Searching for my Father’s Body

Searching for my father’s body
I begin with the index
hoping to see the name
and to catch sight of a familiar grave.

It all depends on who you knew,
or rather who knew of you,
that determines history;
which circle self-conscious
wanted to commit to paper
its existence and mark a common grave.

The shock of not finding his name
is always the same. Unused to his
anonymity, I close the books angry
that his body was not discovered
and remains buried in an unmarked grave.

It is more painful
when there is no index.
I put it off, thinking
there’s time, he’s been
buried for twenty-eight years;
one more day won’t make a difference.

I numb myself and begin the body check
skimming quickly unwilling to be caught
in strangers’ tragedies, only looking directly
at those whom I would have known
had circumstances been different.
The search leaves me weak.
I am still not hardened.
Often caught by a particular sight
I begin to read, despite myself,
and learn a new name, another event,
still another atrocity. I smell again
the burning bodies, see the flames,
wade through sewers in a last desperate effort,
till some present distraction,
like hunger or cold, draws
me back and I begin closing windows
and preparing dinner.

After dinner I procrastinate.
Again I ask myself: should I really do this
and if I do it, will it finally
be done with? Once having found him,
will I be able to leave him in his grave
or will I still insist on carrying
him with me, a thirty-year-old man
whom I never knew?
Will I finally purge myself of the last image
he presented to his friends
when he chose deliberately, in split-
second consciousness, his own style of dying?

In one of the attics we are suddenly surrounded. Nearby in the same attic are the Germans and it is impossible to reach the stairs. In the dark corners of the attic we cannot even see one another. We do not notice Sewek Dunski and Junghajzer who crawl up the stairs from below, reach the attic, get behind the Germans, and throw a grenade. We do not even pause to consider how it happens that Michał Klepfisz jumps straight onto the German machine pistol firing from behind the chimney. We only see the cleared path. After the Germans have been thrown out, several hours later, we find Michał’s body perforated like a sieve from two machine-pistol series.¹
Confusing details, difficult to follow, but the main fact, his death, stares at me from the faded page, stares at me without penetrating my reason or understanding. Simply a fact, dead, like the object it describes.

I am dissatisfied. I am angry. I would have liked more life in this description. I would have liked those present to have stopped (We do not even pause), to have examined the body, to have made sure no pulse was there (We only see the cleared path), to have described his stillness, their certainty that he was really dead at that moment, that they hadn’t deserted him, that he didn’t lie there alone, feeling his own death.

I want more details to fill up my emptiness.

But the fighting had only begun. On Shwentoyerska Street it raged around the brush factories. A group under the command of Michel Klepfisz [sic] took a heavy toll of Germans. They battled for every building and for every floor of every building. They fought along the stairways until they were forced to the top floors. Then the Germans usually set fire to the building. Our fighters would dash through prepared openings in the attic walls to begin the fight again in the adjoining building.

On the fifth day [sic] of battle, in executing such a withdrawal, Michel’s group found themselves caught in an attic with German soldiers. In the dark, the fighting was confused. A German machine gun held Michel’s men at bay by sweeping their side of the attic from behind a chimney.

Two comrades managed to get close enough to the main body of Nazis to throw a hand grenade. At that precise moment, Michel hurled himself on the machine gun. It stopped firing.

An hour later, when the Germans were cleared out, his comrades found Michel’s body with two neat rows of bullet holes across the stomach.
I do not want this death.
Instead I leap towards life
when my father slept

Michał himself, thanks to a Polish acquaintance and worker and the two Pepesowske sisters (Marysha Sawicka and Anna Michalska) whom he had drawn into the work to help Jewish underground fighters, was able to find places where he could stay overnight, and when all doors were hermetically sealed and it was impossible to find a roof over his head, he would go to sleep in the cemetery among the graves.³

in Christian cemeteries,
perhaps even in the one
where his sister, who succumbed in a hospital, lay buried under a Christian name.

And my father sleeps among the graves in Christian cemeteries grateful that there is a dry spell, that the contact will have a pistol, that he will be able to jump the wall, that perhaps tomorrow Marysha will find him a real place to sleep. It is here I see him most clearly as he sleeps leaning against a tombstone and dreams, never considering where he himself will one day be buried.