

Myself

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I walked with my chin tilted up toward a sky that looked yellow through the lenses of tortoiseshell sunglasses. My long sweater billowed around my jeans, but the subdued color warmed the January air, and I drew out my pace to take in the counterfeit glow. People streamed by, altered, illuminated. I watched blonde hair turn gold and brown hair turn copper and black hair turn charcoal, with embers.

Sepia sidewalk. Ruddy brick. The coffee shop on the corner once contained the same kind of loveliness.

I stepped inside, half-distracted as I removed my sunglasses and fished for two dollars with the air of a person who'd been here before. Yet I hadn't been here, not *this* here. I looked up, abruptly immobilized by the unfamiliar scene that greeted me, glowless and stark.

Purple suede, tasteless upholstery covered a new bench along the edge of a wall that was once bare. New tables made of black wood formed a row on the other side, each attended by matching, cushioned chairs with high backs and no armrests and no character. Against the wall opposite me stood a rack filled to the top with glinting bottles of wine.

Blinking, I exhaled a trapped breath.

The furniture was too new, glaringly incongruous within the walls of a space whose crooked, mismatched chairs once contained wear and memory and time. I entered the adjacent room. Some of the old stuff had been placed there, but it cluttered the atmosphere, stifled the coziness. Where once I reached out from anywhere and touched a table or a shelf or a wall with my fingertips, now I struggled not to bump into them. I wove slowly, cautiously through the cramped space. The woman at the cashier threw me a grin of recognition as I approached the counter.

"The place looks great," I lied, eyebrows raised. Her expression faltered, and she looked down with a weak smile as she plucked thirty cents of change from the register. I always order a small coffee, no milk.

"Thank you," she lied back.

I took my mug to one of the old tables, slunk into a creaking bench, and surveyed the crowd, spotting some regulars.

The guy I call Larry sat at his usual spot, white hair slicked back, mouth slightly open, eyes darting left and right as he took turns licking his thumb and flipping the pages of the *New York Times*. I stared at him, fairly rudely, protected from disclosure only by his immersion in the day's bolded headlines.

His face looked fleshy, swollen. His bottom lip hung too heavily, revealing a row of small teeth. From the thighs down, his chicken legs hinted nothing of the enormous gut they supported, nothing of the corpulence that sagged over both sides of the small, wooden chair. Each breath was labored, methodical, an unwilling expansion giving way to a shuddering release. Sitting there with his large coffee and a dish covered with jelly and crumbs, he didn't seem bothered by the changes—the new bench, the sleek tables, the clean, cushioned, matching chairs didn't seem to wound him the way they had wounded me.

My hand crept into my bag for a book but found only spare change and a Doublemint wrapper. With something like resignation, I lifted the coffee cup from the table and held it steadily near my chin while the steam billowed upward. My eyes swept over the new table next to the corner window, the reconstructed ceiling where a hole used to be, and I ached for the glow, for the yellowness, that once saturated this place without the enhancement of a pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses. I ached for the hard-earned tint.

Now, when I enter alone, I feel alone. I quickly look away from the tall, matching chairs and the black, glinting bottles as the sensation of loss spreads into the space around me—and into me, through me, as though I were a vessel instead of a body. I stand within a space that becomes a space within myself, but the beauty of it has fallen, and now all I can feel is a cold, incipient loneliness.

Yet Larry still comes in on Saturday afternoons.

He still wears those suspenders with the red, white, and blue straps, still rests his forehead in the palm of his large, liver-spotted hand, still props his clear plastic cane against the back of the lopsided chair. Maybe I only come here so often because I want to see Larry. Maybe I need the comfort of his unchanging, steady routine.

A routine that contains remnants of myself, of one of my selves.

As I stare at the soft line of his jaw working at the last bit of a pastry, for a moment I am almost the same person I was last week, sitting in this same chair, absently aware of his habits. Yet the background behind his large frame

has transformed into a new scene that will not permit me to occupy the space the same way I once did. I search for old reminders, but behind his head I cannot find the amateur drawing that once hung on the far wall—a slightly lopsided, charcoal rendering of the corner where I usually sat. It is now gone, absent, invisible. Its disappearance seems to exclude a warm sensation that could emerge only during the times when I would enter and anticipate its coming into view, *see* it before it emerged. It shatters the sense of safety, the feeling of home that I had allowed this place to instill in me. It shatters my expectation that the space alone could safeguard my memories and my experience, the way a static painting might.

Late one evening in early December, the drawing's artist sketched my face as I sat and pretended to read. I can still recall the gray, floppy hat that I pulled down over my ears and the heavy leather boots that had grown pleasantly worn from daily use. But perhaps that girl, too, has disappeared from me along with the missing charcoal. Perhaps I ache to retrieve not just the yellow tint, but also the version of me that existed as a part of this tiny café, the version that can no longer emerge without the frayed, sagging cushions of the mismatched chairs.

I am sitting on my bed when a similar longing seizes me.

The room feels musty and bleak and uncomfortably warm, and as I look around I can see that the Christmas lights are still hanging, half-fallen from the doorway where the hooks fell down. I can see that the blue strips of masking tape we used to stick the television cords along the wall have peeled away in the humidity. Muggy air makes it hard to breathe, but I decide to take out my guitar anyway, because for a moment I believe a song might transform the bareness that spreads through this muted space.

The broken D-string dangles from the right side of the polished bridge. It bends sharply in two places at the loose end, lending a discordant impression to the instrument even as it lies silently in the open case. It's been about a month since I've played, and I had almost forgotten how cool the wood feels against my palm and how perfectly the curve of the body fits into my lap, but now, without the string, the chords chime hesitantly, timidly. They skip like a hiccup as my thumb strums over the open gap.

On and on, I've been waiting on the open invitation, but I stop because my voice sounds airy and timorous and inadequate without the heartbeat of the bass, incomplete without the support of the harmony. I stop because I do not understand how the glare of the fluorescent light can so easily dissolve the shadowy tenor that pervaded the words two nights ago, as they rose to the

ceiling of Webster Hall. The song cannot work here, in this empty room. It cannot work with this uneasy voice.

The scene needs rearranging. When I place my guitar on the comforter it feels too soft, looks too clean. When I close my eyes to escape the harsh light, I can still see the brightness infusing a reddish glow through my eyelids. When I stride across the room, my boots do not stick to the linoleum floor the way they did when I stood a foot away from a dark stage where two men sent lonely voices arching over a silent crowd.

They stood far apart from one another, anchored to their microphones.

They cradled their instruments as though to comfort themselves while pulsing blue lights segmented their movements into short, disjointed clips.

In the rising cold, don't you feel alone, I'll be standing with your sorrow. The one directly in front of me moans the line with a voice that climbs on the fourth word, falls on the last. The veins in his neck expand with blood and press against his skin and make the sweat gleam with a bluish color from the flashing lights. My feet stop shifting on the sticky floor as low notes drip slowly from the bass, replete with heaviness, interrupted by infrequent, extended strums of the guitar. Two voices and two instruments and they each sail separately through the room and I try to listen to it all at once but I cannot—try to blend the music into a single entity, but the sounds will not obey me. They resist the synthesis I seek. They each hold on to their pitch, the guitar ringing lowly, the bass still lower, sustaining a sense of separation the same way I will two days from now, unwillingly, as I sit in my room and long for the beautifully lonesome sensation that spreads through me in this moment. The sounds pulse, throb with a melancholic languor that drags my heart with it, and as I listen my feet do not tap, and my head does not move. This is not a song but a howl, not a song but a mournful dirge.

Two days from now, I will recall the way my boots stuck to the floor.

My room will feel too white as I remember the flashing blue lights, too quiet as I remember the ongoing drone of the sorrowful bass. I will rise from my bed and walk away from my guitar and realize that until that moment, I hadn't felt the loneliness.

Yet it will taste sour, spoiled.

As I stand still and gaze at the thin, hollow-eyed figures poised at either end of the stage, listening to their words roll into my ears with the slowness of dripping syrup, I do not know that two days from now I will look away

from the fluorescent room and the sound of my shuddering voice because my loneliness does not feel beautiful, like theirs.

I set my guitar against the side of the small, dented refrigerator. The white light endows my skin with a transparent quality, and I can see blue veins trailing the length of my arm. The contours that ought to separate me from the stagnant space blur beneath the glow. It renders me its own ashen manifestation the same way a splintered table once rendered me an extension of its warmth. The whiteness *claims* me, and I feel myself morph into a fluorescent form, rather than an obstruction within the space.

Perhaps something more transcendent than time and separation prevents me from retrieving my sense of the girl who stood by the side of the dark stage. Maybe I do not possess her. The bass does. The blue lights do. She did not disappear from me so much as she was never mine, just as the girl with the floppy hat and the leather boots belonged not to me, but to a coffee shop whose charm now lies tattered across the floor.

As I sit here longing for another me that stood embalmed within a lonesome, melancholic beauty, perhaps it is the white light and the bleak, cinderblock walls that keep me separated from her. We are removed from one another like two drifting notes, like the sounds of the instruments of two artists at either end of a stage. A beautiful loneliness may have once passed through me, may reside elegantly amid my growing stream of selves, but it will not fuse with the air within this space, within this room. The sounds may harmonize, but they will never merge.

The broken string juts awkwardly into the air, and I can see it from the corner of my eye. As I reach for the guitar case, I do not know that two days ago, I belonged to a stage and a room and a song that would exist only as long as the last chord. I do not yet realize that the space I inhabit can force the space I contain to fluctuate as fitfully as a renovated coffee shop—disappoint as readily as a bleak, empty dorm room.

Three Wednesdays ago, I was sitting on the ninth floor of the library.

My watch seemed to tick too quickly for the paper I hadn't begun, and a distracting window to my right framed a portion of marble and the height of the towering stacks. The north and south balconies appeared to skew inward towards the east wall of the building, which felt far removed from me, as though it were stretching away. A tense hush pervaded the space, broadening its expanse. When I spread my arms and spun around with my eyes closed in

the middle of the atrium, I felt only cold, rushing air for minutes and minutes.

I saw patterns, repetitions. From floor to ceiling, I saw students hunched over small, wooden desks, faces illuminated by glowing laptops, knees bouncing rhythmically behind the gleam of the tall, Plexiglass panels. I suppose I decided to leave when all I could think about was the panels.

They stifled the sentences in my throat. They stood resolutely in the corner of my eye as I stared at a blank computer screen and massaged a pain in my neck.

I gathered my things and walked down the hallway and into the quiet elevator, but the journey across the atrium always seems to last too long. The structure rises in four massive walls that absorb the cacophony of student voices rising through the vertical space. A sense of permanence is exuded by the marble and the heavy stone, and I find myself always looking up, always trying to gauge the height of the ceiling, where large squares of fluorescent light occasionally flicker but never go out. Weight and symmetry and hard, monumental walls push down upon me, asserting their immensity with a tinge of cruelty, as though to remind me of my smallness.

I walked faster towards the exit.

Perhaps it is a building that will persist with too much disregard for the people who pass in and out. The heavy walls and the logical, brutally geometric design seem a deliberate attempt to defy impermanence, a bold effort to contest the frailty that lurks within shifting spaces, consumes books, and takes possession over us. Here, space will not startle me one day as an altered version of itself, the way it once did within a warm, tiny coffee shop; it will not destabilize the aspect of me that exists between its walls, the way it once did within an empty dorm room. Even as the sun rises and falls outside the towering, clear windows and as the trees stretch slowly higher, I am filled with the unwavering conviction that the library will remain forever frozen. A fossilized, hollow cube.

It unnerved me. Passing through the turnstile and out the revolving door, I could think only of my corner coffee shop, hold on only to the memory of blue, pulsing lights in an attempt to ward off the loathsome solidity of the monumental walls. I walked away from the immense, orange building the way a prisoner might walk away from a jail cell.

The air was cold, but I kept walking, heading to the only place that could dispel the heavy feeling of eternity—a tiny café on MacDougal, between 4th and 3rd. And if I keep taking haven in small, fickle spaces, keep longing for the fleeting emanation of blue, pulsing light, perhaps it is because I seek a

sense of inconstancy or instability or capriciousness that joins harmonically with my own.

I continued down the sidewalk, escaping not only from the walls but also from the unnatural effort to impose a lasting space upon a temporal, vacillating self.

Caffe Reggio does not come so much as sneak into view. The green, rounded awning probes into the space above the entrance as though it were unwilling to escape my peripheral vision. I like to arrive unaccompanied so I can sit without talking and allow the objects on the walls to flood my vision for a while.

I push the door open. A glass counter filled with Italian pastries obstructs the wall directly in front of me. Waiters and patrons mill about bronze statues of anonymous heads that stare into distant corners. Multi-colored lanterns hang from the ceiling, infusing the room with stained light, casting a warm glow over the collection of large, aging portraits of aging men that overwhelm the surface of the walls. A half-finished jigsaw puzzle might lend a more convincing sense of order. As I turn to my left, I spot a free table in the middle of the hardwood floor.

The room feels warm. From my seat I can see every side of it, feel the unsteadiness of the dizzying array of miscellaneous objects. If the drone of the murmurs and the chime of the clinking cups subsided, I would hear overlapping ticks from six or seven large, ornate clocks. They seem to teeter, holding on to their balance only by the measured rhythm of my breath. Dust floats in the air, lending a swirling life to the light coming in from the window, but I hold in a tickling sneeze.

“Ready to order?” The waitress stands by the side of the table with an easy smile, holding no pen and no pad.

“Just a small green tea, please.”

As she walks back towards the counter, passing through the colorful succession of lantern-light, her skin changes quickly into three or four different hues before she vanishes from sight around the corner. It happens as suddenly as a missing charcoal; it is over as quickly as a lonely song. Not even the twelve-story walls of an immortal structure could have contained the way it came and went.

And as the sun begins to set, the shadows of the objects grow long and thin, sprawling across the walls and the floor and the customers, and I, too, let the light play over me, modify me, multiply me. I let myself shift within the shifting space, and perhaps the solace comes not from accepting that I will

not last—the way tall, heavy walls might last—but from knowing that I am not the only person or being or thing who won't.

WORKS CITED

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