

## The Survivor

John C. Pine

She learned early that in order to survive  
She would have to make herself  
As small as possible and hide  
Among the others, even if it meant  
Concealing herself behind a corpse.  
She learned also to appropriate  
From the dead their bread  
Ration and articles of clothing.  
The sheer bureaucratic  
Size and impersonality of the death camp  
Worked to her advantage.  
She survived also on animal instinct  
And cunning. She knew that her elders  
Thought too much about their situation.  
Their fate could be read in the dazed  
And vacant look on their faces.  
After the inevitable selection they became  
Spectral voices, disembodied hands  
Between the iron bars of high windows.  
Sometimes on warm spring days  
When the foliage was beginning to turn green  
And wildflowers were blooming in the woods,  
She would sun herself within sight of the crematories  
And observe the smoke rising from the chimneys,  
And smell the stench of burning flesh  
Which permeated the entire camp.  
Almost thirty-five years later she returned  
To Auschwitz-Birkenau with her son  
From her home in Birmingham, England.  
There was grass where before there had been only mud.  
Some of the buildings had been torn down,  
And the emptiness all around them  
Was strange and unsettling. Nevertheless,  
It soon came back to her. Unhesitatingly  
She walked through the thick underbrush  
To the pits which had been hastily dug  
When the crematories could no longer  
Dispose of people fast enough.  
Many of those selected for extermination  
Has been burned in these open pits—  
Some of them while still alive.

Now poking in the ashes with a stick  
She came upon a small fragment of bone  
Bleached by the heat and cold of thirty-five years,  
And gave it to her son as a memento  
Of all that she had been witness to  
And in memory of all those who nourished  
The earth without even a whitish sliver  
Of bone to be remembered by.