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[...] It's been raining since yesterday, an incessant rain that hammers the eucalyptus leaves and the ferns, shiny and bright in the murky, humid air, an insurmountable wall of water, and everything is on the other side, the faces, the voices, the years ... Istria too, up there, is on the other side, in another world, it's strange how from here I seem to see it so clearly, so near, like when you look at it from the coast of Barcola, but then it vanishes, dissolves ... There were scores of black swans, that day we sailed up the estuary of the Derwent River on the *Lady Nelson*, a century ago, maybe two, flocks of black swans in the sky, and occasionally I would shoot one down. The meat had a pungent, gamy taste, I threw a few scraps to the convicts in chains, whom we had come to drop off and who were chewing theirhardtack. The banks of the Derwent River were covered with clumps of drenched, shiny grass, waterfalls and cataracts white as snow plunged into the river from great heights, their fine particles glinting in the sunlight, rotted logs got trapped in coves of brownish water formed by the meandering current, a kangaroo ran off into the bush. A forest brimming with confusion stood where Hobart Town now stands, the light filtered in and disappeared like birds in the tangle of branches, fungi and lichens clung to giant trees a thousand years old.

It was there in that bay, at Risdon Cove, that we landed, that we put ashore the convicts sentenced to forced labour; that's how Hobart Town was born. I remember the day perfectly, September 9, 1803. I went to check my autobiography and I'm glad to see that this date is reported accurately, it shows the author's diligence and meticulousness. Hobart Town, the first civilian, military and penal colony of Van Diemen's Land. Above all penal. Every city is founded on blood; it's not surprising that the Risdon Creek massacre occurred a short time later, perhaps the Aboriginal who climbed naked on the *Lady Nelson* that first day to trade us his spear for a roasted swan may have been among those massacred.

I'm just saying that, since afterwards no one bothered to find out how things really went; even our Reverend Knopwood turned a blind eye. Everyone always turns a blind eye to these things, massacres I mean. Nelson did too, when he continued to bombard my Copenhagen for hours and hours after the Danish fleet, trapped in the strait, had been sunk; the city, battered and in flames, had raised the white flag and Admiral Parker himself, the British commander, had sent a ceasefire signal.

But Nelson brings the spyglass to his blindfolded eye, observes the carnage with the wrong eye, the blind one, and sees only the black patch, no white flag, I'm damned if I see it, the shells continue to fall on people who no longer defend themselves, then come the surrender ceremonies, admirals and dignitaries in full dress, swords handed

over and magnanimously returned, a blindfold is convenient, it helps you close an eye to the slaughter.

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A LITTLE ORDER, I agree, I was just about to say so, for one thing because otherwise I'm the first to get lost. Moreover it's not my fault; with all these questions piling up, the responses get tangled up too, because each time I have to stop and think and by the time I answer there's already another question, and so it seems like I'm answering chaotically. For that matter, it's a technique used in all interrogations.

And don't say you're not asking me anything because I can sense your questions just the same; I can read them on your clamped lips, in the faces you make, even over there, in those other rooms, or who knows where, when everyone questions all those things about me. I hear them in my ears, your repeated cries, shouts, questions questions questions; everyone wants to know everything, drag everything that's his out of a poor devil's head, thoughts, images, memories, facts. There are so many things in your head, smiles, seas, cities, screeching hurricanes; the wind coils among the shrouds shrieking, enters the convolutions of the brain and can't get out, an eddying whirlwind between one hemisphere and the other, right and left, here and there, boreal and austral. I saw that photograph of mine, Dr. Ulcigrai, on your table, I knew it was mine by the name, though the name is debatable ... but I would have recognized myself just the same in that nocturnal galaxy exploding in the immensity, in that grey and white corolla that exfoliates in the darkness, Identi-Kit for wanted prisoner Salvatore Cippico -C~ ipiko, passport photo of convict Jorgen Jorgensen, official portrait of His Majesty King of Iceland, a section obtained through Brainvox magnetic resonance imaging, I heard your henchman say in the usual sibylline jargon of inquisitors.

Yes, there are many things in a man's head. Or there were, because they take them from you, they empty you out; those black plates, scored with white filaments like shooting stars in the night sky, that bear my name, are the image of the dark, empty space that's in your head after they've taken everything from you throughout your entire life. That milky obscurity, those clots floating through infinity are me—if this is the portrait of a man, can one tell his story, does he have a story, a life, this mushy pulp? But then Maria, white daisy in the dark glade, her eyes slanted, tender, ironic ... those dark stars, gleaming in the night ...

I have some difficulties, however, with those translucent portraits of mine in your folder, Dr. Ulcigrai. I recognize myself more clearly in the photo printed in the Hobart Town Almanack that accompanies my autobiographical sketch. I doubt that your x-rays are as durable and I'd like to see them, after a century.

It's sharp, distinct. Moreover you're already familiar with it, it must have been you who stuck it in that magic lantern of yours the other day, like my uncle Bepi used to do sometimes in the evening ...

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I LOVED THE SEA more than women, before I understood that they are one and the same. But I only understood this later, much later than that night in London when, fleeing from that girl, I ended up running into a press gang that dragged me onto a scow on the Thames and from there on board a fine warship, the *Surprize*. Yes, I fled. It happens. Haven't you ever been afraid? That body that is no longer yours, you don't even recognize its odour, a sour sweat—you're no longer in control, you can't order yourself not to sweat, not to have that odour.

I like to give orders—also to obey, it's all the same, it's I who decide, even whether to submit to the Party, for example. You know what you have to do and you do it. But that night in London, after disembarking from the *Jane*, that night in that tavern with that girl, I didn't know who was giving the orders and who was obeying. My body was there, remote, sweaty, chilled; I felt that when it came to love, even the five-minute variety, no one gives orders and no one decides. What do you do, with a girl like that, what do you say to her, who is it that makes the first move, what will it be like ... Clear out of there, cut and run, even brutally if she won't take no for an answer, as soon as you turn the corner the fear, and shame, will pass. I'll be able to get a pint of cold beer somewhere, which I can't seem to get down now, ah yes, beer, cold, frothy, you can feel your arms again, your legs; even the sweat is different, a good sweat. It's a delight when the beer slides down your throat and into your belly, and when, soon afterwards, you go to take a piss, even your pecker is free and easy again, relaxed; every once in a while, who knows why, it makes your pants bulge, but that's its business and you pay no attention to it, any more than when you belch, especially since it's quick to settle back in place.

Of course, that time I didn't get to drink any beer, the press gang grabbed me almost immediately, there in the alley, before I could duck into another tavern. But that's not the point. What I find a lot more objectionable are those malicious stories insinuated by my biographers, more or less all of them—Clune, Stephenson, Davies, and now even that Dan Sprod, who thinks he's so smart. It's true that I wrote that I was the only one of my siblings not to be nursed by my mother, I went and checked, and so they had a great time with my not having been breast-fed, surely I don't have to explain these obsessions to you, since they are common even in here ... Aside from the fact that I'm not the one whothat, it's Thomas, in the *Adventures of Thomas Walter*—I wrote that novel in prison, in Newgate, even that pedantic biographer of mine says so, and I invented all of it—Oh well, all of it, no one ever invents anything, for that matter, and when one writes "I" ... yet how could one say "he" instead, which is an even greater lie than "I"? You don't mean to tell me you're talking to him now ... All right then, that time I did not make love, let them go ahead and write it. I like a biography that recounts everything you don't do—Still you had to be there, that night, to understand ... that confusion, in the tavern and outside, the crowded streets, the shouts and brawls, someone lying in the gutter, half dead, the peddlers passing nearby

hawking honeyed fruitcake at the top of their lungs, people flocking to Mother Proctor's Pews scuffling to get the best place from which to watch the hangings at Tyburn gallows, the roosters ripping each other to pieces in the cockfights at the Cockpit, the chained bear tearing the dogs limb from limb at the Bear Garden and those large tents with their monsters, those dazed brutes ... And in all this pandemonium, two lost, solitary creatures, me and you, a girl without a name, what should we have done if not flee, rather than uttering false words of love or faking loving gestures, even for five minutes? That night I fled, a deserter from the battlefield of love, savage like all battlefields. If only I had always fled like that, later on as well, perhaps now—later instead I was no longer able to flee, or abandon the flag—you should always have three or four of them, flags that is, if you hand over the right one to those in command, saying that you tore it away from the enemy in the dust of battle, you'll even get a reward, and they'll pay for your wine at the tavern besides ... but instead, look where the red flag ended up taking me, that flag forever in my grasp, a far cry from cut and run—

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FORGIVE ME AGAIN, Doctor, it was just a sudden dizziness, for a moment I couldn't see anything anymore, just a dazzling dust mote that was hurting my eyes. It happens. Now it's gone and everything is clear, like Maria's face. The fault of that revolving door with the glass panes, at the Café Lloyd in Fiume where we would go sometimes in the evening. One time I saw her arriving; I was already inside waiting for her, she crossed the street, smiled at me from beyond the transparent door and entered it, making the panels turn; as she passed between them her figure and her face were mirrored in those revolving plates of glass and shattered into changing reflections, a handful of luminous, fragmented splinters. And so, between one revolving panel and another, she vanished. I must have stayed there a long time watching those glittering door panes; years sitting inside there, as the door revolves more and more slowly and nobody comes in. It's understandable that your head spins too and after a while you don't even remember so well who it was that disappeared between one pane and the other, whose smile it was. For a moment, for instance, catching a glimpse of her in the street, I thought it was Mangawana; that she too had crossed the great sea. It was I who called her that, under the huge eucalyptus trees leaning out over the waters of the Derwent: that ancient Aboriginal name, to tease her about her dusky skin, dark like my mother's. Instead it was Maria—yes, she was also Mangawana, because Maria was the sea into which all rivers flow. Loving a woman does not mean that you forget all the others, but rather that you love them and desire them and have them all in her. When we made love on the solitary beach of Levrera or in that room in Miholašćica, there was also the austral forest at the edge of the ocean, Terra Australis Incognita. Instead in Fiume, that day ... When Maria, seeing that I was incapable of leaving, took my hand, placed it on her breast, then led me to the door, in the scented dawn, helping me to go—the journey

is the beginning of the return, she smiled at me, but I knew, at least I think I did, that there would be no return, by decree of the gods whom I—by some distortion of my heart’s will—had set above my heart and that smile.

Perhaps I never loved her as much as I did at that moment, when I lied about returning and embarked on the search for the fleece; while she held my hands a moment longer, and at the same time, gentle yet resolute, helped me disengage mine—Hypsipyle bidding farewell to Jason: “Go, and may heaven bring thee back again with thy comrades unharmed, bearing to the king the golden fleece, even as thou wilt and thy heart desireth; and this island and my father’s sceptre will be awaiting thee, if on thy return hereafter thou shouldst choose to come hither again. Still remember Hypsipyle when thou art far away and when thou hast returned; and ...”—“Well, don’t you know how the rest goes, like in school?—Come on ... Here, repeat with me, “and leave me some word of bidding, which I will gladly accomplish, if haply heaven shall grant me to be a mother.”—Enough, we’re not in school, prompting during an oral quiz ... We don’t want to recite the whole book, now, do we? And don’t ask me, please, if the gods ... what do I know, what can I know ... Jason doesn’t meet her eyes either when he solemnly replies: “Hypsipyle, so may all these things prove propitious by the favour of the blessed gods.” When I raised my eyes, she wasn’t there anymore, she had vanished—no, she was there, like always, but I didn’t know who she was, a beautiful figurehead without a name that the fury of the storm tore from the sunken ship, she drifts along rising and falling with the waves, her large eyes turned upwards, to an emptiness even greater than that of the sea.

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THIS IS GALATEA. She was found on an African beach following a shipwreck, and was worshipped like a goddess by the aborigines; other figures ended up adorning inns and taverns, so that the sailors might feel a little more at home even when they were on land. You see, figureheads were evicted from the sea and so they manage as best they can, I’ve discovered more than one of them displaying a coiffure in a beauty salon window or modelling a dress in an apparel store—well disguised of course, a proper mannequin, but she didn’t escape my attention. Still, I pretended not to notice anything, everyone gets by as best they can. We buried one of them—read what it says here—the one from the Rebecca, a whaling ship from New Bedford, among the rocks by the sea. Under the bones of the waves, as they say in Iceland, we drank beer in her honour, her funeral beer; women should have one too, it’s only fair, we got drunk and sang the Office for the Dead on her grave of sand and stones. Lewdness too, as is fitting; death is lewd and sorrow is lewd. I’d like to piss on my grave, the flowers on a grave have to be watered, don’t they? I even do it, when nobody can see me, there in St. David’s Park. On the figurehead from the Rebecca all we did was pour some beer, but we didn’t do it on purpose, it’s just that we were a little drunk; besides, the waves quickly washed it away, that rank odour vanished in the salt sea air and now there’s not a trace, not even the

grave, the tide scraped and sucked it away, maybe now she rises and falls on the open sea, corroded by the water, wood that is no longer distinguishable from any other remains of a shipwreck. Even a face composed of flesh soon deteriorates, the fish devour it and it quickly becomes unrecognizable, an unrecognizable piece of flotsam from the sea. It was I who pushed Maria, on the open sea and under the sea; I threw her to the sharks as food and so I was spared by them. Savage teeth tore her from my arms—no, it was I who let her go, who shoved her into those jaws, all the more voracious because her heart was bleeding and the brutes get even more excited at the taste of blood, the slave drivers lash out more enthusiastically when they see red trickling down their captives' backs.

And so she disappeared in that shadowy sea, in that darkness. But I read that sometimes shipwrecked figureheads return. Maria disappeared on the open sea, the ship vanished over the horizon, and when I heard that it was returning to port I also heard that it was returning without her—she was no longer there, they must have treacherously thrown her overboard, of course, how could I think that one small push ... I read, in the catalogue, about a sculptor who chose his beautiful girlfriend to be the model for the figurehead of a ship on which she was about to leave on a long voyage—for her, soon afterwards, the longest voyage of all: she died. Every day he watched the sea disconsolately, he couldn't believe she was dead and when the ship re-entered the port and he saw the figurehead, standing upright on the prow, identical to her—he leapt into the water to go to her, longing to embrace her, but he went under. Waterlogged and dazed, water in his nose in his mouth in his ears, it was impossible to see the ship as it passed by, to see whether she was there or not. She wasn't there, Eurydice vanishes; look how beautiful she is, this Eurydice wiping her tears with the edge of the mantle that envelops her. She too is in La Spezia, the caption says; we'll see if I'm able to successfully recreate her, that mantle is the dark water, the night, the bottom of the sea, I'll pull it over my head and we'll stay under there, close together, clinging to one another ...

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