MARTHA BAILLIE

Topographies

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A multitude of deaths produces a fiercer wind, or so it seems to those observing from a distance—the distance required to take in so many.

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A man lies in his bed. When helped to his feet he walks, supported by a cane. In his final days he will sink his hand into a substance smooth as raw dough. The woman who comes to make the mold will say that she has arrived too late, his hand already reduced to sinew and bone. Nonetheless she will pursue her end, slipping from its airless sack the Alginate—the synthetic clay sold to her by the dentist, whose recognized role is to clean and mend her teeth. Any unused Alginate she will wrap and set aside for some future hand or foot. Once the dying man is gone, a choice will remain for his wife: plaster or bronze. If she chooses bronze, an initial cast will be made of wax, and from this wax the bulge of his knuckles, the tapering of his long fingers, the fine fissures and whorls—all will mark and shape the metal. His widow will choose bronze though it costs more. His hand forever hers; she will yearn to be caressed.

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From necessity, Spinoza ground lenses. Scientists from across Europe purchased the curves he imposed upon glass discs. He was a master. His lungs full of powdered glass, he died, a thinker, an outsider.

The glaciers, now that they have completed their work as grinders of rock and gougers of valleys, are departing. From across continents we come to admire them. By placing one foot in front of the other we approach, and they retreat.

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The hoof of a donkey sent me racing across the city. The article in the small community paper, accompanying the photograph of Rose's split and curling hoof, explained how Rose had been rescued (in the nick of time) from years of confinement in a small shed, hooves submerged in feces and urine. I arrived out of breath at my mother's door, knelt at her feet. I removed her socks and shoes, examined her gnarled toes, inhaling their mushroom scent. "We must floss," I explained and slid a warm, soapy cloth up and down between her digits. Head bent, I explored the pink valleys, removing dead skin. Each toe, in bonsai contortion, grasped at the air as I lifted her foot. The silken cream I applied to her skin spread a tender silence throughout the room. I slowed my pace.

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The art critic has told many times the story of his first encounter with Velazquez's painting, *Las Meninas*—how he rushed from the airport straight to the Prado, sleepless, having fallen drunk then sober then drunk several times during the flight across the Atlantic. He stood in front of the painting. Its "tissue of decisions" invited him in, and his mind was thrown open at such a sharp angle that he heard silk skirts

rustle and knew that the painting had changed him forever. Never before had he experienced an auditory hallucination.

Several of the figures in the painting did not notice him, their gaze landing elsewhere. But those who were looking straight at him had caught sight of him an eighth of a second before he arrived. It was visible in their expression: that eighth of a second.

On another wall hung a large portrait of a king, also by Velazquez. The critic stepped close to the splatters of paint. He retreated several meters, and the steel blade of a sword sprang into existence, as did a lace collar, a satin sleeve, and a velvet pocket.

Now the critic, his presentation over, the projector put away, his story of his encounter with *Las Meninas* once more applauded, is boarding a plane. Now he flies, home, hurtling high above tiny mountains, having stood in an auditorium and addressed a crowd of listeners, certain of whom had envied him the moment in which he was altered in his youth by standing in front of a painting, while for others his words had evoked similar moments in their own lives, when they too dangled between the tiny and the immense, between the singular and the many, suspended by time carded and spun, time twisted thin as thread.

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I stepped onto the library roof and saw that I was one of many small figures, the others each charting a diagonal path across the vast and flat surface. What game was being played? Into what "jeu de société" had I wandered? I half expected to hear the knocking of dice, to feel a thumb and finger pinch the scruff of my neck, to be lifted then placed in a new position. At the far side of the roof the sky, weighed down by cloud, fell in a huge curtain.

Through a large rectangular hole in the center of the roof poked the tips of coniferous trees. The forest, rooted at the level of the lowest reading rooms, grew straight up, enclosed by glass walls. On one singular day, yearly, the public was permitted (even invited) to enter the forest.

The library's books, kept in four transparent towers, were ceaselessly multiplying and traveled by rail to the reading rooms that circled the forest. In the four towers, each the shape of an open book, the volumes of text waited, arranged on shelves and protected from the sun by wooden blinds, which shifted in response to the smallest changes in daylight.

This is not where I'll find my mother, I thought, as I stepped onto the escalator beside the glass wall enclosing the forest, and the seamless movement of the mechanical stairs carried me down. I glided past the forest, close but not close enough to scratch the glass wall with my fingernails. Blue, stenciled silhouettes of birds flew across the glass enclosing the trees, trees brought to Paris from the four corners of the world.

I'd been invited to an international conference on digital archives. This unexpected invitation had brought me to the National Library of France. I was not a librarian and had no doubt received the invitation by mistake but had accepted, eager for a change of scene and curious to observe and learn. In truth, it was my mother I was searching for.

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Wrapping his tongue around her wrist, the cow pulled the woman deeper into his dripping mouth, his dark muscle caressing as it tugged. Her hand disappeared then her forearm. "Ooh, Dudley, you're such a suck; you'd suck all day, wouldn't you, you wuss?" her voice cooed, maternal. The pleasure-heavy lid of the steer's eye descended, obscuring the superfluous world. Twitches of desire rippling under the skin of his flank, he stretched his powerful neck. "Ooh, Dudley," she admonished.

Bliss consumed him.

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A friend once took me up in an airplane he'd built from a kit. Two wings, two suspended seats with seatbelts, three wheels, a frame of extreme lightness and strength, also a small engine that fit behind our seats and was fed through a tube from a plastic tank full of gasoline, this potentially explosive tank located above our heads. "You'll probably want to wear this," he advised, handing me a helmet. "Not because it will do you any good if we crash, but because the engine makes a lot of noise. You'll be less bothered by the loudness." We rolled out into the field. The frame must have included a tail, or how could he have steered? I don't remember. I was looking straight ahead, trying not to think about the gasoline sloshing above my head. The field had been given a clean shave, its grass reduced to stubble. Every bump in the dirt jolted our frame. We rose into the air. I knew that we'd separated from the ground because we were now traveling through smoothness. The air was warm and windless. We were advancing so slowly I had no sensation of being propelled from A to B. It was an experience without glory or excitement. I looked down. A was a line of trees at the edge of a field, B the opposite side of the same field. B was now behind us, and we were headed for C; therefore we were moving.

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Color-coded rubber stoppers prevented the blood from escaping the bottles. Orange, green, pink, yellow, and blue indicated which tests were to be performed. From beneath taut skin or slack, her needle sucked. "Please form a fist"—the words used for collecting blood pleased her, as did the rows of colored stoppers in the slender bottles stacked horizontally above her desk.

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In the Collision Reports Office, the art critic waited in line for the next available police officer. On the wall hung a white metal board. Statistics

had been jotted in black felt pen. An officer approached, cleaned away a number and in its place wrote a new one, as if he were a waiter correcting the day's menu, warning that a certain dish had been entirely consumed. The numbers represented fatalities. The cyclists had a column of their own, as did the pedestrians. The drivers of motorcycles were stacked one on top of each other and kept separate from the passengers in cars. Over a period of four years the number of dead pedestrians had jumped from nine to forty, whereas not one motorcycle passenger had died. There was room on the board for a span of four years.

An officer beckoned to the art critic, who advanced and was asked to describe the collision involving his car. He told of the slow movement forward, of his bumper pressing someone else's bumper, causing a man to step out of his parked vehicle. The officer pulled on his heavier jacket, as the warm air and tenderness of spring, though approaching, had not yet arrived; together cop and critic crossed the room preparing, each in his own way, to step out into the brisk wind and have a look at the critic's car. As they crossed the room, the absence of any visible clutter reassured the critic. Soon he would accept a verdict arrived at in a room with clean surfaces, legible signs, and updated statistics. It is not my car, he explained, as the officer opened the door and the wind grabbed at them both. The car belongs to my sister. I was driving, as she does not know how to drive.

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For several days, following her return from Milan, the banker's wife did not dare put her hand inside her purse, which was new and made of alligator skin. She caressed the outside as if taming it, her fingers lingering on the animal's umbilical scar. Here, two rows of oblong cells collided in a narrow space of disorder, producing tangled lines. Twice within the same hour she caught herself exploring this area of compressed, unpredictable pattern. A week passed and she was no longer taming the purse. She yearned for its wildness and opened it. Exploring the interior, her fingers encountered the cool metal of keys, a thick tube of lipstick, several pens, a rubber-tipped pick for removing food from between her

teeth, the smooth bulge of her wallet, and deeper—a dampness that trembled. Tonsils? The purse exhaled a fetid cloud of gain and loss.

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"Between the singular and the many," the young woman thought, sliding the DVD once more into the player.

Such effort of will expended to gather hundreds of men, for each to move into his assigned position. They are armed, and between their thighs the restlessness of horses. They wait. They are soldiers and they wait. Their fear is terrible and they yearn to be released into motion.

To shoot the scene, the cameraman must have positioned himself on a high and windy ridge. The young woman watches the one scene repeatedly. Under her feet she imagines the dirt of the hard hill, and when she looks down, or rather the cameraman looks down (as he is doing all the looking for her), a blade of wind slices through the sea of grass. In the valley, the opposed armies converge in clattering agony, their chaos rises, it swells in the air, ascends the ridge and drifts. The high moan of carnage ripples, unraveling the afternoon. The cameraman pulls back and the soldiers shrink, their numbers increasing. Each time the young woman watches she listens for the silence that will follow, the absence that will sweep the world clean. The film has a name, as do the director and the cameraman. It is the extras that intrigue her—their willingness to perform, nameless.

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They proceed in a single file along the ridge of gravel, orderly as ants or soldiers patrolling a great wall. From my perch, higher, on a slope of scree, eating my apple, clothes and hair tugged by wind, I observe their

advance towards the glacier. By placing one foot in front of the other we (for I am one of them) are entering the distortions of distance.

The mountains lure us into their immensity; they promise that each rise will prove to be a summit, and we clamber. Beyond each rise another rise rises. We are buffeted by wind. Far below, a child has arranged hills and rivers, placed trees in rows, a child escaping boredom and the fears that curl beneath boredom, a child soothed by patterns.

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On each dark green sign his name is clearly printed in white—Hans Christian Andersen and an arrow points where to go next. On a borrowed bicycle, wobbling a bit, the woman, no longer young, glides beneath the boughs of so many trees in bloom that when she shakes her head white petals fall from her hair as if she were a bride. Though she is all attention the grave of the storyteller eludes her. Abruptly she comes upon the Kierkegaard family instead, Søren crammed amongst kin, their names carved in stone. What a peaceful place to leave our tourist. Dappled light, circuitous paths, and the drooping generosity of ancient trees. Boughs brush the ground, while everywhere excited new foliage springs free in the cool air of a rainy day in May. A thick yellow wall encloses the whole. But if we abandon her here, how are we to learn whose bicycle she is riding?

She has removed her extravagant black hat because of the low branches. The hat now rides in the basket attached to the handlebars. Happily this scene does not exist as a photograph and so cannot be used to promote Copenhagen as a travel destination.

Half an hour away, less if you are riding a familiar bicycle and not unnerved by the press of cyclists speeding beside, before, and behind you, a cluster of men and women march along a stretch of sidewalk in elegant Frederiksberg, carrying makeshift signs that read: "Freedom." Past the immaculate hair salon, the clothes boutique, and the real estate agency, they advance, protected by six police officers. A short woman dressed in a raincoat of a classic cut, guaranteed never to go out of fash-

ion, hands out flyers. This woman should, I feel, be wearing curlers and sipping a glass of Akvavit while admiring the buttocks of the postman who is trotting up a flight of stairs to deliver a registered parcel, but my imagination has not been consulted by the woman in the raincoat, who at this very moment is thrusting a flyer into my hand. Her hair grows straight, to the extent she allows it to grow. She's recently had it lopped off, two inches above her shoulders. She is moving on, has passed me now, and is offering her propaganda to the next pedestrian in her path. There she goes, neatly trimmed as a bush in an Enlightenment garden, a formal shrub evoking the clarity and order of Ancient Greece, the hierarchies of Mount Olympus without the mischief of the gods. The flyer she's handed me warns against succumbing to the rise of Islam. "No to Racism," "Yes to Freedom," "No to Islam"—the words on the signs carried by the protesters lilt and sway as the defenders of Denmark advance. It is a parade without floats, no inflatable statue of a woman, ten feet long, lounging on her side and wearing a hijab, is being pulled behind the group. It must have been in Amsterdam, Cleveland, Gdańsk, London, or Neuilly-sur-Seine that I saw a woman made from a plastic membrane, pumped full of air, swollen almost to the point of explosion yet supine as Olympia, and wearing a hijab while being towed behind several dozen chanting protestors.

Our tourist, wearing the extravagant black sun hat, has left the graveyard and is sailing beneath the flowering chestnut trees that line the rectangular lakes leading down to the planetarium, lakes constructed at the time Copenhagen ceased to be a fortified city, lakes contained by outdated ramparts. A brisk breeze lifts the water in rows of tight waves. The patrons on the floating café have wrapped themselves in blankets. Swans paddle here and there, and white plastic boats in the shape of swans ferry passengers here and there. The men and women sipping drinks on the floating café consider taking a ride in a swan boat, a delight they remember from childhood; but they decide to wait, to save the adventure for the next time friends arrive from abroad or family from Jutland visit the city.

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The birds that look beautiful but are so destructive are called sulphur-crested cockatoos. They sharpen their beaks on the leaves of the gum trees. We call them cockies. The main types of trees we have are *Acacia victoriae,* which are very spiky but the cattle love the leaves, flowers and seed. The seed can be ground, roasted, and used in cooking and is often used in the native food industry. We also have black oaks and northern cypress pine up where we walked in the hills when you were here visiting with us, which seems so long ago. There's too much work to be done: holes in the fences, thanks to the dastardly emu, and wild goats to be shot as they have no business here, drinking the water and eating the plants until the birds fall silent, nothing left to imbibe in the hills, goat-pellet calling cards strewn about—proof of culpability. They never should have been brought here in the first place; of course they escaped and bred. We should shoot the kangaroos as well, but we don't. We should, for the sake of the cattle. We keep moving the cows, so the native perennials can take hold and the water won't all rush away, carving gullies as it departs, trenches twenty feet deep that grow and grow. Fifteen years of good wheat, a hundred years ago, and now the soil is ruined. We also have bullock bush (*Alectryon oleifolius*).

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In great haste the travelers retrieve their carry-on luggage from the overhead bins. The plane has landed, taxied across the runway, and the seatbelt sign is no longer illuminated. The passengers stand in cramped aisles between rows of narrow seats, suitcase in hand, voluminous sack suspended from shoulder, and wait. They wait in fear. Though they have safely landed, they feel anything but safe, the search for meaning not over, never over. With every remaining ounce of energy coiled within their bodies they push their way out of the aircraft and through the maze of corridors to where their luggage, if it hasn't disappeared between home and here, sails in a loop.

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As a child, repeatedly I watched my father's arm disappear, fingers then wrist, followed by elbow, up to armpit, into rubber glove, into vagina of cow. It was my first experience of sex. Quickly it was over. Elbow, wrist, and fingers holding syringe became visible once more. In his notebook, my father jotted down the date of anticipated delivery and with a frown moved on, efficient inseminator.

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