

I. Precipice

“It doesn’t have to be beautiful or good, just true,” said Rothman.

Primo Levi spoke truth. Unguarded, disarmed, engaged, I saw through the pages and was transported to him. I stood next to him, blisters pushing against shoes far too large for me, breathing in the sooty air and flinching in the cold. When I turned to look at him, I remembered that I didn’t speak his language. He spoke a few words to me, then everything melted and merged into a wash of gray and brown.

Now I stand next to Art, chest expanding then contracting suddenly as I inhale his cigarette smoke. He is speaking to his father—again, I don’t speak their language. Art gestures with his cigarette and Vladek turns away, waving his hand for emphasis. They don’t see me, and I rest in invisibility. I know in a few years, Vladek’s heart will fail. Where is Absolution? Where is Mother?

Everything, everything I believe in, and everything I do not, will exist when I am gone. There will be memories, certainly—photographs. I hope to leave the world old, a privilege not granted to all. I think of hunger—it doesn’t plague me. The wind screams outside my window, unable to reach me. I’m nestled in my own bed when I read of death and destruction.

II. Hurtling Uncontrollably Toward Something

Black milk of morning, the night seemed e n d l e s s

She was pointing somewhere in the distance, always the same place

“Fire! I see a fire!”

Silence fell again.

On my birthday, the Germans walked, walked into Holland

A very tall man

He said, “Black Crows — Black Crows have

Invaded

Our country—”

My forehead

Was covered

In cold sweat

Black milk of morning we drink you at night

And she said,

“Quick, go!”

And he said,

“Don’t breathe.”

Into the cattle wagons, they were loaded with people

(in the dark)

Flames going up into the sky

We drink you at dusk time.

We drink and drink.

Primo Levi said, “Dawn came on us like a betrayer; it seemed as though the new sun rose as an ally of our enemies to assist in our destruction.”

Light made into the ultimate traitor—a strange concept.

In my notebook, Flaming Hand came to life, my drawing of the burning of the Jewish people.

Flaming Hand is the word of the survivors digested by my head and manifested on paper.

Flaming Hand is the culmination of weeks of deep introspection.

Flaming Hand is perceived pain.

Flaming Hand speaks for me.

III. It Has No End

The Holocaust has not ended.

It has transformed from a humanitarian crisis to a black mark on the history of the planet, but it has not ended.

Not for Primo Levi.

Not for Vladek Spiegelman.

Not for Elie Wiesel.

Not for Ruth Kluger.

It stops for no one, it thinks of nothing. It has swallowed up other peoples. It devours bodies in Syria, Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Turkey. It bites at the heels of survivors.

It has no end, but perhaps it will eventually swallow itself.

My brain simplifies a horrible and abstract concept, boiling it down to a single bare concept. If only they had just looked at each other's hands. Only the hands. Large, small, worn, soft, young, old, they all had fingerprints, the mark of humanity.

And then, of all the people to speak of hope and simple faith, the survivors often do. Shoulders relax, feet go out to rest on a stool, heads lay down into pillows and features soften into sleep. I sit in my bed and I think soft. I think soothing. I calm the raw thoughts that come along with knowledge of suffering. The Holocaust does not end, but perhaps it gets a little softer around the edges. It speaks through decades with the voices of the survivors. It rests on our shoulders—I feel it on mine now.

Let Primo Levi speak this time, he says it best.

“I was thinking that life was beautiful and would be beautiful again...”