

POEMS

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AT THE HOLOCAUST MUSEUM: WASHINGTON D. C.

I - *Before Our Eyes*

We've had it told to us before;
we've seen annihilation, *Vernichtung*
at the movie house in town.
Videos reveal the same declensions of rage,
speech acts crowds shall act upon—
no principles governing reflection,
words shattering glass, building up the
circumstances of the fire,
the same conclusion mortality demands.

Now before our eyes: how darkly different
when a deep terrain of text persists with artifacts;
and photographs, each one a cell of time made real.
We turn, and make our way on cobblestones
pounded out from Mauthausen,
and through a freight car walk along once more,
fitting facts in place—:
what led up to what; how a people lived
keeping at their tasks which came to be their lives
with the etched impression of their
history taking place,
until one day: were seized
and carted off in trains like perishable goods
squeezed into the mind-dark of enclosure,
breath coming hard.

Great god,
what geography of pain we are walking through.
What a season of convincing clouds that
hang like smoke, as when the soul,
unassailable,
has found release through manumission.
And what indecent will of those who
saw no cause to care, foreshadowing, therefore,
the concentric rush of time running out.

This is fact: the harsh articulation
of someone's life that, in the end,
will end too soon.

II - *The Freight Car*

We move on, affirming the proximity of everything,
eyes breaking open to the light: installations here,
photographs and objects there, the visual details of
time-kept dying. Suddenly: an intractable fragment
of truth—a freight car brought, finally, to a halt

on the same illicit logic of rails. No stench now;
human grime gone, washed away by water and soap
and the varnish of time. Still it affronts: the tight
seal of steel and wood, a prisonhouse suffocatingly
small, non-sequent, disconnected from the event.

If steel and scarred wood could recount their story
from memory, could beg forgiveness or bring back
the dead, then my hand might not flinch at their
touch as I enter, enter the past: One evening
a cantor was singing before a full congregation,

true worship known by heart. Peacefulness in
the infinite, and the lightness of candlelight
breathlessly still when: a muster of men from a
shadow realm broke forth, cutting off the prayer.
Cantor, families and friends by the thousands,

hundreds of thousands, were led to the station,
rabid soldiers barking out orders, firing pistols
in the air, dogs bringing up the right flank. So
many helpless immortals so far from their dwelling,
clutching their garments, huddled like the bundles
they carried, unable to run away from their names.
To think they leaned where I'm standing, squatted
or kneeled, dark-stricken, their children driven
to tantrums; or stood where they could against

steel-dug-into-wood, no heaven above them, no earth
below. Some in their places fell mute, were confused,
riddled with fright when the train screeched, jolted
forth, shimmied and swayed and pulled out. Others
kept faith, and for them the summit of sky remained

whole; still others felt death beginning to sink
into them—everyone drawing a breath: breath in,
breath out, holding their breath, sighing, inhaling-
exhaling full breaths, half-breaths, gasping with
all complexities of thirst. Long after Treblinka,

"Water," I hear them cry. "Water, air." I step
out, looking back as I move away with the crowd.
One freight car at a standstill, uncoupled from its
long concatenation of steel dissolved into this
artifact: the summation of all that advances no more.

III - *The Photographs*

To look
into devastated eyes is not enough; to touch
the photographs is not enough.
Even if their breath could reach me,
I could utter nothing among the ruins
written with light.
But someone such as I, a nobody in all of this,
has come to see (this much the heart allows):
what man has done to man, human acts of the profane,
and the defeated countryside.

Led to camps
by the uniform substance of hate,
one by one they held
still enough to be caught in the strict regulation
of natural or flat light. I read it in their eyes:
reluctance seeking its own landscape
with so much night to come. To myself I say:
this face, or that face had a name:
Joseph, Daniel, or Hammah,
but oh, you are a number—
sharp alchemy scored on skin.
I pray your soul remained intact until the end.

(Print after print: I am carried away by destruction
exhausted into fact, forgetting
the persecuted who escaped; who from the
edges of the battlefield were saved, here by a
timely neighbor, a benevolent baker; there by a
factory owner, a farmer, or by decent Catholic nuns
—reflexive acts of the unsung.)

Then there was Ejszyszki (A-shish-key), 1941:
a village of 4,000 that could not find the
doors to exodus—slaughtered in two days.
I touch the photographs of how it was
before it ended in a great field of darkness...
and my body shrieks.
Five decades, and in another country,
I am too late as in a blazing nightmare
where I reach out,
but cannot save you, cannot save you.
Sarah, Rachel, Benjamin, in this light you have risen,
where the past is construed as present.
For all that is in me: Let the dead go on living,
let these words become human.

I am your memory now.

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