



OVUNQUE SIAMO/NEW ITALIAN-AMERICAN WRITING/Vol 3 Issue 4

Paola Corso Mama's Rules for Writing

The late memoirist and Virginia Woolf scholar Louise DeSalvo once shared how she kept at her writing while raising children.

Rule Number 1: As soon as babies are in their cribs for a nap, Louise wrote, don't clean the house or talk on the phone. Get to your desk.

My rule: As soon as baby falls asleep in his stroller, lug him in his carriage up four flights of steps to your walk-up apartment.

Keep the rattle in his hand. Bonnet on his head. Pacifier in mouth.

Do not move him to his crib or sunny nursery. Wheel him into a cool, dark closet, recline his seat, and crank up Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star loud enough to make an exit without baby flinching.

Grab a bag of cheese puffs from the pantry. Then get to your desk.

Rule Number 2: Louise said you don't need blocks of time.

What I need is two bucks fifty and a subway ride. Any borough. A residency in a mobile writing workshop. Not at home with fussy baby. Not at work with cranky boss.

In the company of creativity. A woman who knits and pearls a sweater. Acrobats with beat boxes who swing on poles, inches from your front-row seat. A ventriloquist dummy singing the Beastie Boys' "Stop that Train."

Rule Number 3: You are not a taxi cab driver. And if you do have to take your child to games or lessons, bring your work and do your work. Ignore your child. Wave occasionally, Louise did say.

I am not a city driver. I don't own a car, but I do have a knapsack big enough to stuff the 6-ounce paperback I'm reading, disposable scrap paper, and a change of pens.

CONTINUED

When I get to the end of a paragraph, I look up and wave at my child. When I finish a page, I cheer him on. I complete a poem or a chapter: I rise to my feet in a standing ovation. When I write the last word of a first draft, it's time to sign my son up for another 12-week session.

Rule Number 4: Louise said you have a right to do your work even though you're not getting paid yet.

I tell that to my husband who holds a full-time job. To my father who calls me a pauper without a pension. To myself when another rejection letter arrives in the mail.

Louise's Rule Number 5: You are the grown-up.

So if I skip a shower for a few extra minutes of writing time, I've made an adult decision to trade a bit of body odor for a poem that doesn't stink.

And if I stock up on jars of baby food rather than chop and steam, puree and can fresh vegetables, I've made an adult decision to trade a bit of earth mother for a story that isn't mush.

Or if someone asks me what restaurants I've dined at to get back into the real world again, I answer without shame, "There's two that I frequent. One is called Frozen. The other is Take Out."

Your life is yours, Louise said. Not your child's.

All the years I've been a writer vs. weeks, a mother. Changing genres instead of diapers. Chest baring rather than breastfeeding. Writer's groups. Not mommies.

I've examined my life and witnessed my world through characters and conflicts with conclusions on the page. Still do but with a different perspective.

When my son is old enough to vigorously point and say with passion, "Dat! Dat!" I turn to see what dat is. As if for the first time. A jackhammer blasting concrete. A church bell ringing in its tower. The hum and whirl of a ceiling fan.

Something I've neglected. Someone I've taken for granted. I wonder. What does he see when he gazes at me?

My son looks me square in the eyes, and I dare to look back.

Bio: Paola Corso is the author of six books of poetry and fiction, all set in her native Pittsburgh where her Italian immigrant family worked in the steel mills. Honors include a New York Foundation for the Arts poetry fellowship and a Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award. Corso's latest books are *Vertical Bridges: Poems and Photographs of City Steps*, *The Laundress Catches Her Breath*, winner of the Tillie Olsen Award in Creative Writing, and *Once I Was Told the Air Was Not for Breathing*, a Triangle Fire Memorial Association Awardee. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Progressive*, *Women's Review of Books*, and more. Corso is co-founder and resident artist for Steppin Stanzas, a grant-awarded poetry & art project celebrating city steps and a member of the Park Slope Windsor Terrace Artist's Collective. Visit paolacorso.com.