

Eva's Song

By Michael Gurian (with Eva Lassman,
survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and Maidanek)

1.

My friends, I speak to you from beyond your dreams,
an old woman whose hands no longer tremble with love.
My voice once spoke of six million candles
that rose to the sky, and now I sing again.
You who gather here, good people who have all you need—
your families, your friends, your city of lilac and rose,
your boxes of blue light in your living rooms,
your internet with its endless poems--
tonight, at this temple, what gift have I left to give you?
I have my last song, my memory of another time,
a question of the eternal soul like a light, still, inside me,
“Did I do enough with my life?”

2.

When I lived among you, I was known as Eva Lassman,
born Eva Bialogrod, in 1919, that old time
of horsemen, valor and trains.
In Lodz, my Polish home, evening skies burned
electric red like a beating heart,
and every map that was ever vague seemed clear.
In their black coats and hair curls, our Hasidic men
davened at shul,
rocking back and forth on their invisible boats of glory,
while our women held the wanderer's moon
in their busy hands.

My family of Jews carried thirty centuries of sorrow
off a few small stands of joy.

My *Ojciec*, my father, held me on his lap,
and talked of the great light.
“Eva,” he said, “God will keep His promises,
though not always how you expect.”
My mother, my *Matka*, taught me to knit curtains for our windows
and light candles for Sabbath.
When my brother, Chaim, was born, she smiled,
“Eva, be grateful for this world,
and always love the children.”

When my older brother, Moshe's, daughter was born,
I held her tiny fists in mine:
"Lord," I smiled, "she will be our butterfly!"

Can you see my family there? I once had photographs.

There are no photographs anymore.

Much happened to my family, and the Jews.

I learned: there is a light so infinite it cannot be seen
until it flickers.

3.

My friends, did you know: everything can be taken from you?
The world can hate itself with the fury of love,
while you wander in the thick of it.

Throughout my life in America, people asked,
"Eva, how could the Jews not know what was coming?"

My answer: hate happens slowly, near firelight and singing,
while children, playing in the snow,
breathe air white as a loaf of bread,
and old people sit together, comparing their wings.
The radios fill with loud lies, the streets with tyrants,
but we say to one another,
"When have the Jews not known a bit of hate?"

When the Nazis ordered, "Wear the yellow star!"
we raised our heads in pride.

When the police took our bicycles, we thought,
"It's better to walk anyway."

When a young German soldier, blond fuzz on his cheeks,
ordered me to clean the sidewalk with my underclothes,
I refused. He beat me with his black stick
until the flower of my body became no more than flesh
attached to his brutal rapture—
yet, still, I did not think I would have to become
other than myself.

How could we not know what was coming?

There are questions a Jew asks
for which all the answers are dead.

4.

The Nazis broke down our doors. *Juden, Schnell!*
They chased us through the grainy fields.
“Eva, hide!” my family cried, “Eva, save yourself!”
Matka, who sang me awake to this life,
lost her heartbeat to the fleeing.
My *Ojciec* died wrenching and pockmarked with disease.
Moshe and his wife and daughter...shot dead;
Chaim, little Chaim, held onto his ragged clothes
until, a naked boy at Auschwitz,
he burned to ash.

I fled to Warsaw where the days of time closed to me.
In that ghetto of grief, I became a woman.
I learned to read the maps of God’s silence.

Friends, when you cannot save your own family,
forgiveness of yourself becomes
the worst cruelty imaginable.

5.

When the Nazis set fire to our ghetto,
we who survived were herded into cattle cars.
In the iron moan of trains, we rode to Maidanek.
A Rabbi near me whispered, “We must remain brave—
but Lord, what trail is the Jew following?”
We arrived at walls of echoing screams, as if God
could make a hateful symphony.
I begged the soldier at the garrison,
“Please! Let me keep my last family photograph!”
He put his gun to my head, he said,
“You may keep it in death.”

In the falling snow, I watched the last paper of my life
turn to ash.

People have asked me:
“Eva, how did you few souls survive the camps of terror?”

My answer: We decided the footprints of the Jews
must not disappear from this earth,
so we moved rocks from one wall to another
to prove we were alive enough

to move rocks from one wall to another.

We breathed just enough air each day
to hold in our small hands each night
the beating heart of shattered things.

6.

My friends, what would *you* have done?
Would you have given up on the world?
Would you have hated God?
Would you have closed away your love?

I tried to hate God, I tried to close myself away,
but I was a Jew who had lived for many years
in a garden of the beautiful sun,
and though I lost my family and my home, still,
an ancient poem returned to me,
still, a light appeared in the crack of an old doorway,
still, shadows promised mysterious truths
of that light.

Matka whispered, “Eva, will you sing a song for us?”
and *Ocjiec*:

“No matter what, Eva, you must carry God’s stars
in your trembling hands.”

So, I prayed:

“Lord, if I die in this place, please make my bones
into wax for Your lit candles.”

People ask me: “Eva, how could you keep your faith
in that dark and godless time?”

Friends, I do not know why God brought us to the grave
of a thousand spectacles,
but in the name of all who once touched my baby skin,
I could not blame that light.

People say: “But Eva, God abandoned you!”

I say: God was the presence of light
even in the darkest dark.

People say, “But Eva, that God is not enough!”

I say: there is no greater God in the universe.

7.

When the dying mothers with their empty arms,
and the dying fathers with their darkened eyes,
and the children sobbing before their burning
commanded their angel of God,
“Young woman, you will survive,” I heard also:
“Young woman, what promises will you keep?”
Twenty five years old, rags for skin, I promised all I had,
the eternal lightness of seeds:
that ash rising from smokestacks would carry with it
weightless births on other shores.

When the Russian soldiers came, their faces sordid and grim--
when they gave us back our freedom,
that dull magnificence regained at the cost of everything--
I promised to live.

My dears, I have seen paradise:
it is wherever you breathe freely.

8.

I walked half-dead from Maidanek to Lodz,
saw *tefillin*, *tzitzit*, and hair curls again,
saw a Torah again.
I met a skeleton from Buchenwald who still breathed.
Zev Lassman and I learned how to eat and drink again,
we tasted milk and candy.
At an altar of broken glass, we married.

There are six million reasons to love,
and no reason not to.

Holding hands at the rail of our ship to America,
Zev and I watched wind slide across the waves. How beautiful!
Eternal light wrinkled the water like jewels.
In America, we had three sons, Iro, Joel, and Sylvan:
they became the stars God gave us to carry
in our trembling hands.

9.

And our boys grew into men and married,
and I became a grandmother,
a bent lily with a slight accent, butterflies clinging to my stem.

One day after Zev had gone, my granddaughter
helped me hang curtains on my windows,
for I could no longer lift my thin arms; with her kind voice
she asked me why I had no photographs of my childhood.

I told her my story.

Her eyes filled with angry tears, and we held each other.
We talked a long time of the old worlds.
Finally, she asked, "*Bubbe*, should I hate the Germans?"
I spoke my truth: "Jews must never hate—
we must use that ash for our flowers."

O my friends, O my dears, this is my song:
I am a Jew, and Jews were born to plant flowers
even in the garden of a thousand sobs.

10.

Do you understand, then, do you understand
the beauty of being here, in *your* time, in *your* place?
Will *you* choose to see what *you* must do?

You don't have to walk through fire--
we did that for you, so that, now, you are free to dream.
You don't have to love as if the death of love
is all you'll ever have. We did that for you, also.
What you must do is keep your promises.

Care for your family as a promise, and take photographs.
Let them become your masterpiece.

And when your life is hard and tiring,
promise, still, to cherish it.

And when your marriage does not fulfill you,
promise, still, to practice mercy.

And even when God seems to disappear
into His own thoughts,
promise, still, to choose between
the sweet and the bitter.

And you who always want more...more...more,
promise to love what you already have.

And you who sit complacent in a gilded cage--
find your journey, and a star.

11.

And when terror comes knocking on *your* door,
say, while you're cooking in firelight
and your children play in the snow--
when hate hisses on your Internet or television or radio,
"Your God is not the right God,
Your children are not as holy as *my* children"—
promise to fight that hate with every breath you have.

No matter your creed or color, never let the ash of hate
cover our human footprints.

And when in your lives, you lose sight of God's stars--
when you think, "I cannot have faith anymore"--
remember why the first flower opened its petals
to show its fragrant heart:
it felt encouraged by a light so vast, such an infinite, blazing eye,
it sought truth even in darkness, and flickered there,
a piece of creation ever re-born.

12.

I am the voice of Eva Lassman, born Eva Bialogrod, in 1919.
I was a Jew who survived the excesses of God's masterpiece.
When my life ended at 92, I knew "the truth."
Truth is not some loud answer to a human fear:
truth is a question as fragile as the world's most fragile child,
"What will we do with our lives?"

I gave everything I had to mine,
so it would not merely be taken.

Now I end my last song with love for you and your homes,
with reverence for my life and yours,
I end my song with hope that you will now and always ask yourself,
"What will I do with *my* life?"
in a voice so loud and clear your children's children will hear
your determination long before they're born.

My dear friends, I hope you will feel the freedom of being alive,
as I did,
and may you learn the lesson I learned:

no matter how much you suffer in a human lifetime
nor what mistakes you think you've made;
when in *your* life, God opens *your* soul and asks,
"Will you keep the promise I made to you at Creation?"
you answer,
"Yes, Lord, Yes, I will: to my last heartbeat,
to the last action of my last breath, to the last flickering of my light,
my *life* will be the promise You kept."

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