

ROBERT COOPERMAN

THE DISCOVERY OF A MURDERED GENTILE WOMAN NEAR THE GERMAN TOWN OF SPEYER, 1195 CE

Berthe met her “friends” in a forest glade;
Christians, the Devil’s Jews, all the same to her.
So it serves her right that one side of her head
was caved in like sauce-smear’d crockery smashed
to the floor, blood crusting like my butchering-day apron.
I ran with her carcass a feather in my arms, my lungs
like the cauldron fire when I stir blood pudding.

“The Jews did this!” I cried, “The Jews!”
Others took up the alarm and marched on the ghetto.
We dragged out the rabbi’s lowing, drooling son,
and when his sister tried to stop us with spider-lies,
I slit her throat, her father keening prayers over the bodies.

We stared at her, almost as pure looking as the Virgin—
Christ forgive my blasphemy. Our rage would’ve died,
had not her father screamed, “Murderers!” I smashed him;
he keeled over, an unbalanced cart on a narrow path:
the signal to set fire to their hovels and avenge poor Berthe.

Afterwards, not even my wife Greta—removing her shift
with a lewd smile while she rubs her bee-hive breasts
against me—can blot out the sight of Berthe, the rabbi,
and his son, though it was a kindness to slaughter
the simpleton: no one to care for him in their community.

As for Berthe, I was the only one she wouldn’t lie with,
holding her nose and spitting that I smelled of blood.