

Totoro

today, my aunt has returned from eastern climes, charm in hand. this charm, she says, hails from a submerged shinto shrine, its pillars seabound & salt-stiff. it is silkshod & tinkles as I move it between each battered palm. *good health*, it means. or so she says. I haven't the tongue to parse the kanji thread stippling tea green with red, cannot hope to pronounce its inscription for you now. must take her translation as read.

good health. we have a word for that where I'm from: *slàinte*. we say it when we drink. though, technically that's just *health*. we always seem to leave off the *good* part. on dour mornings, I whisper it to myself when taking pills, as though one can ward off three years of warped mitochondria & leaky blood vessels with a single word: a

command. a roar. a spell.

on its flipside, the charm bears the image of a white stag, spectral & proud. see me now thumbing it absent-minded, the black wisps for antlers transporting me to another shrine: a night spent in the belly of the barbican, freshly ill & unmoored by all this aching.

I wept that night. here, in these stalls, in the dark, I wept for a life that had left me, for the lungs that gasped as winter winnowed through them between door & taxi, for the body that now stumbled & swung round dizzy orange carpets, desperate for horizontality. & I suspect you will think I am building to a heartfelt conclusion here:

THE MAGIC OF THEATRE OVERCOMES ALL!

yeah. not so much. flesh continued to decry the barbarism of these damn upright seats all through the show. yet, if you ask me to call its scenes back for you now, I will concede all I can give is squabbling chickens, trickster soot, & the drag of grass-laden feet: deft work from the chorus amidst all that razmataz. I will give you adventure & I will admit even I forget the bedbound mother we barely see. this is not a criticism. I love this story on stage & on screen. I suppose what I am asking is merely what does it mean when I see another form like mine & cannot retain them in memory? do I blame that on society? or on me, specifically?

I don't know. I'm lost in this battle with invisibility. I want to tell you something potent that makes you think differently, but everything coming to mind is old hat. I guess all I can ask is that wherever you journey today you might consider who does not move with you & why. how many of us might rely on charms & whispered words to survive. how many would vie to be in this very theatre, night after night, only playing at being sick.

or, next time you're in, just count the seats. it'll be more than you think.