Two Poems by Mari Železnik O'Neill

Last Row, Last Seat

When grandfather Anton and his brothers
came from Austria, a three-syllable name
was the only thing they owned
It was as heavy and enticing as old world dumplings—
the kind you want to take out of your stomach
after you've eaten them—
but can't.

I never fit into the country of grand aunt Jennie's kitchen,
Though strange scents of stews, sausages and foreign words
drew me there like forbidden secrets—
in spite of myself.
I would stare up at her kind face, my grandmother's sister
a pale map of hard times where
Lines and wrinkles charted out memories of
skinned rabbits, recipes, and a harsh old world
lived with their menfolk.
Grand Uncle Frank
towered over me—scornful
I didn't want to eat *potica*--
*t*hat delicious word that looked like chocolate dessert—
but turned out as tasteless on my child's tongue
as most words I didn't understand did then
like the last name even the teachers could never say.

I was the only child in first grade who couldn't
write or say her own name—
but would soon learn to write it with a death-hold grip
on my fat pencil—
two -z's, a -k, an -l, two -e's, an -n, and an -I
Zeleznik made my fingers sore with mystery.
I wanted to be an Adams, or a Ryan, or even a Chen
so I wouldn't have to wait in line so long
and sit behind everyone in the last row.
Blissfully ignorant of rich and
ancient cultures I didn't know then,
that most of us still don't.

When Anton and Frances died long ago,
The relatives gorged themselves on talk and drink
And danced to the accordion just as they had at their wedding—
like in the old country
Missing their families in the little farmhouse on the hill
My mom and four siblings went to the orphanage.
I used to get tired of correcting people, but then
This name is all I have of them
Except for Anton's laughing eyes
And the borrowed memory of him
with his hand on Frances' shoulder—
gripping her chair in the portrait.
I say it with pride now that I know them better.

Note: An earlier version of the preceding poem first appeared in *Hawai'i Review*, Winter 1993, Issue 36, Vol. 16, No.#3, pp. 65-66

I. Who am I ?

This is a complicated question
I am a woman with roots from elsewhere.
My ancestors lived hard lives
just surviving.
All of them got here by sailing
From somewhere to New York—
or Baltimore
or Boston
then moving on
to the windy city
And the Slovenians —
They all went directly to
Joliet and St. Joseph's parish

I'm 100% American—
but DNA doesn't lie
Slovenian and *Gotscheer* on one side
Irish and English on the other
My face is my father Jack's—
he died before I met him
I saw his image first at 61
His freckles and that grin exact, but
fingers and toes from my mother,
my nose Slovenian like my uncle Tony's
A gift for language from somewhere—
an Irish tongue
And somehow an affinity for islands
or the mountain lakes,
throwback hair from Johan
and blue eyes—
from those *Gotscheers*
Tiny like great grandmother Frančiška,
And grandmother Frances born in America—
and my mother
DNA doesn't lie.

II. The Journey

Frančiška and Jernej—my great grandparents
Traveled separately- he from Amsterdam
And she alone with the young children—
$10 in her pocket to get to Jernej
from Le Havre
and their new life
I try to imagine that journey into the unknown—
hopes and plans for the future—
weeks spent on a boat
amid bizarre tongues, foreign syllables
of immigrants
at the turn of the century—
All feeling the loneliness of being far from home
I'm not sure I would have her courage.

Grandfather Anton, youngest of six—
came from tiny Riharjevec
With a long Slovenian name,
accordion music, and
stories and laughter
in a strange language
from that place no one ever heard of
with two brothers—
remembering a few recipes for
pickling cucumbers and making sausage
All his memories
concealed in that odd language
my mother and siblings never really learned.
They tried to figure out—
listening at the wall
with a glass—wondering about
how much trouble they were in—
Anton's memory full of
the beautiful hills and lakes in Slovenia,
and the family he would not see again
on the farm.

My ancestors
dreamt of making a life—
there was no room for the last three
of five sons
on their farm in Riharjevec—
all at American Steel
struggling to survive the early years,
then World War I
Because a Serbian knocked off Ferdinand
somewhere in Austria
and started a war

My grandfather married Jernej's daughter
in 1919—
the only one born American

and survived—even later
in the depression when
everybody ate what appeared in their yard—
rabbits, cabbage, and I try not to think what else—
Just as their people back home
had survived for centuries
on the once feudal farm
In Austria.
They had always survived—
with just a few cattle and small fields.
Did they really eat voles?

They are still there—
my cousins, who lived a century of war
without us—
Fascism, Communism, Nazism,
free now but with a past—
the cousins my mother never met—
and won't learn about now
because I've left it too late.
I was still that child who
wouldn't eat strange food
But then suddenly I wanted to know—
long after I could ask.
So I asked the living.

One got conscripted
by the Nazis.
I saw the photo of Leopolde—in uniform
When I asked, my cousins said—*ne vem*
And to think I could have spoken to him—
If I had been quicker to ask questions
None of us know what they went through
in this land filled with mass graves.
A distant Kovačič was Partisan from Bločice
—a communist hero to another cause—
My cousins are still there—
living in peace in calm land.
On the beautiful farm where—
I was so excited to see the same view
as Anton—
of tall pines and cloud topped hills
From the window
of the rebuilt farmhouse

My mom and uncles and aunts
waited every day for Anton
to come home
with leftovers in his lunch box
American Steel must have been hard work
yet he saved something
for the 5 little ones.
Embracing their lives in America
where most of them were born, married, died—
buried too soon—
in a churchyard

with more Slovenian names than
I had ever seen—
when I finally visited.
I didn't feel a stranger
In St. Joseph's cemetery.

My great grandmother Frančiška died of TB—
as had her mother and her grandmother
back in *Loška Dolina—*
*w*here so many died young.
She sailed with with little Angela and Franc Mihael
from Le Havre on La Bretagne
Franc Mihael, the Joliet boy who died a soldier—
a train accident in 1918.
Buried in France near an Irish grand uncle
My grandmother Frances died young in an accident
on the Joliet road
In 1934.
Hit by an impaired driver
on her way home from a catering job.
My grandfather Anton, a few months later—
from a hit and run
He knew something was off that day
but couldn't explain it.

Great grandfather Jernej lived until 1941
but never married again
Angela became Jennie—and
stayed with her father for years
doing other people's ironing
to make money.
Her sister Frances long passed,
Jennie married and moved away
Where she died at the end of the 80's
So many questions I could have asked her
when I had the chance—
but didn't.

I knew her from weddings and funerals
Where the accordion played—
celebrating the lives passed
with food and dance—
as if nothing sad had ever happened

So many things I don't know, but
DNA doesn't lie.
Who am I is a complicated question
With a simple answer.
I am a small dot in the passage of time.
I know who I am now—an
American girl with a Slovenian heart.