## **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?