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The Place is Prologue

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THE PLACE IS
PROLOGUE

“With memory set smarting like a reopened wound, a man's past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present: it is not a repented error shaken loose from the life: it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavors and the tinglings of a merited shame.”

-George Eliot

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In the Garden

A trolley conductor points to Pitch Pine
centuries old and along a narrow path,
we pass the Sassafras and Spruce.

There was once sweetness in air;
Forrest peppered with White Walnut,
Red Cedar, Oak Willow,

wild meadows rose overgrown,
lush strawberries that bit back with tartness.

This land of Canaan,
seven thousand years in the making,
stood bare above marble and schist before it flowered,

beneath torrents of water before that,

before the ocean called back
its sons and daughters

leaving just a few behind
to lay guard in the Hudson, in Harlem,
and the East.

They called it Eden then.

For the Natives of New Amsterdam

the fall did not come with the snap
and soft crush of the flesh of an apple.

It came slow --- like infection,
mutated cells splitting and replicating
behind a wall,
nucleotides festering in bug ridden blankets,

in strands of foreign nouns and verbs
knitted together in cryptic cursive
on scrolls of parchment paper.

It came in the form of an X,

in edges of river beds
stained murky with blood.

It comes, keeps memories
locked behind tempered glass.

Specimens in a petri dish,

they are static among collections
of ceramic and fabric,
crowns of feather, bead, and horn

resting, above small descriptions
of who they were
and what these items
were used for.

The Blackwell Diaries

"At the beginning of the 19th century, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration contributed to the explosive growth of New York City. Accompanying this growth was a burgeoning underclass of convicts, the poor, the sick, and the insane. A policy of institutionalization was adopted to manage this group. In 1828, New York City purchased an island in the East River from the Blackwell family to build a jail and an asylum. When it opened in 1839, the asylum on Blackwell's Island was New York's first publicly funded mental hospital and the first municipal mental hospital in the United States. It was designed to be a state-of-the-art institution based on the theories of moral treatment. Fundamental to its success was an organized and orderly environment. But this model asylum was never built."

-The American Journal of Psychiatry, VOL. 164, No. 4

September 15, 1886

Specters dance across dim marble floors
weaving through each other like
tiny bodies on ballet stage

Allegro, Adagio, Avant

My eyes shriek at the rattling of keys, how strange
to be woken from a dream. I've lost days --
sunsets and sunrises melt into one extended
twilight. Only violet and vermilion befall this island.

February 2, 1887

Water's wintery tooth gnaws cleanly
though ragged cloth. These prison walls
do well enough to keep us in but
are lame against Mother Nature.

"Your name."

"What is your name?"

Entschuldigung, ich verstehe nicht.
(Sorry, I don't understand)

March 1887

The doctors...
Their vacant eyes all look the same. No,

that's not right either. The little orbs
that cut are not empty. A curiosity
crawls through the cracks around
the blackened pupils. Oh,
I see it now. Like cold water.
It's a slimy thing that creeps between
the ivory and cobalt.

1887

How many there are, comical and queer,
passing lines, fearful filth; the most
miserable collection of humanity in their
sterile white cloaks walking through us
like ghost.

Summer

Memory sleeps quietly on nerves
at the ends of my fingers.

Ten Days in a Mad House

Tired of typing in the narrow spaces
of the daily; about how to act like a lady,
what not to wear for your man, and
look who just got married,

Nellie Bly lost her mind, not for real

just enough to get her hauled off
to Blackwell;

just enough to get her story.

Ms. Bly's face bent back in madness
Bellevue declared:

She was certifiable.

Inside asylum walls,
iron barred windows, sour broth, and gruel

-an extra blanket was a favor.

White cloaks splashed cold water
on near nude shivering bodies,
thin frail fingers reached out
in penance for sins not committed,

In New York World lines read:

*Those not already mad
could easily become
in a place like that.*

Manhattan Wells

I.

Every so often they find one,
while digging to make space
for towers; a privy,
five to six feet deep
and before archeologists
can pull out clear baggies,

privy diggers come, sift through
bistre soil, hands and iron cutting

altars to the past. They crawl into ditches
and smile up from their digs;

 lifting broken bottles, rusted dentures,
a glass eye.

II.

In some tenement across the river,
the smell wafted through windows.

Tusset skinned and taut faced Tubmen
dragged their loads, wheeling waste
through tapering streets.

Misery oozed out of abandoned
alley ways and six foot flats, out of
stacked stone privy vaults;

 rain never cleansed anything.

It only brought stygian sludge
to the surface.

Snapshots I Had Hoped Were Lost

Sunflowers burnt brightest that summer,
red and orange kissing petals to ashes,
when a cigarette cherry bit down on the sofa.

Midday sun blistered tiny arms pressed
against the passenger window
streaks of red, blue, and silver.

Scorched spoons glittered in our eyes.

Swerve and a slam;
the wheels bearing down on tinsel asphalt
your eyes cradled

somewhere between sleep and waking.

Things never stopped burning and crashing
while you were there;

and though we could never see where
you had pierced yourself, we knew
where you had stuck your needles in us.

The Corner of Anthony & Cross

is now 152 Worth Street.
A loft a few blocks down,
at 79 Worth, was once home
to self-proclaimed "King of All Pimps,"

but Jason Itzler did nothing new in that
rather old corner of Tribeca.

Long before he auctioned sex
to high rollers,
the Ladies of Paradise Square
lingered on balconies, showcasing
their fare, in varied stages of undress.

With stained silk of thistle and rosewood
resting like banners beneath
flushed breast, they waited in welcome
for gentlemen and country boys alike
who made the pilgrimage to Five Points.

At Central Park East

A swarm of stars bore witness:

Tracing names in spit that raced to dry,
we played games to crack July ice;
laced hands at knuckles until palms
became blue beneath wrists;
left berry rings on necks and chests;
marking tender, budding spots
with spring mouths.

On hot afternoons I'd lift strands
of hair from the bed; pieces of ourselves.

At dusk, we bathed in the first fall of sienna and
sepia, cracking softly beneath our backs.
My tongue trailing against the ridges of my teeth,
I'd chew and spit out blades of dying grass,
wishing they were words too buffaloed
by your heat.

An autumn moon lacing blue strands
of light upon your summer skin,
we made a home of ivy walls and
thatched the past for a roof.

In the morning,
you wrapped the stones and stars
in velvet; said goodbye
without saying it.

Museums

So many poems begin with "Tonight"
and so I say tonight but maybe
I really mean yesterday or tomorrow

—maybe I mean that days weave
into one another like the lanyard
on the key chain dangling off a teenager's
back pack, neon green and electric blue,
twisting and yielding beneath and above one another,
forming the shape of something vaguely familiar

a cobra swelling it's head above the nightstand,
reeling back for the bite, tonight
I dream of endless stairs made of bones
and T-Rex teeth.
Eons of sand and soil encased at every step,
they go on; mammoth ribs and skulls.

I cannot pronounce any of their names
but they all end in us,
something or other "us"
that vanished
leaving only half remembered names,

tooth, and egg—reminders that
the end will come.

The Girl with the Pearl

Somehow she knew where to find me.

I want to know why she's returned;
why now? Is it something
to do with Mercury Retrograde?

Three times a year things go awry because, from Earth,
Mercury appears to be spinning in reverse.

I want to ask if she's lost an earring;
if her mother will be mad because pearls
are still so expensive.

I want to tell her that I understand,
that I know all about loss and return.

1339 Bristow St.

Between cracked corridor walls,
brick and mortar, and countless
fingerprints,
stale piss remains pinned on sheetrock.

Somewhere on the second floor,
the stairs tremble with a familiar rattle
and the wail of some love unrequited
leaves me unmoved, I know how this story
ends.

A growling dog behind a door
on the fourth landing reminds me:

You were lucky to get out.

Sundays

The end of my pony tail curled around my finger,
I'd watch the passing cars in the rain,
water collecting and forming drops large enough
to fall from the window guard.
Tiny droplets splashing as they came down on me.

Something had been collecting in me too
as cars whooshed and red numbers
on the digital clocked blinked half past six
water rose along my eyelids, collecting.

Countless Sundays spent like this.

Why I No Longer Visit My Mother

We sit in the dim kitchen, faded papered walls
tinged in cigarette smoke and nicotine.
As usual, we discuss the past.

Behind a yellow cloud, she predicates
the good gospel of forgetting,
calling me a lemon mouthed ingrate,
silencing me only to incite me again
with memories of a childhood,
not mine.

She likes to dwell on the smiles
contained in gold borders and black trim,
the only vacation we ever had
as a happy family. She imagines
we always smiled that big for the flash;
the Mouse knew better.

I point to replaced doors and plastered walls,
this time broken down by age.
I don't mean to dwell but I insist on truth
when we sit at the wooden table and reminisce.

There's a glass of wine in my left hand
when she retorts, in an effort to end discussion,
"Jesus has forgiven me and told me he's forgotten,"

I am not Jesus.

Guaroco

Gums ache with absence.

A Taino would rather take
a jagged blade to his throat;
sweet untainted sounds
bleeding out, onto the soil.

Cacique in his BOhio,
hanging by a jico.

How to Make Prison Hooch

On your last visit to the prison --tell your brother you're through with him just like you promised you would be, if he ever got arrested again.

Take a loaf of bread and let it soak a gallon of water.

Never write or take the phone when your mother offers it like a gift on Christmas afternoon.

Add three orange rinds or two grapefruit rinds.

Take a sibling rivalry and let it steep, slow in disappointment.

Let the mixture sit, undisturbed.

Kingsbridge

Above the waterless creek,
lay a tribute to a king:

a bridge that rests
at the mouth of the 'devil's spout.'

I try to trace its path along the asphalt
but lose myself.

Perhaps, it's worth asking the rats;
they've been here the longest.

Bound Tongue

My R's no longer roll, greased gears
snapping into place.
They jam and lock, creating a sound
like scraping of shaved ice in summer

Every time I say "carro" the Piragua Man
lingers in my sentence.
Or I swallow them up; taking words
into me, forever.

Mami, Tierra, Dolor slowly fading,
into a dull mom, earth, pain.
The roof of my mouth clings savagely
to Chévere, aches when I say cool.

Dulcé once rolled on my tastes buds,
its sweet syllables, memorias.
A heavy tongue, trips over la filosofía;
fumbles con el tema of being libré.

Rejection Letters

#15

Dear Stranger,
We skimmed through your work.
Unfortunately, it didn't make it
past the slush pile. Keep banging
your head against keys.
We hope to send you a similar
letter in the future.

Cordially,
A ghost behind a monitor.

#7

Dear MFA Student,
It was nice of you to try.
We acknowledge your
chutzpah with at least
two "regrettablies."

Thank you for submitting.

#10

You shouldn't do this,
what you're doing this instant.
We can see you.

#3

Dear Poet,
We read two of your five
poems and liked half of one.
Take solace in the fact that
we referred to you as poet.

Best,
Editors (read: interns)

#18

Dear Writer,

We are currently obsessed with poems whose imagery is cryptic at best. We like to be confused by something really deep only we can see.

Your poems were too easy.

-Staff

Spring is Late Again

Winter's nail trails its sharp edges
down the small of necks,

beads dangling down like rosaries,
swollen breasts all puckered
nipples in the chill.

Tomorrow, we will kneel against soft
and tattered velvet;
knees kissing bent nail heads and
the creases of wood.

Today, we take into us the scorch of liquor,
the stale fizz of barley and wheat;
the saccharine sweet of the bacchanal.

Re-past

Forgive me if I cannot eat with you,

no, there's nothing wrong with the white rice
or stewed beans before me.

The chicken is fine.

Forgive me if I cannot eat with you,

it's not the chair, or the silverware.
Cat hair and watermarks have never bothered me.

Forgive me if I cannot eat with you,

I'm beginning to hate dining room tables--
the way they collect the dusty remains
of conversation I never want to have;

the way they serve as storage for the heavy things
that cannot be stuffed away behind pantry doors.

It's the table
killing my appetite.

Trigger

My skin stains carmine most nights.
Between the sheets and the cold sweats,
there are acres of wooly woods awaiting
on the other side of the bed.

Your's is the cold side I avoid,
but mine is the one that leaves me dangling
precariously over
the edge.

Gin rises like ghosts,
bringing all things that go bump
in the day;
the rapist and muggers whose faces
line the wanted walls like lilacs
at a flower shop.
I don't want to think of them long after
the street lamps have kicked off
but I'm passively suicidal.

I don't want to think of him
hovering over my bed but
three am is the watching hour
and I'm watching the clock
as he's watching me breathe;
his face buried sideways in my crotch;
while 8 year old me

is pretending to sleep.

Woodlawn Cemetery

You want to wander around rooms
of gilded mausoleums,
touch the snowy hands of cherubs,
claim the angel wings for your own.

Death for you, is something you can
soak and bottle,

this Necropolis,
another place to visit.

Inked

That tattooing dates back
to 2000 years before Christ

doesn't stop my grandmother
from reminding me that it was once
the mark of slaves and whores.

I told her we women have always
been marked for both
that Whitman across my ribcage
did little to save or spoil either of us.

I was marked long before
I let stranger carve into me
at least this time
it was my choice.

Emily (St. Raymond's Cemetery II)

The dirt here is soft --
we don't often come to visit
and I'm older than our mother
was when you died.

But your name clings to memory like dust,
each syllable, a specter inching closer.

--- I promised long before my mouth could form vowels, I'd keep it,
hold it in my hand.

But legends are heavy
Emily

Myths become stones
that even God can't carry.

Breaking Night

We broke night like the telephone wires
twisted and frayed around our index fingers;

Night, always one twist too many away
from snapping into two.

We broke night with jagged edged
brown bottles kicked over in some
sudden act of carelessness.

Legs slicing through, all open-mouthed can rims;
invisible blood everywhere.

We broke night with laughter
that punched through silence,
closed fists.

We broke night,

we broke night,

and then night broke us.

Makeshift Memorials

Dusk settles in like a cat, pawing
its way into night fall above a garden
of oxidized cans and abandoned beds.

The willow, branches bent,
wishes for fingers.

But here, there are only vigils
for the dead.
Strange voices chanting
Rosarios for Ramon.

It weeps for him,
It weeps for all of them.

The ones they leave candles for
on light posts and street corners.

First Floor Problems

Sometimes, I wonder if Don DeLillo
dealt with the smash crash siren scream
of life in Little Italy, the real one,
uptown, on Arthur Ave.

I wonder if my neighbors know
it's rude to drunkenly thunder
through the great halls that may
or may not have been built upon
the house of a legend on a Monday
morning at 3am.

I wonder how he managed to write
because if Belmont was anything then
like is tonight
it's a fucking miracle he didn't end up
behind bars instead of best seller lists.

Don, if you're listening,
tell me how
not to lose my mind.

On Friday Nights

My father likes to drunk dial me
and remind me of what a shit daughter I am.

He rings, just to say,
that in Colombia
los padres y las madres se honran.

I try to tell him that in my America,
we stopped praying to false idols long ago
and that my therapist has been encouraging me
to worship
myself.

He's not listening.

He thinks it's a cult, calls my therapist a false prophet
- in pursuit of my savings.

Los si-co-lo-gos son pi-yos.

His limp tongue lingers on the yo;

the self.

I close my eyes and say another prayer:

Santa Natalia,
llena eres de inteligencia
Bendita tu eres
entre toda tu familia
y bendito el fruto
of the life that you chose.

Funeral Arrangements

Is he catholic?

He can only be buried at St. Raymond if he's Catholic

As if the dirt cared who it covered.

Principles of Parallax

For the last time in 105 years,
Venus will cross her orbital body
in the face of the sun;
I could do nothing so spectacular
to hold your gaze.

But I'd like to lick the salt rock moons
of your shoulder blades,
trace pyxis across your chest,
stick my fingers in the craters,

dig deep
into the hollows of you.

Redeemer

I inked blue words in your palm last night.
Above your love line and through your lifeline,
they rested, sighing. Each blink,
an incantation, a new spell yielded.
Your marble palm indifferent.
Pressing my index hard into the place
your love line split, I pointed,
stone stared back at me.

There are enough folded napkins in my pockets

to fill a museum, each one telling a story that
I can't remember when I'm sober. I wanted
to ask you about your childhood but I didn't
have the courage, so instead I asked about
your dentist and where you get your haircut.
The surface is all I come to when I scrawl
black lines on white bible like paper. I write
"eyes" when I really mean essence. I write
"want" and "lust" when I really mean something
like "saudade." What I write is gesture and there are
enough scraps of paper to fill my mouth;
each one swallowed whole every time you speak.
Miles waver between our words, your seashell bones
are most concrete in a room filled with beer brimming
glasses and varnished pine tables.

Not Sonnet 116

I asked him to define love
after a brief pause he told me
someone else's definition: Lust,
Convenience, and Necessity.

But I knew he was wrong.
The moment those words left his mouth
they fit him like something loose and worn,
some hand-me-down philosophy

he didn't feel like changing out of. His eyes
turned away from my screen lit face,
aimlessly searching for songs;

He didn't have an answer.
I didn't either.

When the Zombie Apocalypse Comes

I need to know that you're the kind of guy
that will put a bullet in me if I turn.
I know this only our first date but you
really don't know someone until you've shared
survival stories. My last boyfriend wouldn't have
had the heart to do such a thing.

Talking about exes is always poor taste but
disaster response should be discussed more often,
over coffee.

You should probably know that I always chew
mouth-open and that I already hate the way
you cut your meat, knife edge biting down
on porcelain loudly.
None of this will matter when
the zombies come,
there are other disasters
we will have to face.

In the meantime,

I need you to know that I may not be able
to cut your arm clean off should you be bitten;
seeing red makes me uneasy
but then, so few things clip clean
sterile and bloodless.

What about you? Any angry exes
thirsty for something other than love?
The last thing I need
is some crazy bitch out for my brains
because of something you did.

Could you pass the salt please?

In the Forecastable Future

I'm going to find myself adrift
in something you shouldn't have said
my arms will be tired from trying to teach
us both to swim

the bones I cast on waxed floors already told me
that reading the tea leaves was pointless
that oxygen was no more mine than yours
that we've been drowning since birth

in the forecastable future the coffee grounds
set against the porcelain will tell
all I need to know about what will be

The Ghost in Apartment 4E

likes to open windows in the winter.
She likes to smoke cigarettes
at two am while I'm writing papers.

One time I saw a strange woman
laying in my bathtub, maybe it was a dream.

My ghost
doesn't think much of me.

I'm pretty sure she thinks I have bad taste,
except for my boyfriend.

She almost certainly likes him better.

Twenty Eight

At one sixty seventh street,
light enters the subway car like a whip,
crack crack cracking

against silver poles and sleepy faces mouthing secrets
to the only people that will keep them.

Facing the back of the car always gives the illusion
of going in reverse, and in a way I know I am.

Crack crack cracking
like the wheels of a roller coaster as it lifts for the dip.

We go slow
and then brace for the fall;
the inevitable crack
crack
of joint, nerve,
and drop.