

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.)*