

An Iris for Etty

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“There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance.”

—*Hamlet*, 4.5

The suddenness took you by surprise, not
that you didn’t know the day would come when,
forced to board an eastbound train, you would join
the many already immolated,
mere smoke and ash under gray Polish skies.

You had, after all, refused to escape,
remained resolute as you witnessed
your people’s collective catastrophe
and—taking full measure of their despair—
became the *thinking heart of the barracks*.

How startled were you, then, at suddenly
finding God and beauty there—mysteries
arising unbidden amid the mud
and malevolence, blossoming like
spring wildflowers entangled in barbed wire?

Irises bespeak faith, valor, wisdom,
and hope—virtues you wholly embodied,
choosing presence over preservation—
so when I find your cenotaph bedecked
with stones and flowers by passersby,

I’ll leave behind an iris and some rue—
that’s for grace and clearness of vision—
for on the postcard you tossed from the train
ferrying your family toward extinction,
you calmly wrote *we left the camp singing*.

*(Esther "Etty" Hillesum, born 1914, Middleburg, the Netherlands;
interned 1942-1943, Westerbork Transit Camp; murdered 1943,
Auschwitz, Nazi-occupied Poland.)*