NOTES ON THE PRODUCTIVITY OF NOSTALGIA

by

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The power of place(s) will be remarkable.

— Aristotle, *Physics*
A Sentimental Education
02.02.09

Two days after missing her call, he listens to a voice message on his phone from his mother. She says that the time is now. A few days ago, she slipped down the stairs and broke her rib, hit her face against the wall; she’s having trouble breathing and hasn’t showered in days. She urges him to buy a flight this week or possibly next to see her. We must heal our hurt, she says.

He saves the message on his phone, whose automated voice tells him that his credit has run out, and pauses to consider the threat of death in his mother’s recorded voice, her faltering resilience to that inevitability. In the most humbling of ways he is shattered.

The living space he has made his own over the course of a year in New York can no longer be held onto with certainty. His patchy income won’t cover it, and the savings initially put aside for a trip to Zimbabwe, the country of his childhood, have slipped away into keeping his life here afloat. He has found new partnership—a sprite, lovely and beyond him—but must now hold a stern, prideful line to not allow her offers of support to trigger past self-pity. He would fail at this struggle only via its familiarity. And with the example of his mother, why the gross lack of intent? There are immediate distractions, one could say; he is not of this place and lacks the youth and where-withall to adapt. The word temerity—he has lost its exact meaning but its closed-jaw musculature seems somehow to apply.

06.02.09

The accents and word arrangements of Bruce Chatwin’s On The Black Hill are implicitly audible in the accents and grammar of Caribbean Islanders. He thinks here of Bajans and Scots, and of his English cousins who, years ago when he first visited them from Trinidad, exclaimed at the Welsh-ness of his foreign accent. It feels like a revelation but it shouldn’t. A hundred and fifty years back those small sugar islands were worked by black labourers overseen by employees of the British landowning class: rough English and Welsh middle managers whose megalomania could run free on the distant plantations, writing dark histories into the land that still mark the culture.

Place carries, is the simple way of putting it. And perhaps language is the carrier. The visit he made to Trinidad last year was a waste, at least for his conceit: to photograph all the homes he had lived in there as a teenager. It had a nice sound to it, the marking of some alternate measure of time passed. But what educated arrogance, in the end, to think that a place could fit into a neat idea for some pictures! Being back where he’d survived his muted teenage years, there was no way to look at those buildings (mostly fixed up, and much cleaner than he remembered them) and connect them with any edifying resolution of self. The context crippled him into re-adolescence. Or call it redolence—in that suffocating climate they mean almost the same thing.
And it was as though he’d forgotten how to talk, slipping in and out of Trinidadian patois, resorting to book English when pressed to explain his life abroad (art words, travel words, descriptions that he realized have no translation because they have no real use on this proud island where all other countries are called “in foreign”), then turning to the sing-song grammatical anomalies of the local dialect when he could, when he concentrated.

One failure stands out. A friend of his mother’s husband, one of her eventual lovers, used to live in a housing complex on the north-west point of the island, so shaded and isolated by jungle-choked hills that it always felt haunted by duenes and other, more sinister forest spirits. He had spent some awkward nights there after his mother’s divorce, and drove now west along the strip road to see what the houses (imping Winogrand here) would look like photographed.¹ As it turned out, the whole complex had been taken over by the army and, without rebuilding, declared a kind of gateless barracks—the gates being local soldiers’ well-known freedom from accountability in their acts—onto which he walked in blind curiosity, only to be called back by two men lounging on the steps of the first house, rifles propped within reach against the wall.

The thicker of the two pointed a finger at him and, with a tone aimed to belittle, said the words: what you for. It didn’t register so the soldier pointed again, this time with real threat: what you for? Which he finally grasped as, What business do you have being here, but which struck him quite literally as What are you here for, as in, What is your reason for being here, in this place, right now? So shaken was he by the broad implications of the question that he stood there withered, managed no words at all, only raised a hand in apology and walked away.

19.02.09

Tentative plans for an afternoon in the city fall through, giving way to aimlessness, followed by a recollection of his more generous outlook on the world as a younger man. He has come to assume as fact that the onset of physical degradation until death that has begun within him is mirrored in a psychological progression, wherein a casually naïve relationship to mortality plateaus into hardy acceptance of an ultimate end. The progression of time as we now mark it is manufactured, John Berger would say. All is equal. Each moment takes its place side by side with others and offers no critique; at most, with each pass, one nods or shakes one’s head. It reads as a fictive notion but perhaps, in the longer view, contains the greater truth. In Sebald’s masterwork, Jacques Austerlitz muses:
Why does time stand eternally still and motionless in one place, and rush headlong by in another? Could we not claim, said Austerlitz, that time itself has been non-concurrent over the centuries and the millennia? It is not so long ago, after all, that it began spreading out over everything. And is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction?

The space for this most pastoral of privileges, the consideration of ‘what is’, has been excoriated from the life of our cities, our culture-production centres. The moment of now has been reduced from a lifetime to an instant, each instant following closely on the next, armies of instances on parade toward no end goal, or at best an obscure and chaotic one. To sit, then, is to take a little bit back from this beast, to allow storytelling to seep in where it can, but above all to feel the extremities of the place flail as one rides side by side with King Now.

And yet, his memories overwhelm him. Berlin: the rough texture of the old court-yards and the sharp scent of coal burning in dank winter alleyways. The wet, cobble-stoned streets, the slick sound of city rain; cyclists, lookers, lovers-to-be; and him, this awkward alien, catapulting into their world. He dared to believe in the mania of laughter and legs thrown open on makeshift beds, in those fiercely appropriated freedoms: a feeling that would spiral its way up into euphoria, into a longing that ached in the chest and the groin, that would satiate the agony but in reality kept feeding the most acidic part of himself. Then, dullness. Disgust. Faithless morning light—a fallen figure cut from religious cloth, carried by these masses. An ecstasy, a mercy, every trail on every one he meets, every single one, like a pathway back to the fullness of his first love, the shape of a universe blown into being through the palms of the hands.

16.03.09

The exact words are forgotten but the significant thing about their first exchange was its ease and inevitability, so much so that his cousin, later in the night, expressed surprise that they had only just met, the encounter having felt like the crossing of two old friends.

Waiting for a train into Brooklyn, he commented to this new face, familiar from the circuit of gallery openings earlier in the night, on the predictability of their social agendas, establishing with a laugh that their evenings had in fact mirrored one another’s exactly, and leading him to her accent (German) and background and purpose in the city.
There is a cushion of privilege and daring in the eyes of so many young Germans, with a certain rosiness in the cheeks of those from the former West supplanted by a soberness around the eyes of those who spent their last childhood years in the eastern bloc. A war generation living in denial bore a generation weighted irretrievably with guilt who have now bestowed to us these lusty creatures, men and women both, who are driven by an almost purposeful recklessness to move on and be absorbed by the world writ large.

(This is how he sees them, in any case, and is drawn time after time to the sparkle of their passions. It’s as though their surroundings will darken and the ground slope gently toward them, leaving only the brightness of laughter or a blunt, invitational stare: an energy powered by proximity, an incapacity that draws foreign words out of him and is rewarded with the deep, round vowels of his theretofore indeterminate desire.)

Lust.

The word is the same in both languages but has been relegated in English to refer to the purely sexual. In his own landless translation it is that poignance that fills the heart as well as the gut as well as the mind. It is a possession that lives far beyond the visual.

Still, as an examination, or out of sheer habit of perversion, or simply to see what she looks like, he pictures her. He pictures her once as she is distracted, gains her attention with the flash of light, then pictures her again with the full presence of her wealthy face. The night proceeds casually and without coaxing, the unspoken question of whether to pursue the anticipated end activity answered finally with a knowing smile and a shrug of consent. But even as they become animals, even in that madly prosthetic elevation, there is the space of the universe between them, so many symbols in place of the real thing.

13.04.09

Constant thoughts of the inevitability of death, of the demise of efforts, the swallowing up of every legacy, every memory by the ceaseless crescendo of what might more simply be called Time but which surrounds time and matter and will abide no such construct.

In less than a century, everyone he knows will have died, will exist briefly within a circle of memories, and then, more peacefully, in a ledger of notations. He too will have finished his course as part of the earth and will be returned. The certainty of this fate has lately triggered bouts of panic in which he grips the mattress and stares out at his room in confusion. How to come to terms with the bluntness of this finality? How did the Renaissance masters work, he wonders: soothed by a blind self-assurance of long-standing legacy or driven to actual blindness by the task of turning pigment into
muscles, fingers, skin?

This must be ‘growing up’. Adapting to compromised living. By all accounts it gets worse. Like in the movies, miscalculated I-love-you’s and sex with neighbors’ wives eventually become commonplace guile. Moral right, that whole lie, wears down like his teeth over the years. He used to cry out to his mother, catch her and play tug-of-war with the bottle in her hand, plead with her to not drink, or not drive at least, back when Richard had left and sickness lurked around their house and she would go off into the night, leaving him to wake up to a shirtless Dane, or a local suit, or some other silhouette of a man. She was always acting, as if for the stage or screen, that things were okay, that what was going on was normal. She was always hiding the mess behind this façade of family and home, always saying traditionally this is how it was done or my dada, your grandfather... as if to hold onto an identity that had long become meaningless. And now he feels himself approaching that same stage where he must either begin acting like everything is fine—begin acting polite and sporting and outgoing while honesty grinds downhill—or accept the truth of this passage, not hide behind terse smiles.

23.06.09

For a change, he looks for a rideshare into the middle of the country and finds a man in Philadelphia who will take him most of the way. The man is a self-created myth of blackness, with his fictional name: T. Dorje Immanuel, his thick, manicured dreadlocks, and the dense interior of his black Jeep filled with the possessions of a chronic bachelor. On the road, they listen to chapter after chapter of Barack Obama’s first autobiography, read by the young presidential nominee himself, the preacher-like intonations giving boisterous narrative subtext to the landscapes passing by. What stays with him longest, though, is the man’s smile, terrifying in how clearly it has been fashioned as a sexual weapon: chemically white, perfectly even, unsheathed only in the face of potential conquest.

In the middle of the night, their mistrust turns to open disagreement and he is left on the side of a highway exit, further from his first destination than he’d hoped, delivered from one kind of darkness to another: the steamy night road of a town with a forgotten name. Another kind of threat, too, as he realizes when he walks into a gas station for directions and must fold his colour back into his skin, leave without having gathered the way.

The mainroad is called The Meridian. That’s all it says on the signpost as he walks, sweating peacefully, under the yellow cones of sodium vapour street lights. Only The Meridian (synonyms: acme, apex, apogee, capstone, climax, crescendo, crest, crown,...) and this magic night light, glowing like the sucking sound of passing rubber tyres in the heat.
After a time, he gains a companion: a small, dark figure who has come out from a side street and begins to follow him with a kind of fascination. In America, the poor and the itinerant always greet each other with a summary, often tragic, of their life’s story. It serves as a white flag, a downing of arms in this land where violent histories are made and re-made on the spot. Thus the figure finally presents himself, telling of how he came to live in Indiana from a small town in Tennessee, outlining hardships that hint at the unacknowledged sexuality that appears to have marked his half-a-life in the intolerant South.

Properly introduced, they walk side by side in silence, the small man occasionally chatting and beaming at him with a crooked half-smile of contemplation. The man can’t understand his being there on that road in the middle of the night. He talks wanderingly of two women friends, whom he labels in the kindly Southern manner: She’s gay and, well, her friend is too. They live together. They love each other. He opens up about his roots in rural Tennessee, roots so deep that for one consummate passage the man’s hands reach out before him with his palms facing the world and he completes a description in the swinging intonations of western Africa. The gesture and accent are suddenly centuries old— incredible enough to cause him to give pause, to stare hard at the man’s face, to see within it a chasm of childhood and torture and hands-in-the-dirt history. To see this archaic humanity live again through the corpus of a being shining darkly, to see it announce so indisputably its infinity to the world suddenly forces him to reconsider his now petty-sounding fears of impermanence.

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They part ways with a flashed photograph. Half an hour passes until he gets hold of a friend in the next town south. Twenty minutes later he is picked up by three twenty-year old friends (all smiles, leaning out of the car windows in the dark, cheering his name) for whom life has written a less calamitous script. They speed him back to Bloomington, where days succeed one another indefinitely, where their vegan bodies still grow and the beginning and end of things is not yet felt. This too is time immemorial, the timeframe of youth: sneaking into pools at night whose owners are away, skating in the park at dawn, pure, daily, unremarked-upon ecstasy. The summer.

He doesn’t know how many days pass like this—riding bikes, picking berries, making costumes, going swimming—but eventually he is told of a freight yard where a coal train pushes south every night into Kentucky. With a photocopied rail map and crew change, he hops the train without incident and, finding a secure hiding place, has some mindless hours to burn looking out at the swampy lowlands going by. Clouds of fireflies hang over the darkened grasses, glittering like mirrored stars.

To move, to want to get away, is no longer enough. Certainly, there is enjoyment in the abstention of this kind of travel, the leasing of control. You relax into it, linking
fireflies seen from a freight train to the memory of a thunderstorm in a Kentucky
backyard years ago: fireflies of a different age and the naked tears of his first love. But
now he feels bleakness and caring, in equal measure, and it sustains him through his
next encounters: a pimp named Grady who offers him a hitch from a desolate country
road into Louisville, and tries to hustle him a white bitch with her own room for a good
price; then the army boy who got his knee blasted to shit in Iraq, betwixt by the travelling
stranger’s motivated lack of direction, hobbling after him to exchange some small talk
and the intricate affirmation, be well.

It’s not enough. His tour takes him into the bowels of Tennessee where clusters of
queer and transgender radicals have settled into shacks and houses in the rural central
valleys of the state, living from the land, or with part-time jobs in Nashville, or from
handouts. (It’s here, sitting half-naked one evening on the rocks above Great Falls
Lake and watching the onset of another summer storm, they find out that Michael
Jackson, that ill-fitting piece of them all, has died.) Three self-declared exhibitionists,
two men and a woman, take him in because of their weakness for beauty, but there’s a
deep sense of threat underlying their casually clothed lives. He helps them roof a goat
barn—it’s some sort of payment they are making for the house they live in, which
belongs to an older, wealthier queen with ties to Hollywood—but after a few days he
grows tired of the unspoken tensions in the trio and leaves the loving behind.

His return to the coast is arranged with a van-full of friends who play music and will
give him passage. He must go back up to Indianapolis again to meet them, so he de-
cides to return to The Meridian, dumbly in search of a metaphor. This time, though,
it’s the middle of day, blindingly white bright, and he staggers around lost in som-
nambulence until he falls fully sleep in the private grasses behind some train tracks
having learned no lesson, having felt no poetry, stripped of purpose by the weight and
burden of the sky, eventually gasping back into wakefulness as if from the dead.

“Immensity is within ourselves,” Bachelard has written. “It is attached to a sort of
expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we
are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a
world that is immense.”
THE SYMPATHIZER
The island of Ibiza means different things to different people. For him, it’s where his first love fell apart. For his mother, it was an island that offered the guise of paradise but from which she withdrew exhausted after some years of unrewarding market labour. She is now back one last time to deal with her belongings, to try selling off the bulk of her clothing and fabrics in the hippie markets, and he has promised to visit her on his way north to Sweden.

Their time together is a string of absurdities, beginning with the cut-price rental car that a mechanic friend has loaned her. Its engine dies at the airport, and in the white midday heat the failure triggers a panic attack in his mother. She screams and goes stiff, says she’s having a heart attack, draws her face with lines of hysteria. It’s high drama and it does the trick. He is deeply frightened and will do whatever she asks of him for the rest of their time together.

The sun here has an overwhelming power—too bright to even conceive as a heavenly body, so overexposed is the blinding sky. A troupe of local punks filters down the cliffs to a rocky beach where he is camped for the afternoon and, once situated, begin to undress. Dreadlocked and soon naked, they start ferrying plastic bags full of sea water to a dusty crater further up the beach and pouring it in. With the red mud that’s created from the mixture, they cover each others bodies, laughing and allowing hands to go everywhere. The heat is staggering, grimacing. It triggers within him a pathetic obsession with the flesh of these honey-toned, tattoo-scrawled bodies as he watches them casually push, kiss, and one by one fall into slumber under the dominion of the sun.

One boy sits apart in a shallow enclave of sea water and, like a calling—Lucía!—one of the sleeping girls lifts her body and wanders up to him. She gradually lowers herself onto his fresh erection and they copulate with a deep and slow intensity. Rock. Heat. Love: nothing else seems to make sense.

Two other images stand out. First, It’s late dusk at one of the more upscale craft markets. The sun has called off its daily attack and the dusty ground glows warm under strings of incandescent bulbs. His mother has set up a small table of glass beads and patterned fabrics for sale and is seated next to it on a borrowed crate. The deep furrows along her forehead are alert but at peace. She reaches for a bottle of cheap wine
sitting in the dirt behind her, twisting backwards so that no one can see, and chugs a few thirsty gulps with her hand gripping the neck. She turns back around and chuckles sweetly, brushing a few wisps of auburn hair from her face.

Second, having woken up in the darkness before dawn to pack their cranky rental car full of boxes and drive to another market to claim a stall, they are still too late and spend the next hour running boxes from one taped-off square to another, trying to set up but being argued or bullied out by the veteran stall-holders. Their morning is a failure, they leave humiliated, and so he is driving back to their cottage in the raking mid-morning light. He turns to say something to his mother, who has gone silent in the passenger seat but she has fallen asleep with her head sideways and her mouth half open. Her face shines with residue from the morning's exertion and her hair is everywhere and she looks so mortal, so slight.

04.08.09

A teary-eyed goodbye (unknown to either of them, he will not see his mother again for several years), a quick flight, and he is in a wholly new country, green and grey and softened with constant rain: Sweden. He has come to visit a new friend in Gothenburg with whom he will make a walking tour of some mountains, route so far undecided.

Here the reality of a straightforward and simple life seems to match the dream. Klara lives alone in graceful quietude with her senses bent toward the natural world. How do others in this warless state live? Their talk deepens easily. She is two years past her mother’s premature death—an eventuality that, in the reserved Swedish manner, she describes as very hard, and which appears to stand as the point, after grieving, from which she rejected her self-loathing and began to live this healthy, apparently simple life. She is almost surprisingly without tears when they start opening up about death and their mothers. Where he would expect a loss of control (those profound silences) she is sombre and offers only clarity. Her relationship to her own sadness is more fitted and yet more mature than any he has encountered, and he is chastened by it.

Later that evening, Klara proposes a walk away from her housing development and along the edge of some woods where all is cool, blue night and the tranquility of sleeping trees. But even in Sweden, the edge of a city is where the untamed can move more freely, where the mandate of social order begins to fracture. As they are walking back to the apartment they hear noise and turn to see a man and woman running toward them in a panic. The couple stops in front of them, breathing hard, hands on knees, saying they’ve just escaped an attempted stabbing. A man they can’t describe attacked them with a knife and they ran. The woman asks the time. The man asks for a mobile phone. Klara has no phone with her, and in any case their questions make no sense. Is it some ploy, he wonders: two scam artists, or errant members of a troubled cult? Or is there really a man out there, gone to the dogs, swinging a switchblade
this way and that? The couple leaves them with a warning to watch their backs and disappears down a nearby street. They’ve achieved a kind of success. The silence, so enveloping, now prickles with threat.

The next morning at breakfast they decide on a promising route. Five days in the Aurlandsdalen of Norway. Majesty incarnate, according to the trekking brochure. He wants to take Klara’s picture but she holds back, so they agree on a compromise: two exposures each morning for the days they will travel together. It’s exciting to think that the course of getting to know her might be registered on film.

09.08.09

Norway. A mountain cabin. On a wooden wall is the image of a man in a white space suit with the earth behind him in the black sky like the moon.

He is hiking these mountains alongside two friends: Klara, with whom he has spent only a quickly passing evening in the city, who until recently has stood as an icon of serenity from her distant, privileged land; and Tove, a surprise addition in Oslo, who parted ways with him two odd years ago in the lurch of love.

“What are you writing?” asks Klara, sitting down showered beside him after the first day’s hike.

He stares at her but then demurs, mumbles vaguely that he’s writing about the experience of place, about everything around him, about her. She realizes it’s a cop-out and smiles, dismisses the response, turns her attention to the view behind them of a towering slope of a fjord.

There’s more, he should be saying. It’s about you! he should yell, because for these moments, these few days, his every act comes from the little space he has left himself after plastering his psyche to hers. She is like the weather to him, or even more perverse, she is his own history, both the body of his memory and his responses to it, sitting there in such easy silence before the glowing light outside.

But what role shall she play? His wishful, abbreviating foresight comes saddled with the circularity of experience, and with a reminder of connections to other hearts. Her slender peg is driven too deeply into her familial grounds and he has precious little desire to shift camp, to be taken up again by a reparation of what cannot entirely be called love. But he wants to feel, and he wants to know, and (taking pause now to adjust the lens) he wants to follow the route of the passions taken by his once-bright mother, to inhabit them and to face them with his own, to take charge of that mirror and shift it into the sun.
I am sitting at a table at night with a dying Derek Walcott, a table that we’ve dragged onto an overgrown jungle road. Curled over and half blind, he asks for my help to open a bottle of pills, asks after my writing, listens for a blonde puppy that comes bounding down the hill out of the darkness, a puppy I had met earlier when I was out walking in the jungle with friends.

Before us, the animal becomes a young Amerindian boy: almond-eyed, carob-coloured, quiet and alert. Its older brother drives down in a black car to collect him away and Derek and I are left sitting there, talking, swallowed up in the thickly green half-dark. Half-blind. Some kind of father and son.
He has arranged to meet a man in Bergen with whom his mother, thirty years ago, travelled through jungle villages in Guatemala. The man is married to a callous and overbearing German woman who ignores him completely when he first sits down at their table and the man, Jan Otto, has left to order drinks at the bar. She continues to ignore him until her husband returns and she glances up from her phone, stares at him briefly, then takes leave, warning her husband against staying out late in the manner of a matron with a child: “Not too late, is that understood?”

The two men are left to drink through an erratic conversation scored with silences. There isn’t much to be said about the man’s time with his mother three decades ago. Jan Otto recounts a story, anecdotal in its familiarity, in which his mother has an argument with a young porter over the price of a river crossing, leading to their brief detention in the local police barracks and a scene in which she flies into a rage at the policeman as a means of negotiating their freedom.

He assumes that Jan Otto and his mother were intimately involved, but his face and voice show no fissures of nostalgia, only a mix of contentedness and resignation, likely consequent on the family of two he has raised with his wife and the profitable business partnership (vaguely, life-coaching for professionals) that the husband and wife team have entered in late middle-age, but showing too that in their business as in their life at home, he is the subordinate partner; dominated, even humbled by the Frau, a far cry from the social anthropology student his mother might have known.

For himself, he had no idea his mother had been through Guatemala a year before his birth, and is curious now about this specific period of his pre-history. His conception was unintentional, this much was clear, but to what extent did his arrival disrupt the plans his parents had for their mutually autonomous lives? It took his father until his forties but eventually he married the woman he always loved and bought a small house in San Francisco. His mother is the one who claims destiny and that he, her only son, is now her solitary joy. He can’t deny the fervency with which she adores him, but it is irrational too, and his coming into being has done nothing to countervail the worn-down gypsy life that she still leads almost thirty years on.

Regardless, he is here now, absent and transparent—enough to pretend to be that Nordic son or daughter, or conceivably enough to re-imagine his young mother-to-be, classically lost in love. The time of life is so brief, looking at it this way, that we can make one or two bold changes at most, but if we never take pause to consider even these most basic of adjustments, the florid, carefree thirty-year old in the weaving villages of Guatemala becomes the affectatious sixty-two year old living in Bali on the kindness of friends, and this in an instant.
Two Quick Beers / Seven Soft Bodies
17.05.10

He will now travel for a third time through the city of Rostock, that place where the world fell in on him four years ago and left him an absolute outsider (concrete for a sleeping place, a car full of skinheads to outmaneuver, hunger in its purest form). He will do this willingly, and with foresight, and hopefully with a little money in his pocket. The only change shall be himself. He is no longer a young man—four meandering years have assured that—and has no reason or excuse to be rudderless and on the road. Everything in the culture works to suggest against it. But for some reason he must walk this route; perhaps it will become his routine, treading over these hardest of place-memories until sense is worn into them.

20.05.10

The destination, as ever, is Berlin, but it is an unrevealing return. As much as he feels like a progressed creature (as in: a progression to a final end), his exuberance for the place has been drained. The world swells before him and steps forward blindly. Babies accessorise young lovers. Within a week his grandfather, a friend he just spent the night with, and Gregory Isaacs have all died. Love is kindled everywhere and over everything sounds a continuous hum, as if the growth and friction of time itself were producing sound.

What about the crowds? He spends an afternoon in Mauerpark with Cameron, one of his clearest friends. The park is a hillside, no more than a short slope, and fifteen acres of grass crossed with concrete pathways where a weekend flea market teems with young Berliners buying and selling clothes and trinkets, playing music, sharing beers, and in all ways invigorating their identities. A basketball court at the centre of the park is covered in broken glass and flooded from yesterday’s rain but Cameron is keen on a game so they talk two cafés out of their brooms and set to work sweeping the glass and muddy water away. That’s what defines the American spirit, Cameron says as they set to work, that’s how we succeed!

The court is rimmed with onlookers who smile and peer casually over their efforts. One shirtless man, beer bottle in hand, begins shouting instructions their way and eventually, remarkably, decides to join in. With some effort he unscrews the submerged storm drain cover and in a good-natured, beer-fueled flurry of declarations, begins digging out the years of bottle caps and city silt and glass with his hands. His image itself is a pop spectacle: the broad back of a man with the word BERLIN tattooed across its breadth, an arm disambiguated to the shoulder in an opaque brown sludge, a glittering sun reflected in the pool that surrounds him, and a ring of beautiful urbanites pointing and laughing with their friends. The scene serves its own end, becomes its own god, God being the spectacle itself, that in which the disciples are both worshipper and creator. What history might the city have coughed up in his
hands, this thick-set young man with its name on his back! One would expect historical darkness but a spirit of heartache and the exigencies of youthful regret were the worst to come out of that hole. Filth, beer caps, little pieces of every single body that has happened along but, amazingly, nothing more sobering than that.

24.05.10

Cameron has left town, and he has two weeks, more or less, until the coming of his loved one. The time pulls into threads of—not melancholy, it lacks the proper acidity, but tabanca as they’d say in Trinidad, or saudade in Portuguese slave terms. He has been here before, to this place within himself where two weeks must pass between the now and the coming. He was in another capital, one far more mired in anguish and darkness as he waited for his first goddess to arrive (all he can clearly remember is night, subway tunnels, drunken incapacitation, sharp daylight as some hallucinatory intermezzo). That he loved her beyond his own capacity to comprehend such completeness put him, in that bright star’s absence, into an unlit emptiness that drew all life and colour upon itself, life in such a tormented city being of the unhealthiest variety: reduced to short, dull lines between himself and other bodies, lines lost in an inkwell of present-tense blindness.

At the Staatsbibliothek he sinks into Philip Roth’s The Dying Animal but the pages he reads are no consolation:

George wouldn’t let up. “Attachment is ruinous and your enemy. Joseph Conrad: He who forms a tie is lost. That you should sit there looking like you do is absurd. You tasted it. Isn’t that enough? Of what do you ever get more than a taste? That’s all we’re given in life, that’s all we’re given of life. A taste. There is no more.”

As he wanders this city now, listless and constantly on the verge of unexplained tears, he takes measure of his presence in space and is troubled by what he feels. The parts do not fit. His head hangs awkwardly forward and his back is strained. Walking becomes too deliberate and unnatural an act, so he sits, looks wistfully for reassurance in the eyes of passers-by, but finds only mistrust or concern or disdain. Every library or bookshop he enters feels like a prologue, as if string music were about to swell. (In one sudden reverie, staring at a shelf of French-German dictionaries, he imagines the spirit of his unborn child whispering to him from the uterus, the echo chamber, of his first love; mouth closed around her sex, his tongue forms a lullaby, though no words are issued). The few words he does speak on a given day tend to catch in his throat. The effect is that of a voice shuddering before the onset of tears and, in fact, the function works as well in reverse; the sensation of these broken words leaving his body engenders a certain sadness, almost asks for the unshed tears to come.
The thought of a test pilot who points his jet-fueled plane into space and powers sixty-five kilometres above the earth’s surface; a pilot who, when he tries to break back into the atmosphere has too shallow an angle and bounces inexplicably off its invisible surface back into the heavens, where aerodynamic forces are too weak to let him retake control of the machine and he must caterwaul, for a timeless moment, through the emptiness.

The image of a smoking particle of debris falling from a clear summer sky as rocket boosters go spiralling into blue and the fiery cloud of an explosion (symptomatic of a design flaw of a single rubber ring) hangs high like the residue of a firework and expands.

The feeling of seven soft bodies strapped to the interior of that particle, shocked but alive, and trying in the few seconds remaining of their awareness to rig an emergency charge. Christa McAuliffe, her historic smile gone as she sits in the capsule, gripping, breathing; she would have known that things were terribly wrong, but might have held faith in the frantic actions of the pilots, or perhaps in some greater providence. With all of these preparations, all of these tests, she would have told herself, this can’t be happening; with all these children watching! The suddenness of that reality.

Impact. And instantly the nouns change. It is all debris. They are searching for survivors. From floating weightless in a test chamber, beaming with beauty, the eyes of the nation upon her, the destiny of the first civilian in space is torn down from the sky, her physical form compromised by the very gravity from which their rockets desired to break free.
Winter now. Sitting down to write of angst and confusion, he can hear nothing above the whine of tinnitus in his ears so he gives up and takes the train into the city (again Berlin—how does he keep ending up here?) where familiar streets and bookshops offer a peculiar comfort in their reminder of lonelier, more vivid times. He’s in an art book shop when he notices a reciprocity with a young woman across a table of books and is surprised to find that her eyes, in fact, are on him, and if not her eyes then her entire energy has drawn itself into scent-distance of his own. She lingers, then crosses to a different section of the room, fingerling books with a deliberate disinterest as she senses without having to look back that she has motivated his curiosity.

Having founded her platform, she comes back to where he is still standing among the photography monographs and pulls on a title directly beside him. This thick-set girl, with her matching silver sneakers and handbag, mustard-coloured coat and platinum blonde hair cropped to the skull, has set him up to pass comment, even turning slowly to face him with her book (eyes down, alert). But he says nothing, plays coy, wanders off.

She matches her exit of the shop to his, again with apparent coincidence, and it is up to him one final time as they share a smile to say something, anything, and the night would be theirs. But he doesn’t, and instead watches her walk down the café-lit street, follows her actually, until she steps into the metro station with a certain weight gained in her stride, a downturn expressed in the back of her neck. Which is the more unsettling, he wonders, his predatory disengagement or the pedestal she hefted herself onto?

No matter. He makes his way to an exhibition opening in a top floor apartment down a dark, tree-lined avenue in a posh part of town. The space is majestic. Whitewashed, warm and powdery but retaining the ghost of its splendor as a wealthy Prussian home. He has arranged to meet a gallerist, and former dancer, with whom he engaged in similar, if more fruitful, rapture two summers ago, her deft body now wrapped in layers of winter wool but still permitting grace. On this occasion there is a dearth of communion between the two and she leaves early, as pre-arranged, to attend a dinner. He is left to make brief conversation with the artist, whose installation is organic, clean, and intelligent—exactly what you would expect and no more—but of whom he can command attention only briefly before guests with deeper pockets intervene.

Two quick beers, another in hand, and he decides to retake the streets. Already on the stairs he falters in zipping his coat. His rangy path takes him toward a familiar canal where he pulls his hood up and stands staring at the apartment windows of a lover from years past, a rancorous, vindictive woman whose companionship was a mistake.

And yet he feels a certain wistful sentimentality for that life, at least for the potential it offered of a place in this European metropolis, a partner whose face was built
heroically (whose brow and nose bridge would carry for generations) and for some ill-defined sense of recognition: *Here I am.*

Stupid. He regains his way, wandering back onto the brighter streets, onto the elevated train, and ends up at another site of history, this time a strip of cheap shops further east where he sits with a bag of nuts and stares out, eyes open for a mustard coat and silver sneakers, reassuring himself that this time he will not falter, this time he’ll offer the requisite charm.

On the train back to the suburbs is a Tillmans character: tall, muscular, and quintessentially German, with a trim, Weimar-era haircut, polyester trackpants, and boots. He obsesses over the exposed V of the man’s torso, and imagines his thick cock hanging heavily erect over the edge of the seat, as clean-shaved as his chest. But no, he will not sink to his knees here under the cinematic perversion of fluorescent carriage lights. He will close his eyes to that delusion and walk the forested path back to his room, taking softer pleasure in a warming engagement with his own gait, taking momentary pause to flash a photograph of a Christmas tree in a shopping cart.
I am stuck on a large ferry that has been turned into an old house, floating untethered in a vast inlet never too far from passing islands but never close enough to alight. The house is my mother’s and I’m charged with the task of trying to keep all the loose window panes in place to prevent a family of sad, soft-spoken tigers from entering the musty, carpeted bedroom from the second-floor verandah where they are begging to be let in. The father tiger, who looks like a stuffed animal up close, built of cheap felt with his seams showing, has already once pushed his way in and sprayed urine over the carpet, had to be scolded by my mother and pushed back out. But she is in another part of the house now, yelling about something, and with the pride of animals sensing my isolation and closing in, I begin to panic.
AFRICAN LAUGHTER
03.02.11

Everything reminds him of Trinidad: he is an adolescent again. He sits on a bench on the Seapoint boardwalk, the Western Cape of South Africa, and watches the sun drop into the horizon’s haze. He watches for the moment of its disappearance, the final blink, but a couple is promenading in front of him, or he has turned to consider a dog, and when he looks back up the rim of light is gone, there’s only a glow above the horizon, a brightness and colour in the sky that outplays its surroundings.

He is stunned into remembrance, still only days old, of his airport departure in Berlin, of this bright light standing there in the lounge, watching him go. Standing in the security line he turned to her smile, then ahead, then back towards her, and back ahead as he shuffled forward with bags. At one glance she was there, wrapped in soft grey and black, legs steadily askance, eyes radiating openness. And then, at the next, she was gone. A space in that hallway crossed with travellers, and he couldn’t believe that any of it had really happened.

01.04.11

When he has bundled himself off the two-day bus journey, arranged a taxi from the station to a sleeping lodge, left his bags at the front desk while a room is arranged, and set out for a first walk, he is met with the sudden scent of over-ripe guavas and—of happiness, of home—he begins to weep. Zimbabwe.

Twenty-one years have passed since his mother took him from this place and followed her new husband to Trinidad, framing the trip as an adventure, masking the irreversibility, the real permanence of their flight. Ever since he left, or rather, ever since it sank in that there was no going back to his life in Africa with its rural fascinations, he has dreamed of a return. He walks like a blind man in love, in turns cautious and exuberant, familiarity coming from a recognition of the kinds of streets he would swoop over in his childhood dreams of flying: low hedges, colonial patios barely seen, the white sun hats of uniformed school children floating below him in pairs and threes.

At the entrance to a shopping plaza, though, a woman sitting on the pavement looks up and asks him for a dollar. She is not well, she says. She has a problem. He sees her sores and understands, offers his juice box, which she accepts with two claps of her hands and the touching of her palm to her heart. This is the real distance to cross, he realizes, this history that supersedes him.
The National Herbarium of Zimbabwe is a moderate stretch of city-bound grass-land dotted with locked and abandoned facilities—a tea room, toilets, a rusting sign pointing to Desert Plants—and with gestural stone sculptures that hold their poses like chameleons. At the entrance is a small booth in which three people are sitting listening to a radio and talking in Shona. When he gestures to enter, the woman of the three, who appears to be the guest but draws obvious power around her thick, seated form, says to him, *you pay*, and leaves it at that. Their easy conversation has stopped. They examine him more with insolent curiosity than suspicion as he makes up his mind, the most absurd moment coming (for all of them) when he silently hands over a worn two dollar bill as payment to enter this neglected patch of land on the outskirts of a city where a month’s rent can cost eight.

A café from a different era sits packed up behind rusting gates so he takes a seat under an exterior edge of thatched roof and fixes a sandwich. In the distance, an egret sulks its way past some bushes. The view softens when a cloud floats in front of the sun; it happens every few minutes, fading out and fading in, a kind of breathing, the way low waves in the evening can remind one of heavy lungs. Half an hour later, a man in gum boots strides along the same horizon with the loose-limbed cadence of a labourer. Two birds that have been echoing each other’s calls have stopped. It could be evening but for the missing colour, the inevitability, of dusk.

After lunch he walks out of the Herbarium—the booth is now unmanned—and takes a turn down a long stretch of road without houses. Eventually he comes upon a trench being dug alongside the pavement. Piles of the reddest earth have been loaded to one side, richer and deeper in colour than brick; he presses it between two fingers and the stain will not come away. Further down the road he comes upon a vast white house behind tall walls. There are surveillance cameras along the length of the compound, and he tries to ask a man walking nervously past him what the building is but the man shakes his head and refuses to stop. He begins to ask the next passerby but with eyes fixed on the ground this man just yells at him. *Don’t ask questions! Just keep walking!*

He has already guessed at whose house it must be but by this time it’s too late. A grey-uniformed man with a machine gun held to his side trots out of the compound gates and speaks a few words to an armed soldier. The soldier, a short, helmeted figure in fatigues, featureless under the clear afternoon sun, then gestures for him to cross the street. The first remarkable fact about the soldier is the ease of his actions, swinging his rifle into one hand and waving him forward in one practiced movement. Close-up, he has the hard, cubist features of a grown-up child soldier, and uses the point of his rifle’s bayonet to stop his approach some yards away.

The soldier starts asking questions that are intended to demean, to instill fear: What is your problem? Do you know whose house this is? But they are offered with such soft-spoken nonchalance that he keeps smiling and talking, unraveling the story of his
return to his childhood home, promising that no pictures were taken of the old man’s house (it’s now clear to whom it belongs: the man who no one, not even the security forces hired to guard him, refer to by name). He is too casual, though, too aware of the absurdity of what he’s gotten himself into, and the soldier becomes testy, starts flicking the rifle’s safety off and on. Do you expect to receive your freedom on a silver platter? he asks. The soldier threatens to call a superior, and then does. The superior interrogates him more rigorously, going through his bag, accusing him of being a journalist. Two men in suits follow some minutes later, asking the same questions about his cameras and his origins, intermittently trying to topple him with accusations.

The posse, it is a posse now, drags him through the tall, grey gates of the compound. He is speaking quickly, and with as much levity and focus as he can maintain. He is pushed across a courtyard. Their questions repeat and he knows that any discrepancy in his answers will be his downfall. Trying to keep conversation light, he asks one of the suits whether they are secret service. A smile. It’s something like that.

He is taken into a concrete-walled room in the centre of which is a plain wooden table. The floor is flooded, and in one corner is a rudimentary jail cell, just wide enough to stand in. He is told to unpack his belongings onto the table by the last of the suits, who then turns around and speaks to him under his breath. He tells him to act relaxed. He tells him to keep talking, says he can talk his way out of this if he’s lucky. For the rest of the interrogation the man offers key assistance, gesturing for him to pack up more quickly or, when he is forced to walk the courtyard again under the gaze of rooftop guards, telling him to slow down, walk more slowly. When he is finally escorted back to the entrance guard house (mouth dry, heart pounding) there is a fifth or sixth round of questioning, and this time his notebooks are read page for page. On the final written page of his workbook, the one on which a list of photography-related tasks is headed Shooting Robert Mugabe, his man flips the book closed before others can see it, this after demanding answers to a list of suspicious wikipedia search terms earlier on: Nuclear Winter, Doomsday Device, The Destroyer of Worlds.

It’s unclear how much time has passed when he is finally escorted out. The agents shake his hand and wish him well on his travels. The soldier gives him a thumbs up as he crosses back over to the civilian side of the road. He walks with his eyes to the ground without looking back until the end of the compound appears some half a kilometre away, and as he finally gets to the corner and turns to take in the experience, he feels a weight and ugliness—the thick insult of power—in the long, dirt-yellow wall and the sentinel trees standing tall behind it.

Further along Samora Machel Avenue, three young boys merge in front of him, talking eagerly with each other and moving with the promiseful urgency of ten-year olds everywhere. But the heft of what he is walking away from keeps pressing down on his view of their happiness. How can a man, a ruler, soak such dense dominion into his surroundings? He himself was likely six or seven when the old man visited Mupfure College for a ceremony commemorating the progress of the teaching initiative
there. Standing at attention under the sun, watching the seated dignitaries speak from a party tent, he had collapsed from heat exhaustion, the only time it has happened to him. At about the same age, he was detained by personal guards of the President for causing a disturbance on the foyer of the Harare hotel at which the old man was due to arrive. There was a similar sense of privilege then, as a child—to slide on his knees back and forth across the marble floor, shrieking with delight and taking the guards and agents who tried to catch him as simple obstacles in a game—that seems to have matured into an impunity to walk where he pleases, to look and ask questions as he desires, to obey his curiosity above all. The dead weight of incontrovertible power never figured in this perspective, but there has been a definite humbling, a tangible readjustment of the elements that back his vision of this place, as he walks behind these children with his freedom all packed up again.

03.04.11

He is on his way home. That’s the anecdote he would like to tell. But in reality, he is a complete foreigner in this place where the earth and the grasses and the smells feel so familiar. Children call him white man on the street. A baby on the minibus to Chigutu stares at him in awe. And when he arrives at the dusty, roadside town in the late morning after a delay on the highway caused by a wheel flying off the bus, he knows right away what direction to begin walking. The main road turns off before the petrol station, curves past a bank of shops, and straightens up into the western Midlands; another right turn and he will be on the raised single lane road to Mupfure.

As a traveller he has come to inhabit his oddity, selecting an outfit that will wear well across social borders, learning to walk efficiently enough to weather a full day. Now, on this ten kilometre stretch, his camera hangs as a matter of habit on his right shoulder, tucked behind his elbow. It’s a Sunday and other rural walkers cross paths with him or overtake him, and among the stares and smiles, a few stop to request that he take their picture. Without exception they stand stock still, holding a pose, holding what feels like a universal identity within themselves, then walk away satisfied once their image has been captured. Like this, he follows the afternoon arc of the blue-skied sun, finally making his way down past the large guard tree at the turn­off that has remained so clearly within him as an image, out of context, and into the compound of small, dust-coloured teachers’ quarters where he grew up.
He would like to believe he can remember which one was theirs—just point it out, 
that’s where my imagination was born, in that ordinary little dwelling with my mother 
and Mai Mombeshora and her happy-go-lucky giant of a son—but the truth is they 
all look the same to him now, these worn-in concrete houses staggered behind bushes 
and paths of swept dirt. He guesses at one, is answered at the door by a woman who 
points him to the next house over, saying the principal lives there, that he is the one 
to ask.

The word is soon out. A stranger has arrived, and it hasn’t yet been determined 
whether he means well. Two men, one who introduces himself as the director of the 
school and one as his assistant, usher him into the living room and greet him politely, 
cautiously, asking how he travelled here, asking from where he came. Things loosen 
up when he presents the story of his mother and Horst Podoll and the other expats 
coming to this piece of land in ‘83, building these houses brick by concrete brick. 
Laughter, so often a diplomatic weapon here, soon becomes more expansive.

An older woman has been summoned. She was around in those early days, they tell 
him. And soon enough, into the room walks a dark, firmly set woman in green robes. 
She stares at him and they both break into smiles. Mai Manyika—practically his sec-
ond mother, the way she used to feed him and spank him and pack him off for school. 
Too matronly for prolonged astonishment, but sparkling with laughter, she rattles 
straight into stories of how things used to be in those early days. Sunday stories. And 
then, just as brusquely as she arrives, she takes him away, making arrangements with 
the principal for a proper meeting in the morning, showing him into her own little 
house, demanding his shirt and instructing him into the bathroom where she has 
meanwhile arranged for a cold bath to be poured.

Toni Morrison has said that, “All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to 
get back to where it was.”

As a child in these handmade homes, tap water would come once a week. It was his 
great joy to lie at the bottom of a shallow bath on those days, ears submerged, listening 
to the warped vibrato of household chatter and bass-heavy footsteps in the kitchen. 
Much taller now, he undresses with a hint of ceremony, the memorialized sounds of 
years ago mingling with the work-a-day conversation happening in the front yard, and 
sinks into the cold-water tub like a child. His history, all of those sense memories, and 
his immediate bodily awareness of cold-blue-soap-concrete-echo start shimmering in 
an ageless embrace. When he rises, his washed and pressed shirt is already waiting for 
him on the back of a chair and it looks like a resolution. He puts it on and, for the first 
time in his life, feels fully-grown.
A young man named Kip, whose eyelids hang low with beauty, welcomes him into the house (finally it’s identified) where he spent his early childhood. Kip shares the house with his older brother and it’s a boy’s house now: crooked lines of spraypaint in the bathroom, a single work desk in the living space, a bar of laundry soap by the unwashed kitchen pot.

Standing in his childhood bedroom, he is overwhelmed by the need to strap meaning to his being there. Edward Casey writes that:

Poets and topoanalysts both recognize the privileged status of the body in getting us back into place—in particular, our childhood home. They also affirm that the house we reënter by means of images or words is itself body-like... An imagined or remembered room within such a body-house “clings to its inhabitant and becomes the cell of a body with its walls close together.” To return to an inhabited room, whether in fact or in fantasy, is to return to an organic part of a house that is itself experienced as a megabody, with windows for eyes and a front door for mouth.

Dominating the space is a free-standing wooden cupboard that is too large to fit into the nook for which it is intended. Consequently the far corner of the room—the one in which he had tacked to the wall a life-sized outline of himself at six or seven years old and that he had filled in with a rudimentary face, his first portrait—is completely blocked from view. The room is unnaturally small, too small even for a single bed. If he were to lie on the ground and stretch his arms above his head he would touch the furthest walls, a heavy shade of earthen yellow, and when his eyes adjust, he notices termite tunnels running up and down one corner to a ceiling that is stained and peeling from rain leakage. He breaks a section of their clay tunnel open with his thumb and a stream of translucent termites scrambles for the darkness. But, soon enough, they reorder themselves and get to the task of rebuilding, an edge of wet clay forming between their mandibles on the cusp of the break.
I thought changes were holy. I spilled them like grain. How could I know. How could I know she would lose.  

10.05.11

He is sitting at a desk in a bedroom in Oslo, wearing his favourite grey-striped shirt, worn thin and still wrinkled from the journey up from Africa (Harare—Johannesburg—Abu Dhabi—London—Oslo—Narvik—Oslo), still failing to find faith in his decision to be here. He has seen the North, the sun that never sets; he has exposed some film in that northern place that may come to be of value, or might at least point a way forward, but this is small reward (a few good pictures and one more surreal turn) for his loss of positive self-regard.

Is he doing the thing you learn from books and movies to not do? Leaving the one who cares for him, who has taken him back because she believes in a lifetime of companionship, to spend a second term with the one with whom he was transfixed, en-gorged, enamoured for a matter of days? It would have been perfection to experience that quickly burning love for the time that it pitched up so suddenly and then return to the hardscrabble sanctuary of his everyday life. But he has given up on a chance of home for another taste of that fire and, oh, doesn’t he know how bitterly it burns the second time around! Ayehlet’s email, years old at this point, comes back to him now:

Sometimes I’m lonely chuffing around by myself here, and it seems like the biggest question is where to be, how to avoid claustrophobia and loneliness, both, one on each end. Then sometimes it seems that I have a limitless capability to be content by myself, writing, or having chance encounters on the street, in shops, observing little really funny things. In the end, nothing really requires much thought. The best is to be in the first person: so with that in mind, I’m outta here… I’m off to the desert, to the red centre, the outback, Uluru, King’s Canyon, the Olgas. (When you don’t know a place, the names have a magic ring, no? Glebe, Wollongong, Vacleuse… the first time you see them, too, they have a magic air, so that when you return it’s a surprise to see that it’s just as it was, that really, you’re more ethereal than it—you’re passing through it, it’s not passing through you).

And yet here he goes, hoping that after a likely and anticipated collapse he will be able to find a way home on his knees. Is he writing his own fiction before it happens? Is he writing this into reality? Or will the capacity of this northern lover for poetry and sensuality overwhelm these high frequency concerns? How can a no-longer young man be so far into this unitary life without any clear answers? A curiosity about what shape a self-inflicted end would take worries his horizon.
Nighttime. A crowd in a small sports arena is watching a race, perhaps it’s a bicycle race. My father is at the lower end of the grandstand, at ground level. He is lying curled up on his side, weak, breathing mechanically.

I step back and spray the entire section of the small crowd with a hardening plastic foam and walk away, trying to ignore the consequences. When I return, the light green plastic has hardened, enclosing the forms of the people under it, including my father. I tap the shape of his body and hear his voice from underneath asking me why: he just wanted to touch me, he says, to hold me. It had been so long.

I leave again, distract myself with other tasks, then come back around. Feeling guilty, I crack my father out of the plastic casing and we go for a walk along an empty city street lined with mirrored glass buildings that have no doors; it’s no more than an idea, a projection, of a city. I confess that, despite his age and fragility, I am in fact the one who will die by the morning. I am getting weaker by the hour, I say, and need to sort things out while I still have the strength. I think about my negatives: who to give them to, who might take the time to find a few good pictures among them. I think about this sombre walk as my last before a final bedding and am grateful for it.
An idyll. When did a paragraph start this way in these writings before? He is in this idyll: in the Norwegian mountains again, in a private cabin, sinking into a slow routine of days that serve no master (a ticking clock, the only mad-made sound, is taken off the wall on their first day and its battery is removed). They read, talk, go for walks. Occasionally they drink a glass of wine with dinner or sit up on the slanted roof at midnight to catch the sun as it skims the mountain line, never quite setting. The panorama throbs with beauty: one lake fleshy pink, the hue of love, a distant marsh a dying lilac, deep blue mountains with snow peaks turning imperceptibly to cloud, and above it all these unreconstructed streaks of gold and orange sky that silence the birds into slumber and slow the sound of a nearby stream to a prayer. One afternoon, they take a wooden row boat into the middle of the lake, taking turns rowing while the other bails out the leaking hull. A candle is all they can find to plug a hole at the aft of the vessel and they light it before setting off, some measure of elemental humour marking the ceremoniousness of the act.

After a week like this they hike across to the other side of the valley, where a small mountain resort will let them catch up on correspondence left unanswered online. Today is his mother’s birthday. And yesterday she wrote to ask whether she can speak with him today, as a gift. She suggested times when she could be there, waiting at her computer, but the clock says it’s nighttime now in this place that never darkens and it’s pre-dawn in Bali so he’s missed her. He pictures her sitting alone at her desk some hours prior, waiting for her only son to simply show up as words on a screen—to give her some happiness by this surrogate presence—but he has failed even that. Does he even know her age? Two or three years ago he was certain she had turned sixty-four. But when he mentioned it she laughed. Don’t age me! she said, and she was barely past sixty. He now has her birth certificate as one of his belongings, and 1948 (or was it ‘47?) would make her sixty-three. He wants to imagine a family cabin like the one he’s staying in now, full of objects with human history, but he can’t, and will have a legacy only of these simple, tarnishable things: official papers, a confirmation of a person’s birth. The passage of her life, the histories she has negotiated, will be lost when she passes, at least what she has not passed onto him. And what of his legacy? Will it be formed of acts, or offspring, or a cabin full of things? He looks over at his companion and decides that this rootless engagement will be the last of its kind.

This time he leaves her sitting on a bench in the Oslo train station, a romantic, crest-fallen figure framed and obscured by the misted glass of the train window. She tries to look in at where he has taken his seat but cannot see him looking back from the inside. With this lack, she becomes an image, and turns her eyes to the ground, supporting her body’s weight on one arm like a riverside actor in a tragedy.
EPILOGUE
Walking down to the Brooklyn waterfront after a night storm that sent millions into mandatory evacuation, I see a small bird lying still on the ground with windblown eyes and claws curled up and am piqued with a sudden sadness for its loss. The thought of its hysteria in the violent hurricane winds—a creature of flight, unable to even pull its wings open—puts me in mind of a bird in Trinidad, years ago, that crashed into our window and fell to a confused death on the concrete driveway below, a perfect arc of blood wreathing its stunned form.

I wrote a story about it then, for a class: a simple metaphor of a moment that stood up and was counted. Thinking back now, it was the first time I took a chance to caricature my mother, in that case for an attempt at Christmas dinner that flew smack into farce and recrimination. But it dawns on me here on the docks, staring down at this yellow-breasted creature—apparently uninjured, as if it died of panic or heartbreak and fell cleanly through the rain—it dawns on me that this is an image she no longer deserves.

When I smell storms, I always assume that the happiness it brings has to do with Trinidad. But now I think it’s older, even older than Africa. There is a lifetime of mine for which I have no visible memories, but to which the rich tang of rain-whipped grasses and salty air must owe its resonance. Old enough, then, to come full circle and rise up before me here as wind, as rock, as bird.


----------, *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).


