

My Vacation on the Island Rab
for F.P. (1921–2010)

Bread, ~~150g~~ 100g 50g
Rice, ~~66g~~ 33g
Tomatoes, ~~15g~~
Meat, 50g 25g, ~~2x~~ 1x a week
Cheese, 20g, ~~5x~~ a week

A gruel so thin
you can count the grains

If lucky a boiled potato
or at least the peels

A lone barrel of water to share
our dysentery our lice
our diminishing will

They know an ill
prisoner is a quiet one

The soldiers' daily calls mark
the passage of time —
Everyone out, even the dead!

What crime do we pay for? Our birth
in the wrong place?

The sun presses
down on this dry patch
as I watch my withered
weathered countrymen

Do I look better or worse
than they do?

We are cut by the salty night air
our useless bodies wracked by cold
wind and the merciless hunger
and spreading diseases

Should I be whispering
my prayers too?

As I nod off and I dream
I dream of death and when I wake
I see it coming true

So I keep watch — and try
not to gawk as my compatriots die
A pile of coffins every day

They are with God now
so long as he's still taking us

Blessing or curse
I won't die here
My dreams are portents

I see this island no longer ugly
with suffering and hate but a paradise
of shimmering white stone buildings
surrounded by warm shallow seas

Again we will call it Felix
The Happy Island

Vacationers will visit its towns and beaches
dip in the waters and picnic in the parks
eat delicate ruffled cakes of marzipan
on sun-soaked terraces

Few will know or remember
the guard towers the barbed wire
and the death will be a distant memory
abundant crops will grow here

Then I see me — an old man withered
weathered but aged
in a pristine hospital bed

flanked by my progeny
a set of foreign strangers
that somehow came from me

But until then, I remain firm
I have souls to keep safe now
and the rousing promise of a new
country I'll soon call home

Julia N. Petrich lives in Chicago and works as a designer. Her paternal grandparents separately emigrated from Slovenia after World War II and later met as members of the Slovenian community in Chicago. During her undergraduate studies, she earned a degree in writing, much of her work inspired by family memories, stories, and history.