

Omarska

"Omarska," once a factory, was the most infamous of the Serbian camps for prisoners of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

They took us one by one
at night, would call a name
and whoever was called
would go
because not to go
was to die.

To go
might also mean
to die.

The men were tortured in another room.
By day we cleaned up their blood
their teeth the body parts.

By night, we trembled.
The things the soldiers did
were unspeakable things.
They raped us
many of them. Many times.
And carved their names in our bodies
and burned us,
raped us again.

When we went back to the room
where the other women waited,
we did not have to say.

This room was not large.
Perhaps it was the office
where some bored clerk toiled
or from where he shipped the parts.
He couldn't see then
how death's black thumb
hung over him, in wait.

The soldiers knew
that to violate the woman
was to violate the man, the family,
the culture.
This is why they did it.
This is why the women,
the ones who lived, I mean,
have never told their story
and why I tell it now.
It is for the women
because we have been shamed,

as if it was we who did wrong
and not they.

The soldiers did the work of war
too well. Now every night
I wake up screaming.
It wakes the child but not my husband.
He left.
My husband would not have me
after the soldiers used me.

But here is my daughter
Sonia, whose name means *Wisdom*.
My mother does not leave me alone with her
for fear I will strangle my child
but I will not hurt this daughter,
not make another victim. No.

When she is old enough
I will tell my daughter how
in that not-so-large a room,
we said nothing, only how
each living woman
on her dirty mattress
under her single cover
held hands
with the next woman
in a circle of women.

We held hands.
This is how we survived
Omarska.

Now here is my revenge.
My daughter, Wisdom,
will work for justice.
And she will not work alone
but holding hands
as her mother did, together
with all the other women.

Kate Braid