

GOGA

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The Doors of No Return

FRAGMENTS OF AN EPIC

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Notebook One:
THE ADDRESS

Canto One: THE FIGURE

1

The world may be getting ever smaller, but time remains now and forever the dictator of distance. After long hours of traveling, the claustrophobic airplane casts a tiny avian shadow down on the shore of ancient kings.

The desert is no void: it's a patchwork of all colors, a mirror of winds. Our tour guide explained that Europe had no place remotely like the paradise of Australia. But my jealousy

gave me no peace and I blurted: *Paradise has no memory. There is no past in paradise.* – My own heart's past had summoned me there ...

Australia is our end of the world. Beyond it is everything, world without end ...

And at the end of the end stone pillars rise up to the heart of the sky from out of the sand, amidst a dreamlike, noiseless, colorful valley: *Pinnacles Desert*. Centuries ago, when after a sleepless voyage

sailors for the first time saw those heads turned to the stars, they thought they must be the ruins of an ancient stone temple. Adventurers ...

But we were just tourists: through the low grass

we hunted kangaroos with cameras. A dusty gravel road
lured us into a glorious twilight, spreading
moonlight over the blazing pillars like a bride: the axis

mundi! And us, the fellow travelers of blind chance. Sometimes
freedom and fate make strange traveling companions. I felt pressure under my ribs:
it reached me by every road, both traveled and unknown,

it welled up from the earth's interior, rising along the stone stumps
and fragile branches of my limbs way up, into the sky.
As if I were hypnotized beyond recovery. As if thrashed by these

mysterious giants, suddenly come back to life. The air was silver
and time immeasurably old. Older than plough and field.
Older than writing and the tree of royal descent.

An ancient time. Not historical, deeper: as old as stars.
We tourists were approaching a dangerous place, a cosmic eye.
I was filled with fear and trembling: sunken into the oil of night

the sculptures were dancing their motionless dance.
I could sense that we were forbidden to step in with the lust
of our western will. I could hear the sound of stars and divine fire:

that we people, creatures of fragile and vulnerable bodies,
were weaker and at the same time so much stronger than the world ...
The next morning, I read that Australian aborigines

believe that this ground is forbidden and sacred, a temple
where spirits of the dead assemble atop heaven and earth.
But I knew that already: that night – in the lava's bright glow –

I had dreamt both my dead parents back alive. We were eating and drinking,
laughing aloud! ... The spirits of the desert brought them to life,
there, far away, at the end of the end of our one and only world ...

4

The strongest bond is not with the living,
but with the dead. We are their heirs,
unserious, irresponsible, playful,

running barefoot on the dewy grass. Our ancestors,
speechless, forever broken, watch us mutely,
but we are alive, mortally alive and at fault ...

Yes, more than the living, the dead are demanding.
They don't speak, but we hear them nonetheless.
Their silence resonates audibly in our blood.

There is no other way for us but to heed them.
There is no bargaining, their demands
brook no evasions. However hard we may try,

they can never be satisfied. Though we may not think
of them for days, suddenly, one night they
come back and cast reflections of their loss

deep into our dreams. Staring at nothing
and sweating, we remember this guilt,
this debt that can never be repaid.

This is not just. We would like to direct
these living feet into living crowds,
forget the whistling bow of absence

and enjoy our modest happiness
alone somewhere or shared as a couple.
At the most beautiful moment, we hear

a humming silence. From beyond. A silence
that sings. And we know – deep inside us we know –
that this is just as it should be. It's dark. Dark are

the poems waiting for us. Wherever we go ...

Canto Two:
THE ANCESTRAL TREE

1

... I was a reflection on the water's fleeting mirror,
and a shadow on the speeding window of a train,
a footstep in fathomless mud, an instant of freedom

amidst an anonymous crowd, I was an eye
at the nadir of twilight and skin at the zenith of day
and the growing distance between the two heels of a step,

I was the crying of a boy surrounded by light
in the form of his mother in a photo that miraculously
survived all travails, and I was the rosy-hued face

of a young woman still present in the poems of a young man
who disappeared amid the chaos of war,
I was the co-author of a nameless philosophy

of the poor, shouting in fear, vanishing in a rage
of smoke, I'm gone, my name is erased
from all of the records, forgotten thousands of times,

in the peasants' rebellion I used my scythe to defend
the stubbled field and village from horsemen in armor,
the lines of my face are drawn on the dark wall

of the village church, I am the blind beggar
kissing St. Martin's hand for mercy, and I'm
imprinted on the memory of women as the handsome

dusky-eyed fiddler whose bones were lengthened
in a dungeon, the memory of a warm spring
evening beneath a chestnut tree living on forever

in the Asiatic cheekbones of their female descendants,
the impulse of the dance beat like a glowing ember
surging through the veins of grandsons who will never

know the joy of racing bareback through the endless steppe.
I was a woman who couldn't flee in time because of the child
I was carrying, the child that I lost when a horseman's

foot landed in my belly, I'm the one who hid a newborn child
when his mother, a Protestant, perished,
I fed him, took him to be christened with the name

intended for my own dead son, I've waited, waited
for a thousand years for all these frightful hordes to pass,
so I, so we no longer have to fear the tread

of boots' dread stomping through the night, I drew the towers
and the guards who terrorized the camp, my drawings
now yellow in museums, I remember how fear can hollow out

your bones, how vulnerable is skin amidst a darkened barrack,
now I'm just a signature in the lower corner of each drawing,
last name, first name, date as entered in the church's great book of births,

the place of birth, the place of death, all touch erased,
all happiness and sorrow, all fear and courage,
in my grave all languages are mixed, I lie

beneath the ruins of Babylon, I was Italian, I was German,
a Jew, a Scot no less, brought here by Bonaparte's mad venture,
I was a Slovene woman, by moss now covered all alike,

my name was Krulc and Lužar, I had soft skin,
my name was Schwarz and Kerstein, and we went
before the altar, but he kept leaving,

long and cold is this road,

I was the gleam in all my forefathers' eyes – exhaustion, fire –
in endless wars,

and I was the fragile shadow
of all my mothers, frail girls bending over an old

and eternally young spring out in a field, all things flow,
only the story remains, full of names already forgotten
which must be saved from oblivion precisely by me, their footprint

in sand, reflection in water, the shade of the nuances
expressed by their faces in all the window panes and mirrors,

I was Anica

and Ante, I have drawn my shadow across all the walls

of the family house in far-off Belgrade, I was the beating of their hearts,
I was Leopoldina and Anton, but I owe my images
of their heaven and hell to the magic of imagination,

I was Angela and Janez, in an old, faded photo from outside
their poor peasants' house in Lower Carniola I recognized myself,
I who am an alien to them, I who come from a utopia

and no longer from the village of my roots, for what purpose
do I repeat their long forgotten names, why do I keep
repeating their long forgotten story which aches and aches,

and who am I, anyway?

A mere reflection of an ancient flame?

Indeed, who am I, who once was all these people?

An erased footprint? Am I a sum, the culmination of a tribe?

Beyond this ancient story just an echo and a shadow?

Am I nobody?

Whose is this reflection in a window, on the water, whose is this face,
and who am I? ...

Canto Three:
CAPITAL

My capital is memory.

MONIKA VAN PAEMEL

1

Even now, as I write this, the taste of ashes
fills my mouth, makes breathing hard. Because
cleaning up after the dead is a horror. To force

whole lives of loved ones just laid to rest
through a sieve, from their effects to pick the best
for memory's heaven, and the rest for oblivion's hell.

To find in the estate the precious items, the gold for fillings
and for wedding rings, the bracelets and the pocket
watches with broken hands, all that old junk

of souvenirs and calling cards, postcards
and letters, important documents and photographs,
a sewing kit and boxes full of buttons, broken necklaces

and rusted keys, fruit rotting in the fridge,
someone's (but whose?) first tooth and grade school textbooks,
a dozen pairs of glasses with different frames and lens strengths,

a couple dozen passports and IDs,
 prints and paintings, shelves groaning to the ceiling
 with dusty books, and books, and books ...

A life's last summing up, amazement at what a beauty
 mother was when she was young, the scent in her skirts,
 where her smell still lingers in the pleats,

so lovely. – My memory of her lives as long as that fragrance
 hovers in the empty clothes and haunts me. – Sorting through
 a life is bittersweet, a ritual that for one last time revives

all that they once were and had, before death's
 shroud of absence covers all the traces. Awful the dilemma
 of what to keep and what to pitch. Closed up in boxes

sealed for good, memories make the pilgrimage
 to garbage. Which of two evening gowns with matching scarves
 of silk to rescue from non-being? ... The zeal

of the living plows on relentlessly, the forces
 of the present force out the past's dead weight,
 all those wardrobes full of rummage from the past

would strangle us, we must make room, air out memory,
 before it burns up from the sheer weight of the cargo
 it must carry ...

And then for years the corner

gleams with that small statue from the Horn of Africa,
who brought it here, so far from home, to this foothill
of the Alps remains unanswered, an intimate, impassioned plea

from dad to mom, postmarked '53, the ninth of April,
before becoming mom and dad, fades on, a letter
father wanted to destroy but mother saved

after his death for future eyes, which now
I also save because I'm mentioned in it: me, with whom
my mother – so feminine, so mild – was pregnant then,

and I am tortured by the question: what will be –
when the time comes – this letter's fate amid the next
house cleaning, the next great purge by the living of the dead,

will some other face bent down peruse it and dream of lives
lived fully, of lives too early ended, will my parents' love be tossed
into the garbage bin

or in a box of ancient memories?

I'm enveloped by a breeze of silence ...

9

When dividing up estates, let others
claim the houses, land, the numbered Swiss
accounts. *Full moons continue gliding*

on the calm and gleaming river of my childhood games.
Let them haggle for a percent or two, for property
and investments. Let them saw the cradle in two.

I spit and take my father's ancient chair,
that essence of his rootedness in time. They wolf down,
ravenous, the family kitchen, grandmother and all.

My only claim is to the name, untarnished. They've emptied
out the drawers. *At whose bottom I discover yellowed photos.*
They've even commandeered the tombs, without a trace of shame.

My epitaph you'll not find there; dimly even now it shines
through these lines. They've tossed aside the papers. *I've picked them*
all up off the floor. Me, the most faithful, disinherited son.

This is all my heritage. My only capital.
Memory.