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For my Grandmother, Rose Nevel

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FOR MY GRANDMOTHER, ROSE NEVFL

I. When I was seven, you lay on our couch and whispered stories in my ear. I remember how your grey hair blended with the blue cushions, as my fingers twisted in your nightgown, grey as morning sand, as I strained to grasp your fading words. My face pale, with freckles and soft skin against yours, rough, dried by sea air, like an old gull's. I remember your stories through your hands caressing mine, as you dreamed and spoke.

"Once there was a girl in Russia, your age maybe, her hair in a kerchief, flowered shoes on her feet. She was afraid of nothing and thought she would like to be a soldier when she grew up. But her mama told her she could not, and she was sad. One day, real soldiers came to her door, and she asked if she could join them; but they laughed and pushed her away, then searched her house and seized her mama who tried to stop them. The girl ran from the house, ran and ran until her flowered shoes were only shreds. She hid in the woods, still as dust, until she imagined she heard the soldiers foot-step pass away."

II. On those nights when you dreamed, I woke trembling, wondering if the screams I heard were mine or yours. We shared your nightmare: hands bruised from crawling under wire, our sleep stabbed by guns and dogs on taut leashes.

III. At night, after falling asleep I see you stalk the yard, dragging bare feet back to Russia, to childhood, 1905. The night breeze blows your nightgown against your legs, blue-veined, knees poking through folds of grey cloth. Toward morning, you dream your one dream: Smoke-grey sky, you on a street, the stones slippery under your feet, your hair knotted in a kerchief,
the laundry basket you carry concealing guns to heavy.
Your fingers, clutching your nightgown,
ever let go of the basket.
Again and again,
you must walk and carry,
walk and carry
the basket. Footsteps
echo on stones,
guns fire into morning,
morning, grey as your nightgown,
grey as the morning you wake to.

Bonnie Nevel