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## Tatyana's Granddaughter

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Tatyana's Granddaughter

*A chicken is not a bird; a woman is not a human being.*

*—Russian proverb*

I.

As we walk I whisper to Christof  
that Odessa cannot hold me,  
that no town so filled with heart's weight  
should ever be more than a forgotten dot  
on someone's wall map, long in the future.  
The women who buy fruits on the streets  
pinch my cheeks, tell me that I am like spring,  
and the men, always huddled and smoking,  
wink at me and call my father lucky.  
"Is your father lucky to have you?"  
asks Christof, smirking like he does,  
following me home so I can give him a haircut.

"I don't know, I guess," I tell him  
as I dip my hands in a bowl of water  
and run my fingers through his tangled,  
dark hair, feeling his scalp beneath,  
and beneath that his skull, the pulse  
knocking softly inside his temples.  
I lose track of myself and cut his ear,  
and he jerks forward, clapping his hand  
to the side of his head and drawing it back,  
showing thumb and forefinger red.  
When he sneaks back later that night,  
and as we make love under my bedroom window,  
I fill his nicked ear with my warm breath,  
and listen as he tells me he loves me  
and will take us to America soon.

II.

Years can bring many changes,  
and still none at all.  
Christof and I wed in a small building  
along Debribasovkaya Street,  
above the old tunnels used by resistance fighters in 1905,  
across the street from the opera house and Pushkin Museum.  
Never having been in either, I still know their history,  
and can imagine how the air would taste inside them.  
Odessa, "hero city of the Soviet Union,"  
cannot hold Christof or my father,  
so they both work the Turkish ships,  
return nearly black from the sun,  
bearing silks and ornaments from the bazaars,  
none of them enough to satisfy Mother,  
who burned all season in bed.  
In the days they are gone, she tells me  
of my grandmother, Tatyana,  
but I remember only one thing:  
her husband Grigori kept a horsewhip  
by his bed to train her,  
for his late-night rages,  
to keep the unbroken tradition,  
and the nights that follow Christof  
and my father when they are harbored,  
stir up Grigori's ghost and his lessons.  
When they are shot strong with him,  
Mother and I understand.  
We are meant to understand.

III.

I have been to Moscow,  
so I can, in part, die happy.  
I read Chekhov on the train ride,  
saw the cinema once there,  
and then finally made America;  
all this from reading the article in a paper,  
*Come dancing in the USA!*  
stealing money from Christof and my father,  
and now driving back to Brooklyn  
every night through the tunnel  
after Denise, Ashley, Monica, and I  
entice men from the stage.  
The other girls are Polish, Brazilian,  
some Russian, like me, and try to forget their real names.  
One guy, the one with a red and blue teardrop  
tattooed at the corner of each eye,  
the one who calls himself Stray Dog,  
is good to me and makes me omelets  
the nights I stay with him after a show.  
I wake before him some mornings,  
drink coffee and stare out the window,  
wondering if Christof is looking out  
from the deck of a ship somewhere near Istanbul,  
if my mother wishes that she was dancing beside me.  
I wish Tatyana was on the stage.  
Even her ghost would be enough.

—Robert Crisp