

The necklace.

prologue.

The necklace itself is nothing remarkable.
A frail gold medallion,
etched to glimmer in the light.
I remember it dangles from my grandmother's neck,
sometimes she lets me touch it.
It quivers rolling potica,
and in the echo of rare belly laughs.

It belongs to her mother,
who is there with us and has never been there
with us all in the kitchen. My aunt
and my mother lean easily on the dark wood
cabinets that my grandfather built
(he is somewhere compelling my father and uncle to
drink jagermeister from tiny crystal goblets) -
and my grandmother always half-minding the pot
(I barely remember this) -
this is where the belly laughs live.

Grinning, emanating another moment
in another kitchen, where I am not,
but Tonchka is there, my great-grandmother,
dropping the silverware and saying
company's coming!
(You see, we just miss each other.)
I remember I think, what a lady she must have been,
to have commanded my own grandmother!
More formidable, even, than my grandmother's sister,
Aurelia, who once, at a tepid cocktail party,
lay herself upon the serving table, arms folded
like a cadaver with a green onion corsage, and trilled:
This party is dead! We're going to have a wake!
And who could yyyyyyyyyyip! Like a true
Slovenian on the polka floor, Aunt Really.

We are always in the kitchen,
it is our HQ. At least for a little
each time we convene.
We come to air our secrets,
read back the minutes,
preserve our kitchen history.

i.

The necklace, it seems to me,

is at this very moment worn by every woman in my family
and very likely many women from
very many once-Catholic immigrant families,
the gold is thin, the chain cheap,
and the medallion depicts Theotokos,
God-bearer,
whom we like to call mother.

Perhaps Tonchka is wearing this necklace right now
while she is waiting three days at Ellis Island
for her name to be called. It's November 1920, and
perhaps she is rolling the necklace
between her fingers, superstitiously, listening,
when she realizes the official simply
doesn't have the tongue to pronounce her.
[According to my father's genealogical records:
"This may explain some of the markings
on the ship's manifest that look like a name was crossed out
and the name "Antonija Pecuh" was written in later."]

In the corner of a room in 1990,
there rests a cane which belongs to her,
which is not really a cane, but a stick.
Yes, a plain branch Tonchka plucks
from the bare ground in a moment of need,
loves so much she has it smoothed
and varnished, has the bottom leveled and
a small metal plate added that says words
I can't remember, a date.
I glide my hands over the canestick,
touching the carved signatures
of all the marvelous strangers
she meets in her travels.

ii.

It's June 1956, and maybe the Theotokos is swaying gently
away from Tonhcka's neck as she leans over the
rail of her ship, bound home to Slovenia.
Surely she clutches it from time to time,
praying for her three small grandchildren.
She is 58 now and will not return to the States
for six months.

These letters are the last remaining
written record of her life, and I anoint
my skin with the words, flexing and
folding my hands.

[My mother transcribes:

“After super went up on the deck”, Tonhcka writes,
“in a little while somebody tap me on my shoulder
and here was my spanish lady friend a verry nice person
and she said to me kosce vola plaja di canasta si ha,
and I said bona signora me plaja canasta
and her answering to me a ki swe bona signora mia gracia.”

Tonchka rises early the next morning,
as every morning on the ship, to show the Theotokos'
face to the sunrise, and to write to her daughters:

“me and spanjolka won 3 games,
Ivan and Captain Pesoli one game.
At 11:30 went to sleep.
The wheater still is beutifull.
Last night I saw another ship far far away.”]

iii.

The necklace, it must be admitted,
would be a far more omnipotent narrator.
Theotokos is there a few days later
when Tonchka (age 58) accepts the arm
of an anonymous gentleman from California
to go exploring in Casablanca
because her friends are taking too long.
Theotokos catches the glint of Tonchka's tears
when she says goodbye to her Spanjolka there
[“I believe if she stayed on for the rest of the trip I would learn Spanish”]
gleams like a medal on her breast when she is called,
aboard the ship, “canasta champion.”

Theotokos follows her into Casablanca,
Tangiers, Pompeii, God-bearer is there
weeks after the pen runs out of ink, when Tonchka
arrives in her motherland, the necklace is around her
when she returns to her daughters and tells them every detail
and perhaps Theotokos knows everything while
I know so very little.

iv.

Read back the minutes from our last meeting.
[According to my father's genealogical records
for my grandmother:
“She witnessed the death of Antonia Pecuh
31 January 1982 at Zebrugg Memorial Hospital, Riverside.”]
Theotokos, seer of all, trinket who will survive us,
is there, grasped, bequeathed, matter that can

never be destroyed.

Theotokos. Always everywhere right now,
always alone, always belonging to someone else,
crossing unfathomable oceans,
Theotokos diaspora.

She is there when Spanjolka taps
on Tonchka's shoulder,
rippling with inscrutable light
wherever two women conspire
to cause trouble together.

Theotokos is already there during WWII, toiling
alongside my grandmother in the South Philadelphia shipyards,
whispering “wars make armies of women, too.”

epilogue.

It is June in the early 1990s,
and we are in the kitchen, and Theotokos is there,
many of her, polysemous. Tonchka is there,
I can see her because my grandmother,
my mother, my aunt, breathe her into the
room and she mingles with the smells
of the tomato gravy, and because I am a child,
her image more definite than the tiny golden
face on the necklace.

It is Thanksgiving 2011, 2012, 2013.
The meal is over, my mother, my aunt,
and I in the kitchen, scraping, rinsing, washing plates,
containing and distributing leftovers
(all of the nightmare organizational aftermath
of a great family meal) we delegate
wordlessly, a time-oiled tupperware machine.
And after that, chatting while we dry dishes
(each piece of China by hand, helped by the
bottomless drawer full of clean, dry towels),
though I am not a child, I still see my grandmother,
nine years after her passing, real and close
as the necklace is to me.

Where my grandmother followed Tonchka,
each year more extraordinary women
of my acquaintance are bound.
The one place Theotokos never goes.
She stays and shows us how to anoint

our skins with their words, light the incense,
read back the minutes. It's the most
and the least we can do. Remember them,
remember and survive.