

JUNE 1944

1

The woman leads her brothers across a ditch. They
lean on her, their muscles too weak
for walking after fifteen months
hiding in an attic.

Rain mired the Russian tanks near Berezhany,
and the Ukrainian who hid them said
they must walk, across the soaked
fields of early summer,

away from the house, the attic. German troops
were still in the village, and neighbors
said they smelled Jews
hiding. So one night

they bound rags around their shoes and set out
toward the Russian lines. The woman
was tired, but when the boy,
six, couldn't walk

(did he cry?) she lifted him on her back. The wind
was new to the boy. In the attic one brick,
end-on, was out of the wall.
He watched children

play outside through this rectangular mask.
The children looked flat, and had a habit
of jumping out of view. Their giggles
bounced in, but no wind,

for the brick hole was small. Parts of the attic
the boy wasn't allowed to be in (the boards
might creak). Dried peas in a sack
made a good pillow.

So it was right for the boy to reach to the wind
to hug it, but the big guns then took
the wind from him, his mother
stumbled, he had to grab

her coat. The hedge swung off up the hill, and
they had to cross the field, the brother

who had been with the partisans
said. He had the gun

(continued, with stanza break)

with four bullets (but there were five of them.) So
they moved slowly, feet sinking into clay,
exposed, as they were, to the road,
dawn, to the Russian lines.

2

Tanks (thank God for the red star) ruttet
the road, made them jump back. We are Jews,
they called up to the trucks, we want to go
to Zloczow. One stopped, Russian soldiers

climbed slowly over the side, some wrapped
in blankets, smelling of vodka and cabbage.
They gave the men handrolled cigarettes,
the boy a hard candy. One said to his mother

in Yiddish, I'm from Odessa, and pulling
out a worn book, look, I have my Peretz
with me. The soldiers hugged themselves, coats
flapping, pissed by the road and told them they

could climb up and ride as far as they went.
The others slept, but the boy looked over
the side of the truck as it lurched around
craters, stopping to let tanks pass. He saw a leg

in a ditch, then a body crooked in the way of
dead things, and he thought: that must be a German.
He saw trucks with Katyushas, crews cleaning
the tube racks, stacking shells. He imagined

them fired at night. Another body, two
arms, a helmet. No blood in this mud, just
soldiers cursing a flat tire in Russian under
gray skies. His mother called him and he came.

3

The Russian truck left
them five kilometers from the town.
They bought some milk, bread, kielbasa from a farmer

who gave them a look, but took the gold

coin. The boy swallowed
the milk, didn't like it, he had
not drunk any for three years. They slept in a barn, walked
into town the next morning. A Polish woman

sweeping her gateway
recognized them. She frowned
Ah the Rosen family, so they didn't kill you all.
Their house was standing, the biggest

house on Jagiellonska.
Only the roof was shot up.
When they knocked, a man came to the door: We live here
we thought you . . . wouldn't be back. The furniture

was gone, but the stamped
enameled tile ovens stood in the corner
of each room. In the attic they looked for the pictures
they had hidden. The boy found his mother

crying, baby pictures
(is that me, is that me?) around her.
Photos of a man pushing a baby carriage in a sunny park,
a man holding hands with his mother.