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A Visit to Belzec

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Magician? She hunts for him in other cold rooms—returns to say that her house has been taken over by the snow. There is snow even in her bedroom. The General attempts to soothe her.

“My dear, the ravages of war.”

She wrings his ear. The aide has his hands full, he cannot help.

“I will not,” she says, “be a casualty of your war.”

She relents, goes off to see what is to happen with our dinner.

“Let her alone. She will be her old self soon.”

It is the Magician speaking; he is crouched on the hearth, rebuilding the fire. The flames leap in special colors.

“Get busy,” he says. “I like to leave her house as we find it: no neater than the General’s tunic.”

The General is not listening. He hunches over Mistress Beabontha’s desk, organizing a plan of attack. His spirit is heartened by this evening’s victory; it is time, he thinks, to mount the spring offensive.

His aide disappears through the front door. The wind is not so fierce, but it is snowing once more.

More was inevitable; it is with us, like the war. Major sacrifices are demanded. We must fight for life and country—learn from Mistress Beabontha who hides from the Magician’s love. His love is powerful; it is against human nature to greet it with open arms.

POETRY / HEYEN, SADOFF, ANDERSON,
McELROY, ZAWADIWSKY, WOODS, MEEK,
HOOVER, MATTHEWS, HUGO, LEVINE

A Visit to Belzec / William Heyen

I

This is Belzec,
in the East of Poland,
in the Lublin region
where the fumes of Sobibor,
Maidenek, and Treblinka still
stain the air:
smell the bodies

in the factories' smoke,
smell the sweet gas
in the clover and grass.
This is Belzec
where the death compound's gate
proclaims in Hebrew,
"Welcome to the Jewish State."
This is Belzec.
This is SS humor.
Curse them forever
in their black Valhalla.

ii

At 7:20 a.m. a train arrived from Lemberg with 45 wagons holding more than 6,000 people. Of these 1,450 were already dead on arrival. Behind the small barbed-wire windows, children, young ones, frightened to death, women and men. As the train drew in, 200 Ukrainians detailed for the task tore open the doors and laying about them with their leather whips drove the Jews out of the cars. Instructions boomed from a loudspeaker, ordering them to remove all clothing, artificial limbs and spectacles. . . .

They asked what was going to happen to them. . . . Most of them knew the truth. The odor told them what their fate was to be. They walked up a small flight of steps and into the death chambers, most of them without a word, thrust forward by those behind them.

iii

Reader, you have walked
into the smoke-streaked mirror
of my dream, but I can't,
or won't, remember.
Did my boots gleam?
Did I fill out quotas?
Was it before, or after?
Did I close those doors,
or did I die?
I can still feel
iron cold as water on my fingers.
I remember running
along the bank of a river,
under trees with full summer
in their branches,

the sky lit up with flares,
the night air wet
with the odors of leaves.
Dogs barked.
Were they mine?
Were they yours?
Were we running from,
or after?

iv

Inside the chambers SS men were crushing the people together. "Fill them up well," [Hauptsturmführer Christian] Wirth had ordered, "700 or 800 of them to every 270 square feet." Now the doors were closed. . . .

The bodies were tossed out, blue, wet with sweat and urine, the legs soiled with feces and menstrual blood. A couple of dozen workers checked the mouths of the dead, which they tore open with iron hooks. Other workers inspected anus and genital organs in search of money, diamonds, gold, dentists moved around hammering out gold teeth, bridges and crowns. . . .

v

Reader, all words are a dream,
but one Belzec morning
a boy about to die
composed a poem,
and spoke it,
and saved his life
when a guard's mouth fell open
to wonder. The words
seemed true. The words
worked at the time.

Reader, we have walked together
into the smoke-streaked
terror of Belzec.

 Now wind,
and the dawn sun,
 lift our meeting
to where they lift
 the human haze
above that region's pines.