

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

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Homage to Kafka

Snow reveals profoundly dark and black shadows. As the camp lights glare down from towers above, grays are beautifully exposed. The wind whirls small eddies of snowflakes about the curving of drifts as if an emery board has polished them.

The impulse is to break into the snow drifts much as I had as a child. What drove us to jump with our boots into pure and virginal snow, to break into what nature patterned for that day or night? The smashing of undefiled snow drives some children furiously. I wish all that snow out there as I see it through the barrack window would infiltrate our barrack, blow incessantly into our hut, cover the bunks and drift across our weathered bodies, hide us from hell, cover us to prevent detection, finally bury us beneath that sleep that only extreme cold can bring about.

Feverishly, I've prayed for snow these past few weeks in the darkness of February. And now I want it to unleash itself for days if at all possible so that the accumulation on the grounds becomes immense and mountainous, mounds for me to make my way across to the wires undetected and so to end it all if I can, craven person that I am. Snow has fallen so high and deep that I could almost walk across it to the outside world, avoiding the wires beneath my legs. I want to stretch out upon the snow and just grab the wire with both hands, feeling the current electrocute me, to become a molecule once again, that which I was before birth.

To run to the fence while in a rainy downpour, sloshing through muddles and slovenly mud, is arduous, given the gruesome task I intend to accomplish. Snow provides grace and access, for it blinds the guards and gives me opportunity for my task. Snow blankets, layers, warms, weighs heavily like a profound idea upon the mind. It has substance, character, things that I admire, bereft that I'm of both.

I could walk out from the barrack; I'd be spotted as soon as I stepped out. So the self-imposed trance between going, doing and setting out is a personal dilemma that I needn't put into action. I observe my inner hesitations. Safer here this very cold night in my spindly wooden bunk than venturing out across the snowed in yards to the fence wired with barbed and electrified cockleburs, juiced and amply invigorated with current enough to roast anyone of us. The barbed wire fence keeps us in and all others out, like the Great Wall of China.

Snowing steadily for most of the pewter sky of day and night, the searchlights come on, casting a brilliant light on the barbed wire, each of the nettles filled with heavy, clotted snow like cottage cheese. Lines of wire stretch for yards, sagging, taut in places, slovenly relaxed in others, especially at junctures and junctions where wood meets metal, all the while sheathing the electrified crowns of thorns, lethal to the touch.

I stare through the barrack window as the lazy lullaby of falling snow fixates my mind upon the fence. I wonder how long it would take for me to cross the yard, making heavy indentations into the snow until I reach the fence. Can I reach the wire before I'm seen by the tower guards or magnified by the stark brightness of a searchlight groping for shadow figures in the darkness set against the whiteness? If only I could make it to

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the wire and either touch it with my bare hands or just walk up to it and place my face into the albino thorns snow has made of the barbs.

The difference between here in the barrack and there by the electrified fence is unimaginable, for it might take me centuries of time to come into contact with the fence. Of course, I'm anxious about how I'll put all this into motion if I were to arrive at the fence intact, without being shot or spotted by the lights. So complicated and inexact, to do away with myself takes planning but it's all so filled with threats and fear – I continually self-parry with myself. Doing away with myself is such a natural – if not bad – thing to do, considering how the guards would feel. They prefer that none of us do away with ourselves because they reserve that right for themselves, as it should be, as it is. To do away with myself is presumptuous as I think about it. By what right I do this, for I'm their prisoner.

The difference between the thought and the deed is monumental, especially if your will has been broken and abraded, if not extinguished. Yet I lie here mooning over possibilities, fantasizing of how I can do away with myself without drama or giving offense to my guards. Perhaps the blowing snow will conceal my short trek to the wire and my sizzled endeavor only slightly observed because snow is blindingly wicked, obscuring all things this night – even the fence is dimly presented as the wires are snow-laden, ensconced in chest high drifts, dropping here, there, making magical motifs as if musical notes along a staff made of braided, snowy cables.

Imagining myself at the fence, I feel somewhat relieved as I close my eyes and feel the rivers of pain course through me, the jolt, the shocks, the loss of awareness – and then unconsciousness, finally the sublime state of death, all unknowing. I open the window about a few inches and feel the freshness and fury of a snow driven night as the chilled air hits my nose and cheeks. Oh, how magnificent it is to feel snow in the air, sweetly sharp, smelling like a newly cut fruit.

I look forlornly at the fence, my friend, my brother -- mother, if I only could reach it. I'll not be dramatically rash if and when I touch the wire – no crucified Christ for me as I drape against the wires – that's for movies and literature. I merely want to merge with the current. In order to accommodate the guards, the wires themselves, to abstain from any fuss, I'll roll up my pants above my ankles and push back the sleeves on my arms and in this way. I'll not set afire to my clothing as other inmates have revealed to us – a bit much, as their extremities flamed up, charred. If I had to choose, I'd rather have the smell of burnt flesh about me than scorched clothing. I don't want to be unseemly as I leave this life. Everything that I have experienced has been unseemly, ungodly – the beauty, the glory of a snowfall such as this one is that it hides everything that's ghastly.

I'm entranced by each hypnotically slow searchlight sweep of the snow burdened fence before me, for it's all so slovenly magical and peaceful. Desperately I want to trudge through the snow and reach the fence before observed, really a sense of being found out which is so unsettling to me personally. It's critical to me not to be shot down when all my desires are to touch the wires. I don't want to fail. Again, how unseemly to be killed in a stretch of snow, while dying upon a fence allows one final choice, to take away from the guards final and masterly control over me.

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In the fence is my final intention as a human person. As the fence takes me to heart, I surrender willingly, the vivid and alive current and the wintry snow are a mix I'd endure for the few seconds it would take to do away with my unseemliness.

If all my fellow inmates rose from their bunks and charged like sleighs toward the fence, the guards would have nothing to do. Their purpose would evaporate and ours attained. Lofty thoughts, but I'm still here behind the iced up window pane, thinking, wishing, unable or unwilling to act.

I cannot will myself to act, paralyzed with fear. Although I can be shot where I stand or kill myself with a lunge of my body, I cannot choose either, riddled by my own inertia. I don't fear my death. Apparently I fear doing something about that. In any case, whatever choice I make – and act upon – I would be dead. Yet I don't act. I'm a coward. If the guards were to throw open the gates to my hell, gave me sturdy clothes, money, a passport, the horror to my mind is that I couldn't will myself, or move my body to leave from this burrow. I'm frozen all the way through. Whatever it takes to choose has been removed from me. I'm a failure. My suicide is deferred tonight, although ably thought of, reasonably planned for, and well-considered. What it lacks is my own self-ignition.

The guards in their tower belfries, in this penal colony, look down upon their well-mannered flock.

"Homage to Kafka" is from Mathias B. Freese new collection of short stories now being readied for publication, "Working Through the Holocaust." Recently, "Archipelago" from the same work, was published online at Subtletea.com. David Herrle, editor. Author of *The i Tetralogy*, a Holocaust novel, winner of the Allbooks Review Editor's Choice Award, and *Down to a Sunless Sea*, a collection of short fiction, finalist in the Indie Excellence Book Awards, He is a retired psychotherapist and teacher.