

Maura MacNeil

Summer Garden: Leningrad 1942

*Let no one forget;
Let nothing be forgotten.*

— Olga Berggolts

Last summer the local boys made nets
from the treads of unravelled shawls.
They threw them into the trees and sky
like gifts then picked the largest
birds out when it floated back down.
They roasted the crows, the sparrows,
over small fires made from the bark of
flowering trees.
We were hungry then.
If any birds remain now they hide

Now ice coats the windows. I am no longer hungry
and those boys have long passed gathering.
Everything has become a window I look
out of in a room I know I can't leave.
In the city writers have burned their desks
and chairs; the musicians have finally
burned their violins. All the window sills are gone.
There is only the *tick, tick, tick*
of the metronome broadcast from the radio
house when the flutist stops playing,
when he really believes he can no longer go on.

Today in Summer Garden
I remember the smell of sausage, jam
spread thickly on bread in picnics
laid out on the grass years ago, it seems.
I smell the hyacinth that flowers in the trees.

I do not see the bodies wrapped tightly in dark
 blankets and coats, leaning against the tall
 iron fence as though resting or waiting.
 I do not see their faces covered in scarves
 as if to keep the cold away,
 as if they still knew the winter cold.
 I swear to myself that they are alive —
 frozen into conversation
 with old friends, lovers, and themselves.

I tell myself not to remember how I cut the boots
 off one of the young men who fell dead in the street,
 cutting the leather away because his feet
 were so swollen, so blue.
 I am eleven years old.
 I am eating the soles of shoes to stay alive.
 The water tastes of bodies
 hidden under the snow. Last Sunday I pulled
 my older sister through the streets on a small sled
 because she was so weak —
 She cried out to me *faster, faster*
 as though we were speeding down a hill.

I am eleven years old.
 I am Tanya Savichev;
 I live in House No.13, Second Line.
 I am giving this to you as a gift.
 It reads:
 "Savichevs died. All died. Only Tanya remains."
 And I am the one who started up the metronome
 when the man at the radio house fell dead, clutching
 the small wooden box to his chest.
 I am old now, unable to sleep without the *tick, tick, tick*
 like an old woman who counts her breath at night.

I am Tanya Savichev.
 In one month I will die.
 This I know, hearing it in the winter walls.
 I know this as I know the poets have burned their desks
 and when they die they have their verses on their lips.
 The musicians still hear distant concertos

in their heads, so they hum to themselves when they
have forgotten all else.

Tomorrow I will go again to Summer Garden.

I will look for birds.