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Memory and Mythmaking

IN THE FALL, IN THE LAST LIGHT BEFORE DUSK, my mother would take me back to school for some meeting or other and leave me to wait on the empty playground, my hands crawling up into the sleeves of my jacket as the temperature dropped. I'd watch the wind bend back the tree branches in ominous ways but I wasn't afraid. My favorite thing was to stand on one of four patches of dirt that marked where the swings used to be before accidents and insurance tore them down. If I stood really still I could see them, and my brother and sister when they were my age, and sometimes, if I squinted, I could see even past that, to memories of a world I'd never known, as if ancestral secrets were leaking through the soles of my sneakers.

Across the expanse of the scarred blacktop was the Depression-era brick school building, made up of one massive hall, bounded on each terminus by blue double doors, so that you could roll an apple from one end and out the other. The whole design had the sort of grandiose greediness of space only seen before World War II, when the great open prairie was still fresh in the American psyche. Everything— from the ceilings to the prehistoric radiators— was covered in the most distinct faded mint green, grayed from years of mingling with dust and sunlight.

Childhood enlarges everything, but in my mind, my first-grade classroom has become a cathedral, lit up among the darkened windows as some meeting progressed, chains of white paper ghosts and glue-laden owls with missing eyes illuminated from behind.

But it wasn't the darkness, or the trees, or the solitude that impressed itself on me. It was the immensity of all that came before. The same feeling I had when I was early to school and waited alone in the massive cafeteria, flanked by its tall line of windows. In the sanctuary hush, I could feel the decades trying to quiet themselves, somehow sensing that it was my turn now, but maybe also realizing that this meant that one day my turn would also end.

I grew up in Virginia, one of the American states with the tightest grasp on its physical footnotes of history. Maybe that's why my first exposure to the world outside my home happened among the ghosts of old buildings, and the people who had lived in them.

Our first locations become the lifetime blueprints of our imaginations and in my mind, that high-ceilinged school cafeteria becoming all the other cafeterias, cafés, and citadels in books I read. And perhaps, in that receptive time, some part of the souls that came before me in those places snuck in too.

The borderlands of past and present, real and imaginary, were thin back then. Those old buildings provided the scaffolding of my imagination, but also the roots of myself. When I was not much older than five, I accompanied my mother on an errand for our church that somehow involved our priest letting us into a derelict clapboard building filled with splintered planks and shadows that are still clearer in my mind than yesterday's dinner. The building is now boarded up, its windows blinded

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from looking over the cemetery where the living fight over how best to acknowledge the Confederate bones under its crust.

A block away is my family's church, designed by an Irish immigrant longing for home in 1878. The building had limewashed walls outside and dark corners within, made of carved wood rubbed to a marble patina from a century and a half of fingertips. Despite my own tenuous spirituality, the "mysteries of faith" will always make intuitive sense to me. What else could be hidden among those echelons of mahogany rafters and inscrutable statues?

Old buildings after inhabitation by humans for so long, take on the mannerisms of our species, like the bones of our elders creaking in the rain and settling at night. The same way that dogs and their owners begin to look alike. My ballet lessons were at the top of a nineteenth-century Masonic lodge's stone tower, with a carpentry shop on the ground floor and uneven floorboards that sank and jumped more than the dancers. To this day the smell of freshly sanded wood and capricious egg doorknobs make me think of eight-counts and pliés.

Steinbeck, on his 1960 canine-escorted road trip in *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, spoke of the eeriness of motel rooms, how a human imprints his character, his plans and hopes, in the rooms he occupies, as an animal leaves crushed grass and footprints. "I further believe that personality seeps into walls and is slowly released. That might well be an explanation of ghosts and such manifestations," he theorized.

If that's true, then haunted places aren't limited to those cemetery rows where we've tucked Civil War and Spanish Flu bones away. If spirits linger, it seems to me they'd do it in places they know best—their schools, churches, and social halls. It isn't happenstance that the word "haunt" comes from "home."

Of course, the present's venerated old buildings were new once, smelling of paint and unfinished wood and without the patina of time to white-wash their shortcomings. We all know the good old days were never so good as we think; it's easy to forget just how messy they were while in use, not sacred museum displays but filled with the profane of homework and half-done projects. The romantic black and white images of the old Penn Station conveniently mask the accumulated grime on the walls and the bedraggled newspaper stands, provoking a nostalgia not for what was, but for what never existed.

But it's the messiness of all those lives that came before that moves me. Maybe it's because in our modern age, it feels more urgent than ever to find something larger to be linked to.

A hundred years ago, a house could take two years to build. Today, we can hoist a McMansion into being like a circus tent in a matter of weeks. The painstaking process of shaping plaster walls has given way to the streamlined manufacture of drywall that we can nick with a fingernail. And if the pace of problems picks up with our dwellings after a couple decades, we can just bulldoze the slate clean and start all over again. How wonderfully convenient. How terribly disposable. I wonder how many of these plywood boxes imprint themselves on a child's imagination? I wonder how those children's imaginations are architected in adult life?

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If what we live in is this disposable, what does that say about our own disposability? The difference between a main street and a shopping complex is individuality and an expectation of permanence. If our surroundings are permanent, or we can plausibly kid ourselves that they are, then perhaps of course, so are we. Those stubborn stone pediments and embedded granite foundations throw us a bit of hope in the inundating tide of history, that perhaps something of our own time will also stay on. "Perhaps it is the sense of place that gives us the belief that passionate things in some sense, endure," Eudora Welty wrote of her unyielding attachment to Mississippi in her essay "Some Notes on River Country."

Over the course of my childhood in northern Virginia, where the economic reach of Washington D.C. government contracts expanded every year, it was impossible for anything to molder in peace, even the Spanish Flu gravestones. By the early 1990s, dairy farms were replaced by data centers. Part way through my early school years, a new elementary school was built, where I met classmates who lived in matching, mass-produced homes on predesigned streets, where even the colors of the front doors were predetermined. Tyvek-wrapped drywall shuddered upright along the sides of the highway, and as I entered my teenage years, my world of ghosts and shadows began to tremble and fade like a mirage in fluorescent light.

Yet vestiges of the past remained in my small enclave of a neighborhood, which was buffered from development by the Potomac River and a circle of woods. One of my neighbors kept his pet alligator in a turret of his asymmetrical collage of a house. Another neighbor, a retired farmer with a local accent that no longer exists, passed me plastic grocery bags of green beans and tomatoes, overflowing bounty from his elaborate vegetable garden, over our back fence. I hold on to these remnants, as they fade from traditions to only memories.

More and more, those of us lucky enough to live to old age will leave a world that has already left us. Little deaths beginning in our thirties and forties prepare us for the big one. We see our turn come and go. The old schoolhouse is now an office building for the county. I can't bear to go back and mar what it has become in my memory. I did pass it once, late at night driving a friend home from a party. I averted my eyes as I passed, but I couldn't remain ignorant to all the changes that had happened. The fields no longer sprawled but were confined to their allotted spaces. Fun-fair hayrides once circled the fields and lasted an eternity. Now a tractor could barely do a three-point turn in the grassy space that remains. The windows of the school are bare save for a few spider plants; the seasonal artwork replaced by the monotony of maturity.

Martha Graham once said, "A dancer dies twice, once when she stops dancing, and this first death is the more painful." It isn't just true for dancers. Despite only living a half hour away from where I grew up, I take three exits and go an extra ten miles to avoid driving through the remnants of my hometown. That first death is still too fresh.

As for the playground, I'd like to think some kid is standing on one of those dirt spots seeking some piece of knowledge that comes before. I wonder if he'll succeed and one day, I'll wake up feeling as though I've forgotten something.