

# First Place, Prose, Grades 10-12

## “Majdanek,” Max Walker

As we drove through the land of death I wondered how people still lived here. My stomach tightened. The dead grass, illuminated mockingly by the surprise sun, screamed death. Death was everywhere. The sounds seeped through my defenses, and even as we stepped off the bus with no guards or dogs, the air screamed death. My senses interrogated me, “Why have you come here, to this forsaken place?” My hands battled the bottom of my pockets as we passed through the gate. Two thousand years of resistance struggled to break free. And yet I walked right into the abomination.

At Auschwitz I expected to feel something. I wanted to feel something. The movies, the books, my brother’s college essay, all revolved around this one place, the most feared place on earth: Auschwitz. But I felt next to nothing. The knots in my stomach untied themselves as we walked through the camp. I stared with dry, emotionless eyes at all the luggage, the hair, the shoes, the plates, the photos, the holding cells, the gas chambers. I hadn’t walked into a camp but rather a museum.

Days later, approaching Majdanek, I had no worries. Another day, another camp without emotion. On this bus ride I was neither scared nor nervous. Majdanek’s fence was wimpy. We stepped through the first building, the one with the showers. The real showers where prisoners bathed, and the gas showers where they died. Tears began to come, but I wanted them. They were proof that I could feel in a way I couldn’t at Auschwitz. Majdanek, preserved to appear just as it did in the Holocaust, wasn’t the most famous camp. But I knew immediately it was going to change me.

From barrack to barrack we walked, reading the stories

and the diagrams, seeing the shoes and the bunks. The sturdy wood of the walls sheltered us from Poland’s deceptively cold July wind. The barracks were ironically homey; the outside was cold.

Eventually we reached the end of more than a dozen barracks and walked across the camp. Passing through a larger gate, we turned onto a path. The path’s perfect smoothness clashed with the rest of the camp’s gravel roads. At the end was a set of stairs leading up to a plateau. On it sat a concrete dome, supported by beams just tall enough that one could walk inside. We strode briskly, hoping the dome would shield us from the chilling winds. It didn’t. As we ascended the steps, the dome’s inside came into view. “Is that...ash? That can’t be ash,” I said, squinting as the wind barraged my eyes.

“No, it can’t be,” my friend Shawn agreed, quickly ascending, excited for the shelter the dome would provide.

But our guide soon corrected us. This was not a shelter. It was a mausoleum.

My stomach instantly retied its knots. Under the dome there was a barrier that reached my waist. As I approached, more and more of the ash came into view. A pile. No, a mound. No, a hill. No, a mountain. Ash on top of ash on top of ash.

Realization came over me like a giant wave. At last I understood. My stomach tightened and tightened. Tears, generations of tears, overtook me. Shock. Fear. A piercing wail. A scream from the air: Death. I looked over my shoulder at the houses that border the camp like my house borders my backyard. People still live there. *How can those houses*

*still stand? How can they be human and still watch from their windows as we suffer? I am standing at the edge of humanity. If I take one step forward, I will be among the dead, gone forever. If I retreat, I will return to ignorance of the ashes. Not knowing is worse than accepting. But before I step forward, I must enjoy one last moment of disbelief, of the in-between.*

I turn in place back towards the larger city. A sunset has emerged from the grim clouds. I squint in disbelief. My tear-stained vision renders me blind. *Is this great beauty mocking me? Or can we recover after all?*

A sustained note cuts through the cold air. It holds, resonates and then dissipates. A church bell. *Why?* My fear turns to confusion, but the serenity is undeniable. It holds a weight the air’s scream never did. Before me I no longer see a land of death. Instead, I see a nation, a world of life. And with the gleam of the sunset in my eyes and the tranquility of the church bell in my ears, I return to the bus, hope coursing through my veins.

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