The Five Daughters

At the crossroads between countries they take her away in a cart for cattle. Six years old and leaving a part of Poland that one day won't exist.

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they were so polite to us —
she tells us, of the soldiers forcing her out.
her voice breathy but animated, lifting up at the end:

— so polite!

they were so young, she says, young boys: they didn't want to take us away.

warm clothes... they said to my mother — voice low, eyes wide because it's very cold in russia.

so my grandmother's mother went and packed warm clothes they were so nice to us, she says, so nice

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She was generous about the past in this way.

In one camp, her mother sheared sheep
with a knife. One sheep kicked her in the ribs,
breaking them. Of the labour camps of her childhood,
there was a 'nice camp; the camp I liked.'

In this one, there was a school nearby
a bearable place to sleep.

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We sort through her things.
The passport, under place of birth, reads L-W-Ó-W.
With my ignorant eyes, I see, in capitals,
an expression of surprise, of wonder,
next to her monochrome photograph: WOW

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They killed her father, with countless others.

A Katyn death. His remains vague, unrecorded. But we have one note still, written on a scrap of a matchbox delivered in secret. When he writes, he addresses his words to his mothers / the mothers meaning mothersisterwifedaughter — all of the women he loved.

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Near the end of her glorious eightynine years, more or less aware of who I am, though perhaps not whose daughter I am, she calls me by my mother's name againagainandagain like a lullaby: *aaa kotki dwa*. My mother. Her daughter. We gather there at once, by her bed, holding her hands. She calls us my daughters: my five daughters — really, her two daughters, three granddaughters — my motherauntcousinsisterself.

Five women blurred into solidarity by her fading words — bound by the borders she crossed to bring us into the earth that tried, that failed, to push her out.