

# Yggdrasil

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## **A Burnt Offering**

*By*

*Dee Sunshine*

# Introduction

On the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015 we will be “celebrating” the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the notorious Nazi death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. As time marches on, there are fewer and fewer people alive who were first-hand witnesses of these horrors, and the physical history begins to melt into mythology. Few young people today truly grasp the nature of the brutality of the Nazi regime, and the voices of Holocaust deniers mutter in the background, gaining credence among an admittedly small minority... but one has to remember that the National Socialist Party of Germany had only a very small membership just a decade before Hitler became chancellor of Germany.

As a “half-Jew”, born in the early 1960s, whose grandparents escaped the pogroms in the Ukraine and Romania, just as Hitler was rising to power in Germany, I recognize that just one small twist of fate and there would have been no-one writing to you right now. My grand-parents could easily have suffered the same fate as many of their brothers and sisters.

As a teenager in the late 1970s and early 1980s I was profoundly disturbed by the re-emergence of the extreme right wing in the UK and Europe, and in the early 1990s, as I watched the collapse of Socialism around the world it seemed to me that the soil was now fertile for further growth of extreme right wing groups. Even in Scotland, normally a staunch Labour stronghold, I wondered if the growing call for Independence could not be subverted by Nationalist zealots. Add to all that, a climate of pre-millennial fear, marked out by freak weather and an increase in the frequency of Earthquakes around the world and there you have the background picture to my poetry sequence, “A Burnt Offering”, the first draft of which I wrote on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1995 (the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau).

In light of the recently rapid and disturbing growth of support for extreme right wing parties throughout Europe, the rise of anti-semitism (once again) and the increase in the number of holocaust-denial websites all over the internet, I think it is very important to remind people what happened, because if we forget – and in a few generations it could easily be forgotten – it may well happen again.

Dee Sunshine

# A Burnt Offering

27<sup>th</sup> January 1995:

*The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.*

1.

You covered up the mirrors,  
not wanting to see the radiance dissipating:  
The sexless city sucking you in,  
erasing your face.

Without reflection  
we clutched at each other:  
clinging together like little children.

We clung together  
till gravity pulled us apart.

\* \* \*

Junked out on television  
we watched the world disintegrating  
in raptures of violent dreams:  
each dreamer being so much less  
than the sum of the parts;  
each dream, a fragment  
deconstructed from the whole.

\* \* \*

The sirens and screams  
that shredded the night's silence  
were a forewarning  
of the worst that would come.

We could sense the beast's breath  
bubbling under the skin of the earth.

\*   \*   \*

Fucking to the hot dark rhythms of the night  
we allowed ourselves the luxury of entropy,  
the muted ecstasy of mutual extinction:  
it wasn't love, but its fire kept us warm.

\* \* \*

In sleep we would lose ourselves,  
let loose shadowy spectres -  
abominations that slithered  
through the ragged gashes  
in the veneer of our sanity;  
trailing a terrible afterbirth,  
foetid and reeking of fear.

Our dreams gave birth to  
walled in ghettos,  
bloody towers,  
children without eyes,  
animal corpses,  
beggars, mobs,  
freight trains...  
armies of the dead.

\* \* \*

Waking to the lightless morning:

lost to each other, lost to the detritus

of fear filled dreams,

we would shiver, cling together

and fill each other's ears

with the hot blood

of promised tomorrows.

2.

In holding together and clutching  
we imagined ourselves to be whole -  
sublimated in a spurious spirituality,  
elevated above the chaos of spiky rooftops  
and darkly smoking chimneys.

But the sky blew through our every construct,  
insinuating a secret hunger, infecting us  
with the knowledge of our fragility.

We were held together by mere fragments -  
broken pieces that could never be anything more  
than broken pieces.

3.

Sometimes, standing skeletal  
in the rusted metal wind,  
with clouds clearing from frosted skies,  
a blur of stars dazzling our eyes,  
we would be surprised  
by something bigger than love.

Momentarily the futility would fall away  
and we'd taste that ineffable no-thing  
with an undefined inner sense.

Transcending the linear,  
we would cross the border  
without passports or maps.

4.

The night before you left  
we tore the clothes from each other  
and pulled our loins together:  
it was a last frantic attempt at connection  
before our final separation.

In the deliberate darkness -  
not wanting to see  
what we'd lost in each other -  
we thrashed to an angry climax.

You were a Nazi storm trooper  
and I, a sub-human Jew.

5.

Last night I sat shivering at my desk  
watching the moon track across the sky

listening to screech owls

yammering in the distance,

the wind muttering to the trees,

the silence from my unsleeping bed.

Tonight I cannot pretend I'll sleep.

In the double-glazed safety of suburbia

I cannot excuse this agitation:

these solid buildings nurse the spirit

to slumbering, willing forgetfulness.

But I cannot forget you:

your post-war, housing scheme passions

assail me from across the great divide,

shaking me to my very foundations.

Your ice blue eyes

are watching me as I squirm -

you torturer, you.

I miss you!

I am at a loss out here,  
on the periphery of prosperity  
with this job, this house,  
this security:  
I miss our days and nights  
of unemployed reckless penury.

I miss the neon emptiness,  
the dirty knickers,  
the one bar electric fire,  
the stinking fridge,  
the anonymous screams  
in the death still night,  
the nightmares  
    and our dreams  
    of a greener, cleaner place.

6.

My heart is acrid as this ashtray,  
hard as blown glass.

There is no poem to our love:

I remember only

the murmuring of your body against mine

in abstract -

    one sideways blow

    and the image is cracked.

I need your hands

to pull me out

from this stagnant murk:

I need your Teutonic no-nonsense

To wipe away this Semitic self-pity.

7.

Tonight I am alone,  
with no hand to guide me.

Under my feet  
the world is trembling,

mountains are moving  
to Mohammed's muezzin call.

Soon the infidel,  
will be routed out,

cut down:  
devoured in ash and flame.

8.

A postcard from Japan,  
a picture of gleaming, erect Osaka -  
skyscrapers piercing  
a Hiroshima red, sunset sky.

On the back it reads,  
*I am alive and well,*  
*if a little shaken.*

My brave, adventuring friend,  
but a butterfly's kiss from Kobe:  
she says, *don't worry,*  
but I do.

Drunk on my father's brew  
of cynicism and anxiety,  
I watch the storm clouds gathering,  
drawing near  
and I'm filled full  
of wretched fear.

*These islands, he once mused,  
are but wretched specks  
in a vast wilderness;  
and these oceans,  
just a dribble of sweat  
rolling down the buttock cleft  
of an indifferent deity.*

My father knew  
the heart of his father God  
even before his bar mitzvah day:  
he was but ten  
when the news filtered through  
from Poland and Germany.

9.

*The struggle of people against power*

*Is the struggle of memory against forgetting.*

Milan Kundera

Sleepless,

these flickering images of newsreel  
strobe blue in the late night corners

of this hallucinated, tangled room:

random, uncollated images

of collateral damage;

names colliding

in a jangling discordant poetry –

*Angola, Sarajevo, Eritrea,*

*East Timor, Cambodia,*

*Haiti, Soweto, Kuwait...*

an endless litany of forgotten places

like the dispassionate whisper

of a distant, voiceless God.

Here, great Jehovah,  
are the bits of a child  
who stood on a land mine.

Here is the skull  
of a prisoner  
who had nothing to confess.

Here are the bodies  
of women and children  
who were queuing  
at the well for water.

Here, there and everywhere  
uncountable numbers,  
unfathomable numbers:  
I would tattoo them  
on your loving arms,  
Dear God.

10.

My great aunt - my grandmother's elder sister -  
is over fifty years dead:

no exact record exists,

but somewhere in Hamburg or Hanover

her skin still shades the harsh light of a naked bulb.

Perhaps, that is all that remains of her.

The books that were bound

by the glue made from her pulverised bones

have long since been read and discarded;

and the soap made from her body fat

was used up

scrubbing clean

the blackened faces

of Aryan coal miners.

11.

I learned the necessity of lies early on:  
picking up a penny in the playground  
there was a momentary flush of joy,  
but it was soured by classmates  
who gathered round, taunting me,  
calling me - *a fucking Jew*.

The half-Jewish blood  
in my veins  
boiled in shame.

12.

Twenty-five years ago, this very night,  
I sat by the muttering gas fire,  
in the blue light of the television  
and the shadow of my father's chair.

It was then that I hardened my heart,  
for I was tormented by his weeping.

13.

Weep not,  
for the dead are but dead  
and the past is always passing  
further and further over  
the ever-receding horizon.

14.

Under the eiderdown I twist  
like a colony of maggots  
eating the last scant remains  
of a corpse.

I am cocooned against  
the January frost,  
waiting for the watery dawn,  
wishing this knot of cloth  
was a chrysalis -  
that I'd burst forth  
from these dark dregs  
into a wondrous and kindly light.

The clock on the mantle shelf  
savages the last vestiges  
of the night's silence,  
ticking its fascist beat,  
dragging me ever onwards.

Malign,

its number fragmented face mocks:

its tic-toc like the rocking of railway carriages

and the tarnished laughter of Polish permafrost;

its hollow echo like the passing of freight wagons

through war torn, crumbling factory towns.

This clock,

with its bland, smug face,

measures the pulse

with the clinical precision of Mengele.

15.

The same sea in us all,  
but waves breaking  
on different shorelines.

Drunken footfalls  
on the stair head  
mark the passing  
from night to dawn:  
the clock laughing,  
its hollow pedantry  
as celebration reaches  
inevitable anti-dimax.

I wait for the door to open,  
the return of the revellers,  
*my sisters and brothers:*  
one flesh,  
but waves breaking  
on different shores.

Belatedly, the feast  
has been consumed.

Dry mouths have slaked their thirst  
with dry waters;

and now the tongues are loose

with burnt offerings

to a dead poet.

16.

Hark, the heroes are returned!

Drunken and clamouring,

their voices raised and roused:

glorious, victorious

and, by the way,

totally fucking stocious.

The Saltire flies high,

blowing in the wind

of nationalist pride.

The Sassenachs

are once again routed:

slain by the true might

of Burns and Bruce.

With haggis and neeps in the belly

and the power of whisky

on their tongues, they ask

*wha's like us?*

These true blue pure-blooded

xenophobic Scots.

Has the bagpipe's wail

deafened their ears?

For none among them can hear

the same sea

which moves within us all.

17.

It's not as many miles as you imagine  
from Nuremberg to Hampden:  
the cross is easily crooked.

When the soul is bled dry  
there is nothing left  
but the braying of empty minds.

18.

Four fifteen, a forest  
of broken crucifixes,

flags, effigies,

the reek of stale beer

in half drunk cans:

I fix a coffee

in the crematorial kitchen,

resigning myself

to lack of sleep.

The celebrations are over

and darkened rooms

are littered with snoring:

making my solitude,

my sleeplessness,

all the more poignant.

In the broken wind

I hear black Lilith laughing:

*Schottland Schottland*

*über alles.*

*Ich bin unbeweglich.*

Four fifteen and I cannot sleep.

How can I sleep

when you are not asleep beside me?

19.

Back in those halcyon days  
when her nest floated upon a calm sea  
my mother would lull me to sleep, singing

*Silent night, holy night,*

*All is still, all is quiet.*

Back then, I believed  
in the perfection of peace.

20.

Finally, I am arisen, like a phoenix  
from the ashes of the night:  
I wipe the sleeplessness from my eyes  
  
and discard my bleached out, striped pyjamas  
  
in a ragged, loveless heap,  
  
like so much worn out Jew-flesh.

Out the window, the snow has turned to rain  
  
and a thin line of watery daylight  
  
has lain itself across the horizon.

Sat at my desk, I scrape my pen  
  
across the stiff white parchment  
  
of my leather-bound writing book  
  
and cannot suppress the image  
  
of Jewish skin -

          it creeps upon me  
  
with a Semitic tenacity,  
  
sending into the penumbra  
  
any Burnsian sentiments  
  
that might be lurking  
  
in the Scottish parts  
  
of my bastard blood.

21.

Is it my bastard blood  
which makes me fear  
my country's cry for nationhood?

What is this Scotland?

Is it not just a mass of land,  
part of an island,  
conquered by robber barons  
whose bloodthirsty mouths  
declared themselves kings?

Who are these Scots

that claim this nation?

Are they Picts, Celts and Norse?

Britons, Angles and Saxons?

Italians, Irish and Jews?

African, Chinese and Asian?

What line divides

the waves of immigrants

who have settled

on this fragment of island?

Whose hand divines  
the right to be?

Who is Scottish, exactly?

Who can call this crag of rock

their homeland...

and for whom will only

*arbeit macht frie?*

22.

*Ich bin, ich bin:*

in the loveless dark,

in the icy January rain,

in a silent cold rage;

there is a swastika

where my heart used to be.

My love, my love,

what has become of me?

23.

Weary gunmetal dawn,  
a miasma of monochrome:  
the wind is stilled  
and leaden rain  
like dull crystal  
softly splinters  
on slush stained pavements.

24.

Here I am,  
within the soulless framework  
of technology,  
filled with the rhythm  
and hot impulses  
of our time.

Herr Goebbels,  
your ghost moves  
in the salt wind,  
whistling through  
rusted metal  
skeletal cranes,  
raw rasping  
Teutonic laughter -  
*Ich höre Sie.*

These abandoned docks  
bordering the cold wastes  
of the northern sea,  
my footprints alone  
in the grey snow,  
but across the waters  
and across time,

your voice  
following me.

No solace  
in the dark sodium light  
of this unpeopled hour.

Across the waters,  
across time,  
your voice is  
a thousand broken windows,  
a tongue of fire.  
smoking chimneys,  
a black leather zeitgeist.

From Zyklon B  
to bunker suicide -  
you see, Herr Goebbels,  
tomorrow belongs to no-one.

25.

Among the carnage of yesterday  
and the carnage of tomorrow

what hope is there for today?

What hope

for this dismal grey morning?

Without you, my love,

there is no love.

Without you,

there is no God

to oversee this chaos.

26.

These tomorrows, these yesterdays -  
if you were here now  
they would all be consumed  
in the pyre of our passion play.

These flags,  
these abstract arbitrary divisions,  
would be wiped away.

The slate would be clean:  
no scribbled saltire,  
no tricolour or union jack  
would sully its perfect blackness.

There'd be no star of David  
muddying the sky,  
no crescent moon.

All would be dissolved  
in the fire of our Shiva-Shakti.  
All would be undone  
in the tender loop of love.

If you were here

I'd be blinded to unbelieving eyes.

No more would I see

this scorched skin,

these skeletons in stained shrouds

of striped cloth.

If you were here

I'd believe in a listening God:

one who heard the trains,

one who tasted the sweat,

the sorrow, the bitter ash

of Auschwitz-Birkenau;

one who could conjure up rainbows

and promise a perfect new tomorrow.

# Post Scriptum

**Dee Sunshine** is a writer, artist and perennial traveler. His father is Jewish and many of his great Aunts and Uncles perished in Nazi concentration camps during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. He wrote the first draft of “A Burnt Offering” twenty years ago, on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and spent a decade re-writing it. Extracts from it have been previously published in a number of magazines and the whole sequence is featured in his third collection of poetry, “Visions Of The Drowning Man”. Dee has a Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/Sunshine.Visions](http://www.facebook.com/Sunshine.Visions) and a website at [www.thunderburst.co.uk](http://www.thunderburst.co.uk)

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## COMMENTS & SUBMISSIONS

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