

The New Continent

in celebration of Victoria's Lifelong Learning Festival, September 30, 2006

1.

A wooden bridge, a stream of trout,
a single plum tree leaning to the east:

even through the palace window,
a man's world grows small; therefore –

under the silk map of a China sky,
Wan Hu, Ming dynasty official,

straps himself to a wicker chair,
and orders his servants to tie to his seat

47 bamboo tubes packed with gunpowder,
then light those fuses in unison.

Into the night, he's launched, all stars
and confetti, blast of dragon scales

and bright shreds of kite-tails fluttering
in a banner of smoke and torches, because

doesn't everyone ache to travel toward
what he does not know, toward that other

fishing village hooked to the moon,
to the dark idea of its ocean?

2.

A week before her eightieth birthday,
my grandmother buys a violin.

On the kitchen windowsill
lined with ripening tomatoes,
she props a how-to book with photos
of a younger woman holding another violin,
a picture of how her knotted hands might look
with decades smoothed away.

Soundboard. Ribs. Neck. Scroll.
She learns the instrument's anatomy

edgework to fret, slides her fingers
down those razor tightropes and over
the bow's horsehair scratch
that brings her back to the Kansas farm
of childhood; the familiar fence-line,
milk bucket, firewood, so unlike the shape
her hands now grip, this maple flame
carved from a tree in a faraway forest
she has never walked through.

Like the book suggests,
she balances the bow
on an open G, first step into
the high-wire blackness stretching
between here and the Blue Danube,
that castle-waltzing river.

3.

After hauling your nets up empty from the silt,
you sail on in your makeshift boat of skin and paper,
catch what wind you can until the new continent appears.

You drag yourself to shore, water-heavy,
compass-weary, stunned by the air's
violet and humming machine.

What you have come for greets you now
with a generosity that humbles;
fish leap like handfuls of silver

coins tossed from the surf.
Fire waits inside a circle of stones. Sparks
rise orange on black to butterfly the night.

You lift your eyes to an unordinary horizon:
vines shot through with birdsong, fruit
hanging whole notes in the trees.

Into that jungle of leaves and music you set out,
a trail of nameless flowers before you and above,
the sky's new alphabet of stars.

by Carla Funk