

Maria Breaks Her Silence

by Nancy Mattson

This manuscript is a poetic biography of a woman from Kauhava, Finland, who emigrated to Michigan in 1886 and to Saskatchewan in 1891.

The character Maria is based on a real historical figure whom I discovered while working where my parents were born and where I spent all my childhood summers. I know the bare bones of Maria's life, but I have had to invent details since she left no letters, no diaries, and no pictures, and her descendants know very little about her.

She had three husbands, all of whom died before her, and three children, one of whom died in infancy. I have speculated that her first marriage in Finland was unhappy and that her second marriage to David Kautonen, the founder of the New Finland settlement, was extremely happy. Her third marriage occurred when she was 80 and her groom, a widower and old friend, was 76.

I see Maria as a Finnish "everywoman," in some senses a composite of the Finnish women I've known. In many of the poems I've incorporated elements of Finnish folk poetry and customs, historical details of the Finns in the old country and the new, and some Finnish words and phrases which seem to fit in context.

(The poem Tietäjä: One Who Knows was reprinted from Prism International, Vol. 26, No. 2).

WRITING

a poem about a famous man
is one thing:

Socrates
Blake
Picasso

but how to hymn a woman
whose voice was lost
as she shifted
continents
languages
husbands
names
one dying into another

whose letters were lost in
oceans
furrows
decades

whose thoughts were lost in
sewing
washing
making do

from under a tangle of genealogies
rosebushes
cloudberries
nettles

your voice, maria, whispering
growing stronger

TIETÄJÄ: ONE WHO KNOWS

When Paavo, the seasoned lumberman
strikes his foot with an axe
the devil's axe seeking a tree root
finding instead Paavo's ankle
through layers of boot and heavy sock

When Paavo's eyes are swimming
in blood and branches and clouds
his own blood soaking earth and wood

What can he do but send for Maria,
village blood-stopper?

Run, little helper
to the cottage of the tietäjä
we all despise her except in distress
now that her husband has left her

Three heavy lumbermen carry Paavo
a log filled with pain
his leg wrapped in sodden shirts
to Maria's kitchen
her children standing around

She unwraps his foot
dips her hands in the stream of blood
seeks out the edges of his wound
presses the slippery flesh together
skin to skin
threads the rivers of blood
vein to vein
lifts her head to Ahto
utters these words:

Blood, blood, become a wall
thicken, thicken, like a fence
stay, stay, behind my hands
stop, stop, beneath my thumbs!

As Maria chants what she knows,
chanting softly
the lumberman Paavo, fearful as a
wounded bear
falls quiet under her hands
When the sun falls, his blood sleeps
dries in thick threads and wooden scabs

Maria rises, her hair matted
blood hardened on her dress
congealed on her arms:
a newborn calf covered with blood and
straw

CROSSINGS

Here on this blunted border
between snow and snow
she is crossing blind
a crone clicks
her teeth on the tracks

She remembers another crossing

a rope thick as a woman's
wrist cut through
by salt scissor wind
moonlight a midwife
ship adrift

She tightens her belt
around the sharp stone
of a wizened berry
the withered grief of leaving home
the train slows down
stops for no reason

She hears through the steam
her daughters' cries, "Maa maa"
her body their only country
she settles their heads
on her empty womb
the train pulses forward
from darkness to darkness

New Finland
Canada
October 28, 1894

My dear father,

This is a letter to bless the day you were born. I wish I could celebrate with you, eat berry preserves and cake. I miss you, but I cannot say I'm lonely here in this clump of Finns. They speak the same language my tongue learned when my tongue was unlocked. Sometimes the townspeople laugh at my English, but I know enough to get along.

It is cold here today, nearing winter. But I'm used to the cold: the same north wind, *pohjan tuuli*, blows from Kauhava across the pole to Canada on our huddle of buildings in Uusi Suomi. David shot a deer this morning for the girls and me. He is bleeding and gutting it, skinning its soft hide. He does it swiftly in the barn, the cows shift and tremble in their stalls, their eyes roll when they smell

the blood. For a few days their milk will be curdled, but soon they will offer smooth milk again. The deer meat will be good. David quarters it, hangs it in the seppa shop. It is sweet and pungent and lean with the taste of wild grass. He's a good man in my middle age.

What I must keep locked inside: Matt was seldom kind, though he struggled. You saw in his eyes what I could not see, tried to warn me. But why did you and mother close your door to me when I married him?

The geese came down today from the north. David ran in to tell me he heard them honking and growling and filling the sky. He took me outside, we threw back our heads, laughed and called to the geese. They flew in a wide V from Vaasa, heading for warm islands. David sings to me of the tropics, he went for a sailor some of the years of his wandering. He ties up the horses with sailors' knots, tells me stories in the sauna.

What I cannot ask you: why did mother hurt you? You never spoke harsh words in return, but charmed and teased her out of her moods.

The girls are growing, they like David. He's carving them dolls for Christmas. I wish they could see their grandpa. I hope

they marry men who love them, this is a new land.

*David scrubs my back in the sauna
tickles me with the vihta
we throw cold water slowly
on the hot stones
prolonging the löyly
the stones laugh with steam
our bodies soften and ripen
we go outside to cool off, recite the
stars
come in again for löyly
After sauna, the house is quiet
the girls are asleep in the loft
we drink tea and look at each other
make love as slowly as we can
cool off and start again.*

We broke more land this year, 6 more acres. The crop was healthy except for the oats, maybe we got some bad seed. David has time now to build me a loom, the rugs from Kauhava are finally wearing out. Take care of yourself, do not worry about me, but write to me again with news of Kauhava.

With love,
your goose, your girl,

Maria.



*Prairie women worked with the men in the fields. Family Hjelt, Steeledale, Saskatchewan, 1914 .
Photo: Multicultural History Society of Ontario/ Ontario Archives.*

PHOTOGRAPHER

I was the first woman photographer in
the west

the one who captured women
their lined faces, tired eyes
children at their skirts
the ones buried in your trunks
whose names you don't remember

This one was Maria
she had eyes like the glint
of a bluebird's wing
fair hair braided and coiled
heavy as August wheat

Her dress that day was a clear red
if you look closely
you'll see tiny ovals on it
little pointed eggs
or grains of rice
in a flowing pattern

I posed her in front of the garden fence:
willow branches woven
into a landscape of hills
her daughters had gathered wild flowers
stuck them into the fence here and there

I caught her with one arm outstretched
beckoning to a wren

This is a picture of the girls
one was sprightly like her mother
the other tall and serious after her father
a study in contrasts

They helped me load the equipment into
the buggy
it was cool in the house
I drank two dippers of cold spring water
many cups of strong coffee
with honey-dipped buns

When her husband came in from the
field
I could see where her joy came from
if I'd ever met a man like that
I'd have packed up my camera and
tripod
settled down on this flat prairie
and learned how to make honey buns

MIDWIFE

The *sauna* is the best place for a birth
warm as a womb
I used to sit on a bed of towels

on the lowest shelf
waiting and thinking
how would this baby be?
I looked at the knots in the wood
watched the flame in the lantern

Finally Maria would arrive:
how come you get an old woman
out of her warm cosy bed?
Oh well, now that I'm here
let's see if there's a little one hiding

She sang as she stroked
my belly, legs, back
loosening the skin and nerves
she wiped my face with cool water
made circles with her fingertips
on my forehead and temples
her hands were rough from work
she wasn't afraid to use pressure

When the time came near she crouched
below me
kneading and stretching the walls
every time the pain bore down
the sauna walls contracted
she told me to throw my pain
into the coals, throw it in the water
let it steam away

She had a chant for breathing:
Yksi, kaksi, wind goes in
kolme, neljä, hold it there
viisi, kuusi, shoo it out
Another verse when she saw the baby's
head:
Open up, my flower
come out, my bird
don't be afraid to leave your nest

When the baby came she caught it
cradled it, cleaned away the blood
laid it on my chest
I closed my eyes
saw a lake, a sunrise,
maybe a rainbow or northern lights
heard music on the shore
like a soft flute, *huhuilua*
We floated and rested on the waves
Maria rowed us back to shore

MARIA MAKES SOAP

"*Eukko sika* witch of a sow
I nursed you as a runt
now you trample the young of your
young
with your wicked old hoofs!"

She's killed pigs before
but this one's too mean
and Maria knows she's getting old

Hitching her skirts above her boots
she strides off through the snow
to the neighbor Lauttamus
to fetch young Gus the smith
he treated the sow last week
for running sores in her eyes

Old Juha is splitting wood
his axe true, his forearms thick
when he sees Maria
his back straightens
like a sapling slowly released
but she heads straight for the seppä
shop
without so much as *päivää*
for the friend of her youth

"My son has gone to Yorkton
to buy his animal medicines
he won't be back for a week
come in for a coffee...
What's the matter?
Are you planning to murder the Czar?"

"I guess it has to be you, my friend
the old sow's gone crazy
needs to be put down today —
are you sure you can do the job?"

"Do you see that woodpile?"

Never mind his years
Juha is up for the task
still on the green side of fourscore
if he can kill the sow clean
maybe Maria will listen to him
she always says they're both too old

Maria skims the clean fat
from the rendering pot
the rotten silt settles on the bottom
she thinks how good it is
to be so useful after you're gone
haunches into salt pork
thick skin for tanning
gallons of fat for soap

"But this old sow's fat
reeks of bitterness
I'd better not add too much lye
or I'll burn the dishtowels
when I boil them

Maybe I'll use this soap in the sauna

my skin will crack off
I'll be a newborn piglet underneath

Juha's a fine man for his age
he skied both here and back
the red tassel flying on his hat
he killed the old sow clean
just one blow with Gus's hammer"

KANADALAINEN

To have left behind the language
that flowed like spring water
the easy seepage
of fresh words every hour

To have come to a land
of thorough drought
with a dry tongue

To have to pump the handle
like a child again
lifted off the platform
by every upstroke
the pump so stiff
the well so dark
you doubt the alkali earth
will ever release its sour water

To hang a new pail
from the knuckle
on the pump mouth
watching the water trickle
slowly at first
then slowly faster
until the pail is overflowing,
only to stumble on a root
on the path to the house

To watch the pumped water
settle and seep
into insatiable
Canadian earth

To have believed the words
would ever flow together
into sentences

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Some Reflections on Equality, Democracy & Identity in Sweden & Canada

by Ingrid Ljungberg van Beinum

The other day I read an article in a Swedish magazine about a woman who is an actress, dancer, educator, as well as many other things. What really struck me was her statement: "I'm Swedish, I'm black." These words triggered off a forceful image because of their inherent strength and impossibility. Swedish people are after all, mostly blond and blue-eyed. Ingrained perceptions can be very deceiving. Being blond, blue-eyed and Swedish myself, although I've lived in Canada for 10 years and outside of Sweden for 18 years, it reminded me of my own identity and how it is linked to the notions of equality and democracy, and how these change over time.

In this discussion I will take the view that being sure of one's own identity is necessary to understand equality and to be able to participate in a "real democratic" society. The three concepts are, as I see it, positively correlated.

Instead of following an academic discourse of comprehensive definitions and analyses of equality, democracy and identity, I will focus on more general and operational definitions as we use and understand them in our daily reality. Although I am very much aware that these questions are pertinent to all the different groups that make up society, I will limit my remarks to women and men and their relationship. I think that if we cannot clarify the "equality and identity crisis" between men and women, we will have little chance of making any progress in improving the relationship between the various other groups in society. As the picture with regard to the latter is somewhat gloomy, learning about the role and relationship between women and men is a matter of urgency.

I will begin with a few remarks about the meaning of the three concepts and how I use them, and then I will try to link

them to some examples, mainly from Sweden but partly from Canada as well.

Equality

In Sweden there was a lively discussion in the late 1950s and early 1960s about equality in the field of education. The debate was largely about whether equality means people are basically the same or whether equality means that people should be treated equally although they are different. The debate led to a school system allowing equal opportunities for dissimilar people which included a compulsory 9 year education for everyone.

In Canada the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment for women, native people, disabled persons and visible minorities, which was chaired by Judge Rosalie Abella, has expressed its views as follows: equality "means that no one is denied opportunities for reasons that have nothing to do with inherent ability." Further, "discrimination...means...limiting an individual's or group's right to the opportunities generally available because of attributed rather than actual characteristics," and "sometimes equality means treating people the same, despite their differences, and sometimes it means treating them as equals by accommodating their differences."¹

These are broad and humane definitions. To treat people in a certain way does not, *per se*, mean one does so out of an inner conviction. It may well be the result of environmental forces such as legislation or peer pressure.

The point is that unless we recognize, understand and believe in equality as discussed in Judge Abella's report, we cannot deal with it in a genuine fashion and consequently society will have great difficulty in developing equality as an authentic cultural characteristic.