



I was playing, I suppose,  
when it happened.  
No sound reached me.  
The skies did not darken,  
or if they did, one flicked  
away the impression:  
a cloud no doubt, a shadow perhaps  
from those interminable aeroplanes  
crossing and recrossing  
our sunbleached beaches, Carbis Bay  
or the Battery Rocks, where  
all summer long we had dived  
and cavorted in and out of  
the tossing waters, while  
the attention of the adults,  
perpetually talking,  
seemed focused,  
unaccountably,  
elsewhere.

No sound reached me  
when it happened  
over there on that  
complicated frontier  
near Geneva. (Was the sun  
shining there too?)  
I did not hear you cry out,  
nor feel your heart thump wildly  
in shock and terror. 'Go back,'  
they shouted, those black-clad figures.  
'Go back. You are not permitted to cross.'  
Did the colour drain from your face?  
Did your legs weaken?  
'You are under arrest,' they barked.  
'Go back and wait.' Back to the  
crowd waiting for the train, the train. . . East?  
Did you know what it meant?  
Did you believe the rumours?  
Were you silent? Stunned? Angry?

Did you signal to them then,  
When it happened?  
To the welcoming committee  
one might say, on the other  
side of the border.  
To your husband and his friends  
just a few yards away,  
there, beyond the barbed wire,  
beyond the notices saying,  
'Illegal refugees will be shot.'  
They called across, they said,  
'Run, jump, take the risk,'  
the frontier is such a thin line,  
the distance so short between you and us,  
between life and death,  
(they said afterwards).  
How was it you lacked  
the courage (they said  
afterwards, drinking tea).

No sound whatsoever disturbed me  
when it happened.  
I slept well. School  
was the same as usual.  
As usual I went swimming,  
or raced down the hill  
on my scooter or on foot  
laughing with friends.  
Often at night  
in the dark of my bed,  
I would hear the trains being  
shunted down at the station,  
their anguished whistling  
stirring my imagination  
drawing me towards oblivion.  
At last, no more embarrassing letters  
arrived in a foreign language  
witnessing my alienation  
from the cricketing scene.

Distracted and displaced  
when it happened  
I did not hear you ask  
which cattle truck to mount,  
nor, parched in the darkened  
wagon, notice you beg for  
a sip of water. On the third day,  
perceiving the sound of Polish voices,  
I did not catch you whisper to your neighbour,  
'It is the East. We have arrived.'  
Nor, naked and packed tight  
with a hundred others  
did I hear you choking  
on the contents of those well-known  
canisters marked 'Zyklon B Gas'  
(It took twelve minutes, they say.)  
I was not listening  
when it happened.

Now I hear nothing else.

### ABOUT THE POET

Hilda Schiff compiled and introduced the book, *Holocaust Poetry*, which is one of the main works on Holocaust poetry. A poet herself, and also a short story writer and editor, Hilda Schiff was born in central Europe and came to England as a small child. She was educated at the Universities of London and Oxford, where she went on to teach and engage in research.

---

*[Carbis Bay and Battery Rocks are beaches in England. Cricket is a very popular sport in England, almost representative of British culture, similar to baseball in the United States.]*

*From Holocaust Poetry, ed. Hilda Schiff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 135–137.*