

The Bodies of Memory:

mapping past and future through community and self

The first time, you are asking them to remember. You're surprised at how vulnerable it feels, the asking, the solicitation—awkward at first, and then easier: *look back, don't you remember; come on, sift through the ashes with us.*

The air is stale and cold, laden with the smell of car exhaust and boxed pizzas that are stacked up in the back on a plastic fold-out picnic table. It's loud, too—on the street and in the subterranean structure. Tourists and transients rub shoulders on the sidewalks. A group of people loiter around a battered dumpster, laughing and shrieking as they pick through the debris in the gutter, looking for trash. Further down the street a man is smoking, bringing the cigarette to his lips once, and then again, white pluming over the low Spanish-tiled roofs, up against an eggshell sky.

It's a Sunday. You can feel it in the air, a vague sort of sleepiness that underpins the hive of activity in the lot. Then the car is parked, and there is a brief moment of hesitation, of nervous waiting.

You have a sense of un-belonging, standing in the center of the U-shaped table arrangement, almost like the feeling of standing on sliding sand. This you have experienced before, and you know it is important. That it can't be cured by anything but the inevitable leap.

What is it that we're looking for?

How long can a place hold memory before they become synonymous? The questions are easy, but the answers are hard. Even these few things that survived are no longer recognizable. Mostly they go nowhere, in neatly sorted piles.

When I was younger, he says, shy. I liked to garden.

That, you think, is perfect. You could talk about flowers forever. So it seems, can Mary Oliver. And you like to garden too—though there's nowhere to do it now.

But things are moving in the right direction, aren't they? Is anything really moving at all?

The first time, we talk about cycles. Don't you remember?

This is a process of panning for gold, except we are all holding the pan and moving the river and nobody really has any idea what gold even looks like. So we stand there, in the approximation of a circle, blind—here, you especially are blind—following the sound of each others' voices.

Cycles become seasons become the human necessity of experiencing suffering. Funny, how easily that went, and how little language was needed. You've got to fall before you can learn how to get back up. You know that, we all know that, but it does not make it any easier. Here the river slows, and begins to wind back on itself. *You have to let it pass around you, but also let it pass through you.*

Not holding a thing must be learned—or, perhaps better the holding itself unlearned,

painful but practical,
a good way to survive.

I wanted to be a lawyer; way back then, before life got in the way. This from a woman sitting to your left, as you pace back and forth in the small space carved out by the *U* tables. A single camping lamp has been clipped to an exposed pipe in the ceiling, its glass filmy and clouded.

You think of your mother, the lawyer, describing a slow death that announced itself all too loudly. Describing a weekend—one of the last weekends—spent crying in a shitty hotel room down by the airport: *something to get through.*

You do not sit down, though they have left you a chair. It feels important that you do not stop moving, not even for a second. If you stop, someone might ask you to hold something. Or worse: you might ask to be held.

That's how it is, you know. You think you've got it all figured out, and then you stumble again. That's being human.

But where does the stumble end, and the slide begin? Once you are moving, you don't know how to stop. Instead you run faster, hurtling towards something—towards *anything*, thinking that of course there is another side to this, there must be, if only you can break through—hoping that falling is actually really just the first step towards flight.

The second time, we ask them to dream.

This time there is familiarity, with the noise and the smog and the creak of the chairs. This time you feel that you have their attention, although perhaps it is only that they have yours: each face, each voice making up a window into which you will never catch more than a glimpse.

How easily a stranger's dream can be planted like a seed in your mind, the glimpse more than enough, guiding your eyes and your hands and your mind in preparation, until you finally learn how to speak.

The dream is a delicate thing. We talk of stinking garbage, fresh-cut onions so real we start to smell them. *This really reminds me of the weekends at my grandmother's house, having poor people bacon, but we didn't care, we were so happy.*

It's Sunday again.

The hearth is the base of the house's spine, cold and darkened. Cracked, but still standing, the only thing still standing.

The return is migratory. We rarely acknowledge that this is a thing that will take years. Instead we place estimates and make bets. Nothing is for certain now, except that crisis has always been one of our strongest suits.

At least now we don't have to keep cleaning out the garage, my father says, and we all try to laugh.

The doctoring is done first by a man with fading tattoos sitting inside a battered one-seat excavator, a cigarette hanging from his lips as early morning settles over the shoulders of the coast. The process of sifting seems unending, the clearance violent in its noise and its dust, and the yield poor: a class ring, a little ceramic angel stained by the heat. The angel makes your mother cry. The carcass of the house is big enough to hold a century of family.

Sweat beads on the inside of the white plastic hazmat suit. Like this, you become an expert in hollow bodies, in the way old plaster turns pink when exposed to too much heat and how glass does not melt but explodes, sending glittering shards into flight halfway down the

hillside. You examine fire-scorched brick and rusted mattress coils in nauseous fascination, looking for anything to keep, something of your own. You kick down nails with the toe of your boot as you clamber over the corpse, in some futile effort to make the landscape less hostile. You know it is too late for that, but you do it anyway. Your head begins to ache. It always does, on the return. You become a cartographer, remapping memories by only their bones.

The second time, we talk about love.

It surprises you, the way the group reorients powerfully and seamlessly, like a great shifting current. How the girl wearing lip gloss and hoop earrings fans at her face, says *Y'all gonna make me cry*, and then does, though the tears are controlled, only a few and very quickly swiped away. How tears prick at your own eyes and must be forcefully swallowed.

Love-starved is the word she uses, and this you will think about for days: how love builds bodies, how its absence diminishes them.

But we love you, baby.

The last of the tears are wiped hastily away.

We love you.

I don't know you, but I was you. I know where you've been.

*And all that time I was praying for somebody to come into my life—
somebody who could really love me and support my dreams,
until that one day I woke up and I looked in the mirror
and I realized that person was me.*

But how to dream?

It feels difficult these days, like you're a fly stuck in honey, like trying to swim upward through syrup towards a surface that you're not quite sure exists. A woman reads the poem she wrote about dreaming. It stops your breath, how she writes about the moon: how it holds her, and how she is held. *It's peaceful*, she explains. *Imagine—how peaceful would that feel, if the moon reached down and wrapped her arms around you?*

The only way you know how to dream anything is here, like this.

The corpse is almost entirely cleared away. The body was so big and the intervening rains so fierce that it has taken more than three months for its funeral to reach its conclusion.

Now the burnt-out husks of the trees—lemon, grapefruit, orange—are gone too, leaving the land open, naked to new angles. Grass has begun to push up through the cracks in the scorched stone, green and insistent. Roses and agapanthus make spots of color in the ash fertilized planters.

The city tells us that six inches of soil may need to be scraped to clear the earth of carcinogens.

You know, I still love it here, your mother says, looking away from the near-sutured wound and out over the ocean. For now, at least, the flowers are blooming again.