

# Jacqueline Kolosov

## *Slovenia in Shadow*

I

Why does she kneel within  
the hard oak pew, hazel eyes

held by Mary presiding  
within immanent stained glass?

This ageless girl-mother the pattern  
my own mother, on ice-floe days,

patterns herself after. Why  
—when her mother never lived

to see the shadow farm her husband  
created on American land?

—When her sister wearied  
a hospital bed, her cancer-  
ridden body consuming its own flesh,  
a four year old daughter

asking after her? Why? I ask,  
having asked these questions  
since I first knelt beside her.

II

...Only now, in the misting  
alchemy of morning,  
beyond cricket chirr and absent  
star, a path unfolds,  
mossed and earth-fragrant.

Up ahead, and almost  
within reach, a russet-haired girl  
in pigtails and scuffed leather shoes,  
who fled the sharp-beaked village  
geese, big as swans,  
but greedier, and without  
the swans' prism grace.

Tucking a jay's wind-riffed feather  
    behind her ear, she pauses  
to scout mushrooms  
    and the eared chance of rabbit.  
She is eleven. In one year  
    the government will seize  
her family's farm, and her father  
    will be hauled to jail.  
But for today she is still  
    a girl who mounts a horse  
and makes it all the way  
    to the poppy and yarrow-stitched meadow  
before the clutch of mane  
    slips her grasp.

### III

My mother's mother, my *Oma*  
    of the sorrow-dark eyes and pale  
freckled skin, gave birth at seventeen  
    to my mother, *Helenca*.  
Fourteen years *Oma* helped  
    my grandfather turn grapes  
into *cvicek*, the Slovenian wine  
    they sold in barrels in Ljubiana,  
a half-day's journey from their farm.  
    My mother helped  
coax seedlings into life, pick  
    fruit from the gooseberry and  
currant, feed the cows,  
    even gather eggs still warm  
from the hens. Yet she was  
    too young to help  
with the wine, source of  
    her shoes, schoolbooks,  
and satisfied smile.

#### IV

Mostly, I remember Oma's  
gentleness, the soft way she moved  
her fingers through my own  
russet hair. She brought me  
jelly bismarcks from the Cicero bakery  
and tucked me in when I visited,  
but she never told me her stories...  
It was more than twenty years  
after she died, my mother revealed  
why Oma never drank the milk  
she once coaxed from the cows,  
having come briefly to America  
with her own mother  
in the depressed years  
following the First World War.  
Oma, whose grandmother  
once petitioned the bishop  
for Oma to attend private school,  
joined her mother  
in the airless assembly  
of a milk bottling plant.  
For years, she woke  
from nightmares of bandaged  
hands that would not heal.

#### V

My mother, whose memories  
of the farm resemble dandelions  
buoyed by wind, now tends  
her own thicket of gooseberry  
and currant, peppery

rosemary, and for Oma,  
    a rosary of bleeding heart.  
Of their months in a refugee  
    camp, she remembers only  
hours of English classes  
    taught by a former prisoner of war.  
Of the ship's long crossing  
    to New York (how the sky-  
scrapered horizon must have exalted  
    and terrified)  
and the overnight train ride  
    to Chicago, she says even less,  
though she, at sixteen,  
    her English surpassing her parents'  
by far, must have been  
    their American voice.

## VI

Last July, my mother journeyed  
    back to Slovenia  
for the first time, found relatives  
    still growing wine,  
though the horses had been replaced  
    by tractors, and the gypsy songs  
by the haze of a TV screen.  
    Yes, she found the timbers  
of the farmhouse decayed.  
    Yes, she wept when strangers  
chased her off *their* land.  
    Yet there remained time  
enough to discover swallows  
    still nesting in the ruined barn,  
to eat from the currant, and catch  
    the evergreen drift of rosemary.  
The geese, she believes,

are still the village's reigning terror.  
When she returned to the States,  
her only photograph was a swan  
and her young. And although  
she has not said so, the scintillate  
ripples fanning from that continuum  
of birds I keep thinking of  
tell me, somewhere  
between the school  
and what was once her family's farm,  
is the shaded path,  
and the silhouette of a russet-haired girl  
in scuffed leather shoes,  
a girl who lingers  
as long as she can  
before the path gives way  
to a meadow, and the un-stolen  
glimpse of the beckoning land.

## Answer Me

Take that I am afraid of a world where the robins can build a nest, tend their eggs,  
nourish their young, then lose each and every one.

Take that yesterday's fallen fledglings, speckled breasts rigid beneath  
the pear tree, sharpened my own vision of the rose bush's second flowering.

Take that this morning we spied a surviving fledgling perched far out  
on the pear tree's branch, calling to her parents so that they could find her:

Take that the baby redbreast woke us to the bowl of sun-warmed peaches basking  
in a downpour of light.

Take that I could not sleep last night for fear of the orange cat who overstepped  
the chicken wire blockade you strung around the branch harboring the nest.

Take that you pried a robin's young from the cat's mouth just after dawn.

Do birds grieve? I ask, recalling the robin's frantic circling when we stooped  
to examine the dead fledgling half-hidden in the grass.

You don't answer. Next question:

How many afternoons make up a robin's life?

This is our garden bordered by pear and the last owner's chain-link fence.

Here a tenacious rose buds forth hundreds of luxuriant, scarlet  
blooms twice each summer. Here the robins have begun another  
nest along a branch directly above the last.

Umber eyes half closed, the orange cat drowns towards noon's slow overture of sun.  
Behind the monkey grass, the female robin forages among drooping iris and desiccated  
leaves. We'll have to buy the cat a bell, drug her food, keep watch.

We live among these creatures, as if within a secret text. Once initiated, we wake  
to a three-week robin exploring the leafy luxury of pear amid the constant  
riot of sparrow.

You stand at the fence's edge gazing at the robin through binoculars that distill  
the speckled feathers he will shed, if he survives the season.

We plunge our hands into the deep-wood lilies transplanted to our garden.  
Watch butterflies coupling in electric light.

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A single fledgling survived.

But do birds grieve?

And whatever the morning's birdsong communicates, do we not also hear a current called joy?

Answer me.

## ***Field Guide to North America's Birds, An Ode***

I've little use for the male prairie chicken's courtship sac of clementines, or the turkey vulture's lifetime diet of carrion. Sure, that accidental wanderer, the blue-footed booby, gregarious fisherman of the Salton Sea, is awfully cute, until a frigate bird's pursuit prompts him to disgorge his midday meal. Still, who wouldn't covet the zigzag plummet of woodcock, or the whiskered auklet's ability to swim tidal rips off Alaska's coast? Given witches broom or a surfeit of wishes, I'd like just one afternoon in the upper reaches, following a pygmy nuthatch's voracious climb, several more hours trailing the bushtit through chaparral, and an entire aerial blue afternoon exploring the Sangre de Cristo Mountains as a fleet violet-green swallow. True, the feedlot cluck of cowbird merits scant admiration, and the hunch-backed skua's habit of stealing may explain solitary confinement well beyond the Antarctic Coast. Still, there remains the stalking gait of the least bittern, patrolling mangroves along the Gulf, and the jade-footed little blue heron, contemplative keeper of Florida's coast. Perhaps if I save my crusts for the rock dove, and pray for elf owl, three-toed woodpecker, and boreal chickadee, I'll manage to come back as the evening's whip-poor-will, who wakes to a mountain woodland, the night sky just a curtain sheering thought.

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Jacqueline Kolosov's first full-length collection of poems, *Vago*, is forthcoming from Lewis-Clark Press in November 2006. *The Red Queen's Daughter*, a young adult novel, will be published by Hyperion later in 2007. New poetry and prose appear in *Orion*, *Shenandoah*, and *Lifewriting Annual*. She is on the creative writing faculty at Texas Tech University.