

The Census · *William Heyen*

Something happened: this is history, of course.
But how to feel it, and who cares?
Example: November 17th, 1943, at Terezin,
day of the infamous census, the SS inventing
a need to know how many Jews they had,
herding maybe 40,000 into a muddy field
to wait all day without food or water. Planes
circled overhead. Machine guns guarded the edges,
an evening of shrieking children. At midnight,
the Jews are ordered back to barracks,
never mind 300 dead as the cold mud. . . .
We have heard this before. We even have a painting,
The Census, by Leo Haas, filled with darkness
and the silence whereby/wherein we witness.

I have read this twice, this history. Here,
in my own words, the same Holocaust problem,
and luck. No one, never mind me, can quite catch it,
not even those surviving that field can feel it,
not even now as they trace numbers on their wrists,
not even though we cry, as we do. And we don't truly
want to, unless we want to die. I, for one,
write this from a safe place, the green woods
darkening around me with what history can do, yes,
but safely. November as I write, yes,
bringing these memories on again,
but I am warm here, and can leave. Even Terezin
recedes, relentless, gray milk of the afternoon,
of grandma's hair. This is the census:
the lost are too many, and are lost.

We strain to, or say so, but cannot quite remember.
What about the mid-January 1945 forced march
of 64,000 prisoners across Poland from Auschwitz
to the camp whose name curses a beech wood?
Fifty thousand died. We want to live. Who
ever wanted to know the truth about transports
to the East from Terezin? Those who knew they

might be chosen the next day, tried
to sleep, or hum music, or pray. . . .
Still, it was November, just a trace of snow in that field
where Israel waited to be counted in milky light.
Overcast, and planes circling like ravens.

So, you and I are still alive, or are we? We know
what happened at Terezin seventeen November
1943. This is close enough. We
cannot kill the guards, though we might wish to.
Most moved away, died natural deaths, or have retired.
We cannot take the prisoners' places,
or promise the dead that that field will
not be used that way again. But Leo Haas is
there, and the next day will paint the field of Jews.
Now, I have his painting in a book, can turn to it
as often as I want to, which won't be often.
Will *you* go out of *your* way to look for it? We
make do. We do what we can, or want to.
Each day numbers us further away,
unless history circles closer, as it may.

We change pronouns, and tenses.
We change our names, or say them until they wear away.
We live. We walk from the field at Terezin.
Even those who make history
shovelling corpses into ovens
sleep, and will not/cannot feel their actions.
Do I follow me? Who wants to hunker down
in that field again? Why live there
when we can live more easily in history? . . .

Still, now, no matter where I've talked to,
I want to show you, to say
"here, here it was, here." And you would like,
as long as you are passing time here,
to be led there, where they were, in threadbare
coats, or coatless, some shoeless. Cold enough
for the prisoners' breath to mist the air. Droning
shadows overhead. 1943. November the 17th.
Terezin. This is our history,
despite the Nazis. East means Auschwitz.
Part of the census. As true as we can be.