

Arbeit Macht Frei

With daily weeding, Emma imposed race codes on crabgrass, from knees that knew no begging. As if the blades of her front lawn had cheeks, she pulled and pinched till they were plush and edged like a regiment at drill. If only they hadn't wished to kill her, she would have done the Germans proud with work that made her free like the motto her relatives passed under, one way, at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

An immigrant, she had found refuge in America, but something less than freedom. Ignoring screams in languages they could and couldn't understand, Akron nurses took her firstborn, Elsvetta, to be sterilized for Down syndrome. When her young husband died, in-laws came from states away, while she was sewing in a sweatshop, to inspect her daughters and abduct her sons. She got them back, but honed her faith in imminent disaster.

She took revenge on dust and backyard chickens, which she beheaded with a gusto that prompted Mom to dub her Robespierre. Fluent in French, German, and Yiddish, she battled English, unable to distinguish between *holocaust* and *roller-coaster*. So she did her best to shield grandchildren

from amusement parks with their well-guarded
entrance gates and promised horror chambers.

After Elsvetta died, aged fifty-four,
at the Apple Creek Asylum near Wooster,
a gestapo of guilt kicked in the door
of Emma's heart. Now her old neighborhood
quarters a new kind of ghetto. Yellow
crime tape marks where crystal meth and shattered
panes inflict a belated *Kristallnacht*
on the home she kept painted and polished
to postpone the knock she always knew would come.