I'm twenty-four
Led to slaughter
I survived.

These words are empty and equivalent:
man and animal
love and hate
foe and friend
dark and light.

Man is killed just like an animal
I've seen:
truckloads of chopped-up people
who will never be saved.

Concepts are only words:
virtue and vice
truth and lie
beauty and ugliness
courage and cowardice.

Virtue and vice weigh the same
I've seen:
a man who was both
vicious and virtuous.

I'm searching for a teacher and a master
let him give me back my sight hearing and speech
let him name objects and concepts again
let him separate the light from the dark.

I'm twenty-four
Led to slaughter
I survived.

When all the women
from the transport had their heads shaved
four workers
with brooms made from linden twigs
swept and gathered up the hair

Behind the clean glass
lies the stiff hair of those gassed
in the gas chambers
there are pins and bone combs
in this hair

No light shines through it
no breeze parts it
no hand touches it
nor rain nor lips

In giant chests
clusters the dried-out hair
of those gassed
and an ashen pigtails
with a little ribbon
pulled on at school by
naughty boys

The Auschwitz Museum, 1948
In the Middle of Life

After the end of the world
after my death
I found myself in the middle of life
creating myself
building a life
people animals landscapes

this is a table I kept saying
this is a table
on the table are bread knife
the knife is used for cutting bread
people feed on bread

man should be loved
I learned by night by day
what should one love...
I answered man

this is a window I kept saying
this is a window
beyond the window is a garden
in the garden I see an apple tree
the apple tree blossoms
the blossoms fall off
fruit forms
ripen

my father picks an apple
the man picking the apple
is my father

I was sitting on the front steps of the house
that old woman
pulling a goat on a rope
is more needed
is worth more

than the seven wonders of the world
anyone who thinks or feels
she isn't needed
is guilty of genocide

this is a man
this is a tree this is bread

people eat to live
I kept repeating to myself
human life is important
human life has great importance
the value of life
exceeds the value of every object
man has made
man is a great treasure
I kept repeating stubbornly

this is water I kept saying
stroking the waves with my hand
talking to the river
water I said
kind water
it is I

the man talked to the water
talked to the moon
to the flowers to the rain
he talked to the earth
to the birds
to the sky

the sky was silent
the earth was silent
if he heard a voice
flowing
from the earth the water the sky
it was the voice of another man

1955