

On the persistence of lies and poetry

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Of course we all know Adorno said that after Auschwitz poetry as we know it is senseless. The world keeps on stumbling into the flames and dust obscures even the faces of children. Can any art matter without the great ideas that fuel the fire?

Over Black Forest cake and ice wine, the conversation drifts to history and remembrance. There's Herbert, a boy in Germany, walking with his grandfather by the tracks near the railroad station. They see a train stopped, hear human voices

murmur from the cattle cars. "Don't look," grandfather hisses, "just walk on. Some things are better not to know." Across the table Herbert lifts his glass to ghosts, "Don't believe them when they plead our ignorance. By Gott, we knew."

Awake at three a.m., I open a book of poems passed over for the prize because they "merely celebrate the personal." These poems know. Against the big ideas they weigh the heft of each brief life, sing home games, potlucks, hugs—each green fuse edging back the dark.