

## THE CZAR'S FIRST DAUGHTER

*by Angela J. Davis*

A half-cellar window between two trees,  
on the walls, a frieze of faded flowers  
a baize covered table, bottles inscribed,  
"Court Pharmacy to His Excellency."  
In the garden, a chain of sentries, bells  
wired to the commandant's room, his room  
a pattern of date palms, gilded moldings,  
a piano, and the blind head of a deer.

We arrive by steamer, our crew shooting  
blackbirds over nameless mines where our dead  
nurse-maids lie, later the oldest women  
will tell of prayers lifting from quarries,  
like bandages of mist, or the violet  
wounds of hemophilia, we carried  
our own: valises, cameras, white dresses  
blackened by rain, our heels swallowed in mud.

It is July. Lilacs and parasols  
dot the Winter Palace, where last Easter  
in a ward for the wounded officers,  
my sisters and I wore the crossed aprons  
and watched miracles, simple as ritual  
offerings of bread and salt to the czars,  
or the painted eggs, lavender and rose  
colored letters and globes in our cupped hands.

Spies in nuns' dresses bring bottles of milk  
cream, sometimes, and eggs for Alexie,  
but mostly milk, and the message to pray  
and "wait for a whistle toward midnight."  
Newcomers, blond Latvians, sleep below.  
In the afternoons, we learn translations.  
I will translate the ring of granite bells  
to the first ring of a rifle report,

but my sisters and I will have our own  
secret miracle: from all that remains  
we have fastened beneath our gray dresses  
bands of emeralds, garlands of rose pearls,  
in our corsets, the sapphire crosses, half-moons  
and suns, crests of rubies, from ten-pointed  
stars, our captors' bullets will ricochet,  
black-bellied smoke will nearly choke and blind

our sad executioners, their bayonets  
to find not flesh, but diamonds: lockets  
of our hair, alexandrite scar daisies,  
our breasts and shoulders a sacred armor—  
jeweled tears, the shimmering amulets  
of Rasputin, until the last of our  
blood sinks into the ground, and we wake  
delivered to the steel wings of angels.