

from Night Scales: A Fable for Klara K

Prologue

Begin with a quotation:

She (softly): ... Listen to me.

Like you, I know what it is to forget.

He: No, you don't know what it is to forget.

She: Like you, I have a memory. I know what it is to forget.

He: No, you don't have a memory.

She: Like you, I too have tried with all my might not to forget. Like you, I forgot.

Like you, I wanted to have an inconsolable memory, a memory of shadows and stone.

End quotation.

Write, "The translation begins":

A platform bed on the stage, barren, exposed walls, as if unfinished. Tears and events. After the stopped clock. After disaster. Artfully reconstituted. Boarded up windows, the ramshackle brigade of personal effects of someone on the run, a suitcase in hand.

Write, "Ich habe alles vergessen."

What do you see, Mnemosyne? Do you hear the trains? You once counted them, un deux trois quatre cinq six under the mute gray sky. Is it time yet? Is it someone you once knew, soft pale shawl left behind where one enters at night like a thief or ghost walking on bones, dogs smelling your blood, stain on back of skirt spreading whistling the warning, "tear up the photo, now," tell them how you swallow each pellet until you finger nothing more than the torn lining of a winter coat. For an eternity, framed in the doorway I summon you like that. I pose you as if history didn't have a hand in it, didn't sew your garment herself, stitch by ruinous stitch, the green felt you parade in after the Libération, all eyes agog as you march on, oblivious to the chain of signs: "How dare she wear that boche rag now?"

I find it hard not to return to yesterday's bind shown today too heavy for words, too deep, it seems, for the measure between lines, blown off shards.

Scene four

Time is now Colder than a devil's tit Theatre's maiden unities
Three old bags skanky tooth and bony butt have been quarantined
No exit visa in a holding tank Meanwhile upstairs in the kitchen
of remembering floor covered with sawdust sloppy bread pans
lonesome for a flock three YOUNG girls call them X Y Z or if you
must know just this once Ania Sonia and Vera Three young girls at
the camp not the hags from before sit over icy vats They peel
potatoes with thousand-year-old eyes
in long pure ribbons of heart
lest the tiniest interruption of the coil
feed death in their mouth

: K's lover did not return
: His brothers?
: Never made it
: From that field?
: She'd mentioned he might have to
: Play dead?
: Lie there in their clothes
: Like waiting for a signal?
: Even though he swore
: They'd be gone?
: By dawn
: Far from here?
: To the other shore
: That other place?
: Called Life or something close
: How she tripped him up?
: I want to know
: So near the ending?
: Did she clap her hands
: Just like that?
: Eins zwei drei
: Twelve-bar hole?
: Something to fall on
: This passing of the bag?
: Not incarnate yet not flesh pink
: On the narrow bunk?
: Light three candles
: Like a reel that will disappear?
: From the low forest and orphaned hills

Scene five

Object lesson: an OLD MAN in a yellow hat, the very emblem of history, lends his torn coat to partition the stage; hangs it across like a volleyball net, to split it in two, define the boundaries, unequivocal, bill of divorce.

OLD MAN: See that boy scaling a wall? Imagine the crowds that watch as we are led to the gateways. Draw a line or a circle. Be careful of what you say. On this side there's a park with a kiosk like a gazebo, music is heard on special days streaming down the slope, a simple pretty song, small trees pink in early cherry blossoms. The stranger cannot inherit that story. His partition, some call it a score, calls out for other events, other sounds. If he winds up on the dank streets after lockdown, light disappears. Write what happens next in the lacy penumbra at the border of town. *Wstęp do parku wzbrożony!* (Do not enter the park!) He is saying the narrowed space on the other side of the page holds the boy as he slips his armband off, careful of the blackbird that skulks after him and takes off in a noisy panic as if he were the one they were after. Where is he now? Wretched, tightly packed, walled off and branded, black columns of figures escape in a swarm, fly in throngs toward a notion of forgetting but the trace has left its ink, permanent mark on the stem. See that boy scaling the high wall? I'm good at smuggling and delivering arms, knives and bread. Wrapped like grenades around my ribs, the goods fatten me up for a moment, then I jump like a skater or maybe a black cat between poles. Because of my youth, alarm hides in their eyes but mine are all steel, latched to the gray bricks I pet with my naked hands. Come close. Now mark a spot. Yes! Here and there, more like an outline, skeleton fence to shade in the interior. You know the rest of the play: fugitive vocabulary, mud, sorrow. No need to recount the obvious denouement. They say we're good with numbers. I'm not the one to prove them wrong. We own empires of shame, longing and disaster, all good bonds in the market world. Always already outside the line. The teacher's ring finger flies like a flag in your face. Would I seek this image to install the spectacle of that other sum, ominous *numerus clausus*, locked number, programmed to remove you from the bench of being? Don't worry, hush-a-baby. I won't quote from the interminable code of exclusions. Let the stranger practice her night scales. Let the other find his doorstep with the rest.

Scene three

On a mound or ramp sits a giant glassine box. Think Arman's crushed pianos in plexiglass, tubas, auto parts. Here in the press are eight to twelve BODIES: prone, nude, indistinguishable as if asleep or dead. The ribbon of rumors pulls them up onto the stage where they move all limbs pliant quick flame from one to the other, dancelike neither prophets nor angels—their lines float in the air no period no way of knowing their fate.

- : They say we have nothing to worry. We'll be going to work. I don't mind. Beats eating potato peels...
- : They say it's for tomorrow...
- : Sh, what do you know, snotface?
- : They say it's like a fire in a mine, walls come down scraping mouths, bloody hands all done with...
- : She said he died of hunger, wife stowed away the last moldy bread...
- : Under the jewels there's a rectangle bordered by electric wires... cat's cradle... full of current... they say you can jump in between if you time it right, if your foot or any body part touches...
- : They all say he must be alive still... she'll hear from him soon... it's only scene three, she's got a long way to go before...
- : They say it's like a piece of shrapnel right above your eye, everything goes blank... scroll of names you'll read on the carved wall...
- : In the fire of his speech, we are blind waiting in a cheap hotel for instructions to cross the border... we don't speak their language...
- : No one knows the code... no one knows the dosage...
- : They say it will be impossible to write after that...
- : A carpet of bombs...
- : Shock corridor... a canal full of rats...
- : Who will cross the bridge at that moment? Throw the grenade?
- : They have an orchestra down there; did you hear what I said?
- : They say he didn't get all that much for her, though his mother really loves the mink stole...
- : They say the old ones help the young, dead leaves and moss dressed into a shirt...
- : They say the soldiers sleep like birds... their fleshy mouths open to the sky...
- : But why take all this stuff? Don't they have their own tools? Their own scales?
- : They say she left in that black dress with the sequins... not an hour passes... whose hand bids me to run...
- : They say the fog will lift this veil of misremembering...
- : I see the towers in the distance... a river runs through the hole... grows shallow in places... depending on who is speaking...

Scene four

This is a scene where nothing happens.

That thing we call theatre is a transit where words pass on the way to silence.

K and THE WRITER sit on steps of cardboard

Orange crates

Blankets stained with blood

Flowers crushed beyond recognition

Might as well be rice or confetti well-wishers throw at the bride.

Sheets of time folded and refolded to mark movement

Mechanical stairs emerging from the deep metro

And going back down

Exactly the same way

Into the forest

Little rocks

We place to find our way

K: Go away. There's nothing for you here. Nothing to put down in your big register. No names no dates I remember nothing. My throat is plugged up like an old laundry tub, black stocking twisted around the pipes. A hole I tell you, seven feet deep with straight walls, really a well. The voices fall in the dark...

WRITER: We'll do it out of sequence; cross-hatch the narrative...

K (*interrupting*): With ghouls and corpses, wounds and gauze!

Impossible! You have no idea! The minute you utter a word, or stand next to the place where they were, you walk into a wall... The words harden! I need a blank, naked, abandoned lot...

WRITER: The ruined memory! Please spare us, thank you very much!

People want more than *mise-en-scène*!

K: I mean it. You better leave! Let them stuff an onion into their mouths. We're married to no one. One should never talk about this. You hear, never! It's a fucking disgrace this habit of always blabbing as if under a spell, laughing gas or ether. "Getting it right" "approaching the truth" what a joke! It's not a wisdom tooth, for christ's sake! Not a tattoo either!

WRITER: Then what do you want? An empty page smack in the middle of the book? Is that it? A bloody outline? Little vials with dust and ashes? A tin box scotch-taped all around, smudgy label in its center, spelling "sickness" or better yet, "death?" Small bottle of paint rattling inside? What color was it? What hue should

murder be, Miss Set Design? It wouldn't be fair to black, always
pounding on the same body. (*beat*)

Remember, in boarding school, ours were under lock and key. We
could only open them under the supervision of the witch with the
long gray hair, Madame Gilda, the one who withheld my mail if I
didn't finish my asparagus. Dark chocolate, biscuits, our tiny
share of sweetness we nibble at allotted times, chewing our misery
behind her back.

K: Yes! That's precisely it! You will write with your eyes shut, I'll pin
them myself if I have to! No markers, no way to stretch your arms
across the map. Illegible, gone to the dogs, tatters, what do you
care. It's not a documentary. You don't know where you're
going. Try crawling through the sewer. Above, men in leather
coats and yellow gloves inspect papers; peer with such
concentration as if examining a rare stamp.

Of course you have no pass no key not even a sense of what they
search for in your face. "Such pretty eyes," the tall one says
holding you up by the chin, "zu schön für eine ...". You don't hear
the verboten word at the end of the compliment. Take your fake
goods elsewhere while they sharpen their knives. The
streets look unfamiliar, crude like in a dream. Where are all the
houses, shops, schools, you used to know. Floorboards ripped to
shreds. Loose bricks everywhere. Charred bundles, could it...
These aren't showers, are they? Beds? What do you see now
under your blindfold, Mnemosyne? Do you hear anything? Trains
in the night?

"Is it far yet?" Is it far yet! Who do you think you are, la petite
Jehanne de France?

WRITER: I give up then! Gag! Tomb! Silence! That's what you wanted
all along. Cut out my tongue, dig a grave...

K: Be quiet! Someone's coming...