

Three Poems

Carol V. Davis

Dancing

We are dancing, if you call absence a dance

Nothing so regular as the 3/4 signature of a waltz
or even the contrapuntal of Renaissance music

Maybe no music at all
just the soft shuffle of two people circling

circling, determined not to say much

afraid to regularly communicate

phone calls are out, weekly emails might
may be could be are dangerous

Before the invasion none of these problems

Our two countries (US/ Russia) not officially at war

but he remembers when neighbors ratted
on neighbors and didn't an uncle disappear?

Vanished taken away arrested

Everyone knew what it meant

when the Black Maria skidded
to a stop in front of a building

no need to talk about it

and now, 80 years after Stalin's purges a white blank

card held aloft in Moscow's Red Square or
Palace Square in St. Petersburg is enough

10 years mandatory

Searching for Names

I pour through online records of the dead
for mention of conscripts from Buryatia, Siberia.
Afraid to look. Can't stop looking.
Will my former students be on the lists?
Two years before the pandemic I was last there.
Two years waiting for Covid to subside.
My return delayed and delayed.
Then war.
My U.S. government grant cancelled.

Will I ever get back to Siberia?
Front page of the *Los Angeles Times*
blared a photo of a funeral in Ulan-Ude
where I taught at the university.
The journalists who snuck inside
the Lukodrome Sports Complex expected one funeral.
Instead, four coffins: three Buryats, one Russian.
Buddhist lamas walk solemnly around the coffins,
a smuggled video documents.
Families stand erect in silence. No one weeps.

The Buddhist soul must make its way to heaven,
then return on the 49th day to a new body.
Tears would block the journey of the deceased,
prevent the soul from letting go.

I do not hear from my colleague Mikhail,
his two sons now of conscription age.
I wonder if they have fled over the Mongolian border
or are praying for anonymity in their tiny house
on the other side of the Selenga River,
past the statue of Mother Buryatia
charged with protecting the city and its people,
a task she spectacularly fails at.

At the Cafe

We were lunching inside.
Next to us, outside;
only a window screen
separated our two tables.
I was eavesdropping,
half-heartedly
trying not to stare.
The man, slightly older,
the young woman,
a date? A relative?
He regaled her, voice
rising with each detail.
A story about a difficult
tenant, a recently
arrived Ukrainian,
(that much was obvious),
how unreasonable she was
to complain about the movers,
who were Russian.
The man at the table,
clearly a landlord, said,
in that patronizing way,
"I told her, this was America!
I can't control the back-
ground of the movers."
It seemed so obvious to him.
To me, that he did not
understand what this

war has done.
His smugness.
It took all my self-control
not to say anything.
Instead I paid the bill,
stood up, proud
to have minded
my own business.
Then ashamed I had.

Carol V. Davis is the author of five books, most recently, *Hovering* and *Below Zero*. She also published a bilingual English/Russian collection, *It's Time to Talk About...* Her first book, *Into the Arms of Pushkin: Poems of St. Petersburg* won the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. Her poetry has been read on National Public Radio, the Library of Congress and Radio Russia. Twice a Fulbright scholar in Russia, she taught in Siberia, winter 2018. She was awarded a Fulbright Specialist grant for Siberia in 2020, postponed because of Covid, and now cancelled. Donna Sternberg and Dancers is using Davis' poetry in the recent dance piece "Ancestors' Voices."