

The invisible bodies

by Raven Avery

You need an eastern horizon and it will fade blue, purple, pink, back to blue always, every tint of light following you home or meeting you halfway or watching you wait. Berlin architecture, the mountains of your mother's house, the merciless plane of northern California and the curve of I-5 all cut the colors to the jagged shapes of living, hold the sky in the belly of a valley and push it over peaks. It is the same through windows and over shoulders, no sunrise more or less amazing to me in Europe than from a trailer park in or college campus, and beyond the colors it is this consistency that is the true beauty, that has true weight.

I start feeling better at Buchenwald. Bland brown bread, unbroken sun and walking slowly stops my stomach from turning. On a field of stones I trace black gravel rectangles that mark concentration camp sleeping spaces. I'm overwhelmed.

It's impossible to define any one feeling: you stand in silence, surrounded by strangers, and the sky expands in more shades of warm, clean blue than you've ever seen. You wonder if, maybe forty years ago, another person stood in this place, breathed this air and watched the condensation in the sky pass the fences, the trees, over the ground trampled with pain and death. But before you really wonder, you force a denial: No person ever stood here, where I am, and looked out to this horizon, breathing this air. It is oppressively material to know that another life existed in the space you now occupy, a body pushed prematurely into history. If events could be deleted at will, you could breathe in sync with the invisible bodies of history, unseparated by time or distance.

A month later, mid-November, it is my birthday and we are at another concentration camp. Rain rips our paper maps and silence separate the class, but we make fleeting eye contact that feigns we are troubled only by the holocaust experience and oblivious to the rain. What are our troubles compared to those of the victims we study? I hurry into a reconstructed bunk and browse an archival

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exhibit blindly, vaguely comprehending that these letters, shoes and photographs are artifacts of lives and deaths, that I am separated from the reality of history by only time and glass cases.

A date hand-written on yellow paper brakes my idle observations. Coincidence arrests me: November 17, which has belonged to me since 1983, is suddenly blown apart to new meaning. It becomes the birthday of a German Jew named Leo Krebbs, scribbled here on Nazi paperwork, laminated and displayed. I think, had she not been killed in the place I am standing, we could both celebrate today. Would her friends take her out? Would they buy her drinks and would she dance with them? I can't ask these specifics yet because I am too stuck by the strangeness, and when I read that the camp she went to was Ravensbrucke, I'm out of breath completely.

You think you could be desensitized with years of education on atrocities, ideologies, methodologies, characters, death tolls, reactions and excuses. Eventually you'll have absorbed it all, one student can only be so horrified. But even comprehending causes and effects, facts and ideas, you are still struck by the details. And the details are endless, the identities, bodies and stories countless.

When we consider something huge, understanding grows inside us like flesh in our bellies; it forms bones, a spine, a mind of its own. The body of stories gets heavy and hungry, wants to escape the comfort of our skin and be known outside us. We carry it through the world, collecting details rapidly. I watch the sunrise from the S-Bahn, falling asleep; comparing my pace with the rise and fall of the sky, it's inconceivable that I move more slowly than the earth. On a train or from my window, the shifting light is slow, silent breathing. I am not spiritual or quixotic; I don't find god in the sunrise or commune with nature; I am simply reassured knowing no trauma is enough to stutter the spin of the Earth.