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## From "Claims"

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*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.