

Surgery of Place

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Having been on the train from Ulaanbaatar for two days prior to their arrival, they decided to learn Beijing by walking. From the hostel in the Shijia Hutong Dongcheng District, down Dongjiaomin Alley, around Tian'amen Square, they covered everything on foot. It was because of this literal physical communication with the city, their dusted hiking sandals forming a routine, then a relationship, eventually a marriage with the bricked paths and concrete streets, that they found the shop.

Had they only passed by with the Double Luck Taxi Company, they wouldn't have even noticed.

By seven a.m. that morning, like the three prior mornings, the air was already heavy with heat and city. By seven a.m. they had already been walking for an hour. Passing down a road lined with shops and hutongs jutting off on either side, he saw the rows of geta for sale in the window. They agreed to come back later that day.

When they returned in the late afternoon, the sky the same dull wood color it had been in the morning, the shop was gone. The street was gone. The hutongs were gone. She asked if they were in the right place, he double checked the map. They retraced their steps. It was the same place. Only it didn't exist. Emptiness filled with settling dust stretched before them. A pile of rubble and a couple of tired machines were the only indication that it had been.

Cosmetic

My dad visits for the day and he shows me a YouTube video. It's a fifteen minute piece on China's Ghost Cities. We sit together and watch an Australian reporter take a gondola ride through an empty shopping mall, a guided tributary tour through the abyss. When my dad leaves I become obsessed. I stare at pictures of Ordos, Chenggong, Jiangsu.

Forest of skyscrapers.

Soulless cities.

The eerie quiet engulfs me. I put my face right up to the computer screen and squint into the vacant streets. I want to go there.

But, I've been there.

Hemorrhage

In the town I grew up in we only locked our doors one weekend every year. It was the weekend when they drug the Starship Enterprise, hitched to a Ford, down Main Street. Strange cars filled the fire station parking lot and out-of-towners came to pay homage to the future birthplace of their captain. My excitement was heightened by the sense of danger in the air. It was the smell of an empty beer can in morning dew. It was the sound of distant thumping from speakers by the river. It was aliens in our corner store.

As an adult I went back. Plywood and for sale signs covered every Main Street window. The corner store had been converted to a makeshift Star Trek museum. I didn't recognize the man behind the desk who told me that William Shatner would appear in the parade that year. I took an obligatory picture of the Enterprise and told him congratulations.

I stole candy from that store when I was nine. My mom made me walk back to return it. To enforce the lesson she made me go alone. Now grown, I walk that same trek through the alley. This space exists because I left. Because we all left.

I tour my old elementary school with a real estate agent. A rusty drinking fountain blocks the door to the nurse's office. My fourth grade classroom is a cavity of drywall dust. I ponder the items left behind. A couple of children's desks, a book, half of the chalkboard. No war drove the inhabitants frantically grabbing what they could. What remains is a deliberate emptiness. The agent reads from an invisible paper phrases about potential, development, condominiums. The paint-peeling walls and I strain, creaking into nothing, to listen for ghosts in the echo of his memorized chatter.

Amputation

He'd gone to Harvard, he told me. He chose to come back to the reservation. Indians were forgetting the names for their places. My tape recorder played back his plans to teach them. His belief that their language would make them whole again. The owner of the motel warned me not to walk alone.

I pulled over on an empty dirt road by the cemetery and a pack of dogs appeared out of nowhere. They growled and barked, surrounding my car. Mangy Cerberuses. Rabid teeth encircling a gulf of forced barrenness.

The woman I interviewed at the community college rattled off place names. Sweet Grass Hills. Ghost Ridge. Chief Mountain. Ni-na Us-tak-wi. She talked about Lewis and Clark, how Meriwether Lewis renamed Bear Pass after his cousin Marias. The Lewis and Clark memorial outside of town is vandalized with spray paint. The names of young lovers cover the names of the explorers. Profanities rename their achievements.

The land does not belong to us, we belong to it.

At the edge of the rez I photographed a hand painted sign in red letters: Land For Sale.

Phantom Limbs

The neighborhood where I spent the first five years of my life was slated for demolition. My dad returned to see the old place for the last time. It had been over twenty years since he'd stood and shielded his eyes from the ever-present glare of Quonset huts in the sun. He was in the city for a meeting and decided to walk down the deserted road of memory during the lunch break. Place brought it all back: the cries of his children as babies, his wife pulling a red wagon to meet him, the names of transient friends in a neighborhood of constant migration.

My mother had done her best to make it a home. She sewed curtains for the corrugated rimmed windows. She painted ducks from a field guide on the cupboards in the kitchen. She stenciled and patched and cleaned. My dad tried the door of their unit and found it unlocked. He stepped into his youth, into two decades of other family's memories.

The ducks were still there.

He tore the cupboard doors from their hinges and carried them back. When my mom opened them on Christmas morning, eight tall packages wrapped in reindeer and stars, she started weeping. Then only a teenager, I didn't understand. I couldn't understand the weight of the gift of place.

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As they walked on in silence she considered what existed. Armies of cranes marched across the horizon. Her breath was burdened with petals falling from late-afternoon trees. Billboards proclaimed the future of Beijing.

Demolition is part of building.

She imagined the shop owner looking out as they looked in. There on the street two tourists glance over the only place he has known as home. They don't know, they can't know, as they walk on that theirs will be among the last sandals to touch his street. When building is the construction of emptiness, place names with no place, it is the felling of trees in forests where no one is there to hear.

Had they come in to buy a pair of geta at that moment, they might have carried a piece of that place with them, a piece of a place that now only exists in his memory. A memory that will die when he does.