

LAURIE KRUK

## Time Coming

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*For Helen Kowalchuk (1904-2005)*  
*U.S.S.R.-Canada*

I

For thirty-five years,  
“Time coming,” Baba used to mutter. Satisfaction  
in the argument-ending certainty  
of a clock hand’s crawl, moving her out in the company  
of ancestors, saints and the pre-ordered funeral package, planting her beside  
husband #2, Emilyan, who fell from her pruning.  
Satisfaction, in the way she wrung a dishcloth  
or stabbed at the potatoes. Comfort in the silence she could generate,  
dark cloud spreading like squid’s ink as we sat at her table, forking down  
mountains of cabbage, beef and rice  
pickled beets bleeding  
onto chipped Woolco saucers. “Not gonna live forever—“ Though every year  
we denied it—grew up, older—and she disproved it. Seventy-five, eighty,  
ninety and beyond. To the Nursing Home, where they only spoke English.  
Hired illegal immigrants to wash, dress and wheel our grandparents,  
weekly deposits  
at the Visitor’s Room.

II

At 100, she descends to a wheelchair, without benefit of a MP’s photo-opp.  
Celebrations turn to accusations of her seventy-eight-year old son,  
now known as her brother, and “stealing my new potatoes—thief!”  
No longer Miss Clairol-orange, her feathers of white fire wildly as she fixes  
me, the unexpected Wedding Guest, Christmas, with an eye ever-bright for

the world's worry. It's the boys, she tells us, a river of words, in Russian, then English, they need shelter, and clothes. "Police, lost, lost. Poor *Chupchik*."\* Who will help? Her flood won't be dammed by barriers erected feebly now, with comments on the weather, a gift of soap, the plastic evergreen. "Ah, the winters were terrible there," whether Kirkland Lake or her village in Belarus. "Yes, Nicky, he was going to become a teacher, but he needed new shoes. And a pair of glasses—he broke the last ones, chased home from school by that bully, Anton." I sit up; Dad sighs. "You know, I rang and rang, I was trying to phone the police, but *that woman*, she never came." A nurse passes, peers in and says isn't it nice that Grandma has visitors for Christmas. And that it's almost lunch time. Baba glares, "And the soup, I wanted to tell you, it had no flavour at all. A nothing soup."

### III

Diapers called Depends are now changed by brisk brown women who know her as Elly, always talking about her washing or cooking. Cutting down her skirts and blouses to clothe the lost boys, so that she sits in Wal-Mart sacks, tattered and safety-pinned. Now in Russia, now in Kirkland where husband #1, Mike, finally brought her and *chupchik*, Baba rides the halls of memory, startling the blank faces she meets. In conversation with her "brother" who remembers her son's birth. She, 21, in a shed beside the wheatfield she was scything. Two women watching. "I was so thin, so young. Had no milk. Had to hand him to the woman beside me, her baby died. Anton."

Stopping before the photos of her 100th birthday party, she jabs a finger and says "See, my mother—like monkey—she lived too long, too long—"

### IV

As we listen, her second granddaughter, 39, waits in hospital for the pains, the driving division that will turn her world inside out, begun again. Her husband holding her hand, rubbing her back, drinking her fear but ready with the camera and the rose in plastic. The ghost that haunted her nine-month house of flesh will put his feet down, sensing earth, now hidden under the first snow. Claim flesh's dear indignities, and a name. The purple wail that ends with him crushed to her filling breast, an echo down the halls of memory of the hundred years of his great-grandmother's losing, gaining and worrying.

The mother, the timekeeper. Like the puppy trick:  
a hot water bottle and clock, wrapped in flannel,  
tucked beside the whimpering whelp  
whose only comfort is breathing in the beats  
of mother time.

\* *“child” (Russian)*