

Fourth Place
Division II - Writing

Molly Harris, Grade 9

“Sorrow Songs”

Our Lady of the Elms HS

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I had a daughter. I lost her a long time ago, before she was ever really gone. Or maybe it hasn't been that long.

I kept her close in symphonies, humming strings and a bow of horse hair. My violin was the last thing that she would hear before her eyes fluttered with the weight of sleep, and it served as a lull to envelop her into the invitation of dreams. Sometimes, rarely, I would sing, old Roma songs passed down by my mother and hers and hers before, in hopes that the tunes would catch in her brain and pass down to her daughter and the daughter after: preserving the beauty of tradition, which I was always taught was lovely. Her favorites were the brigaki dijili, the sorrow songs.

Miri tehara, she took in the songs, walking through every story I strung to her and living it as if it were her own. She had an eye to see it rather than just to hear. My girl had a gift.

When I heard news that our country was being overtaken by Nazis, I played music. I played to pretend everything around me wasn't crashing, to deter my daughter's worried face, and I now play instead for them to pretend everything isn't falling down all around us. It's a disappointing fate, using such beautiful art as a lie.

I play for the Nazis to show us to the questioning world—you see this music? You see the humanity we allow our prisoners? Any place with music couldn't be the hell that it seems, they say, uttered between the lines. The orchestra plays often in the mornings and during selection; when there's a horror to deny, we play. It makes it easier for those outside to believe that the conditions we're in are humane, and therefore easier to turn shoulder to.

It makes my heart ache, as a mother, watching every man and woman from adolescence to maturity walk like they've already succumbed to the fate of a corpse. If we deny the basic pillars of human life, where do we expect to end up?

On the first selection, my daughter still had the music in her eyes. It was a shimmering remnant of a spark, even in the graveyard she set foot on.

Franz Schubert trills on my strings, "Ave Maria." Strange music for selection, although no music, with its beacon of hope, could ever really seem unstrange in this world we inhabit. Somber, in a way, depending on the way in which you interpret it – there's really nothing as subjective as music. It all lies in the ears and mind of the listener, whether or not that music is happy or sad or if it keeps you afoot or sails you away.

I play and I think of my daughter. I am playing my last song for her, and it is one she's never heard. When I saw her before the selection and her eyes were dull, I knew, then and there, I would serenade her to sleep for the last time, before every song in the world turned into a discordant symphony.

Guards shout far away, and they watch us as we play. They hear it, but they do not live it. They stand with apathy, refusing the existence and sound of the Jews, the Roma, the inferior, and refusing the highest level of humanity that can come from us, or anyone. I'd say it's a sad spectacle to see, but it pales in comparison to every other aspect of Auschwitz.

I play and I listen. The musicians around me have all given up the idea of living for music, and instead it is the only thing keeping them alive. Some know it is their last performance before they are sent to the chambers. Most have forgotten what it is like to wield an instrument for the purpose of their own pleasure instead of as a benefit to the oppressor.

I drag the bow along my strings like a knife to skin. Soon, it is over, and the melody is only a shadow. The bunk is enclosed in night. My daughter is not below me.

It is hard to feel. Parent-child relationships are more separate in this world than in the past one; the death of a family member seems more like a weight lifted than borne. For me, it is not either – the music to my world is gone, and earth will have to turn without such. I take my violin. Without her, there is no music to live for. I bring the chinrest of the instrument to my head, and my fingers to the strings. My arm aches with the soreness of labor, but this has not stopped me before.

A state of unease starts to settle around the room the longer I play. Sideways glances followed by silent ignorance from those who were too tired to care, or even register. Perhaps they thought selection was still going on outside. For a moment I'm sure there's nothing else in the world, not a thought, not a kapo, not a knock on our ghetto door that could wake me up from this daytime slumber where the only sense that I'm capable of feeling is what I can hear. I don't hear the guard marching in from the door, and I see no metal bar in grasp. But I hear my daughter's favorite lullaby, and, above all, I can hear her voice singing along.

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