KATIE CATER

Petaluma, 2001
gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in

courtesy: the artist

EVA SAULITIS

Nonexistent Black-and-White Photograph

Nothing is stronger than the instinct to return to where they broke us, and to replicate that moment forever. Thinking that the one who saved us once can do it forever. In a long hell identical to the one from which we came. But suddenly merciful. And without blood.

—Alessandro Baricco

A girl's face stares out the window of a train stopped at the station in Riga, Latvia. The year is 1944. A war is on. It's raining. The girl is seventeen years old. She's bundled in a black coat, her brown hair rolled softly up and bobby-pinned in place, one loose curl lying on her shoulder. Hers is a small, serious face with large, dark eyes and long brows that arch slightly toward the temples. She stares at something, someone, past the vague reflection of a figure in the window glass. That figure is me, holding a camera to my eye. In the girl's face there is no fear, no anticipation, no premonition. On her face is the expression of waiting, of inevitability, of resignation, of exile. It's an expression one might call open. Her face is an open book, but the text is unreadable. Why is the image blurry? Is the train's billowing steam misting my camera's lens? Is it time? Is it rain? Is it ash?

I'm that young girl's daughter. It's 2012, February, a cold, clear day in coastal Alaska, wind gusts swaying the frozen sheets on the clothesline. You'll understand now why the photograph I just described can't exist, why the image is blurry as though still submerged in a developing bath. I wasn't there. No one was there, on the platform, taking such a photograph. There is no documentation. No photograph I have shows her face on that day. The face is a palimpsest, an image and a story superimposed upon a story that's been effaced. And yet this moment in time haunts me. This image of my mother is very real to me, more real than any other. I'm looking at it right now.

I sit at my desk, staring at her face and simultaneously staring at my laptop, which perches on a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov.* On this laptop, I'm trying to write a crown of sonnets. It begins with the scene of a girl staring out a train window. I lay the words down across the image until I come to a gap. It's said that the space between the two stanzas of a sonnet indicates an abyss. I'm trying to write my way across this abyss. You see, as surely as I sit here listening to February gusts rattle the window glass, watching a nearly extinct candle gutter on my desk, I'm standing on that train platform. I'm watching her face through my camera's viewfinder. I'm trying to retrace her steps, how she got from her home to that train, that moment, and how, consequently, I got here. I'm standing on both sides of the abyss at the same time.

There was a soldier who had an arm in a sling. I thought he had lost his mind. He was talking about big trenches that people were falling into—just being shot.

Elie Weisel wrote, "Writers write because they cannot allow the characters that inhabit them to suffocate them. These characters want to get out, to breathe fresh air and partake of the wine of friendship; were they to remain locked in, they would forcibly break down the walls. It is they who force the writer to tell their stories." My mother once wrote to me that I was in her blood, under her skin. "I can't get you out. Does that disgust you?" she wrote. But it's she who lives inside my head and under my skin. It's she who's breaking her way out, sometimes by force, sometimes by a gentle pressure against my left eye, sometimes by a story she lets slip out, of war and its aftermath, of memory buried for sixty years, like the silver her mother buried in the backyard of their home before they fled.

On the train there was a soldier who had an arm in a sling. I thought he had lost his mind. He was talking about big trenches that people were falling into—just being shot. Then, I didn't know what was going on. He was probably talking about Jews being shot.

As I transcribe my mother's stories into the laptop, as I copy Elie Wiesel's words into my notebook, I again see the face in the train window. It's stronger than any memory I have of my mother's face, and yet I never knew this face, this train. I never stood on that platform, in that country, in that half of the twentieth century. The face hovers before me like a ghost. What does she want from me? Her image vibrates, shaking in my hands. It's a cold, rainy autumn day in southern Latvia. Now I hear gunfire: the advancing Russian army. I zoom in tight to the train window. Now there's no one there.

The girl who stares in black and white and gray, her large eyes not blinking, the girl I see if I unfocus my eyes slightly, was in late September 1944 not looking out a train window at all. She was sitting with her family, with other families from her town, with wounded Latvian soldiers, in a windowless freight car. Her father's name was on Stalin's deportation list, so they'd packed some suitcases, buried valuables in the backyard, locked the door to their Valmiera home, and caught a ride on a horse-drawn wagon to the train station. They were fleeing the advance of the Russian Army. They were following the German Army's retreat. In Riga, her father bribed a conductor with bottles of vodka, and amid Russian gunfire, their freight car was hitched to a train bound for displaced-persons camps in Germany. Her father, a judge, a stern, narrow-faced man in a black overcoat and trilby hat, had been through this kind of thing before; he'd had practice, and he had my mother's faith. Latvia had been a country frequently overrun.

I remember my mother packing some suitcases, maybe boxes. My dad hired a man with a horse and wagon. We put our chosen belongings on the wagon, and I remember sitting on the side, my legs dangling, and the man took us to the station, where a twilight train was standing. As we went down the hill and over the bridge over the river Gauja, the town was very quiet, seemed to be empty. So we were sitting at the station for hours, as other people were arriving. The news was bad, the Russian Army was approaching, and there was panic on the country roads. There were rumors that the army was already in our town. They'd turned some people back, who had tried to flee.

In the train's window, now I can see a blurred reflection of myself, wearing my mother's long black coat. Sixty years later, she'll tell me that on the day they fled, she wasn't afraid. She had no idea they wouldn't be coming home again. She trusted her father to keep them safe. They had always come back, her family, after fleeing during changes of armies. "The idea was not to be visible while armies come and go," she would write. As the girl stares back at me, I see that she reads in my face some knowledge, something her father can't tell her. In the face of a stranger on the train platform, she sees the truth as she pulls away forever.

And yet I don't know the truth. What do I tell her? I know some of what happened. But I don't know all of the reasons. The exiled Chinese poet Bei Dao says, "Where there's truth, there's forgetfulness." That makes the task of retrieving history difficult. In a poem called "Prague," he makes a parallel claim: "Where there are ghosts, there's history." Perhaps those ghosts come to us from a great distance, from decades and continents, not to instruct, but to beckon, begging us to tell them what happened and why. But perhaps that's just our own desire, we children of exile, children of war. Perhaps we're the ghosts.

On the phone, I ask my mother what she remembers. She tells me it was dark. There were no windows. The boxcar was filled with Latvians from her town, but she doesn't remember which ones. She remembers hearing shots being fired at night. She says she was scared. She says, *I am getting very upset.* I feel bad for making her relive this for me so I can hook her memories, nab them from the dark, snatch them like scraps of paper blowing by, like exotic currency I can turn over in my hands, one side, the other, while my mother's breathing on the phone grows rapid and shallow. Whatever her father did to curry enough favor with the Germans to be harbored on that train, she was just seventeen, a girl escaping with her family, a dark history on their heels. Escaping it on a train chugging through a landscape of devastation. *The train would stop,* she said, *to let the armies cross. The train would be shot.*

I look out my window and see a cloud bank pushing in from the west. After five years in displaced-persons camps in Germany, my mother came west with her sister on the USS *General Sherman.* They spoke almost no English. She never returned to Europe. Here in Alaska, I've come so far west, I'm halfway back to the Riga station, to the war that began our migrations, to the train on the platform. And today, I cross the abyss of geography and time, cross Siberia, leap several decades. I stand on a platform, steam billowing all around me. I look past the rain-streaked glass of the train window into the face of a seventeen-year-old girl. She looks into my face. As the train begins to move, I see she is trying to tell me something. I lift the camera to my eye. I snap her photograph.

Those ghosts come to us from a great distance, from decades and continents, not to instruct, but to beckon, begging us to tell them what happened and why.

Eva Saulitis is the author of *Leaving Resurrection* (essays), *Into Great Silence* (memoir), and *Many Ways to Say It* (poetry). She teaches creative writing in the low-residency MFA program at the University of Alaska Anchorage.