

SAMPLER

A Cloud of Witnesses

ALSO BY KJELL ESPMARK IN ENGLISH

Bela Bartók Against the Third Reich

(Shearsman Books / Oasis Books, 1985)

Lend Me Your Voice (Marick Press 2011)

The Inner Space (Marick Press, 2014)

SAMPLER

Kjell Espmark

*A Cloud of
Witnesses*

En sky av vittnen

translated from Swedish by
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Shearsman Books

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Far inside the cave's darkness
I painted a bison on the wall
while the woman held up the flare.
The red and the brown
compelled the rounded back into view –
and my hand took fright.
The beast snorted
and lowered its head at me.

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I am the tyrant Ardaios
they flayed
then gashed on thorny aspalathoi.
But my ending was so exactly etched
by a shrewd master
that it resembled a beginning.
And my glare is so intense
on what man can do to man
that the world will never be rid of me.
The thoughts that swarm in the helmet
worm their way into the heads of the living.

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Alkaïos! The echo disowns me.
On a bed of twigs and leaves
I rest alone. Night without stars.
With a soiled name I arrived here
to a life for wolves.
A window into humanity.

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No-one wanted to say the name
of the river we had to cross.
Those who waded laboured
especially with a child in hand
and were helpless targets for enemy arrows.
It was a drifting killing-field.
And the other bank, a piece of future
with scorched brown grass and alien faces,
was too steep. When all seemed lost
a helping hand reached towards us.

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It happened in the Han Dynasty. Condemned
for having defamed the Emperor
I was castrated, a punishment
more calculated than beheading.
My work became the son I was denied –
a furious swipe of the sickle
took home a whole epoch of family trees and private fates
and meeting-places where times were changing.
So I, Sima Qian, set the pattern
for the twenty-four chroniclers
who, through the centuries, at the Emperor's behest
wrote the history of the previous dynasty.
I entrusted them with my son.

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There's a flicker of sea between the pines
by the remnants of the amphitheatre.
Space is crickets and rosemary –
the empire has just been brought down.
On the fragment of capital on the sand
the stone leaves have opened as green foliage.
As when you were suddenly there in my life.

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I was long on my way to exile,
sentenced by Augustus
to lose my life hour by hour.
The ship was already reduced, day by day,
until it scarcely touched the waves.
Only my heart had weight.
It sank like the anchor
on this black coast.
Hurrying clouds wanted to erase my name,
the gibberish around me to silence my language.
But my Epistles demanded to be written –
their splinters of grief shimmering

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I was the handsome slave
who read to Maximus.
Powerless myself
I gave him eyes to see with
and hands to create a piece of the world.
His wife seduced me.
His sons betrayed me.
No stone will remember my name.

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Our camps torched,
our herds plundered –
the hyenas saw to
what was left of us.

It all happened in the name of Allah,
the same Allah we thought we worshipped.

The dry river bed
is a scraped parchment
still showing traces of our heresy.

And the desert wind that bears history
from mirage to mirage
carries our voices.

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The wild geese drew over the houses,
tidings that told me my loved one had fallen,
face down in the shallows,
still grasping his bow.
His evil dreams
had for long infiltrated my own.

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