

Iterations of emptying

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All our content culled: books and clothing sorted into piles to keep or to discard, old radios and broken clocks taken to the tip, unwanted furniture sold or given away. What is kept: silver christening mugs, spoons and sugar bowls; a set of teacups, fragile as flowers; crystal inkwells and decanters containing only light; my grandmother's porcelain doll; passports of long-expired relatives, with pages of stamps and dates and visas; medals from the Boer War, World War One, World War Two, and an assortment of sports events; my father's flying logbooks, written in his scratchy hand, *April 15 1945 Harvard III Thornhill - Kabanga*; my mother's manuscripts typed on paper thin as dragonfly wings, faintly redolent of nicotine; old school reports and magazines, a photo of the swimming team, my hair in pigtails, my limbs awkward with adolescence; paintings of msasa trees, Victoria Falls, Muntplein, Wadi Dayqah, Aberdeen harbour; squash rackets and cricket bags smelling of linseed and mould; a filigree box with milk teeth and thruppenny coins; photographs of our sons, new-born in my arms; waving on merry-go-rounds; blowing out candles on train cakes, pirate ship cakes, volcano cakes; with footballs; with girls in prom dresses; graduations and engagements, weddings and babies. All packed in boxes, numbered and inventoried, ready for removal.

First iteration

When we have subtracted our belongings, what remains is the evidence of absences. Rooms seem smaller once they are empty, stripped of the objects that gave them their meaning. Sunlight filters through pollen-stained windows to slide unhindered over floors and riff languidly with drifts of dust. Smudges on the wall at the end of the corridor are testament to games of indoor cricket, a visual *Howzat?* Vanished paintings have left their scars. We feel the silence: unheard voices, unplayed music. A pale patch of carpet marks where the table stood, around which we sat and ate, talked and studied. Fractal geometry, fluid dynamics, Homer and Euripides; a bell curve resonates struck. Fluted glasses clink, holly crackles in a brandied flame. Echoes of difficult conversations reflect off the walls. *It's cancer of the tongue. I'm dying, sis.* Outside, amputated limbs of trees. We were not born here but still we leave our imprint on this soil, the rowans that we planted, energy latent in spring bulbs. The clothesline airs only spiderwebs. Hidden in the rhododendron is a tennis ball; a toy boat floats on hosta leaves like a plaything of snails. Somewhere among worms and weeds, a lost wedding ring.

Second iteration

Afterwards, some residue of emotion perhaps, like particles of dust but finer in the air. Sorrow collects in corners. Vibrations of unbeaten drums, conversations had or not had, tension of hands that did not touch. Memories dis-integrate like the slow fade of midsummer light, like the shapes of trees against encroaching mist. Dreams infiltrate the walls and floors, sneak into the dusty loft. The patterns of seasons undulate through time. Rowan trees bear their blossom, serrated leaves, scarlet clusters of berries in autumn; naked branches grope at the winter sky. Patterns configure their own dimensions, shifting through spatial scales like the density of generations. The secret pathways of the mind are repeated in the splay of creeping buttercups across damp shades of lawn, in the cosmic web of filaments that weave clustered galaxies together. The spiders have abandoned the clothesline. The shadow of a sparrow-hawk silences songbirds; apples fall unharvested upon the ground.

Third iteration

W h a t i s l e f t w h e n m e m o r i e s
a r e g o n e ? S t o r i e s
a r e e r a s e d . A b u i l d i n g i s a
c o n t a i n e r f o r a i r ,
a p o e m w i t h -
o u t w o r d s , a f o r e s t
w i t h o u t t r e e s . A w e b i s a
g e s t u r e i n u n c o n s -
t r a i n e d s p a c e . B o u n d a r i e s
l o s e a l l m e a n i n g s
u n d e r a s k y
e m p t y o f c o n t r a i l s
a n d t h e l i g h t s
o f a f o r -
g o t t e n p a s t .
I n s t i n c t p r o v i d e s
r e f e r e n c e
p o i n t s o f g e n e r a t -
i o n s ; w i t h o u t g r a v i t y t h e
w a y i s l o s t . S p a c e
s i n g s i t s b i r t h - s o n g . H e l d
i n t h e g r i p o f s u n
a n d o f e a r t h
t h e m o o n w i l l n o t
f l i n c h f r o m t h e p r e c i s i o n
o f i t s d a n c e . W e
c l i n g t o t h a t r e a s s u r a n c e .