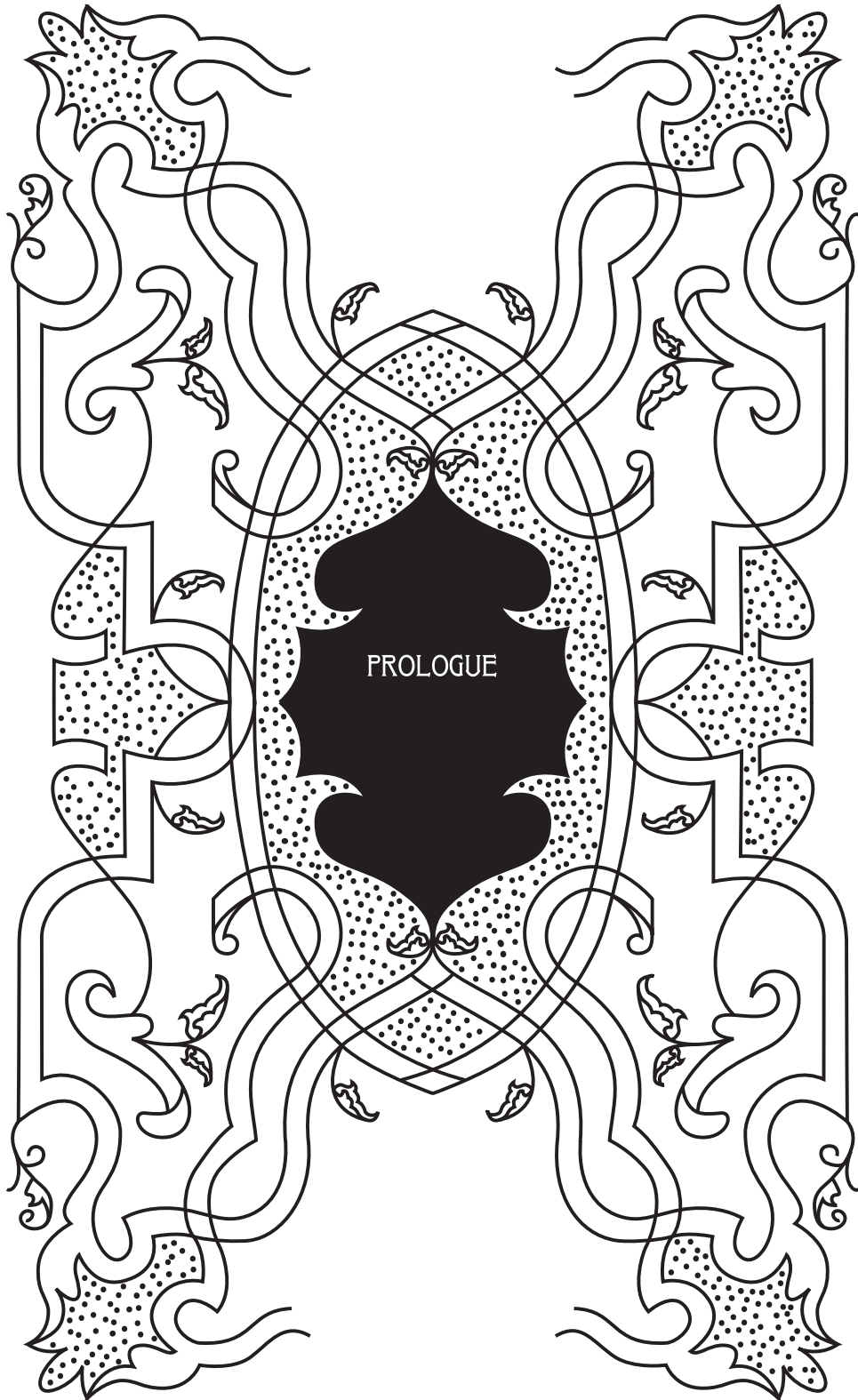


NOTORIOUS



ROBERTA
LOWING


ALLEN & UNWIN



A YEAR EARLIER



The driver stopped the taxi beside the rusted iron gates and sat, silent and immovable, in the front seat. I stared at the back of his dark head and the moles scattered on the white skin above the fur-lined collar of his jacket. The leather at the shoulder was weather-worn except for a shield-shaped patch below the seam.

I said, 'You can't take me to the house?'

The driver shook his head so abruptly that a gold chain rode up his neck. He cleared a circle on the misted glass and pointed out.

He said, 'Terrible things there.'

I made my own circle and felt the cold gnawing my gloves. I looked through the ice-sheathed gates to the black jagged trees and the clumps of snow ribbed by black Polish earth.

The driveway ran straight to the austere silhouette of the mansion I had come so far to see. On my left, the fields, planed by the wind, fell back in bone-coloured waves of snow. Low humps marked out a long rectangle: the landing lights around the airstrip. I imagined the late-night arrivals: the rumbling engines coming to rest, the ramp grinding down, the hooded and tethered figures stumbling across the rutted ground.

I said, 'That's the famous field? Where the Polish army rode out?'

'Worse than famous now. Not – not –'



‘Notorious?’ I said.

He shook his head. ‘Not even for crops anymore. Everything goes in, dies.’

‘Diseased.’ I thought, No-one would expect the new tenants to tend the land.

He nodded. ‘Dis-ease.’

‘Blood below the soil.’

‘Pardon, Mrs?’

‘Miss,’ I said. ‘Never mind.’

From the rear passenger seat, I saw the spines of the books on the shelf beneath the glove compartment: Szymborska, Neruda, Milosz, Brontë. More poetry. I felt for the book in my pocket, pulled it out, looked at the dagger which pierced the bleeding red heart on the cover, the spiked black trees which scratched the jagged horizon, the title in its sprawling ecstatic French; the author’s name. Arthur Rimbaud.

Too much poetry. I would never get away from it.

I held out the book. ‘I want you to have this.’

The driver turned. He had very pale blue eyes. ‘No need to give book for me to come back.’

‘Keep it safe,’ I said. ‘For my brother.’

I looked up the driveway again. The leafless trees revealed the house in all its rigid lines: the tall pointed turrets raking the frosted grey sky, the stark lightless windows along the broad stone terrace, the tiles which were strangely clear of snow even though I could see the diamond dust – water in the air freezing as it fell – already coating the rust stains on the gate.

Soon the cleansed land would glitter. Erase the old stories, for a while.

‘Not go.’ The driver looked at the curdled grey. ‘Very cold, very soon. And dark.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. ‘I have a mind for winter. It’s hot places I can’t stand.’

I pulled my wool beret as low as it would go, bunching my hair over my ears and around my neck. I put on another pair of gloves and said, ‘I’ll call you when I’m done.’

‘Phones not work here.’ The driver pointed down the salt and peppered road. ‘I live in next village. Walk to there.’

‘What’s its name?’

‘Same as here.’

‘It’s called Koloshnovar?’

He wound down the window and spat. He said, ‘The family owns it all.’

I pulled my galoshes on over my calfskin boots and made sure I had the investigator’s file in my bag. Outside, the cold gripped my throat, tugged at my legs. Racing tendrils of mist streaked the frosted sky, reducing the sun to a sickly yellow watermark.

I threw my head back, let the cold bite my lungs, the corners of my eyes. I breathed out damp, pricking clouds of cold. It hurt. I welcomed it.

The gate was padlocked but the investigator had given me a jeweller’s pick and instructed me how to use it. He had said, Tell the border cops it’s an Australian cuticle cutter.

With a ragged snort of diesel, the taxi rolled away, its exhaust smoke spiralling. I waved but the driver wouldn’t look at me.

As I walked, the wind came up in a swell of beating breaths, a rush of broken murmurs, before it moaned, diving into itself again.

In the silence before the next rising, a door banged – one-two-three-four, pause, one-two-three-four – like someone methodically venting their anger. Close by.

But there was no-one else in this landscape. Nothing but the bleak season cutting its fossil-coloured chips into my cheek. No-one here but me, I thought. No ghosts. Ghosts belonged to poetry and I was no longer infected.

Grey snow blotched the driveway and turned a dirty brown where it hung like shaggy throat fur from the cream-humped hedges around the frost-bitten lawn. The poplars here were wind-stunted and twisted, their upward-flung arms netted in ice.

The house was already blurring into wreckage: the shutters hung from their hinges, tiles were missing from the roof, the broken

windows were starred with radiating darkness. No smoke curled from the chimneys; only mist writhing into the implacable grey.

A splash of leaping, lustrous red: a squirrel landed in the snow, its tail a flag of mottled scarlet.

It stopped, closer than I expected, and regarded me with inky eyes. It raised its small velvety front paws, almost in prayer. I was so pleased to see another living creature that I squatted, extended my hand. The squirrel tilted its head. It understood me. I took off my outer gloves and leaned forward. 'Here, baby,' I said, too loud. The sky shivered. I said, softer, 'Here,' and leaned closer.

The squirrel hissed at me, the sound snaking out between long incisors coated in yellow foam. It advanced slowly, never taking its eyes off me, hissing again, hooking out a claw as it aimed for my eye. I scrabbled backwards. The squirrel hissed and advanced, hissed and advanced. The falling yellow droplets ate through the snow in steaming black holes.

I kicked. Snow sprayed out. The squirrel snarled, turned and bounded away. I lay on my back, the cold eating into me, an ache in my eyes. Scalding chips of cold fell on my upturned face as the bone-marrow sky looked down on me.

The grey dusk doused the dying sun. I had to decide: go through the house or around it. I trudged up the front steps, past statues so encrusted with snow that it was hard to tell what they were. I saw frozen people inside the crucifix-shaped meringues: glistening like chandeliers, crystal knots of tears on their cheeks, struggling to escape their marble deaths.

The front door rocked on its hinge; snow patched the polished wooden floor. I was surprised: I had thought the new tenants – the Americans – would have taken care of the house, as though this was conventional wartime and it was a matter of billeting, of courtesies observed.

But ever since 2003, this had been a different kind of war. If the investigator's file was right, the Americans weren't interested in protocols.

Odd shapes were mounted along the hallway, nailed to wallpaper which in this light looked blood red. The first shapes were tinselled with ice. I took a half step. Was that – ? Yes, preserved animal heads, hundreds of them, pierced from ceiling to floor down the long red corridor.

Midway, the shapes changed. Apes' heads? No, too small. I edged forward, saw the deep lines around the open eyes, the grimaces of the tongueless mouths. The fading afternoon light slipped in mustard-coloured tears down the metallic cheeks. Death masks.

The banging started again, closer. I didn't want to see any more. I backed out, went down the steps, slipping on dark grey mirrors of ice. I grabbed at a statue. With a whiplash crack, my hand went through the glittering crust and I felt the strangely warm stone beneath.

I pulled out the investigator's report. The map seemed accurate so far. If those were the fields and the house was here . . .

The snow had been roughly cleared from the side path. I went past stone buildings huddled around a cobbled yard – the old stables – to the south field. The low-slung aluminium building in the centre looked like one of the chicken sheds near my childhood home: those apparently innocuous, windowless huts whose lights shone all day and all night through the prefabricated joints, through the dreadful, muffled quiet.

I picked the lock surprisingly easily and, visualising the door slamming shut, wedged it back in the snow. I wanted all the light I could get.

The floor was covered with rotting hay; a dilapidated tractor lay down its rusted neck in one corner; in the other: a pile of gumboots clotted with grass slime and grey mud.

From here on in, the investigator had said, he couldn't vouch for accuracy. Bribes only get you so far, he said, even with Nazis.

'They're Poles,' I said.

'They're grabbing people in the middle of the night, throwing black hoods over them and flying them around the world.'

'That's the CIA.'

‘Is this political for you?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘It’s personal.’

‘It’s personal for the people getting snatched,’ he said. ‘I bet it was personal for your brother.’

The hatch was twelve feet exactly from the door. I cleared the dead hay and pulled the heavy rubber matting aside. Beneath was thin steel painted a pale brown; hay-brown. I heaved it up and back and looked down into the dark square. I tried not to think of the poet Shelley drawing his grave, precisely shading the steps which descended into the earth.

I descended into the earth.

At the bottom, the investigator had said, was a switch about shoulder height. He looked at me. ‘About head height.’

‘It won’t set off an alarm?’

‘Nobody’ll be there.’ He half raised a hand. ‘Nobody should be there.’

Light came on in the bulbs strung on wire along the narrow passage before me. I had expected something engineered into the earth, not this hastily hacked crevice, its moist walls held back by buckling wooden planks. A temporary place; no-one would have been kept here for long. Not the young bearded men picked up in airports, snatched as they were getting off trains, into cars, as they turned the key in the lock of their cheap hotel room. No-one stayed for long. Not even my brother.

There were things in this under-earth which were not temporary. Tiny creatures rustled and scuttled away from the light: worms curled frenziedly into the black wall, slaters slid between the wet, dangling roots. Small clots of dirt constantly hit the ground as though the earth was trying to get comfortable, shifting away from the grip of the wooden planks.

Don’t go down the left passage, the investigator had said. It’s not relevant. And you can’t see anything.

But the bulbs projected enough light to at least look; to make sure. I inched sideways, the wall spongy against me, the low, knotted roof

catching my beret, wet grit scratching my neck. I thought, There must be another, easier entrance.

I went on. The damp earth mushroomed at my back; the sooty air coated my throat. I smelled mould and the deeper odour of decay. The bones of long-dead things, asleep and hunched in the dirt, dug into me. I imagined vertebrae folded over like pale plates in the gloom.

Warmer air brushed my cheek. I stepped forward and out into a rock cavern. In the wedge of light expiring at my feet, I saw that large hollows had been scooped out of the glazed wet walls. As my hand stretched into the nearest dark oval, I felt a husky, splintered bone. Another lay parallel, and another. A human ribcage. I touched the ridged neck, the eyeless skull. A skeleton, buried upright in the earth. Why? To save on coffin wood in war time? I let my hand drift down, felt flaking metal, heard the clink of a chain. Manacles. So, a local punishment for traitors? A family custom?

I measured myself against the corrugated human before me. Too short to be the one I was looking for, I told myself, trying not to think of chain saws and quick lime.

Catacombs, the investigator should have said. But maybe he knew that would be irresistible to me. To be deep down where the earth truly became bone. Became truth.

Be careful what you wish for, my mother used to say, pinching me. Now, this close to answers, I found it hard to breathe. I backed away. My heel caught the jut of a paving stone: the first in a path which seemed to me – although I could hardly see – to glow in the dusk. I followed it, more by feel, away from the fissure, away from the light, into a wider passage. Hot air riffled around me. The paving stones became broader and neater as they led to two rows of tall iron boxes.

The boxes were haloed by a sullen orange light which rose from tubes lying on floor brackets and which coated the heavy bolts and the barred windows set in the metal walls. Not boxes. Cages.

I heard no human breath but I had to be sure. I pulled open the first door and went in. I saw the nicotine-coloured sheen on the

floor and the child's yellowing, disposable nappy curling beneath the scratches in the wall. I smelled the fear and the blood. I imagined the human shapes crushed together, merging with the damp. Flinching in the darkness. And when my foot crunched on something that was not glass and I looked down and saw the tooth clotted in red at the base, I knew it was much worse than I had thought.

A click. The light vanished. In the absolute blackness, a breath slowly exhaled next to me. As I backed away, I heard the beat of boots on stone. One-two-three-four. Louder. Closer. Light burst in arcing stars. Torch lights surrounded me, dark shapes behind them. My bag was ripped off my shoulder. An American voice funnelled out from the star-burst in front of me.

'You're trespassing. What are you doing here?'

'Trespassing,' I said. 'What are you doing here?'

'Arresting,' he said. A torch on my right dipped down to point at my bag, and in the back light I glimpsed the pale set face of a young man in uniform. Hands came out of the darkness to search me, roughly. Another star dipped; a halo illuminated the file. A hand – wrist-less, arm-less – turned the pages.

'You,' said the American. 'You're a bigger fool than your brother.'

A silhouette loomed up. My hands were grabbed, twisted in front of me. Plastic cuffs snapped around my wrists.

'You're lucky you're too rich to be disappeared,' said the American. 'And too unstable to be believed.' As the stars swung away, a small white square fell from the file. The photo. I put my foot over where I guessed it had landed.

'You, book-boy,' said the American. 'Put her in the truck. Direct to base. No stopping for friends, get it? And don't talk to her.' His torch retreated.

Another moment of blackness. The orange glow surged up the walls.

There was only me and the young soldier left in the cage. We looked down to the photo lying by my boot. The low light made the man in the black and white image shudder, as though he was coming out of the dungeon floor.

The young soldier bent. On his nape, I saw black moles below his sandy hair. He picked up the photo. ‘Lover?’ He had a Polish accent.

‘Hunter,’ I said. The shadows slid across the face of the man in the photo. A man who lived in shadows, a shadow who wanted to be a man.

The hot air swelled in my throat; the wall vibrated against my shoulder. I looked at the photo of the man who called himself John Devlin. ‘The man who wants to ruin me.’

‘So, you will run?’ said the Polish soldier, standing. He held out the photo, face up; offering me John Devlin’s head in a vice. Exactly what I should want.

The soldier took a book from his hip pocket, a book with a pierced red heart on its cover. It was the Rimbaud. He put the photo inside and held out the book. ‘From my brother.’

I looked at the book. Poetry, I couldn’t escape it.

A shout coiled down the corridor. The soldier stiffened.

I held out my cuffed hands. ‘Can you make these tighter?’

He stared at me.

I said, ‘Make them hurt.’