

Two Poems by Marina Romani

When Voices Sang for Him

And then the voices
intertwined to sing for him, my father,
who used to say a Russian funeral
will always break your heart.

I knew what he meant—
I'd heard the mournful melodies
and harmonies of grief,
the chants of graveside weeping,
the prayers for memory eternal.

I knew all that,
been to enough by then,
knew to stand grim
as smoke of incense drifted
upwards with the music,
the priests intoning ancient words,
the choir chanting in response.

But when I heard the voices
intertwine to sing those melodies for him
I felt the tears, so long held back, release at last
as smoke of incense drifted past.

And still I wondered
if he heard the voices
twining in those melodies for him,
and what he felt and thought

because I could not comprehend
that he could not.

Her Voice

Just be grateful you can still hear her voice,
my friend remarked quietly

I'd been carrying on as I often did,
about my mother's recurrent complaints,
her disappointment in the person I was,
—mainly not a replica of her.
She was well of voice then.

Then came the strokes.
The first merely frightened her.
The second took her control of words.
She left me phone messages anyway.
Write to me, her voice said.
and I knew it meant to call her.
Sometimes, she tried over and over
to say the word she knew she meant.
She'd compose her mouth and her brain,
but *Sunday* would come out as *someday*,
or *church* as *birch*, or *tomato* as *potato*.
Tfu! she would spit out after each failure.

The third stroke took away the word remnants
she'd managed to hold on to. She never accepted
the loss, protesting it with every gesture.
Lifting herself on her one good elbow,
she'd turn toward us, her face and half-body

poised in the manner of conversation,
but the mouth and the tongue produced
only *bu . . . bu . . . bu . . .*
She watched us trying to guess her message.
Her eyes spoke the humiliation.

There were no more phone messages.
I kept the last, garbled ones for a long time.
Now even those are gone, and her voice
is an absence I've come to know.

Marina Romani, child of Russian émigrés, spent the first part of her childhood in wartime and civil-war China; those early years are the focus of *Child Interwoven*, a memoir in poem and prose she is now assembling. A second project-in-process, tentatively titled *Catching Scatters*, is a compilation of her latest poems. Marina's early work appeared in the now defunct *Poetry Shell* magazine; her recent work has been published in *Homestead Review*, *Porter Gulch Review*, and the *Tor House Newsletter*. Since 2008, Marina's poems have twice been finalists in the Central Coast Writers' annual writing contest.