



Poems of the Holocaust

In Commemoration of
Holocaust Remembrance Day
April 21, 2020

REMARKS ON HOLOCAUST POETRY

In his Holocaust memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* Primo Levi writes, “There is no word for this offense: the demolition of a man.” There is no word for the demolition of a man, of a human being, because the demolition of a human being is the demolition of the word. Setting out to murder Jewish souls before they destroyed Jewish bodies, the Nazis obliterated the very meaning of a human being. And they did so by undertaking a systematic assault on the word itself. For the life of the soul is rooted in the word.

Holocaust poetry, then, is not only a response to the systematic murder of European Jewry and the calculated destruction of the Jewish soul. More than that, it is a recovery and a mending of the word itself in the aftermath of a radical demolition of the word. As they tore meaning from words, the Nazis created an anti-world of “non-men,” as Primo Levi described the denizens of Auschwitz. In an effort to mend the word by restoring the bond between word and meaning, Holocaust poetry undertakes a mending of the human soul itself.

Here, in this poetry that has emerged from the ashes, ordinary words are charged with extraordinary meaning and silence takes on an unprecedented eloquence. Indeed, what Elie Wiesel once said about prayer applies to poetry as well, particularly to Holocaust poetry: it is the substance of language and the language of silence. Let us therefore fall silent. And listen.

by David Patterson
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1 DEATHFUGUE

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at noon and at morning we drink it at night
we drink it we drink it
we shovel a grave into winds where you lie unconfined
A man dwells in the house he plays with the snakes he is writing
he writes when it darkens to Deutschland your soft golden hair Margarete
he writes it and walks to the house in the glittering starlight he whistles his hounds to him
whistles his jews to him has them shovel a grave in the earth there
he tells us to strike up the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at morning and noonday we drink you at evening
we drink you we drink you
A man dwells in the house he plays with the snakes he's writing
he writes when it darkens to Deutschland your soft golden hair Margarete
your ashen gray hair Shulamith we shovel a grave to the winds where you lie unconfined

He's calling out you over there dig deeper you others start singing and play
he seizes the iron in his belt he swings it his eye is bright blue
you with the shovels stick them down deeper you others play up for the dance
Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon and at morning we drink you at evening
we drink you we drink
a man dwells in the house your soft golden hair Margarete
your ashen gray hair Shulamith he plays with the snakes
he orders them play death more sweetly death is a master from Deutschland
he orders the violins play it more darkly and then you will rise as the smoke in the winds
and then you will have you a grave in the clouds where you lie unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noonday death is a master from Deutschland
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
death is a master from Deutschland his eye is bright blue
with his bullet of lead he hits you he hits and his bullet flies true
a man dwells in the house your soft golden hair Margarete
he's setting his hounds on us grants us a grave in the winds
he plays with his snakes and dreams that death is a master from Deutschland
your soft golden hair Margarete
your ashen gray hair Shulamith

By Paul Celan

Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth & Fred Turner

2 [WINTER]

It's falling, mother, snow in the Ukraine:
The Savior's crown a thousand grains of grief.
Here all my tears reach out to you in vain.
One proud mute glance is all of my relief . . .

We're dying now: why won't you sleep, you huts?
Even this wind slinks round in frightened rags.
Are these the ones, freezing in slag-choked ruts —
whose arms are candlesticks, whose hearts are flags?

I stayed the same in darkneses forlorn:
Will days heal softly, will they cut too sharp?
Among my stars are drifting now the torn
strings of a strident and discordant harp . . .

On it at times a rose-filled hour is tuned.
Expiring: once. Just once, again . . .
What would come, Mother: waking or wound —
if I too sank in snows of the Ukraine?

By Paul Celan
Translated by John Felstiner

3 ASPEN TREE

Aspen tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.
My mother's hair never turned white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.
My fair-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, do you linger at the well?
My soft-voiced mother weeps for all.

Rounded star, you coil the golden loop.
My mother's heart was hurt by lead.

Oaken door, who hove you off your hinge?
My gentle mother cannot return.

By Paul Celan
Translated by John Felstiner

4 TENEBRAE

Near are we, Lord,
near and graspable.

Grasped already, Lord,
clawed into each other, as if
each of our bodies were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Wind-skewed we went there,
went there to bend
over pit and crater.

Went to the water-trough, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It shined.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.

By Paul Celan
Translated by John Felstiner

5 LIKE A BULL

So all my existence that's how I've lived, just like a young bull,
who in the noon heat bored among his gravid satisfied cows
gallops about in circles to show his strength; and as if that
weren't enough, weaves in his play a foamy banner of spittle.
And he shakes his head and he turns, on his horns the dense
air is bursting and under the stamping print of his hoofbeat
the torn grass and mud spatters the terrified meadow.

And so I live still, just like the bull; but look at
him now, he jerks in the midst of the cricketsung field,
sniffing the air. High in the forest peaks he senses
the stag's halt: who listens and snaps away with the wind,
which has just brought hissing the scent of the wolfpack,—
but the bull snorts and doesn't flee as the deer are
fleeing; he fancies that when his hour comes round he'll fight
and fall, and the pack will scatter his bones all over the meadow—
and slowly, sadly, bellows into the buttery air.

Even so will I struggle and so will I die;
still as a sign to posterity the fields will preserve my bones.

August 22, 1933

By Miklós Radnóti

Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth & Frederick Turner

6 FORCED MARCH

Crazy. He stumbles, flops, gets up, and trudges on again.
He moves his ankles and his knees like one wandering pain,
then sallies forth, as if a wing lifted him where he went,
and when the ditch invites him in, he dare not give consent,
and if you were to ask why not? perhaps his answer is
a woman waits, a death more wise, more beautiful than this.
Poor fool, the true believer: for weeks, above the rooves,
but for the scorching whirlwind, nothing lives or moves:
the housewall's lying on its back, the prunetree's smashed and bare;
even at home, when dark comes on, the night is furred with fear.
Ah, if I could believe it! that not only do I bear
what's worth the keeping in my heart, but home is really there;
if it might be!—as once it was, on a veranda old and cool,
where the sweet bee of peace would buzz, prune marmalade would chill,
late summer's stillness sunbathe in gardens half-asleep,
fruit sway among the branches, stark naked in the deep,
Fanni waiting at the fence blonde by its rusty red,
and shadows would write slowly out all the slow morning said—
but still it might yet happen! The moon's so round today!
Friend, don't walk on. Give me a shout and I'll be on my way.

September 15, 1944, Bor

By Miklós Radnóti

Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth & Frederick Turner

7 RAZGLENDICAS* (POSTCARDS)

1.

Rolling from Bulgaria the brutal cannonade
slams at the ranges, to hesitate and fade;
men and beasts and carts and thoughts are jammed into one,
neighing the road rears up, the maned sky will run.
And you're the only constant in the changing and the mess:
you shine on eternal beneath my consciousness;
mute as an angel wondering at the catastrophe,
or the beetle of burial from his hole in a dead tree.

In the mountains. August 30, 1944*

2.

At nine kilometers: the pall of burning
hayrick, homestead, farm.
At the field's edge: the peasants, silent, smoking
pipes against the fear of harm.
Here: a lake ruffled only by the step
of a tiny shepherdess,
where a white cloud is what the ruffled sheep
drink in their lowliness.

Cservenka. October 6, 1944*

3.

The oxen drool saliva mixed with blood.
Each one of us is urinating blood.
The squad stands about in knots, stinking, mad.
Death, hideous, is blowing overhead.

Mohács. October 24, 1944*

4.

I fell beside him and his corpse turned over,
tight already as a snapping string.
Shot in the neck. "And that's how you'll end too,"
I whispered to myself; "Lie still; no moving.
Now patience flowers in death." Then I could hear
"Der springt noch auf," above, and very near.
Blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear.

Szentkirályszabadja. October 31, 1944*

By Miklós Radnóti

Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth & Frederick Turner

8 THERE IS A LAST, SOLITARY COACH

There is a last, solitary coach about to leave.
Let us get in and go,
For it won't wait.

I have seen young girls going softly
With sad faces
That looked ashamed and sorry
Like purple sunsets.

And chubby, pink children
Who went simply
Because they were called.

And I've seen men
Who stepped proud and straight through the world's streets,
Whose large eyes went ranging
Far and wide,
They too got in calmly
And left.

And we are the last.
Day is declining.
The last, solitary coach is about to leave.
Let us too get in quietly
And go,
For it won't wait.

By David Vogel
Translated by A. C. Jacobs

9 A CARTLOAD OF SHOES

The wheels hurry onward, onward.
What do they carry?
They carry a cartload
Of shivering shoes.

The wagon like a canopy
in the evening light;
The shoes – clustered
Like people in a dance.

A wedding, a holiday?
Has something blinded my eyes?
The shoes – I seem
To recognize them.

The heels go tapping
With a clatter and a din.
From our old Vilna streets
They drive us to Berlin.

I should not ask
But something tears at my tongue
Shoes, tell me the truth
Where are they, the feet?

The feet from these boots
With button like dew –
And here, where is the body
And there, where is the bride?

Where is the child
To fill those shoes
Why has the bride
Gone barefoot?

Through the slippers and the boots
I see those my mother used to wear
She kept them for the Sabbath
Her favourite pair.

And the heels go tapping:
With a clatter and a din,
From our old Vilna streets
They drive us to Berlin.

By Abraham Sutzkever
Translated by David G. Roskies

10 O THE CHIMNEYS

*And though after my skin worms destroy this
body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. — Job 19:26*

O the chimneys
On the ingeniously devised habitations of death
When Israel's body drifted as smoke
Through the air –
Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,
A star that turned black
Or was it a ray of sun?

O the chimneys!
Freedomway for Jeremiah and Job's dust –
Who devised you and laid stone upon stone
The road for refugees of smoke?

O the habitations of death,
Invitingly appointed
For the host of who used to be a guest –
O you fingers
Laying the threshold
Like a knife between life and death –

O you chimneys,
O you fingers
And Israel's body as smoke through the air!

By Nelly Sachs
Translated by Michael Hamburger

11 O THE NIGHT OF THE WEEPING CHILDREN!

O the night of the weeping children!
O the night of the children branded for death!
Sleep may not enter here.
Terrible nursemaids
Have usurped the place of mothers,
Have tautened their tendons with the false death,
Sown it on to the walls and into the beams –
Everywhere it is hatched in the nests of horror.
Instead of mother's milk, panic suckles those little ones.

Yesterday Mother still drew
Sleep toward them like a white moon,
There was the doll with cheeks derouged by kisses
In one arm,
The stuffed pet, already
Brought to life by love,
In the other –
Now blows the wind of dying,
Blows the shifts over the hair
That no one will comb again.

By Nelly Sachs
Translated by Michael Hamburger

12 TESTIMONY

No no: they definitely were
human beings: uniforms, boots.
How to explain? They were created
in the image.

I was a shade.
A different creator made me.

And he in his mercy left nothing of me that would die.
And I fled to him, rose weightless, blue,
forgiving – I would even say: apologizing –
smoke to omnipotent smoke
without image or likeness.

By Dan Pagis
Translated by Stephen Mitchell

13 ALREADY EMBRACED BY THE ARM
OF HEAVENLY SOLACE

Already embraced by the arm of heavenly solace
The insane mother stands
With the tatters of her torn mind
With the charred tinders of her burnt mind
Burying her dead child,
Burying her lost light,
Twisting her hands into urns,
Filling them with the body of her child from the air,
Filling them with his eyes, his hair from the air,
And with his fluttering heart –

Then she kisses the air-born being
And dies!

By Nelly Sachs
Translated by Michael Roloff

14 BABII YAR*

No monument stands over Babii Yar.
A drop sheer as a crude gravestone.
I am afraid.

 Today I am as old in years
as all the Jewish people.
Now I seem to be
 a Jew.

Here I plod through ancient Egypt.
Here I perish crucified, on the cross,
and to this day I bear the scars of nails.
I seem to be

 Dreyfus.
The Philistine
 is both informer and judge.
I am behind bars.

 Beset on every side.
Hounded,
 spat on,
 slandered.
Squealing, dainty ladies in flounced Brussels lace
stick their parasols into my face.
I seem to be then

 a young boy in Byelostok.
Blood runs, spilling over the floors.
The barroom rabble-rousers
give off a stench of vodka and onion.
A boot kicks me aside, helpless.
In vain I plead with these pogrom bullies.
While they jeer and shout,

 ‘Beat the Yids. Save Russia!’
Some grain-marketeer beats up my mother.
O my Russian people!

 I know
 you
are international to the core.
But those with unclean hands
have often made a jingle of your purest name.
I know the goodness of my land.

* One of the five Yevtushenko poems on which Dmitri Shostakovich based his Thirteenth Symphony. Babii Yar: Ravine in the suburbs of Kiev where Nazi forces murdered 33,000 Soviet Jews. For a long time there was no monument at the site of the atrocity.

16 WITHOUT JEWS

Without Jews, no Jewish God.
If, God forbid, we should quit
this world, Your poor tent's light
would out.
Abraham knew You in a cloud:
since then, You are the flame
of our face, the rays
our eyes blaze,
our likeness
whom we formed:
in every land and town
a stranger.
Shattered Jewish skulls,
shards of the divine,
smashed, shamed pots—
there were Your light-bearing vessels,
Your tangibles,
Your portents of miracle!
Now count these heads
by the millions of the dead.
Around You the stars go dark.
Our memory of You, obscured.
Soon Your reign will close.
Where Jews sowed,
a scorched waste.

Dews weep
on dead grass,
The dream raped,
reality raped,
both blotted out.
Whole congregations sleep,
the babies, the women,
the young, the old.
Even Your pillars, Your rocks,
the tribe of Your saints,*
sleep their dead
eternal sleep.

Who will dream You?
Remember You?
Deny You?
Yearn after You?
Who will flee You,
only to return
over a bridge of longing?

No end to night
for an extinguished people.
Heaven and earth wiped out.
Your tent void of light.
Flicker of the Jews' last hour.
Soon, Jewish God,
Your eclipse.

By Jacob Glatstein
Translated by Cynthia Ozick

* Refers to the legend of the last 36 Just Men
for whose sake the world is saved.

17 SHEMÁ*

You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

By Primo Levi
Translated by Ruth Feldman & Brian Swann

*This poem is based on the principal Jewish prayer, 'Hear, [Shemá] O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.' (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41). Primo Levi reworks some of its major ideas, making it possible to incorporate the experience of the Holocaust into the Jewish religion.

18 YOU ARE A SIGN ON MY DOOR-
POST

For my dead father

I haven't any memories,
and if I do I don't hold onto them.
I don't prowl sniffing in the cemeteries,
I'm not moved by organic chemistry.

But sometimes, when November comes,
and it gets foggy, and behind the clammy pane
I find myself gasping for lack of air,
—the place your body lies unknown—
tracking some kind of vegetative memory
one of your gestures oozes, oozes up.
I feel how in your long and nervous fingers
a thermos turns, a bad can opener,
a pocket knife, a backpack with an open mouth,
one pair of undershorts, a prayer book,
and taking on the weightless weight your back
creakingly finds it still can carry it.
I feel you're setting out, the well-dressed wayfarer:
you never take the trip, only set out on it.
You laugh, you look back, you are only thirty-eight;
I'll be back soon, you nod, and point—
next day would have been your birthday—
and whimpering inwardly, like a picture by Mednyánszky,
you wave—and how you wave!

Your sign is on my doorpost: you cling on yet;
Ferdinand Bridge, the palm-sized grating,
the slushy road, the inanition, crazed grass-eating,
all of them only lucubration,
for I lied. I keep on seeing you;
under that strangling November sky
I'm with you as you start, you're breathing and it's you,
your tears that choke my throat, I leave them as they are,
and up above, there where it flew,
that slender cigarette knocked out of your mouth
burns through the skin, on a star.

1963

By Ágnes Gergely

Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth & Fred Turner

Poem 1:

From an unpublished translation by Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Professor Fred Turner

Poems 2, 3, and 4:

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