

Mounds

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On the northeast corner of 4th Avenue and Astor Place stands my favorite streetlamp in New York City. Once upon a time, this silver post that bears a traffic light and a set of walk/don't walk signs looked no different from any of its counterparts. But today, it stands as a glorious beacon of East Village culture, an exquisite piece of local art. And if you look closely, you'll see it also serves as a reminder of New York City's tragic past.

The lamp-post's surface is a mosaic of tiny, vividly-colored tiles. It is a memorial to the souls lost in the World Trade Center on 9/11, and it is stunning. I live in the neighborhood, so I pass it often, and every once in a while I stop to admire it. I have always liked the mosaic, but it developed a special meaning for me after a strangely poetic encounter I had with it last year.

Time was never on my side, and on a rainy Wednesday last September, I was late for a meeting as usual. I shuffled as fast as I could down the sidewalk, shifting uncomfortably under the weight of the heavy bag hanging from my shoulder. I had given up trying to hold up my umbrella in the windy down-pour and had resigned myself to becoming soaked instead. I was a mess by the time I reached Astor Place; my shirt was sticking to my front, my hair hung wet and cold around my face, and I was sure my eye make-up was beginning to run. My anxiety started to get the best of me. *Relax, it's only Jonah*, I reassured myself.

I saw him across the street as I reached the northwest corner. He was leaning against a lamp-post, hood up, hands in his pockets. My heart sank as I drew closer. There he was. This was really happening. The weight of the realization hit me hard as I tried to keep my composure. I had been dreading this moment for months.

In my head I had constructed an elaborate fantasy of what this day would be like, the café where we would go for lunch, the music that would play, the way he would look, the way I would look, what we would say, what we would-

n't need to say. I had the image mapped out perfectly—my blueprint for a perfect last memory of Jonah, something to cling to when he was gone.

That scenario was illogical, of course. Kodak moments like that have never been my forte. Really, it was appropriate that it happened as it did, on an unspectacular gray September day, both of us soaked to the bone, and myself running 15 minutes late. *How fantastically cliché*, I thought as I neared the corner, imagining a dramatic embrace on the rainy streets of New York City. I envisioned myself as Holly Golightly in the closing scene of *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, except slightly rattier-looking and much less graceful.

It shouldn't have mattered, really. That day could be no more important than the other hundreds we had spent together, yet I wanted to feel like it was. I wanted this moment to be significant enough to be remembered.

"Superb meeting spot," Jonah called as I crossed the street. "Really, I was feeling a little too dry."

"If you didn't have enough sense to go find an awning to wait under, I think I am hardly to blame," I retorted, reaching him at last. I had to stand on my tippy toes to give him a kiss.

"Hey kid," he said, smiling.

"Oh, hey."

"You look, wet."

"Thanks, it's this new look I'm trying."

"Stunning."

"I call it, *monsoon season*."

"It's fitting. So . . . tell me, if we are eating at Yaffa, why exactly did we have to meet *here*?"

"To pay our respects, of course."

"Our respects?" He raised his eyebrows, confused. I sighed in mock exasperation and took him by the arm, turning him around to face the lamp-post he had been leaning on.

"Five years ago today, New York City experienced one of the worst tragedies in modern history, and we are going to take a few seconds out of our day to acknowledge it."

"Shit, it's the eleventh. I totally forgot."

We both stared up at the mosaic covering the lamp-post in front of us. I had looked at it so many times, I had nearly committed it to memory. My eyes passed over the broken shards of glass and porcelain, the memorial message for the NYPD written in blue tile, the words *For Tiffany* painted at the very bottom. It was a sight to see; even on a gloomy day, the light reflected off the broken glass, and the illuminated colors burst from the tiled surface.

I broke my gaze and glanced at Jonah. He stood beside me, taking it in, his hand holding mine.

“I never even knew this was here. It’s beautiful.”

We stood a few moments longer in silence.

The lamp-post, although my personal favorite, is not unique—it is part of a series of mosaics scattered around lower Manhattan. Over the years, they have become something of an East Village institution. I see the artist around the neighborhood from time to time. “Jim the mosaic man” is the name journalists use when they write about him in the papers. He has the look of an aging Vietnam-era hippie; he wears a denim jacket and an American flag bandana most days, and he has spent the last decade or so creating this urban folk art on the lamp-posts of the Lower East Side. After the World Trade Center fell, his mosaics evolved into tributes to the “soldiers” of New York City. They are his way of honoring the brave and glorious dead, reminding us all to remember their sacrifice.

Jim is older now. In years past, he could be seen riding his bicycle around the neighborhood. Lately, he moves slowly and walks with a cane. Many of his mosaics have been ripped down or painted through the years, but he continues to build them. They are not all 9/11 memorials; many grieve a different loss. The mosaics stand as monuments to a slowly fading era in the East Village, to a dying underground culture defeated by time and gentrification. The grungy, nihilistic punk rockers of the 80s and 90s have abandoned St. Mark’s Place; their old haunts have been transformed into tourist attractions. The dives they frequented have been torn down and replaced with posh new restaurants, sake bars, and Japanese markets; everything that was once savage, intimidating, and raw has been sterilized and packaged for mass-consumption. The new American youth inhabit the stoops of St. Mark’s, juvenile and cynical, brooding and smoking their Marlboro Lights; and yet Jim remains.

The current youthful generation is a different breed; they have evolved with the times. They live in newly built luxury apartment complexes and watch Jim build his tributes to the past through the windows of Starbucks as they drink their mocha lattes. Even as the world changes slowly around him, Jim forges on, constructing his mosaics, preserving the legacy of his neighborhood.

Although I have always admired Jim’s mosaics, for years I believed that there was something fundamentally amiss at the very core of their creation. Jim’s mosaics represent a concept of a time and a place that’s as frail and gray as Jim himself, a New York City that no longer exists. On that rainy September afternoon, standing in front of Jim’s mosaic as I contemplated the

certain agony I would feel after Jonah's departure, I couldn't help but see the lamp-post as nothing more than an enormous gravestone. Tall and imposing, it cast a dark shadow over lower Manhattan, reminding us of the loss of not only the hundreds of souls lost in the World Trade Center, but also the soul of the Lower East Side, which had been sold to the highest bidders.

In the past, during moments like these, I would wonder what really could be gained from building memorials. It seemed to me that constructing monuments to those we have lost was not, in fact, a positive action. We build memorials out of grief, out of feelings of loss and abandonment. How could we benefit from creating a permanent, concrete reminder of something or someone whose disappearance we mourn? How could it cause us anything but more pain to cling to the ghosts of our past?

In some way, all cultures have developed their own means to accomplish what Jim does. They have fashioned some method of documenting, of leaving behind traces, evidence, of their existence. There's a certain desperation in this act, an inherent human desire to be immortalized, to give one's life meaning, and importance. It's as if we fear a future we will never know, in which there remains no trace of our existence, no account of the life we lived or the things we accomplished. "A person isn't happy unless he's building something," writes playwright Lanford Wilson (22). In other words, man isn't content unless he creates some monument to his success, his existence, his history. To live it isn't enough, because how will we remember it?

In Wilson's play, *The Mound Builders*, a group of archeologists race against time to excavate an ancient burial site before the land is bulldozed to make way for a new interstate highway. A "mound," in the context of the play, is an artifact left behind by early civilizations. It is literally a great mound of earth beneath which are buried layers and layers of history, stacked one on top of another as centuries passed and cultures replaced cultures. Mounds are time capsules, monuments to a forgotten people.

When I visit one of Jim's mosaics, I can't help but think of those mounds. In a way, they are so similar. There is so much of Jim in his creations; they are as much a monument to himself and his legacy as they are a tribute to the city and the lost souls he loves.

Yet even if I was to understand Jim's mosaics as a representation of *himself* as well as a representation of the fading culture of the Lower East Side, something about their creation still seemed to me counterintuitive. Surely monuments like these could only be painful reminders for their creators, whether they be constructions honoring a lost loved one that inspire a remi-

niscence of the departed and demand the acknowledgment of their continued absence, *or* an account of one's own existence, a monument to the self that serves as a constant reminder of one's own mortality.

It would seem in both cases, but especially in the latter, that we create these legacies for ourselves partially because on some level, we know we *will* eventually die, the same way all societies and cultures and civilizations die. Jim's mosaics are beautiful, but one can't help but feel some sadness standing before them. In mourning the loss of the East Village the way Jim has known it to be, they demonstrate the fleeting nature of all things. We are reminded of that loss every time we look upon them.

The rain was letting up at last. As Jonah and I stood before the lamp-post, I found myself staring up at him, trying to memorize his face. I wanted to know every inch of it, just as I knew the mosaic. Silently, I traced the curve of his nose, the furrow of his brow, the plumpness of his mouth, the stubble peppering his chin and upper lip. When I finally spoke, it was little more than a whisper.

"You can't really be leaving."

Abandoning his silent soliloquy, Jonah turned to face me at last. "Uh-oh, we said we weren't going to do that today, remember?"

"Well it's hard not to when you're leaving tomorrow. Fifteen months is a long time. It's an eternity. You're acting like you're going away for a long weekend. Things fall apart. We could fall apart."

"Hey, we are not going anywhere, you and me. You can't think about it that way. Do you think I don't know? That I haven't counted how many days until I get to see your face again? Four hundred and sixty. If I think about it that way I'll never be able to leave." Then he smiled. "Man-up, wuss. You'd better not start crying."

"You ass." I punched him softly on the arm. He laughed and pulled me into a hug. I started memorizing again—his musty boy smell, the weight of him around me. In my mind's eye, I built myself a memory. I built it like a mound. I layered the two years of our life together into a great mosaic of images, of memories and moments. I layered them together so I wouldn't lose them between the cracks in my recollection, so they would seem important, a part of the greater story that is my life.

There is a physical weight to memory, I think. I never used to understand why we who have lost carry around our past like baggage, why we drag our feet, lumbering towards our future weighed down by our own remorse, grief, preoccupation, regret. In fact, sometimes I wonder if we don't create physical

memorials in order to transfer the weight of our grief temporarily into something outside ourselves, yet representative of ourselves. But in that moment I understood the desire to keep those recollections close. I wanted to make myself heavy with my memory of Jonah, to fill my whole body with the warmth of his embrace.

My dad left home when he was 18. He loathed his father so much that by the time he was out of college he had put an entire ocean between them to act as a physical divide. He moved from his small town in New Zealand to London. From there, he traveled all the way to New York City, where he met my mother.

After they were married, my parents visited my dad's family sporadically; after I was born, they visited a bit more. As our visits to New Zealand were rare, when we did make the trip we would travel for weeks at a time, but our stays with my grandparents were always brief.

At nineteen, I have very limited memories of my grandfather. All I can recall are tiny snapshots of Christmas mornings—his big red bathrobe, his fine white hair and his tinted, thick-rimmed glasses, the deep, gravel-like chuckle that made his belly shake. The day he died, my family was in Maine where we had rented a lake house for the summer. I hadn't seen my grandfather in three years.

My dad rarely spoke about his father. I'll never know what it was about their relationship that fueled such resentment. Even my grandfather's death didn't break the force that kept my dad away. After receiving the news, I remember he talked to his brother on the phone for hours. His words were hard and cold, unwilling to give in to the sentiment appropriate to the moment. He and his brother were arguing. My dad had decided he didn't want to go home for the funeral.

Later that day, I followed my dad out of the house, down to the lake. He carried a mushroom and a large piece of bark with him as he walked. Finding this strange, I asked him what he was doing. He replied, "I'm sending my dad out to sea, baby. Come help me."

Together, we set my grandfather, the mushroom, at the stern of his boat of tree bark and pushed it out onto the lake. We didn't speak, but in that moment, as my dad watched his father glide gently away, try as he might to suppress the painful memories of his past, I think he revisited them once more, in an effort to release them at last.

We all build mounds. As we lose things, times, places, people, we struggle to fill the void they leave behind with something concrete, something to remind us of a time when they were there, something to give meaning to the time when they were there. Painful as it may be to remember, somehow the thought of forgetting seems much worse.

Sometimes the change between what is present and what is history is so constant, so gradual, that we don't even know something is missing until it's gone, and sometimes something is gone long before it leaves. The act of building, of memorializing, is just as constant, to the point that *what is* and *what has been* become fused. Jim builds monuments to his neighborhood even as it crumbles around him, and my father revisited memories of my grandfather even in his attempts to rid himself of them. Jonah was leaving me, or maybe he was already gone. Even as we stood there on that day, in the rain, on that street corner, in our embrace, I *felt* like he was already gone. The tighter I clung to him, the more I sensed him slipping through my fingers.

"Hey, look."

"What?" I said into his shirt.

"There are names, up near the top, it says *Joan plus Chuck*. Somebody wrote it on a tile with a sharpie."

"Hoodlums."

"Do you have one?"

"Have what?"

"A sharpie."

"What?" Then I understood. "No. Absolutely not. This is someone's *art*," I said as we pulled apart.

"Hang on, I have one on my keychain." He pulled his keys out of his pocket and uncapped the tiny marker.

"Cover me," he whispered.

I danced in front of him nervously as he crouched before the lamp-post. When he stood up, I turned and read *Jonah loves Kea* written discreetly in the corner of a tile near the bottom. I shook my head at him. "You vandal." He smiled and kissed my forehead.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

Memory is a funny thing. There are sizable pieces of our past that I have completely forgotten with the passing of time, yet I remember Jonah as he was on that day so clearly. The past has a way of haunting the present that we may or may not be conscious of. Jonah's memory haunts me every time I pass that lamp-post; it is a terrible and wonderful feeling. Sometimes I think it

would be easier to forget, and yet as each day of his absence passes, I ache to remember.

Through our monuments, these records of our lives, we are reassured in thinking a part of us and others lives on endlessly, exists beyond time, separate from ourselves. If the weight of a lifetime can be encapsulated in a single work of art, a mound of earth, even a mushroom, or a relationship—imperfect and fleeting, immortalized with the scribble of a marker—if what is left behind is beautiful, even in a simple, tiny way, maybe it *means* something after all, maybe it's worth the hurt of remembering.

People come and go; cultures rise and fall. We live, we conquer, we love, we hate, we win, we lose, we fear, we celebrate, we mourn, we die. We face the transient nature of all things, and we build.

WORKS CITED

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