

Kaśka Bryła

mein vater der gulag die krähe und ich

English sample translation by Sheridan Marshall

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Shortly before you died, a hazelnut fell on my head, then my mother called for me and I ran into the house to hear your last breaths. I lay down next to you on the bed and slid my arm under your neck, holding you close to me so that you could be sure you would not die alone, so that your soul could speak to me in peace when, years later, I would open up the past and tell your story, *and here I am, full of confidence*, you say, and I say that I would not be up to this task without you, *together*, you say, together, I agree with you, and peer into the forest where I thought I saw you a few days after your death.

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Wpadł pies do kuchni i porwał mięsa ćwierć, a jeden głupi kucharz zarąbał go na śmierć, a drugi kucharz – mądry, co w sercu litość miał, postawił psu nagrobek i taki napis dał ... Wpadł pies do kuchni,, I sing, just like you used to, when you wanted to distract me from something or make me laugh, when I sing, I believe that everything will still turn out all right, I'm ready for the day, and Henrike is already standing next to me, your first walk outside, she exclaims, throwing her arms up as if I were finally getting out of a wheelchair, are you happy, she asks, but I just look at Karl, who will look after him while we're away, I ask, he'll be fine, says Henrike, she believes, just like Gerhild, that my little black angel can hold his own against the killer cat, that we humans shouldn't interfere with nature, you really need to get out, she urges me, how many weeks has it been now, I have stopped counting days or weeks, it will be so good for you, she assures me, Karl sits on the steps of my trailer, watching me, his beak half-open, he can't believe it, as I walk towards the gate with Henrike, towards that exit I once denied my prince, now I'm going through it myself, I should be ashamed of myself, I should turn back right now, I should do a lap of the site like I usually do, instead of deluding myself that I might be able to escape the illness, but I'm a human being, and you never grew tired of saying that humans are born with hands that point toward their own bodies

and not outwards, and I never grew tired of trying to prove the opposite to you, that solidarity really exists, that one human being sees another in crisis and looks after them, even if they aren't members of their family, whether by blood or marriage, Henrike stays close to me, putting one leg in front of the other, it must be awfully boring for her, trudging along beside me like this, wait a second, I stop her after a few steps, I need to rest for a moment, we stand still, I look up at the sky where the clouds are moving quickly even though it isn't windy, they are a little greyish, we'll be back well before it rains, Henrike reassures me, she is as small and delicate as a bee hummingbird, yet no one would be surprised if she uprooted a tree as she passed by, have you listened to the recordings yet, she asks into the midst of the stream of clouds, in the morning, after getting up, even before I opened the trailer door, before my time with Karl, I had breakfast with your voice, with the story where you were supposed to take the train from Lwów to Warszawa to deliver a letter, you were a courier because you were so young, practically still a child, there were carriages on the train where only Germans were allowed to sit, so you thought that would be the safest place, you must have told me this story when I was still a child, *I'm sure I did*, it was probably one of the many bedtime stories that I no longer remember, a few minutes over breakfast today, I answer Henrike, it was good to hear his voice, even if it

sounds full of holes because his lungs are already so sick, I instinctively place a hand on my chest, Henrike nods, come on, let's walk up to the rubbish dump, I push myself onwards and wonder how people feel whose bodies are never fully functional, and I realise that I am surrounded by people with fully functional bodies, maybe one or two minor ailments, thick glasses or a hearing aid, lots have tinnitus, one even had diabetes, but there's no one in a wheelchair or who needs crutches, no one blind or deaf, once when I was standing in a queue at the post office, a small child, four years old at most, was running up and down screaming incessantly, it hurt my ears, everyone looked around reproachfully for a parent, but no one reacted and the child kept screaming, it wasn't an aggressive screaming, it seemed like the child was used to screaming so loudly, then a blonde woman about my age turned to the child and addressed them in sign language, how do you feel, Henrike asks, are you excited to be so far away, the first drop lands on my head as we reach the hill, I'm worried about Karl, I answer, the trailer park is a fortress bordered by two roads, a fast road which regularly claims the lives of cats from the park, and a thirty-kilometre-per-hour zone, the other boundaries are the dog daycare and the parks department, in the middle of the site there are two huge halls, a forge and the facilities building with the for-free shop, an open part of the central hall forms the living space where fire pits

burn in the winter, at the first fire pit I fell in love with trailer park life, I sat opposite Jonas who has the friendliest smile and who asked me about myself so honestly in a way I've only ever known in the East, we have to go back now, I say, I have to go to Karl, he needs to go in his cage so he doesn't get wet, but he's a bird, Henrike counters, they get wet when it rains, I turn my head towards her and repeat, we have to go back now, shrugging her shoulders Henrike turns around, despite all my efforts I don't go any faster, as soon as I try the pressure on my chest intensifies as if a gold bar were lying on it, one step at a time, I think, one step at a time, it's not like I have to wheel a wheelbarrow across an abyss, I only have to walk five hundred metres from the rubbish dump back to the trailer camp to be with Karl before it starts to rain, Henrike laughs at me softly, *first I would like to quote from a letter to the consulate in Kraków confirming the death of my brother Zdzisław, the date is July 9, 1949, and it says here that Zdzisław passed away in July 1949,* which year, I ask, *1949*, then he must have been there for quite a long time, I remark, *why a long time*, well when were you deported to Siberia, I ask, *1946*, we're almost there, says Henrike, the rain is getting heavier, she opens the gate, I go through, walk decisively towards my trailer, towards Karl's cage, the camp is empty, when we set off Gerhild was still sitting on her steps, but now the door to her trailer is closed and the killer cat is lying on the steps, any moment now it will

disappear through the cat flap into the trailer, Karl!, Karl!, I call out, there's no movement either in the cage or under my trailer, of course Gerhild drove off without locking Karl in his cage, Karl!, Karl!, instead of the angel's croaking my phone vibrates, Estha is calling, I swipe across the screen and scream, Karl is gone, it's raining, but Karl isn't here, calm down, she says, he'll turn up, no, I scream, he's gone, some cat caught him and dragged him into the jungle, I run behind the Portaloo and fight my way through the bushes, oh come on, sweetheart, he's just hiding somewhere, how would you know, I sob, you're not even here!, not with me and Karl, instead far away in another country Estha sits at her desk while I fight for our survival, *the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was signed on August 24, 1939, and guaranteed the German Reich Soviet neutrality for the planned attack on Poland*, during which you were thirteen-years-old and your brother fifteen, in a supplementary protocol it was specified that Eastern Poland, including the part where you and your family lived, should fall to the Soviet Union, the rain eases, my shins are scratched from fighting through the bushes, Henrike nudges me from behind, come on, I've put some coffee on for us, hello?, Estha calls, I can't talk right now, I answer and tap the red dot on the screen, she wasn't any help anyway, and at least now she knows what it feels like when someone hangs up, fast and without warning, Henrike takes me by the

hand, life isn't a Disney movie, she confides in me, and that thing with Karl was never going to last, she adds, maybe it would be more comforting to talk to Estha on the phone after all, I reflect, he probably just flew away, Henrike continues, emptying the contents of the coffee pot into two cups, I sit dazed in the deckchair, tears running down my cheeks, it can't be that Karl has disappeared, possibly dead, my phone vibrates again, Estha again, yes, I say, did you just hang up, she asks, I don't answer, and Karl, she asks, gone, I answer, Henrike stands up and leaves me alone with Estha, even though it is her fault, she led me to the iron gate, Henrike, my Lucifer, my bringer of light, just like Gerhild who drove away during my walk without locking Karl in his cage, just like Estha who sits in Vienna and only calls when it suits her, all three of them have conspired against me and my black angel, they don't want me to rear a wild animal, they'll definitely have just been waiting for this moment to be able to say to me that this is how it is, that life isn't a Disney cartoon and that things like this hardly ever turn out well, I down the espresso like a shot, perhaps he's flown away, Estha suggests after a long pause in which I could hear her typing something on the computer keyboard, what is it that you're always doing while you're on the phone to me, I ask, and the typing stops, I just had to reply to an email quickly, I'm all yours now, sweetheart, Karl can't even fly yet, I say weakly, and the sun

continues to shine brightly, wouldn't you like to begin with your arrest, I suggested to you in our first conversation, or maybe even earlier, I changed my mind, and suddenly I feel you so close, as if your hand were on my shoulder, as if we were having our conversations for the second time, what was the situation, where did you live, absolutely everything, you are so close to me that I freeze in the sun, we wanted to talk about your text, Estha changes the subject, my hand brushes the crumbs from the garden table, shall we, Estha asks, but Karl, I reply and I'd much rather sink just back into our conversations together anyway, so I put the phone in my trouser pocket while Estha keeps talking, and get up out of the deckchair, *we lived in Lwów, Zdzisław and I, on Ulica Senatorska, we had a two-room apartment, my brother and I lived in one room and our friend Podgórski lived in the other with a friend*, sweetheart, I hear Estha from my pocket, of course you know how much I love your writing, but there are a few things, I pull out my phone, what things I ask, and drag myself along beside the facilities building towards Jonas's trailer and the bypass, in the face of danger an animal would move towards the place where it once felt safe, I would do that, my bird is an orphan who has now been abandoned by me too, then I spot a black dot in the leaves of the birch tree in front of Jonas's trailer, there is the tense, for example, Estha says slowly and deliberately, what do you mean, I ask, my attention

entirely on the black dot, wouldn't you rather put it in the past tense, no, I answer, nobody knows how it will turn out, I add for politeness' sake, hm, Estha says, and this is followed by a silence that muffles everything like a metre of snow, it is the first time that I contradict her, even though it feels completely natural, the branch with the black dot wobbles, Karl?, I hear a barely perceptible croak, how did he get onto this branch, around the thin poplar are a greenhouse, a chair, a short set of steps, but nothing that would be high enough to help him to get up into the tree, my darling must have fluttered from the greenhouse onto the branch, you're wrong, says Estha, and it hits me unexpectedly hard, so hard that tears shoot up again uncontrollably, at least Estha can't see that, my little angel comes out of hiding and I reach out to him with my index finger, but he hesitates, I just want to help you, the present tense doesn't really work, Estha insists, finally Karl hops onto my finger and waddles further until he settles down on my shoulder, sweetheart, can you still hear me, I would love to hang up again, instead I wipe away my tears and reply that I need more reasons to change the tense, that I'm not convinced yet, all right, Estha begins, I'm not finished yet, I interrupt her, that I would think about her arguments, that I take them seriously, but that I wish for the same in return, that Karl has shown up and is sitting on my shoulder, that he was back by Jonas's trailer, that he hid on the branch of a poplar, and that

the branch was so high that he must have fluttered over from the greenhouse, fluttered, I emphasise and hang up.

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Sometimes upon waking, being human slips away from me. Back muscles pull my arms backward, my elbows shoot up, my chest arches sharply forward, feathers push painfully through the far too thick skin everywhere, bleeding everywhere, even before my eyelids open, it is done and my palms face outward, out into the world, I hop down from the loft bed, tear open the trailer door in my plumage and call *Karl! Karl!*, run to the cage and open it, the bird leaps toward me, we both smell of night sweat and down and of the present, my black angel pecks gently at one of my many wounds, finally takes one of the feathers in his beak and plucks it out as if it were a hair, now the spot bleeds more heavily, but it doesn't bother me, though I feel the pain, I encircle the wound with my lips and suck at myself because I am my own child, this body is my mother animal, my snail shell, my clam shell, my hell and my heaven, the only one I will ever get, the taste of iron spreads in my mouth, I swallow, keep swallowing, taste myself, Karl preens, drawing feather after feather through his beak, I spit on my knee, smear the fluid until a bright patch of skin appears, we are wild animals, I say to Karl, we are wild animals, we are dirty and sick and swimming in our own aquarium, so we linger for a time, because time has lost its meaning, and at some point I am hungry and at some point Karl is too and we eat together from one plate and later the sun comes out.

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Senju, that was a camp where bricks were made. It was a brick factory. And I was in that camp in 1946, 47, and 48. After that, they deported me to Moscow. So I was in Senju the longest, and the mortality rate there due to hunger, disease, and cold was very high. In Senju, we were also responsible for maintaining the railway line on which coal transports travelled from Vorkuta to the south of the Soviet Union. You know, Siberia, it was seventy centimetres of Vaseline and underneath that was mud, and when those freight trains ran over it, the rails on the track would sometimes give way and we had to go out there and repair them so that the transports could keep going. The prisoners there weren't even heavily guarded because there was nowhere to run away to anyway. If you stopped working, you just froze to death. And that's exactly what I thought: I don't care! I'll just freeze. I was sick of life. And then I stood still. I didn't move anymore, just shivered. I probably would have frozen to death if some blatnoy hadn't saved me. Guards and bandits were sitting around the campfires, and one of these bandits saw me standing there, already freezing, and he jumped up and shouted: What are you

doing? Shto ty delayesh? Do you want to die? Ty kbochesh umeret? He drags me over to the fire, gives me his coat, and lets me stay until I'm not cold anymore. Until I no longer want to die. A criminal, a Russian, my enemy saves my life. I have no idea why. After all, I wasn't Russian. The Russians were treated better there. Just because. I never saw him again after that. Not even in the camp. Without him, I would have frozen to death.

Yes, I say. And I wouldn't exist. *Exactly*. We laugh because everything suddenly seems so light, because life is nothing more than the glow of a firefly, than Karl's gaping beak, than Estha's glance and the arm of a bandit who pulls you over to a campfire, thwarts your plan to die and gives me my life.