

Timber so Crooked

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(A Novel Excerpt)

Daniel Greer

Abstract

"My piece concerns itself with Reserve Police Battalion 101. After the men of fighting age had been conscripted into the German Military during World War II, the remnants, mostly middle aged, working class men of humble background were recruited into reserve police battalions. These family men were instrumental in the murder and deportation of Poland's Jewry. It is my intent to expose the lived reality of the men of the 101, the hard choices, and the descent of the human spirit. I further aspire to complicate the morality and character of the perpetrators of the 20th century's most vicious genocide."

This is a quote from my preliminary prospectus, when I was only beginning to think about how I would tackle this project. A lot has changed. I thought this project would be an examination of the darker elements of the human spirit, à la Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Capote's In Cold Blood, but it isn't. It's hardly a story about the Holocaust at all, or so it seems to me. Certainly it takes place in the time period, and deals with the material, but that isn't what it's about. This is a story about people: the way they move through the world, the way they pass through each other's lives, and the bizarre, horrifying, and sublime ways in which they are brought together. This is a story about what it is to be human, to grow, to live, to love, to lose. The characters do bad things, undoubtedly. The purpose of this piece is not to exonerate the most unforgivable of crimes, only to expose the rawest humanity in the greatest acts of hatred, as well as the most divine acts of love.

I could never dare to hope that this piece lives up to my aspirations for it. Because this is a novel excerpt, there is so much story still to come, so much left to say. Writing this piece has been a labor of love, and frustration and anxiety. I can only hope that it resonates, that it speaks to something inside. Like the writing I love most, I hope that it might delineate some measure of the human experience. Below is a list of works I deemed essential to my writing process, whether as source material, or an influence on style or format.

Reading List:

Ordinary Men- Christopher Browning

In Cold Blood- Truman Capote

No Country for Old Men- Cormac McCarthy

"All my Sons"- Arthur Miller

"Death of a Salesman"- Arthur Miller

The Things They Carried-Tim O'Brien

A Visit from the Goon Squad- Jennifer Egan

People of Paper- Salvador Plascencia

Watchmen- Alan Moore

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This is a page of glory in our history, which has never been written and is never to be written.
 This is a page of glory in our history, which has never been written and is never to be written.
 This is a page of glory in our history, which has never been written and is never to be written.
 This is a page of glory in our history, which has never been written and is never to be written.
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—*Heinrich Himmler*
Commander of the SS

I

Sleepers

Józefów, Poland, July 13th, 1942—05:00

They rode in somnolent silence, swaying with the crooked course of the road, a blue tinged darkness and a rush of night hued forests creeping in at the edges of the truck's cover. 30 men per truck. 20 trucks in total. Hamburg men of every profession, mostly working-class: drivers, construction workers, some career policemen. They were middle aged. They had families back home—wives, sons, daughters. Some of the men had been in occupied territory before. For nearly five months they had moved tens of thousands of Poles from their family homes Eastward as part of a plan to “Germanize” Western Poland. Five months of traveling town to town, sleeping in the truck as it wound miles of curving gravel roads. Five months of screaming children, crying mothers, barking dogs, a fusillade of strident sights and sounds—yelling, crying, cursing, and every night the swaying silence of the truck. But most of the men were untested recruits, fresh from Germany. They had slept in their own beds only weeks before, watching the dawn break through the curtains. And if the war had changed their lives, it hadn't changed them much. But now they were here. In either case, they were all tired, the men of Reserve Police

Battalion 101. And as the trucks pulled through the crepuscular gloom, they wished only for the day's labor to be done as quickly as possible.

Timber so crooked

They passed through slanted forests. The diesel engines muttered as they drove, the wheels crackling on the dry gravel road. Except for a few terse words, they spoke very little. When they had first moved into Poland, Captain Julius Sommer would talk for miles about his girlfriend. He was young, foolish, in lust if not love with a girl from Hamburg. A blonde haired, blue eyed man of twenty-three, with the strong square shoulders, upright posture and inexhaustible jawline of the ideal SS man, which he was. "Treu, Tapfer, Gehorsam" (Loyal, valiant, obedient). He loved few things in the world more than looking at himself in the mirror: the full pink lips, the sharp tilt of his cheekbones—counted his most valuable possessions. He preferred, perhaps, only hearing his own voice poured out in the dark. Once as the wheels turned and the men slept or turned restlessly and the road unlaced behind them, he told them about Freida. "Nipples sweet as apricots. Apricots..." Someone laughed. He turned in the direction like a dog hearing a sound, tilted his head, crushing a panzerschokolade tablet with his blunt teeth. Then he too laughed, softly, and the sound rushed into the night.

But now he was silent, pensive almost. They all were. Nicolas and Paul were silent too. Any other day they would be making plans. They lived like prisoners, for whom the future is more real than the present.

"Colombia," Nicolas would say.

"Siam," Paul would respond. They'd talk for long hours, spinning dreams in alcoholic breath over a bottle of Schnapps. Things would be looking up for them once this was all over. They'd live like kings in South America for a handful of marks a month. Have their fair share of

women. Tonight was different; tonight they did not speak. If they dreamed of riches both gold and of the flesh, they did not share them.

Private Erik Schäfer, too, was silent. At thirty-three, he was one of the youngest men in the battalion. Dark hair, dark eyes. He was quiet, and kept mostly to himself. A kind man, though world weary. He didn't share Sommer's patriotism, nor had he reached the age induced apathy of the other men. At eleven, he tried to catch a moth in a glass jar. He had been watching it for some time, as it writhed against the light bulb. When he moved to capture it, he crushed it instead. Translucent strands of life came away with the glass. Without thinking he slammed the jar down until it was dead.

Jakob Ziegler rode in the lead car. He was fifty-three years old, an iron cross recipient from the Grand Old War, a career policeman afterwards. A man of principle, of law and authority. A simple man. He'd made major when the conscription notices went out. He read it at home, alone, thumbing the ink letters, pressing against the future.

They rode on, the men of battalion 101, knowing nothing of what awaited them that day. As the sun cut blue ribbons in the East, they stopped amid rolling hills, the town of Józefów sleeping beneath them.

*"Out of timber so crooked
As that from which man is made
Nothing entirely straight can be built."*

—Immanuel Kant

II

Growing Things

Jakob

Sometimes when I wake there's a thin line of time before I remember anything. It's like when I was a kid and I'd nap in the room my brother and I shared with a thin sheet up over my head, so the world came through in a white haze. I'd wake up and I could see the room before I opened my eyes. Before I even knew who I was, my name, before I knew if I was alive or dead. Sleep still clung to me. It was like I was waking up on some white sand shore after a shipwreck, with no idea where I was. I'd lay with my eyes closed for a long time. That's when I'm happiest, those moments when I'm still partly asleep, orbiting sleep, before my memories come thundering up the shore, when it's just me and a blank white sheet in a room afire with the amber of afternoon.

Biłgoraj, Poland, July 12th, 1942—17:00

“Ziegler?”

The major watched water condensing on a glass of brandy, light tracing the vermiculate contours of an amber hued thumb print.

As I hear I judge

“Ziegler, can you hear me?”

He had expected something like this. Hadn't he? Hadn't he known something like this was coming? The evacuations, the endless shuffling of people. Had he been a less responsible man, more sure of himself—had he been obstinate or a man of private ideals he surely would have wondered at the strangeness of it all. Where was it all leading? What was the point? But no, he did wonder. Perhaps if he were a different man, he thought, he would react differently. He would rage and storm, but he was only he, himself, Jakob. He was only as good as he was. All the questions, and now he knew. The question and the answer together at last. How strange. How very strange.

“Ziegler?” The voice from the other end of the receiver asked again, with only a hint of irritation.

He said nothing. He didn't know what to say. What could he say? What words could he tumble together in staggering drunken sentences and fling through the transmitter? To some things there is nothing that can be said. Still, when the voice of Brigadier-general Fleischer asked, “Will you do this?”—he answered. His tongue leaden and uncertain, as if performing some alien task, his lips dry—despite everything, still, when the question dropped like a hammer, he answered, stammering in the most imperious tone he could muster, “Yes,”

There was a pause.

“Then you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

The communication ended. The line went dead. He held the receiver against his ear for several more moments, shell-shocked, then, coming to his senses he returned it to the cradle and like a man dying of thirst drained the glass of brandy, holding it against gravity so that the last drops ran out.

The city of Józefów. 1,800 Jews. Male Jews of working age to be relocated. The rest...The rest...

There was something strange in the afternoon light as it hit the window. The glass was dimpled with age and beyond the sky blushed a deep red. Something strange. And as he stood and looked into the dusty courtyard he saw his garden back home as it had been years before.

Jakob's son Heinrich is bent over, digging in the ground, warm dirt squeezing between his toes.

How deep, dad? he asks.

What does it say?

Six inches, I think.

Here let me see. Jakob takes the seed packet. Oh, but this one needs shade. We'll put it closer to the fence.

How about this one?

That one you can put right where you have it.

The ground's too hard.

Let me try. He struggles for a moment, the shovel gouging ribbons of dirt.

It's too hard dad.

Jakob continues for a moment. Sweat trickles down his face, neck, and the back of his knees. Hasn't rained much. Some water will soften it. He fetches the hose.

They don't speak much. People seldom do when they're content. Nothing needs to be said. The whisper of the wind in the trees and the warm croak of cicadas in the hot afternoon sun says it all. He could live forever this way, Jakob. In a few minutes Hanna will bring water out to them and they'll all sit, each with their own thoughts, as the sun traces its wandering path through the azure sky. But for now they plant and he's filled with warmth.

Growing things, he says to no one in particular. He speaks with a far away tone to fill the dense afternoon pressing down through the houses. That's what people are meant to do. That's all anybody needs to be happy. He watches sweat and dirt mixing on Heinrich's slender face, the slender face of his mother. That's all, he says.

And as Heinrich turns to him to speak, his words dissolve in a fit of loud thumping. Jakob shook his head. The door. Someone was at the door. Again he was in the office, the order ringing in his ears: Józefów. 1,800 Jews. Male Jews of working age to be relocated. Józefów. Józefów.

A soldier entered with a sheaf of papers in one hand. "Sir, Sommer needs your signature to requisition extra ammunition." he said.

The ground is too hard dad.

"What?" Jakob said, confused—

"Your signature, sir." The man said stepping forward, proffering the papers.

"Yes ...yes, of course."

"Are you ok, sir?"

"Fine, fine—you startled me, that's all... startled me."

Too hard.

"I can come back later if you'd like." The man said slowly, carefully. He took a step backwards.

"No, no, it's fine. Come in. Come in," Jakob said, then, "What's your name?"

"Erik Schäfer" the man replied.

"Of course. Forgive me, it's impossible to keep everyone's name straight. " Jakob gestured at the chair in front of him. Erik sat and removed his hat. He waited for Jakob to speak. Jakob was silent, agitated. He looked out the window as if searching for something. The seconds ticked by in the curt clicking of the wall clock.

"Do you have any kids, Erik?"

"No, it's hard enough to take care of myself."

"I know what you mean." Jakob said, still looking out the window.

"Sir?" Erik asked uneasily.

"Yes?"

"Do you have any kids?"

"No, no. I did. A son. "

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's ok. Really." He paused to scratch his chin. "It's funny—I miss the strangest things. We had a garden out back, he used to help me tend. Nothing much, just a little patch of dirt. Our house was boxed in by buildings, you see. It was my father's house, he built it. The city sort of grew up around it. There wasn't room for much. But it was enough."

Erik didn't speak.

"Anyway," Jakob said returning to the moment and turning from the window. "We used to play cards in the evening. Do you know how to play Elfern?"

"Yes. It was my sister's favorite."

"Was?"

"Is—is my sister's favorite. We don't talk much, that's all."

"Oh." Jakob dealt. They let the silence brood, each man examining his hand of cards, the clock clicking softly. Evening shadows draped the room and fell across both men. They played a game. Then they played another, and another, and another. Someone won, someone lost. The details blurred, were blunted, vanished beyond recall. Jakob didn't say a word. The shadows in the room lengthened. Finally, Erik spoke as Jakob dealt another hand, "Sir, I still need your signature."

Here, dad? Heinrich asks. Jakob rubbed his eyes.

"Sir?"

"Sorry. Tired of our game?"

Erik didn't respond.

"A good soldier, I see." Jakob laughed. "Let me ask you this then, what do we do when we're given an order?"

"We follow it."

"And what do we do when we can't?"

"I don't understand."

He smiled ruefully. "You will." He was tired, his skin thin, like paper stretched over a mesh frame. "I've been dreaming about that little garden. It's not so much a dream. I see it when I'm awake, with my eyes open." As he spoke he examined his hands, turning them over. "It's real as you and me. My son's there. It's a summer day. The sun is shining. It's hot, but I don't mind. I'm barefoot. One thing, though: the soil is warm, like blood." He looked up as if

noticing the darkness in the room for the first time. "I didn't realize the time. Always running away from us. That's enough for tonight." He stood. "Thank you for humoring an old man."

Erik stood. They shook hands.

"Sir, your signature."

"Yes, yes."

Jakob swiped a pen across the order. Erik walked to the door, turned the handle and then looked back. "Sir," he said. "It's always a choice."

For a moment Jakob turned the words over in his mind. Somewhere in the past, trapped like images in a spool of film, Heinrich was digging in the dry dirt and Hanna came onto the porch carrying a pitcher of water. They watched the sun hang in the rarified air at the edge of the atmosphere—scarlet then indigo. If only things could stay the same forever, he thought. If only time were not a line moving inexorably forward.

Jakob shook his head. "I wish I had your idealism." With a quick unceremonious motion he grabbed his hat from his desk and put it on. The Insignia—an eagle bearing a wreath surrounding a swastika—flashed like heated metal a deep red. With his hat he looked just another soldier, a military man. "Goodnight, Erik," he said, and sat at his desk.

Józefów. 1,800 Jews. Male Jews of working age to be relocated.

The ground is too hard, Dad.

*I can of Myself do nothing.
As I hear, I judge;
and My judgment is righteous,
because I do not seek My own will
but the will of the Father who sent Me.*

—John 5:30

III

Broken Things

It started with long walks by himself. He wouldn't say anything before he left, just out the door, down the steps, away, anywhere. His eyes, which had always been blue, grey and green became flat, monotone. They were the eyes of a man who had outlived himself, who haunted his steps like a shadow, who drove down old roads and waved to old faces and ate cold meatloaf over the sink.

"I was hurting," Jakob said slowly, softly, his voice crackling and tinny as it emerged from the phone receiver.

He was trying to make her understand. It wasn't working but at least he was talking. "I was hurting." She said too carefully, as if trying to keep from shouting. She wanted to shout, to scream, but she couldn't—not at him. And as she was silent, as she didn't scream at him, she turned an old photograph in her hands.

There were days she didn't know why she had married him. She was almost glad her mother was dead; the gloating would have been too much. She had been right in the end. The

daughter had become the mother. All the same mistakes. She even married her father. Well, someone just like him.

After the funeral, there were some nights Jakob wouldn't come home at all. He never said where he had been, maybe he honestly didn't know. He was a loud man when they met, a rumbling diesel engine voice, large hands, an easy smile—the center of it all, the crowd, the restaurant, the universe. The war to end wars didn't change him like it did others—so many came home like broken vases, where the water had all slipped out: fathers, brothers, sons halved and divided—but then it didn't change war either. Twenty years later and it was all happening again.

"I was quiet some times," Jakob said.

True, he had been. He'd see a face in a crowd. Did you see him? He'd ask, breathless, anxious. Who? The man. There was blood all over his face. Didn't you see? We need to find him. He has blond hair, the color of sand, and wet, pebble eyes. Of course, she hadn't. It was all a long time ago, she'd remind him.

And sometimes he'd wake in the night crying, and she'd hold his head and touch his back—press the tears from him. She loved him most when he cried. In those moments, he was pure, open, like a child. It's ok, she'd say again and again. I have you. It's ok. I have you. I have you. I have you. The first time it happened, she asked him what was wrong. He wouldn't say. From then on, she just held him, swept up his pieces. She knew no other way to love him.

But he was much the same before and after. She got used to the admiring glances of other women. She never doubted. Never once doubted. And she got used to his powerful lungs

running over her sentences, his cannon fire laugh disheveling a quiet restaurant or an evening at home. She got used to him, and that's what love is anyway, being used to someone. She loved him.

"I love you, Hanna" Jakob said.

She listened to his shallow breath over the phone. The receiver was cool to the touch. From where she sat in her brother's home, she could see out the window. Rain cut clear channels in the glass. Her brother had always been distant, like her father. Like all the men she had ever known. And maybe that was the problem—the distance between them, the cold feel of the receiver against her ear, the wires spilling electric words, a breath, or silence unspooling out in the night, lacing the distance to his home, their home. It didn't used to be this way. She didn't used to be this way. She used to be happy. She set the photograph on the table. She was thirteen, surrounded by other thirteen year olds. Smiling. She remembered the crickets sizzling, the sun bobbing on the lake water like an apple. What happened to those kids she used to swim with? Married. Kids, maybe.

Sometimes, she felt that if she went back there to her friend's cabin by the lake, they'd all still be there. The girls would be laughing and whispering. She'd look at the boys and their egg shell skin would be shiny, exciting and terrifying and a hundred other feelings all bound up in a prickling heat and a tightness in her chest. But those days were long gone. She didn't like to imagine that. She knew that it was just one of her many delusions, like having a quiet home and a husband and a family.

Besides, water held a special place of terror in her heart since Heinrich killed himself. She couldn't stand to bathe, to go under the water like she had back then, back when she was

thirteen. It was like being in the womb. It made her feel trapped—the darkness and the sound of rushing blood pounding out of the water. Motherhood had felt the same some days, but she tolerated it: the slow days alone sweeping time around with a broom. She was tired. It wasn't that she was unhappy, not exactly. She didn't know what it was. "Blanket days," Jakob called them because she'd spend the whole day in bed.

Where did it all go wrong she wanted to ask, but she knew. Her father had been a carpenter. The kind of man who could only live through his work. When he got arthritis in his hands at forty five and had to stop working he only limped two years further. Jakob was the same way. Heinrich had been his greatest possession, his wonder boy, his purpose. When a girl broke Heinrich's heart at twelve, it was his father who held him through the lonely hours of the night. When Heinrich toyed with his machines, playing at taking them apart and reassembling them, Jakob would smile wide like the horizon at sunset. She was convinced it wasn't only pride; there was fear there too.

But no, it wasn't only the men. She knew she had a problem simplifying things. She knew that remembering was an act of fiction. It had been her fault. She let herself be carried away, that was it. She was afraid of making mistakes, so she didn't move. Hadn't her sister taught her about it when they played chess in the evening. Zugzwang, the inability to make any move. Her sister had always won. Checkmate, she'd say and brush a strand of hair behind her ear. Checkmate. The board was cracked in a hundred places. Half the pieces had gone missing, replaced by coins, rocks. Still, they played. How she'd wanted to be like her sister. Smart, turned in, as if she didn't know the world was there, and finding it didn't care for it. But she wasn't her

sister. She didn't have the strength to leave home, to go to college. She let life carry her forward, a branch on the tide. She got married because that's what people did.

"That's not why you married me," Jakob said. Anger. She wanted to make him angry, like he used to be.

They'd been dating for two years the first time they fought. In the course of the shouting, she threw a Delftware plate he'd given her. When it cannonballed in to the wall, the pieces of a rustic house beside a stream turned into blue and white shrapnel raining over the wood floor of their apartment. Later, she'd cleaned it up, marveling at the beauty of the pieces, the disorder, the absolute irreversible ruin of their present state. She kept a shard on her bookshelf.

She'd found lipstick on his collar. It could have gotten there any way. But it didn't. There were only so many ways for lipstick to get on a collar, on a man's collar, on the collar of an engaged man. And didn't he smile too much at other women? And didn't he lean too close? Maybe she wanted it to be true, some part of her, to be proven right again, for him to let her down; his kindness felt such a burden. It'd been a week alone and a night with a stranger she met before they talked it out. She never got the truth, because maybe the truth wasn't what happened but what she couldn't make herself believe hadn't happened.

"It is why I married you." She said, to hurt him, hurt him like she'd hurt him when she told him about the man she'd slept with and the way their breath mixed in the dark. They'd met staring into the setting sun, anywhere, she couldn't remember where, couldn't remember his name—if he had told her. She didn't want to. It was like watching herself from above, watching someone else remove his belt. You smell like cherries he said. I want to eat you, he said. It

wasn't that she wanted to be eaten, she was just tired of being a good person. She was tired of being a shard swept up and discarded. And when it was over she felt nothing, like it had never happened—a quick turning of valves to release pressure—except that it had. I fucked him, she'd said to Jakob, her voice empty as if ordering a glass of water at a restaurant. Then the look of confusion, terror, anguish; his face moving from one to the next, rippling, then sagging finally like wet clay. I fucked him. It was something she'd done, some part of herself that she could never change, some part of her fiction.

“I'm sorry,” he said. His goodness cut. She couldn't understand. Everything was his fault. Nothing was his fault.

So Heinrich died and everything fell apart, except everything had been falling apart all the time only they hadn't known it. She looked into the photograph through the edges yellow with age, into the image dark and grainy: a group of teenagers jumping into a lake. She knew the lake, knew the faces if not the names, saw herself among them—younger, happier. Between the edges they all hung, frozen in time. Anything could have happened afterwards. Without reference it would be impossible to tease out the chronology. Were they falling or flying? Gravity suspended. She wished she could live in a photo, be forever smiling, the clean sweet smile, bounded by an edge. It gave a moment significance that it had passed. She felt now the messiness of moving day to day, with no final stop to lend it all an overarching purpose, to define it.

Maybe Heinrich held them together for a while. They were a normal family sometimes. She remembered father and son in the garden. She'd sit on the porch when she felt well enough, sewing, because that's what she was meant to do—living in a house, raising a kid. One was

enough. They never could conceive again. A problem with one, or both. She didn't mind. She liked the quiet. And father and son would work in the dirt, and maybe she was bored by it all, and maybe she didn't care for it. And later they'd all watch the sunset. But now those afternoons were different in the remembering, and as Heinrich turned to her his face was blue and swollen like he'd been afterwards.

"Why did you call?" she asked. She wanted so badly to anger him, for him to yell at her, then she'd be justified, then what she felt would be real and the lipstick would mean something. But when he spoke his voice ached with infinite sadness.

"I got a letter. I leave in two weeks," he said.

What was she supposed to feel? He always did this, dropped bombs out of a clear sky. "Heinrich," she said, "killed himself." If she could make him understand for once it would all go back to the way it had been: Heinrich would be alive and the pieces of the delftware plate would all fly back together again, and the children in the photo would flow back onto the shore, gravelly sand gushing between their toes. And she would be better. Honestly, she would. She would be better for him. She'd be capable.

"He drowned. I know. That's enough." Jakob said.

"He didn't."

"What do you want? He's dead isn't he? Isn't that enough? Dead. Gone."

"But it isn't—"

"Can't you let me have that? I have nothing. No reason. It was all for him. Everything. And now what? What's the point? What was the point of the whole goddamn show? Say it. Say he drowned."

"I won't—"

"Say it. Say it. Just let me have that. My son...my son," he was crying, so tenderly, so softly. He was hurting.

"Ok." she said finally.

And she knew what was coming.

And she knew she'd sweep up his pieces.

And she knew this feeling—Zugzwang.

And she knew she'd stay with him.

And she knew she could never again be thirteen.

And she knew, maybe, she loved him, because she was used to him, and that's what love was, and because she could only love broken things.

IV

Ordering of Wires

Jakob

When I was ten my father gave me my first badge. Made it himself from some old scrap metal. He was like that, good with his hands. The man could've made anything. Talent. That's what I mean. He had a talent, a gift. He made me too, though it's strange to put it that way. Showed me how to use tools and how to fight when I had to. He taught me how to be a man, how to stand up when I'd fall. He taught me that. I don't think I ever thanked him. Well, he gave me that badge and that was that, as they say. I never wanted to be anything else. Never wanted to be a scientist or a store owner or a soldier like some of the other boys. I'd go around arresting kids twice my age for littering or spitting. I used to get into some hot water. It was good. I was young. How I'd like to be young again. Youth is spoiled on children. Those were the days you could lay in the grass and watch the clouds roll by and not think of anything.

He was a policeman, my father. So was his father before him, my grandfather. He died before I was born. We kept one picture of him; he's sitting in a wooden chair eating prunes. There's nothing more exciting

for a boy than to help his father. That's where I got that feeling. The feeling to do the right thing. It wasn't about power. Power is meaningless to a kid. It was about being a part of something greater than myself, about holding the world together. There is such pleasure in order sometimes, like when you set everything in a room straight; it feels complete.

It all comes back to that badge, my whole life. When I'd put that badge on I'd feel something, like I had purpose. Purpose—a man needs that. A man needs to have something to hold onto, a future to move towards, or there isn't any point. He won't get up in the morning. Today doesn't mean anything, nothing at all. The present is just the width of a hair. One single human hair, here one moment and gone the next. It's the future we're working towards, always the future.

Józefów, Poland, July 13th, 1942—06:00

They stood in a semi circle, dawn just beginning to percolate the edge of the void. The trucks had stopped five minutes before. The men had dismounted in a sea of sound: the crush of boots meeting gravel, the jingle of metal, the scrape of movement. Now they stood assembled and waiting, the light of the truck headlights throwing lumbering shadows across the hills. In their glow, Jakob stood and faced his men.

"I don't quite know how to begin." He squinted against the glare. He looked around at his men. They seemed tired, rundown—how he must look, numb and shaken. Men all of them, good men perhaps, but only as good as they could be. *It's a choice*, Erik had told him. But it wasn't. He knew the mechanism that turned the world, gears grinding and clunking.

A machine to make the machine

It was like a telephone. The internal circuitry, the wires looped and coiled and wound round, just like the telephone he and Heinrich had taken apart. The boy had a knack for machines, an intuition call it. Jakob had nurtured it, tried to lead him to his passion, show him to himself. His own father had taken a different approach, laid the bricks out in front of Jakob, and though he didn't hold anything against him, he wasn't his father.

"Until now, it has been our duty and our privilege to serve the Reich by moving the inhabitants of the Warthegau district East. Today, that changes. Today, our orders come from the very highest command." He paused to let the words settle in. "And though regrettable," he began again, "very regrettable." Heinrich was breaking in at the edge of his vision. He saw again the eviscerated bowels of the telephone, the soldered viscera—exposed, open to the air. He took a breath to steady himself. "We must persevere. We are soldiers now, not of conscience, but of Deutschland." Heinrich wore thick rimmed glasses. He turned his head as he tinkered, his mouth partially open, his pink tongue sliding against his lips.

"Our duty, be what it may, is to our home and our Fuhrer. Even now the bombs of our enemies are falling on our homes and our children."

Taking things apart and putting them back together. That's a talent all unto itself.

It's easy, really.

Easy for my son! Not easy for anyone. Don't say it's easy for anyone.

Heinrich laughed. You always do that.

Do what?

Get worked up over nothing.

Can a father be proud of his son?

Maybe not quite so proud.

A man has his hands and not much else in this world. And you have a gift, something no one can take away.

Dad, you sound so old when you say that. You don't know anything.

Maybe he didn't know anything. A year later Jakob received a call on that very same phone. When he picked up the receiver his son was alive, a future as bright as his golden hair. By the time he returned it to the cradle it was gone. Drowned. It couldn't be. Not his son. Not Heinrich. An excellent swimmer, an athlete. Maybe he had never known him after all. He wanted to remember him in that moment, exactly as he'd been—happy.

Drowned.

"Our duty...our duty, is—."He became aware that he was rambling, that he hadn't really said anything. He was circling it, he couldn't get it out, it stuck in the back of his throat. It all seemed tied up in his head like telephone wires, it all merged. Why was he taken away? The gears ground forward. What if he had never picked up, would Heinrich still be alive?

Józefów. 1,800 Jews. Male Jews of working age to be relocated. The voice said through the receiver, then *Drowned. Drowned. Drowned.* He knew he shouldn't have picked up. In his dreams Heinrich was bound up in telephone wires, glittering rivet eyes staring out.

"I can't. I'm sorry." When had he started crying? Everything inside shook, as if on a bumpy road. They were all looking at him, all waiting. Round them up and move them out they expected him to say, like he'd said so many times before. "The Jews..."

József. 1,800 Jews. Male Jews of working age to be relocated. The voice said through the phone

Their eyes picked at his skin, turned out the wires running through his body—open, exposed.

"The male jews are to be relocated." *The rest. The rest. The rest.* "The rest are to be taken into the woods and—and..." he looked into the audience waiting for someone to stop him, waiting for the curtain to fall and the scene to end. He wanted to laugh, but it came out in sobs. "Executed." The word escaped his lips like a tire letting out air. The silence that followed pounded in his ears. No one spoke. No one moved.

Again he watched the casket swallow Heinrich. The loose soil feather over him, handful by handful. What was it the priest had said then? The end of a bright future. It was the end of something, surely. The headlights separated in the prism of his tears, bent rings of color over his retina. He sniffled. Someone cleared their throat. Jakob looked up at the sound, let his eyes linger over his men. Good men. As good as they could be. Bauer, Paul, Nicolas, Hans... Erik. He thought he glimpsed something in Erik's countenance, understanding perhaps. *It's a choice*, he had said. Maybe it was. Maybe he could make it a choice...

"If you now bear any reservations, any moral qualms, step forward and you will be excused from duty," Jakob said. There followed an embarrassed hush. He thought no one would step forward, knew they wouldn't, but then a trickle of men spread before him. No more than half a dozen among 500. He recognized their faces if not their names.

"Anyone else," he asked. He looked at Erik as he spoke. Their eyes met. He wanted to call him out, tell him to step forward, but he couldn't. The end of a bright future the priest intoned, and

the dirt fell, and the phone rang all at once. He didn't call him out, and Erik didn't step forward. The end. He knew he'd lost something then, something essential. The phone howled in his ears and he fell into it and slipped into the casket and was buried.

You don't know anything.

*You can find meanness
in the least of creatures,
but when God made man
the devil was at his elbow.
A creature that can do anything.
Make a machine.
And a machine to make the machine.
And evil that can run itself a thousand years,
no need to tend it.*

— Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*,
or the Evening Redness in the West

IV

Träume, die wie hehre Strahlen

Dreams, like Holy Rays of Light



Erik went to see his father Rainer in the hospital two days before he would die in his *adagissimo* sleep. A picture hung above the bed—a river surrounded by trees, their leaves touched by Fall: red, gold, yellow. The sky looked a deep sort of blue. A man and a girl waded in the paper waters, a father and daughter perhaps. He looked at the painting or his hands or his feet while he waited for his father to wake. The man who bought him his violin for his seventh birthday—that man. The man who loomed large in his memory looked smaller now, the powerful shoulders turned in, the flesh sunken as if he was leaking out of himself through a hole hidden beneath the blanket. Beside his ashen skin, the white bed sheet was a palette of color. His breathing was inaudible; his chest looked still. But he was alive. Rainer had always been stubborn.

Why had he come? Erik wondered. He'd known as he mounted the steps outside the hospital, as he'd asked for the room (203, last one on the right—a flat, I'm-sorry-for-you look on

the nurse's face), and as he'd grasped the handle and faced the wood grain of the door and pushed inward. He'd imagined his father standing beside the bed looking out the window. I don't know why they put me in this, he'd say, and gesture to his hospital gown. He'd imagined that same noncommittal curve to his lips, the swagger of his chin when he spoke. Erik imagined spitting into his father's face, slamming his teeth against the wall, the jarring impact shivering up his arm, blood pulsing from his father's broken face. But then he had turned the handle and the room unfolded and nothing was the way it should be. The air hung close, pinched with a cloying smell—bleach and decay. The skeleton of a man he used to know lay out in bed, knobby bones like white topped peaks.

He'd come to yell and rage. He'd come for revenge. Thirty years old and he still couldn't stop being the twelve year old boy who watched his mother vacate her own skin, time dissolving her corners, deflating her cheeks and neck, losing herself in the quiet of the afternoon. Rainer left without leaving at first. Sometimes he didn't come home till morning. There were clues in the ruffle of his shirt, a mystery unraveling in the creases of his pants.

At twelve, Erik knew.

He'd listen while their voices tore at the ceiling and their footsteps bit into the floorboards, covering his sister's ears or talking to her.

Hey, look at the moon. [she's quiet].

There's a face there. [she doesn't look out the window. her skin is like chalk.]

Margrit. LOOK. [she puts her head against his chest. six years old, already tired of it all]



He'd tell her a story. He'd tell her everything would be ok. He'd play the violin: Wagner Träume in A-Flat Major. The room would roil with the rise and fall of vibrating strings. They'd play cards, Elfern, first to ten. He'd let her win because she was six and needed to know what happiness felt like. Other times he'd laugh too loud. Or something else. Or something else. Anything to cover the sound sliding under the door, rising like steam through the floor. *f* If she fell asleep, he'd drain into that secret part of himself that existed only in these moments. {D.S. al coda, repeat through childhood.}



One night, his father didn't come home. Erik waited for the scrape of shoes on the porch, the squeak of the door—shouting, anything. Silence chewed his ear drums.



He sat in bed and waxed his violin's bow. His sister slept or pretended to sleep. A moth orbited the lamp its shadow seizing on the wall, its wings whirring with spastic, hateful movement. He watched it for a time. With a glass he tried to catch it, to get it to the window, but he crushed its wing. He didn't mean to, he told himself, never quite believing as he cried into his pillow so his sister wouldn't hear.

At twelve he knew where his father had been.

But no, he hadn't come to yell at his father. He'd found a cigarette lighter under the bed where he slept alone, same kind his dad used. Under the bed, like a dead rat, coated in a brine of dust. That was all it took. Something in the way the light stroked the metal casing made him



remember. Rainer offered him his first cigarette when he was seven. He couldn't remember the brand but the heat burned his lungs and he recalled coughing and the vomit taste in his mouth and his dad's crispy laughter. A woman is like a cigarette, Rainer had said. Sometimes you love her. Sometimes she makes you sick. Erik hadn't smoked since then.

There were flowers beside the bed where the hollow man lay, in a glass vase, chrysanthemums, hydrangeas—still in glorious, riotous bloom. Couldn't tell it was fall outside. Erik stood and walked to the flowers and reached down to touch them. How hadn't he noticed? The petals were wet and papery. They were arranged carefully, Erik could tell, but there was a touch of disorder among them, some leaves askew. He wondered at who had left them. Someone who cared for his father but lacked the coordination to properly arrange—a man perhaps. He looked at Rainer—sleeping or dead, it was impossible to tell. Who would leave flowers for him?

Erik sat down again and took the lighter out of his pocket. With his thumb he played with the flint—a flame and a breath of smoke, heat on his face. Inside, butane met a spark, combusted, came undone, shed its form in robes of scarlet and orange. The fire fit the scene of the hospital room: the burned rubble of Rainer's face, the blow out of Erik's life.

Two weeks after his father left, they moved in with their grandmother across town behind a deli. She was a fleshy woman, his grandmother, all floury apron and warm cookie smiles. The house felt too big, all the rooms empty. At night the open doorways would follow him like eye sockets. His grandmother never left the house, never set foot in the garden. A man left groceries on the back porch once a week. The same things every time, always a chocolate bar for each of them. Once when Erik asked her why she never went out, darning needles clacking

a tuneless rhythm, eyes heavy in the lamplight, she replied, because I'm too old. At twelve, he knew she was lying. Perhaps as a widow and a grandmother, she had seen enough of what the world had to offer.

The nights were quiet. Margrit had her own room. When they first moved in he'd knock. Three notes through the wall to say goodnight.  And she'd answer:  As time went on, she stopped knocking. She grew up faster than he would have thought possible, spent the evenings with friends from school, coming home only once the sun had set. He was happy for her. He was. He was. She didn't need him.

At night:



Years later, music roared in his ears where he worked at a small law office, transferring numbers from one page to another. Swelling orchestral movements: Chopin, Strauss, Wagner. He took to banging pots at home to dispel the noise. He kept his violin beneath his bed. He couldn't play. It was a dream. It always had been. Eighteen years later and he still couldn't play. It was as if he'd missed a train somewhere, he'd missed something—been left behind. He never grew up, never grew up like everyone else: family, two kids or three, house with little windows—he grew inward. He couldn't be happy, he didn't know why. It felt wrong somehow. So he walked by himself in the evenings, crunching the leaves with his feet.

Erik stood over the dying man. He was fifty-five, in August, though he looked much older, as if the firestorm of his life had consumed his fuel too quickly. Fat had burned away from his face and ribs leaving a dry scaffold of bone. Strands of water vapor hair smoked from his cratered scalp. When had he gotten so old? Who was this man? He wasn't Rainer, surely. He had been young, arrogant, vicious: laughing smoking, drinking. Where was the man who had stayed out all night? Where was the man who threw his children in the summer air, who carried his wife up the stairs of their small house? It had all caught up in instant. Eighteen years.

Erik leaned over the man who towered over him all his life. "You always won. Even now." Fifty five and dying. We're all dying, Rainer had said with a cigarette dangling between his teeth—Reemtsma that was his brand, Erik suddenly remembered. That's what living is, Rainer had said in a puff of smoke. But now he was really dying, and Erik didn't know how to feel.

His sister called two weeks earlier. St. Matthews hospital, she said. He didn't ask how she knew.

You going?

No.

You?

No.

But there he was, in the hospital, room 203, his father asleep in a hospital bed.

Erik heard the door open behind him and he straightened up. A woman entered neither old nor young, neither beautiful nor ugly. She looked like a woman he might see anywhere, she had that kind of face—impersonal, clean, tending towards friendly, but like a drop of water in an ocean of a crowd. She regarded him thoughtfully. After a time, she asked, "How do you know him?"

"He was a friend of my father." Erik said. The lie came easily to his lips—one of the many bad habits he'd inherited.

"Is a friend." she corrected and moved into the room on soft whispery feet and bent to arrange the flowers. Her hands shook slightly. "He hasn't had any visitors."

"How did you know him?"

"Wife." She held up her left hand so he could see the ring.

"You left the flowers." He meant it as a question but it came out as a statement.

"Yes." Her hands trembled. Even as she toiled, the flowers fell back into disarray. Finally, she gave up and turned to look at Erik. "I'm sorry. I don't think I caught your name."

"Franz," he said without hesitation.

“Franz. It’s nice of you to come.” She said, then, “Lorelai,” indicating herself. Her eyes wandered everywhere but to the dying man beside her. “I was afraid he would be alone while I was gone. I hate for him to be alone.”

"I'm sorry."

She nodded.

Erik looked at the painting on the wall. A blue knife through a field of autumnal fire. A wife, of course. He remarried. Erik tried to force an emotion. He felt hollow inside. The man in the bed wasn’t his father. Eighteen years had made them strangers. A wife. Why had he come?

"He didn't deserve this," Lorelai said. "He was a good man. A good husband. A good father. "

Father. Erik froze, the word seeping into his cracks like poison. His eyes ached and he retreated into the sensation, let the pain fill him. Father. Eighteen years. “You have children?” he asked at last.

“A daughter. We had a daughter.”

“Had?”

“Had.” She played with her wedding ring, twisting it as if unscrewing her finger.

“I’m sorry.” A sister. He thought of Margrit.

Lorelai gestured to Rainer. “He used to carry her everywhere on his shoulders. She’d beat the sides of his head and bounce up and down. Horsey, that’s what she called him. Horsey,

faster, faster.” She tried to laugh but it came out a sob. She covered her mouth and turned towards Rainer. “He wasn't the best man, but he tried.

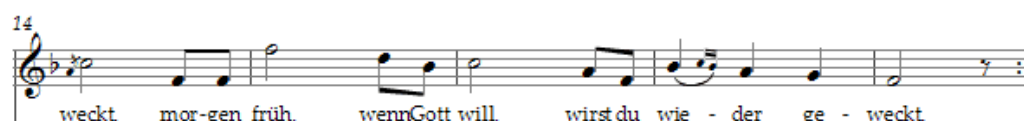
Erik didn't say anything.

She touched Rainer's cheek. “Thing is I always got the feeling that he had a hard life. Maybe he made it hard for himself, did things he regretted. He never talked about the past much. I know he was married.”

“Maybe he had kids.” Erik said too forcefully.

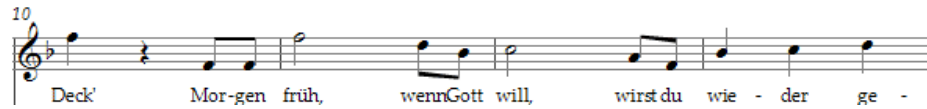
She met Erik's eye with a sad smile. “Maybe. We aren't all we say we are, not to everyone, not all the time,” she said. She focused again on Rainer. With her fingers she brushed the hair on the sides of his head. “He tried, I know that. Only human.”

They let the silence steep, each with their own thoughts. Somewhere in the hospital a woman was singing, as if to a child.



Finally, Lorelai let out her breath and rubbed her eyes and turned to look at Erik. He knew what was coming; he always knew when people were about to ask him personal questions. He had spent his entire adult life avoiding them. He made a quick escape. A goodbye-I'm sorry for you-kind of exit. He opened the door and stepped over the threshold but turned back one last time. It looked almost like a photograph seen in some distant future, the hospital room—the way Rainer lay still, his wife beside him, yellow dusty age creeping into the creases around her

eyes. Above, the painting glowed incandescent, turning the colors loose. He could almost imagine the water rushing by, the trees denuding in winter. Then in spring, new life—dewy green buds on the bough like millions of green chrysalises. Father and daughter locked together perpetually. The woman was still singing as he turned away.



He asked a nurse for a cigarette on the way out. She reached under her desk and pulled one out and handed it to him. As he walked home, crunching the leaves in the road and the gutter, he smoked and the music of his breath diffused in pale lines on the open air.

IV

Sound of Silence

Józefów, Poland, July 13th, 1942—08:00

" צי נישט נעמען אים . צי נישט נעמען מיין בייבי . "

The woman pleaded in Yiddish. She beat her fists against her legs and gnashed her teeth. She might have been beautiful. Her lips were full and red, her skin luminescent in the early morning glow. There was something in her eyes; Erik couldn't bring himself to look at her.

People hearing without listening

"What is she saying?" Erik asked the translator, Nelek, a Catholic Pole from a neighboring village, of middling age and height. Stress had disrupted the fastidious flow of his hair, like a spring branch battered by late snows, it hung across his forehead and in his eyes. Every few moments he raked a hand quickly through it, only for it to wilt just as quickly.

"ביטע . ביטע טאָן נישט נעמען אים . עפעס . עפעס אַנדערש . ביטע . ביטע . ביטע ."

“She asks you not to take her child.”

“We’re not taking her child” Erik said softly. “Tell her that. Tell her we’re not going to take the child.”

“Don’t think she’s likely to believe us,” Bauer nodded to the rifle slung across his back. He was older than Erik, a man of endless appetites: food, cigars, women. A different woman every week he claimed. “More like a different belt,” a soldier had laughed as they tried to sleep. Now on the downhill slide towards sixty, Bauer was no longer the incorrigible womanizer of his youth. A stolid man, though. Warm and inviting. He had a deep rumble of a laugh, a laugh he used long and often.

An older woman pushed through the family members hovering around the doorway. She wore a black scarf over her head. She had a round face, the kind that would seem to be smiling even at rest. She reminded Erik of a teacher he had once had, a lifetime ago and miles and miles away. She was not smiling now. Her dried leaf lips split open, revealing gray teeth too large for her mouth. The skin around her eyes was creased like the knot of a tree.

" באקום אויס ! "
She spit.

“Tell her we’re not taking the child.”

Nelek spoke in Yiddish. The old woman ran over his words.

" באקום אויס דײַטש הינט ! באַקומען אויס ! "

Then, as if something tore loose, everyone inside the house began speaking at once. Bauer covered his ears. Erik looked from Nelek to the old woman, she opened her mouth like a puckered wound and spittle blew forth with her words. They were all talking, lips wriggling like

ants over one another. Erik unsung his rifle. The old woman's eyes grew wide, glistening wet and dingy like uncooked fish.

" שטאַרבן פֿיגס ! "

Nelek turned to him his eyes wide as they continued shouting. "I can't.. They won't listen. They won't listen. Won't listen," his voice trailed off as Erik raised his rifle. He couldn't think. The voices seemed to be in his head closing about him. Erik felt some part of himself come unstuck and wash away in the tide of voices. Then, it was as if he was watching a film of himself. His finger found the trigger. A bead of sweat wound down the dark continent of his face. He held his breath. Please, he wanted to say. Please stop, and from twenty years in the past he heard shouting in the dark, a body hit the wall.

A rifle shot rent the air.

"גענוג!"

Bauer shouted in his deep gin and cigar soaked voice. He was in among them faster than Erik thought a man of his size and age ought to be able to move. He put a hand on Erik 's shoulder and a hand on the muzzle of his rifle. The bullet had pierced the top of the door frame. Everyone in the house was silent.

"Tell them they need to be out in five." Bauer said to Nelek.

"But—" he began.

"Just tell them."

Later, they sat side by side in an alleyway. Shouting and gunfire drifted on the wind.

"Thing I love about Poland is the Fresh air," Bauer said taking a long drag of his cigarette.

"Why wouldn't she listen. Why don't they ever listen? We weren't going to take her son. We weren't going to take him."

"Listen? Problems not with her ears. She heard you. But what a man says and what a man does are two different things entire." He took another drag.

Erik kicked a rock down the alley, then looked at Bauer. "You speak Yiddish?"

"Maybe." Bauer said.

"You said something. "

"I said stop."

"How?"

"Opened my mouth. Moved my tongue. Blew some air. It doesn't have to all come out of your ass."

"How do you know Yiddish?"

"Not too different from German, is it?"

"I couldn't understand."

Bauer sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "My grandmother. She was from a little town south of here. Dynów. " Bauer brushed embers from the tip of his cigarette, they spiraled burning to the street. "Woman could fit in the palm of your hand, never stopped me from being afraid of her. She was mean with a ladle."

"But you're here." Erik said, confused.

"I am here. " Bauer nodded. "You're here too."

"Yeah."

"You think it would have been better if we weren't, I can see it in your eyes."

"Maybe."

"Wouldn't matter."

"No?"

"No."

"Get as old as me, you realize people are the same anywhere. If it wasn't us, it'd be someone else. "

Erik was restless. He felt penned in by the houses and the sounds. The screaming hadn't stopped. "We should go."

"You a religious type, Erik?" Bauer asked holding out a cigarette.

Erik didn't say anything. Bauer looked from the cigarette to Erik and back. "I can wait all day," he said. "See, thing about being an old man is you've got more patience in one nut than a younger man has in his whole body."

Erik sighed and took the cigarette.

"So?" Bauer asked.

"I was baptized."

"So, no." Bauer grunted.

"I guess not."

"Me neither."

"Why'd you ask, then?"

"Being a believer and being literate aren't the same thing." He finished his cigarette and lit another—petals of flame, a soft hiss. "Ever heard the one about the tower of babel?"

"Sounds like a bad joke."

"Yeah, a joke maybe." He closed his eyes then opened them and coughed and spit into the street. "See, a bunch of people get together and start to build this tower. But then God sees it and decides to fuck with them, so he makes it so they can't understand each other. "

Erik waited for him to finish. When it was clear Bauer was done, he asked "So what's the punch line?"

"The punch line?"

"If it's a joke. The punchline."

"There is none" Bauer said. He stood and brushed his jacket and knees off and shrugged. "Poland isn't going to Germanize itself," he said and laughed. They went back to work then, clearing the city house to house, driving the Jews to the marketplace. Everywhere men were doing the same thing, buttoned up in their crisp uniform jackets, not men, copies of men buttoned up in gray jackets.

It was an hour later when Erik and Bauer took another cigarette break, sitting on crates beside an empty house. The sun dripped down their necks. "I think I figured it out," Erik said looking at his feet, the road, nothing in particular. "The punchline. It was pride. The humans, I mean. They were prideful."

Bauer shook his head and then brushed a laugh off his lips with a hand. "Nice try, but it isn't pride."

"Then what is it?"

"You got it all wrong. There is no punchline. That's the real joke." He rubbed the bridge of his nose and his eyes. "It's just a true story. Sure, it never happened that way with the people all speaking the same language and the tower, but it did. You know what I mean? The events don't matter, they never matter. Maybe they build a palace or nothing at all. The specifics don't

mean anything. That's the way the world is. We're too far apart. We're too far apart, all of us, too far apart. Brains are too small, too close to monkeys. Even speaking the same language you and I can barely know each other. We're like stars. A million miles apart, with just blackness in between." He shook his head. "That's what this whole thing boils down to. That woman back there. This whole goddamn country. The war. Everything since man crawled out of the mud. You, me, everyone, we don't know how to listen. Not if we're screaming into each other's faces. You can't trust someone you don't understand."

Erik looked at his feet.

"Funny enough?" Bauer asked. He stood with some effort. "Come on. We've got to get to the marketplace."

Erik watched the cigarette burn between his fingers, ash dribbling onto his feet. A baby was crying somewhere, but for that it had grown silent. The houses where so many had woken in the morning and worked and dreamed the dream of living were now cold and empty. He took one last pull and threw the cigarette into the road and crushed it with his heel. "We were supposed to kill that kid, you know," he said. His words rose in a spectral choreography of thin smoke.

"Yeah, I know."

*And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more.
People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening*

—The Sound of Silence
Simon and Garfunkel

V

Treading Water

I.

She could never explain the feeling of being in the water to herself, in over her head, sinking, sinking. It was like walking alone, without roads or leaves or whips of smoke uncoiling from chimneys, that feeling, of being small and totally empty, where her eyes would slip the miles as they uncurled beneath her feet, seeing everything, but taking nothing in. But then it wasn't. It was like nothing really. It was like being nothing, like being dead, except her heart beat out of the water, and the current picked at her skin, and her lungs ached with every second. Sometimes she dreamt of being pulled down by a leaden weight, air bubbles gushing from her mouth, kicking holes in the darkness, rising, rising between her outstretched finger tips. Then she'd wake up clutching her throat, unable to breathe. It scared her to be out of control. It scared her (a mass of muscle and bone fibers slightly more dense than water) to attempt to levitate.

When she turned eight her family moved from Jozefow, Poland to Brunswick, Germany. Before they left her father drew a circle around their new home (his word not hers) on a map. This is where we're going he had said—a new start. She only stared. She wanted to cross it out with a pen, level it with sharp stabbing strokes. It wasn't real, she told herself. Until she saw the town unfold beneath her, the roads and city blocks scrawled to the edge of her vision, until the bricks added themselves into buildings, it was just an idea. Something imagined. A creation of the mind. Same as mom, she told herself.

Her new school was to be St. Matthews. Her dad left her around the corner because she still wasn't talking to him. The façade glowered at the road, aged brick browning in the sun. The halls were cavern cool. She felt like she was underwater. She held her breath and plugged her ears. Everywhere brick faced girls in plaid skirts, their string bean legs huddled together. Someone laughed as she passed. She watched a green caterpillar eat a leaf at lunch sucking the flesh from the lattice, across and back, line after line. Typewriter mouth chewing the page.

They won't talk to you, she had known. They can't talk to you. Her German broke, skipped, sounding the scratches on a phonograph like the one her father took her to listen to at a friend's house, a German woman with pointy eyebrows. They spent the evening arm in arm.

"Aren't you a pretty, little girl," the woman had said, the way adults do when they're speaking down to you, voice rising high.

"Aren't you an ugly old woman," she had responded.

I mustn't be rude. 29 more lines.

I mustn't be rude. 28 more lines.

I mustn't be rude. 27 more lines.

I mustn't be rude. 26 more lines.

I mustn't be rude. 25 more lines.

Her father, Szymon, was a schoolteacher, a warm wiggly, fuzzy sort of man, caterpillar eyebrows inching downward towards his nose. He had carried her on his shoulders when she was smaller. He used to carry her into the Świder river, and she'd arch her back, clawing up his head, a rat fleeing a sinking ship. She didn't like that way the water brushed her legs with its fingertips. He'd changed some after mom died. He liked to think his daughter didn't notice. She was only a child, five years old. He didn't smile as much he used to, and he liked to sit in his office alone typing an empty typewriter against a blank page, typing, typing till the ink ran dry. He wrote all the things he couldn't say, couldn't let himself feel:

I miss her

I miss her

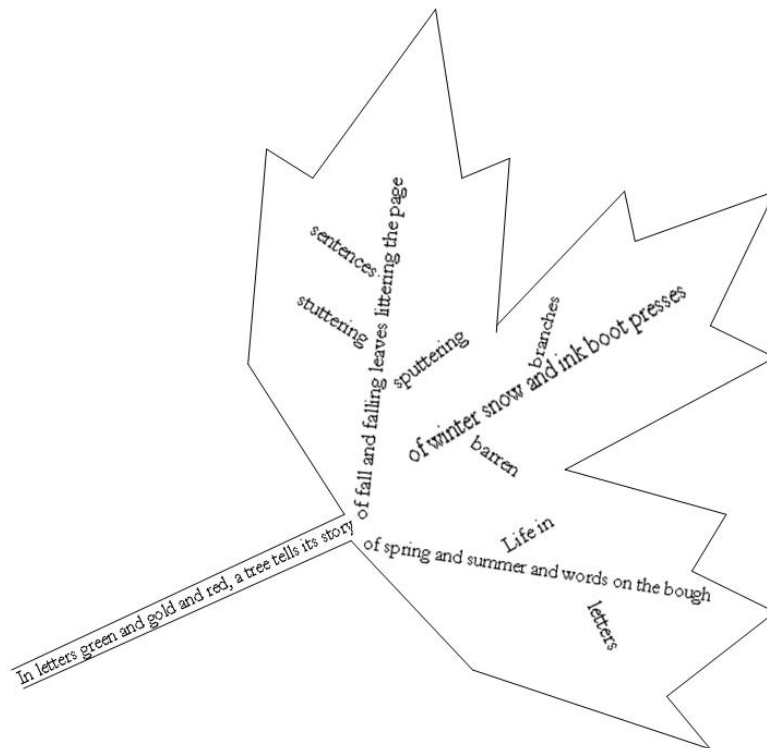
I miss her

I miss her

He rolled the emotions up and let them drift away. Sitting at the typewriter he recalled all the past, and before him the future rolled off his chair and down the hall. In two years he would move to Brunswick in Northern Germany. His daughter would resent him for the move, barely speaking to him and making him drop her off around the corner. There he would teach until his

brother died and he returned to Poland to be with his father. In 1944, he would die in the Lodz Ghetto, a slow death starting with a cough. But that would come.

So they don't want to talk to you. She thought. You don't want to talk to them, anyway. Why would she want to talk to them? They could only distract her. She was making a scrapbook of everything that happened to her. In it she put the leaf the caterpillar chewed and poems in the shape of life. On one page she splashed a cup of water.



"I like it. None of it actually has to do with you, though, Shprint," her brother Czcibor pointed out. "It's just a bunch of weird stuff bound up in a notebook."

He didn't understand. He was too busy with girls from school. Sixteen. For him, the world had condensed into a singularity—a point of infinite density and importance between a woman's thighs. How could he understand? Everything was happening all at once for Shprintza, the whole world pressing in at her seams—all connected. She knew it was all connected, the way she knew who she was without looking into a mirror, without opening her eyes at all.

Once she followed some of the other girls home after school. They walked in a line pushing the world out of their way, or they stood still and the ground turned beneath them, she couldn't tell. Light sloughed from their faces, like water pouring off her hand. They talked and their voices rattled the inside of her eardrums. She didn't want to hear, the tinny rain of their laughter and the sandpaper scuff of their shoes, but she couldn't help but follow—call it an impulse.

They went to the same place every day. She knew instinctually, prophetically. She knew where they went without knowing, as if every possible road led to this one place. It was a small lake, a glittering blue eye gazing into a cloudless sky. The surrounding area seemed to slant into it, curving like a bowl. They stripped along the beach. It was September and the air was dense and wet with the end of summer sort of heat, burning the back of her ears, an aching cold lingering just beneath. The bodies of the girls wriggled white, their hair flashing metal between the tree leaves. They reminded her of silk worms.

Her mother used to paint, to catch movement in flowing lines of oil, so it could harden and dry—transforming as it did, till it became a moment out of time. Some she sold, others she entombed beneath a blanket in the attic, and later a chest. One went to the hospital in Hamburg,

where it hung through the crackling applause of firebombs in the final days of the Third Reich, only to slide off the wall some years later and break without much ado. Shprintza remembered how she'd stood behind her mother while she painted one afternoon, close enough to see the little hairs on her mother's neck damp with sweat, too small to be caught up in her bun.

"Shprintza, I can feel your breath. Do you think you're standing too close?"

"No." She smiled every time she said her favorite word.

"Ok," she made the word sound like a sigh. She hummed as she worked, nothing in particular, sometimes just the same phrase over and over. From the hill where they sat, they overlooked a river, just a narrow crack between the trees.

"What you painting?" Shprintza asked.

"The afternoon," her mother replied, then more specifically, "The water. The way the sun hits it just right." She traced the water's meandering path with quick little brush strokes of white.

"Why?"

"This isn't going to be one of those never ending questions is it, you little terror?" her mother turned to look at her. Shprintza ducked behind her shoulder, giggling.

"No." Another smile.

"Well, if you're serious, I guess I can tell you." She sat beside her daughter and picked her up and put her in between her legs. "Do you feel that? Like a raindrop?" she asked and prodded Shprintza's little stomach. "There it is again." She tickled the little belly that had spent

so much time growing inside of her. How thirsty she'd been those nine months. She used to joke that she was pregnant with a fish.


"And again." She said and tickled her daughter once more. Shprintza laughed and squirmed like an eel. "That's time moving forward. Always moving forward." She sounded sad and Shprintza looked into her face.

"I just want to remember this moment and love it while I can, because there will never be another time exactly like this, not exactly with just us two girls and the river. Never."

Her mother died six months later.

II.

Days fell away in the sway of her teacher's pony tail and the staccato scratch of chalk, until winter lumbered into town one morning, settled on its white haunches, and fell asleep. She'd hike to school before the sun had risen, the grass cutting glass knives. She would sit in class, because she was told to. While her teacher's words impregnated the air, she would write poems. She liked listening, but she didn't like hearing, like when her father and brother spoke beneath her room so their words slithered through the floor.



[Szymon: I don't think she has any friends.]

[Czcibor: She's just quiet]

[Szymon: You shouldn't encourage her.]

[Czcibor: You shouldn't do that.]

[Szymon: What?]

[Czcibor: Be so hard on her.]

One day at lunch, she put on her coat and earmuffs and picked up her notebook and made to go outside; she wanted to catch snow in her notebook. As she passed through the desks, a string bean leg tangled itself between her feet. Her knees hit first, then her left shoulder. The notebook spun out across the wood floor. Lights exploded in her head. She lay there stunned. When she lifted her gaze she saw a group of girls crowding around her notebook. The pages crinkled like an old, wooden staircase as they leafed through. Someone laughed. Someone spoke: *Schweinjude*. She heard ripping and for a moment she couldn't tell if it was coming from the notebook or her insides. Hours later, the principal spoke to her father in his office. She sat outside bicycling her feet in the air, still clutching a handful of someone else's hair.

As they walked home:

Szymon

Shprintza

Do you want to talk about what
happened?

I'm just worried about you.

Say something.

Please, Shprintza.

Mom's dead.

When they get home, even though it was cold, she felt hot. And when she lay in bed, the red coals of her skin cooked her insides so she couldn't sleep. She paced. She did headstands against the wall. She pulled up bits of wood from around her windows.

Beneath her, Szymon sat at his typewriter writing the history of his love in white spaces, raindrop letters scattering randomly.

I v r l ea

It was all disappearing and running backwards, the ink flowing into the typewriter pulling words off the page in strands. He was trying to go back, before they moved and his daughter resented him, before his wife vanished into the trees of the cemetery. He typed with his eyes closed. And opened them.

she is gone

It wasn't a realization. He'd known it all along, really. He'd known it when they left Poland. He'd been running from ghosts. Couldn't live in their old house, sleep in the same bed. She'd fallen into all the cracks, dissolved in the air. If he drank water, it tasted of her lips and hair. It wasn't sadness. He'd lost the best part of himself, gone into the ground with her, rain mixing them together as it seeped down. But he never could face it. *She is gone*. He made himself feel it. *She is gone*. All these years he'd kept her paintings in a chest. When he and his children had moved to Germany, they moved too. And at night when he felt lost and desperate he'd look at the chest and feel time passing by.

The hinge squealed as it opened. He knew the contents by heart. A painting of Jozefow's city square. Another of dry open fields. And others. And others. One of a father and daughter in

the river, they're faces blurred with movement. He closed the lid and with a key from his desk locked it. He wanted to put the key somewhere he wouldn't remember. He opened the window and with one final look dropped it into the night.

He would retrieve it three days later.

He could hear the creek of Shprintza's steps in the ceiling. *Mom's dead.* The notebook, the fighting, the weirdness—it was all bound up. He went up to her room and opened the door. She looked at him with small eyes. “You should be asleep” he said. She didn't say anything. He sat on the bed and lifted her into his lap. “It's late.” Her heart shivered against his arm.

Silence unspooled between them. Finally she said, “Can we go swimming?”

He looked surprised. “Of course.”

“Like we used to. With mom.”

“With mom.”

“In the river.”

They were silent. A cold wind cut down out of the north, fibrillating loose slats in the roof and howling between the wood planks. Shprintza knew there would never be another moment exactly like this one, and so she snuggled into the warmth above her father's heart and fell asleep.

VI

Lights Out

Erik

Years ago, I saw my third grade teacher crying. The class had just gone out to recess, and she was sitting at her desk, a tissue in her hand, sobbing quietly to herself. Maybe there was something I could have done. She needed someone, that much was obvious. She needed someone to reach out a hand to her, to tell her everything is alright. You forgot that sometimes, that teachers and parents are people too; it's a strange thought really. You forget and then one day you come in on them crying, mascara tracing deltas down their cheeks. It's funny. You never think to ask those people, especially when you're young. They're there to help you to take away your pain. Anyway that's what you think. They're not people, not really. The class had two caterpillars in a glass tank. They had stupid little kid names I can't remember. Anyway, one day they died. It wasn't like someone had forgotten to feed them, all you had to was toss some milkweed in. They just died, the way things do. It was no one's fault.

So they died, and some of the kids wanted to poke around the dry husks, and class went on like usual and that was pretty much it. But later, Ms. Frauenfelder cried to herself with soft muffled sobs, the kind a wounded animal might make, its paw caught in a trap, when it feels all alone. That's it. End of story.

Well, who knows why she did it. Why cry over two caterpillars? After recess, the kids came back and she taught just like normal the same soft smile that seemed to take in the whole world, the same whispery tone of voice. She cared, maybe that's what her problem was. She cared so much. It's not easy for people like that. If a kid got hurt, she felt it too. She had that kind of empathy. It's why all the boys had a crush on her. Nothing ever came of the incident. She didn't kill herself, or leave town. It's not really even much of a story. Once a third grade teacher cried over dead caterpillars. The end. What's the point? But maybe there was a reason, if not a point. Those caterpillars never did fly. They never spun cocoons or did anything really. They ate and whiled away the hours of their lives and then died. Maybe it wasn't compassion, the reason she cried. Maybe she felt like she was in that glass cage with those caterpillars, and maybe that was simply too sad.

Józefów, Poland, July 13th, 1942—13:00

He counted his heart beats. *Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three.* He could hear the blood pushing through his ears, like cars on a distant road in the night passing somewhere alone. In a rough semblance of a line they walked—women and children and the men guarding them, not from harm but escape. Together they cut a path through crisp knee high grass beneath a lidless sun. Their footfalls beat the road like rain. *Forty-two, Forty-three, forty-four.* Every heart beating. As many heartbeats as stars in the sky.

There are Stars

He could almost let himself forget. Almost let himself relax. He shut his eyes and felt for a moment what sleepers and the dead feel, as if he were totally alone, as if he had never been. He opened his eyes. There was something of a dream to the afternoon, a vague uncertainty to the slope of the hills, a runny watercolor to the summer flowers. Sweat intimated a lover's touch down his back. A dry, coughing wind wheezed every now and again, or was silent.

"Hello? Didn't you hear me?"

One hundred eight, one hundred nine, one hundred ten.

Yes, he could almost feel as if he was alone.

"Don't try to ignore me."

He looked to the speaker, a young woman. She squinted in the sunlight, a detached curl to her lip and nose. Black hair clung to the sweat on her neck and around the corners of her face holding her head together.

"Where are you taking us?" she asked in German.

Erik chewed the inside of his cheek. He couldn't stand to look at her, couldn't stand to see her. When they had paired off at the marketplace, one soldier to each Jewish woman, she had become his. His Jew. And now she walked beside him and asked where they were going. She didn't know. She didn't know where they were going. He wanted to laugh at that, to curl into the gutter and puke with laughter, till his ribs shattered. *Where are we going?* He hated her for that little innocent question. He hated her. He loved her.

She sighed, and switching gears tried a sweeter voice, "You don't seem so bad as some of the others. You almost have gentle eyes."

He turned away from her, his hat screening his eyes. He wanted to crawl into bed. It was one of those days, where he couldn't stand to be himself, to move from moment to moment, step to step, heartbeat to heartbeat. Sunlight pinched the inside of his head, pressed his brain against his skull. He wanted to be someone else, somewhere else. He wanted to be nothing.

"Wait, I'm sorry," She said, and something of her voice reminded him of his younger sister. When he would help his mother fold laundry she would climb into the bed sheet. *Swing me*, she'd say in her little voice, sweet and playful, but commanding. *Swing me*, and they'd lift her, soft, fleshy body locked into the folds and creases, till she came tumbling out breathless and red from laughing.

"Please... please, it's just—I have no one to talk to." She paused letting her eyes follow her feet. "My mother passed away when I was a girl. I have a brother, and a father, but since they've been taken away I have no one. I have no one to talk to."

He slowed his pace.

"Look, just tell me where you're from."

"Hamburg," he said stiffly.

"That's north of Brunswick, right?"

"Yes."

"We lived in Brunswick for a few years when I was young. My father was a schoolteacher there. That's where I learned German."

"You speak it well."

"Do I?" She laughed, softly, just a little, a moment of sunshine through diaphanous cloud, gone as quickly as it came.

Whorls of dust kicked up by the feet ahead rose in sputters, the chalky breath of dry grass. So many feet, he thought. So many feet in so many shoes going in so many directions. Or they were. Now they walked lockstep in a ramshackle line, forward, relentlessly, irrevocably forward. He wanted to speak, to break the monotony of trudging feet and the pounding of his heart, now too many beats to count. He didn't understand why she was here, why she had to be here. "Why did you come back?"

"I've been asking myself that same question." She looked down at the ground. "My uncle passed away, so my father moved back to be with my grandfather." She tucked a piece of hair behind one ear.

"I'm sorry," he said, unspoken worlds of grief beneath his words.

They both looked at the ground.

"What about you? What brings you here?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know why I'm here.—I mean I do, obviously. I have to—but I don't know. I'm not talking sense. I just... I didn't think it would be like this."

"Me neither." In the distance they both could hear a woman crying. "Do you know where they're taking us?"

He didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't ask. Just one foot in front of the other. That's all we can do." She lifted her eyes to the sky. "You know, it's funny. I've spent so much of my life depressed for no real reason and now that something truly bad is happening I can't seem to cry. It's just...here we are. I'm alive. No matter what happens when we get where we're going, I'm here right now, in this moment. "

"Are you scared?"

"Scared? Yes. I suppose am. I'd have to be dumber than you look not to be." She smiled.

"I'm sorry."

"Can you see them?"

"See what?" He looked at her for the first real time. He could tell she had been raised by men. Something of a coarseness to the way she walked, the sway of her hips, as if looking to pick a fight. Blue eyes. Black hair. Pale skin. Still, there was a kindness to the curve of her cheeks and the lines around her mouth and eyes. She looked as if she would drop a spider into the grass rather than crush it.

"The stars."

He followed her eyes. A faultless azure sky swirled into his retina. "It's daytime."

"It doesn't matter. They're there. All the time, they're up there. Looking down on us. I wonder what that's like. They're so far away. We must look like nothing to them, less than nothing."

"It must be like being God."

"Yeah, maybe. Like ants on an anthill. How do you know who to squish?"

"God knows," Erik said, a weight in his stomach. He could feel her gaze on him as he spoke and he met her eye.

"Hopefully," she said. "What's your name?"

"Erik."

"I'm Shprintza. After my grandmother."

"It's pretty."

"I know," she said.

They walked for a time in silence, a hot, stale air hanging around them. Finally, they came to a clearing. Ahead, the column had stopped. Already many of the Jewish women were lying face down in the grass, and as they approached more pushed themselves down.

"What's going on?" Shprintza asked. The translator was yelling in Yiddish. Erik caught a few words. Women cried and sobbed into the soil. Those who would not lower themselves or were too shocked to understand were pushed down.

"Erik, what's happening?"

He turned away, unable to meet her eyes. You're about to die. He might have said. Run, he might have shouted and pushed her away into the woods. He might have done anything. But he didn't. His heart beat against his ribs. He thought so many hearts beating all at once ought to be louder. He thought it ought to mean something.

"Erik?"

"Lie down"

"What?"

"You have to lie down."

She looked at him and tilted her head. "No. I won't"

"Please." He thought he might be sick. His eyes ached.

"Why are they doing this?"

"Please, just—"

"If you're going to kill me, at least have the decency to look me in the eyes."

"I'm not going to—"

"To what? Kill me? Then why are we here?"

"No—"

"Either kill me now, or let me go."

"Please."

"Either kill me now or let me go, Erik," she stepped away.

"No—" He grabbed her arm.

She twisted in his grasp. "Let me go!"

He didn't realize he'd slapped her until she lay on the ground, her legs spread to the side. She looked like someone. How he'd watched his mother lay against the stairs, the moonlight behind his father. Shprintza met his gaze, eyes like hot coals, blood leaching from her lip. He took a step backward. "I didn't mean..." he stammered. "I'm..." She spit blood and glared at him. "I'm," without a word, she rolled onto her stomach and was still, "sorry." It wasn't his father, he knew. That's not why he hit her. People get hit. They don't always hit back. They sometimes hit themselves. He wasn't his father. He had just wanted quiet, like when their voices whipped the air in his ears, like when he heard the body of his mother hit the stairs and looked out to see her in the moonlight and his father. Like when the music or his blood raged in his head and the moth fluttered around the lamp, the sound flaky. He had just wanted quiet.

All at once, the soldiers were standing over the women, their rifles pointed against the base of the skull. Waiting. But it was all happening too fast. Waiting. Waiting for what? He heard someone whistling Wagner, but when he looked he couldn't find who it was. The trees were still.

Everything was still. The grass was still. The sun was still. He stepped up, straddling Shprintza's legs and unshouldered his rifle. Her skin was red and peely where he aimed, just below the hairline, a beauty mark perhaps; it almost looked like a moth. He felt numb, as if he were floating in a pool of water, watching someone else hold the rifle. He thought his hands should shake, but they didn't. He thought he should feel something, anything, but he only felt far away. He understood what Major Ziegler had meant when they spoke together. What do we do when we're given an order we can't obey, he'd asked. He was scared, distracted. It was a choice Erik had replied, but it wasn't, not really. The world shrank to the touch of the metal trigger against his finger. He closed his eyes. It all seemed so simple. Just pull the trigger. Just pull the trigger. Like breathing. Just pull the trigger.

She crawled from between Erik's feet. He didn't stop her. She ran into the woods, and though soldiers fired after her, she survived with only a graze on her left butt cheek that she'd explain while her husband held her close and her children slept in the other room, the stars looking down on them. She would can peaches. She would watch the sunset from her porch. She would live to ninety and die peacefully in her sleep surrounded by grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

But then he opened his eyes and Shprintza lay between his feet, her black hair cascading into the dirt, and someone was whistling Wagner. Commander Kaufman shouted, and the rifles thundered. Erik had never noticed the grass before, the way it bent and straightened in the wind, waving its scrabbly fingers—or he hadn't seen it just like that, golden like fire, lit by the sun. It wasn't anything monumental, his noticing. Beautiful he wanted to say. It didn't change anything. Crows wheeled overhead. Sacks of meat. That's all they were. He let out a breath.

Long after the others fired, Erik stood, his finger against the trigger, shaking, Shprintza breathing beneath him, still alive, her heart flooding her veins, slamming her walls. He could almost hear it, like footsteps, like rain. He wanted it to mean something; he knew it didn't. Shprintza turned her head to look up at him, as if she meant to speak, and in that instant he pulled the trigger and the side of her skull exploded in a shower of viscera and blood, and the soil drank all that she was and all that she could have been.

*There are stars whose light reaches earth
Only as they themselves are lost and are no more.
There are people whose radiance
illuminates their memories
When they themselves are no longer in our midst.
These lights that cause the darkest night to shine
They – THEY light the way for humanity.*

— Hannah Senesh Yesh Kochavim
(There are Stars)

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