

# 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.

