One of the first things I notice upon entering Auschwitz 1, the infamous labor camp near Krakow, Poland, is a sign. On this sign it reads “Please keep quiet to respect the memory of the thousands who were killed in this room by the Nazis”. The room with the sign was one of the early gas chambers where the Nazis had experimented with the proper amounts of cyclone B gas to use for optimum killing at minimum cost. It is for this reason that the sign only read “thousands” and not “hundreds of thousands” which it would have read if it had been posted by one of the two main crematoriums located in Auschwitz 2-Berkanauw. The number of people murdered in that room is appalling, but that is not what struck me about the sign. I had prepared, or at least as much as one can prepare, to read such numbers. No, what struck me about the sign was that it requested silence of me. Perhaps this was my minds way of trying to focus on something else besides the despair and death I found myself surrounded by. Such despair is like the sun; one can only look at it for so long before having to blink. So I blinked and wondered why silence had become a part of this room, and more why silence had become a part of the apparel that was and is worn in Auschwitz. Why was it that if I coughed too loud I was given a reproachful glance from the people standing next to me?

And so I walked in silence wondering why I was silent.

I find it is only after humans are denied the ability to talk that they are able to do something not quite as natural to do, listen. I mean truly listen, not just wait for an opportunity to say something more relevant, more profound, or more exciting. So I listened. Penetrating the silence I heard the soft crunch, crunch of my footsteps and the footsteps of those walking beside me. I heard and felt the beating of my own heart; dah doom…dah doom. I heard my breathing, in and out, as I walked. But just as the sun leaves a bright mark in your vision even after you stop looking at it so did the despair around me leave a bright mark in my mind. I couldn’t look at, hear, or even think about anything without the despair being foremost and coloring the rest of my thoughts. So as I walked and listened to my footsteps, crunch crunch, I wondered how many people before me had listened to their own footsteps walk along these paths. How many of them would have made a different sound because they walked barefoot, stripped completely naked as they made their way to
“showers”? I wonder how many people would have heard the sharp click of military issued boots as they walked this road, rifle in hand? I look down at my own feet and suddenly they don’t seem so loud, as I am surrounded by the sounds of millions of footsteps walking this same road. Millions of people walking into their destiny, and because of my silence I can, for an instant, hear them. I walk to an intersection where a Nazi doctor would have stood sorting through the arriving shipments of people seeing who was fit for work and who wasn’t. I wonder if he hears his footsteps marching towards his destiny? With a jerk of his thumb he indicates whether to go left or right. Left is sure death, right is perilous life. 80% go left. The footsteps of children are the hardest to hear but they are there, like the small staccato accents to an awful symphony, and without exception they go left. It is only now that I hear the breathing. Millions of inhales and exhales. Some heavy and on the point of breaking down, others calm and deliberate like waves on a calm beach, in then out, in then out. Their breathing both affirming that they are still alive and that this is not a horrible nightmare. I hear the labored breathing of the soldiers as they hurriedly go through the luggage, taking whatever is precious and degrading it to dollar signs. I hear the breath of the officer as he takes a big inhale before shouting that everything will be all right if everyone would just make their way to the showers to be disinfected. I again hear the footsteps as we crunch our way toward a building billowing smoke from its chimney. I hear the breathing as everyone tries to ignore the smell of that smoke. Now I begin to hear the heartbeats, billions of muted heartbeats. I listen to the frantic pace of some as they begin to realize the truth of where they are. I hear the relaxed beating of others who have believed the propaganda. I listen for the hearts of the guards behind their rifles and wool coats; and even there I hear beating. I’m not sure if I am comforted or disturbed by the knowledge that we are both humans. But I walk, surrounded by footsteps, heartbeats, and breath of the millions who have gone before me. I walk as far as I can but abruptly I am torn back to present. The crematorium and gas chamber is in ruins, destroyed by those same soldiers who, however uncomfortable it may be to acknowledge, have hearts. Yet those soldiers did not think that their actions could be heard by the silent. And even though a flower-adorned fence prevents me from going any further I still hear the feet continue. I still hear the anxious breathing of people getting undressed in front of others; I still hear the labored breathing of soldiers forcing so many people into such a small place. I hear
anxious gasps of breath accompanied by the unsure shuffling of feet as the door to the room is slammed shut. There is a moment when all that can be heard is the collective heartbeats when everyone stops moving and tries to hear what is going on. I can almost imagine ears cocked to the side listening for the sound of running water, the eyes looking for where the soap is kept. But from my vantage point outside of the dynamited gas chamber I can see the vents through which the little tablets of gas were poured down into the room full of breathing and heartbeats and I know that there is no running water, there is no soap. I close my eyes but my ears still hear. And now I am almost deafened by the sounds of frantically scrambling feet, I can hear the pound of feet trying to kick a door down that has been latched to prevent this very thing. I hear desperate gasps as some seek out air from the tiny crack at the bottom of the door. I hear huge exhales as people no longer able to hold their breaths have to give in to the deadly need for oxygen. I can feel heartbeats quicken to a frantic pace. I can hear someone’s pulse as it begins to throb in their forehead, their hands, their eyebrows. Throughout all of this the only steady sound is the slow, rhythmic heartbeat of the guards. After what seems an eternity the frantic scrambling begins to slow. Breathing becomes shallower and shallower until it ceases; the only heartbeat I can hear is my own as I stand on the edge of a chamber I can never fully enter or understand. Everywhere around me is silence. There are no more breaths, no more footsteps; even my own heart seems hesitant to beat. Finally I can hear a solitary pair of feet move toward the door to look in and see if the gruesome work is done. He looks in, still breathing, his heart still beating and decides it is has been long enough, there are more transports that need showering. So he crunches away to order others to clean the room, again leaving me in silence.

I listen longer to the silence. I listen longer because I want to hear something, anything. My own pulse quickens and I feel the blood rising to my face as I desperately listen for one more breath, one more beat. But I cannot, only silence. So I turn away and begin to walk back the way I had come.

It is now only my footsteps that echo through my ears in a crisp autumn afternoon. I wonder if this is why silence is requested. I wonder if the people who wrote that sign wanted me to be able to clearly hear and deeply appreciate what it means that my footsteps carry me away from those chambers of death. And so I listen because the sign tells me to. I am not sure whether it is a trick of acoustics but as I listen to the sound
of my footsteps I hear the sound of bare feet slapping on pavement, on another step I hear the sharp click of military boots, and on yet another step I hear the tennis shoes of an observer from the Midwest. And even though I look down to again confirm that I only have two feet, I am sure I hear all three.