

DIORAMA OF THE UNINHABITED HOME

At first things collide, collude, drive you along. Only later do they begin to “fall apart.”

Brian Lennon, “Sleep”

I.

Build the diorama from back to front,
starting with a favorite hand-painted design,
a weathered photograph in sepia tone,
a snippet, perhaps, of wrapping paper
clipped then glued to the cardboard interior.
Consider a horizon, a fallen landscape,
a city cast in permanent silhouette
against the blood imprint of jazz.

II.

Should I begin from a corner of gray?
Or yellow? Just below the sunset
where the silhouette of the city is more or less the same.
Paint a few scattered strokes, a few vibrant colors,
scratch and drag for city lights, wait for the pull,
the undeniable Creole flair
as the city flickers with life.

Or should I begin at deepening dusk—
the point of first collision?
A deserted shopping mall
where I scale mounds of broken glass
and broken dreams,
standing upon a precipice of forgotten objects,
memories abandoned with the storm—

teddy bears crusted with mud,
gumball machines cracked and empty,
shirts scattered and torn, abandoned,
ceiling tiles hanging by electrical wires
that no longer spark, no longer noticed

except at the moment of imposition,
the pause before the tile falls out.

In blue, I paint this canvas blue,
but like Swenson, *with blood dots shining through.*¹
It seems to come back how I remember:
titled at the center, bursting at the cracks,
skeleton of a city, stripped to the studs and bare.

All around is the disappearance of the jazz I once knew—
the palpitating beat forgotten,
moving somewhere underneath,
echoing below the staggered crash of solemn waves,
the retreat of a raging ocean;
hidden among the poorest poor
where things are vaguely reminiscent at all,
where nothing shouts “New Orleans” about this tattered city.

I realize, *before that rain stung like silver, I had forgotten me.*
My name was a rude visitor,
always *arriving unannounced, without a gift,*²
begging and begging for silence or silence or jazz.

III.

Late August and I capture a snapshot of the cypress tree
as it bends and breaks through splintered wood—
the family home where a woman cooked jambalaya each Sunday,
several Sundays ago.

And its massive roots tear through the foundation,
tangle with concrete and identity,
burst through an attic
filled with sentimental and painful things—
scrapbooks and dresses,
an ancestor’s old freedom papers;
shackles from slavery and slavery.

In that crucial hour, when the city *breathes*
in an equilibrium of surge and repose,
I listen to a *near infinity of ghosts,*
paint red *the footsteps of the dead*—³
the awkward man standing at the doorstep with his children,
all barefoot and shirtless,
passing a bottle of water

as they glare into the mid-morning sun;

the family that has finally come back
to literally pick up the pieces of their lives;
the young woman who grumbles and mumbles,
grumbles and mumbles,
cries sotto voce as she begins again,
brush in hand, a life in the city
she hates and loves.

Again, I begin at the point of erasure,
at the crossroads,
at the moment I compel the place to reinvent itself,
a moment when *the city*—
always erasing and being erased—
renders *the notion of 'origin' absurd*.⁴

In white, I paint these houses white,
stark white; a new beginning,
and render the notion of origin absurd.
I, after all, was just one of the comfortably devastated—
or so I was told at a conference on race and Katrina—
one who lost but not really;
one who felt their pain
but hadn't truly experienced it at all.

So, what did I know, what did I know?
I only wanted to watch from my sheltered window
after a long, hard day, detached;
lay back in the cool summer air and enjoy a tangerine.
What did I care about their stories?
Their identities?
Their pasts lost in the rushing
and the rushing of the storm?

Didn't I want to hear every detail?
Lift every over-turned board
and piece these broken memories back together again,
dream by shattered dream, board by splintered board?
Didn't I want to be amidst it all,
to know how it felt to be completely devastated?
Wading through the mud for a single spoon,
a single memory, a single glimmer of hope—
a photograph, perhaps, just one would do,
just one would do, or many.

IV.

Inch upon inch, I re-measure and cut again—
a split down the center,
held together with thread
where the city was once broken not too long ago.

In the corner, I construct a trailer out of cardboard,
paint it white, surround it with a white picket fence.
And I wonder what formaldehyde smells like. If it smells at all,
just below the mold,
the shadow of mildew,
the stench of dead bodies buried, like strangers, beneath the city.

(Like the levees,
this was never intended as a final solution.)

So I try to put myself in the position of another,
the completely devastated.
Would I begin with hammer in hand,
nails in pocket,
and piece this world together again?
Board by board, brick by brick?
Recreating, at least, in the shadow of a former self, a former identity?
Beignets and all, those summer floats
and multi-colored Mardi Gras beads,
that undeniable Creole flair of flashing lights
and marching bands, the swinging jazz—
or what I always imagined this place to be.

Or would I listen to the bones,
this moment of collision, collusion;
the early morning traffic, the screech of familiar streets,
the strained seconds before things finally fall apart?

These are the lost memories
somewhere in my diorama—
the one that is no longer representative
just a shadow unique to me.

Still, *Wait with me*, I beg them.
Watch me sleep in this room that looks so much like night.
I'm gon' wake up, I promise; *I swear it, to some kind of light.*⁵

Christopher Varlack

¹ Swenson, May. "Blue." *Nature: Poems Old and New*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.

² Smith, Patricia. "34." *Blood Dazzler: Poems*. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2008. Print.

³ Lennon, Brian. "Sleep." *The Next American Essay*. Ed. John D'Agata. Saint Paul, Minn: Graywolf, 2003. Print.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Smith, Patricia. "34." *Blood Dazzler: Poems*. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2008. Print.