

Stitching things together, 2007

I: Tracing the pattern

I stab the curved needle
into broken skin
pulling edges together
with blue, nylon sutures

II: Alterations

my father was a tailor
on Haufgass in Zhetl, 1931
running his thumb
over loose threads

after he set the pigeons free on May 1st
red ribbons tied to their legs
he sat in Lushinkes gaol for months
urine poured into his Communist nostrils

my grandfather shared a bottle
of vodka with the guard
and put his son on board the *SS Moreton Bay*
in 1938, before the storm began

we sacrifice everything for our children
father said as he sewed coats in Melbourne
looking down from the window onto Flinders Lane
at men loading mannequins into trucks

while Europe blazed and swallowed up
his youth, his love, his life
he basted coat sleeves
and pad-stitched lapels

III: Pressing the Seams

local anaesthetic wears off
the laceration begins to throb
the pain of the body
split open, returns

Dealing the cards

*I: Mizinek **

Fifteen years after father limped down Flinders Lane
and mother drank bromide tea in Bergen Belsen
I was born, an accident of old age
Why bring children into such a world?

I was a good girl then
my parents' little miracle
their heart and soul and hope

II: Wrestling ghosts

On Saturdays they played
Polish rummy
crammed around the kitchen table in Caulfield
with Gdale and Genia, Luba and Max

the women smoked Craven A's
the men ate greasy herring on rye
sipping whisky before they dealt

kids would wrestle in the lounge room
evil Dr Schnitzelbaum body-slammed Lewin the Jew
and I was always referee – *1,2,3, you're out!*

ghosts cheered from the sidelines
hidden behind the cigarette haze
no one ever saw them, except me

I resurrected them from the dead
their faces locked away
behind mother's eyes

and I fell into her world
wanting to be the air
that filled her every breath

III: Shock

In this house, in my room
where I dreamed for years
unspoken words piled up

father sat on the floor
playing *Go Fish* with me
his crooked leg stretched out

while electrodes forced the sun
of pre-war Poland back into mother's brain
and she saw a carp swimming in the tub

her mother chopping off its head
mincing the flesh for gefilte fish
served with a slice of carrot for shabbat

did the volts burn the darkness in her
and force my faceless relatives to move on
searching for shelter in another's haunted mind?

unspoken words piled up between us
silent, like murdered bodies
the *what-we-should-have-said*s
the *if-only*s

* the youngest child (Yiddish)

Aus(chwitz) to Aus(tralia)

I: Aus(chwitz)

the ashes settle on the town
bleached white bones huddle under snow
the ovens the ovens
a baker's dozen
thirteen faces kneaded dough
never faced my face they gaze
in silence scream my name

from dying embers rose the smallest flame
blackened eyes watched
chimneys belching smoke
my mother's mother sisters brothers

scattered with the breeze

across the seas
my mother saw a safer shore
mother sisters brothers
she followed them as far as she could go
and hidden in the clouds
their only shroud
they rained for forty years
their bitter endless tears

II: Aus(tralia)

While Bondi's waves were crashing in the sun
there lay within the oven mother's bun
pat-a-cake pat-a-cake baker's man
bake me a cake as fast as you can

sacrificial lamb
basting in the oven
she fed me spoonfuls
one by one
one for your aunt
one for your cousin
 from
the oven
 for
the ovens
 for
the baker's dozen

I spat out every mouthful
in defiance of her past

of eyes that had no face
of mouths that had no voice
and I played with my curls
like the rest of the girls
and cried that my hair wasn't straight

and in every mirror
she saw her shaven head

one day the mirror cracked
she saw her ghost had no reflection
she told me Hitler won the war
I laughed and went to bed

that evening
the empty heart stopped
bleeding
she never woke
she never spoke my name
again

the dirt has settled on her coffin
bleached white bones rest beneath

she came from god-forsaken hell

to hell
forsaken

Recipes from the SS Kitchen

mother stands beside the highchair
feeding me tomatoes
sprinkled with sugar
my first sour-sweet mouthful

she wipes stray seeds from my chin
with the edge of a bib
then offers more

shoves in spoonful after spoonful
her bony fingers brushing my cheek
here she comes again with schnitzel
gnocchi, potatoes, klops, broth

holding back the bile
she chokes on meals she never ate
the best cook in the camp

Little Vienna Cafe, Carlisle Street, 1965

what I remember most
is the waiter's bow tie
white shirt, tailored pants
horn-rimmed spectacles
and his way of serving schnitzel
as he smiled at my mother

a glass of red wine for her
raspberry cordial for me
her nails painted red
mine bitten to the quick

what I try to forget
is father spilling soup on his trousers
rubbing at the stain
with a white, linen serviette
mother glaring at him
while the waiter hovered nearby

and now I remember
trying to ignore her scowl
wishing he would hurry up
and bring sacher torte for dessert