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## *A Letter to Serafin*

John Minczeski

In his poem "Tour Bus," John Minczeski writes: "I wanted to break free/and make my own way/to the present world," but what's extraordinary is how achingly present and compassionate this accomplished poet is, whether pondering the plight of the October Primrose, or Birkenau's "few intact barracks turned black under soot and history," Minczeski takes it all in and brings it back to the page with passion and grace.

—**Dorianne Laux**, author of *Facts About the Moon*

*A Letter to Serafin* is an absolute original...[offering] a subtle fusion of forthright plainspeak and a blend of near rhymes and soft cadences. Minczeski is a smart and feeling person who has thought long and deep about time and art, belief and the past, asking questions like: "Why does a great painting affect us as it does?" and "Why does something my grandfather touched touch me as it does?" and "What is it that you and I and a farmer working the dirt in Poland or Sicily or Darfur or Iraq share?"

—**John Guzlowski**, author of *Lightning and Ashes*

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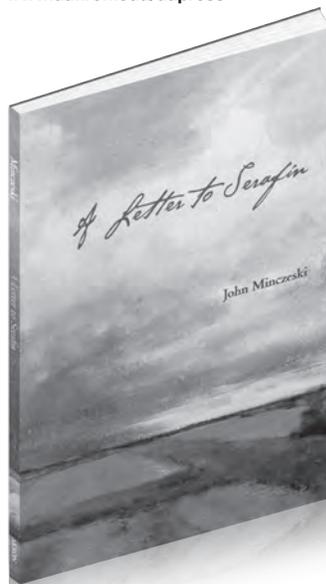
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JOHN MINCZESKI

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## The Camps

### I. Auschwitz

Winter lasted forever  
for those never heard from again,  
their daily ration of coal as meager  
as a bowl of thin soup.

But this October, in the suburbs of Kraków,  
the air crisp as celery, the sky  
sparks over maples that do not turn red;  
horse-drawn carts creak on the side of the road

under loads of turnips and rutabagas  
as they have for a thousand years.

A kiosk at the entrance displays books  
in English and Polish, posters, a rack  
of picture post cards. *Get what you need here,*  
a fellow tourist visiting a second time says,

*you won't find another gift shop  
anywhere on this tour. We get  
two rolls of Kodachrome, a bottle of water.  
Should I know what I'm doing here,*

standing at the pit of history under *Arbeit Macht Frei*  
as Joan frames it in the camera? Other tourists,  
fresh from the orientation movie,  
flood through. I am unable,

even now in the privileged future,  
to go in without her.  
Looking down cypress-lined boulevards  
away from the barbed wire, the brick barracks

could be campus dorms. It is too easy to imagine  
gerbera daisies by the front doors, rows of rust-  
colored zinnias and dahlias gracing the road  
to crematorium #1.

Trains pulled in hourly. Smokestacks  
pumped around the clock with lubricated precision.  
Prisoners, in striped pajamas worn to zero,  
took their suitcases. *Hush,*

they said in Polish.  
*Take this hanger—you must remember its number.  
Your clothes will be disinfected and returned  
when you finish your shower.*

Tooth brushes  
clothes brushes  
shaving brushes  
Shoe brushes

Baby shoes  
baby bottle nipples  
entered in ledgers  
with so little time in our lives

pitchers  
wash basins  
eye glasses  
crutches

prostheses  
spent cans of Zyklon B  
catalogued and examined  
and under glass.

Told to label their suitcases,  
they wrote in large, block letters

MARIE KAFKA  
OTTO ISRAEL SCHÖNHOF  
WEISS, GEORG

the tour keeps moving  
I cannot copy more.

## 2. Wooden Barracks, Birkenau

The wind through the open eaves said nothing,  
the furnaces with broken tunnels

running down the center of this kennel  
spoke no word.

The scab of night wasn't any better  
than the open wound of day.

A faint smell filled the barn.  
I, who had a return ticket

to pizza and vodka  
in the underground cellars of Kraków

would be rid of it by morning.  
If there was a window

I could have thrown it open  
and flapped like one of those crows

perched above the statue of Kopernikus  
under the light of unknown stars

as though I could be any more successful  
in piecing the shattered fragments

of that century—or anything—  
together again.

### 3. Wooden Barracks / 2

How could I write about them when the notes  
I scribbled in the shorthand of the moment  
were like electrons fumbling toward eternity?

How many of my carpenter cousins,  
with wooden pegs instead of valuable nails,  
joined timbers for the barracks of Birkenau?  
And how many, after the Nazis fled, did they dismantle?

The houses they built from that lumber  
must still front a street or a field. Is there a word  
in any language for the perfect conscience

of wood? The few intact barracks turned black  
under soot and history. Among the acres of ruins,  
chimneys remain standing like weeds  
after the unmentionable harvest.

## 4. Tour Bus

I wanted the bus to leave without us.  
I wanted to wander as though I'd lost my mind,  
picking stones from the rail bed  
under the gate to Camp #2.

I wanted to forfeit the remainder  
of my ticket to see if I could get back  
with only a Visa and a handful of Złotys.  
I wanted to break free

and make my own way  
to the present world.  
I wanted to lie down and curl  
into the earth and have it not be a disaster.

Was it a sudden discomfort  
at hearing my own language spoken on the bus?  
Or the forensics of silence,  
the violent shades of white,

a lingering hangover from the war,  
the haze of it still hiding the horizon?  
I didn't want to know the way home.  
I wanted to follow any scent

rather than continue obeying  
the tour guide, no matter how patient  
she was. But she held  
the bus,

\* \* \*

ready to send out searchers,  
knowing there are those of us  
who have to keep our ears pressed  
against brick and wood,

thinking we could spend another hour,  
or night,  
or the rest of our lives here.

## 5. November

The day seeps in, Venus riding high at dawn,  
both hands on the handlebars, gunning it, hard.

Night lingers in a cup of black coffee,  
stars remain etched in frosted windshields.

November: a juke box of crows,  
a dog barking at the wild universe.

In this country where we welcome  
the value of distance, the ancient,

wooden smell of Birkenau lingers:  
maybe a remnant of coal,

not the rags worn by prisoners.  
Does forgiveness have a smell?

Did the circling angel of hope  
leave anything besides dust

and the morning trills of jays  
in leafless trees?

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**JOHN MINCZESKI'S** poems have recently appeared in *Umbrella*, *Kritya*, *Cerise Press*, *Connecticut River Review*, *American Poetry Journal*, and others. He lives in St. Paul.