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)
Kjell Espmark

A Cloud of Witnesses

translated from Swedish by
Robin Fulton

Shearsman Books
First published in the United Kingdom in 2022 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
PO Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-823-7

Copyright © Kjell Espmark, 2020
Translation copyright © Robin Fulton Macpherson, 2022

The right of Kjell Espmark to be identified as the author of this work,
and of Robin Fulton Macpherson to be identified as the translator
thereof, has been asserted by them in accordance with the
All rights reserved.

Acknowledgements
En sky av vittnen was originally published in Swedish by Norstedts,
Stockholm in 2020. It is the third in a trilogy, of which the first two
volumes were Vintergata (2007), published in English translation as
Lend Me Your Voice (Marick Press 2011), and Den inre rymden (2014)
published in English as The Inner Space (Marick Press 2014).
Contents

Far inside the cave’s darkness 9
I am the tyrant Ardiaios 10
Alkaios! The echo disowns me 11
No-one wanted to say the name 12
It happened in the Han Dynasty. Condemned 13
There’s a flicker of sea between the pines 14
I was long on my way to exile 15
I was the handsome slave 16
Our camps torched 17
The wild geese drew over the houses 18
In the cathedral’s shade we learned 19
The day before I was married away 20
On the wall in Vamlingbo Church 21
I, Farinata, saved Florence 22
The moon was a sickle that night 23
This is a woodcut from Wallachia 24
Glimmingehus is my work 25
I, the youngest novice in Saint Julien 26
The sky that day was as if new-born 27
I was the unknown painter 28
The iron wind snapped like jaws 29
My cell here in Kajaani Castle 30
It was I who was commissioned 31
When I’d just turned sixteen 32
Before they set the barn on fire 33
When their sails brought them to our island 34
Snowed-over windows and loneliness 35
In spite of everything the world existed around me 36
My pamphlets knew too much 37
The Arabs came, they were part of the night 38
Sea burial, a poetic phrase 39
It was the eve of all revolutions
It happened when the herring was still abundant
The great army was in shameful retreat
The wolf pack was snapping by the kitchen door
I’m a voice turned to the wall
Dizzy with sleep I staggered up
We who were shot for our hunger
It was I who deciphered the Brahmi inscriptions
Thought I understood birdsong
It’s harsh being married to history
According to an Australian myth
I was one of those they strapped
Why did you demand “documentation” from me?
There was nothing remarkable about me
Whoever occupies the country’s highest office
I can’t have been more than fourteen
I was on my way by sledge
Here, nature is created by light
Stooping and straining, I trudged on as before
We tried to reach China
My last days were nothing but torment
My agonizing cost me my bishopric
The whole of our Berlin slum
I specialised in prosthetic faces
I wrote my life
So long as someone remembered me
It happened that I did prophesy
No, I didn’t live in Alexandria
It was when water ran
These Siberian barracks, a mass grave
This was the unthinkable
The sign at the border-station was erased
The day Warsaw rose
To ensure perfection in our fire-bombing
Someone had informed on us
Perhaps you remember me, Uncle Jakov  
When we’d fled from the burning village  
We were standing at the grindstone in Espnäs  
I wrote that I lay naked on the pier  
Pressed my hands to my eyes  
The cell window’s miserly gleam,  
I’ve a memory of one of the Bible’s books  
When I floated down the Seine  
Have you heard the silence of the defeated  
The ghost horse in Hiroshima  
During my broken-off studies  
When I, the rabbi from Chemnitz  
“The Great Leap”  
Once I was a celebrated poet  
One day in June when I was struck  
The living room was a sickly darkness  
I’ve never found out  
I had what they called the seventh sense  
Here’s the memory I cling to  
I live in the cemeteries in Cairo  
Heard on the radio. A Polish poet  
To the great memory,  
He had a nose for women like me,  
My name has been scrubbed out  
Think it was Boxing Day.  
I sought refuge with the nuns  
Each evening I wait here in the half-light  
“Falsehood feasts on democracy!”  
Each day we became lighter,  
They won’t slit my throat  
He called me his little sparrow  
When the earthquake shook Mexico City  
I was the inconvenient journalist  
The coast we left is pale blue
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.
I am the tyrant Ardiaios
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.
Alkaios! 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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.