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INSIDE DACHAU

1. big lies, small lies

Having lied to our German hosts about our plans for the day, Diane and I visited Dachau instead of searching for rare albums in Munich. Only a dozen visitors walked through the camp because we were months away from tourist season. The camp was austere. The museum was simple.

Once there, I had expected to feel simple emotions: hate, anger, sorrow. That was my plan. I would write poetry about how the season of winter found a perfect home in cold Dachau. I would be a Jewish man who died in the camp. I would be the ideal metaphor. Munich

would be a short train ride away from hell. Munich would take the blame. I thought it would all be simple but there were no easy answers inside the camp. The poems still took their forms, but my earlier plans seemed so selfish. What could I say about Dachau when I had never suffered through any season

inside its walls? Could I imagine a season of ash and snow, of flames and shallow graves? Munich is only a short train ride away from Dachau. If you can speak some German, it is a simple journey which requires coins and no other plans for the day. We lied about visiting the camp

to our German hosts, who always spoke of the camp as truthfully as they spoke about the seasons. Dachau is still Dachau. Our hosts have made no plans to believe otherwise. As we drove through Munich our hosts pointed out former Nazi homes, simply and quickly. "We are truly ashamed of Dachau,"

Mikael said, "but what about all the Dachaus in the United States? What about the death camps in your country?" Yes, Mikael, you ask simple questions which are ignored, season after season. Mikael, I'm sorry we lied about Munich and Dachau. I'm sorry we lied about our plans.

Inside Dachau, you might believe winter will never end. You may lose faith in the change of seasons because some of the men who built the camps still live in Argentina, in Washington, in Munich. They live simple lives. They share bread with sons and daughters who have come to understand the master plan.

2. history as the home movie

It begins and ends with ash, though we insist on ignoring the shared fires in our past. We attempt to erase our names from the list that begins and ends with ash.

We ignore the war until we are the last standing, until we are the last to persist in denial, as we are shipped off to camps where we all are stripped, and our dark bodies lit by the cruel light of those antique Jew-skinned lamps. Decades after Dachau fell, we stand in mist that begins and ends with ash.

3. commonly asked questions

Why are we here? What have we come to see?
 What do we need to find behind the doors?
 Are we searching for an apology

from the ghosts of unrepentant Nazis?
 We pay the entrance fee at the front door.
 Why are we here? What have we come to see?

The actors have moved on to the next scene
and set: furnace, shovel, and soot-stained door.

Are we searching for an apology

from all the Germans who refused to see
the ash falling in front of their locked doors?
Why are we here? What have we come to see

that cannot be seen in other countries?
Every country hides behind a white door.
Are we searching for an apology

from the patient men who've hidden the keys?
Listen: a door is a door is a door.
Why are we here? What have we come to see?
Are we searching for an apology?

4. the american indian holocaust museum

What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.
We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

We too could stack the shoes of our dead and fill a city
to its thirteenth floor. What did you expect us to become?
What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

We are the great-grandchildren of Sand Creek and Wounded Knee.
We are the veterans of the Indian wars. We are the sons
and daughters of the walking dead. We have lost everyone.
What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.
We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

5. songs from those who love the flames

We start the fires
on the church spire:
ash, ash.

(stanza continued)

We build tall pyres
from children's choirs:
ash, ash.

We watch flames gyre
and burn the liars:
ash, ash.

We watch flames gyre
from children's choirs:
ash, ash.

We start the fires
and burn the liars:
ash, ash.

We build tall pyres
on the church spire.
ash, ash.

We build tall pyres
and burn the liars:
ash, ash.

We watch flames gyre
on the church spire:
ash, ash.

We start the fires
from children's choirs:
ash, ash.

6. after we are free

If I were Jewish, how would I mourn the dead?
I am Spokane. I wake.

If I were Jewish, how would I remember the past?
I am Spokane. I page through the history books.

If I were Jewish, how would I find the joy to dance?
I am Spokane. I drop a quarter into the jukebox.

If I were Jewish, how would I find time to sing?
I am Spokane. I sit at the drum with all of my cousins.

If I were Jewish, how would I fall in love?
I am Spokane. I listen to an Indian woman whispering.

If I were Jewish, how would I feel about ash?
I am Spokane. I offer tobacco to all of my guests.

If I were Jewish, how would I tell the stories?
I am Spokane. I rest my hands on the podium.

If I were Jewish, how would I sleep at night?
I am Spokane. I keep the television playing until dawn.

If I were Jewish, how would I find my home?
I am Spokane. I step into the river and close my eyes.

7. below freezing

Dachau was so cold I could see my breath
so I was thankful for my overcoat.
I have nothing new to say about death.

Each building sat at right angles to the rest.
Around each corner, I expected ghosts.
Dachau was so cold I could see my breath.

Everything was clean, history compressed
into shoes, photographs, private notes.
I have nothing new to say about death.

I wanted to weep. I wanted to rest
my weary head as the ash mixed with snow.
Dachau was so cold I could see my breath.

I am not a Jew. I was just a guest
in that theater which will never close.
I have nothing new to say about death.

I wonder which people will light fires next
and which people will soon be turned to smoke.
Dachau was so cold I could see my breath.
I have nothing new to say about death.