

# Arbeit Macht Frei

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I cannot sing this place.

I stand on ash, balance  
on the platform. The audience of ten  
faces, hollow and ghostly, urges—  
Try not to fall into those earthen jaws,  
moats of dust mixed with rain.  
Looking into the deep troughs, dizzy  
from time-induced nausea, I think  
of that lullaby, Sleep, sleep,  
one day you will have raisins and almonds.

I try to make a song here.

The air drips with inky streaks,  
bus fumes and burnt hair.  
Charred scrawls on the station  
wall condemn me to death,  
Stars of David replace Xs, cross  
out hearts, point to the letters in Polish,  
need no translation: Gas the Jews.  
I want to scream old songs, erase  
these coal marks that smudge, but do not fade.

My voice is no vandal.

One small voice: I hate  
the green narrow barracks  
These icy beds, cracked,  
gravel under boots. Bones  
ache, thinking of boots,  
and breaking bodies.  
Bald and fleshless,  
song keeps me human.

And another: Labor  
at poems—no ink, no scraps of paper  
bags, cardboard packaging. Try  
to sing my words, help commit  
them to memory. Others make simple  
tunes, children's nighttime songs. I do not  
want to lose my words. I cannot  
lose them. They are all I own.

I do not always remember.

A raspy once-tenor: The tattoo on my  
arm wrinkles as my body fades. I  
listen to folk songs, rock  
to jagged breathing. My fellow men,  
dying, sing German songs with  
dulcet words. They chant as though still  
in taverns, men with real clothes,  
reeking of ale-splotched wool.  
Their songs transport me  
to another town, to a place where one  
need not stumble onto a crowded train  
with suffocating grandmothers.

When I try the first note, my throat constricts,  
closes around a small D.

And a voice like a tin bell: I drew a picture  
yesterday, with two pieces of colored  
wax. I snuck them in here, and  
a few envelopes, and I drew a bird  
with long feathers and lots of corn to eat.

I was told that if those men  
find my envelope-bird they will take it  
away. I have no pockets to hide, I want  
to put it on the wall, by my splintery bunk,  
where women sometimes sneak to tell stories and  
sing quiet songs. My favorite one  
is about a white goat that eats almonds.  
My bird would like to eat almonds, too.

No lullaby is needed here, I think.  
Everything already sleeps.  
I am alone with my family of ghosts,  
ready to sing to them:  
Rozhinkes mit mandlen, shlof, shlof.  
But the words are foreign.

(How can I sing these words?)

I grab the gnarled black fence,  
rusted and thick. I do not care  
that this border is sharp, I just want  
to sing, to have a soft note leave  
my body, some small solace—  
a salve of words to cover these  
bitter marks in my palms. Bloody lines,  
here an alef, there a jumble  
of burning crossroads.

And still my scarred throat demands:  
Where is the song?