



Auschwitz and After

Charlotte Delbo

Second Edition

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With a New Introduction by Lawrence L. Langer

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Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven and London

Published with assistance from the Charles A. Coffin Fund.
Frontispiece and cover photograph by Eric Schwab.

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Designed by Deborah Dutton.
Set in Bembo type by Marathon Typography Service, Inc., Durham,
North Carolina.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012945659
ISBN 978-0-300-19077-9 (pbk.)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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1

None of Us Will Return

*Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true.
I am certain it is truthful.*

Thirst

Thirst is an explorer's tale, you know, in the books we read as children. It takes place in the desert. Those who see mirages and walk in the direction of an elusive oasis suffer from thirst for three whole days. This is the pathetic chapter of the book. At the end of that chapter, a caravan bringing provisions appears; it had lost its way on trails erased by sand storms. The explorers pierce the goatskin bottles and they drink. They drink and their thirst is quenched. This is the thirst experienced in the sun, the drying wind. The desert. It is accompanied by the image of a palm tree profiled in filigree against russet sand.

But the thirst of the marsh is more searing than that of the desert. The marsh thirst lasts for weeks. The goatskin gourds never arrive. Reason begins to waver. It is crushed by thirst. Reason is able to overcome most everything, but it succumbs to thirst. No mirages in the marsh, no hope of an oasis. Just mud, slime. Mud and not a drop of water.

There is the thirst of the morning and the thirst of the evening, the thirst of the day and the thirst of the night.

Upon awakening in the morning, lips move but no sound comes out. Anguish fills your whole being, an anguish as gripping as that of dreams. Is this what it means to be dead? Lips try to speak but the mouth is paralyzed. A mouth cannot form words when it is dry, with no saliva. And the gaze drifts off, it is an insane gaze. The others say, "She's mad. She's gone mad during the night." They summon words capable of recalling reason. An explanation is owed them, but lips decline to move. The muscles of the mouth want to attempt articulation and do not articulate. Such is the despair of the powerlessness that grips me, the full awareness of the state of being dead.

As soon as I hear their clatter, I rush toward the tea canteens. They are a far cry from the goatskin gourds of the caravan. Liters and liters of tea but divided into small portions, one per person, and all are still

drinking when I'm already finished. My mouth is not even damp and words still decline to be spoken. Cheeks are glued to teeth, the tongue is hard, stiff, the jaws locked, and what persists is the feeling of being dead, of being dead and knowing it. Dread expands in the eyes. I feel dread growing in my eyes to the point of madness. Everything sinks, slips away. Reason no longer exercises control. Thirst. Am I breathing? I'm thirsty. It is colder, or less cold, I cannot feel it. I'm thirsty, to the point of shouting it. The finger I run along my gums feels my mouth's dryness. My willpower collapses. One obsession remains: to drink.

And when the blockhova orders me to fetch her roll-call ledger from her hovel, where I find the soapy water she used to wash up, my first impulse is to sweep off the surface scum and kneel, ready to lap the water as do dogs with their agile tongues. I recoil. Soapy tea in which they wash their feet. On the edge of insanity, I gauge the full extent of the madness to which thirst has driven me.

I return to roll call. And to my obsession. To drink. Perhaps we will turn to the right of the road. There is a brook running under the small bridge. To drink. My eyes see nothing but the brook, far in the distance, the brook I am severed from by the roll call which takes longer than crossing the Sahara. The column is formed for departure. To drink. I place myself last in rank on the side from which the steep riverbank is more easily accessible.

The brook. Long before reaching it I am ready to leap like an animal. Long before the brook is in sight I have my tin cup ready in my hand. And when the brook is reached, one must break rank, run ahead and down the slippery bank. The water is often frozen, so the ice must be broken quickly, fortunately it is less cold now, the ice is not that thick and can be broken with the edge of the tin cup. The cup filled, the sharp slope must be scaled without losing a precious drop as I rejoin my place, avidly eyeing the water which might spill were I to go too fast. The SS is running toward me, shouting. His dog runs ahead, almost catches me. My comrades grab me and the rank swallows me. Avidly eyeing the water which moves with every step I

take, I do not see the anxiety in the faces of my friends, the worry I caused them. For them, my absence was interminable. To drink. I was not afraid. To drink. They tell me, as they do every morning, that it was insane to go down to the brook with the SS and his dog behind me. The other day he had a Polish woman bitten to death. Worse still, this is marsh water, the kind that gives typhoid fever. No, it is not marsh water. I drink. Nothing is more awkward than drinking from a cupped tin can while walking. The water moves from side to side, not reaching the lips. I drink. No, it is not marsh water, it is a brook. I do not answer because I am unable to speak as yet. It is not swampy water, but it tastes of rotting leaves, and I feel this taste in my mouth even today as soon as I think of this water, even when I do not think of it. I drink. I drink and feel better. I have saliva in my mouth again. Words return to my lips but I do not speak. Sight returns to my eyes. Life returns. I rediscover my breathing, my heart. I know I am alive. Slowly I suck my saliva. Lucidity returns, and my sight—and I see little Aurore. She is sick, exhausted by fever, her lips discolored, her eyes haggard. She is thirsty. She does not have the strength to run down to the brook. And no one can go there for her. She must not drink that unhealthy water, she is sick. I see her and think: she might drink this water since she is going to die. She is waiting. Her eyes beg and I do not look at her. I feel upon me her thirsty gaze, the pain in her eyes when I hook my tin cup back on my belt. Life returns to me and I feel shame. And each morning I remain insensitive to the supplication of her eyes, her lips discolored by thirst, and each morning I feel ashamed after drinking.

My mouth has become moist. I can speak now. I would like for this saliva to last a long time in my mouth. And what about the obsession: when will I drink? Will there be water where we work? There is never any water. Only the marsh. A muddy swamp.

My comrades considered me mad. Lulu would say, "Take care of yourself. You know that here you must stay on your guard. You'll get yourself killed." I paid no attention. My friends never left me alone and they said to each other, "We must look out for C., she's crazy.

She does not see the kapos, the SS, the dogs. She just stands there, looking vague, instead of working. She doesn't understand when they shout, wanders off anywhere. They'll kill her." They were afraid for me, they were afraid to look at me with those crazed eyes I had then. They believed I was mad and probably I was. I can remember nothing about those weeks. And during those weeks which were the hardest, so many of those I loved died and yet I could not recall that I had learned of their death.

On the days when we go the other way, away from the stream, I do not know how I can bear the disappointment.

There is the thirst of the morning and the thirst of the day.

Since morning I can think of nothing else but drinking. When the midday soup is dished out, it is salty, so salty that it strips off the mouth's mucous membrane burning with canker sores. "Eat. You've got to eat." So many had died already because they stopped eating. "Try. It is quite liquid today.—No, it's salty." I spit out the spoonful I tried swallowing. Nothing goes down if you have no saliva in your mouth.

Sometimes we are sent to the tipcarts. A demolition site with meager trees growing in between ruins. The shrubs are covered with frost. With each handbarrow I carry to the carts I graze a shrub from which I tear a small branch. I lick the frost, but it does not yield a drop of water in my mouth. As soon as the SS step aside, I run toward clean snow. There is a bit left, like a sheet spread out to dry. I take a fistful of snow, but the snow does not turn to water in my mouth.

If I pass close to the open cistern on the surface of the ground, I am seized with vertigo, everything swims in my head. It is because I walk with Carmen or Viva that I do not hurl myself in. And each time we go by, they try to skirt it. But I drag them in that direction, they follow so as not to let go of me and, at the edge, pull me back roughly.

During the break, the Polish women crowd around the cistern and scoop up water in a tin cup tied on a wire. The wire is too short. The one who leans over is almost entirely suspended within the cistern, while her comrades hold on to her legs. She brings up a bit of

murky water at the bottom of her cup and drinks. Another takes a turn at drawing water. I walk toward them and indicate that I would like some too. The tin cup goes down on its wire, the Polish woman leans far enough to fall in. She is pulled back up again and as she hands me the water asks, "Chleba?" I have no bread. I give all my bread in the evening for a bit of tea. I answer that I have no bread, pleading with my lips. She upsets the tin cup and the water spills. I would fall had not Carmen or Viva rushed to my side.

When we are working in the marsh, I think all day of the way back, of the stream. But the SS remembers what happened in the morning. As soon as we reach the turn in the road from where we glimpse the small bridge, he walks up front. He goes down into the stream and makes his dog wade in it. When we get there, the water is slimy and fetid. I would still take some; impossible—all the anweiserins are on the alert.

There is the thirst of the day and the thirst of the evening.

In the evening, throughout roll call, I think of the tea they will dish out. I am one of the first served. Thirst has made me bold. I shove everything out of the way to get there ahead of the others. I drink and when I have drunk I am thirstier still. This herb tea does not quench one's thirst.

I now hold my bread ration in my hand, my piece of bread and the few grams of margarine which constitute the evening meal. I hold them out in my hand and offer them from cell to cell in exchange for a portion of tea. I tremble at the thought no one will accept. But there is always one who does. Every evening I exchange my bread for a couple of gulps. I drink at once and am thirstier than ever before. When I return to our cell, Viva tells me, "I kept my tea for you (tea or herb tea, it is neither), keep it to drink before falling asleep." She does not succeed in making me wait till then. I drink and am thirstier still. And I think of the water of the stream, spoiled a while back by the dog, the water with which I might have filled my cup, and I feel thirsty, thirstier still.

There is the thirst of the evening and the thirst of the night, the

very worst. Because at night I drink, I drink and the water becomes immediately dry and solid in my mouth. The more I drink, the more my mouth fills with hardening rotting leaves.

Or else it is an orange section. It bursts between my teeth and it is indeed an orange section—amazing that one should encounter oranges here—it is indeed a section of an orange. I have the taste of the orange in my mouth, the juice spreads under my tongue, touches my palate, my gums, flows into my throat. It is a slightly acid, marvelously fresh orange. This orange taste and the sensation of freshness flowing wake me up. The awakening is horrifying. Yet the instant when the skin of the orange splits open between my teeth is so delightful that I would like to bring back this dream. I chase after it, corner it. But once again the paste of rotting leaves petrified into mortar fills my dry mouth. It is not even a bitter taste. When you taste bitterness it is because you have not lost the sense of taste, it means you still have saliva in your mouth.

None of us was meant to return.

2

Useless Knowledge

We came from too far to merit belief.—Paul Claudel

Thirst

After roll call, the ranks became columns setting out to work. Lined up five abreast, all we had to do was an about-face on the spot to be in perfect marching order, facing the gate, ready for takeoff. It didn't go that fast. We had to wait longer, marking time. The kapos busied themselves, forming their commandos. They counted us, five by five, and at one hundred cut the column. Each kapo sliced its portion of labor force. This morning, the cut had been made within our group, so that some of us were sent to work on a demolition detail, while the others were directed elsewhere. In the evening, when we were reunited at roll call, Carmen said to me, "Tomorrow, we'll go back there. I had a good look at the kapo, and I'll recognize her. Stay close to us. Watch out so they won't cut you off. There's water."

I'd been thirsty for days and days, thirsty to the point of losing my mind, to the point of being unable to eat since there was no saliva in my mouth, so thirsty I couldn't speak, because you're unable to speak when there's no saliva in your mouth. My parched lips were splitting, my gums swollen, my tongue a piece of wood. My swollen gums and tongue kept me from closing my mouth, which stayed open like that of a madwoman with dilated pupils in her haggard eyes. At least, this is what the others told me, later. They thought I'd lost my mind. I couldn't hear anything, see anything. They even thought I had gone blind. It took me a long time later on to explain that, without being blind, I saw nothing. All my senses had been abolished by thirst.

In the hope of seeing a glimmer of awareness in my eyes, Carmen had to repeat a number of times, "There's water there. Tomorrow you'll be able to drink."

The night seemed interminable. My thirst at night was atrocious, and I still wonder how I lasted till the end of it.

In the morning, clutching my companions, still mute, haggard, lost, I let myself be led—or rather they watched over me, since I was

deprived of all reflex action, and without their help would have walked into an SS as easily as into a pile of bricks, or failed to keep my place in the ranks. I would have been shot. Only the thought of water kept me alert. I was looking for it everywhere. The sight of a puddle, of a slightly liquid mud flow, made me lose my self-control, and my friends held me back since I wanted to throw myself, face down, upon this puddle or this mud. I would have done so right under the dogs' fierce jaws.

It was a long way away. It seemed to me we'd never get there. I didn't ask any questions since I couldn't talk. A long time ago I had stopped trying to form words with my lips. Of course my eyes must have been full of anxious questioning. My friends kept on reassuring me, "Have no fear. It's the right commando. There's water there. We're telling you."

We got there at last. It was a tree nursery. "We plant trees. Little ones. Once a tree is planted we water it. We give it a full watering can," explained those who had been there yesterday. Indeed, there was a row of sprinkling cans near a well. I wanted to run to it at once, break ranks. Viva held me strongly by the arm. "Wait till the kapo has stopped counting us." The count made, the kapo assigned the teams. I wasn't assigned to the watering cans any more than any of my friends. We were supposed to carry the shrubs to the men who planted them. I was desperate. While each of my companions tried to comfort me, Carmen took things in hand. "Listen. Stay quietly with Lulu. Be good, very quiet." She spoke to me gently, as one does to the ailing. "Work. Here, take this." She put in my hand a frail shoot. "There's a Pole who draws water from the well. I recognized him, he was here yesterday. He fills the watering cans. We brought a whole portion of bread for him. See? In exchange for the bread, I'll ask him to put water there, behind the tree pile. Don't move. As soon as it's ready I'll let you know. No, don't make a move. I'll come back, right away." Fortunately, we weren't in a flat, exposed place. There were bends in the path and hidden corners, here a tool shed, there a lean-to for wood, so that we weren't constantly under the gaze of the kapos or

the SS. Held up by Viva, and hidden by the others, I pretended I was working. Coming and going with them, carrying the same shrub, I did not have the strength to put it down in the furrow where a Pole would pick it up for planting. I could hardly stand, and did not know what I was doing. I believe I did not even have the sensation of thirst. Unconscious, dazed, I no longer felt or perceived anything.

Carmen came back. She and Viva, having made sure the way was clear, grabbed me under each arm, taking me into a recess between a piece of wall and the pile of shrubs we were supposed to carry. "Here!" Carmen said, showing me a pail of water. It was made of zinc, like those used in the country to get water from a well. A large pail. Full. I tore myself from Carmen and Viva, threw myself on the pail of water. Actually fell upon it. I knelt near the pail and drank like a horse, dipping my nose in the water, plunging my whole face. I can't remember whether the water was cold—it must have been, early in March, and having just been drawn from the well—but I felt neither the cold nor the wetness upon my face. I drank and drank breathlessly, and from time to time I had to lift my nostrils out of the water to take a breath of air. I did so without interrupting my drinking. I drank with no thought of any kind, without stopping to consider I might have to stop if a kapo happened by. I kept on drinking. Carmen, who was on the lookout, said, "That's enough." I'd drunk half the pail. I took time out without letting go of the pail which I was clasping tight in my arms. "Come," said Carmen, "that's enough." Without answering—I might have made a gesture, a movement—without stirring, I plunged my head into the pail once more. I drank and drank some more. Like a horse, no, like a dog. A dog laps water with its agile tongue. It hollows out its tongue in the shape of a spoon to hold the liquid. A horse merely drinks. The level of water was going down. I tilted the bucket to drink to the very bottom. Almost stretched out upon the ground, I aspirated the last drop, without spilling any of the precious liquid. I would have liked to lick the side of the pail, but my tongue was too hard, too hard even to lick my lips. I wiped my face with my hand, and my hand with my lips. "This time, you've got to go," Carmen

insisted, "the Pole is asking for his pail." She was making signs to someone behind her. I didn't want to let go of my bucket. My belly was so heavy I couldn't stir. It was like an independent object, a weight or a package, hooked onto my skeleton. I was very thin. For days and days I hadn't eaten my portion of bread, since I couldn't swallow anything without saliva in my mouth, days and days I'd been unable to eat my soup, even when it was sufficiently liquid, because soup is salty, and it burned the bleeding ulcers in my mouth. I had drunk. I was no longer thirsty, yet still uncertain of not being so. I had drunk all the contents of the pail. Yes, just like a horse.

Carmen called Viva. They helped me up. My belly was enormous. Suddenly, I felt life pouring back into me. It was as if I were regaining consciousness, feeling my blood circulating through my body, my lungs breathing, my heart beating. I was alive. Saliva was returning to my mouth. The burning feeling round my eyelids was fading. Your eyes burn when the lacrymal glands dry up. My ears could hear again. I was living.

Viva took me back to the others while Carmen was returning the bucket. As my mouth regained its moisture, I recovered my sight. My head grew light. I was able to hold it up. I saw Lulu, who was looking at me with concern, staring at my enormous belly, and heard her tell Viva, "You shouldn't have let her drink so much." I could feel saliva forming itself in my mouth. Speech was returning as well. It was still hard to move my lips. At last I was able to utter, in a strange voice, on account of the stiffness of my tongue: "I'm no longer thirsty." "Did the water at least taste good?" someone inquired. I didn't answer. I hadn't felt the water's taste. I drank, that's all.

"We'll try to come back tomorrow," said Lulu. "We'll have to hoard some bread this evening," added Cecile.

The following day, disoriented by the jostling following roll call, we did not succeed in slipping into the tree nursery commando. It didn't matter any more. I was cured.

There are people who say, "I'm thirsty." They step into a café and order a beer.