

Elise Imagines Herself Behind Flowers: 1938

by Tantra Bensko

Elise, you prepare your grave face for the soldier
Who has come again to smell the air for turpentine
And feel the paint brushes for moisture.
You look in the Nazi's pale blue eyes, pale lashes
Like brushes left too long in the sun.
He asks: Has your father been painting today?
You swallow.

In your mouth is the attic studio
Where your father's brushes lie wet with water
Colors, stacked paintings
Of you surrounded by huge flowers.
If only the handsome sergeant could see you
In the middle of flowers that cut you off,
Make you move so lusciously on the paper.
From hidden hip to hidden shoulder, you move
Out of the picture.

But your father would be taken to the camp.
He asks: Elise, has your father painted today,
Tell me? You step forward with the desire
To be as important as your father.

Your Mama and your brother don't know he still paints,
Against the orders of the regime..
Their serious faces are not as charming as yours.
He paints them from memory,
But always in one sitting.
If only you could tell them

That your father takes you up the ladder in your frilled dress.

If you could tell the soldier that your father
Loves you the best, your father would be clenched around
The narrow shoulders and swung down the stairs
The way you swing him down in your dreams.
You took off your shirt for your father last month,
Your undershirt this month. What will come next?
You looked up at him, sideways, and smiled
While he painted your body.

Your father would be pushed in the back, maybe bleed.
You would never have to take off anything more for him.
You want to tell the Nazi's blue eyes the truth,
To show him tiny bare breasts
In the picture, to tell him:
That is more than anyone should see.
You would both take your father away
In his black shirt flecked with orange paint,
And roll him into the car and he would not look at you.

