

11/16/09 - Silvertone

1.

Every Friday my father's voice, drunk  
on plum Slivovitz, rose from our basement  
through the heating vent on my bedroom floor,  
not a Blue Jay's warble? a deeper velvet  
vibrato, like the color of his eyes.

Careful not to step on a crack  
that would give me away,  
I'd creep down, peek over the café  
swinging saloon doors.

Alternating three minor chords,  
he'd strum his guitar, lips pursed,  
angelic as an adult Hummel figurine,  
hold each note until each word released  
from the luscious center, stretched  
like taffy into a *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*

or *Once-upon-a-time-there-was-a-tavern*.

Across from him, my mother, shoulders back?

black turtle-necked, black stocking-ed legs

crossed and wrapped around a bar stool?

poured herself another half glass

of Schwartz Katz wine,

the small insignia plastic black cat

dangling from the bottle's neck.

She'd lean toward him, cautiously,

as if he were a wren that could

be easily frightened away.

She'd plead *please* play

the sad song again ? the one

about the village girl who, to flout her mother's warning,

slipped into night to meet her moody lover,

but not before first inspecting

her reflection in the family's well.

Pushing her hair away from her face

to check the curve of her cheek,

she leaned over too far, fell in,

and no one heard her cries,

and no one wept in chorus.

2.

Once, I was caught spying on them?

envying their adult fun earned crossing

the ocean from Kiev to New York,

then down long back roads to Ohio?

I was supposed to be asleep

and out of their way.

But I wanted to hear my father's voice,

see my mother fall in love with him again

as he carefully plucked the strings

that now look rusted, tainted,

medieval?as if they could slice  
through thick bread or a hard wheel of cheese,  
or could send an arrow flying.

They could cut fingers, too,  
if the player didn't know how to press them  
properly, fingertips angled just right,  
nails evenly trimmed.

I was sent immediately to bed. No second  
goodnight, no quick cup of water.

3.

In the Scituate Music Shop,  
a young guitarist-salesman holds Father's guitar up  
to the window. He says the neck is warped.  
The strings are shot from human sweat?  
not enough alcohol rubbed on them over the years.

I could replace the strings,  
but they'd barely sound against the badly damaged frets.  
He turns it upside down and shakes it  
until my father's Lucite pick  
falls out like a tooth.

*Silvertone: Sears and Roebuck*, he mumbles. Catalogue ordered  
in the 50's. There were a lot of them back then.

It was not the guitar I imagined my father bartered  
from gypsies and carried through harsh winters  
with barely a shield to protect it,  
the one he and my mother made love next to  
for the first time, the guitar  
propped on the bed next to them,  
the large tear-shaped guard  
and wooden bridges  
I thought I was born of.

Instead, it's 1959. My father sits near their bedroom window,  
his black glasses perched at the end of his nose:

Doc Orlowsky of Brunswick  
prudently studying each guitar,  
imagining the weight of its wooden body  
in his lap,  
his left hand circled around the neck,  
fingers poised, right arm resting heavily.

He decides on the one pictured slung over  
the shoulder of a Midwest cowboy,  
the guitar sturdy enough to take,  
if need be, to a fall-out shelter.

4.

The salesman continues to tilt the guitar  
in every direction, shake it violently,  
upside down, like an obstetrician, as if to make it cry

or to force whatever was still wedged or stubborn

out of the sound hole:

my mother's shiny bobby pins loosened

from her hair ? no, further:

Mother, herself, hanging

onto her wine glass,

Father reaching deep,

fingers stretched into a seventh chord,

to find his soul ?

fur hat,

cowboy hat,

a bird.

*Not bad, he says,*

*for what they were.*

I don't know if he means the guitar

or my parents.

He twists the tuning pins with pliers

to see if, one last time, they might budge

then, resigned, lifts my father's Silvertone over the glass

counter case. Handing it over to me,

it's now as weightless as a stingy bouquet of carnations

presented at the end of a paltry recital.

*Good luck*, he says.

It's so light I can barely carry it.