

On the Map of Despair

Elena Lelia Radulescu

*Maria, Safta, Rodna, Teresa, Jiva,
guilty for
being mothers and wives,
daughters and sisters to owners
of land, cows, horses, farmsteads;
guilty for
speaking more than one tongue,
as if words were silver bullets
meant to kill those of the new order;
guilty for
living close to the border, so close
some days they could hear the dreams
of their neighboring Serbs crying,
trapped onto the teeth of barbed wire.*

*Ana, Petra, Dabrinca, Mileva, Rada,
rounded up like lambs,
sentenced to a forced labor camp,
in the scorching fields,
north of the river Danube,
the new Siberia on the map of despair.*

*When the land entered
into the labor of spring,
hemorrhaging wild poppies far into the horizon,
side by side with their men,
Anca, Dejana, Flavia, Maranda, Liuta,
dug deep into the veins*

*of that parched ground,
forcing the water out,
quenching their thirst
but never the ache of their hearts.*

*Sofia, Pera, Nelia, Mitra, Lavina,
slaved, struggled and sweated
in the fields of tobacco,
corn, cotton, hemp and sunflower.
At night, they wove reeds into blankets
to cover their starved, cold bodies,
holding tight to their faith,
a rope thrown to their souls
by the God of exile.*

*Year after year,
Marica, Livia, Dobra, Pavlina, Anda
scattered seeds into the hard soil,
urging plants to bear life giving fruits,
cooked, raised children,
tended the old and the feeble,
buried the dead,
and slogged, toiled, worked
till the skin of their hands peeled
in strips like scrolls of papyrus,
blood inking the hieroglyphs
of endurance.*

*After five sweltering summers
the gales of history blew*

*Mara, Lisandra, Radva, Floarea, Ida,
to the old villages
at the foot of the mountains
back to their empty homes,
broken windows, glass shards on the floors,
sparrows nesting inside the cupboards,
roofless houses hosting
the rain, the snow, the wind.*

*Again, Stanca, Vlaha, Lana, Tita, Bora
began their work;
lit a fire, cooked a meal, raised a child,
plowed the fields, milked a cow,
sifted through their memories,
kept some, threw others away.
They lived with the past
in their hearts like a kernel
of wheat swaddled in the husk
of silence,
while the eye of the world
looked somewhere else.*

On the night of June 18, 1951, 44,000 people from six villages on the Yugoslavian border were deported to the south east of Romania for security reasons.