

## UNTITLED

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*Ken Smith*

1.

if you set most people down  
in a town north of munich  
with no money or jobs  
they would if nothing else  
begin to walk freely  
across the plains of europe  
toward their homes  
so there had to be the bent pylons  
holding the barbed wire taut  
to keep the thousands  
there in dachau

and our minds now need the help  
of those bent pylons and the wire  
and the trip line beyond which  
anyone was quickly shot  
because if you put a few hundred  
tourists each day into a town  
north of munich and ask us to think  
about brutality and loss  
our minds would wander  
too freely across europe  
we need the machine gun towers  
to keep our thoughts from  
straying off with some cloud  
we need the *arbeit macht frei*  
in bold metalwork  
over the front gate to keep us  
from stepping out too quickly

we need the heat of the crowd  
waiting to see the historical film  
in the "research" building  
to turn our attention inward  
to build up the heat inside us  
to boil off impurities  
to leave at the bottom of the crucible  
some pure metal which would refuse  
to bend as those pylons bent  
or to be formed into barbed wire  
or to be beaten into the shape of words

2.

the noble tone fails us  
the film clips from the war  
taunt us without mercy

there is a signpost tagged "mastery"  
and at the end of the road  
we found dachau and bergen-belsen

there is an old garden tool  
with three fork tines bent down  
at the end for scraping in the dirt

speak the word "mastery" or think it  
drag the iron tines of that tool  
across the surface of a heart

the word so poisoned those places  
the barracks at bergen-belsen  
that they had to be burned

they burned furiously in the old film  
the flames violent at every window  
the word survives

we remember the camps  
and the films and the numbers  
and the words which helped make them

we try to master that history