The Clamor of My Dead

Naomi Reimer-Duke, *Tacoma, Washington*

THE CLAMOR OF MY DEAD

We go half around the world to look for Sady,
not a girl but a place in Poland
where great-grandmother Helena lived,
baptised a Mennonite there.
New maps don't show Sady.
A military map shows it,
the place charted when war required
keeping track of everyone—potato farmers,
growers of cattle, mayors and teachers—
all villagers counted either enemy or trusted.
Helena, that sad great-grandmother, not counted,
buried instead in Oklahoma by then.

No cottages remain, no place she might have lived,
only a low, long building, white against the mire,
the squeal of pigs being slaughtered,
the invasive smell of raw meat
and on a trail that leads to the woods,

the hooves of hogs, an ear and skin.
Smocked women lean against a rail smoking.
Lilac branches sprawl across the littered trail,
old bushes of them, tangled and blooming,
their scent a wonderment coming as we did
from the smells of cigarettes and butchering.

Here in an overgrown cemetery,
gravestones askance, face down in the earth,
names remain hidden.
Bird songs tremble from the lilacs.
Pigs grunt and moan and slaughterers shout,
and underneath the loam,
the gravid quiet of Mennonite dead
becomes a clamor,
like the silent spinning of wheels.

Together we tug and lift
and uncover a name and date—
1838, a Wahl—someone known
to Helena's father. That strange man
left wife and children, Helena nine then,
and went to look for land in Germany.
Gone for two months, he came home
to find his children motherless, his wife buried.

The story passed down through his heirs:
he took a shovel, uncovered her coffin,
settled his grief and married
her sister to be stepmother.
Was it here in this dark earth
left to roots of lilacs
and the remains of slaughtered hogs—
did he dig here?

FROM ZAPOROZHYE

At dusk three roses placed in a vase
in our room in Zaporozhye
surprise us. A soft flow of air
stirs the lace at the windows,
touches the petals, spreading their fragrance.
A Ukranian woman had brought them,
cleaning our room, laundering our shirts,
bringing roses from her garden.

There are roses in the park
next to the Dnieper River,
roses and fountains
and Lenin's image in stone.
Behind the dam built for power,
Bethania is a Mennonite memory—
the hospital, the therapeutic baths,
the treatment center for mentally ill—
flooded for progress.

We are told that the village of Einlage
and its Mennonite church is there
settling into the river bottom sand.
The waters are expansive and quiet,
seem a natural lake ruffled
by a breeze, like the pucker
in a housewife's quilt, an error
made in obeisance to God's perfection.

In the cemetery in Chortitza
near well-tended Ukrainian graves
red roses are abandoned,
growing wild, climbing a headstone,
monument to a Mennonite wife Agnes,
the stone precarious beside a vacancy,
a trickle of earth leaving surface,
eroding to a casket below.

But there are no roses in memory
of Jakob Hoeppner who spied
out this land for settlement
when Frederick's Prussian war
unsettled Mennonites in Poland.

Families of them, our forebears, spent
their first miserable winter in Chortitza
under the large oak that's dying there.

And brought a case against Jakob,
had him imprisoned for duplicity
though generations later
it would be determined
he too had been deceived.
Released, he farmed quietly here
separate from his Mennonite neighbors
and is buried alone under a wild pear tree.

SCHOENSEE

What remains of the church at Schoensee,
that Mennonite Bethel built in the Golden Era
before the Revolution, two wars, and Stalin?
Only brick walls with empty gothic windows,
an eyeless visage where pigeons chirp and roost,
dark birds along the framework, rising as one
image, one fluttering changing body,
underwings white against the blue Ukranian sky.

The roof is gone but bricks remain, clay
binding them together past use and reason.
The earth is floor where once on Sunday
the choir sang, the Jemeenschoft prayed,
the prediga read and preached in German,
and locusts grow rampant succored by the sun.

Under Joseph Stalin more than forty-two million people lost their lives, among them Molokans, Tartars, Kirgise, Lutherans, Jews and Mennonites.

FOR THOSE WHO WERE TAKEN

and those who grieve the taking,
we remember and grieve with you.
In memory we open the deaths
as once in the Old Country
we opened the coffins,
looked a final time at a beloved,
touched the silenced lips. We uncover
the lives of these who were silenced by death,
who though unfuneraled have been mourned
with the unrelieved mourning of one who remains
to hope and to question when the death of a beloved
is only suspected, occurs in a distant place among strangers.

How can we measure a grief?
Who can gauge the pain of a mourner?
Is heartache measured in time—
the loss of a loved one
assessed in minutes or days?
When a people is lost where is the scale
to measure the scope of the loss—the Richter?

Taken from homes in the Molotschna, Karaganda,
from Chortitza, the Crimea, from Orenburg,
spirited from each other, husband from wife,
father from children, daughter from mother,
taken in night visits to be beaten and pelted
with questions, with contrived accusations
while behind their heads along a wall
"Life now is better, life now is merrier"
scripted in Russian; the taken ones
sent to Siberia, to the steppes of Kazakstan
to mines and forests and gulags.

We shelter their names like bones
in a coffin and sing a Mennionite dirge,
"Es ist genug...
nun gute Nacht, o Welt!"
for Mennonites, Jews, Lutherans,
Molokans, Tartars, and Kirgise—all the taken.

And those who were ours,
those who were theirs,
the bones of ours and theirs,
interred in the common graves
during the Revolution,
or when Stalin called too many deaths
the "Dizziness from Success,"
or later in the "Great Terror."

Villagers taken—husbands and fathers:
Seventy-two from Burwalde
One hundred thirteen from Nikolaifeld
Two hundred forty-five from Einlage
Three hundred thirty-seven from Chortitza
Brothers taken: Johann and Gerhard, teachers,
Jakob and Martin, cashier and miller.
Preachers taken: Johann M. Janzen of Memrik.
Philanthropists taken: Franz Wall,
founder of the hospital at Muntau.
Physicians taken: Doctor Isaak Thiessen
of Bethania Mental Hospital.
Elders taken: Franz Martens
of the Daviekanova church in Ufa.

Ministers, three Wiebes:
Johann, Peter the elder, and Jakob;
Deacon Franz Janzen taken two days after Christmas.
And others taken:
Engineer Hermann Lepp;
Katya from Omsk;
Hans and Jakob to work on a frozen river;
Joseph Hirsch, teacher from Adelscheim.

We weep for the dead,
for these and the unnamed ones,
for mothers and children taken or left,
and pelt questions at the takers:
Where? Where? Where?
Where were these beloved lives lost,
beloved bones buried?
And pelt the world with our questions:
Why? Why? Why?
And wait, the questions unanswered.

We sing to remember the taken.
Es ist genug... nun gute Nacht, O Welt!