

Dead Men Don't Praise God

Jacob Glatstein

We received the Torah on Sinai
and in Majdanek we gave it back.
Dead men don't praise God,
and the Torah was given to the living
And just as we all stood together
at the giving of the Torah,
so did we all die together at Majdanek.

I'll translate the tousled head, the pure eyes,
the tremulous mouth of a Jewish child
into this frightful fairy tale.
I'll fill the sky with stars
and I'll tell him:
our people is a fiery sun
from beginning to beginning to beginning.
Learn this, my little one,
from beginning to beginning to beginning.
Our whole imagined people
stood at Mount Sinai
and received the Torah.
The dead, the living, the unborn,
every soul among us answered:
we will obey and hear
You, the saddest boy of all generations,
you also stood on Mount Sinai.
Your nostrils caught the raisin-almond fragrance of each
word of the Torah.
It was Shavuoth, the green holiday.
You sang with them like a songbird:
I will hear and obey, obey and hear
from beginning to beginning to beginning.

Little one, your life is carved
in the constellations of our sky,
you were never absent,
you could never be missing.
When we were, you were.
And when we vanished,
you vanished with us.

And just as we all stood together
at the giving of the Torah,
so did we all die together at Majdanek.

From all sides the souls came flocking.
The souls of those who had lived out their lives, of those
who had died young,
of those who were tortured, tested in every fire,
of those who were not yet born,
and of all the dead Jews from great grandfather Abraham down
they all came to Majdanek for the great slaughter.
All those who stood at Mount Sinai
and received the Torah
took these holy deaths upon themselves.
“We want to perish with our whole people,
we want to be dead again,”
the ancient souls cried out.
Mama Sarah, Mother Rachel,
Miriam and Deborah the prophetess
went down singing prayers and songs,
and even Moses, who so much did not want to die
when his time came,
now died again.
And his brother, Aaron,
and King David,
and the Rambam, the Vilna Gaon,
and Mahram and Marshal.
And with every holy soul
that perished in torture
hundreds of souls
of Jews long dead, died with them.

And you, beloved boy, you too were there.
You carved against the constellated sky,
you were there, and you died there.
Sweet as a dove you stretched out your neck
and sang together with the fathers and mothers.
From beginning to beginning to beginning.

Shut your eyes, Jewish child,
and remember how the Baal Shem rocked you in his arms
when your whole imagined people
vanished in the gas chambers of Majdanek.

And above the gas chambers
and the holy dead souls,
a forsaken abandoned Mount Sinai veiled itself in smoke.
Little boy with the tousled head, pure eyes, tremulous mouth,
that was you, then—the quiet, tiny, forlorn
given-back Torah.

You stood on top of Mount Sinai and cried,
You cried your cry to a dead world.
From beginning to beginning to beginning.

And this was your cry:
we received the Torah on Sinai
and in Majdanek, we gave it back.
Dead men don't praise God.
The Torah was given to the living.