Aunt Mary Geraci Cieslinski with co-owners George Papas and Philip Claditis at the closing of the confectionery, 1971.
Every time I come home to Pittsburgh for a visit and drive past the confluence of three rivers at the Point, I'm moved by it the same way my grandmother was the Trinity when we passed a Catholic church. She'd touch her forehead, her heart, and each shoulder to make the sign of the cross. The Catholic schoolgirl in me wants to bow my head and say, "In the name of the Allegheny, and of the Mon, and of the holy Ohio. Amen." And in this moment of awe over its sacred equation of one plus one equals one, I often ask myself how I could leave in the first place.

There is no geography of unity in the cities I've lived in since — Boston, Denver, San Francisco, and New York — nor is there the same sense of consecration that somehow people who live together, stay together. Many Pittsburghers have no inclination to move away from their block let alone to another neighborhood or city. Why did I?

My family's river town has been in economic decline for as long as I can remember. As a child, I used to peek into the vacant business supplies storefront next to the family fruit market where my grandmother worked to see if the numbers on the adding machine paper roll had miraculously changed or the pop machine resting on its rump red side was somehow standing upright.
When I pointed this out to my Uncle Joe, he told me how he started working in the family’s fruit business when he was 9 years old. His Uncle Frank drove the delivery truck on Saturdays and he carried the orders into the house. By the time he was in the 11th grade, business was so good that he drove to Pittsburgh to load 40 to 60 bunches of bananas every Sunday. After serving in the war (and by that, we know he meant World War II), he got a job at Pittsburgh Plate Glass where he worked until he retired. He never answered my question, but his response made it sound like things could have been different if only everyone had worked harder.

Not long ago, he and a former coworker of his who became a priest had this exchange: “Calderone, I want to ask you something.” My uncle replied, “What do you want to know? You’re the one that went to college.” The priest asked him, “How do you keep your age?” Uncle Joe said, “I’m not gonna tell you. Not even in Confession.” When the priest laughed, he offered this: “I don’t drink or smoke. The only thing I ever did a lot of in my life was work. And there was plenty of it.”

My mother told me stories about how the fruit store used to be one big party on Saturday night. Like the one about the bronze shop owner who’d come in “spit and polished,” wearing a top coat over a suit and tie with a felt hat to pick up his order. While she or my grandmother or Aunt Philly boxed his fruits and vegetables, he’d go to the cupboard below the cash register where he kept his bottle of Seagram’s Seven. He helped himself to the pot of coffee they always had on the boiler plate in the back and poured in his whiskey.

Or the one about the doctor’s wife who stopped by every Saturday and had time for coffee and cookies. She wore her hair straight back in a bun. “She’d stand there and dunk with us,” my mother says. “Hell, they all did.” Every week when the mailman came to deliver the vacation postcards customers would send, my aunt stuffed a banana in his bag before he left. Then there were the times when the owner of a diner across the tracks called to say they were so busy that they ran out of lettuce and my mother would stand up on the high curve to toss a couple of heads over the fence to him.

She told me how Tarentum used to be so bopping on Saturday nights that it took 15 minutes to pull your parked car out into
traffic. Now it sometimes took 15 minutes for a car to pass by. And much of the activity in the town is generated from doctor’s offices, pharmacies, and the funeral home.

College was my way out. I wanted to go to Pitt and was accepted. I didn’t care that it wasn’t a traditional campus with acres of green grass and trees; I liked the fact that it was right in the middle of the city’s busiest neighborhood. In high school, my friends and I loved driving to Oakland in an old Ford Falcon to do research at the Carnegie Library. We had a ritual: jot down titles from the card catalog’s immense wooden cabinet, sit with our books in a remote corner of the stacks, and follow footsteps in the glass ceiling above as if they were shooting stars. We’d break for lunch and walk to our favorite coffee shop. I was astounded at what city life had brought. The first time a waitress said “sweet and sour” was a choice of salad dressing, I answered sweet, then impulsively changed my mind to sour before she explained that they came together.

My parents persuaded me to go to a state university, then I transferred to Boston College, I found an apartment to share with three other women. It reassured my parents that they were Italian American and Catholic. It reassured me that outside our door was a trolley line to downtown. So I attended Boston. When a boyfriend and I went to the Brattle in Cambridge to see Casablanca on the big screen and we walked by international news stands and jugglers surrounded by street art and coffeehouses with live music, I knew this was where I wanted to be.

My father used his pension check to pay for my education, so it wasn’t surprising that he encouraged me to get a degree in nursing or business so I could find a job after graduation. Instead, I majored in sociology and began writing for the student newspaper. For one class assignment, I researched the Jonestown mass suicide in the Bay Area and discovered that San Francisco was a journalist’s haven for social analysis. When a friend sent me a postcard from his trip out West, I decided that I would go live there after I graduated to experience the other coast, despite the fact that I loved Boston.

I needed a job in San Francisco if I was to justify the cross-country move to my parents. My father began to remind me that as a girl, I had promised when I got big and he got little that I would

**SATURDAY MORNINGS**

Truth is I resented my weekly chore of
dusting
mill soot under my dresser doily,
on the windowsill, baseboard, and floor,
beneath
the corners of my desk blotter, using spit
and four-letter words with each glide over black specks
so fine
I couldn’t tell how dirty the surface was
until it soiled my white rag, an old T-shirt
my mother
cut and folded into handy squares
she made the size of a loaf of bread
for a family
of four or six or eight depending.
I would rather have left the house,
gone
to the movies, a football game,
gone shopping for a tighter pair of jeans or
darker
shade of nail polish.
Truth is my mother couldn’t have cared
less
that I hated having to clean my room
every Saturday; she was grateful because dust meant jobs
in an industry where the blacker the better,
angel’s dust she called it but how could that be,
angel’s
dust, the color of the devil.
The family held a going-away party for Uncle Joe before he went to war in 1943. First row left to right: grandfather Anthony Calderone, Uncle Joe, mother Vinnie, grandmother Carmella, and great-grandfather Anthony Geraci.

take care of him. I reminded him that he went to college in Ohio and Florida and lived in Washington, D.C., before he returned home and settled into a career. I spent the summer in Denver attending a publishing institute to launch my career and to allow me to do some climbing in the Rockies with my sister. A friend from college even drove out to the Mile High City in her Honda Civic, her back seat stocked with homemade pepperoni bread and canned peppers from her native West Virginia to take me the rest of the way west.

My first job in San Francisco was in the public relations department of a trucking association; I spent my days tracking down a nomadic boss whose career evidently peaked while designing a truck coloring book. Regardless, I felt lucky to find work since I had come to the city clutching my Samsonite luggage and the address of a youth hostel with rooms for five bucks a night. Plus I already had a record for roaming. During my job interview, one of the questions asked was, “Tell me, Miss Corso, why is it that you move around so much?” He was right. I quit my job before my year anniversary and went to Europe for three months with friends I’d met in Denver. We pitched our tent in eight countries and tried every kind of bread and cheese you can imagine. I had a hard time justifying the practicality of this adventure to my father but tried to soften him up by sending a postcard from the village where he was born and later publishing travel articles I wrote about the trip.

When I returned, I worked for a community organization dedicated to uncovering arson-for-profit schemes in residential hotels and got a master’s degree in public administration at San Francisco State for $132 a semester, but I never came up with a paradigm to solve social problems. I did, however, make my way through the java joints on Mission Street. Despite the espresso frappés, I experienced my share of Bohemia too, and the transient nature of the city began to make me homesick. When I got fired as a weekly newspaper editor for writing controversial editorials, I decided to head home.

My parents were thrilled, not just because I was coming home. I was leaving behind the man I had been living with, a bearded U.C. Berkeley grad who wrote plays about the Nicaraguan revolution and acted in community theater. He decided to join me a year later when he got accepted into Carnegie Mellon’s drama program and was given explicit advice from father not to interfere with his daughter’s “career.” People couldn’t tell by looking at me, but I was supposed to have been my family’s boy. The letter “a” added to the end of my name didn’t represent femininity: it stood for ambition.

After living amidst San Francisco Victorians and the vibrant shades of these painted ladies, Pittsburgh felt very gray, but it was at a time when the city was hanging onto steel and organizers were trying to preserve those last puffs of smoke. It was as if I had left
Disneyland in living color for film noir. I was offered a temporary job at the Press. I caught up with friends from high school who still lived in the area and remembered what I missed so much about Pittsburgh, usually over a beer and wearing a Mill Hunk Angels softball uniform in some post-game booth at Big Jim’s in Greenfield or Hambone’s in Lawrenceville or Chiodo’s in Homestead.

But Pittsburgh was changing; one of my first writing assignments was interviewing a color consultant about the dozen or so shades he used to restore houses in historic Manchester. Whatever happened to the aluminum siding on so many of the houses in working-class neighborhoods that no matter the color it turned gray? Pittsburgh during the late 1980s was different than it was when I’d grown up here 15 years earlier. I didn’t need an economist to tell me that; all I had to do was run my finger on a windowsill and check for dust. My measuring stick was remembering the thick layer from my childhood and the weekly cleaning chores my mother asked my sister and me to do.

Problem was I didn’t have a knack for cleaning. As a girl, I’d once helped my father remove paint spots on the hardwood floors. When he told me to use some elbow grease, I threw down my rag and jumped up, eagerly asking where in the garage I’d find it. It didn’t occur to me that what I needed was to use muscle. Decades later, he and my mother cleaned my half-renovated apartment while I nursed a newborn and never once did they ask for elbow grease. Their backgrounds were Italian American working-class and their ethic was physical labor.

My paternal grandfather started out a landscaper when he came to this country from Italy where he worked in the olive grove and as a sheepherder. He got a job as a crane operator at Allegheny Ludlum Steel in Brackenridge with the help of compari (friends of the family.) He worked at the mill for nearly 50 years and was determined not to miss a shift. One day when his 1936 Chevy stalled as he approached the railroad tracks, he got out and walked to work, leaving the car to get nicked by a train. He punched in on time though. On his last day of work, my father and my uncles surprised him by driving up to the mill gate in a limousine to greet him after his graveyard shift. They drove home and made him a pancake breakfast.

After high school, my father got a job in the mill pattern shop where molds were made to pour in the steel. He was a thin man, weighing 145 pounds at the time, and he was given a snow shovel to fill the molds with sand. His coworker, a husky 200 lb. guy, used an air hammer to tap the sand down. My father laughed when he told me it should have been the other way around but admitted the job wore him down. He and a couple of his friends snuck out of the mill one day to go to a carnival in town, and it was no surprise he got an ear beating when he got home and that my grandfather said he better use his head instead of his hands.
My Very Own Cleaning Lady

I always thought I'd do my own cleaning, never forget the working-class way of Italian American women like my mother who kept a broom beside her front door as if it were a sign that read, "we work hard, we clean hard so wipe your damn feet on the welcome mat before you step inside." The broom was a sign that well-off 'mericans didn't understand; they saw it as clutter that belonged in a tool shed behind a fence in the back yard with the snow blower and the leaf blower and the lawn mower. Then I moved to Brooklyn, bought a co-op apartment, had a baby and a contractor who skipped town in the middle of renovation. He left me in dirty living hell with a nursing newborn, 650 square feet of filth and six ounces of breast milk every four hours, dust he knew my own prosperity created because I could afford to add on a second bedroom. I was another 'merican in this immigrant's eyes who'd just pay to have someone else clean up after him. It was all I could do to take a shower but I ignored signs in our lobby that advertised "PhDs who clean." It wasn't in me to hire someone, even a scholar gathering dust samples for a doctoral thesis. I still thought money would never change hands to get the apartment clean when my mother came for a visit. She wanted to but didn't ask why not a house in Pittsburgh, why I waited so long to leave my job and have a baby. She filled a bucket of water, scrubbed the floor on her knees one square foot at a time. Payback for all those Saturday mornings. As she rinsed her rag and said the contractor's name in vain, I rested on the sofa with my son, remembering dust to dust.
My father went to college in Ohio on the GI bill but made frequent visits home. The engine wasn't even cool from the drive, yet my grandfather opened the hood and started cleaning off the grease. Family lore has it that he got the engine so spotless you could grill a hot dog on it. And he did, depending on who in my family tells the story.

Those cleaning genes were passed down to my father but not to me. When he and my mother came to Brooklyn to help me pick up the pieces in a half-renovated apartment because my contractor skipped town in the middle of the job, he took one look at the new brass spigot in my bathroom sink and said to me as he meticulously wiped the water off with a rag over his index finger, “You see how shiny and polished this is now? It’ll turn just as dull and corroded if you don’t take care of it.” This, I’m sure, would come as no surprise to my Uncle Angelo who tells me that when the Corso family went for a car ride and the six kids had to double up in the back seat, my father wouldn’t like him sitting on his lap because it ruined the crease in his pants. Not only was he a fanatic about cleaning but equally so about appearance.

Like my paternal grandfather, my maternal grandmother lived by a work ethic. So much so that she instinctively ate standing up no matter how we tried to get her to stay seated during Sunday dinner. We’re reminded of this every November 27 when we celebrate not just Thanksgiving, but my parents’ wedding anniversary and my mother’s birthday. A holiday was the only day my mother could get married because it was the only day my grandmother would take off from working at my uncle’s fruit store. And she, no doubt, had somehow timed my mother’s birth on Thanksgiving as well for the same reason.

I got to spend a good deal of time with my grandmother who retired a couple of years before I became a staff reporter for my hometown newspaper, The Valley News Dispatch, a few blocks from her house. I’d sleep over when I covered late night meetings and had to be at work the next morning for a 6:30 a.m. shift. I joined her for lunch most every day too. It was over fried eggplant or ricotta cheese spread on a slice of Italian bread or an onion and egg fruozza (omelet) that I got reacquainted with my upbringing. She’d tell me about the fruit store where she worked for nearly 50 years and had made a name for herself by making up hundreds of orders for Christmas fruit baskets. One of the first things she would ask me each day was, “Were you busy today?” I nodded obligingly. As she forked a slice of eggplant with sugo and grated cheese, she would pinch the flesh on my arm and say, “Nothin’s too good for the poor.”

My Aunt Mary worked at the confectionary in Tarentum for 36 years. She told me about how she typed up a half dozen copies of the menu every day with carbon, helped cook in the kitchen, waited on tables, made candy after lunch, and did the payroll. I remember how she gave me the best advice that only an insider could give to a young girl ordering a cherry Coke there: “Uncle Philip only puts in one sprig of cherry. Uncle Louis pumps it several times.”

My Aunt Grace told me how there was a time when trains always seemed to be chugging through with heaping coal cars and that was a blessing when she came home past curfew from a date. She and my Aunt Toni used to stand outside the door wearing their feather hats and high heels and gloves, waiting for a noisy train to pass so they could sneak inside the door without my grandfather hearing them.
THE DOCTOR MAKES HIS DIAGNOSIS

I have two cities but only one home
that is my mother’s womb
with one long umbilical cord
that reaches across thousands
of frequent flyer miles.

I have two apartments and one window
filled with pleats of light
and a sooty curtain
that no matter the color
is a checkered gray.

I have “an abiding devotion” to my birthplace,
so when I go back to Pittsburgh,
I’m *stupida* for living in Brooklyn
and when I’m living in Brooklyn,
I’m mad with longing.

I have an “afflicted imagination”
that incapacitates my body, causing
nausea, loss of appetite, high fever,
pathological changes in the lungs,
brain inflammation, and cardiac arrest.

I have a “lifeless and haggard countenance,”
an “idleness conducive to daydreaming”
about thick village milk and Iron City beer,
about the sounds of bagpipes and Terrible Towels
whipping in stadium winds.

I have three college degrees and seven bookcases
but rely solely on “associationist magic.”
When I climb the stairs to the torch
of the Statue of Liberty, I imagine being
at the top of an idle factory smokestack.

I have a “highly contagious disease” but curable
if you purge my stomach, induce torture and pain.
I can be ridiculed, laughed out of my homesickness
unless you see me as a working-class woman
who does a white-collar job with blue-collar hands.

*Note: Swiss Doctor Johannes Hofer coined the word “nostalgia”
for “the sad mood originating from the desire to return to
one’s native land” and defined its symptoms in his 1688
medical dissertation, Dissertatio Medica de Nostalgia.*
Listening to family stories of how the town once thrived inspired me to jot them down in my reporter’s notebook, but what I wrote up were not feature articles for the newspaper but plays and short stories. My writing had become more creative. I had been inspired by the playwriting workshops my boyfriend taught and by Lee Gutkind’s course in creative nonfiction at Pitt. I started out with a piece of journalism and ended up with a piece of fiction from a forthcoming story collection. I quit the paper and took a part-time job so that I had more time to write. My father asked me when I was going to stop living like a pauper. He wasn’t thrilled about my move with my boyfriend (who later became my husband) to New York a couple of years later in search of writing opportunities rather than a full-time job with benefits and a pension plan. I had left for the wrong reason.

It certainly didn’t make sense financially. I was making twice as much teaching writing at universities in Pittsburgh than I am in New York but paying more than twice as much in rent now as I was in Pittsburgh. But living in Brooklyn has its advantages. Not because I am wining and dining with big agents and editors but because I have the distance I need to write about Pittsburgh.

In my new book of poems, *Death by Renaissance*, I explore how blue-collar towns can be revived so that the community purpose on which they were founded and the history that once gave them life aren’t laid to rest in the process. Not that I want to romanticize Pittsburgh’s steel industry but simply employ “the power of memory and the poetics of witness” to quote working-class studies author Janet Zandy. I write as one who left for those who stayed: My sister who struggles to button her shirt after working her share of hand-intensive assembly jobs that cause repetitive stress syndrome and rheumatoid arthritis. Cousins who can’t afford to go to the doctor because they don’t work enough hours to qualify for health insurance. In-laws who have been forced to file for bankruptcy or work two shifts to bring in more income. People who still don’t have two pennies to rub together, as my grandmother would say.

When I think of the human toll on family members and so many Pittsburgers who never made the transition to the high-tech industry, I realize that I have no regrets about leaving Pittsburgh. What I will regret, however, is if I can’t find a way to come back and live again some day beyond the virtual pages of my writing. Not because my husband and I haven’t found a sense of community in Brooklyn. We live in a coop apartment, shop at a food co-op and belong to a community garden. Our son attends a cooperative daycare, and we are members of a babysitting co-op. Writing groups as well. Cooperation enough, but the best thing about New York is Pittsburgh — how I can remember it as a place where I belong regardless of where I happen to be. Perhaps I have been a wandering soul for so many years because my identity is so grounded in my Italian-American, working-class upbringing in Pittsburgh that no matter where I live, I know that I won’t shed my skin. I can’t, even if I wanted to.

Since my father passed away, I’ve been thinking more about coming home to be closer to my mother. Each time I take my son back for visits, we walk along the river to look for boats with her or my sister the way we did with my grandfather when we were little girls. I’ve even taken him to see the Point and asked him what he sees. He still says water, like most three-year-olds probably would. I see my father’s name, my name written on the current as if it were a sign in Italy for a major thoroughfare that reads, Corso. Yes, this is my course.

Paola Corso’s new book of poems, *Death by Renaissance* (Bottom Dog Press), is set in her native Pittsburgh and draws from her Italian American, working-class background.