

Edward Hirsch

Paul Celan: A Grave And Mysterious Sentence

(Paris, 1948)

It's daybreak and I wish I could believe
In a rain that will wash away the morning
That is just about to rise behind the smokestacks
On the other side of the river, other side
Of nightfall. I wish I could forget the slab
Of darkness that always fails, the memories
That flood through the window in a murky light.

But now it is too late. Already the day
Is a bowl of thick smoke filling up the sky
And swallowing the river, covering the buildings
With a sickly, yellow film of sperm and milk.
Soon the streets will be awash with little bright
Patches of oblivion on their way to school,
Dark briefcases of oblivion on their way to work.

Soon my small apartment will be white and solemn
Like a blank page held up to a blank wall,
A secret whispered into an empty closet. But
This is a secret which no one else remembers
Because it is stark and German, like the silence,
Like the white fire of daybreak that is burning
Inside my throat. If only I could stamp it out!

But think of smoke and ashes. An ominous string
Of railway cars scrawled with a dull pencil
Across the horizon at dawn. A girl in pigtails
Saying, "Soon you are going to be erased."
Imagine thrusting your head into a well
And crying for help in the wrong language,
Or a deaf mute shouting into an empty field.

So don't talk to me about flowers, those blind
Faces of the dead thrust up out of the ground

In bright purples and blues, oranges and reds.
 And don't talk to me about the gold leaves
 Which the trees are shedding like an extra skin:
 They are handkerchiefs pressed over the mouths
 Of the dead to keep them quiet. It's true:

Once I believed in a house asleep, a childhood
 Asleep. Once I believed in a mother dreaming
 About a pair of giant iron wings growing
 Painfully out of the shoulders of the roof
 And lifting us into away-from-here-and-beyond.
 Once I even believed in a father calling out
 Names in the dark, restless and untransfigured.

But what did we know then about the smoke
 That was already beginning to pulse from trains,
 To char our foreheads, to transform their bodies
 Into two ghosts billowing from a huge oven?
 What did we know about a single gray strand
 Of barbed wire knotted slowly and tightly
 Around their necks? We didn't know anything then.

And now here is a grave and mysterious sentence
 Finally written down, carried out long ago:
 At last I have discovered that the darkness
 Is a solitary night train carrying my parents
 Across a field of dead stumps and wild flowers
 Before disappearing on the far horizon,
 Leaving nothing much in its earthly wake

But a stranger standing at the window
 Suddenly trying to forget his childhood,
 To forget a milky black trail of smoke
 Slowly unravelling in the distance
 Like a victory-flag of ashes, to forget
 The hard clarity of another day
 Forever breaking behind the smokestacks.