

Lost Girls

MEGAN STEINER

“Life here is magic. Even you knew that, you girls / who seemed deprived of it, who were trapped in the city’s / vilest streets [. . .] For each of you there was an hour, perhaps / not even a full hour, but between two intervals / a space not marked by the measures of time—, / when you had an existence.”

—Rainer Maria Rilke

“I sit and dwell on faces past / Like memories seem to fade [. . .] / may these shadows rise to walk again.”

—Flogging Molly

It is the end of February, and it has been a cold winter. Then again, any winter feels cold when one is living on the street. I took up residency in Tompkins Square Park—I call it “my park”—nearly two months ago. Upon my arrival, I staked my claim on a particular bench. I guard it fiercely, for though it does not provide me with shelter, I cannot bear the idea of losing it. This bench is prime real estate. It sits beneath boughs of trees which, though bare, provide the illusion of a makeshift roof, of a makeshift home. It is located near the chessboards, where wizened old men with calculating gleams in their eyes sit bundled against the cold and play for hours.

I love to watch them play. Gloved hands move pieces back and forth across the board, locked in a mesmerizing dance: a piece is lost, then another, yet the game goes on. Watching the casualties of the game pile up—valiant little black and white monuments of expendability—makes me sad. While I love to watch them play, hearing that triumphant crow of “Checkmate!” sends a chill up my spine, for I’ve come to identify with those conquered pieces, defeated lives in miniature.

You see, stationed at my bench, watching the comings and goings of people who participate in the act of living, I experience the strangest feeling: I call it a voyeur’s invisibility. I am isolated from everything that I see—from

the chess players, from the men and women who walk by, from my fellow park tenants, from the squirrels who dart past my feet. My bench is tucked away in a quiet nook of the park (for not many people seem as intrigued as I by the pastime of old men). I am far away from the verdant hill upon which college kids congregate, coffees securely in hand. I am a world away from the jungle gym and the dog run, hidden from the respectable people, the proud parents and giggling children and tentative lovers who exude a sense of ease. I am, however, relatively close to “junkie row.” Its occupants are my friends, my peers, but I am far too proud to claim my place among them, to share their benches. Instead, I cling to *my* bench, for when I sit here I can pretend at least to belong among the chess-players, if not among the respectable people. I can forget that I am fading into the colorless background of the winter landscape, blending in with the dead trees. I can forget how trapped and helpless I feel; how afraid I am of disappearing entirely. I only truly live through the chess players. I can imagine my hands directing the intricate dance; I can deny my kinship with those faceless, fallen pawns.

Curled up in my sleeping bag on the bench, I see a neon flash of vitality against the barren, faded landscape of winter. It is a little girl wearing a puffy pink jacket and matching sneakers, with two short blonde pigtails poking from the top of her head. She is smiling and skipping—she is bouncing. Her little pigtails bounce with her. It is as though the buoyancy of her happiness frees her from the pull of gravity for a moment or two. She is holding the hand of her mother, who is also smiling. Yet her mother’s smile is different; she does not seem to evade gravity. There are cracks in the facade of her happiness—a corner of her upturned mouth twitches, the muscles pulling relentlessly downward, revolting against an expression rarely worn. Her pupils are dilated, and beneath them lie two dark circles, their darkness a stark contrast to the brightness radiating from her child. She glances over at me. I suppose I’ve been staring. Now the facade is smashed: when I look her in the eyes, I see despondence, apprehension, absence. I see a fallen pawn, a defeated life. Just as I cannot bear to look at the defeated chess pieces, I cannot bear to look at her. It’s a cold day, I tell myself, and I burrow deeper into my sleeping bag. I pull it up over my head and tug it closed. It’s just cold out there.

Though I wish I could, I cannot remain in my cocoon forever. I live in this park for a reason, aside from my fascination with chess. It is dusk; the families are long gone, and with them the laughter. The chess players have called it a day and gone home, taking their little black and white armies with them. The college students have scattered, leaving the hill naked. Only the junkies and I remain, and there remains nothing and nobody to separate us.

By day, the park is cacophonous: shrieks of amusement, strains of buskers' tunes, the hurried staccato of well-heeled footsteps and snippets of the too-loud musings of junkies intermingle. In the daytime, all I hear is white noise; like the many faces passing by, the sounds become a blur. But by dusk, I fall victim to dope-sickness, as all addicts do. I shake, and I cannot pretend that this chill is from the cold. My ears are suddenly attuned to the siren call of junkie row. The time for invisibility and voyeurism is over. It is time to join the dance.

I can no longer see clearly—sickness blurs the park I know so well—but, like a rat in a maze, I am on the scent of my reward. Burning need drives me towards the choreographer of the twilight dancers. I have come to purchase my medicine—that which will stave off the shakes, stave off the world, return me to blissful blurriness for a while longer. Oblivion is the sustenance—the lifeblood—of this netherworld. Though I may deny it, my separate bench does not negate my status as one of them, as one who comes to life only in the dusky world of shadows. Now shaking with anticipation, I snatch the poisonous treasure from his hands and shuffle away to attempt to lose my senses once more, to once more become invisible.

I do not return to my bench. I am ashamed of what comes next—I refuse to defile my sanctuary with my sins. A shadow takes my arm—it's strange, but I cannot make out its face or form. The shadow has a firm grip, and guides me to the bathroom. Blood is rushing to my head—I am hallucinating—and as I prepare my fix, I hear the sound of falling chess pieces, one after another, each landing a thunderclap echoing with finality. It will be over soon, and I can return to my bench. I shake my head to silence the hellish crashes. Then, the inevitable.

My veins ignite; the chill that has permeated my bones is replaced with reassuring warmth; the horrible din subsides, giving way to the usual white noise; I am safely absent once more. At some point, I fall to the floor. After a moment, perhaps an eternity, I open my eyes. I am lying on the black and white checkered floor like a fallen pawn, just as I lie here every night, my cheek against the cold tile. I catch a glimpse of a face in the grimy metal of a stall partition. Her skin is gray and smudged with dirt; she has sunken cheeks, matted hair, cracked lips, hollow eyes . . . *oh—her eyes!* In those eyes, I see despondence, apprehension, and absence. I see weariness, sorrow, and uncertainty. I see the falsely happy mother; I see another conquered chess piece; I see *me*. This ghostly thing—this zombie of a woman, this shadow on the floor—is what I have become. And I am terrified by this shock of reality. I

claw at the sink to pull myself up from the ground and stumble away to flee my own image. I return to my bench. The chess players will be back soon.

Two years have passed since I struggled to rise from that freezing floor for the last time. It's strange how memory works. Sometimes, I feel as far removed from that version of myself as I once did from everyone who passed me in the park. Yet at others, that wraithlike, lifeless being that I once was feels inescapably close. She is haunting me; she appears everywhere.

Sometimes, when I catch a glimpse of my reflection in a shop window, for an instant I see *her*—the specter of my past—glaring at me judgmentally with cold dead eyes. Sometimes, I walk through Tompkins Square Park—these days my well-heeled footsteps add to the cacophony—and look at my old bench. It is often occupied; it is mine no longer. But often, when I allow my gaze to linger long enough, the oddest thing happens: the bench's current occupant looks up at me, and though I know it is an illusion, I see *my face*—as it was that February—instead of his or hers. I hate these moments most of all—when I subconsciously superimpose my own face upon that of another person. It happens so often. Each time it does, I am erasing the face my own replaces. I am turning a person into a faceless pawn. It happens so naturally, so easily. It's startling how easy it is to not see another human being.

Yet there are also some faces that refuse to be ignored. That effervescent bouncing little girl, for example—she was brimming with vitality, so alive in that particular moment that I can still see her skipping through my memory. But perhaps this is not quite correct: I can still see her bouncing pigtailed, her pink jacket. Her face escapes me. And yet I do remember vividly the face of her mother; I remember vividly my own face reflected in the bathroom stall door. I cannot escape them. But these are my memories, my haunts. If you had seen these faces, perhaps they would escape you, or rather, perhaps you would escape them. We'll never know—you will never see these faces, at least not in the moments in which I saw them. I am sorry to say that I cannot truly share my memories with you, not completely. But I can share a photograph, and what is a photograph if not a captured moment?

At first glance, one is struck by the beauty of Lee Jeffries's photograph *Michelle* and by that of his model. She is young, perhaps in her early twenties, with long brown hair, high cheekbones, large, light eyes, and a delicate mouth. She stares up at us through her arms, her hands clasped behind her neck. The beauty of the photograph, however, does not come from the radiance of the model. It does not come from the sultry pout she wears. It comes from the flaws and the unmistakable sadness that are present in the face of a woman so young and so beautiful. Her hair is frazzled and unwashed, and

premature strands of silver frame her face. Her skin is rough, every pore and freckle and line cast in relief by the harsh contrast of the image. There are even smudges of dirt visible on her wrists and forehead. The traces of a hard life are unmistakable, impermeably stamped upon her countenance.

Yet all these details fade into the background when one locks eyes with Michelle. Her gaze is riveting. Her eyes are wreathed in shadow, out of which they positively glow. One can stare into them for hours and still be struck by some new depth, some new emotion that reveals itself. Her soul is within her eyes, and it seems to be begging to be seen. Michelle's eyes tell of weariness, of sorrow, of uncertainty. The portrait is almost painfully intimate; it hurts to be allowed into her internal world. She looks so *lost*, and one can't help but ache for her. Yet from this woman who sits wreathed in shadow—from behind the veneer of dirt—emanates, more than anything, honesty. Yes, it is the honesty of the portrait that makes it gripping and unforgettable. Michelle bares her soul before the camera, stares directly into the lens, and in turn it feels as though one is bare before her. As we search her face, she searches ours in turn, and we are disallowed any pretense. Hers is a face that refuses to be ignored, or erased.

As I stare into her eyes, the old familiar ghost of Megan past rears her haggard head; she tries to subsume Michelle. But then the incredible happens: Michelle *banishes* her. This is not my portrait; this is not my moment; this is *not* me. However much kinship I may feel with her, this is Michelle. And while I allowed a zombie to replace me, erase me, make me a faceless chess piece, the incredible thing is that Michelle will not be replaced. There is something undeniably strong in her: she seems quietly yet adamantly to declare, "I am here." While I, beneath the crushing weight of a hard life, chose to slink into invisibility, Michelle remains visible. There is no danger of her disappearing into the background. And that is the most beautiful aspect of her portrait: the fact that she is wholly, self-affirmatively *present*, present in her filthy skin, present as the gray hairs grow in and as her skin grows weathered, and *unbroken* by it all. As someone who has been incapable of such presence, I stand in awe of Michelle.

But this is simply my impression of her portrait, of Michelle as she was in this particular moment. And in giving you my impression, I am imposing upon you—and upon Michelle—all of my biases. I am coloring her story with my own, but perhaps it is not my place to do so. In an interview recorded by the same man who photographed her, Michelle tells her own story. Her voice is melodic, lilting, a thick Scottish accent revealing her land of origin. At the time the photograph was taken, she is 22 years old. She lives in the doorways

and sheltered alleys of London, and has for some months. She tells us that life on the streets is both scary and fun; there is danger from roaming drunks, but she feels uninhibited and freer than she could ever have imagined. Only when Jeffries asks her of her plans for the future—for getting off the streets—does uncertainty creep into her confident speech. She “emm”s and “ahh”s a bit, but in the end concludes with “looking at getting a flat” (Michelle). Jeffries himself comments on what we can only assume, what he’s seen firsthand: “addictions keep her where she is; it’s a vicious circle” (Bignell 1).

If her portrait is powerful due to its honesty and lack of pretense, I cannot keep up an idealized pretense on her behalf. She, as I once was, is a denizen of the netherworld. She, too, is a twilight dancer. I wonder how she copes; whether, when out of the camera’s sights, she allows herself to disappear. I wonder if she too has found herself curled on a cold, unforgiving bathroom floor. I wonder if she has caught a glimpse of her own reflection and been shaken to her very core. I wonder if her own face has ever escaped her, if she has seen in a mirror that same deathly terror that I have.

When I look into her eyes, despite the honesty, the beauty, the trust that they contain, more than anything I see a look all too familiar—the look of the lost girl. Once you have worn it, you will always recognize it. Lost girls are characterized not merely by homelessness, nor by sadness, nor by addiction, but by the constant, looming threat of facelessness that you can practically see. It is woven around them like a net, and at any given moment the trap can be triggered and the girl ensnared, consumed by nothingness, rendered invisible. But perhaps it is the presence of this very real danger that made Rilke write that such girls know that “*Life* here is magic” (Rilke 43). Yes, I believe that Michelle and I—along with all the world’s lost girls and faceless pawns—know this well. For when we begin to feel ourselves slipping away, being consumed by an unrecognizable other, everything around us seems sharper, more valuable, more *magical*, more *full of life*.

A game of chess becomes a life-affirming ritual. A child skipping becomes an expression of life itself. A reflection in a grimy door becomes a malicious specter. Jungle gyms, dog runs, and grassy hills become the landscape of a higher, heavenly realm. Indeed, when life escapes you, the world in which life goes on comes aglow. Even inanimate objects take on a glimmer of life’s magic; you might find yourself believing that maybe—just maybe—when nobody is looking, those fallen chess pieces might right themselves—stand up off checkered floors and become their own choreographers—no players needed. You might find yourself able to see your face in the faces of others. I see now that when I do this, perhaps I am not erasing the faces upon

which I superimpose my own. Perhaps, in some strange way, I am assimilating them. Maybe we engage in some magical exchange from which we both walk away transformed: maybe they impose some part of themselves upon me, just as I impose myself upon them, without either of us realizing it. I wonder if we all carry each face, each person in whom we see ourselves, within us—if others are living *through* us, through our memories, just as I lived through the chess players. And I wonder if we are all, by way of this exchange, living through others as well. I like to think so. Maybe this exchange is Rilke’s “*existence*”—perhaps it is a sharing of lives, a sharing of life itself (Rilke 43). If this is true, then the cages of our current situations may always be transcended: though our bodies may rest upon benches, floors, or in alleyways, our souls and our faces go on living in that “space not marked by the measures of time,” that eternal space of magic (Rilke 43).

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