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Imagining War: Ilyse Kusnetz's *Small Hours*

My dad filled out my first life insurance form before I entered basic training when I was eighteen-years-old. He made himself the recipient of my death gratuity, $100,000, and selected another $100,000 for insurance instead of the full payout of $400,000. I glanced it over before signing.

"What would you do with the 200K?" I asked.

My dad turned to me, three decades of night shift in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility grooved around his eyes.

"Well, I'd pay for your funeral first," he said.

"I want to be cremated, and the Air Force will pay for it. You know that, right?" I said.

Dad nodded, "Do you know where you want to be buried? Or would you rather be spread?"

"I'm not sure. Is there still room in the plot at St. Ignatius? I mean after you and Mom? An urn wouldn't take up too much space. Can I be buried with you?" The only time I saw my dad cry was when he found our first dog, a golden retriever named Ridley, dead on our hardwood living room floor one Saturday morning when I was in ninth grade. He woke me up and asked if I wanted to go downstairs and say good-bye. His heart always had more space for animals than people. He wasn't crying when I asked him about my burial, but to me his eyes looked glassier than normal.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"You still didn't answer my question about the money. What you'd do with $200,000."

"Oh, I don't know. Invest. Give some to your brothers. Add to our retirement," he said.

"You need to take a vacation," I told him.

"Oh yea? My daughter passes and I travel the world?"

"Sure. I don't think my death means you should never leave the house again. How about a trip to Poland? You always wanted to go there."

He laughed. "Okay," he said. "Your mother and I will go to Poland." My dad struggled to have certain conversations with me, ones about death or sex or love. We stuck to topics like Philadelphia Phillies baseball, the moody Colorado weather, what high school classmate of mine he saw at the grocery store last week, how to file taxes. He grew up with an abusive alcoholic father who worked in the Pennsylvania coal mines and a mother who disciplined with the cat of nine tails. Family discussions didn't happen during his childhood. My dad's maternal grandparents emigrated from Poland in 1906, first settling in New York and eventually made their way down to Scranton, Pennsylvania. My grandmother and her three siblings were all born in the United States and never went back to visit. My great Aunt Mae, the oldest of the four, wrote to family members still in Poland, but never visited. My dad doesn't know anything about his family who stayed in Poland. My grandmother, her siblings, and her parents all spoke in Polish and never passed on the language to the next generation. They used it as a way to speak code in front of the children. If there was ever any talk about World War II, about the names that populate our family tree, the Nowasielskis, the Gryzbowskis, the Wroblewskis, who were in Poland during the 1930s and 1940s, those stories were never passed down. I can't access my own family's memories so I'm forced to look elsewhere, which is why I picked up *Small Hours* by Ilyse Kusnetz. If my great grandparents never left Poland, would they have suffered the same fate as the two million other Poles brutalized under German occupation? Would I even exist?

Small Hours, a collection of poems, is divided into three parts. The middle section deals with human consciousness, memory, death, and the worst of human capability in World War II. Kusnetz constructs her poems with beautiful language and grace, and then takes us to one of the darkest periods in our history. What she does best is challenge her reader to imagine. For me, that word, *imagine*, creates a picture of children laying on the grass and interpreting clouds or people swaying with lighters as John Lennon sings about his wish for peace and harmony. Instead, she is asking us to encounter the foulest. To force our minds to thoroughly contemplate the worst of humanity and stare at its grotesque form. Kusnetz imagines that she is Auschwitz prisoner Dina Gottlebova, a woman spared by Josef Mengele, the man who performed experiments on prisoners, specifically twins, for research in genetics and how to preserve the Aryan race. Dina was kept alive by Mengele so she could draw portraits of the victims who underwent horrible experiments

without any consideration of health, safety, or suffering. Mengele wanted his victims painted because he believed photographs did not properly capture Gypsy skin tones, which became an important part of his documentation as he linked inferiority with particular physical characteristics. In the poem "Dina," Kusnetz writes:

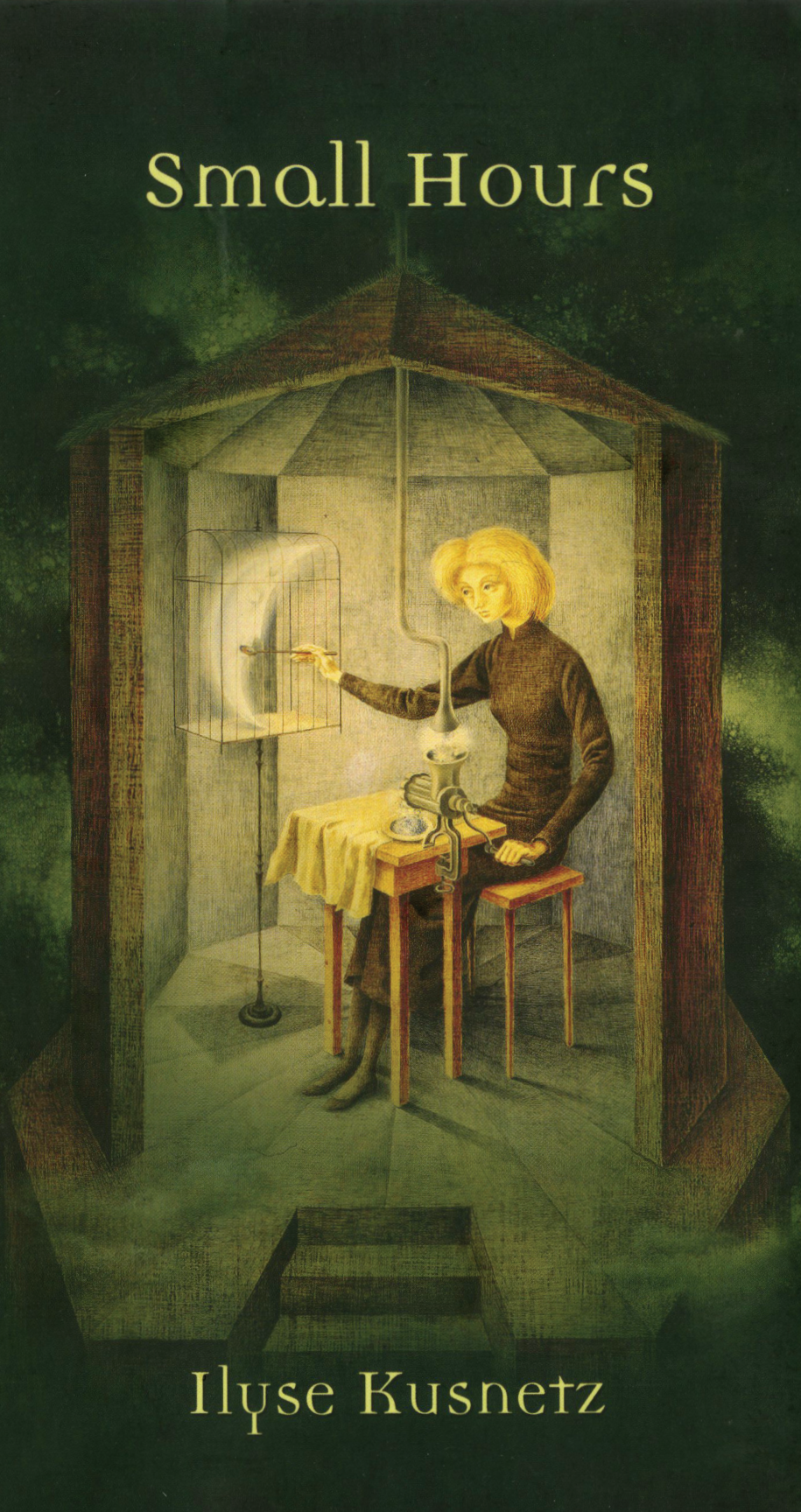
> and because she sketched dwarves, giants,
> gypsies, twins killed simultaneously by formaldehyde
> injection into the heart, prior to dissection—
> a brown-haired girl whose eyes still
> beg her silently, she remembers the Sonderkommando
> carting away thousands of prisoners a day—
> that inconceivable lattice of flesh—how even
> in death bodies cling to one another.

The image of a brown-haired girl with begging eyes, turning to Dina in what I imagine to be her last plea for salvation, is stomach-churning. Kusnetz so skillfully takes on the persona of Dina and the atrocities she faced by witnessing all of these killings. "How even in death bodies cling to one another." That image of desperation does something to the reader. It tenses your shoulder muscles and makes you want to quit humanity. But there is also a hopefulness attached to that image. A man, a single man, performed these experiments on innocent people. But it was not enough for those victims to turn away from all other humans. In their last moments, they turned to one another for comfort and protection until all of the life drained from their emaciated bodies. Dina agreed to paint the portraits for Dr. Mengele only if he spared her life and her mother's. He honored his end of the deal.

Kusnetz not only captures the haunting stories of the victims, but also the men who enacted the conditions she witnessed:

> IG Farben, Zyklon B,
> the seven dwarves of industry: Schmitz, Schnitzler,
> Meer, Ambros, Bütefisch, Ilgner, and Oster—
> she paints them convicted, paints them released,
> profiles them, pen and ink: chairmen of Bayer
> and Deutsche Bank, board members of
> chemical companies, oil companies, smoke screen
> of financial consortiums.

Small Hours



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T. S. Eliot
Poetry
Prize

Ilyse Kusnetz

At the IG Farben Trial in 1947, the listed men were convicted on various counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Otto Ambros, head of the chemical warfare committee and production chief for Auschwitz and Buna, was handed the longest sentence of eight years. He was released after serving four. After serving some portion of their sentences in prison, these men went on to hold various leadership positions for large companies across the world. I enjoy how Kusnetz likens these men to the seven dwarves. It says nothing about their physical stature and everything about their stunted minds and inability to value the sanctity of life. How did Dina, after being liberated, deal with learning of their releases and continued success? How does one come to peace with that? I'm not sure I could, and maybe Dina never did. When Ambros was locked up for those four years, did he spend that time thinking about the victims? Did he wake up sweating to nightmares of children in striped pajamas choking for oxygen as the Zyklon B flooded the concrete chamber? I imagine he did.

Kusnetz finishes the poem writing about the memory that Dina had to endure for years afterwards:

> For the rest of her life,
> Dina paints self-portraits, tilts the mirror until she is
> dark-haired, fair-skinned, untouched by age.
> A kingdom of memory inside her.

Imagine witnessing that kind of event and living with it for the rest of your life. As this woman sits in front of the mirror, time stops and she questions everything. Kusnetz perfectly pairs survival with guilt and challenges the reader to imagine the impossible. I once read that some psychologists think it's better to see the body in a traumatic event because the fantasy would be worse. I agree with that. I don't know if Dina ever saw the aftermath of castrations with no anesthetic or baths of unknown chemicals to remove flesh from bone. Dina painted beautiful watercolor portraits of condemned humans who were placed directly in front of her and all she could do was imagine what happened next after they left her page. Dina was sent to her first concentration camp at the age of 19. She died when she was 86. That is 67 years of imagining, remembering, wondering. She painted to save her life and the life of her mother. She also painted afterwards to save her sanity and to heal. In 28 lines, Kusnetz tells the story of a woman placed in an impossible situation, subjected to witness war. It's repulsive and brilliant.

"Archival Footage" is another poem in *Small Hours* that not only imagines, but begins the confrontation with war. This poem does not focus on one particular

person from the Holocaust, but frames a situation in which people are first exposed to the aftermath of the war and what really happened in concentration camps and the medical experiments performed there. She mentions piles of bodies, withered corpses, bisected heads preserved in jars. But most striking about this poem is how she captures the reactions of the townspeople after witnessing these atrocities for the first time:

> Local townspeople trucked in. *Now you can't*
> *tell the world you didn't know.*

That italicized line accuses. Before the liberations and before the world learned of the actions to promote and preserve the Aryan race, I imagine it was easy to ignore what was really happening when Jews were forced from their homes and shipped elsewhere. When an atrocity takes place, it's easy for someone to claim non-participant and the guilt washes away. Kusnetz does not let that happen. No one is guiltless in war. This line is not just directed at the townspeople, but to the reader. She exposes the details of this suffering and sharing the responsibility:

> One woman
> presses a handkerchief to mouth and nose,
>
> a man dizzily cradles his chin. Look closely.
> You can see history rooting in their bodies,
> the horror of it pulling out their tongues.

As in: *Look at what you've done*. Kusnetz releases the truth about concentration camps like an infectious staph disease, immediately turning the recipients of the germs pallid, feverish, and with red, pus-filled lumps canvassing the skin. That disease moves, quickly, from one person to the next and it doesn't simply wash away in a cold shower. In this poem, Kusnetz shows us the reality of people imagining that war for the first time. Their reactions are physical and involuntary and that memory will forever have a place in their minds. And it should, because no one gets off easy in war. We all play a part.

One of the last poems in this section on WWII is named "The Birth of Godzilla." Again, Kusnetz pairs imagination with confrontation, but she does so with metaphor in this poem and transitions from the brutality caused by the hands of the Nazis to the utter destruction released by the Americans onto the Japanese. As an American, I easily slip into blaming the Germans for WWII and the horrors that took place

in concentration camps. While the Third Reich is responsible for killing millions of people, Little Boy and Fat Man claimed a lot of human lives and left thousands more susceptible to radiation exposure, resulting in higher cancer risks and birth defects. The actual mortality rate of the two atomic bombs will never be known, but estimates are around 225,000 lives taken within the first few months of the bombs being dropped.

Kusnetz begins the poem by likening the bomb to Godzilla, finding pleasure in the destruction of the Japanese town. She then writes:

> Survivors draw
> memories of the day, clothes torn like tissue paper,
> the way, blind and deaf, arms outstretched to ease the burning,
> they staggered through wreckage, down to the cool skin of the river.
> How the water, even the blessed water, could not ease their pain.
> How instead, their flesh blistered, then melted. Closer to the epicenter
> shriveled remains of children rose from the charred earth.

These people are like wax, skin dripping from the bodies with no way to relieve the insurmountable pain from the flame, the flame that refuses to extinguish. As a reader, I begin to think that the children, made of fragile ashes, experienced the better fate. We all know to be scared of a nuclear war, but have you ever imagined what that would actually look like? The most terrifying thought is surviving, as Kusnetz captures with her wandering figures. She continues:

> And later,
> the farmer who lost his wife and son but would not leave his cows,
> sickening as they sickened, watching as they starved.

When a person loses everything, he tends to keep a strangle hold on one piece that looks vaguely familiar. The familiarity is needed just to keep living, even if it's an exaggerated or completely made up familiar. This man holds onto his cows to keep alive any resemblance of his life prior to the bombs. It's desperate and sad. Even as they all die, he feels the need to stay with the cows because there is nothing or no one else. Survivors aren't always the lucky ones.

Imagining is the scariest way for me to consider war. I'm pretty good at learning the facts, memorizing names and dates, being able to recite the basis of a conflict and which countries or affiliations of people are involved. But imagination for me usually leads to the worst and it makes me consider the fear that people feel. I'm not always

able to handle that. After reading Ilyse Kusnetz's poem "Dina," I found myself trying hard to stay concentrated on that poem. Once I gained my focus, I read it over and over and over again. And then I researched every name she mentioned, thinking *this can't be real*. But it is. And the more research I did, the more I learned and it was harder for me to imagine because a situation like Dina's just doesn't seem possible. It shouldn't be. We need to spend more time contemplating war, confronting it. It shows up in our literature and history classes, our grandfather's repeating stories, our favorite Oscar-nominated movies, but taking time to truly think it over takes courage and deep thought. That's what Kusnetz challenges us to do. Her poems unrooted me deeper than anything I've read or seen about World War II before.

I know my dad thinks about war. He reads the *Philadelphia Inquirer* every day and watches the nightly news. He wonders about those unknown relatives in Poland. I once traveled to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar for thirty days and when I told him about the upcoming trip, the news unnerved him. Although I went to the pool every day and spent afternoons handing out ice pops to Security Forces, my dad didn't want me anywhere "over there." It's the same reason he struggles to talk about my life insurance and burial wishes. His imagining of me dead, coming home in a casket covered by the American flag, being carried out of a C-17, is too much for him. I haven't deployed yet but when I do, I know my father will age five years in the six months I'm gone. His imagination will take over and he will worry every day about where I am, who I'm with, and what I'm doing. But I admire my dad for thinking these situations through. He takes on the urgings of Kusnetz and feels the weight of war every day. We don't live in a time of front lines and battlefields. There is no place like Gettysburg or Normandy for us to memorialize today's conflicts. We are all at war. In the past year, terrorist attacks have occurred in a pedestrian shopping district, the Louvre, a fireworks display, airports. An eight year old girl named Saffie Rose Roussos was killed at an Ariana Grande concert. How can we be participants of this world, of this human race, and not imagine that being our daughter?

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