

A SWALLOW PAPERBOOK

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ANNAIS NIN

UNDER
A GLASS
BELL

engraving by Ian Hugo

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UNDER A GLASS BELL
AND OTHER STORIES

by
AN AIS NIN



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THE LABYRINTH

I WAS eleven years old when I walked into the labyrinth of my diary. I carried it in a little basket and climbed the moldy steps of a Spanish garden and came upon boxed streets in neat order in a backyard of a house in New York. I walked protected by dark green shadows and followed a design I was sure to remember. I wanted to remember in order to be able to return. As I walked, I walked with the desire to see all things twice so as to find my way back into them again. The bushes were soft hairy elbows touching mine, the branches swords over my head. They led me. I did not count the turns, the chess moves, the meditated displacements, the obsessional repetitions. The repetitions prevented me from counting the hours and the steps. The obsessions became the infinite. I was lost. I only stopped because of the clock pointing to anguish. An anguish about returning, and about seeing these things but once. There was a definite feeling that their meaning could only be revealed the second time. If I were forced to go on, unknowing, blind, everything would be lost. I was infinitely far from my first steps. I did not know exactly why I must return. I did not know that at the end I would not find myself where I started. The beginning and the end were different, and why should the coming to an end annihilate the beginning? And why should the beginning be retained? I did not know, but for the anguish in my being, an anguish over something lost. The darkness before me was darker than the darkness behind me.

Everything was so much the same and equal before and

around me that I was not certain I had turned sufficiently in the path to be actually walking towards the place from which I started. The clouds were the same, the croaking of the frogs, the soft rain sound of fountains, and the immobile green flame of evergreens in boxes. I was walking on a carpet of pages without number. Why had I not numbered the pages? Because I was aware of what I had left out; so much was left out that I had intended to insert, and numbering was impossible, for numbering would mean I had said everything. I was walking up a stairway of words. The words repeated themselves. I was walking on the word pity pity pity pity pity pity. My step covered the whole word each time, but then I saw I was not walking. When the word was the same, it did not move, nor did my feet. The word died. And the anguish came, about the death of this word, about the death of the feeling inside of this word. The landscape did not change, the walk was without corners; the paths so mysteriously enchained I never knew when I had turned to the right or left. I was walking on the word obsession with naked feet: the trees seemed to press closer together, and breathing was difficult. I was seeking the month, the year, the hour, which might have helped me to return. In front of me was a tunnel of darkness which sucked me violently ahead, while the anguish pulled me backwards. The escalator of words ran swiftly under me, like a river. I was walking on my rebellions, stones exploding under my feet. Following the direction of their heaviest fragment might take me back. Yet all the time I knew that what I would find would be white bleached bones, sand ashes, decomposed smiles, eyes full of holes like cooled lava.

My feet were slipping on accumulated tears like the slippery silt of river banks, on stones washed by slow waters. I touched rock-crystal walls with white foaming crevices, white sponges

of secret sorrows set in a lace of plant skeletons. Leaves, skins, flesh had been sucked of their juices, and the juices and sap drunk by the crevices, flowing together through the river bed of stillborn desires.

Legs and arms and ears of wax were hung as offerings, yielded to the appetite of the cave, nailed with humble prayers for protection that the demon might not devour those who passed.

I walked pinned to a spider web of fantasies spun during the night, obstinately followed during the day. This spider web was broken by a foghorn, and by the chiming of the hours. I found myself traversing gangways, moats, gangplanks while still tied to the heaving straining cord of a departing ship. I was suspended between earth and sea, between earth and planets. Traversing them in haste, with anguish for the shadow left behind, the foot's imprint, the echo. All cords easily untied but the one binding me to what I loved.

I sank into a labyrinth of silence. My feet were covered with fur, my hand with leather, my legs wrapped in accordion-pleated cotton, tied with silken whips. Reindeer fur on my breast. Voicelessness. I knew that like the reindeer even if the knife were thrust into me at this moment, I would not even sigh.

Fragments of the dream exploded during my passage through the moats, fell like cutting pieces from dead planets without cutting through the fur and cotton of this silence. The flesh and fur walls breathed and drops of white blood fell with the sound of a heartbeat. I did not want to advance into the silence, feeling I might lose my voice forever. I moved my lips to remember the words I had formed, but I felt they no longer articulated words. My lips moved like the sea anemone, with infinite slowness, opening and closing, rolling

under the exterior pressure, to breathe, forming nothing but a design in water. Or they moved like the noses of animals quivering at the passing wind, to detect, to feel, forming no word but recognition of an odor. Or they moved as flowers close for the night, or against the invasion of an insect. They breathed with fin slowness, with the cadence of a bulb flowering.

I was not moving any more with my feet. The cave was no longer an endless route opening before me. It was a wooden, fur-lined crib, swinging. When I ceased stepping firmly, counting my steps, when I ceased feeling the walls around me with fingers twisted like roots, seeking nourishment, the labyrinthian walk became enlarged, the silence became airy, the fur disintegrated, and I walked into a white city.

It was a honeycomb of ivory-white cells, streets like ribbons of old ermine. The stone and mortar were mixed with sunlight, with musk and white cotton. I passed by streets of peace lying entangled like cotton spools, serpentines of walls without doorways, veiled faces and veiled windows ascending, dissolving into terraces, courtyards, emptying into the river. I heard secret fountains of laughter, hooded voices. I heard the evening prayer like a lament spilling on shining mosaics and the veins of the cobblestones under my feet were like a chaplet between monk's fingers. I passed windowless houses erupting at the tip in flowered terraces, a Vesuvius of flowers. And now I was inside the soft turning canals of a giant ear, inside the leaves of intricate flowers, streets spiraling like sea shells, lost in a point, and the bodies passing me were wrapped in cotton capes, and breathed into each other's faces. In their hands the sand of time was passing slowly. They carried enormous rusty keys to open the gates which divided

the city. The palm leaves were waving, gently content, and the city lay like a carpet under contemplative feet. I was awakened by a sound of paper unrolling. My feet were treading paper. They were the streets of my own diary, crossed with bars of black notes. Serpentine walls without doorways, desires without issues. I was lost in the labyrinth of my confessions, among the veiled faces of my acts unveiled only in the diary. I heard the evening prayer, the cry of solitude recurring every night. My feet touched the leaves of intricate flowers shriveling, paper flowers veined with the nerves of instruments. Enormous rusty keys opened each volume, and the figures passed armless, headless, mutilated. The white orifice of the endless cave opened. On the rim of it stood a girl eleven years old carrying the diary in a little basket.