

## Marina Romani

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### Love's Progress in a Triad

— *seventies-flavored memories* —

#### 1. *At Day's End*

Arms, legs, cigarettes, half-finished tea.  
Craving banana chips but too much indulged  
in the delicious flow of idleness to budge.

These are the margins of the day,  
when I feel your beard on my hair,  
and hearing the evening breath, look up  
to see the humorous eye under the arched brow.  
It is awake, for now.

#### 2. *Distance*

Looking up at the sun-goldened map,  
where oceans frame the land's expanse,  
through these three thousand miles,  
I feel a warm and soothing glow  
—your touch, your smile.

#### 3. *Paper Dreams*

Blood cools to ink.  
Flesh slows to paper stasis.  
You've become my paper man,  
and I, your paper woman.

My dreams are shaped into envelopes  
addressed in a familiar hand.  
Last night I found three  
in the black treasure box.  
Why didn't I open any?

Another night, dreaming,  
I wrote and wrote a letter.  
What did it say?  
I mailed in the morning  
the one I had written waking.

I like the old ones,  
dreams of sound and sight  
and flesh and blood.  
These are cold, silent.

## **Messages in Blue**

*Sorrow's tears washed out all the color from my eyes,*  
she said once to her child. Pleased to be confidante,  
the child nodded gravely, not daring to question.  
Yet her eyes were always unfailingly, utterly blue.

In her eighty-fifth year, body stroke-smitten,  
mouth no longer able to shape any words,  
still she spoke fluently her singular language  
of luminous fluid melodious blue.

Living as dead, she expressed her dismay  
with eyes glistening azure rippling to black.  
And in a last act, as her own end came near,  
she welcomed her newborn great-grandchild  
with a twinkle of song in soft periwinkling blue.

## **My Grandmother Vera Kirill'na**

She was

the one we saw now and then in the garden of a tall building  
when she came out dressed all in white, and I was four years old,  
the one I was told to call Busia, a Russian grandmother name,

the one we later saw in a big ugly room with lots of beds  
where messy wild-eyed women sat around or walked about  
saying things I didn't understand but knew were strange,  
and Mama said we had to take her home, and I was six,

the one we made room for,  
who now declared she was too young to be a Busia  
and from then on I was to use her patronymic,  
so she was Vera Kirill'na to me ever after.

She was

the one who always hummed the same little tune  
and could play five pieces on the piano,  
who they said was a wonderful musician once,  
the one I had to share piano time with,

the one they said used to be a great beauty  
with a thick braid that reached all the way to her waist,  
who now tied up her bits of hair in funny ribbons  
and wore skirts on top of skirts with untucked shirts hanging out.

She was

the one who talked about people living in the ceiling  
or above it maybe, and they all had names,  
and Mama said I was not to listen when she talked like that,

the one who sounded angry sometimes and raised her voice  
then would stop and giggle to herself about some joke that was just hers  
and go back to humming that same little tune.

She was

the one no one loved except Mama, whom Papa called his cross in life,  
who was always around, mostly in her cluttered room,  
but would appear in the dining room at odd times of day or night,  
the other member of our little family, who was in it but not of it,

my mother's mother who outlived my father by twelve years  
and in the end had to live in a place among strange people again  
because Mama couldn't lift her any more,

who in the last decade of her life stopped speaking entirely.

She was

my only living grandmother for more than forty years,  
the one I was afraid of although she never touched me,  
the one with whom I never had a real conversation,  
the forgotten one, whose pink marble gravestone is inscribed

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

the words chosen by Mama, the only one who knew her.

## **Cicada Summer**

arms legs bared to the sun  
I lie on summer's green grass  
as cicadas sound all around  
around me cicadas sing zinging

grass blades tickle my skin  
cicada shells crackle beneath  
I lie still listening watching  
acacia trees' leaves flicker  
in clearest sky blues brushed  
light by cloud wisps wafting

summer stillness summer song  
green glints yellow-green blue-green  
in white-kissed blues acacia flecks  
float weave rings in sun shafts  
and golden cicadas are zinging

## Bundle

It starts with your mother  
—the moment she expels you she enfolds you in the first layer  
of that bundle you'll be forming for the rest of your life.  
Mother, father, aunts, uncles, playmates, teachers, all wrap around,  
add layers, whether they like it or not, make you grow as you go.

Some fall off, sort of  
—but even when you don't see them, you know they're there,  
somewhere, sharing with you this bit of time on this planet.  
In that way, they're part of the thickening bundle that's you.

Then someone dies. No longer shares your time or your space.

My Babbi died when I was four.  
Mama said—*Babbi's died. She's no longer with us.*  
I felt a little empty. I didn't know what to do.  
My Uncle Oleg died when I was seven.  
I was taken to his funeral, saw the open coffin—his face, whitest white.  
Aunt Masha, his sister, a grown-up, stood crying.  
I understood, a little.

In the early years, the bundle mostly grows,  
with friends, acquaintances, even celebrities  
—the movie stars, the presidents you'll never see.  
Now and then a layer peels away.  
When Jimmy Dean died, a bit of me got smaller. I got colder, for a while.

With passing years, I grew large with people I met,  
those I came to love and those I didn't,  
those I briefly touched and never saw again.  
Oh, how briefly we touched . . .

If you have a child, you know it dwells within you.  
No matter what happens, you bundle it in, it will never be external.  
My daughter, my son, lodge deep, enrich my core.  
Through them, one by one,  
my three granddaughters, my grandson increase my fullness.

But if you have the luck to live a long life, you'll get to know unbundling.

I've been unbundling for a while.  
My grandmothers (I never knew my grandfathers), my father, my mother.  
Early and later losses. Each one more chilling than the last.

Men I loved and never saw again.  
I never stopped loving them actually. We separated for good reasons.  
Still, they shared earth and time with me. And then they didn't.

There was a man I loved for half a year and never saw again.  
We agreed on the need to part.  
Yet, for the forty years that followed, he was part of me.  
I knew he was around, on the other coast.  
He probably knew where I was, too—but it's hard to know with men.  
It didn't matter too much. He enriched me by existing.  
Last month, a friend sent me his obituary, and nothing is the same any more.  
He is not in the world. I am.  
I'm colder. I continue. No one would know the difference.  
But it's entirely different.  
He's the reason for this piece of writing.

The peeling is accelerating.  
I've been losing friends, loves, acquaintances.  
International figures. John Kennedy. Martin Luther King. Audrey Hepburn . . .  
I'm getting thin.

Still the core holds. Still I grip the core. Oh let me not,  
oh, let me not outlive my children, my grandchildren.

I'd unravel, drift about in ashes and dust.

**Marina Romani**, now retired from a couple of careers and as many marriages, lives in Monterey, California, where taking oceanside walks and writing poems are among her greatest pleasures. Her work has appeared in *Porter Gulch Review*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, the *Tor House Newsletter*, *Poetry Pacific*, and previous issues of *Homestead Review*. Marina's recently completed poem-and-prose memoir, *Child Interwoven: A Russian Girlhood in 1940s Shanghai*, is ready for a publisher willing take a chance on a somewhat unusual compilation of memories and reflections.