

The Flame and the Flame Snuffed Out

A sequence of ekphrastic poems
responding to Käthe Kollwitz, *Bauernkrieg / Peasants' War*, 1902-08

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Ploughman

(after Die Pfluger)

They pull against all sense, against
the eye, the wind, the sky that hauls
dense clouds of storm they won't escape.
The harness rubs their shoulders raw,
they strain against the yoke, a pair
who's matched in height and latched to oak
adzed into beam that bruises ribs,
two brutes who drive the bulk they are,
their muscle, hunger, blood and bone,
to plow a worn-out field. The land's
not theirs, the crop they'll sow and tend
will go as tithe to church, tribute
to noble, barter at market. Mouths
at home will have to take the dregs,
the gleanings, leavings, scraps. They plant
one foot and strain to stretch the leg
full out, transfer weight and plant
the other foot. A row, a turn
to cut another row and turn.
Nowhere to go but here, this field
birth bound them to, beneath the heel.
They won't outlast the blade, the wheel.

from **Pencil Drawing**

after pencil studies for Vergewaltigt / Raped

what dreams I had
I shed, fold into
your field, girl
field you were
trodden into

into your field
Käthe, artist
marking off
the place of violation
with graphite
and chalk

do not speak here

silence will not
protect you

a tendril
of moan curls from
a crushed mouth

Sharpening the Scythe

after a study for Beim Dengeln / Sharpening the Scythe

The paper is pulpy
its surface finely scaled
the stroke of graphite
finely grained
is channeled here
to make a head human
and chocked full of plotting

So the $\mathcal{X}$ you slapped across
your name
canceled more than sketch.
It marked a turn in thought or sight.

The woman presses cheek
to blade
sights down its length
as if the line from here to there
is finally clear.
And clear, you see that something
that's gone wrong.

No going back.

One of her hands steadies
the haft of the scythe
the other you've not sketched
reaches for the whetstone
and her intent and yours
is keen.

Vault

after Bewaffnung in einem Gewölbe /Arming in a Vault

They tend torch that led them down
into the noble's weapons keep,

fan its flame so they can sort
the sabers, battle axes, pikes,

the tools of war they never thought
they'd hold. They've grasped the rake, the sledge,

the hayfork, flail, crowbar, spade
and now they grasp a peasant's fact—

a tool's a tool.
New work's at hand.

The backflash of fervor
singes them to shadows,

shapes them to their rage, choked up.
No more!

They rise to roar.
Smoke. Steam. War.

from **Outbreak**

after charcoal studies for Losbruch / Outbreak

Pouring downhill, a torrent
of fury fleshed, wielding
billhook, sword, pickaxe, mace.
These men, raised up from brutes
whose inheritance is burden,
their hair, like pennants, flying.
A boy leads, his feet old,
calloused by ten years
in the fields, gleaning,
but his voice, young
and his high call
to battle, a birth cry
that draws the men
into a future
they cannot see.
Their bloodlines smolder,
holy fire breaking free.

Night Vision

after a study for Schlachterfeld / Battlefield

Black crayon, white paper
of a stock as common
as a field of wheat
where bodies ripen
where they fell.
It's their first night dead.

Your uncommon eye, Käthe,
searches the slaughter field
for the tell of defeat.
A shawled woman's hand,
shoulder, her head's increase
in weight as it droops

over the dim lantern
to examine the face
she held dear
when it was lit
by more than a candle
housed in smudged glass.

This is the instant
you look for, but weight
is inert.
You want the plunge
into recognition. The flame
and the flame snuffed out.

The Knot of Prisoners

after Die Gefangenen / The Prisoners

It was all headlong, downhill upheaval
no plundered lance and pike could slow

No noble's right possessed them
no plow could turn them under

Revolt! Revolt!

Freemen, they took the slope
they galloped down

Bound and penned
they claim their ground.