

MARINA ROMANI

Swinging with Francesca

She sends herself high, smiling at flight
into nowhere, everywhere,
descends, gathers force, and rises anew,
back and forth, again and again.

The swing hanging adjacent is vacant.
It sways gently, inviting — *Me?*
Even if I could hoist myself up
these gnarled hands couldn't grasp
the chains well enough for the flight.

I watch her rise, legs outstretched,
then folded back, gliding up backward
to the soft bounce, dipping down,
then thrust forward, flying once more,
and again, back and forth.

I know this rhythm, it's etched on my bones.
On the upswing, the sky comes close
and my head seems to poke through the clouds.
Swooping — a catch of the heartbeat,
soaring — a reach to the sky.
Over and over
—each swoop a new song,
—each flight a breath of pure light
shining nowhere, everywhere.

Baba Yaga

1.

She came out of the stories,
stooped Baba Yaga with a sack on her back
filled with children she'd eat later on in her shack.
Her bony old fingers found their way to my bed,
scraggly nails clawed my blanket, raspy voice
crooning, intoning — *Sweet, sweet little one.*
All I could do was cry out to my grown-ups.
They came with their comfort, turned on the lights,
shook out my blanket, and pointed to corners
—*See? All empty!* they said, offered reality, safety
of everyday life, foolproof evidence of nothing.
But *I* knew she was there, in the night.

2.

I know what she is now.
I had a name for her once,
when I had a Mama and a Papa
to comfort me, back when she came to me
in deep darkness, tiptoeing round my bed,
her shadow clinging, as I looked up wide-eyed,
too frightened to move, calling out till they came
offering comfort. But they could not see her.

She came back last month,
when Mama and Papa were long gone.
She came back as I heard voices calling my name,
felt the touch of green-smocked women pulling on me
as I floated in quicksand, my eyelids gluey, arms leaden,
I tried to come up as they wanted, tried to please them
because they were kind, because they wanted to help me.

But how could they, when she was back?
Jagged shadow shape, ghastly whispers, cat-sharp claws
pressed my chest, grasped my breath, sent it floating . . .
I knew her then. I know now what she always was.

Grand Canyon Seen from the Air

Earth scars, meandering layers
—pink, orange, grey, purple —
colors uncountable, unnamable
in myriad shiftings of light.

Serpentine lines undulate in earth
and the river keeps on gouging it
slowly, with persistence indifferent
as it travels to its own destination
without intent, without end . . .

Shoe Odyssey

I was wearing my pretty patent-leather Mary-Janes
that April day, my first day ever in an American School.
In my new sixth-grade classroom, near the end of its year,
I was a fresh arrival from Sydney, Australia,
—it was just starting fall term in its upside-down way.
And I spoke funny. The first girls who talked to me there
soon wanted to know why my shoes were so strange.
How I spoke didn't seem to matter in comparison.

It was penny-loafer time in America, and a pair of penny-loafers
I managed to beg from my parents, barely able to afford them,
not understanding why my perfectly good shoes wouldn't do.
Then they decided I needed the discipline of a Catholic school
where the uniform specified saddle shoes, graceless appendages
I thought them—shoes that made any girl look and feel like a cow.
I hid my beloved penny loafers in my school bag so I could
shed the cow look and transform myself daily on the way home.

The shoe fashions of the fifties were not in themselves full of grace.
I survived Catholic school, then again public school,
shifting from loafers with socks, to loafers without (to my mother's
dismay), to ballet-style flats, and on to young-woman pumps
with starter high heels. Nylon stockings, let's not forget,
were obligatory with those respectable pumps,
and—long before someone came up with panty-hose—
required a garter belt for holding them up.
That contraption might as well have been a chastity belt.

My liberation came in the glorious period of three-inch heels.
I had wooden clog-like slip-ons from Italy with hand painted
designs on those towering heels—they were my pride and my joy.
I had delicate see-through plastic ones, my Cinderella slippers.
Shoes upon shoes crowded my closets, came along wherever I moved.
Each pair came with a story, almost every one held a memory.

Boots arrived sometime in the seventies. How can I forget
my luscious Italian suede, *softest* suede, boots?
So lovely I had to buy two pairs—one black and one creamy.
They gave class to whatever I wore, made me feel beautiful.

Until my toes, slowly curling upward and inward,
and my ankles, stiffening, made a cripple out of me.
I retired the boots and the pumps and the pretty sneakers,
and one memorable afternoon the boots left my closet

as the proud possession of a good friend on her way
to distant and exotic travels, while my feet carried me,
limping, into the orthopedic shoe store.

I watched a woman being fitted with one of those
lumpy appendages—saddle shoes without the flair.
“I’m a *woman*,” I heard her say to the impassive shoe man,
her eyes, her voice pleading for sympathy
as she mourned the loss of beauty and all that came with it.

I settled in, awaiting my turn.

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 in the process of assembling. Marina’s work has appeared in *Homestead Review*, *Porter Gulch Review*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, and the *Tor House Newsletter*. Her poems have twice been finalists in the Central Coast Writers’ annual writing contest.