

Opa the watchmaker

Don't tell me the signs of the sky are against my back
and the rouge of the evening
bears down on the mind's watchworks.
Our bodies sliver into rationed bones;
our souls weigh less than rancid bread.
Life squirms in the palms of death machinists.

God made me stalwart, but like Jacob the Patriarch,
I hobble, leaning on the Maker for what I can't comprehend.
A babe arrives, smuggled into our shop, unaware
that it is poor timing to be born Jewish in civilized Europe.
A pulsating soft spot crowns his head,
a heart throbbing that could stop any minute.
My white beard tumbles over his softness;
I caress this wise baby who must know not to cry.
"It would be a privilege to die for this Jewish child,"
I said to the apprehensive, resistant faces.
The Nazis should also plunder our Christian faith?

I grasp the brass-bound Book,
a watchmaker who seeks precision in chaos.
The Creator of time is not fastened to its brass moments.
Babies and old men plunge into and perish in the rhythm of chimes.

Give us wisdom when there's no justice in the streets;
give us strength when there's no food in the land.
Love perishes in the fire, fields numb, bodies decay.
In dug-out root cellars a chink of light is worshiped;
a grain of wheat transcends to deity.
Like wild herbs curved in raw winds your people succumb.
In the alloy of evil and expedience, in the slap of starvation,
in the rustling of reeds, in the brunt of an instant,
compassion is executed; betrayal is crowned.

Third Reich watchmen hermetically sealed our store.
They prized timepieces; they esteemed Swiss works.
Human beings they despised.
Thrown like sandbags against the levee,

we were carted from Haarlem market.
Psalms burnished in the sky of my mind. Dare I close my eyes
and read the timeless pleas of King David?
In the private conclaves of my ancient head,
Jesus consoles me.
In this Dutchman's entangled body,
every fiber knows time has come today.

Our shoes they retained; our gold teeth they yanked;
our scrolls and flesh they torched and incinerated.
Like skullboned gods, they ruled the camps with sovereignty.
But they could never rampage the hiding place
where the root of Jesse, the bruised Messiah dwells.
No, they will not arrest Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah.

So many bones in this field of clay!
A storeroom brims to the ceiling with eyeglasses—
from eyes that watch from the other side of time.