

FOUR POEMS



C.K. Williams

AFTER AUSCHWITZ

We'd wanted to make France
but by dusk we knew we wouldn't,
so in a Bavarian town
just off the Autobahn,
we found a room, checked in,
and went out to look around.

The place was charming: hushed,
narrow, lamp-lit streets,
half-timbered houses,
a dark-stoned church,
and medieval bridges
over a murmuring river.

I didn't sleep well, though,
and in the morning, early,
I took another stroll
and was surprised to realize
that all of it, houses,
bridges, all except

as far as I could tell
the sleeping church,
were deft
replicas of what
they must have been before
the war, before the Allied
bombers flattened them.

At Auschwitz, there was nothing
I hadn't imagined beforehand.
I'd been through it in my mind
so much, so often, I felt

only unutterably weary.
All that shocked me was

to find the barracks and bleak
paths unoccupied,
and the gas and torture chambers,
and the crematoria; so many silent spaces,
bereft, like schools in summer.

Now, in a pleasant square,
I came on a morning market;
farmers, tents and trucks,
much produce, flowers,
the people prosperous,
genial, ruddy, chatty,

and it was then there rose
before me again the barbed
wire and the bales of hair,
the laboratories and
the frozen ash. I thought
of Primo Levi, reciting

Dante to the all but dead,
then, I don't know why,
of the Jewish woman, Masha,
of whom Levi tells
how, when she'd escaped,
been informed on, caught,

and now was to be hanged
before the other prisoners,
someone called out to her,
"Masha, are you all right?"
and she'd answered, answered, answered,
"I'm always all right."

A village like a stage set,
a day's drive back
what other place which always
now everywhere on earth
will be the other place
from where one finds oneself.

Not risen from its ruins
but caught in them forever,
it demands of us how
we'll situate this so
it doesn't sunder us
between forgivenesses

we have no right to grant
and a reticence
perhaps malignant, heard
by nothing that exists,
yet which endures, a scar,
a broken cry, within.

ICE

That astonishing thing that happens when you crack a needle-awl
into a block of ice:
the way a perfect section through it crazes into gleaming fault-
lines, fractures, facets;
dazzling silvery deltas that in one too-quick-to-capture instant
madly complicate the cosmos of its innards.
Radiant now with spines and spikes, aggressive barbs of glittering
light, a treasure hoard of light,
when you stab it again it comes apart in nearly equal segments,
both faces grainy, gnawed at, dull.

An icehouse was a dark, low place of raw, unpainted wood,
always dank and black with melting ice.
There was sawdust and sawdust's tantalizing, half-sweet odor,
which, so cold, seemed to pierce directly to the brain.
You'd step onto a low-roofed porch, someone would materialize,
take up great tongs and with precise, placating movements like a
lion-tamer's slide an ice-block from its row.

Take the awl yourself now, thrust, and when the block splits do it
again, yet again;
watch it disassemble into smaller fragments, crystal after fissured
crystal.
Or if not the puncturing pick, try to make a metaphor, like
Kafka's frozen sea within:

take into your arms the cake of actual ice, make a figure of its
ponderous inertness,
of how its quickly wetting chill against your breast would frighten
you and make you let it drop.

Imagine how even if it shattered and began to liquefy
the hope would still remain that if you quickly gathered up the
slithery, perversely skittish chips,
they might be refrozen and the mass reconstituted, with precious
little of its brilliance lost,
just this lucent shimmer on the rough, raised grain of water-rot
ten floor,
just this single drop, as sweet and warm as blood, evaporating on
your tongue.

NOT SOUL

Not soul,
not that tired tale anyway about preliterate
people believing cameras would extract
their spiritual essence, nothing so obvious,

but what is it I feel has been stripped,
stolen, negated, when I look out across
this valley of old farms, mist, trees,
a narrow, steep-banked brook,

and have the thought take me that all this
is a kind of reservation, a museum,
of land, plants, houses, even people—
a woman now, crossing a field—
that it all endures only by the happenstance
of no one having decided to “develop” it,
bring in a highway from the turnpike,
construct subdivisions, parking lots, malls?

Not soul,
soul is what religions believed subsumes
experience and will, what philosophers
surmised compels us to beauty and virtue,

is what even the most skeptical still save
for any resolving description of inner life,
this intricately knotted compound
which resists any less ambiguous locution.

How imagine so purely human a term
applying to things, to the rushing brook
which follows the slant of soil beneath it,
the mist functioned by the warmth of air,

even the houses to be torn down or crowded
into anonymity according to patterns
which have no discernible logic, certainly
nothing one mind might consider sufficient?

Not soul,
but still, anthropomorphism or not,
the very shape and hue and texture of reality,
the sheen of surface, depth of shadow,

seem unfocused now, hollowed out,
as though the pact between ourselves and world
that lets the world stand for more than itself
were violated, so that everything I see,

the lowering clouds, the tempered light,
and even all I only bring to mind, is dulled,
despoiled, as though consciousness no longer
could distill such truths within itself,

as though a gel of sadness had been interposed
between me and so much loveliness
so much at risk, as though a tear
had ineradicably fixed upon the eye.

THE NAIL

Some dictator or other had gone into exile, and now reports were
coming about his regime,
the usual crimes, torture, false imprisonment, cruelty and
corruption, but then a detail:
that the way his henchmen had disposed of enemies was by
hammering nails into their skulls.
Horror, then, what mind does after horror, after that first feeling
that you'll never catch your breath,
mind imagines-how not be annihilated by it?-the preliminary tap,
feels it in the tendons of the hand,
feels the way you do with your nail when you're fixing something,
making something, shelves, a bed;
the first light tap to set the slant, and then the slightly harder tap,
to embed the tip a little more...

No, no more: this should be happening in myth, in stone, or paint,
not in reality, not here;
it should be an emblem of itself, not itself, something that would
mean, not really have to happen,
something to go out, expand in implication from that unmoved
mass of matter in the breast;
as in the image of an anguished face, in grief for us, not us as us, us
as in a myth, a moral tale,
a way to tell the truth that grief is limitless, a way to tell us we must
always understand
it's we who do such things, we who set the slant, embed the tip, lift
the sledge and drive the nail,
drive the nail which is the axis upon which turns the brutal human
world upon the world.