

Painting:



Name: Susan Harmon Title: The Waking #2 Size: 22"x30" Media: Mixed/Paper

“...Four A.M.
'Raus! Raus!'

Roll off the bunk. Stand in line to pee. Get a splash of tea. Step into the dark. Wait on the camp road. Stand for roll call. Get counted. The sun rises. Get counted. Get in line behind Emma. March out to the fields. Work until they say ‘Halt!’ Get soup. Sit down for a moment. Get up. Get in line behind Emma. March back to the fields. Work until they say ‘Halt!’ March in neat rows of five back towards... Wait! We’ve turned. We are moving away from Auschwitz.¹

Voices murmur through our ranks. We march. This is a change to our routine. The unknown is dangerous. Eyes vigilant, senses alert, we march away from Auschwitz, away from the walls and watchtowers. The sun sets. There are fences and more barbed wire towering before us. We march under a different gate with the same sign, ARBEIT MACHT FREI We are not fooled. ...We are lost. This is Birkenau.”

⁷ “August 5-10 [1942]... The women’s section at Auschwitz I is moved to Section B-1a in Birkenau’ (Rittner and Roth, 29). ‘Birkenau was a swamp fenced off by electrified wire. No roads whatsoever, no paths in between the blocks.... March to mid-August 1942... about 17,000 women prisoners, most of them Jews, arrived at Auschwitz. A large number of them (probably about 5,000) perished before the transfer of women to the camp at Birkenau’ (Strzelecka, 401, 394).”

I feel a strong emotional response when reading this text. At first, the choppy sentence structure without descriptions or adjectives connotes monotony, a boring routine, there is nothing new. No change, stagnant forever. When the text takes an abrupt turn, the routine is upset, the monotony broken. It is exciting at first. My interest is peaked as to the reason for the break in this routine. Yet soon I feel anxious, and afraid much like the prisoners must have felt. I am confused. I don't know what is going to happen now. It seems as if nothing is going to be the same, but then I am brought back to the harsh reality of another camp, a place much worse than the one before. All hope is lost.

Dreariness also drips from this painting. The lack of complex color conveys monotony, gray everywhere with black shapes lining up as if in an ordered drill. Crisp shapes instill a sense of foreboding danger. The shapes appear tormented as they are led to something terrible, they are shadowy and huddled being led to slaughter.

The language used by the author is curious. There are no thoughts in the words only actions, as if the prisoners have been programmed to do these tasks like machines. There are many short compressed words, such as get, wait, stand, work, and march. Like commands one would give to a dog. These commands appear to be deep seated in the prisoners' psyche. There are no words longer than seven letters in the first section of the text. Such flowery language does not exist in Auschwitz. The painting reflects this as well, showing no bright colors, only shades of grey and black. There are no distinctions, only a dark grey mass.

The words in the first section also lack description of context, as if the direction is presumed. There can be no possible deviation from the routine. But in the second section, this falls away. The cycle is broken, and Rena is awakened from her sleepwalking for a short time and aware of her surroundings, the words grow longer as uncertainty abounds in Rena's mind. There is deep description now; the routine cannot keep them unaware any longer. They could tune out the world before, but now, they have no escape from the devastating reality that they are again "lost." The prisoners are pushed to feel again, they can no longer continue to shut out the world to cope. The sanctity of their routine allowed them to turn off their emotions. To become robotic would allow them to survive another day. To feel every day in Auschwitz would have been immensely difficult. To see death all around you, day in day out, is enough to drive most people to run to the electric fences, thus ending their misery through assistance from their all too eager captors.

The first section abounds with repetition, like commands. Get is used many times, describing the tedium of proceeding in the life that they are living in. It also depersonalizes the prisoners. They are not human beings anymore; they are robots with their programmed actions. The footnote tells the reader how amazing it is that Rena has survived thus far, as roughly a third of the women that have arrived at Auschwitz died before they were transferred to Birkenau. The footnote also describes Birkenau as "...a

swamp fenced off by electrified wire.” The footnote appears earlier than the regular text’s mention. When in the course of reading the text you eventually reach the name of the camp there is already a picture in your mind. This allows the reader to visualize the setting without subjective distortion from Rena.

The painting shows slashes as people, nameless, faceless, and mere numbers on a register to their captors, there can be no identity, no humanization in Auschwitz. They could also be shown to be moving, the slashes instead being movement, a quick huddled march to an uncertain destination. The group is moving in anguish, as the slashes are not perfectly straight in the least; there is uncertainty, fear, and doubt. I believe this painting was done with oil crayon but it could just as easily be paint. There is no texture to the image itself, smudges smooth away any wrinkles on the paper. The background is an unappealing brown, perhaps signifying the ever present filth all throughout the death camps.

The style of writing in the second section changes abruptly, no more repetition, no more monotony. The words have become descriptive; the sentences are no longer short, they become long drawn out thought processes. Uncertainty grips Rena, her grasp on reality tightens, she knows it is not a dream; it is as real as it has ever been.

A smattering of German is present in the text as well as in the rest of the book. One example is the very repetitive *Raus! Raus!* (Get up! Get up!) occurring every day ceaselessly, the lack of translation adds to the realism of the memoir, dictating what the prisoners actually heard. There is also the mention of the infamous “welcome” sign adorned on both camps, *ARBIET MACHT FREI*; work will make you free. The prisoners know this is the cruelest of lies, they will not ever be free, and they will work forever or die. This also represents a macabre “joke” of the Nazis, almost snickering at the doomed souls that walk through that gate.

This is no joke though. The footnote reminds us of what Rena could not have known—how many women were actually in camp, how many women had already died and what day it was. The historical context provided by this footnote makes the black lines all the more real. We simply cannot escape Rena’s truth. We must wake to it, as the painting’s title forces us to “wake”. We must bear witness.

Works Cited

Gelissen, Rena Kornreich, and Heather Dune Macadam. *Rena’s Promise*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Print.

Harmon, Susan. *The Waking #2*. Mixed Media. 2007.