

What is a life? A frenzy. What is life?

A shadow, an illusion, and a sham.

*The greatest good is small; all life, it seems
Is just a dream, and even dreams are dreams.*

Calderón de la Barca's *Life is a Dream*

Darkness. And then, finally, a voice:

CHARLOTTE

The war raged on and I sat by the sea and saw deep into the heart of humankind. I was my mother, my grandmother, indeed I was all the characters in my play. I learned to walk all paths and in doing so became myself.

FATE

Is that so?

A MUSICAL PROLOGUE – THE DESCENT

PRELUDE

1913

A dim light radiates from a body of water. THE FIRST CHARLOTTE walks 21 miles into a darkened lake on a cold November night. We watch her frame by frame by frame. She slowly sinks and drowns.

We are surrounded by water. Echoing half-sounds, vague almost-memories, images just at the borders of our vision. Like desperately trying to remember a dream.

Slowly, slowly. Bits and pieces begin to concretize in a sound collage and rise to the surface. It stops abruptly upon:

FIRST CHARLOTTE, coughing up water violently. She speaks.

FIRST CHARLOTTE

Everywhere earth is the same. Nothing has changed. The body is painful. It must eat, breathe air, and sleep

Nothing has changed.

Only the earth has shrunk, and whatever happens, feels like it's happening next door.

Nothing has changed.

Next to old transgressions, new ones have appeared, real, alleged, momentary, none. But the scream, the body's answer for them--was, is, and always will be the scream of innocence.

Nothing has changed.

Except maybe manners, ceremonies, dances. But the body writhes, struggles, and tries to break free. Bowled over, it falls, draws in its knees, bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.

Nothing has changed.

Except the courses of rivers, the contours of forests, seashores, deserts, and icebergs and among these landscapes the poor soul winds, vanishes, returns, approaches, recedes. A stranger to itself, evasive. At one moment sure, the next unsure, of its existence. While the body is and is and is and has no place to go.

And yet...

I / say I, say I, say I / say / I say, I say, I say / I / say I, say I, say I / say / I say, I say, I say / I / say I, say I, say I / say / I say, I say, I say / I / say I, say I, say I / say / I say, I say, I say / I ...

Her words are a conjuring. A second Charlotte, CHARLOTTE, appears. She is waking from a nightmare. She doesn't know where she is, who she is. She is returning to her self. She speaks:

CHARLOTTE

Charlotte learned to read her name from a gravestone.

CHARLOTTE almost glimpses FIRST CHARLOTTE before the light on her is quickly extinguished. FIRST CHARLOTTE's voice carries on around CHARLOTTE.

FIRST CHARLOTTE

... I / say I, say I, say I / say / I say, I say, I say / I / say I, say I, say I / say / I say, I say, I say / I ...

CHARLOTTE (*Realizing herself*)

I learned to read my name from a gravestone.

FIRST CHARLOTTE

... That's so. That's so. That's so. That's so. That's so. That's so. That's so. That's so. That's so. That's so...

CHARLOTTE

Orpheus descending...to live. To live for them that could not...

BLACKOUT. SILENCE.

The sound of slow, methodical breathing underwater. Through love's altered sense of time, the before was also the after and the after also before. A hard break to:

FIRST CHARLOTTE

Now! For a woman in this family, for a woman, death has three ages - girl, mother, grandmother.

FIRST CHARLOTTE, FRANZISKA, and GRANDMOTHER all appear on stage in front of three oversized windows. A triptych of their faces is projected within the windows: a close-up of their faces contorting on film, each a moment before death and at death. A GIF animation of death. The trio stand in front of their respective projections. They speak simultaneously. Their bodies violently drop down on stage and rise up, death revisited over and over, as they struggle to keep repeating themselves.

FIRST CHARLOTTE *(simultaneously)*

I, I, I, I, I, I, I *(drop)* I, I, I, I, I, I, I *(drop)* I, I, I, I, I, I, I *(drop)* I, I, I, I, I, I, I *(drop)*...

GRANDMOTHER *(simultaneously)*

I see the flowers blooming. *(drop)* I see the flowers blooming. *(drop)* I see the flowers blooming. *(drop)* I see the flowers blooming... *(drop)*

FRANZISKA *(simultaneously)*

White clouds, white clouds, white clouds. *(drop)* White clouds, white clouds, white clouds.
(drop) White clouds, white clouds, white clouds. *(drop)* White clouds, white clouds, white
clouds.... *(drop)*

Eventually, the window projections change. The lights fade on the women. FIRST CHARLOTTE, FRANZISKA, and GRANDMOTHER continue to fall and rise in the darkness in silence, with the ongoing projections illuminated behind them.

CHARLOTTE appears. A swirling, black and white kaleidoscope of Berlin, its people, lights, eyes, wings, happiness, and devastation radiate out the windows and surround her visually and sonically.

Throughout it, DABERLOHN appears and disappears - a flickering celluloid image. Occasionally we see PAULINKA and GRANDFATHER in the same fashion in the windows. Eventually, FIRST CHARLOTTE, FRANZISKA, and GRANDMOTHER fall one last time. Their bodies litter the ground. They remain in the grotesque position of their deaths.

The stage is a lunar landscape of death and destruction. CHARLOTTE is left in search of even the faintest of colors amongst the projected devastation. Eventually:

CHARLOTTE

What was it all for, if I cannot speak?...

Only he who dares can win. Only he who dares can begin.

Blackness. Silence.

CHARLOTTE hums a tune in the darkness.

Music arises out of the humming.

ALL *(whispering)*

Wake up.

CHARLOTTE approaches her family. One by one, she reanimates them with a smear of paint across their faces. They are revived. They are characters in a play.

FIRST CHARLOTTE

I am the first Charlotte. I am your fate.

GRANDMOTHER

I am the grandmother.

FRANZISKA

I am the mother, Franziska.

Hello, Lotte.

CHARLOTTE smiles.

CHARLOTTE

Leben? oder... Theater?