

Kafka's Shadow

poems

Judith Skillman

DEERBROOK EDITIONS

PUBLISHED BY
Deerbrook Editions
P.O. Box 542
Cumberland, ME 04021
www.deerbrookeditions.com
issuu.com/deerbrookeditions

FIRST EDITION
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ISBN: 978-0-9975051-4-6

Book design by Jeffrey Haste
Cover art: painting by Franz Marc, *Heather*.

in loving memory of my father

Dr. Sidney O. Kastner, 1926 – 1999

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I'd especially like to take care of the peonies because they are
so fragile.

And move the lilacs into the sun.

*

Do you have a moment? Then please lightly spray the
peonies.

*

Please see that the peonies don't touch the bottom of the
vase. That's why they have to be kept in bowls.

—Franz Kafka

Kafka's Shadow

Every limb as tired as a person

from Kafka's Conversation Slips

You must understand, for the time being,
that I am without flowers. The viburnum

outside the window sways. Its throbbing
keeps time with the wind and the ravens.

Here and there yellows turn brown, rust
as if with illness. The doctor has found

no cure for moods. I used to like to walk
downstairs into the world. There a family

ate and drank. My sisters' cheekbones high,
their eyes bright and well slept. I was punished

for not being an entrepreneur—for
wanting to write. You must remember me now.

The stories waited to be born. Labor
after labor between bouts of illness.

I ask my awful god for an appetite!
I lift a bowl from the wooden table

to the cupboard fitted with glass panes.
My arm weighs more than all Mama's fine

china gathered in the low boy, hemmed in.
Father is handy with his hammer.

Would that I might sense a little passion.
I'd take up the charcoal stick, shave thin rounds

from its black tip, and sketch this famous tree
whose arching stems hold snowballs.

Kafka's Mole

When will Kafka's father step in one of these piles?
When he walks home from working at the *Jackdaw*,
his meal will be waiting. He'll be fed and warmed
even as he satirizes his son.

You'll find him cursing as he enters the rented flat,
two stories, and hardly enough dowry money
to pay the servant girl.

His wife's standing over a pot large enough
to hold all the earth the mole has heaped up
in Prague. Instead of dirt: carrots, noodles
and strings of meat.

Hermann, the father-monster,
sits in his chair at the head of the table
drinking a mug of beer, nodding off,
until, with a little prod from the skinny boy,
his mouth turns foul and blasphemous.

If this is Kafka's mole, perhaps it is yours as well.
It could be you'll recall, among the fecund scents,
that incident from a childhood long ago forgotten.

Kafka's Wound

Toward sunset it bleeds orange, plums,
and wine. His father always at table
with mug in hand. How long
must a son allow the city to unwind
its long avenues, branching rivers

full of walkers insular with autumn.
It's true the blade took garlic cloves
from their little white coats,
so pliant, the stems beneath that fat knife
wolfing into the core of the matter.

It's true there must be a mother
in the story—her stringy hair, her roast
burning inside the oven. He sees the clock tower
in the square, glances up to find a rim of moon.
At least, for now, the hole's been bled

of what it holds. As far as a man can walk
the shops stretch, their signs reversed.
Closed for another, longer night.
Withholding exactly that porcelain—
that *Jan Becher Karlovy* liqueur cup

one needs to clamp between finger
and thumb. He's learned one lesson.
This wound must be purged each day,
else the stench of what it carries
comes from his mouth, and others turn away.

Burn My Books

*Dearest Max, My last request:
Everything I leave behind me [is] to be burned unread.*

Gather onion skin papers from the desk,
lift sheets full of dust from shelves.
Pile them high, place “Die Reise”
against “Das Ehepaar”.

Use the triangle’s angle.
Tent the work so air can enter this canon
I wrote only out of the desire
for a vocation with which to anger

my father—nothing more. When you strike
the match, listen as it sings.
Perhaps you’ve brought this box from Vienna—
that club where we shared ideas?

The flame creeps shyly at first. Like
a whisper, which is all I’m allowed here.
Stand quietly until the pyre begins
to shine more brightly.

Dear Max, I won’t be happy
until your fire eats all my words.
And afterwards, when you leave the place,
keep well, my good, dear Max.

Miniature Cakes

Kafka likes their outsides
wrapped in icing, decorated
with letters, topped
with Snow Babies and elves.
He likes truffles,
biting through softness.
An intense pleasure, and then
the sinking. So it goes
in rooms without women.
A city made for fathers,
fathers, and more fathers.
He likes to lick
his fingers, yellow in the lamp
that shines beside a Linden tree.
He turns towards the sky
and, like a spider riding its web
higher against a window,
allows a bit of slack
to take in what's been let out.

The Father

Snorts in the passageway, pinches the delicate ones—
those who wear the jackdaw's gray plumage.
Kafka's father and Kafka's father's two dead sons.

This trilogy in which a Czech accent flourishes, upon which
the holy days continue to riffle the year.
Can such a man corrupt the liver of a virgin goose?

A bread job, then. A useless son for Kafka's father,
this loser looking into the lost fingers of workers.
A bit of blood spreads through the lungs.

Feathers ink the page. It's 2 pm or 2 am?
At what hour does the incessant womanizing begin?
How to avoid marriage, how continue flirtations with
drowning?

Kafka's father's son, dirty with the sex of octaves.
Filthy to himself, and as for marriage,
that rumor died in Munich. That consummation—

a conjugation of who, with whom, when, and why.
The father above, the son below, High German spoken
to veil a lowly Yiddish dialect.

Its only remaining artifact—a few satin skirts
left to themselves like theater curtains,
in whose wake the story exists.

Give us a moment to learn to pray for Kafka's father.
Pater in his silk dressing gown with the dusty lilies,
the one who rises early to snuff the light again.

Time Passes Like Oil

Another vacation away from Prague,
“the ball games and card games . . . sitting around
and lying in the garden,” he writes to Max.
To date only fragments of the ill-formed oeuvre.

There is no title, no circling back.
The mystery of the hour, the days away from home
dissipate in grass and flowers spun from the sun,
which also looks straight ahead

even as it sets above a faraway sea.
He holds the delicate stem of a glass of liqueur.
Sips crème de menthe,
places another bad hand face down.

When will the aces come to light?
What of the diamond, redder than Mars,
on no one’s finger? How
penetrate melancholy other than by listening to the bird

who comes to splash water from the bath
in an ornate dance of cleansing?
He can only keep the unmanageable at bay
by holding the boundary between silence and mimicry.

On the manicured lawn no woman walks into his trap,
no girl young enough to overlook
his adolescent flirtation,
to go along with a plot that ends in letters.

He has dissected and analyzed the past,
written in a hand as fine as the spider’s net,
its artful up and down and back and forth.
Anchor, pivot, trap, set.

Two weeks away
and little to show for it, even at his best time—
after 8 in the evening—
when he greases the old, unhappy childhood.

Gregor, After

Flattened. No more fluid
seeping from his wounds.
The apple petrified in his back.

Light just coming
through the single window.
The housecleaner who taunted him

dung beetle, dung beetle
pushes his carcass with her broom.
She suspects he is gone.

Yes, an accordion without air.
The little legs quiet,
an abdomen no longer round.

His death wish fulfilled
just last night—
hearing his sister play the violin,

before scuttling away from the boarders
into the hoarder's palace
his bedroom has become.