"DEVOTION IS FULL OF ARROWS": ON JOANNA KLINK'S *THE NIGHTFIELDS*

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"When I go toward you / it is with my whole life"—thus Joanna Klink opens her fifth collection, *The Nightfields*, with Rilke. It is difficult to divorce Rilke from his own engagement with the Orphic vision, as it is for poets to divorce themselves from the pull of his hermetic verse. Many English-language poets—cue Auden and Merwin—have let his chime strike their poetic imagination, as does Joanna Klink here. *The Nightfields* asks us to take a similar journey to Rilke's *Book of Hours*, a meditative, and often dreamlike, search for God in three parts: *The Book of Monastic Life*, *The Book of Pilgrimage*, and *The Book of Poverty and Death*. This gesture toward Rilke asks the question of how Klink inhabits asceticism, pilgrimage, and separation and what, in a world of loss, is the cost of devotion.

Time, for Klink, is a subject: the collection generates silence, echo, and reverberation within its expanse. *The Nightfields* opens with her sequence, "The Infinities," which presents the reader with three pillars of verse that stand sentinel at the collection's beginning. Her monument is the suspension between hope and loss: "There are no / empty hopes. But knowing / what to hope for is steady / work." Klink's monument is an invitation into her own journey, her need to "sort moment / from moment" and "feel the slow flight of birds / across [the] body." In the third section, Klink moves into explicit invitation:

> When the wind pushes
> branches in and out of
> shade it is an opening,
> as every small gesture
> toward another person is
> incomprehensibly alive.

Will you be part of the
stoneless passage?

For Klink, we slip our hands into the field of night so that we might feel the pulse of another, and this passage among lives is difficult work—a night labor.

The Nightfields labors to create an architecture for the self, a series of rooms and corridors for it to travel within an otherwise merciless landscape. Klink writes in "On Kingdoms":

Who is ever at home in oneself?
Land without mercy. Interstates
set flickering by night. When I speak to you
I can feel a storm falling blackly to the roads,
the pelting rains the instant they
hit. Devotion is full of arrows.

To intertwine with another is to risk the inner landscape's turn to battleground. The impact of devotion blows back into our own field as arrows. She goes on to write, "I am always too close. / I am not sure I will ever be / wholly alive. Still—we are faithful." From arrows, to where do we retreat? In "The Dusks," Klink further complicates her emotional landscape:

A feeling is a grave into which you sink,
forgetting it was ever a grave, forgetting even your own
ill-equipped unhappiness.
And how could you be brought back
to the slow-flowing change—
and how could you ever
unfold again?

There is a transformation of grief here, for Klink, as feeling (which could, in itself, be an everyday kind of devotion to the act of living) leads down into a forgetfulness. Descent is a retreat from the work of living, which draws one back to Klink's asceticism. Klink complicates the religiosity of asceticism in the collection, as the monastic vocation is characterized by withdrawal from secular living into a life steeped in hourly devotion. However, in the ascetic's remove from the world, they are in deeper unity with both God and the entire body of the faithful: and with this unity, they are bound in the body's joy and suffering. Klink, though, passes between an asceticism with and without devotion.

From this ascetic space, there is a refusal to "unfold" and there is a continuous reach outside of the self. In her sequence, "The Devotions," she writes:

When I move toward you
it is with everything I have lived,
emptied out. Like the deer,
whose bodies thread at evening
into the deepening grass.

This reach toward another, for Klink, is both a heave of and a grab for life—but she recognizes that, by design, to travel outside of the self is indicative of an inherent separation: the field beyond us is constellated with other lives, but those burns will always truly be distant and impenetrable. Our own landscape is the only enclosure to which we may retreat, though it is also an entrapment. The only force strong enough to make any sort of pilgrimage toward another is the force of our own life, though there is a grief-work always at play:

And if it is true
that we throw a great darkness
upon everything we see,
we will never be sure of you.
We award the sea
the color of rich nets,
the next minute find our arms
buckling from grief.
Who is the dream lost upon
waking. I cannot tell

what is unbearable in me
from what is opening.

We are led to ask when reading: if the agency of others presents risk, why traverse in faithfulness? Or, as Klink poses in "Almanac": "What will you admit / into your life?" She soon after calls upon us to:

Prize your day these hours won't happen again.
Prize the person who touches you in the simplest way
against all disappointment.
Better to collapse into what you love
than to ask for so little.

This proclamation by Klink reminds one of the love nestled in devotion; the devotional act is made in love, and love is what draws one out into the night between others, at the chance of meeting or the risk of collapse. In "Cancer (Prayer for My Father)," she collapses into her father's dwindling life:

His mind is a room casting infinite love
from four walls. My beautiful father,
you carried me out into the day of my life
and let me stand on earth with affection
and force. Why should we fear our disappearance.

When encountered with loss in "A Friendship," Klink can merely conclude: "Asked or unasked, / I must have loved you."

Venturing forward in her act of love, *The Nightfields*, in part three, passes into the ekphrastic. Klink's subject is James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, an installation at the heart of an extinct volcano in Arizona, where Turrell has constructed numerous "skyscapes." In "Night Sky," a thirty-one poem sequence, she uses the backdrop of *Roden Crater* as a meeting place for the self. She poses in the opening poem: "What if this darkness is no mirror, no scar. The sound / of night only copper greening." She continues to tunnel inside the body, slipping through its clock-gears: "Watchman of the hour, you have / become the hour. Everything you hoped was already above you."

Keeping in mind Rilke's own three sections within *The Book of Hours*, Klink builds a space where the self's pilgrimage arrives back at its start—where the self, as hour, becomes spectator and subject, achieving a union with the "sequoia-quiet" and "glassblown lunar stillness." The crater becomes a purgatorial space, where Klink even portrays "a vaulted interior echoing with air, envy, blood," or, products of the self's most fearsome parts. As we carry forward in her book of hours, Klink builds an understanding with our inevitable disappearance. Though the consciousness of the self disappears, she reminds us that there is "a heat / born in you that outlasts you, there are burning circuits of / stars" and, in conversation with "The Dusks": "More even / than your own life, you flow from what is."

Our existence is astral. Though we must (and, yes—must) live in a world of things-not-ours, our lives, though inherently removed from others, are our own: the habitat of the self takes a lifetime to journey, and its heat both rises and falls back into the same star-scape. Klink reminds us: "You touch hidden stars / as you turn the pages of a book that cannot end." Our diminishment is a return to the splendor of our substance:

Underneath
the scorched domes, you are inlaid muscle, spindle-
bone, a body of mistakes—but you are turning to carbon,
sharded ice, you are the brief errand of what was
given to you in unceasing splendor.

To return to Rilke: not only are we born and do we die poor, we live poor, caught among things and people that refuse possession. Klink's pilgrimage and asceticism within "Night Sky" gathers together, across her star-fields, to dissolve the wounds of devotion's arrows and leave behind "pure flute, pure iron and luster"—an act that can only be completed with the heft of one's own life.