

NIKOLAI VOSS
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Das Verlöschen

A Listening Companion

A cycle of fourteen songs · Texts & translations · A guide to the descent

Voss Editions · Vienna

THE CYCLE

Das Verlöschen is a typology of failing lights. A votive candle. A wick burning low. A miner's lamp going out far underground. Fourteen ways for a light to die, and behind all of them a single four-note figure — the lamp motif — lit in the first bar of the opening song and heard, for the last time, as its own shadow in the final bar.

The cycle is one long descent. It opens in a luminous E major and falls, song by song, to a final B-flat minor — with one warm flat-side oasis at its centre and one last major-key blaze before the dark closes in. You are not meant to notice the descent while it happens; you are meant to arrive at the end and realise you have been falling the whole time.

What follows are five of the cycle's songs, in the original German with facing English singing translations. Read them as you listen.

No. I · E major

Votive

Ich zünde eine Kerze an,
bevor die Nacht sich neigt.
Ein kleines Licht, das beben
kann,
das jeder Wind erreicht.
Aus diesem Funken kommt das
Licht,
das ich verlieren werde.
Halt fest, mein Herz, und
fürchte nicht
das Dunkel dieser Erde.

*I light a single candle now,
before the night comes on —
a small flame, one the wind can
bow,
and one day will be gone.
From this one spark will come
the light
that I am bound to lose.
Hold fast, my heart, and do not
fear
the dark the earth will choose.*

No. VI · A-flat major

The Lamp I Kept for You

Im Fenster stand für dich ein
Licht,
die ganzen langen Jahre.
Du kamst nicht heim. Ich sah
es nicht
verlöschen, Haar um Haare.
Nunkehr' die Flamme sich
nach innen,
ein Licht, das niemand sieht.
Es brennt für ein Erinnern,
das langsam mit ihm flieht.

*A light stood in the window once
for you,
through all the long years gone.
You never came. I did not see it
through —
it guttered on and on.
Now the flame turns inward, low
and small,
a light that no one sees.
It burns for a remembering,
that's all —
and fades by slow degrees.*

No. VII · G minor

The Miner's Lamp

Tief unter Tag, im schwarzen
Stein,
ging eine Lampe aus.
Kein Stern, kein Mond, kein
Morgenschein —
der Schacht ward ihm zum
Haus.
So trägt man jeden Mann hinab,
das Licht ihm in der Hand.
Der Schacht, der Sarg, das eine
Grab —
ein einzig dunkles Land.

*Deep under day, in the black
stone,
a single lamp went black.
No star, no moon, no morning
shown —
the shaft became his back.
So every man is carried down
the light held in his hand.
The shaft, the coffin, the one
ground —
a single darkened land.*

No. XIV · B-flat minor

Das Verlöschen

Die erste Kerze geht nun aus,
die ich am Anfang hielt.
Kein Morgen mehr, kein letztes
Haus,
kein Ton, der weiterspielt.
Der Schlussakkord verweigert
sich,
er endet, statt zu ruh'n.
Das Flämmchen sinkt. Und
über mich
schließt sich das Dunkel zu.

*The first of all the candles dies,
the one I held to start.
No morning now, no last reprise,
no note to hold apart.
The final chord withholds its
close,
it ends instead of stays.
The small flame sinks. And over
those
the dark draws down its haze.*

ON THE ENDING

The finale reaches its long-promised B-flat minor and then withholds the dominant, so that the last chord dies rather than resolves. It is the cycle's thesis made audible: that some things end without cadence.

Texts by Nikolai Voss. Hear the cycle in full at nikolaivoss.com/catalogue.