

“Don’t Break the Circle”

Your name, Yevgenia Lazerevna, is music,
but the last name, Klemm, a percussive thud.
Maybe that was your husband. Perhaps you met him
in the Red Army you served during the war
fought after the war fought
to end all wars.

The Germans captured you, all five hundred
“Red Army Girls,” sent you to Ravensbruck
site of unspeakable experiments on your helpless
bodies or “Rabbits” as they were called.

no words to do justice to your shame

You became the leader of the Red Army women
POW’s, exhorting them to stay strong, united

no words to do justice to your fear

Guards tried to bribe them—starving—to snitch on others,
to become spies, to betray their comrades, for special
privileges, treats. “Don’t break the circle”
your words a plea and a command.

No milk from women’s violated bodies for their newborns.
They—forbidden food-- watched their infants starve and die.

no words to do justice to your grief

“Don’t break the circle”-- your voice holding them as one

You survived, Yevgenia Lazerevna,
went home to Stalinist Mother Russia.
No maternal arms for you, history teacher.
You only wanted to teach history, but they harassed you.
You were a hero, but you were forbidden to teach.
No reason given. Perhaps you had lived too much
History.

You hanged yourself.
Was Stalin’s savagery stronger than Hitler’s
or were you finally broken?

Karen Klein

