

MELANIE DRANE

Brotsuppe

We agree I'll pay by the week for meals
and one room behind the kitchen.
Every morning, Herr Neugebauer stirs
Brotsuppe on the electric coil, porridge
from stale bread rinds, lumps softened
to paste in scalded milk—the same breakfast
he's eaten since his childhood between world
wars. He says bread is holy, a blessed
feast, and then he hums, trimming back
the blue roses that grow wild in the loaf.

In September, he waits for the old plum tree
in the garden to rain small, hard blue fruit,
Zwetschke that cling to their stones. All night
I listen to plums dropping on the tin roof
of the tool shed. By morning, wasps hover
over the lawn, swarm above geranium
pots, until the plums burst their swollen
skins in the grass, sticky red syrup glistening
where they've been broken. Herr Neugebauer's
still humming, won't give up

a single piece, takes a rusted paring knife,
sits on a stool by his blue aluminum pail,
cutting away the bad parts. On Sundays,
he adds boiled plums to my *Brotsuppe*.
For lunch, there's compote, more brown
and wrinkled plums; at dinner, he slices
Pflaumkuchen, tells me the value of saving
whatever you can: "Just eat a bruised
banana with your eyes closed, it's delicious."
He sucks his false teeth, hums.
Plum season has ended, it's cold now.
Mornings when the radiator begins to hiss

and thump in my bedroom, I hear him humming
through the kitchen wall. Today I'm up early,
there's sun over the garden; from my window,
frost on the bare branches of the plum tree.
Today Herr Neugebauer's breaking
into words, so happy, he's singing something
about bread, singing it again louder
when I enter the kitchen—I'm still learning

German, have to concentrate
to understand. Herr Neugebauer's startled
to see me—he's in his bathrobe,
dark longjohns on his skinny legs,
his lips almost blue, *Brotsuppe*
scorching on the coil. Our eyes
meet, as he breaks the law and sings
the Horst-Wessel-Lied out loud:
*Millions look to the swastika full of hope,
The day breaks for freedom and for bread.*

The scent of weedy, long-stewed coffee
rises like smoke. Herr Neugebauer lights
a cigarette, turns to say: "Songs never hurt
anyone, you understand? We just wanted to sing
again, even now I only want to sing again.
You won't move because of music, will you?"
I'm silent at the table, head down, chewing
bread rinds I can't swallow. The tablecloth's
dusted with a fine snowfall of crumbs,
outside, blue jays wheeze in the plum tree.