Arbeit Macht Frei

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I cannot sing this place.

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

I try to make a song here.

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

My voice is no vandal.

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

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

I do not always remember.

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

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

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

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

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

(How can I sing these words?)

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

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