

Street, Haunting

The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream.

Virginia Woolf

There is a church I like on Cochran Avenue. Little street-corner church, adobe-style, like a mission in some minor key. I discovered it during a walk in the neighborhood, one of the interminable loops by which I mark my place in this city, east on Packard out to Cochran, south toward Pico and back around, the whole thing one vast circle, a walkabout, a songline, a way to meander my universe into being. Then one afternoon, I broke the pattern and rather than heading south, I went north, where I found the church. “This morning, going against all convention, I turned right instead of left,” Sven Birkerts writes in *The Other Walk*, describing his own inadvertent rewiring of a common saunter. “Going against the grain of my usual track, seeing every single thing from the other side, was suddenly welcome.” Suddenly welcome, yes, but also—for me, at least—a means of turning the walk into a journey of discovery again. We walk, or *I* do, to pay attention, to see the streets, the buildings that surround us, to immerse ourselves in a world that might otherwise slip by. And

yet, the paradox is that the more we walk, the less we notice, the more the passing landscape blurs to indistinction, like the backdrop in a Road Runner cartoon. That's especially true of Los Angeles, this thirty-five-mile-per-hour city, where the very notion of the street as public space remains alien somehow. I think of Joan Didion: "A good part of any day in Los Angeles is spent driving, alone, through streets devoid of meaning to the driver, which is one reason the place exhilarates some people, and floods others with an amorphous unease." She's right, of course, although what she neglects to say is just how institution-ized this process is, in a city where we can leave our homes and drive to work, to dinner, to the movies without ever stepping outside.

Anyway, the church. I fell for it from the moment I saw it, on the corner of Cochran and Packard, built into the slow slope of a hill. There was the dome of the bell tower, faded gilt, stained glass windows brown as mica, the building stretching back half a block or so, deceptive in its depth. Even more, there was the way it fit into the neighborhood—or not the neighborhood, exactly, but the block. East of the church on Cochran was what looked like a low-slung rectory, and just beyond that, a two-story apartment house, eight units maybe, pallid stucco, flat and hulking, with a red tile roof. All three buildings looked as though they'd been put up in the 1930s, that golden age of California urban architecture, utilitarian and beautiful at once. This is the California of my first infatuation, imprinted when I was eighteen and living in San Francisco, a city I once wandered like a mendicant, memorizing its sidewalks through the soles of my feet. I remember coming across block after block much like this one: apartments next to street-corner churches. In San Francisco, the buildings were bigger, four or five stories, and cleaner, framing

the Marina or Pacific Heights in blinding white. Still, there was something about *this* streetscape, its whisper of density, which brought me back to all those peregrinations through that other city, the randomness, the serendipity of urban space. Above the buildings, the sky was hooded, overcast, San Francisco weather, as if a fog were moving in. If I squinted, I could almost see it, one city bleeding through another, an imago, an unexpected trace.

This is what I love about cities, the way that even the most distinct of them resemble one another when you least expect it, the way the lines between memory and imagination blur. When I was a kid listening to my grandfather reminisce about the glory days of Flatbush, I used to regret, with a child's peculiar secondhand nostalgia, everything I thought I'd missed. Then I moved, in 1991, to Los Angeles, the Fairfax district, where, the first time she came to visit, my mother declared with a mix of dismay and disbelief: "You've moved to Brooklyn in the 1940s." She was referring to the shabby duplexes, the delis and the kosher bakeries, all the black hats on Fairfax and the side streets, with their *tefillin* and their prayers. For me, however, it was a different kind of lens through which to reckon with the past. L.A. even had the Dodgers, a defining aspect of my grandfather's Brooklyn, and if there was little happening at Dodger Stadium that recalled the teams that had played at Ebbets Field, there it was in any case: another echo, another rhyme. "When I go down Figueroa," Norman Klein once told me, as we ate at a taqueria in his neighborhood of Highland Park, "I literally flash back to my teenage years on Avenue U in South Brooklyn. . . . Even though the people here are Salvadoran, I can almost see them as Jewish. I find this a lot." What he meant was that, in his eyes, Los Angeles was less a unified city than "a collection of microclimates, of ethnicity and layers of urban traces, one upon the

other”—which, whatever else it signifies, renders the place a template for our fantasies. In *The History of Forgetting*, Klein makes the point explicit, citing the city’s history of serving as informal film set, often dressed up to resemble *somewhere else*. “I am not implying,” he writes, “that L.A.’s neighborhoods have no public record at all; quite the contrary. The photo archives of vernacular Los Angeles are indeed gigantic, running into millions of images.... However, these cannot compete with hundreds of movie melodramas where downtown is a backdrop.... Some locations are simply easier to transfigure than others, for heavy equipment to be positioned, or cheaper to rent; and they therefore figure more powerfully in the public record, while others never appear. Indeed, Los Angeles remains the most photographed and least remembered city in the world.”

Most photographed, least remembered. The difference is between a public and a private record, between a city’s outer and its inner life. This is why I walk, to root myself, to create a space, a history, a language. I walk to remember, in other words, not to forget. Yet Klein’s “vernacular Los Angeles” suggests a subtext in which the city may emerge as a set of snapshots, a survey of small moments, L.A. as *environment* rather than as sprawl or backdrop, reconnoitered at the level of its streets. As soon as I saw the church, I pulled out my cell phone and started shooting, first the building, then a series of long, angled takes down the sidewalk, an attempt to capture the length of the block. There was something here I didn’t want to let slip, some juxtaposition of angles, a way their composition seemed to bring me closer to myself. I couldn’t explain it then, and I can’t explain it now, couldn’t explain it moments later when the pastor came outside to see what I was doing, a tall black man in a white shirt, who introduced himself and tried to draw me into conversation,

telling me about the church school and its calling (“*where the mission of Christ is meeting the needs of the people*”), theology as social justice, theology as community. I stood there on the sidewalk and listened, by turns sympathetic and unsympathetic, a believer in social justice, in community, if not quite so much in theology. I nodded politely when he invited me to come back for a service, murmured something vague and indistinct. How could I tell him that what had drawn me was not the message—not the *overt* message, anyway—but a sensation more elusive, the idea of these buildings as a kind of hieroglyphic spelled out against the ledger of the street? How could I tell him that I’d stopped because his church was both familiar and utterly unfamiliar, that, in some odd way, I felt I knew it, even though I’d never seen it before? Echoes again, imagoes, resonances ... all of it, yes, a reflection of the serendipity of the streets.

Were all this taking place in another city, it would hardly seem remarkable, all these whispers, all these ghosts. A few months later, I was wandering the Upper West Side of Manhattan when it hit me: the city as if not necropolis then imaginatorium, where the surface, *the public record*, is constantly collapsing into the interior landscape, the streets as markers, territorial or otherwise, the building blocks, the triggers, of identity. This is why Aborigines go on walkabout; this is the essence of their Dreaming tracks. And in Manhattan, where I was raised, and where I lived—with the exception of my time in San Francisco, as well as several loose years in and around Philadelphia and Boston—until I was nearly thirty, those tracks for me are deep, trenches really, with the present always, *always*, burrowed by the past. When I walk New York, I walk my way back into my childhood, into my adolescence, into the early days of my adulthood: I see my life pass through those streets. Or *pieces* of my life,

depending on the neighborhood, and nowhere more than on the Upper West Side. This is important, the New York version of Birkerts's turning right instead of left, for there is little recent history in that corner of the borough to overlay my early tracks. The Upper East Side, Midtown, Lower Manhattan: that's where I visit when I'm in New York, where I lived and worked and where I continue to have an ongoing engagement, a relationship with the city, if such a thing is even possible in a city where one no longer lives. The Upper West Side, however, stands apart. Although I was born there, and spent time there again in my early twenties, after my future wife, Rae, moved into a studio on West Seventieth Street, I'm never on those sidewalks now. When Rae lived in the neighborhood, working at an Irish pub on Columbus Avenue, my grandparents were around the corner, exiled from Brooklyn to West End Avenue, in a massive apartment block at right angles to the Hudson, as blank as a tombstone scoured clean by wind. Until 1998, the year my grandmother died in that building, I dutifully went back every six or nine or twelve months to pay my dues, pay my respects, pay it forward, pay it out. And then she was gone, and for me, it was as if the neighborhood had ceased existing, as if it were not part of Manhattan anymore.

Because of this, perhaps, when I found myself on the Upper West Side, killing time in the early evening before going to a party, it felt different in some quantifiable way from the walks I usually take when I'm in New York. This was history, pure and simple, a trench with nothing else outside it, as recognizable and unrecognizable as that adobe-style street-corner church. And yet, unlike on Cochran Avenue, the echoes here were not of another city but of these very sidewalks, of experiences long since left behind. On Columbus Avenue, I stopped briefly out-

side the pub where Rae had waited tables, took a photo with my cell phone, peeked through the front window at the bar. For a moment, I considered stopping in, but something held me back, a sense not of connection but of detachment, of time less in suspension than in relentless movement, the understanding that, beneath its superficial familiarity, the place had irrevocably changed. This is the most obvious idea in the world, that time takes everything from us, that the streets feel possessed by ghosts because they *are* possessed by ghosts, the ghosts of all the people who have ever traversed them, who have ever occupied those cubic feet of space. But it is more than that also, more personal, more . . . evocative is one way of putting it but not the right one, suggesting as it does a consolation I don't really feel. No, more accurate to think in terms of lostness, melancholy, a fluid (dis)association, a way the streets remind us of how impossibly distant even the most immediate memories are. "The past is never dead," William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*. "It's not even past." He's right, of course, in the sense that we never escape our history, although it's equally the case that the past can't be reclaimed. This is the appeal of photographs, that vernacular public record: they operate as windows, allowing us to see, almost to enter, what would otherwise be lost. And yet, the key word there is *almost*, since no matter how a photo moves us, it also leaves us feeling disconnected, as I was left by the front window at that Irish bar. I could look, but there was something in the place that prevented me from touching, that prevented me from stepping inside the frame.

This push and pull, this (*yes*) amorphous unease, deepened as I left the bar, turning from Columbus onto West Seventieth Street, sliding past Rae's old building, across Broadway and down the long sloping block towards West End. To my left, a

schoolyard, empty in the darkness; up ahead, the building where my grandparents once lived. In the density of evening, it looked conditional, poorly constructed, a series of concrete slabs interposed with light. I could almost smell the stale air of the long corridors, bound on all sides by apartment doors, feel the rattle of the elevator twenty-nine floors up, the metallic click as we passed each landing, the whine of the engine as we rose. In front of the entrance, a family walked in the direction of the river—or not the river, not any longer, but a street that had not been here fifteen years ago. *Freedom Place*, the sign read, and then a clutch of buildings, towering over the West Side Highway, a former industrial block gone residential, all part of the process by which the city reinvents itself. I looked at the building, tried to imagine the old apartment, who lived there, what they knew. I wondered what would happen if I went inside and asked to see it, yet I knew I never would. There were ghosts here, but only in the merest sense; I might walk half a block, to Freedom Place, and be in a New York I had never seen. I stood for a moment, more adrift than actually remembering, then turned right instead of left and sidled up to West Seventy-first Street, where I turned right again and reentered Manhattan as I know it: hundred-year-old apartment buildings, five and six stories, brick and scrollwork, garbage cans clustered at the stoops. Ahead of me, a woman spoke Spanish into a cell phone; otherwise, the sidewalk was deserted, dark. It could have been any moment in my life or any other—a generic streetscape rendered specific by the sheer fact of my presence, the associations this stirred. I thought of movies I'd seen, movies shot when I was growing up in the city, the crumbling rape light clarity of 1970s New York. *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Death Wish* ... didn't Charles Bronson's vigilante architect Paul Kersey take his vengeance around here? Or no,

I thought, as suddenly I saw it, Martin Scorsese in the back of Travis Bickle's taxi, pointing at a lit window on the second floor. "You see the light up there, the window?" he asks, voice a cascade of falling marbles, and then, "That's my wife. But it's not my apartment." Not my apartment. No, nor my apartment either. Not in this neighborhood, not in this city, not anymore.

It's ironic, I suppose, that I should frame New York through the lens of movies, since I almost never think of Los Angeles that way. Nor, for that matter, do I think of it in terms of loss—at least, not of the generational kind. In Los Angeles, I don't have the history, the accumulation of collective memory: I've only lived here for twenty-one years. That's the age of majority, as I joked to someone recently, but I remember how young I was at twenty-one, how inexperienced, which makes that span of time a metaphor also, both for the city, which is still in its own slow process of becoming, and for my elliptical relationship to it, my attempt to find among its streets and sidewalks a place I might recognize as home. This, in turn, brings me back to why I walk here, as an act of creation, of *mutual* creation, in which I remake L.A. in my image (or the image of every other city I've ever inhabited, those ghosts, those echoes) even as it remakes me. I live in Los Angeles not as an Angeleno—that is, a native—but as a lifer, an exile, no matter how familiar my exile becomes. "It occurs to her," Kate Braverman writes in *Palm Latitudes*, a novel published at the very moment I was first seriously considering a move to Southern California, "that what she most appreciates about this City of Angels is that which is missing, the voids, the unstitched borders, the empty corridors, the not yet deciphered. She is grateful for the absence of history." Yes, yes, although in the absence of history, we have no choice but to interpose our own. And so I walk here because I have always walked in cities.

I walk to bring my history to life. And when, on one occasion or another, I turn right instead of left and stumble upon a church I've never seen before, I walk a line between this city as it is and *as it is to me*, haunted, haunting, fraught with association, between what I know and what I might have otherwise passed by.