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Needleshine

Eileen Myles

In one unforgettable night in my life, I lay on the bed in my tiny apartment with my girlfriend, who was a filmmaker and who at the time was betraying me (or it felt that way at the time), and, lying there, she told me one by one about what each shaking orb in the ceiling in fact represented. I think it was mostly candles and glasses of water. I can't think of what else makes beeping lights pool inside of other pools, all of them overlapping one another to make my ceiling a magic sky, an aquarium of infantile trust. I was awed at her skill at zeroing in on what the real object was that wavered overhead, and I was especially wowed that the occupation of filmmaker had given her a capacity to understand optics in a special way. I am working-class, so I like to see art be of use or have wider, more wiggly applications. I mention betrayal because the poem I tried to make out of this experience was just a repetition of her name, say it was Nineveh. The poem went: "Nineveh told me . . .," and then I listed what each thing was in the intimate dark, the point finally being that Nineveh was not a trustworthy narrator of much more than just those jars of bouncing light. The poem sucked because I don't think I was able to imply what I felt without ruining it. So I just have it on a scrap of brown paper bag in my papers somewhere, and now someone can know what that was all about when I'm dead.

I'm sort of unteachable. People have always tried to tell me things, show me things, but what I do really like is a tour. It's the finest model I can think of for narrative. Everything that stops and starts is a tour of some kind. On top of a mountain or looking out a window, people love to go: See, *See*, and what they mean is, look at that bridge or up on the mountain, it's like oh . . . let's find our house from up here. Yawn. And I hate in New York when visitors lure me to some tall building and expect *me* to know where things are. What's that bridge. I don't know. I know the world from the inside (alone), and outside it's pretty much some idea of the feeling I'm in: political events, a poem, or my beliefs about this time. I don't know buildings or land—and how to orient myself by saying home is *there*, to better explain where we are standing now, because I know my place so well. I don't. I'm not like that.

So in Turkey this summer, I was sitting on a bench in a town called İznik by a lake. (İznik used to be called Nicaea, home of the Nicene creed, Christianity's most famous prayer, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty . . . creator of all things visible and invisible . . .") I can't resist mentioning here that the Greek word for creed is *symbolon*, which means something broken into two pieces that when reassembled verifies the person's identity. The word morphed later on into *symbol*. Anyhow, while we were sitting there, John, who has a very good sense of history and location, began naming for me the glittering towns along the distant edges of the lake. I realized quickly that he knew a town by its closeness to the shores of the lake, by its elevation and size and, of course, whether it was to the left or right, corresponding to those north and west and south orientations I never understand unless I'm in New York—a city on a nice 2-D grid, which is one of the things that holds me there, I know.

I suppose, especially at night, there's a childlike feeling of pleasure in knowing that the person you're with knows where you are. I remember adults identifying the fireworks of other towns in the sky on the Fourth of July. Look—there's Braintree, there's Lexington. One of my single favorite spectacles of my life was when I rode

in a plane over America, and the pilot telling us that *those* were the Fourth of July firework displays over the Great Salt Lakes, and there's Minnesota, and finally Delaware's display said that we were almost home. It looked like the U.S. was blowing up all night, and I was glad. It was the moment of shock and awe. It seemed right. I was also glad during the bicentennial—1976 when the clouds from the fireworks kept hiding the Statue of Liberty, and the prospect of her being actually gone (maybe the FALN did it; we excitedly hoped) in the midst of the fanfare of America's birthday party was the fantasy of all of my friends. But today, wherever America is, she's still there.

You are no guest, no stranger.
On our earth we give birth
to nothing but ourselves,
rings linked with rings in a chain.

—Abraham Sutzkever, "To My Child"

Those are words from a remarkable poet, who wrote them during the Holocaust, when his infant son was condemned to death by the Nazis before he ever lived. No more Jews were to be born in the ghetto in Vilnius, and Sutzkever and his wife's son *was* born, after which a German officer came through the ghetto hospital and put poison on the newborn's lips. Responding to this, Sutzkever's poem suggests he would swallow his son to save him. The idea of a man putting his baby inside, back into the dark of the body as a safe place, feels both potent and timely, as well as the most pithy way I can imagine to bear an unimaginable pain. It's an aspiration of another order. To become something mythic, even female, that could hold the other profoundly.

In Florence, while I was looking at the murals in Santa Maria Novella with an Italian poet, Elisa Biagini, she told me that Purgatory was invented in the twelfth century. Before then, there was only heaven and hell—which were just ways to scare the poor and vulnerable, she said, into being better slaves, essentially, of the church. But then it occurred to some capaciously minded bishop that there could be something in between. Purgatory, a holding tank. And the next thought, of course, was that the church could sell it. These were indulgences, and all of this kicked off Protestantism. But the point was that there always was an in-between space, between good and evil, and by imagining spending time in that in-between space you could now achieve salvation. Waiting. It was a really modern idea.

What is Zoe Leonard achieving by reducing the world to a pinpoint of light that holds everything. What is this social camera of hers, so that the world comes into a room and then in a variety of ways we do too. And she's been repeating this action in particular places around the world, but very much in New York.

We want to be tiny, we want to be small. And at night, well, there's the rub. Zoe invited us all to come one night to Murray Guy in Chelsea, where her camera obscura was installed and we could lie down together on the floor and . . . what. Commune? To hold something. To be a part. I think so. Especially when I think about the sensations I had lying there with people I knew and didn't and most of

them without the identifiers of face and clothes . . . well, I think I might know *that* voice, but I'm not really sure. And how close should I get? How close to anyone. What if I step on someone here. Or someone steps on me. And my glasses. I left them on the floor. Where are they? If someone steps on my glasses . . . The night will be endless. Pillows were offered, shoved in my direction, and I wondered if a pillow meant I was special or someone else just left, or if I was old. Or, again, was it a way of pulling me close. Were all the pillows together. Who were those people sitting against the wall. When did they go. When we settled in, which was instantaneous and then long (because no one could watch my growing comfortable or not. Like meditation or writing or prayer, my entire process was my own), I don't know how long I lay in the darkness that grew lighter. Yes, darkness changes and grows features. Darkness was getting born. And so were we. I saw a stripe of conveyance. A street. And it had layers of surrounding stripes, ripples in a multitude of tones, many streets. And they were pulsing and changing as people opened doors, and a ray of light changed the shape of it all. That's someone on a bike. There's a car. Really. Yes, that's a car. Each time a new group formed and changed within the room and the room itself and the same conclusions were arrived at and new ones were developed. Yes, it's a darkroom, duh. Some people were just very good at guessing. Or knowing. Some cared. I didn't. I mean, I cared in my way, I cared about everything. I liked being in the room. I've heard lately about composers who are having special concerts in the dark. Not on the esplanade but the dark inside a new collective space. Why? Is this sculpture, is this activism. Is it poetry. *Oui*. Cause Purgatory must exist in our time in a gray space where the meanings are unclear, except for the fact that we have incremental amounts of time and we are spending some of it inside now and together. Does anyone know about us and our listening parties and our seeing events. Our unplugged events. Our readings. How do we relate to the rooms of people all over the world who are simply living, not by choice, without power. Or sporadically. We lie here in our unspecial, shared blindness in which the night is invented again in opposition to out there and because of it.

I've read that there weren't any Dark Ages really. I think they were constructed to springboard the Enlightenment, which we don't so much believe in now. It didn't suddenly get light, and everything in the darkness before was bad and needed to die. Who were killed in the short and long cultural nights, when everyone could see but someone right in front of you was saying no this isn't happening here, what you think you are seeing isn't true. But it is. Sutzkever went a few years later to Vilnius to a space, a tiny space under a roof, where all he had was a pinhole of light, and in that crevice he, unlike his son, did survive the war, and years later he returned to that ghetto and that nook where he hid. He wrote:

Liberated, when I returned
To my hiding place—
In the same needleshine I saw,
Quivering in the ray of dust,
A familiar figure. I could swear:
I it was. And am. And shall remain,

Zoe Leon

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Strung on a string of dust
With the same needle.

—Abraham Sutzkever, "Needleshine"

We went out and had dinner afterward. Did you join us. It was fun. We should do this more. Yeah, we should see each other more often. I remember the young Zoe Leonard, when she showed slides of her girlfriend, Simone, at some one-night lesbian club. Her photos were devotional. Simone *was* beautiful. She worked at Café Orlin, and everyone said who's she. She was Zoe's, and she was her first subject, or her photography was her love. Darkrooms to walls to darkened rooms. Pinups of beauty. Nothing to see, but the city made tiny and us. Only our adorable syntax, our capacity to huddle in darkness, our love, a litter of friends, silent, laughing and waiting. This is her generous portrait now.

I it was. And am. And shall remain,
Strung on a string of dust
With the same needle.

—Abraham Sutzkever, "Needleshine"

Translation of Abraham Sutzkever's poem "Needleshine" by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav; translation of "To My Child" by Lee Sharkey and Joshua Waletzky