

**SHE CALLED THEM ALL A BANDIT GOD, OR HOW
MY GRANDMOTHER SURVIVED THE HOLOCAUST**

I.

When your country is at war
look for the way people treat children,
then you'll know who to follow.
But when the children are dying
God is a bandit. Masked
as a smiling man, asking
where your sister lives
as the synagogue burns
to keep your house warm.

II.

Leave the birds at the mine entrance,
they are not big enough, wing-tip-to-wing-tip
they will make a cocoon, a cage of feathers
their heartbeats electrical-steel humming
as you enter the Donetsk Coal Basin
looking for energy, a stone-currency,
that will let you ride commercial trains
into manageable horror. But, a Bandit-God watches,
his smirk a collapsing cavern
immobilizing your legs before the Black Cars pick you up.
The birds are still fluttering, a frenzy
before an explosion. Waiting to deliver
your bird-song-survival.

III.

The land will always show you the way out.
It waited for your return at birth,
your bones: hollowed out rocks
that remember river paths & the quickest way to drown.
But it never prepared you for a sea of bodies
a constant churning
you are asked to forget,
because a Bandit-God is a ghost
with a body sewn on.

IV.

Always leave five plates out,
when all you do is cook for yourself.
The table is always ready to give—
you, a skeleton of your mother's foods,
leave out the kasha, the totality of divinity,
each kernel an arrow
a Bandit-God follows into fields
where honeybees spooked as scarecrows
line the wheat.

V.

You can always trust a woman.
She will shape shift into a shadow
like an eclipsed-sun.
She is mute. The tongueless can't give wisdom—
but she gives you grapes to restore your lungs
& holds you to her chest
as you blend into the fabric of her clothing,
her heart, where a Bandit-God can't see
& the children are the vineyard-vines
holding you upright as the sun blazes on.

LIE STILL

There was a time when Ukraine groaned so deep and guttural. Her scream stuck silent beneath lurching country-lines; she choked on plumes of smoky-sun & wept with each child buried alive. They corroded the lining of her throat. A body forged by millennia of kasha farms. A body meant to contain and save the people who took & took & took.

I wanted to feel the grooves of rocks that whispered mined secrets. Of memories for those lost in a mother's grasp. Confined, she struggled; she held her hands together in a prayer lost to gunfire. There would be no feeling loud enough to save her children—

Her body continued to shake and crumble, and still she prayed.

TISHINA, OR HOW SOFTLY MEMORY FALLS

For Sarah Tiplitskaya

I can only remind you of moments
of *house* or *that's mine*.
She hid you among her jutting ribs

where neighbors shared bread
never fearing one or the other.

But strife and war aren't interested in peace.
Your mother called them the Bandit God.

Round up the family into the dirt.

Your mother begged the Bandit-God
not to push the baby's body into
a sea of trembling and wheezing.

But the Bandit-God didn't listen—
made a spectacle for those who questioned

your fall into the pit of human bodies,
as the ground convulsed for seven days.

FIRST SESSION WITH THE PSYCHOLOGIST: THE GRANDCHILD TRIES TO REMEMBER AN INHERITANCE OF PAIN

The psychologist asks the grandchild to twist their body, turn each muscle loose with ghost-stories.

See how the tongue trembles? It tries to swallow a hard vowel before it remembers words like Nikopol manganese. That filled the blast furnaces & mines, a magnet suturing steel, for resistance against cattle wagons full of crows & crowded limbs. In this town, once of 22,000, each mine & school & bakery full of bruised walls or imprints, of one hand ripped from another as neighbors sold cousins & sisters & best friends.

Still the grandchild tries to mimic

the stern caterpillar brows of Dyedushka, who wept into the metallurgical mines. Each spark & removal of oxygen forged rifle & barrel & piping to the gas chamber.

& the psychologist says, *remember the body after a strike*— the way it curls into itself.

Muscles shocked. The mind muted. But when the grandchild touches steel

The metal rings electric through her bones & her mouth full of blood burns to the crack of steel-capped boots disfiguring her Babushka's cheek-bone.

BABA YAGA (UKRAINE, 1939)

*She was none other than the terrible witch who chased little children by riding through the air
in her giant mortar. And once caught, she ate them with her iron teeth.*

My chicken-legged hut limps
as I follow cattle-wagons

on railroads of bone-shatter,

& metallic smoke.

Each night, I listen
for the children.
Hoping they find a way
back to me.

My oven meant for eating
meant for death,
& there it sits:
empty, but for flecks of teeth.

The embers under it
a purplish bruise spreading,
my servants turn ashes—

turn over child's laughter,
their fear, the moment
before my mouth ajar.

Each day I watch
trains of children
evaporate.

I pray to the godless

let the children go.

Frost scrapes my windows
like small hands
& mostly, ghost-like,
those children's faces haunt me.

Tiny eyes like fireflies
on decaying compartment doors,
pray for heat & food.

I didn't know I have a heart,
could feel the muscle twitch
& ache with every passing day.

I watch how each soldier crosses himself
as I enter their camp,
unravel my body with one snarl,

how the forest surges
how the men run,
how it isn't enough.

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