

Displacing Charles the Bald

by Gita M. Smith

This morning in a misting rain I walk to a classroom where I'll proctor a history exam. I stop to adore a flowering Shirofugen cherry tree with its 30-petaled blossoms and to enjoy the cool, damp air on my forehead.

The classroom seats rise, stadium style, and the students slide along the rows with that resigned *step-slide-step* of prisoners. I hand out the slightly damp pages of their exam and take my seat. Such closed faces they have, such disinterested eyes.

I have an urge to shout, "Put down your answer sheets and write a haiku on a cherry tree, instead!"

Curious because I do not teach this course, I read their exam, finding that I am not sure of all the answers, myself.

Which ruler BEST exemplifies 17th century absolutism in Europe: Henry 8th, Elizabeth I, Louis 14th or Frederick II.

They were all bad actors, in their ways, although Lizbet sponsored enough good theater to last for centuries.

Who were the Russian settlers who moved into the steppes south and west of Muscovy: the Boyars, Zemski Sobor, Cossacks or Patriarchs. I try to envision long-haired men riding horses across a vast expanse, their faces blank as those of the students, boots made of yak skins and wolf fur. Cossacks, I decide. No, Boyars.

Finally I come across this one, which makes me smile. *The schism in the Russian Orthodox Church was triggered by whose policy changes? Patriarch Nikon, Peter I, Empress Catherine or Feodor the Bellringer.*

Why, Feodor, of course. It had to be Feodor! I would choose him for no other reason than his cinematic name. I would choose him again and again, test after test, right or wrong.

Feodor the Bellringer, whatever you may have done so long ago, you have now surpassed Charles the Bald as my favorite name in European history.

