

Barbara Rosenthal

“I Killed Jesus Christ”

I killed Jesus Christ. The other children told me this, and because of it they wouldn't play with me unless I brought them cookies. When my mother found out she sent me to Sunday School and Hebrew School and Youth Group and Bas Mitzvah lessons and Jewish summer camps. That's how I learned about the Nazis.

The Nazis chased me all through high school. Crowded subways were deportation cattle cars with passengers packed in, arms above their heads to make room for more. Whenever I took a hot shower I remembered there were no hot showers and I turned off the hot water and stood in a freezing shower even though there weren't any freezing showers either, except the freezing bath temperature experiments. Tiny shavings of soap still frighten me because their price was bread. I stood under the soapless cold showers as long as I could.

What happened each month when the women got their periods? I wondered each month when I got mine. I was thirty before I asked a woman who'd been there. "Periods stopped," she said. "But we envied the girls who still had them. They had the possibility of life if they lived. They bled down their legs to the ground."

In my past life I was a Nazi death-camp worker who peeled the skin off prisoners with tattoos. The skin was made into translucent lampshades. All lampshades remind me of my past life and I don't have a single lampshade in my entire house. Once, when I lived in Seattle, there was a translucent parchment lampshade on the lamp near my ex-husband's side of the bed. It looked exactly like tattoo-skin, but I knew he liked the lamp so I never said anything. I was afraid to admit my past life to him. I was afraid to admit it to anybody. I was afraid the Nazi-hunters would find me and try me and sentence me and kill me, and I was afraid the Nazis would, too.

-from Sensations, 1984