

0. The Selfish Giant
by Carla Zaccagnini



Carla Zaccagnini Yo voy a visitar a mi papa (I am going to visit my dad), 1980.

Crayon and tempera on paper, 33 x 41 cm

There is the myth of Orpheus. When he descends into the underworld to search for his beloved Eurydice, Hades allows him to take her back to the surface as long as Orpheus walks ahead of her without looking back until the sun's rays touch her. Barely at the surface, however, Orpheus turns around without counting the steps that separate him from Eurydice. He only catches a glimpse of her before she vanishes forever, just before reaching daylight. There is also the biblical story of the escape from Sodom, when Lot and his family are also asked to not look back. Unable to leave without laying eyes on the city from beyond one last time, Lot's wife is transformed into a statue of salt—her stride frozen, her torso twisted and her eyes wide open as if they want to swallow it all, while waiting for the next rain.

The threat of looking back, the irresistible temptation to do so, and the punishment: I think I understand it. Even though I don't think the risk in looking back lies in making what we see disappear or in petrifying the viewer. The risk is that we solidify what we once saw, or what we thought we saw. And so, as we continue to walk forward, we do so with coagulated images loading our mind; images that were not formed in the instant when those poses occurred in time, but in the moment when we looked at them again and decided this was how they were. We remember the photos of a birthday, or the story of our reaction to the magician's show, rather than the birthday or the show themselves.

It might be because of the mythical danger of looking back that we only look at the past through rear-view mirrors. That is how history is written. Starting from a present day, equally historic and equally charged with wars, we look at the reflection of a past in the footprints that remain, and we decide that we understand what happened. We decide that we grasp what happened (or what is said to have happened; or what we believe we see in remaining traces that have happened; or what the resulting present makes us think may have happened) and how it could have happened. And that is how salt statues emerge and how they can stay erect for years or centuries if there is no storm.

I don't know if time is cyclical but the past repeats itself—we repeat it, we like retelling it. And the birthday scene we evoke is always the same. Of a day full of surprises and congratulations, we always pluck the same moment without knowing how or by whom it was chosen. Each time we talk or think about that birthday (or funeral, or day without a date) the same moment rises to the surface like the scene of Marilyn Monroe holding down her skirt above a subway grate.

That is how history is written, less so with memory and more so through forgetting. There is a lot to leave aside, iteratively so, to be able to knit together that chain of epic events that history recounts as a family photo album. We have to forget consistently. Anything that does not have a known proof may not actually have happened, and is not mentioned: it disappears from books, anecdotes, questions, and, thus, indeed, cannot have happened. And only one story remains. Of all the possible stories, we choose a fable. The one of the astrologer, who, because of watching the stars while walking, falls into a well? Or, the one of Peter, who, because he repeatedly cried for help over an imaginary wolf, is not taken seriously when the real wolf arrives and is hungry?

Maybe a way to be able to write another history is by approaching the past through new reflections, by finding intact documents; intact not as in unscathed, quite the opposite: we need those documents that were kept without care and which could, by being left to themselves, change in hiding. Those ones that remained alive without any witnesses and that are now a bit dirty and broken. The discrete ones, that knew how to stay quiet each time we could have taken them out to shine like statues or buried them forever in darkness. Those that managed to remain unnoticed and could preserve their own sense of strangeness. Those that we didn't observe and that we can only see with a certain disobedience, with the unconscious urge of Lot's wife and Eurydice's lover, or with the hunger of a wolf awaited long since.