

Beginning with 1914

by
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1. Since it always begins
2. in the unlikeliest place,
3. we start in an obsolete country
4. on no current map. The camera
5. glides over glower beds,
6. for this is a southern climate.
7. We focus on medals, a horse,
8. on a white uniform,
9. for this is June. The young man
10. waves to the people lining the road,
11. he lifts a child, he catches
12. a rose from a wrinkled woman
13. in a blue kerchief. Then we hear shots
14. and close in on a casket
15. draped in the Austrian flag.
16. Thirty-one days torn off a calendar.
17. Bombs on Belgrade; then Europe explodes.
18. We watch the trenches fill with men,
19. the air with live ammunition.
20. A close-up of a five-year-old
21. living on turnips. Her older sister,
22. my not-yet-mother, already
23. wearing my daughter's eyes,
24. is reading a letter as we cut
25. to a young man with thick glasses
26. who lies in a trench and writes
27. a study of Ibsen. I recognize him,
28. he is going to be my father,
29. and this is his way of keeping alive.
30. Snow. Blood. Lice. Frostbite.
31. Grenades. Stretchers. Coffins. Snow.
32. Telegrams with black borders.
33. On the wide screen my father returns
34. bringing his brother's body;
35. my mother's father brings back his son's
36. from the opposite edge. They come together
37. under the oaks of the cemetery.
38. All who will be my family
39. are here, except my sister,
40. who is not yet imagined.
41. Neither am I who imagine
42. this picture, who now jump

43. to my snowy birthday in the year
44. of the million-mark loaf of bread.
45. My early years are played
46. by a blue-eyed child who grows up
47. quickly, for this is a film
48. of highlights, like all documentaries
49. false to the life -- the work
50. of selective memory, all I can bear
51. of a painful childhood. The swastika
52. appears and remains as the huge
53. backdrop against which we're seen.
54. The sound track of a hysterical voice
55. is threatening us. We're heard as whispers.
56. Shortly before my city
57. bursts into flames, my stand-in
58. disappears from the film, which continues
59. with scenes of terror and death
60. I can't bear to watch. I pick up
61. a new reel, a strange sequel
62. set in a different location
63. and made in another language,
64. in which I am back. The colors are bright,
65. the sound track is filled with music,
66. the focus gentle. A man is beside me.
67. Time-lapse photography picks up
68. the inchmeal growth of daughters
69. toward the sky, the slow subversion
70. of dark by gray hair. Little happens.
71. The camera sums up the even flow
72. of many years in a shot of a river.
73. The principals from part one
74. are missing, except for me
75. who am the connection. The time is now
76. and I am playing myself.

1. Read the poem again and in groups underline all the words which relate to the **movie realm**.
 - a. How does the poet use the metaphor of a film to portray the event leading up to the outbreak of World War I (line 1-17)
 - b. Using the Internet, read about the assassination of the Archduke Frances Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in July 1914. What historical information does the poem include?

2. Read lines 18-37. How does the poet combine objective historical images with subjective images from the poet's own life? What effect does this have on you?
 - a. What keeps the father alive?
 - b. What does this tell us about his relationship to war?
 - c. One poetic image can relate a whole series of dramatic events. Can you visualize the image in line 32? Why is it so poignant? In groups discuss the emotional impact which this event produces.
3. What takes place in the year of the poet's birth? Do you know the year? Why is it significant?
4. We have seen together a documentary depicting scenes of WWI, of the years leading up to WWII and the devastation wrought by WWII. Why does the poet refer to documentaries (and to the poem itself) as "a film of highlights false to life, the work of selective memory?" (line 48-50) According to the poet, why can't a poem or a documentary tell the whole story? Do you agree?
5. What does the swastika represent for the poet? (**Note:** It is huge. Where might one have seen a huge swastika?)
6. Whose hysterical voice is heard?
 - a. How does the poet depict the helplessness of those forced to listen to this hysterical voice?
7. Find the line where the poem's tone changes abruptly.
 - a. What "forces" the poet to do this?
8. Can you guess the "location" which the "new reel" has taken the poet? What is the new language spoken?
9. The span over many years of a new life is described (line 64-76). What are the highlights?
10. Why does the poet view herself as "the connection?" (line 75)
 - a. This may be the most important line of the poem. Can you give some reasons why? (Discuss in groups)

Hint: Go back over the poem and make a list of the members of the poet's family, who are mentioned or who appear in the poem.

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