

Marlene Ekola Gerberick

JUHO ERKKI

(My Mother's Father)

I

*When you sat at the head of that long ago table
where my grandmother never sat, but instead
waited on your every wish, you widened our
collective cousinly eyes as from our position
at the opposite end we watched your every move.
Calmly, you balanced a row of peas
along your knifeblade. Then, with a slight
raise of your arm, a dextrous twist to your wrist,
the whole line gently rolled into your mouth.
You never let even one pea fall.*

*Your great mustache kept evidence
of all previous courses. Pearls of gravy
gleaming on bristles of that great brush
further guaranteed our never wavering attention
to the brief but busy space beneath your nose.*

II

*If we were spellbound then by you whom we thought
so rare, I have come to realize that you
were no different, really, from all the others
of your countrymen who crossed the cold Atlantic
to run boarding houses full of swearing, sweating,
hungry humans, or to claw red ore from a miserly
deep earth, or to topple trees older than misery,
until finally you had enough money to sell yourselves,
your wives and your children into many lifetimes
of hard labor. You bought your own land!*

*As all those other men I knew
you talked as little as possible to women
and children. When you talked with other men
the air above the back stairs where
you gathered on summer nights slowly
filled with low, soft melodies.*

III

*Yet you wore a coat of great mystery. In a fabric
of church and family where all was known, there was
something about you, we knew not what, that was not
the same as all those who looked and sounded
just like you. What was it? We whispered our guesses.*

Some said you'd come to America as a stowaway, running from unforgivable transgressions. Others said you were fleeing the Czar who, though he had thousands and thousands of Finnish and Russian men to choose from, wanted you most of all in his Imperial Army. Why? It was not known. My cousins, my conspirators, my whisperers were sure you'd been involved in a shooting in Finland. You shot our grandmother's suitor. Never mind that you didn't even know her until you came to America.

IV

This summer, many summers after the one when we parted from you forever, I decided I had to know. I talked to elderly family members who served up the past as easily as if it were the raspberries now red in every pasture. So close to the end themselves, they offered me bowls full and overflowing. I wrote to your old parish in Evijärvi where the precious records are kept in a great vault, shelves and shelves of all the blood and wars; of marriages, of births, of deaths. A special book for those scarcely finished with their childhoods, who went away from everything known and loved for all manner of sad and restless reasons. Your name was there. And now I know.

You, Juho Erkki, were not sought by the Czar. You did not stow away in the ship's hold to suffer your way across the vast Atlantic. You did not shoot our beautiful grandmother's suitor.

No. You were your mother's firstborn. The September fruit of a long cold winter when embracing beneath handwoven coverlets felt good. Warm. You were a love child.

In the America to which you sailed because love children inherit nothing (except perhaps a certain fondness for winter nights and full moons), in America you became a bastard, guilty of your parents' sin.

And all the rest of your life you were ashamed.
