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For my Grandmother, Rose Nevel

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FOR MY GRANDMOTHER, ROSE NEVEL

- 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,
never 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