

# Many Restless Concerns

*The Victims of Countess  
Báthory Speak in Chorus*

(A Testimony)

Gayle Brandeis



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

“Many restless concerns came over me . . .”

—from *Last Will and Testament of Erzsébet Báthory*, September 3, 1610

“If they didn’t take off their hair covering, if they did not start the fire, if they did not lay the apron straight . . .”

—from *Transcript of the Witness Interrogations Regarding the Cruel Deeds Which Erzsébet Báthory, Wife of Count Ferenc Nádasdy, is Accused*,  
1611

Countess Erzsébet Báthory of Hungary was found guilty of killing as many as 650 girls and women between the years 1585 and 1609.

I

They say she bathed in our blood.

They say it brightened her complexion,  
our iron and salt scouring her skin of impurities,  
a bleach better than arsenic.

Or so you've heard.

(Or so everyone's heard.)

You've imagined her body a luminous petal in all that crimson—  
hundreds of us bled for her beauty,  
scores of us drained so she could glow.

If this were true, we wouldn't still hover here

(still haunt.)

If our blood had seeped into her skin,  
we could have flowed directly into her heart,  
tried to dampen its vicious thirst.  
But our blood was ignored—  
swabbed from marble floors,  
left to sink into hard packed soil.  
Our blood  
(our dear and wasted blood)  
our blood has trapped us here.

You want to know how we died.

(That's all anyone wants to know,  
the harsh circumstance of our death.)

We will tell you

(it's part of who we are, part of how we are)  
but if that's all you want to know, don't waste our time. Leave now.  
Take your bloodlust elsewhere.

We want you to know how we lived. That we lived. That we were girls  
before we were game. That we were alive.

We were alive.

We were alive.

That we are still waiting for the release she thought she had given us.

We came from Pozsony and Predmier; we came from Nitra and Trenčín; we came from tiny villages you have never heard of, some of us sold into servitude by our parents, some for money, some for something as simple as a skirt (our body traded for a limp piece of cloth); some of us were found by scouts, flattered for our needlework, our millinery, our flair with sugar and flour; some of us were lured by the promise of a dowry, the promise of a merchant husband (all the boys and men of our villages gone to war); some of us were already employed at one Nádasdy estate or another before she arrived (Sárvár or Beckov or Keresztúr or Čachtice or the manor in Vienna). Some of us were ten, some seventeen. Some of us left home willingly; some had to be pulled from our mothers, our mothers who turned their heads so we wouldn't see their tears (or their relief). Some of us watched the land change from the carriage, the pastures and moors, the forests and fetid marshes; some of us kept our eyes closed as the carriage jostled us over the land. Some of us held our breath as we crossed the long bridge to the castle at Sárvár, mosquitos rising from the moat, or climbed the hill to the castle at Čachtice, the tilt pushing us back against our seats; some of us gasped as the giant doors opened. Some of us had never seen such opulence, the fine tapestries and golden fixtures and soaring paintings; some of us had never seen bowls full of pomegranates, platters piled with fancy cakes: some of us looked around at our new home and couldn't believe our luck.

**II**

We'd heard stories of torture. Stories about our great grandfathers, the 1514 revolt. Many were hanged or flayed, scarred in some permanent way; some were strapped to a wheel, bullwhipped, stabbed. Some were forced to eat their leader's roasted flesh after he was pushed upon a red hot iron throne, molten crown sizzling his scalp, scepter welding itself to his hand for daring to act like a king.

We cringed at the gore of these stories, thrilled (in secret, just a bit, just a bit) at the drama, cringing and thrilling as perhaps you are now. We never thought it could happen to us.

(You probably don't think it could happen to you, either, that sizzle  
of your own tortured skin.)

The lords passed laws to prevent more revolt, laws to chain our families to the land forever, braiding our bodies to wheat and grapes and sunflowers. From our first breath, we belonged to them, another product of their soil.

But tell that to a girl who felt life move through her limbs as she ran between rows of dill, scent clinging to her skirt, heart clanging into her ribs; tell that to a girl who knew her body was strong and whole and packed with sweet juice, a girl who knew being bound to this land was a gift even as it was a sentence.

You tell that girl her body is not her own.

Our bodies, we later learned, of course, were not our own. As much as we owned them then. As much we tried to hold on to them. But in the end, they were not hers, either. The land took them back. There is some comfort in that.

(Some)

Our great grandfathers were beaten  
when they rose for their rights.  
All we were doing was our jobs;  
all we were accused of was our youth,  
something we never knew we needed  
to defend.

**III**

It's been thirty years since the killing began,  
pools of blood forming beneath one girl after another  
after another after another, fields freezing and thawing  
and blooming and yielding and withering below us  
again and again and again and again

thirty years like one long terrible day

We would be mothers  
if we were still alive,  
grandmothers  
(some of us great.)  
We would have lived  
whole lives  
upon the sweet  
earth,  
would have been  
buried near  
beloved bones.