Unremembered

by Stephanie Paulsell in the July 6, 2016 issue

A PROCESSION OF IMAGES: A panel from William Kentridge's frieze along the Tiber River in Rome. Some rights reserved by Luca Di Ciaccio.

In Rome this spring, a new work of art appeared on the embankment wall of the Tiber River. Containing some 80 images, many of them more than 30 feet tall, South African artist William Kentridge's nonchronological frieze of Roman history stretches for a third of a mile. It's an organic work of art, with images made from the patina of grime that has accumulated on the wall over the years. Using a technique called "reverse graffiti," workers placed enormous stencils on the wall and pressure-washed around them. When the stencils were removed, the images remained.

The frieze depicts a procession of images familiar from Roman art, history, and tradition: the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* recording Rome's military exploits on a shield; the wolf who nursed Rome's founders, Romulus and Remus; Marcus Aurelius on horseback; the angel atop Castel Sant'Angelo, sheathing his sword. Kentridge titled the frieze *Triumphs and Laments*, drawing attention to triumph's costs, the terrible intimacy of glory and loss, victory and despair. Many of the images recall violent displacements: soldiers returning to Rome after the sack of Jerusalem, or refugees with their possessions strapped to their backs boarding a boat for the dangerous crossing to the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Other images reveal a sly humor: a nun receiving communion from a *moka*, the iconic Italian coffeepot; Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg standing together in a bathtub—a reference to their meeting at the Trevi Fountain in *La Dolce Vita*. But everywhere the weight of history is evident. As the *Winged Victory* inscribes the

story of military conquest on her shield, she falls and begins to shatter. Gaunt, skeletal animals stalk through the procession, haunting it with a vision of the losses and laments each triumph bears in its wake. And occasionally the movement of the procession is interrupted by a body lying motionless on the ground: Remus, killed by his brother on the day Rome was founded; filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini lying murdered on the beach; Giorgiana Masi, a student shot to death in a demonstration in 1977.

All of these images are thought-provoking, but one of the most arresting is a simple dark panel. It appears to be on wheels, part of the moving procession. Scrawled on it is a phrase in parentheses: *quello che non ricordo*, "what I do not remember." In the midst of a procession of these well-known stories in human history is an image marking what's been forgotten.

What we do not remember. That's most of history, isn't it? Most names are not remembered, most stories not inscribed on shields or written in books or displayed on walls. Yet the procession of human history depends upon these things: the lives of the unremembered, the relationships they forged, their hopes and aspirations, and their triumphs and their laments. It's inevitable that we'll join them one day.

To memorialize what we can't remember—to give it weight and heft and make it a part of the procession of history—is an act of reverence and imagination. It calls us to follow our imaginations to the boundaries of what we know and then to press on even further. It asks us to imagine the lives of those whose history has been forgotten as well as those in our own day and age whose unfolding history we ignore. It urges us to remember that our triumphs and laments are interwoven with those of others in ways we cannot know.

I've begun to think of that panel of unremembered things as a kind of ark bearing God's own memory through history. Our histories are always partial, but God remembers everything. To carry God's memory with us through our processions of triumph and lament is to know that our own accounts of our histories and understandings of ourselves are never complete. Knowing that, we might change. We might become more than we believe ourselves to be.

In five or six years, the frieze on the Tiber wall will be reclaimed by new layers of dirt, pollution, and organic matter. Even now weeds and wildflowers are pushing through the cracks between the bricks of the wall, delicately disrupting the monumental images. The past is always being swallowed up, and we reclaim it

where we can, on shields, on walls, in the stories we tell our children. This is sacred work, the work of prayer, for only in God are our stories fully known. If we want to know who we've been and who we might become, we must search not only our collective memory but also the fathomless depths of God's memory, where every story is remembered and every forgotten thing is shining.