

Cherma. 2010

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Cherma



Poetry by Jacqueline West

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

Cherma

Poetry by
Jacqueline West



PARALLEL PRESS 2010

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“Jansa” was first published as *Afternoon Burial, 1931* in the March 2007 edition of *Prairie Poetry*. “Smolik” was first published as *Little Ten Fingers* in the November 2006 edition of *Prairie Poetry*.

Historical Note

Cherma takes inspiration from the names, lives, and family stories of a small group of Bohemian immigrants that settled in western Wisconsin’s Pierce County in the late 1800s. Named after the village of Dolní Cermná in the modern-day Czech Republic, Cherma parish included several interrelated farming families, a general store and post office, a nearby school, a cemetery, and a Catholic church. The store was dismantled many decades ago; the school followed. The last mass was said at Cherma in 1987, and the church burned to the ground shortly thereafter. Today, only the cemetery remains. Although these poems are based on a real place and draw inspiration from family stories and historical records, this is a work of fiction. It is not intended to represent the real people, living and dead, who belong to the Cherma settlement.

To my grandparents, Donald and Dorothy Cobian,
and in memory of Jack and Janie Swanson,
with love and thanks for all their stories

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Yanys

She did not know how to begin
that first letter for sending home
knowing how her mother's hands would tremble
veins raised like small mountains over the bones
as she tore through the American seal.

She did not know if she should tell
how, of the seventy-four who sailed
only thirty-eight remained alive,
how the rest had slid from a wet deck
in makeshift shrouds, their landings divots in the waves.

Most of the Dvořák cousins were gone,
three of the Jansas, five of the Mareks,
and all of the children who could not subsist
on biscuits soaked in salty leakage,
on crates of flour curled with worms.

In that first letter she could not write
of the loneliness that ate this land,
the spreads of dense and hungry woods
that swallowed cries from neighbor to neighbor,
the places where there was no road at all,
of the jewelers and teachers and newspapermen
now splitting their skin against an axe handle.

So instead she wrote of the land that they had found
which looked like home, of the hillsides
that folded just like the Orlické
into low troughs that ran with rain,
the robins that chirped in the berry trees,
the soil dark as karakul.

She would say that at last they had plenty to eat,
that the land was cheap
and the china unbroken
and outside the tent where they slept on the dirt
clumps of violets grew wild in the ruts.

Jansa

Beside a deep hole
in the frozen churchyard
a small boy stands
beside his father,
not holding his hand.
It is the burial of the boy's grandfather,
his father's *otec*,
a man he knows
only as someone they saw
on Sundays,
who sat at the head
of the long wooden table
not moving
as the women served and cleared,
who spoke with an accent
like a wood file,
delving sharp clefts
on the flat face of words.
Each man at the grave side
takes a clod of black earth
and throws it down,
smashing against the pine lid.
"Why do you do that?"
the boy asks his father.
It is his first funeral.
His father brushes the dirt
from his palms,
eyes on the rich rift
in the ground as he answers,
"We are saying,
'We forgive you
for anything you have done to us.'"
The boy listens,
remembers his words.
Then together
they walk to Smoliks'
for the luncheon.

Dvořák

Spring came cold and slow that year,
pulling the edge of endless winter.
Snow stifled seeds in their shallow beds.
Nothing pressed up through the tinny crust
until too late; waiting roots shriveled like finger bones.
His Anna cried on the porch in her shawl.
No flowers for their wedding. Bad luck, a bad sign.

On his last bachelor morning Frank was up early,
shaking his brothers out of the quilts.
Their lazy punches sank through the air.
Without breakfast they tromped the fieldrows
and forest, sheep shears swinging in their hands,
walked to St. Martin's church in time
to leave their finds, wash and dress back home.

It was his brothers who made the bouquet
of ditch vetch tied with baling twine
and Frank who clumsily wove the crown
of wild carrot for the hair of his Anna.
Through a lacewing mist he watched her
come toward him down the fresh-built aisle,
and without any veil, she was swathed in white,
as new and soft as meltwater.

Matzek

He was just cleaning his gun,
they said.
Just cleaning his gun in the barn.
After dinner,
he went out to the barn by himself.
They didn't think anything of it,
they said.
He was just cleaning his gun in the barn.
Just cleaning his gun
by himself in the barn
after dinner.
They didn't think anything of it.

Again and again
until they all believed it.

Kusilek

Their daughter came in the springtime,
filling her twig of the family tree
with the tenuous weight of a sparrow.

The other losses retreated gently:
the tiny shoes and hand-stitched gowns
laid gently in the cedar chest
to wait for another slow arrival.

But her name, its chiseled troughs
already filling with gold lichen
could never be a hand-me-down.

Cobian

She was lovely on their wedding day,
the lace cap like frost on her black hair,
black eyes bright as broken glass.
He smiled down at her like one wild plum
he'd picked in the woods and wiped clean on his sleeve.
But after the dancing and shivaree,
when the Bohemian band had picked up their brass
and ambled home over the hills,
when the first slender sliver of moon
had thickened to a coarse white eye,
his bride laid her docile guise aside.

Of course, he never admitted it,
big Bohunk plowman that he was—
why, his hands could span her waist
and touch at blistered fingertips—
but behind the white lace curtains
that he had bought for her in town,
he lived in terror of his wife.

Just once he corrected her speech,
laughed at her rough romský inflection
and came home to find their bed ripped to shreds,
the tick's goosedown drifting like cottonwood seed;
even the thick frame smashed from its legs
and listing like a cracked stalk to the floor.
After that she wouldn't speak česky—
her own tongue boiled up, scalding his questions.

She buried her fine leather shoes in the garden
and walked the house barefoot, stealthy as shadows.
He would turn to find her just over his shoulder,
her black eyes bright as teeth through the dark;
in them, a plot he could not extract
that would eat him by bits, day by day.

Three months married he took off by train
and she chased after him like a raptor,
coal-dust eyes clearing passenger lists
in the blazing sweep of a brush fire.
From state to state she followed fast,
teeth clamped tight to the trail behind him.
He could have sworn she'd leashed him with a spell.

And so at last he changed his name.
V to b, k to c;
he sank through the silt of traveling strangers,
washed at last to the quiet hill of Cherma.
Dust settled over his tracks, over him;
relief like cool soil against his skin
where the burn of his bright-eyed bride
was paling slowly to a nevus.

The changed name dulls above his grave,
twisting a sudden crook on the tree
and trickling quietly down to us.

Marek

Days of snow.
She watches it fall
slowly past the kitchen window,
the flakes hanging like her breath
on the other side of the glass.
Drifts pile up with the hours.
That morning,
she had been woken
by the knock of a fist or foot on her ribs,
and for a moment she was sure
that she felt the pulse of the second heart
drumming impatiently
in her skin.
It will be their first.
She sits and wonders,
scraping one finger through the frost on the glass.
Tomorrow, her Jim will hire
all the local boys to dig them out
for twenty-five cents an hour,
but they have to bring their own shovels.
Then Jim will hitch the team and they'll drive to town
where Doctor Martin will weigh their son,
press his feet with ink,
write down his name.
But for now she is alone in the snow.
She can hear life coming,
its quiet gasp.

Kovak

It really wasn't his fault. Course not.
It wasn't his coat, not his boots or cap,
his sister Greta the one who insisted
he wasn't too scrawny to play the old saint
as she stuffed his cinched belt with a feather pillow,
holding up the mirror for him to see
his own sooty eyebrows and reddened nose,
the sleek furs pulled from the upstairs closet.
The kinder will never know you, she said.

He remembers the look on their four small faces
as they inched into to the chimney corner
where he nodded and chuckled, afraid to speak
in case they should know his familiar voice,
and reached deep into the pocket
where he'd put the packet of penny candy.
Their hands brushed his palm like the feet of birds.
He grinned into his whiskers, never knowing
about the sack of mothballs also stuffed inside.

Greta managed to smother her laughter
as she hustled the wailing boys to the door
and let them spit into the darkness
until they made a game of it, aiming for targets;
then she patted his slumped shoulder, promised him
that the children would soon forget everything.
Still, next winter, the oldest three
shrugged off the hopeful row of boots by the door,
and only baby Joe stayed up to listen for the distant bells.

Falteisek

No shame being hired out,
her mother said
packing up the trunk
that would go to town,
that would stand on its end
in the third-story room
overlooking slate roofs, wrought-iron gates,
the snow-glazed veins of cement paths.
By the end of the first day, Bernadine knew
she belonged not on the farm,
but here,
brushing dust from the velvet and crystal,
from things untouched by dirt and ice,
the clinging teeth of stale straw.
Town things.
In a letter home,
she tried to describe the easy flare
of the oil lamps, the golden heat
that melted the chill from the air.
Nothing like the clanking kitchen stove
battling the cold with its piles of split elder,
the frozen sawdust and cobweb stacked up
beside the creaking back door.
No, not like that at all.
And she wasn't sorry
or even surprised
on the day that the furnace blinked its gold eye
and turned her into a dancing flower
brighter than the tearoom chandelier,
brighter than all of the wax parlor tapers,
brighter even than the colored glass
in the front door when the sun pushed through;
brighter and more pure than anything.

Wurst

The lamb had come late, too small, too many.
Farmer Krost from down the road
had let it go for almost nothing.
And so Papa brought it home.

The girls fed it with their fingers
dipped by turns in a pan of milk
while Mama watched them over the hem of her work,
her needle planting flowers that shot through the white like plumes.

One fall day Mama's cry pulled the girls from the garden
where they were yanking up the weeds,
and they found her sitting beneath the clothesline
where every silk stem and blossom had been nibbled away.

Papa laughed while Mama wiped her nose
on the edge of a shredded napkin,
said it was better than any county fair ribbon
that her flowers looked good enough to eat,
good enough to tempt a bewitched little lamb
as they danced on their white fields in the wind.

Lubov

After the sixth, the baby, died
she took her chair into the kitchen corner.
For two years she faced the joint where the walls split or met,
folding away through the rooms where no one cried.

Visitors stopped coming. Even the priest.
They could only stare at her back for so long,
at the silent curve of her spine
rolling down toward the floor like a broken hill.

Stepanek

After all those Sunday dinners
Grandma would heave her chair
back from the table,
set her napkin delicately
on the untouched fork
beside the plate heaped high
with skin and scraps
and explain to the gathered family:
“It looks like I ate a lot of shicken,
but it was really all bones.”

Ovsak

Standing at the start of the path
that coiled down the mile toward home,
the girls watched Mr. Kolar's sled
slip through falling snow like a needle.
First of December, the heaps already too deep
for his horses to bring them any closer.
Hold on to the fence, he said.
The rasp of the wind tore his words away.

Swallowed to the hip in the drifts of the ditch,
Mary put her feet in Elizabeth's footprints
dragging slowly toward the house
that was lost like a pebble in a bowl of milk,
their hands wrapped tight around the wire
that Papa had strung from farmyard to road,
one thread holding them to the world
against the lift of the snow's white wings.

Elizabeth knew if she let go
that she would soar past the silo caps
and slanted roofs, over the spires of pines;
all Cherma parish, the white hills
falling away like a blanket pierced with stars.
But Mary knew if she let go
she would topple like the Jenkinses' little boy
over the back edge of the wagon,
too quick and quiet for anyone to see.
The snow would catch her, cradle her.
It would have her mother's hands.

Numbness pricked by the whirl of loose feathers,
hidden shafts as sharp as pins,
and the thin line sliding through their fists
until the whole world spun around it,
pulling them home to the light of the kitchen fire,
to Mama crying with relief,
shaking the snow from their frozen socks
and brewing the coffee, just for them.

Kordosky

Because Uncle Karel
owned the store
beside the church
where the men would gather
to chew their pipe stems
on the porch,
their suspenders loose
on the jut of ribs,
he could sit for hours
on the flat-lidded pickle barrel
letting his heels knock
the slatted wood,
tongue working a piece
of peppermint candy.
The men spoke over his head
in česky, their voices
mixing thick with the scent
of molasses, leather, vinegar.
He caught only a few words—
church, and *rain*, *barn*, *work*.
And it didn't matter anyway
because he would never be like them;
the farmers, the men with stone for skin.
He watched as they shifted in the shade,
their arms like ropes
hanging slack at their sides,
the sharp peaks of their cheekbones
and the hard slopes of their spines,
the necks bowed after years and years
and years
of standing against the unstoppable sky.

Dusek

Joe had a knack for butchering.
He sold half the farm, bought a shop
in town, with a counter
as white as church gloves.

All the wet mess
was confined to the back
where three hired boys
wielded cleavers, drained veins.

Each night, Joe brought home
a nice slab of beef
that his wife would cook
but would not eat.

Joe got rich, became the first man
in Cherma parish to own a truck:
“Dusek Butchering and Fine Meats”
stenciled large on its white flank.

With it he hauled calves, hogs, mewling lambs.
Sometimes the farm kids who’d raised the sold stock
would stand and watch as the truck chugged off,
their quiet hands hooked together like burrs.

Back at the shop,
the men wrapped fresh slabs
and ground scraps, peeled hides
from the slick fat inside.

Blood pooled on the tile,
rinsed to the wide drains
still bright as barn paint,
slicker than satin.

Each closing time, Joe scrubbed his face and hands,
hung up his stained smock and changed linen shirts.
Still, his wife could smell the blood
that hung like a warm mist around him.

On her face would rise the same mute fear
Joe saw in the eyes of tethered calves
when he stepped close, grasped the rope.
He hardly touched her anymore.

Brooks

He is whistling something
while he digs.
He doesn't know its name,
probably heard it
at Cobian's pavilion
on the bull fiddle;
remembers it because
at last he'd asked Margaret to dance
and her feet had doubled
its three-four rhythm,
kicked its beat into his brain
like a bruise.
He slings his shovel
in time to the waltz,
gets careless,
loose dirt flying into his eyes.
It's dull
working out there alone
in the evenings
but he is the only boy for the job;
the only one who survived,
now immune to the poison
that still seeps out of covered boxes,
working like breath
through the tight pine slats.
Maybe the whistling's disrespectful,
he worries,
to his cousins and aunt
in those waiting pine cases,
glancing over his shoulder
at the crest of the apse
but it's getting dark
and no one is near
to hear the song
or the cough
or whatever else may come.

Andrle

Sometimes he woke still hearing the bullets
whiz by in the buzz of a trapped housefly.

Kolar

The farmyard that was so familiar
he could have mapped it out, eyes closed,
with his toe in the dust of the gravel drive
had changed its homely workday mask
for the wild secrets of silver and black.
He had never been out there at three a.m.
in the weak breath of his mother's roses,
before even the first edge of dawn had started
pulling down the stars.

He was the good son, not wild like Max
or sullen and mumbling like Jacob;
seventeen years without a missed milking,
morning or night, in sickness and health.
But that night, time had folded in half
between the turns of conversation
and one last quick kiss raced away through the dark
on the hem of her polka-dot skirt.

He parked the Chevy behind the shed
where its headlights wouldn't lance the lace curtains,
slipped like a cat through the lawn, the porch,
past the sleeping eyes of doors still closed along the upstairs hall.
He could have sworn that he was weightless,
still floating in space somewhere above her lips,
but one faint creak came from the floorboards.
And like it had been waiting for that small sound
his father's voice said from the bedroom,
"Well, Don, you may as well stay up."

For a moment he froze, one hand on the wall.
Then he trudged out to put his overalls on.

Pechacek

The way his father told it, the beast
had been possessed by some brushfire demon,
its four hooves trampling the gravel
to sparks, the sweepings skeins
of its mane too hot to touch.
And its eyes, he said, had the red glint
of Mars that you sometimes spot
through the milky starlight,
deep and slow as a bonfire pit.
It had a trick of planting one leg
in a spray of dust at the top of the drive,
sending a boy blinded by brown smoke
overhead and *splat* against the barn wall.
Damn good aim, his father conceded,
who had landed face first many times on the planks.
And whenever they'd ridden free of the barnyard
into the unparceled rolls of woodland
that horse would set its eye on a branch
at just the right height, bow its hot breath
to the ground and carve his rider
from the saddle like an apple off its peel.
I was lucky to walk away, his father said,
knuckles knocking the tabletop.
That beast was something not meant
for riding, something made from iron and fire
come to Earth too long past the age of gods.
And that was why he couldn't have a pony.
At least not for Christmas; not that year.

Merta

The smell of that summer was rotten and sweet.
Ripeness thickened in the air. The apples
fell faster than the pigs could eat, each heavy branch
trailing its tip on the ground.

Bees came down to the trees in swarms,
their black bodies dotting the fallen fruit.
Frenzied and dizzy, they bumped like soft bullets
against the skin of the Merta boys.

The boys scooped apples by the barrowful,
brushing away the cider-drunk bees
and hauling the fruit off to three spreading cairns
that simmered and softened in the heat.

George was the oldest, and ready to leave.
His shovel wedged under the crumbling fruit,
George dreamed of college, of striding brick halls
in clean slacks and a buttoned shirt.

The dirt was covered with a quilt of fruit,
loose skins slipping from amber flesh;
wet meat bursting underfoot
falling unused to feed the roots.

To George's left a slow step crushed the cores
where his father stood, squinting, eyes toward the back field,
his overalls covered in motes of hay
that clung to the denim like glinting pollen.

He cleared his throat, settled his foot.
"We just can't spare you this year," he said.
"Ten new calves, and Johnny sick,
and the picker acting up. Not enough hands."

Then his father shrugged, hands in pockets,
and shuffled back to the milkhouse.

Smolik

They called him Little Ten Fingers.
On the farm, it was nothing to boast of,
but Jack had all his parts in tact: ten long fingers
and ten smug toes enclosed
in mud-soled hand-me-downs.
His father had lost a thumb to a picker,
Vince two fingers to the whirring corn shredder;
even baby Jan had a nub
where one whole pinkie should have been:
he called it Shorty.
“Savin’ em to play the piano?”
they laughed, as Jack’s sound hands
tossed bales in the mow.

He made up for it eventually.
A retired man,
alone at night on inherited land
he put his hand through the whizzing belts of a combine
like a fist into a hive.
He lost three, no one there to see and cheer.
Months later, using his left hand
he drew a face on the healed-over stump,
thumb and pinkie closing like arms,
to make a puppet for his grandkids.
They shrieked with laughter,
bouncing on the couch around him,
their small hands clinging to his wrist like starfish.

Cherma

It was the day the great-grandkids came over for lunch
that Vera decided to burn it down.
She baked apple kolachies for them in the morning,
knuckles wrapped like loose roots around the rolling pin,
finding that now it took all of her weight
to flatten the thick sheet of dough.
Little Nick picked his kolachy to flakes,
his pink mouth crimped in a finicky knot
while his sister Mary gobbled a second,
mumbling, *My mom doesn't make these at home.*

After they left, Vera walked through the house
like a museum guest, brushing blank eyes
over each photograph
while in her head an old česky hymn surfaced
and darted for shade like a brook trout.
From the frame of their wedding portrait
George, in his new suit, stared back,
his eyes with an answer for everything.

In the shed she found the kerosene can
curled in swaths of crusty rags,
unopened since 1938, when the co-op hadn't reached the farm.
Back then she and Anna had dressed by a lamp,
its pot-bellied chimney bright as a tulip,
and the old Coleman burned in the parlor
where their father would read until the kids were all home.

When the sky was the color of a jar of plum jam
Vera set out down the road's empty shoulder,
swinging the kerosene can in one hand.
Cherma's gate had never had a lock;
she stepped through onto the crust of snow
that cracked like candy under her boots,
poured in hard folds around each stone.

The church was set for the morning demolition,
wrapped like a gift in yellow plastic ribbon.
A sign tacked to the board that barred the door
whispered, "No Trespassing" in small print.
From the steps she could see familiar names,
spots where she'd stood to throw down the dirt
that thudded soft on wooden lids.

Jack, whom she'd loved across St. Martin's schoolroom.
Grandpapa and Grandma, Naše Matka, Náš Otec,
and George's headstone where her name waited
to his right, where she had always slept.

It took several tries to pry down the board,
her gloved hands aching with stiff joints and cold.
Slowly the nails pulled free from the wood,
and the loose door swung like a broken arm
into the darkness that breathed inside.
The old church had been picked clean.
Every object carried away
until only the empty pews remained,
patiently watching the bare altar.

Vera splashed the Duseks' pew,
the Kordoskys', the Mertas', the Matzek's and Smoliks'.
Down the aisle, where they'd rolled Charlie's coffin,
the lid closed over his gravel-torn face,
she left a trail that shimmered and curved
like a long lock of hair, like the creek in spring.
Her matches made tiny wood-stemmed flowers,
blooming sudden in the darkness.

Back outside, she watched the old church burn.
Dry wood crackled, catching and furling
in flashes that leapt out onto the headstones,
each stained glass window bright as a Christmas tree,
even the rooftop cross catching flame
in the sparks that scattered faceted flashes,
falling to black ash over the graves.

Then Vera retied the scarf on her hair,
picked up the empty kerosene can,
and started on the slow walk home.



Jacqueline West's poetry has appeared in journals including *St. Ann's Review*, *Inkwell Journal*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Barnwood*, and *Briar Cliff Review*. She has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her series for young readers, *The Books of Elsewhere* (Dial), debuted in summer 2010. She lives with her husband in Red Wing, Minnesota.

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