

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory: and The Work of Remembering

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On the 97th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, I participated in the CHALK project, marking four sites where Italian victims lived.

I was given four names. Rosie Bassino, of 57 West Houston Street, died at 31. Rosie Grosso of 174 Thompson Street, died at 16. Millie Prato of 93 Macdougall, died at 21. Irene Grameatassio of 6 Bedford St, died at 24. I took my street chalk and got to work. My mom packed me a fried eggplant sandwich, saying, "it doesn't have gravy," as she made her offering as I readied to walk out the door.

Macdougall Street. Nobody bothered me as they stepped past what I was doing outside Millie's old house. There was blood spattered on the concrete and I chalked over and around the blood



embellished sidewalk: Millie Prato 1897-1911, and the word "pace." The bloodstains reminded me of my mother's upstairs neighbor, Erica Dituri, who died on Saint Patrick's day, just a few days ago. I was the one who found her dead on her living room floor. Now her carpet holds the blood from her head that hit the coffee table after the heart attack, and a few feet down the carpet is ashes; Erica died smoking. Her heavy body put out the lit cigarette. "You people have no idea how lucky you are," said the cop, "this whole building could have went up in flames."

I saw that chalking these women's names, a day after Good Friday, was a journey for me to remember them, and to remember my own dead, and to consider my own fragility in this economy and this city, the city as Italo Calvino wrote that "would eat your children," in his writings about Saint George slaying the dragon, and how the city becomes the dragon. and in a way my children are slain as is my housing, and breathing. The fiery breath of the city in which we walk our walk, "del cammin di nostra vita..." -- "yes I said yes I said yes"

Thompson Street. Little Rosie's house is still there, the fire escapes intact and beautifully wrought. I wished she had had them at the factory. I shouted "Rosie!!" three times up at the building, and chalked her name outside the door. I handed chalk to two passers-by who stopped to inquire. One, a Mexican student, and the other a Bronx Jew who had bought her apartment "at the right time," she said, bemoaning the neighborhood and what NYU was doing to it, "disgusting architecture," she said in her tight black feathery fur, chalking, "NYU HONOR THESE GIRLS !!" noting the absence of an official commemoration for the fire, and mumbling about the rumour that NYU is encroaching on Washington Square Park next, reducing the public space. The Mexican student drew a star and cried, speaking to me in a combination of Spanish and Italian; we communicated something to the effect of -- somewhere someone in your family, in my family, --is fragile.

I talked of the Bronx with the Bronx born lady, of the fact I lost my Brooklyn apartment of 15 years a year ago, and was wondering if New York is for New Yorkers anymore. I put a flyer under one of four fist sized rocks I carried in my pocket and moved on. The flyer talked about the conditions under which the women perished, March 25th, 1911, with fire escapes falling, and elevator shaft free falls, and jumping to death, and being locked in the building, on fire.

I searched and searched amongst NYU buildings for the next address and never found it. What I did find was a fancy espresso shop at what would have been 57 West Houston, of the next Rosie, Rosie Bassino. Wow, the people looked well-heeled. I chalked her name and yelled ROSIE !!! up at the monolith building, placed my rock and moved on.

Irene Grameatassio's house had a beautiful brown three story countenance, still in the sun on Bedford Street. I opened the gate, placed the rock, chalked on the slate flatstone outside the door, and shouted "Grameatassio!!!" three times up at the building as if I were "calling for her," as we used to say in the Bronx, "I'll call for you." I thought the passers-by didn't hear shouting like this too often, and in a black leather bomber jacket and peddler cap I felt like I was from a different century, from these factory worker womens' times, and I was sweating with the act of remembering, and getting down on my knees, and carrying rocks and marking the pavement.

Tomorrow is Easter, La Pasqua. I feel ready to eat, to feel being alive, and joined in the fragile lives particularly of women. Precious blood, images of angels catching precious blood from Christ's wounds in the golden cups surround me in churches, churches open for a week, and filled with more homeless folks stepping out of the wind on Good Friday. Ah, that's another blog.

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