

Light Stains

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Washington Square

A pigeon flew into my lap earlier. I had been eating a peanut butter sandwich. He must have sensed the remnants. I do not know how pigeons identify. Varying registers and timbres of squawking, maybe. I name him he for his aggression. He was short a toe on his right claw, which seemed not to deter him from his advances. Perhaps his impairment is what made him so forward. It felt like ages before I shooed him off; his remaining digits had dug sharply into my thigh. I took a picture of him to immortalize the intimacy. As he flew away, his claw drew a small loop of cotton from my pants. I hope he is doing well, as well as a pigeon might fare in New York, which might be very well for all I know. In the photo, his back glints purple in the sunlight.

I have since moved to the east end of the park. It was loud on the west end with buskers noisily covering Fleetwood Mac. Now, teenagers have sat in my shaded circle of benches, and it is unnaturally loud again. They smoke cigarettes and play MF Doom from a crackling speaker. An old woman, sweater-shawled and white-haired, leaves immediately. A man in blue jeans walks into the ring of benches, then to me specifically. He says he preaches for Jesus. *Have you heard the gospel?* Sorry, I'm not interested. He says something else; I don't hear him. I was raised religious, and I don't engage with it anymore. That was my choice of words. *I wish you a blessed day*, and he walks away. Instantly, I wish I had not been so terse with him. I wonder how a prophet of a prophet might fare in New York, New York. I imagine that I shooed the man away much as a pigeon. Strange, that I gave the man less time of day; he didn't even want my food. I ought to have taken a picture of him before he left.

Bryant Park

Facing 42nd Street, I sit at a green metal table that rocks beneath my agitating hand. In the layered noise of traffic and voices, no one sound supersedes another. Above the humming ground, a plastic shopping bag drifts high in the air, glancing the

windows of the Bank of America building across the street. It's tantalizing, waiting to see what becomes of the black plastic. In the end, the bag catches in the top of a tree, which itself rises narrowly from the sidewalk. The leaves have just started to turn, and now there is a plastic bag wrapped around a high branch. Will those leaves turn brown sooner or later than the rest? A canvas to a bush or a pillow to the face? Probably neither.

I take back what I said about the non-precedence of sound. An orange ball bounces under my seat. It fits in the palm of my hand. I hand it back to the pursuing man. He moves with great urgency. Men in suits, meanwhile, walk quite slowly along the sidewalk in front of me. They don't chase after atomic things scattering away from them. All I hear now is the hollow plunking of the ball. It is three o'clock in the afternoon; what are the men with paddles doing here? What am I doing here? Across the street, a plastic bag is still caught in the tree. What is the bag doing there? I don't know.

I've decided that non-doing is boring. The orange ball rattles under the metal legs of my seat again. I take it as a sign. I leave my stained table—the pigeons have done it, I suspect—and now there are three tables before me, which is two more than I had imagined. An older man was canvassing for an opponent. He seemed on the cusp of senior citizenry. I saved him the hassle. He gave me a paddle, and we played the game. The net was not a net, but a metal barrier in the shape of a net. It made for lots of chasing, which I did out of courtesy. I learned only the old man's name and his style of play. Antonio backspun the ball with light flicks of his wrist. I wondered if his technique was an adapted strategy, but I did not ask. His feet seemed cemented into the ground. Once I reasoned out the spin, I hit the ball only to his forehand. I won handily in an unsatisfying way. Antonio seemed pleased that I had figured him out. He smiled, and we shook hands. That was plenty of doing.

I felt that I'd exhausted my presence along 42nd Street. It was also quite loud. I've walked to the southeast corner of the park, in front (or in back) of the New York Public Library. It's a patio of gravel and oblong slate, maple trees bowing into the park, full-sail umbrellas, and more green furniture covered in bird poop. On the walk, I passed an Italian couple speaking

briskly. It was only too fast for me to understand. I wanted to tell them to slow down so I could understand them better. It would have been a memorable moment for the Italians. Someone (surely once) said our true colors are dictated by the things we won't bring ourselves to do, as though we're photo negatives, only bid to develop in a light beyond our own. That's a real stuffy thought; that's what happens when you're alone in your head too much.

I sit now at a high table on the raised patio overlooking the park. From here, the Bank of America building seems to squat beneath skyscrapers three times its height. Suited men gesture on the rooftop. A new pigeon has landed on the beige balustrade before me. I have no food to offer. He is missing two digits of his left claw. We watch each other intently, wondering what each of us is doing here at this moment. Well, pigeon, I'm writing about you, but you'll never know that. He is a he as well. He bobs away, toeing firmly down the railing. He manages just fine with half his claw missing. Then he flutters and dips into the concrete bird bath on my left. Tall ferns and pink flowers surround the bath. The black bag remains caught in the slim tree, very far away now. The bag is roughly the size of one blue man on the rooftop, cut off at his waist. The spot on the balustrade is fresh and white, not yet a stain.

Central Park

My legs hang over the blunt edge of a large rock formation in Central Park. My ankle dictated this stop. Injuries are a nasty governor on aspiration. I do limp, though I must dramatize it in my mind. I am becoming a vagrant, but only in the shallow sense of the word: pencil, paper, water bottle, backpack, bad ankle, thumping caffeine heart. One day, someone will triangulate my movements around the touristy pit of Manhattan, and they'll find me sitting on a rock in Central Park. They'll be underwhelmed, because there is nothing unapparent about me besides the words I've hitched my wagon to. The sun descends through a gap in the skyline south of the park. Backlit clouds blend with tinted panes on the high-rising windows. Behind me, higher up the rocks, a baby cries distantly in the arms of his father, who himself smiles into the blue light of his phone. On my left, two young girls pose or photographs. The oak trees' blackening trunks frame the background. The light must be just right. Their dresses shiver in

the wind. When the wind calms, the girls settle into the shape of traffic cones. Then they slip out of their dresses and work delicately down the rocks. The photographer collapses his tripod, packs his camera, shuffles down the rocks, then the paved path, and then somewhere beyond what I can write.

There is a feeling of hollowing out in the evening. I lose the contours of faces sliding below me. Most everyone moves in a pack. I happen to be alone right now. If I weren't alone, I wouldn't be writing. In the encroaching dark, a daughter encourages her father up the sheer rocks. I believe they speak in

Hindi. The father is obstinate. He breaks free from his daughter's hand and turns back alone. He settles with crossed arms under the rustling bough of a tree opposite me. His grown daughters continue taking pictures from the top rock in the waning light.

I believe darkness develops beyond the scope of our lone imaginations. The crickets, for instance, don't mind the darkness; the night is when they sing songs and meet their mates. They've just now shrilled through my subconscious, which means the pigeons have retired from their begging. Where do the pigeons take their nightcaps? Somewhere dark and sweet, I imagine.

I'm learning that the sky never turns black in Manhattan; it only glows gray. Darkness, of course, is a relative condition. Even when our eyes fail us, we still feel the warm scatter of lives passing through us, like the imperceptibly quick shock to a fingertip, coursing through the body. A young boy has just fallen off the rocks and skinned his palms in the dirt; soon enough, he'll be jumping off piers into the ocean. My hand is tired of writing, and my words are increasingly hard to see on the paper. My ankle feels better after a rest. I am off; I'll need to be careful down the rocks in the dark.