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MISSING IN ACTION; MUSHROOMS; HUSKIES

Maria Takolander

Missing in Action

My great grandfather: lost to Stalin's purges
in a Karelian backwater of forests and sepulchral snow.
(The past is a deep but silent world.)

My grandfather: his heart stopped on the swampy farm in Mellilä,
where he dragged up life from the earth after the war.
(Hung over, he would beat the horses, their flanks shivering.)

My grandmother: dead soon after she got an electric stove,
her legs, from labour, covered in weeping sores.
(I heard her voice once, time-travelling through the telephone.)

My eldest uncle: dysentery got him as an infant in Karelia,
but life, seasonal, was not perturbed.
(Thirteen more, including my mother, inhabited the same womb.)

My youngest uncle: alcohol.
He lived with his mother until the sodden end.
(He is round-faced, like a grown baby, in photographs.)

Three other uncles: heart attacks—possibly euphemistic.
(Pictures of those men, modest and blank-faced,
suggest something already buried.)

My cousin (and his wife): alcohol.
Ilkka was tall and blurry around the edges;
(I met him once, under an eternal sun, before he absented himself.)

My nephew: unfurling in a bicornuate uterus,
far from that country infested by weather and history.
(It was a pro-simian womb, so primitive that it ruptured.)

Mushrooms

Trailing after my elderly uncle and his grandson,

through the pagan tangle of forest and mosquitoes,
the sky glowering with an endless twilight,
the path clammy with grass, my uncle stops
and waits for me, just a tourist really. He points
out the *suo*—the bog—behind the murk of trees.
It is a sump layered with moss and looks solid.

Vaarallinen, he says—dangerous. My uncle
wears gumboots and carries a bucket for mushrooms.
The boy has a net for catching butterflies,
for sometimes spirits like that excite the air
before vanishing. My uncle, holding his grandson's hand,
is tall and erect, a champion at skiing and orienteering,
but nevertheless soft—*nassuja*, as they say—and often drunk.

There was midsummer's night, when he raised the flag
of the country defended by his father, who had killed so many
men resembling his brothers and sons. My mother always said
that my grandfather resurrected his enemies with a bottle,
loosing its sad genies into my grandmother's kitchen
during winter, when the iconic sun was in hiding
and the lakes in that land of mirrors sheeted with cold.

The flagpole on midsummer's night was planted (somehow)
on a granite rise, and my uncle could not stand by it for long.
This evening, though, he is sturdy and rational,
like the youth I imagined walking out of Karelia
with his parents and siblings when the Russians came,
their house burned down to the grave snow so that,
no matter what happened, their enemies would not find a home.

My uncle picks up manure—that of an elk—for me to inspect
and the glowing orb of a cloudberry, which disappears
into the silver-haired boy's mouth. Finally, he stoops beside
a growth of mushrooms, wart-like, sallow as the sky.
His grandson kneels too, exposing his pale neck.
The butterfly net is cast aside, and soon the mushrooms
are filling the bucket, with a soft but certain sound.

Huskies

Summer is luxuriating in its weight,
and the sled-dogs, their eyes like ice,
flailing breath and spit, are fleeing

the mosquitoes, the moss-birthing granite,
the riddle of trees, the lapping and seeping.
They had been chained under fir for days,

never barking, but howling their affliction.
They hit the road, the dirt there tamped
and firm so that they gather speed like flight.

They hunt the future,
the ethereal vision in the distance,
but they will never be fast enough.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Takolander is the author of a collection of short stories, *The double* (2013); two books of poems, *Ghostly subjects* (2009) and *The end of the world* (2014); and a work of literary criticism, *Catching butterflies: bringing Magical Realism to ground* (2007). She is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and Professional and Creative Writing at Deakin University in Geelong, Victoria.