California (Day) Dreaming:
A Granddaughter of the Volga and the Valley Returns
By Erin Deis

Not far from the Golden Gate–its
International Orange
illuminating the dense soupy fog
beyond my desk window–
willing and waiting for the workday to expire
hours spent pouring over spreadsheets, eyes squinting at screens,
wishing I were closer to the crashing waves of the Pacific
that will at once (soon, I hope)
wash away the worries of this day

I rest those same eyes
and am transported–
my roots
stretching
south
through Pacheco Pass
to the Valley floor–the Great San Joaquin–
and its fertile sandy loam
an inland spot on the map represented by an
immense ellipse of forest green spanning hundred of miles
the breadbasket into which each of my Volga grandparents was
transplanted–*him* from Straub, *her* from Kukkus–
as children

I find myself
in *her* Zinnias
each and every one
turning its face toward the late summer sun
dozens upon dozens
maybe hundreds
rising high above my
head, others nuzzling my knees
shades of lemon, lilac and lavender
scarlet and salmon
crimson and coral

rose and wine
ivory, violet, and tangerine–attracting the gentle
buzz of bees and humming
birds who swish and swarm
in and out and around their stems
in between sugar water sips at *her* feeder that hangs
in a place of honor outside *her* dining room window
these towering blooms
not delicate by any stretch:
sturdy, strong, reliable
not unlike their caretaker

I blink and find myself barefoot
skin sweating, soon burning,
squeezing between my toes the once scorching soil now
immersed in irrigation
refreshing runoff from the Sierra Nevadas
nourishing the dense, packed clay
home to *his* peaches and apricots and
hybrids–that later *he*'ll dry with sulfur on *their* gravel driveway upon sheets of long
brown paper–
and *his* tart, crisp pale green apples *he*'ll skin in one long strip
under the outdoor shade of a rusting aluminum awning at a
rickety card table typically reserved for
Pinochle and cans of Hamm's and siblings and inlaws with shared Deitsch names
the crackling of the AM radio provides a soundtrack to our lesson:
I listen and learn to love the colorful language of his lecture
he projects to describe *his* Oakland A's and their current losing streak

Moments later I find myself
back on the banks of their mighty river that
he left as an infant and
she escaped as a refugee, fleeing both famine and civil war
He yearned to have memories of this place that *he* was too young to remember
She tried for years (unsuccessfully) to forget it
I'm in *her* Oma's obstgarten
rows of vibrant violets grace the ground beneath
apple and cherry trees tended by *her* Opa, the
bark of which is used to

brew tea and to calm their empty
bellies when there is
nothing
left
to eat
or drink
a yard filled with shadows and echoes from those who did not
survive
its soft soil stomped down by ancient footprints from
a camel who often scared and spit at *her* and those of
her beloved cousin Anna *she* left
behind

I watch them in *her* Oma's backhaus
or is it from *her* kitchen table
I can no longer tell the difference, the
unairconditioned space slightly
uncomfortable mostly
unclear if the humidity dampening our skin and
coiling our hair is
coming from the outside heat
or the stove or both
the subtle sweetness of *her* snapdragons infuses with the
freshness of the mint, both sitting in the sill above her sink
they boil balls of potato and flour and egg
together
melting butter in which to fry them, of course
together humming the same sweet song *she* would sing to rock *her* babies to sleep
I wonder if *she* learned it from *her* Oma or from *her* Mama
the same Mama who rests in grounds reserved for TB paupers in
the same Mountain View cemetery where *her* baby sister joined her mother
months later
in her own unmarked
grave

My head hangs now at *his* and *her* final resting place–a neon red sun setting behind Elm Avenue in Easton–
surrounded by fields filled
with vines,
with what once

were grapes finding new life on the
ground in trays
in the County where *they* settled after years
migrating
up
        and
                down
        and
up
        and
                down
                        this State
toiling in fields and packing houses and canneries–
picking and packing and canning with calloused hands–
stooping and lifting, the
repetitive strain straining
their shoulders, *their* backs, *their* knees, *their* wrists while
raising *their* children, then grandchildren, then great-grandchildren
I place a bouquet of (what I wish were) *her* Zinnia's at *their* now shared address marked with a
bronze cross commemorating *his* years as a mailman in Manila

I'm awakened by a gentle cough from the
kind custodian with pink hair,
an immigrant, ready to lock up and get home to
her children
I pack my bag and
head to the car and
head home through the City– across the Bay
from where *he* once drove cars off the assembly line for Chevrolet–
and I find I'm grateful for
these places and
these people and
these memories–
real or imagined or both–to which I may
return
whenever I close these eyes

Clockwise from top left:

a) Author frying rund glace with her paternal grandmother, who was born and raised in Kukkus.
b) Flowers in the garden of the building the author believes was once her great-great grandparents' home in Kukkus.
c) Author's father pouring sand from the Volga onto the shared gravestone of his parents who came from Kukkus and Straub.
d) Author's father standing on a cliff above the Volga River in Kukkus, his mother's birthplace.