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MOBILE KILLING UNITS, LOPUCHOWA FOREST, POLAND

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The hush in the forest is calming at first  
and then not. No songs to sing along this via dolorosa  
except Kaddish. I walk on pine needles decades  
after thousands were herded like animals to the pit  
that is just ahead. The silent whispers of the dead

linger, caught even in the branches of these straight  
pines, still sloughing, still seeping into the soil.  
Yes, Baumgartner is written in the death  
roles at Auschwitz, Peláez in the archive  
of victims and survivors, but this is not my story,

each name a blood line, each silenced voice words  
unlinked from mine. This is not my story, yet I,  
a Jew of the New Testament, am stumbling along,  
my year-old child clinging to my neck.  
For a flash of a second I am aware of one sharp  
breath and the beginning of a fall into the abyss.

This is not my story, I keep repeating.  
This is not my story.

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*Kazimierz, Poland*

The Jewish headstones broken under Nazi tanks,  
the annihilation so complete even death's work  
crushed, the testament of lives obliterated.

These headstones now puzzle-pieced to form  
a thirty-foot wall, each stone, each fragment  
with their menorahs, candles, pitchers, broken

branches, a person in each symbol, a name.  
A jagged slash, like lightning, from ground  
to full height, dark with shadow like a rent

garment, wide enough to step through  
into another world of mist and pine-needled  
floor, the forest filtering daylight like looking

through the sheerest organdy, a place to stand  
with beauty, a place to stand with beauty  
ripped apart like the curtain of the temple  
torn in two.

## CONCENTRATION

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“. . . In this connection, it is to be borne in mind that only cities which are rail junctions, or at least are located along railroad lines, are to be designated as concentration points.”—Heydrich’s Instructions to Chiefs of Einsatzgruppen, September 21, 1939<sup>2</sup>

“The area of the camp is so small that, had the new arrivals stayed alive for even a few days, it would have been only a week and a half before there was no more space behind the barbed wire for this tide of people flowing in from Poland, from Belorussia, from the whole of Europe.”—Vasily Grossman, 1944<sup>3</sup>

The word itself:  
to focus  
to compress  
to remove all  
distractions  
to create less and less  
space  
for interruption  
to fill the smaller  
and smaller  
spaces with  
more and more.

The word  
becomes sinister.

2. Cited in Dawidowicz, ed., *A Holocaust Reader*, 60.
3. Cited in “Excerpts from ‘The Hell of Treblinka,’” [n.p.].

To cut even  
that space in half  
to cut the half  
space by two-thirds.

Packed  
into stinking rooms  
and then transported  
crushed standing  
in boxcars  
6000 a day  
Treblinka.

The camp map:  
storehouse for victims'  
property  
disguised as a train station  
execution site  
disguised as hospital  
barracks where women  
undressed  
had heads shaved  
barracks where men undressed  
"the Tube"—the path  
to the gas chambers  
three old  
ten new gas chambers  
the cremation pyres.

Today we walk  
the forest path  
now level ground  
the forest path  
the forest path  
then the clearing  
and the ragged stones  
standing, these stones  
a compression

a concentration  
of heat and pressure  
pushed  
by the earth's crust  
from its core  
the stones  
the rocks  
spaced in the clearing  
lined up  
a congregation  
of what's left  
after suffering  
nothing but jagged  
edges,  
the silence  
its own Golgotha.

*Bibliography*

Dawidowicz, Lucy S., ed. *A Holocaust Reader*. Library of Jewish Studies. West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1976.

Facing History and Ourselves. "Excerpts from 'The Hell of Treblinka' by Vasily Grossman, 1944." Online: <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-human-behavior/hell-of-treblinka-vasily-grossman>