

LIZ HARMS

Inquest on Carolina Petrovitis, Case No. 234-3-1916

In March 1916, the AMA created statutes which permitted abortions only upon conferral of one or more physicians to “preserve the life of the mother;” outlawing abortions performed by midwives. Hospitals were encouraged by law enforcement to obtain “dying declarations” of women suspected of having an illegal abortion by any means necessary.

Heaven must be a forest
of mushrooms blanketed

with summer. In Lithuania
as a girl, the basket weave

stamped fossil prints of itself
in my elbow’s bend. Those marks
would plump back up by dinner.

—this round of marks on my belly will not
fade, but I suppose I never finished
the carrying

—I ask the policija where is my husband?
I am not sure I speak in English.

* * *

Standing before the tenements, I unclasp
my bag; remove my stethoscope and cup
the chest piece in my glove-warmed palms;
the cool metal a comfort for me, a small torment
to patients. I find her lying in soaked bedclothes,
a cluster of neighbor women bedside. She is twice
a mother; her children, with a half-set

of jacks, play in the corridor as she clutches
 her abdomen, perhaps unconsciously. Were I
 to replace her hands with my own, would
 I feel the same thing as she who holds
 herself together? I know how a healthy belly
 should feel, soft and pliant; a distressed
 abdomen often stiffens, as if making a shield
 of itself. The carnage of hemorrhage: archaic
 and unmistakable. I'm ill-equipped to treat her
 here, and yet I hesitate to call an ambulance.
 The police call it *chain of custody*, which sounds like
 a playground vow of *finders-keepers*. Her outlook
 is grim. Should she die, I will suffer the law;
 as if I, a licensed practitioner, would leave any uterus
 perforated, leaking its organic poison into the body.
 This is the newest type of witch hunt; but the hunters
 have not yet decided who will play the witch.

* * *

My husband's coarse hands catch wisps
 of hair as he cups my head—
 even his tender worship reflects the slaughter-
 house drudge of his days. We touch

between bites of cheese, a luxury.

He plants young kisses on my neck,
 sprawled as we are against our tree,
 its thick branch dipped,

chaise-like, inches above grass
 littered with mushrooms, and nestles me
 between outstretched legs—palms
 my stomach, awed with the strength

of our first child. He hums

“Let Me Call You Sweetheart.” And the tree—
 though dying, honey fungus at the roots, small

pale leaves — seems to tremble

at the sound. I pull a mushroom
by its stem; as intimate as undressing
a lover — plucking gently the button
from the placket of forest ground.

* * *

I confuse her fear for fear of death, dark eyes
alarmed, violet blooming beneath from fatigue.
I palpate the fresh hollow in her pelvic girdle,
her wincing precursors to moans. She felt the pierce
as the midwife breached her uterine wall; her body,
meant to encase a nascent life, should be resilient
enough for a slip of a midwife's wrist.

* * *

Sometimes, I found knots
of chanterelles

which I sold in town. I hid the rubles
in a pocket I sewed in my skirt hem.

— I pull coins from a bag for some butter;

the first meal I learned from my mother,
how to mask mushroom's earthiness with salt and sweet
juices from a sweating onion —

my eldest only eats
this when he can't stand
the hunger — rye
dry in the cupboard —

he squeezes shut his eyes,
a wrinkle bridges his nose but

he chews. I beg him
to eat—please eat—

fill completely this time. Later—

I will forage my own meal
from his cool plate—

* * *

When I tell my husband—
when his hands finally fall
from his face—a worried blur

masks the cratered wrinkles of his forehead,
the deep cut across his cheek
from the slaughterhouse—

for a moment he is a child
trusting me to handle it—to give me
a modest sum for the midwife

I'm quiet, but I hold his hand
pull mother's quilt across our laps—
the children sleeping.

* * *

The pressure is unlike anything,
even birth—the pain from a healthy baby
is the good hurt,
the kind you know

will dissolve like spun sugar
with each tear
from your baby's new eyes.

— Three policemen at my bedside
We know what happened.
Who did it for you?

But where is my husband? My babies?

You are dying, Mrs. Petrovitis.
The doctor — too young, fears
the lawmen,
maybe me, too.
Who did it for you?

* * *

The police found the midwife; her shawl-covered shoulders hunched, inches from my patient's bedside. I could grab her and shake; a lesser man might. My grandmother, before her death, wore a similar shawl. Her hands, gnarled as the woman's in front of me. Before the arthritis goose-necked her wrists, she taught me how to pull a calf from its grunting mother, to dress a wound; she fought fevers with cool baths and thin broth. Maury, she'd say, plucking chicken feathers at the kitchen table, *good people give more life than they take away*. She would not blame the midwife; but neither of them hold the knowledge I do. I've seen the fickle tricks a body wages against itself. I've nestled an infant against its mother's warm breasts; heard the beat of a mother's heart as it stutters to an end.

* * *

Elena from the corner house
used the midwife before —

the funny thing about pregnancy
is how sharp I get —
I can hear the groan

of a child's empty belly
before it has one —

I hear the police
worry I'll die before they fetch
the midwife.

*You're dying, Carolina.
Do you understand?*

—as though anyone understands dying
beyond the sting of bile on the tongue

or bleach fumes
in stale hospital air. How I long
for the smell of my babies' hair, my mother's quilt,

my husband's neck
damp from aftershave.

* * *

The midwife is here. Can you identify her?
—she looks different

at my side, not between my knees
with a catheter —

I can nod,
which is everything
they need —

*I am Mrs. Carolina Petrovitis.
Believing that I am going to die,
and having no hope of recovery,
I make the following statement,
while of sound mind and in full
possession of my faculties.*