

PRELUDE



Helcia

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Angles of Memory (*Helcia*)

Everyone has a story.

Some stories are difficult to believe, though true. Others accurate, yet dull. Some difficult to tell—apart from the others. One story often spills into another, echoes, diverges before crossing trajectories again. The skeins once separated, can fray. To isolate the variable can unthread the most composed, even the most vain.

This is my story and my younger brother Henryk's story. My mother Zofia's and my father Andrzej's. My youngest brother Józef doesn't speak of these places. Somehow his memories were lost.

A story of war, shifting boundaries, alliances and ideologies. A story of mid-twentieth-century ice and burning sun.

History tells such stories, recorded through speech, shaded recollection. The human hand carves on stone, brushes ink to tablet, lines on a map, throws pottery on a wheel, carries a gun, pats the shoulder of another firmly *it will be okay*, coaxes the infant to sleep, looks over the shoulder—and up ahead.

These gestures to understand, represent, make the past manageable—to pass the book on. *Here is our chapter, remember us. Now what will you do—knowing all this?*

Spin the globe blindfolded and point to a country to see if it is still there. Take scissors and cut out the divisions between nations on a map. An exercise in rhetoric and chance.

Ancient themes reemerge: history repeating itself incorrigibly. Tenacious greed. The snake eating its own tail makes a circle, *alpha* and *omega*, a process, a spin.

A free country is not free not to go to war.
War, it is said, *the path to freedom*.

Yes, there are many stories and many ways to tell one story. Manifold shadows of one tree. Though the limbs can be truncated and leaves shorn.

Some need to speak, to tell the others; others cannot bear to remember, relive. They cannot be relieved, afford to recollect, risk a bankruptcy of the worst kind.

One can be born into a line of kings, another the son of a soldier. The daughter of the king could not marry the peasant's son. The peasant's son dreams of a marble, the eye of a saint on a stick for public display.

Some are born into a way of worshiping or not worshiping God. To be born on one side of a barbed wire fence or stone wall, identified with a group of people as better, or turned away—*you do not belong. You are not one of us. You cannot stay—*

If lucky, take your family and leave. If separated from your family, look through the debris. There are agencies to verify. Records of teeth. Fill out the forms properly. We will send a flag even if you cannot speak. Even if there is no longer a country.

PRELUDE: ANGLES OF MEMORY (*HELICIA*)

There are those who worship power, money, prestige. The ego trying to press itself into the pages of history, unable to admit defeat. *I was here x years and this is what is left. Remember me.*

One's character, place, and time: the x , y , and z .
The fields, the skies, and angle of memory.

Some are born without proper shelter, without the luxury of food, safety, academic training, access to employment, *ladder mobility*. Others born into mansions, many born into disease. So many variables seemingly shaken in a hat—or perhaps pre-mapped, depending on one's beliefs. Who is to say?

This is my family's story. A story of starvation and betrayal. One chess game of many in the tome of history, yet a complicated game with repercussions nonetheless.

A story of survival for a few—a story of intense cold and heat. A story of mid-twentieth-century ice and burning sun.

A story of maps and shadows.

Displaced Persons

The cartographer, busy rearranging borders,
does not hear the gunshots, glimpse the people
lined up behind their possessions, aching
not to turn back, not to remember [home].

He hardly notices the country cut out
and hidden. Severed from history,
lost cities undo memory's veils.

The frozen bluebird wrapped in tree dust
will not survive. This, a fact, or arguably
an omen. *Take your family and leave*
salvage what to carry and what hour.

The wounds of hunger can deepen
bones' vacuous sockets eaten by time
that stills and fallows.

Not knowing the aftermath,
the proper names for infinite
waiting and disarray, the fear
of being useless.

Night, the circumference we stay inside
at the margins of quiet, begging strangers
for variations of kindness.

Counting up deaths, there were many.
Those ghosts that slip, sleeves pulled that
come undone. All this undid
what we knew, feeble specks
lost in the cosmos.