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A Mother's Prayer

In Monza, Italy, in 1962, Gianna Beretta Molla was pregnant with her and her husband's fourth child. She developed a uterine fibroma and was given three options: a hysterectomy, an abortion, or removal of the tumor through a method that posed great risk to Gianna but gave the only chance of survival for her baby. On April 21, 1962, Gianna Emanuela Molla was born, but her mother died eight days later of complications due to the surgery.

"If you must decide between me and the child, do not hesitate: choose the child. I insist on it. Save the baby."

Gianna Beretta Molla

"For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!"

2 Corinthians 4:17

An April gust stirred the forlorn cypress
Lining the hospital's white-washed facade.
A glance from its walls, a small stream cuts course;
Water trapped 'tween cold banks routing its path.
Absently gazing at the even flow,
Her trembling hand atop the parapet,
A woman stood. Her red-rimmed eyes, though dry,
Spoke all the anguish of a fallen world.
Life's bitter nightshade blossom in her womb,
Sweetened her choice with amaranthine joy.
Trust, as a mere touch to His garment's hem,
She pressed a hand on her expectant round.
Her heart's walls echoed with the haunting voice,
Nuance stripped off, it questioned: Death or love?
Burning with ardency, her mother's prayer.

Oh Jesus, I entrust to thee, whatever cross befall.
Just as a steadfast edelweiss atop the alpine pall
Turns to fair sunshine's quickening kiss, my soul finds warmth in thee.
My snowy pennon hoisted: not defeat, but liberty!

For her, my heart's resolved if needful my life to forsake,
A pelican's death to endure, His passion to partake.
As Helios and Phoebus are, so love and sacrifice.
Agape love my heart inflames—I would pay any price!

The strain within Pietro's¹ voice reveals his tacit fear.
My darlings' hands hold tight to me, "Mommy, always be here?"
I wish that I could promise them that sadness we'll not face.
Let death not rend our family—Father of life, give grace!

Will she not gain the thrills of life my heart long loved to seek?
To soar in wind-chapped pleasure down a sparkling, snowy peak?
To be entranced by melodies that free the soul from gloom?
Let her not! Life, a monocarp, be snipped not ere the bloom!

The tranquil stream beneath my bridge of stone flows steadily,
It wears the rock as hope erodes the worries that plague me.
The gentle wash recalls to me, the baptism of life
The newborn's sacrament unites, surpassing any strife.

And though, my babe, unborn, it's true, you are a sacred gift.
Smile — if it happens that the worst should come, grief passes swift;
If one or both our lives be lost, it's only in these days
The mortal veil delays us from reunion in love's gaze.

"Still oft I see Gianna when on Easter morn she held
Our little girl in wearied arms, the painful knowledge welled.
She left her kiss on the soft head, with earnest her voice shod,
'This moment, though in suffering, give praise and thanks to God!'"^{2 3}

¹ Pietro is Gianna Beretta Molla's husband.

² This stanza paraphrases a quote from Pietro Molla: "I still see Gianna when, on Easter morning in 1962, in the maternity ward of the Monza hospital, she took the child in her arms with great effort, she kissed her and looked at her with a sadness and an anguish that to me are the proof of her awareness that she would soon orphan her."

³ The last line of the poem comes from a quote from Gianna Molla: "Also in suffering, let us say: Thanks be to God."

Hemans and I: Suspending and Embracing Ethics in Poetry

“And lifted her sweet voice that rose awhile
Above the sound of waters, high and clear
Wafting a wild proud strain, her Song of Death.”

When the Romantic poetess, Felicia Dorothea Hemans, penned these lines, she did not give voice to the titular Indian woman; rather, the Indian woman gave voice to her. At first glance, Hemans appears to appropriate the Indian woman’s story and send it through a British filter. She writes using Western syntax and style, makes the Indian woman sing in refined English, and extrapolates the woman’s story from three edited pages of a British explorer’s retelling. However, as Kathleen Lundeen stated in her analysis of Hemans’ literary empathy, “Nowhere does she [Hemans] hint that the poem is designed to give a voice to a silenced member of an underrepresented group.” In fact, Hemans said quite the opposite about *Records of Woman*, the book containing *Indian Woman’s Death-Song*, “I have put my heart and individual feelings into it more than anything else I have written.” (Hemans et al.). In response to this, Lundeen continues, “Her sole desire appears to be to give herself a voice, something she can do only by proxy.” (Lundeen). Proxy is necessary because Hemans is broaching subjects—suicide and filicide—for which readers would otherwise condemn her.

It is important to note that Hemans’s purpose in writing the poems within *Records of Woman* was not to provide morally sound studies of motherhood. As Kelly McGuire states in her work on Hemans and maternal suicide, “In Hemans’s hands, poetry becomes a testing ground for suspending ethical considerations in favor of a much more affect-driven meditation.” This allows Hemans to take an ethically controversial—if not morally incorrect—stance in the retelling of

the “Indian Woman’s Death-Song.” Through the poeticized story of Gianna Beretta Molla within “A Mother’s Prayer,” I attempted to right the ethical wrongs in “Indian Woman’s Death-Song.” I am not offering a reproof for Hemans’s choice to portray the Indian woman’s suicide and filicide in a dark, but celebratory, light. This is merely an explanation of my attempt to abide by ethical considerations within my imitation poem.

Many of the ethical and moral issues in “Indian Woman’s Death-Song” appear as a result of distortion of goodness. For example, the Indian woman’s love for her husband leaves an indelible mark upon her heart. Because of this, she cries,

“But *mine* its lonely music haunts, and will not let me rest;
It sings a low and mournful song of gladness that is gone,—
I cannot live without that light!—Father of waves! Roll on!”

She can not bear to be without the love of her husband; as a result, this good love has become twisted into a resolve to take her own life.

Similarly, the woman’s love for her child culminates in filicide. Regarding filicide, the editor poses a question in the introduction of *Records of Woman*: “How can one voluntarily leave the world knowing one leaves behind the vulnerable lives one has brought into it?” (Hemans et al.). Hemans provides her answer within the lines of “Indian Woman’s Death-Song”:

“Too bright a thing art *thou* to pine in aching love away,
Thy mother bears thee far, young Fawn! from sorrow and decay.”

These lines echo the words of Kelly McGuire in “Felicia Hemans and Maternal Suicide.” She states that Hemans’s poem does not attempt to devalue the child’s life, “on the contrary, her maternal figures suggest that these lives are too important to be trusted to the vagaries of this world.” (McGuire). Upon deciding that this life is too painful to bear, the mother cannot leave the child to suffer through life as she has.

In “A Mother’s Prayer,” I answer Hemans’ question through Gianna Beretta Molla’s imagined words:

“Will she not gain the thrills of life my heart long loved to seek?”

Even as Gianna Molla is faced with life's cruelty that may prevent her from raising her unborn child, the thing that pains her most is the potential that her daughter may not get to experience life. How can a mother die knowing that she leaves behind her children? “A Mother’s Prayer” answers that despite its pains, life is too precious a gift for a child to lose.

The women’s certainty of an afterlife is another key element in the poems. This certainty of heaven is used as justification for the mother’s actions within “Indian Woman’s Death-Song” when she sings,

“Thy mother bears the far, young fawn, from sorrow and decay.
She bears thee to the glorious bowers where none are heard to weep.”

Naturally, moral problems arise from using heaven as an escape from the suffering of this world rather than seeing it as the reward or gift at the end of a virtuous life. In “A Mother’s Prayer,” heaven is still a comfort if the worst should come to pass:

“If one or both our lives be lost, it’s only in these days
The mortal veil delays us from reunion in love’s gaze.”

However, final rest within this comfort is not actively sought. Within the poem, Gianna Molla’s character recognizes that ultimately her fate is not up to her when she says,

“My snowy pennon hoisted: not defeat, but liberty.”

She surrenders to the knowledge that David shares in Psalm 139: “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.” This trust and hope that God will bring good out of their suffering is a significant difference between the characters of the Indian woman and Gianna Molla.

The Indian woman and my characterization of Gianna Molla share the love of their children as the reasoning behind their different decisions. However, due to the character's despair, moral complications arise within "Indian Woman's Death-Song." In my imitation poem, "A Mother's Prayer," I attempted to offer a more ethically sound story of a mother's love while emphasizing the joy of life, despite the temporary sufferings of this world.

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