

"I can never know what it was like to be there,
just as they could never know what it was like
to leave."

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU
Remembered on 25th November 2006

We get off the bus. The bus has come from Auschwitz from which we've walked. We arrive at the gate tower of Birkenau somewhere I've wanted to come for many years. The famous gate tower with its mouth, its eyes. The railway tracks leading in. We stand at the beginning. The tracks seem to emerge from the grass from out the ground as if they have come from within. Perhaps straight from Hell and they start just outside the gate. And go through the gate. There's a gate across the gate now. And a car parked outside. Red. A Fiat. Everything seems from there quite normal. We stand at the fence and look through the barbed wire, looking at the vast interior of the camp. The vast area of nothing. This is it. This is the place I've seen in so many photographs. In films. Documentaries. This is Hell on Earth. And I look up at the glass windows of the tower. Each pane reflecting the world outside. Reflecting but not seeing like the eyes of a blind man. The eyes of the old. Not so much looking as reflecting. Yet within, inside the building, inside the camp memories are made all the more sharp because of it. It seems strange to go inside. Willing, willingly. It's almost as if this blind monster although it can't see us can feel us pass beneath as we walk through the gate. We walk through and find ourselves in this one time Hell. We stand by the rail-tracks, these parallel lines that meet only in the distance, in the past. Parallel lines like the parallel world of the past and the present, running with each other but never quite meeting. We stand back, we stand on the railway lines and look up at the tower. At the blind windows. It knows we're there. Everywhere is lines. Lines of the fences. Lines of the railways. And the posts which run up the length of the camp. Scratches. It's as if the entire world is fenced in, as if there is nowhere on the other side. No escape. Nowhere to escape to. We walk up the Ramp. A part of the camp where the prisoners were offloaded from the cattle-trucks. Belongings were left. Up ahead are the trees. Growing where the parallel lines of the railway track converge, growing directly from the past. Even though I cannot see it for the moment I know the tower is standing behind me. It's not looking, it's feeling, as if it can taste us, taste blood. It's addicted to death. Every step we take we are walking on the dead. Over a million who lost their lives in this place, whose lives were snared by the wire, by the lines, by the trees themselves. Once they were sorted the line on the right - men fit for work, perhaps some women too - would be sent to their barracks. Those on the left were sent immediately to their deaths in the gas chambers. The sick, the old, children, pregnant women. Death was where the lines converged. It waited for them amongst the trees. Those trees which now turn their backs as you walk past as you walk through them. The wind might coax them to speak a little but as you approach they fall quiet. Even in the distance the trees are dumb as if nothing happened here. Amongst them families would wait. Now it's a place of peace and quiet. There are no sounds here. Even those have left. A dog barks in the distance as if an echo trapped within the branches. I look back from where we came and see the tower. It seems to know every part of this camp. It seems to know everyone that's come through its gate. For many that tower would have been the last thing they'd seen. As they walked from the ramp to the trees they might have turned and seen it staring back at them in the days when it's eyes were young, when it saw everything. Nothing escaped it. There is a pool in the ground filled with water. In front of it four or five what look like gravestones. The pool is filled with the ash of those who perished here and is now a memorial to their deaths. The trees whisper when the wind blows. They try to convince themselves they did no wrong. They were as such victims as those that died here. The birds don't sing here now. Whereas the tower is blind, they are deaf. There seem to be hundreds of barracks. Lined up precisely. We look through a window at one end and beyond it you can see the next barrack. You see through that window and on and on like a mirror held to another mirror. Infinity appears present, reflected. An impossible route back the past perhaps. Here death was measured, weighed. Death was precise not random. At the end of the line, literally, to our left and right are two of the gas chambers and crematoria, all now destroyed. Piles and piles of bricks like the piles of bodies pulled from within. In the ground is a hole like a cellar, half filled with the rubble from the demolished buildings and in that cellar so many hundreds of thousands, over a million perished. Such a small space for so many deaths. There is a silence in Birkenau which is testament to that number. How does a million voices sound? A million laughs. A million cries. Yet all I hear is nothing. These sounds have slipped through the wires. But the past is trapped within. Just as the present is trapped within. The past, the present held behind the wires. But whilst

sounds might have escaped, the hopes, the dreams of over a million people remain inside. Turned into ash and trampled into the ground by our remembering feet. Every step I take through the trees, beside the railway track, besides the barracks I'm walking on the dead. As we approach the gas chambers through an incongruous gate that stands in the middle of nothing I try to imagine how it would be to think this might be my last time on earth. The gas chambers hid within the trees, the complicit trees, which camouflaged these factories of death from those sheltering between them. The rain starts to fall. The dead return to their barracks to sleep on the bare boards. The shadows swell within as the night darkens. The night comes on a train and passes through the gate. We make our way back. With every step the tower looms larger. It senses that we're going. It knows its time has passed. Whereas the trees seem ashamed the tower is anything but. It stands proud. Remembering in every brick what was done here. It feels us as we approach. I look up and turn around and look at the vast camp, where the dead are still drilled, where they are still numbers, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions. We pass beneath the tower. And walking through the gate we know are doing something denied to over a million people. We are leaving this place. The tower knows that it has lodged itself in our minds just as did in the minds of those who passed through. And though many of those people had not the time to remember we will always remember this place. The very fact that we can remember reminds us how fortunate we are. For us it is that place where the parallel lines meet, where the past is held prisoner but from which are present has managed to escape. The sun begins to set. It spills its light into the camp. Almost as if this is the only light that can find its way inside. The posts become sentinel shadows keeping the past locked away inside. The past which the tower like an old man with nothing more to do can sit and think about. Memories which it might enjoy over and over again. We climb aboard the bus and suddenly we are gone. And the tower remains in our memories. Memories which no-one should have of this place. I see a photograph. Two lines of people and some German soldiers, some men dressed in striped clothing, and dogs. There is a train, suitcases. There ought to be a noise, but I cannot hear a thing. And in the distance the old man stands, his eyes wide, young, taking in the world. Could this really be the place I have been to? The place from which I have come out the other side. Perhaps this is a place, a different place which happens to share the same name. The stranger you greet only to realize in an instant you've never met them before.

We get off the bus The bus has come from Auschwitz from which we walked We arrive at the gate tower of Birkenau some where I've wanted to come for many years The famous gate tower with its smooth its eyes The railway tracks leading in West and at the beginning the tracks seem to emerge from the grass from out the ground as if they have come from within Perhaps straight from Hell and they start just outside the gate And go through the gate The red gate across the gate now And a car parked outside Red Fiat Everything seems from the quiet normal We stand at the fence and look through the barbed wire looking at the vast interior of the camp The vast area of nothing This is it This is the place I've seen in so many photographs in films Documentaries This is Hell on Earth And I look up at the glass windows of the tower Each pane reflecting the world outside Reflecting but not seeing like the eyes of a blind man The eyes of the old Not so much looking as reflecting Yet within inside the building inside the camp memories are made all the more sharp because of it It seems strange to go inside Willing willingly It's also strange if this blind man is I thought I can't see I can feel I pass beneath as we walk through the gate We walk through and find ourselves in this secret Hell We stand by the rail tracks these parallel lines that meet only in the distance in the past Parallel lines like the parallel world of the past and the present running with each other but never quite meeting We stand back west and on the railway line and look up at the tower At the blind windows It knows were there Every where is lines Lines of the fences Lines of the railways And the posts which run up the length of the camp Scratches its side as if the entire world is fenced in as if there is nowhere on the other side No escape Nowhere to escape to We walk up the ramp Part of the camp where the prisoners were off loaded from the cattle trucks Belongings were left Up ahead are the trees Growing where the parallel lines of the railway track converge growing directly from the past Even though I cannot see it for the moment I know the tower is standing behind me It's not looking its feeling as if it can taste its taste blood It's addicted to death Every step we take we are walking on the dead Over a million who lost their lives in this place each lives were spared by the wire by the lines by the trees themselves Once they were sorted the line on the right men fit for work perhaps some went to work in the barracks Those on the left were sent immediately to their deaths in the gas chambers The sick the old children pregnant women Death was where the lines converge I waited for them amongst the trees Those trees which now turn their backs as you walk past as you walk through them The wind might coax them to speak a little but as you approach they fall quiet Even in the distance the trees are dumb as if nothing happened here Amongst them families would wait Now it's a place of peace 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time to remember we will always remember this place. The very fact that we can remember reminds us how fortunate we are for us it is that place where the parallel lines meet where the past is held prisoner but from which a representative has managed to escape. The sun begins to set. It spills its light into the canyon. Almost as if this is the only light that can find its way inside. The posts become sentinel shadows keeping the past locked away inside the past which the tower like an old man with nothing more to do can sit and think about. Memories which might bring joy over and over again. I climb aboard the bus and suddenly we are gone. And the tower remains in our memories. Memories which no one should have of this place. I see a photograph of a line of people and some German soldiers some are dressed in striped clothing and dogs. There is a train suitcases. There ought to be no noise but I cannot hear a thing. And in the distance the old man stands his eyes wide young taking in the world. Could this really be the place I have been to? The place from which I have come out the other side. Perhaps this is a place a different place which happens to share the same name. The stranger you greet only to realize in an instant you have never met them before.

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