what his grandmother said, especially regarding the dangers of indigestion. “The idea that you shouldn’t swim after lunch is an Italian superstition, like the Italian belief that air conditioning brings on head colds.” But Nonna Maria brooked no exceptions. And Bruna was very happy to let her mother, for once, take charge of the children’s discipline.

Mario had walked into the lazy, uniform waves of that windless afternoon until the water reached his waist. Pushing off with his toes, he had slid gently out onto the water, belly down. He flapped his hands clumsily, making little circles on the oily surface of the sea, advancing in brief, irresolute jerks.

“Clown fish are born male and when they mature they become females,” he had once told Ryder.

“Is that why they call them clown fish?” his friend had asked.

“No, it’s because they’re colourful and the funny way they swim,” Mario had replied softly.

Male, female, transgender, gay, faggot, and now, also, clown. For years, everyone he met had found words to label him with. Not to mention the pronouns. He or she, his or hers. And supposing Mario preferred we or they?

“Imagine how cool it would be in a world with no words,” Mario had said to Ryder.

“You can’t live without words,” he had replied.

“But imagine if you could.”

And with the waves of the sea hugging him and tickling his tummy, Mario had heard his name being called. It was his Nonno Gino who had gone to fetch him for a game of *briscola*, and, finding he wasn’t in his room, had come down to the beach to look for him. He had asked Signor Romano if he knew where his grandson had got to, but Signor Romano had replied that he’d last seen Mario at lunchtime. Then his grandfather had noticed a cluster of red cherries bobbing up and down on the shimmering water. He’d found him, at last.

“What are doing here on your own? If your Nonna finds out, there’ll be hell to pay. Let’s go home. Now’s not the time to be swimming, it’s time for *briscola*.”

His grandfather had taken him by the hand and, together, they had made their way through the Arcobaleno club’s sun loungers and beach umbrellas. Signora Zerilli, who had always had a soft spot for his grandfather, had greeted him with a refulgent smile very lightly smudged with lipstick. The sun-hardened sheath she had grown in the place of skin resembled that of a crocodile.

“If I see Mario I’ll tell him you were looking for him,” the lifeguard had told them as they passed, and his grandfather had nodded.

“Good afternoon Signor Gino, are you heading back already?” had asked Riccardo’s mother, seeing them pass by.

“We’ll be back later. It’s time for *briscola*.”

For a moment, Riccardo had looked up from his video game, a million pixels dancing in his pupils. The following day he would ask where that pretty cousin of his had got to.

Just then, while he was immersed in thoughts of the freshly concluded summer, Ellie had sat down on the swing next to his. Mario had looked at her for a second and then instantly lowered his eyes. Then he’d looked at her again, this time without concealing his wonder. The skin on her face changed colour according to the light: it was black, then bronze, then brick red, and then it changed again and was creamy and opalescent and then suddenly almost translucent. Her eyes, likewise, varied in shape and colour, just like the clouds. They were dark and long, then milky-blue and round. One

second close together, and an instant later far apart; at first deep-set, then gently protruding. Ellie looked like everyone and no one. She was like the sky, always the same but ever-shifting. More than anything, though, what struck Mario was her dress. She was wearing a white sundress with red cherries, tied with a bow at the neck.

“I have a bathing suit with the same pattern,” he had told her.

Ellie had smiled, her lips as red as maraschinos.

“Cherries are my favourite fruit. I like the sour ones, though, that hardly anyone likes. Everyone loves the sweet ones. They’re easy to like. But the sour ones sting your tongue and that’s why I like them. They never leave you indifferent.”

From that day on, Mario and Ellie had been inseparable. She went wherever he went. There was always an empty seat in class, right next to his, so she sat there. Her elbow touching his and making, she told him, an acute angle. Every so often, when the teacher quizzed him in math, she whispered the answers. And in the cafeteria she never left him on his own. She opened his milk carton and pushed the straw in without ever spilling a drop. She was the only one who talked to him. Italian was their secret language: dandelion puffs of unhindered words that no one understood.

Ellie didn’t care if Mario was too slow for soccer and too slender for football and too uncoordinated for swimming. She didn’t mind that he understood nothing in math and couldn’t play chess. It didn’t interest her that he had won no trophies or medals, or that they all considered him a freak. And above all, Ellie had never asked if he was a boy

or a girl or something in between, hovering somewhere in the middle. Ellie was the best friend Mario had ever had. She was perfect in every way, even more than Minerva.

“The fault, dear Brutus, is not in the stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.” This was the quote from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* which introduced an article by Amartya Sen that Bruna read to us in class last semester. “Culture too, like our stars, is often blamed for our failures.”

If Mohammad and I have ended up in Mosul it’s the fault of our Islamic culture which has turned us into terrorists. If my father died on Rikers it’s the fault of his Afro-American culture which made him a criminal. If African nations don’t flourish economically it’s because of their culture which has doomed them to underdevelopment. If Muslim nations have never experienced democracy it’s the fault of their religion which is antidemocratic. But blaming culture is disingenuous. It’s an excuse for being unable to solve the underlying problems, an alibi for failing to acknowledge the historical causes that have produced such results. Many consider democracy to be a Western invention. The very fact that we talk of exporting it suggests that the West sees it as a form of intellectual property. That misconception is fruit not merely of our arrogance but also of the fact that, historically, democracy was born in ancient Greece. Yet, as Sen remarks, the Greeks did not invent democracy in isolation. They had come into contact with other peoples and other civilizations – Egyptian, Iranian and Indian – which, contrary to the

stereotypes that would have them unenquiring and backward, have, over the centuries, cultivated science, tolerance and interreligious dialogue. In the sixteenth century, while the heretic Giordano Bruno was being burnt alive in the Roman square known as Campo dei Fiori, the Mughal emperor Akbar legally codified religious freedom and minority rights, and his court welcomed intellectuals from many different cultures. According to Sen.

The West thinks of itself as the defender of democracy. In reality, it claims democracy for itself but is not prepared to share it with other peoples. It assumes the right to adjudicate the world's affairs unaided, without consulting others. It considers all those who dispute its choices barbarians and savages. It calls its own wars just and necessary and those of others ferocious bloodbaths. This, too, we have inherited from the ancient Greeks. During the Peloponnesian War, four hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Pericles exhorted the Athenians not to look with horror on the sacrifices of war. Through war alone could Athens become a model for all Greece and for other civilisations. War is necessary to reinforce democracy. We have been thinking this way for two and a half millennia.

Perhaps things would have been different had Pericles not written that funeral oration, had he done something else that day instead of commemorating those who had fallen in the Peloponnesian War. If history had turned out differently, perhaps I would not be here, dying, in Iraq, for a cause I don't believe in, for a state I don't recognise, for a God whose name is used to justify oppression and slaughter. If *Allahu Akbar* were still a declaration of faith and not an announcement of

impending death. If Mohammad could find me now, if he could save me and take me away from here, if we could go somewhere else together and start afresh, if I could at least be sure I will meet him again in Paradise. If Colin Powell had never made that speech about weapons of mass destruction, if my nation had never invaded Iraq, if President Bush had never declared "mission accomplished", if the Shiites hadn't taken overall control, if the Arab Springs hadn't become eternal winters, if al-Baghdadi had never been in prison, if the hunchback minaret had never stopped reverberating with the *adhan*, if the tomb of the prophet Yunus had never been destroyed, if the English had given the Kurds the state they longed for, if Sykes and Picot hadn't made a secret pact to partition the Middle East, if the father-in-law and son-in-law of the Prophet, may Allah send prayers and peace upon him, hadn't fought over who should succeed him, if Noah had never cursed his son Ham. If the roll of the dice that October night hadn't consigned me to this fate, if Mohammad hadn't had to apologise each and every time for being Muslim, if his father hadn't died an alcoholic during Ramadan, if Mohammad could have forgiven him, if the police hadn't followed us under the Hell Gate bridge, if my father hadn't ended up on Rikers, if the Leviathan hadn't treated us as criminals, if only today's America didn't still so closely resemble that Grant Wood painting, *American Gothic*, and the timorous faces of old white people who think they'll protect their world with a pitchfork, but their world has ceased to exist. If my mother had lived to see me grow, if Bruna had loved me even a little, if her husband had loved her and their children. If 96th Street

weren't still the frontier between wealth and misery, if capitalism had really been a tide lifting every boat forward, if the blacks, at least, had managed to leave their ghettos and never go back, if we didn't constantly have to create our own enemies. If the shrapnel embedded in my flesh weren't already infecting it, if Paradise really existed, if there were some way of getting out alive from the belly of this whale in which I've lived my whole life, if I could cheat death, if my mother and father weren't already waiting for me on that hilltop on the other bank of the Tigris, if the epitaph on my tomb hadn't already been written. If my story could at least be told.

Inshallah.

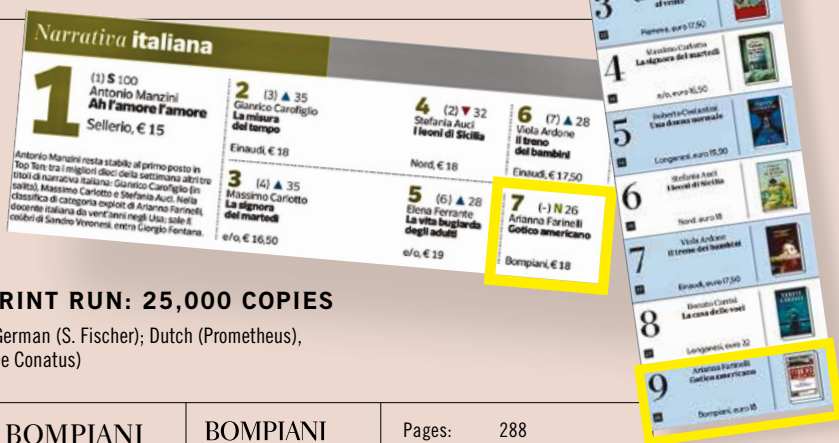
Arianna Farinelli American Gothic

GOTICO AMERICANO

A remarkable debut novel. An unflinching portrait of America today as seen from within and from without. A collective and intimately personal narrative of migration, dreams, resentments, of promises, of betrayals, and love as – perhaps – our only fighting chance.

It's the night of the presidential elections. Bruna, a professor of Political Science in New York, has been on television, commenting on the results. But back at the apartment she shares with her husband Tom and their children, the wave of nausea that overwhelms her has nothing to do with the racist conservatism of the new president or the loneliness that haunts her amid the thousand bright lights of Manhattan. She is pregnant by her young Afro-American student, Yunus, who, for two days now, hasn't been answering her phone calls. Yunus, aged twenty, dedicates a manuscript to her in which he tells his own story: the tale of a young man of colour to whom life leaves few choices, and who therefore makes the most radical possible one – one that takes him to Syria, to fight in a war which represents the failure of centuries of human progress.

Arianna Farinelli was born in Rome in 1975. She has been living in the United States since 2001. In 2009 she was granted a PhD in Political Science and since 2010 she has been a lecturer at Baruch College, City University of New York. This is her first novel.



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