

from Claims · Shirley Kaufman

Look at the map. If you forget
the scale there's no way to measure
how far you have traveled
from there to here.

I roll out the strudel
as she taught me, pulling the dough
until it's thin enough to see through
all the way back.

Strangers open the door. They show me
into the room I slept in
next to their big one,
somebody else's crib, the wallpaper new
where I slipped my finger under the seam
and tore the roses.

I lay on my left
side next to their wall
to hear her whimper in bed,
or was it some immoderate
noise that scared me
from my sleep and made me
cry I'm afraid of the dark
till he stamped in the doorway
and switched on the light.

My mother remembered how she sat
in the cart beside her father
when he rode through the lands
of the absent landlord collecting the rents.

It was near Brestlitovsk,
the names kept changing and the peasants
would stare at them and pay.

Peasant to grandfather, Jew to Pole,
each greasing the other,
steps that went nowhere
like the road to the border.

When the Cossacks came charging through the town
they bolted the doors and windows
and hid under the beds. They put pillows
over the children's mouths
to stop their cries.

There was no summer in this landscape,
even the language disappeared.
Fifty years later all she remembered
was her father's white shirt,
that he was always clean.

Snow in the winter,
pillows of goose down
where my mother still walked
on the underside of sorrow,
thick braids splashing between her shoulders,

or sat by the lamp they lit early
while the young man read Pushkin
leaning against her knees.

It rained in Seattle even in June.
She made fine stitches in her sheets
and waited. French knots and gossip.
The distance between them
was a hole through the center of the world
the rain kept filling. The rain
made a river in her ribs
on which her sad heart drifted.

There are words that can't travel,
threads that have lost their way home.

I wanted to grow up somewhere else.
Not in the living room
where no one lived, the dark oak
smelling of polish, untouchable doilies,
and the sun stopped back of the curtains
so the upholstery wouldn't fade.
Not in the kitchen where she skimmed
the fat off the soup like fear
left over from the first life.

I might have had a sister
mother told me only she lost her
down the toilet at three months.

She grew so pure in her grieving
she no longer saw the blood.

Hunger forgets what it came for
when the fingers won't tighten
around a spoon and the food
is sawdust in the reluctant mouth,

chewing and chewing what I fed her,
refusing to swallow
the lump on her tongue.

Her hands with their patient knuckles
are lighter than anything she held.
They are obsequious as aliens,
swabbed clean, exiled
even under the ground.