Elizabeth Albert

SILENT BEACHES UNTOLD STORIES
NEW YORK CITY'S FORGOTTEN WATERFRONT

Fiction and poetry selection by *Underwater New York* editors
Nicki Pombier Berger, Helen Georgas, and Nicole Haroutunian

DAMIANI

Silent Beaches, Untold Stories: New York City's Forgotten Waterfront is dedicated to my father, Dr. Roy E. Albert, a devoted environmental scientist, and to my mother, Abigail Albert, a fearless New York City educator.

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INDIAN NAMES AND MEMORIES

Long Island winds are blowing fair and free
    As when of old, a thousand years ago
They swept the shining sands, o'erleapt the highest tree,
    And through the sandy barrens trampled slow.

Was there no poetry in those wild days
    When Indian braves their love songs murmured low?
When the young mother held her babe in arm,
    And Indian lullabys sang sweet and slow?

Was there no poetry in those old days
    When lifted skies at sunrise arched the dawn?
Where sparkling waters dimpled all the day
    And darkling midnights hovered close and warm?

Reckowhacky, that "lonely place," that "place
    Of waters bright." Kisseena, "it is cold."
Ronkonkoma, "the wild goose' resting place."
    Manhattan "island hill," and Maspeth "overflowed."

Gowanus "here the sleeper rests," Canarsie
    "Fenced place," and Merrick "here is barren
 Land," "devoid of trees it stands." Massapequa
    "Great water land"—how few, how few they are.

THEIR poetry was Nature's. Deep within
    The heart they held it, but all unexpressed
In wreathed numbers was the joy they felt,
    So silent, grave, they lived their lives, and passed.

From shore and river, forest-land and plain,
    They passed away. Of all they saw and wrought,
Of all their stately life and utterance,
    A few names glimpse for us their every thought.

—*Jessie Fremont Hume*

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I visited the Museum of Modern Art and happened upon *Rising Currents: Projects for New York's Waterfront*, an exhibition composed of works by five interdisciplinary teams from MoMA PS1's architects-in-residence program. The teams reimagined the New York City coastline as an actively engaged, ecologically robust urban waterfront. Their brilliant solutions were visually fascinating, scientifically sound, and historically respectful. I found myself face-to-face with the past, present, and future of the city. Still fresh in my mind was the *Manahatta/Manhattan: A Natural History of New York City* exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, which showed startling images of a lush, hilly Manhattan, rife with ponds and streams, looking as it would have when Henry Hudson arrived in 1609.

Around the same time, I was introduced to *Underwater New York,* a beautifully curated online journal that publishes artistic responses to a copious list of strange objects discovered in and around the New York City waterways: a giraffe skeleton near the Verrazano Bridge, a Formica table upright at the bottom of the East River, a fleet of ice cream trucks sunk into a reef off the Rockaways. *Underwater New York* describes the location where each object was discovered, and I was appalled by how few of these places I knew, how little of the greater New York coastline I had experienced. I had to get out more!

I explored the breached landfill at Dead Horse Bay, the abandoned wrecks at Coney Island Creek, and the ruined beaches across from LaGuardia Airport in western College Point. At each location, nature mingled with an amazing array of detritus. At each place, I met someone who eyed me with suspicion, but then went on to tell me the story of their beloved waterfront. Every plant, every used needle, every wreck, every proud neighbor told the story of New York City.

The more I explored the littoral edges of New York, the more questions I had: What has changed about our relationship to the waterfront? Why have former resorts become ghettos? Why are former industrial wastelands now fashionable? Why have the most coveted oyster beds become choked with toxic sludge? Do we desire, loathe, devour, dread the waterfront? These questions led me in various directions: to the city's photographic archives, to history and literature, to environmental studies of the changing ecosystem, and to artists and writers whose work is inspired by New York City's coastline and waterways.

Initially, I shared my findings with my students at St. John's University, but the project quickly outgrew the classroom and morphed into *Silent Beaches, Untold Stories: New York City's Forgotten Waterfront*, a multidisciplinary exhibition in the university's gallery. The exhibition was designed to actively engage the broadest possible audience and provide a forum for community dialogue on the waterfront's vital role in the region's present and future well-being. The response to the exhibition was so enthusiastic that the idea of a *Silent Beaches* book was born.

Silent Beaches takes the reader to a variety of lesser-known waterfront spaces, each of which tells the story of New York City, and ultimately of us. For instance, not far from JFK International Airport lies Dead Horse Bay, its beach littered with horse bones and glass tinkling in the waves. A century ago, this was where the city's legions of horses met their maker and were rendered into fertilizer and glue. Or consider Hart Island, situated amid treacherous currents in the waters off the Bronx. It is New York City's still-active potter's field, home to over 800,000 of the city's unclaimed dead, buried four times weekly in mass graves by prisoners from nearby Rikers Island. On a journey to the southwest corner of Staten Island, you might stumble upon Sandy Ground, where just a few houses remain of one of the first free black communities in the nation, a thriving town made prosperous through oystering and strawberry farming.

Hurricane Sandy struck during the final stage of research for the *Silent Beaches* exhibition. During my three years working on the project, I had developed a kind of intimacy with the waterfront, and so felt the coastal devastation much more profoundly than I would have earlier. My hope is that increased awareness of the past and present of our strange and marvelous watery environs will create in us a sense of ownership, protectiveness, and responsibility.

UNDERWATER NEW YORK

Artists and storytellers have long drawn inspiration from New York's cityscape, but under the waters that define our islands is another landscape entirely, every bit as gritty and urgent, as lonely and cluttered, as deadly, singular, and Siren as the city itself.

Since 2009, *Underwater New York* has been curating a list of objects lost and found, sunk and surfaced in the waterways surrounding New York City. These objects range from the whimsical (a runaway giraffe, a fleet of ice cream trucks) to the historical (the steamship *Princess Anne*, the remnants of Coney Island's Dreamland), to the environmental and political (Zones A and B, areas of the city that flooded when Hurricane Sandy hit). The objects on our list have been discovered by divers and scientists, detectives and engineers, environmentalists and everyday city-dwellers. *Underwater New York* is a digital journal collecting the stories that these objects evoke, in whatever form the stories take. What interests us is work as inspired as the waters are littered, work that takes us somewhere, unmoors us, makes us think.

Soon after our inception, Nelly Reifler, who wrote one of the first stories we published on *Underwater New York*, introduced us to the artist and curator Elizabeth Albert. We met Elizabeth on the DUMBO shore of the East River in Brooklyn and began a conversation that has since become an incredible collaboration. Elizabeth contributed a painting to our site, joined us on excursions to Dead Horse Bay and Coney Island Creek, and gave a riveting artist talk as part of an event we organized at P.P.O.W. Gallery, describing the project that would eventually become the exhibition at St. John's University, *Silent Beaches, Untold Stories: New York City's Forgotten Waterfront*.

For us, *Silent Beaches* was a gallery expression of *Underwater New York*. Weaving documentary with invention, it captured the vitality and destruction of New York City's waterways. In conjunction with the exhibition, we were thrilled to curate an evening of original readings by the writers Lee Ann Brown, Gabriel Brownstein, Nicole Cirino, Robert Fanuzzi, Steve Mentz, and Nelly Reifler.

When Elizabeth decided to turn the images, research, and ideas behind the *Silent Beaches* exhibition into a book, she asked us to commission new literary work for each waterfront the book would address. The writers we invited to be part of the project—Stacia L. Brown, Bill Cheng, Susan Choi, Elizabeth Gaffney, Ben Greenman, Ravi Howard, Nicole Miller, Kamilah Aisha Moon, Amy Shearn, Nelly Reifler, and Antoine Wilson—all approached it from different angles, making their stories and poems as varied, surprising, and enduring as the waterfronts that inspired them. We are so pleased to have matched each waterfront with such tremendous talent.

Underwater New York would like to acknowledge our community of artists, writers, musicians, friends, family, and fans. We are a project that could exist only with your support, participation, and encouragement. Thank you.

—*Underwater New York* editors Nicki Pombier Berger, Helen Georgas, and Nicole Hartounian

Overleaf: Map of New York City and environs, 1912. Since this map was drawn, the topography of the city has changed. Coney Island Creek was filled in to create road and rail access to Coney Island. One can arrive by car via Ocean Parkway, Coney Island Avenue, Shell Road, Stillwell Avenue and Cropsey Avenue; and by subway via the B, D, F, Q, and N lines. Dead Horse Bay/Barren Island and surrounding islets were consolidated with landfill to create the peninsula that is the site of the now largely defunct Floyd Bennett Airfield and the terminus of Flatbush Avenue. The peninsula is now Gateway National Recreation Area and is connected to the Rockaways via the Gil Hodges Bridge. Jamaica Bay and Broad Channel are practically unrecognizable. Broad Channel now has an altogether different shape, surrounded by a number of islets and sandbars, including Ruffle Bar, Pumpkin Patch Marsh, Black Wall, and Canarsie Pol. Ward's Island and Randall's Island have been consolidated. Riker's Island has swelled to four times its original size, using landfill to create a base for its enormous correctional facilities. The northwest portion of Flushing Bay was filled to create a base for North Beach Airport (later renamed LaGuardia Airport) after it was relocated from College Point.


PATERSON
PASSAIC
PASSAIC RIVER
HACKENSACK RIVER
NEWARK
JERSEY CITY
NEWARK BAY
BAYONNE
ELIZABETH
KILL VAN KULL
UPPER NEW YORK BAY
BAY RIDGE
THE NARROWS
STATEN ISLAND
STATEN ISLAND SOUND
RICHMOND
GRAVESEND BAY
ARTHUR KILL
LOWER BAY
RARITAN BAY
KEYPORT


YONKERS
WESTCHESTER COUNTY
RIVER
THE BRONX
HARLEM
LONG ISLAND SOUND
EAST CHESTER BAY
MANHASSET BAY
HEMPSTEAD HAR.
OYSTER BAY HAR.
LITTLE NECK BAY
FLUSHING BAY
LONG ISLAND CITY
FLUSHING
MANHASSET
OYSTER BAY
COLD SPRING HAR.
ROSLYN
MANHATTAN
WILLIAMSBURG
RIVER
BOROUGH OF QUEENS
JAMAICA
MINEOLA
GARDEN CITY
BROOKLYN
EAST NEW YORK
FLATBUSH
VALLEY STREAM
LYNBROOK
HEMPSTEAD
FREEPORT
JAMAICA BAY
CEDARHURST
OST END
JAMAICA BAY INLET
BAY OF FAR ROCKAWAY
FAR ROCKAWAY BEACH
LONG BEACH
ROCKAWAY BEACH
SHEEPSHEAD BAY
BRIGHTON BEACH
CONEY ISLAND
AMBROSE CHANNEL
ATLANTIC OCEAN
SANDY HOOK

Jacob Riis, *The Potter's Field, The Common Trench*, c. 1890. The New York City Department of Correction estimates that since 1869, more than one million people have been buried on Hart Island, located just east of City Island, where the East River broadens into the Long Island Sound.

HART ISLAND

Four times a week, New York City's unclaimed and unidentified dead are trucked out to City Island, where they board a ferry for Hart Island, located just over the water where the East River broadens into the Long Island Sound. They arrive in plain wooden boxes and are buried in mass graves by inmates from nearby Rikers Island, a practice essentially unchanged since 1869.

The New York City Department of Correction estimates that more than one million people have been buried on Hart Island. Today, fewer than 1,500 arrive yearly, but they are still buried in large mass graves separated into adult and infant plots. Adult graves contain one hundred and fifty coffins, with the addition of organs and limbs termed as "refuse." Infant graves contain one thousand babies and stillbirths, about one third of all interments. Adult and infant mass graves form one continuous plot stretching halfway across the island.

For over a century, the handwritten ledgers containing the names of the people buried on Hart Island were rarely accessible to the public. This has recently changed, however, as the result of one woman's titanic efforts. After devoting more than a decade to helping people track down the Hart Island dead, Melinda Hunt, a New York City artist, obtained records for every person buried on the island since 1985 through a Freedom of Information request—some 50,000 in all. Subsequent FOIL requests have led to the mapping of burials with GPS information and the development of storytelling software for the Traveling Cloud Museum, an award-winning website launched in December 2014.

Now each coffin arrives with official paperwork attached, and once a plot is filled, a GPS grave number is assigned, electronically replacing what used to be a numbered concrete marker. The location of each coffin is charted in a database that corresponds with a GPS location so it can be found if disinterment is requested by a family or by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. About eighty-five disinterments take place every year, although these are discouraged if the body has been buried for more than a decade.

Hart Island is by far the largest public cemetery and the longest in continual use in the U.S., and the largest tax-funded cemetery in the world. In 2012 and 2014, the New York City Council introduced legislation to transfer Hart Island to the Department of Parks and Recreation. Simultaneously, a series of lawsuits led to the opening of Hart Island to visitors. Now, once a month, weather and tides permitting, small groups of family members and guests may visit the island by passing through a razor-wire-protected ferry terminal from City Island. Their phones are confiscated so that they cannot take photographs.

Other potter's fields have been located throughout the city. The earliest to appear on maps was in 1755, located at the current site of the Surrogate's Court Building in lower Manhattan. By 1796, there was one at the north end of Madison Park. Another larger one, on a six-and-a-half acre plot near Greenwich Village, lasted until 1840, before it was fully transformed into fashionable Washington Square. The potter's field continued to move, first to what is now Bryant Park, and also to the site later occupied by the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, then to Randall's Island, on to Ward's Island, and finally, in 1869, to Hart Island.[1]

Hart Island has also been home to the living. Its public use began in 1864 as the training ground for "United States Colored Troops," Army regiments made up primarily of African American soldiers. Subsequently, the island housed a women's lunatic asylum, a tuberculosis hospital, a prison and a "reformatory for vicious boys." During World War II, it became home for German prisoners of war. After the war, the northern end of the island was taken over by the U.S. Army for a Nike missile base as part of the defense system of New York City. The army abandoned the missile site on June 30, 1961.

As of January 2016, the Department of Parks and Recreation has ceased to manage Hart Island, citing lack of resources and expertise to operate a public cemetery. So, although there has been much progress in providing information and access to those who have loved ones interred on the island, as of this publication, Hart Island continues to be managed by the Department of Correction.

Top: Hart Island Depot for Recruits from the *Illustrated London News*, August 12, 1865. **Bottom:** Eugene de Salinac, *Department of Correction Dock, Hart's Island*, 1924. In addition to being a public cemetery for New York City's indigent and unclaimed dead, in 1924 Hart Island was the site of the Branch Penitentiary and the New York City Reformatory. This image shows the prisoner landing dock with the rest of the island in the distance.

Jacob Riis, *Hart's Island, The Dock Where the Unknown Dead Are Unloaded for the Potter's Field*, c. 1890. To this day, unclaimed or unidentified New Yorkers are brought here in plain wooden boxes to be buried in mass graves.

Hart Island

Susan Choi

Kirby and Goss—Theodore Kirby, of course, and Ronald Goss—had built their joint career on their contrasting, complementary styles. Kirby was wild, imaginative to a fault, while Goss was the logician, art's ruthless prosecutor. Their professional partnership had brought each man far more in the way of fame, remuneration, and satisfaction than either would likely have achieved on his own. Their business was thrills and chills, anchored fast in an imagined reality which rendered the supernatural departures all the more terrifying to their legions of faithful readers.

The men were embarking now on a new thriller/chiller, set as always in their home base of New York. One midsummer day they sat down together at Kirby's to choose from a number of possible settings. Hart Island was just one of many—but it had risen to the top of Kirby's list. "Just listen to this history!"

Goss listened as he had all their career. Research was Kirby's first love. Off Kirby would go bushwhacking into the deep thickets of history, dragging this and that into the light, and what treasures he'd found on Hart Island: insane asylums for incurable women, reformatories for incorrigible boys, the New York City potter's field—and more. Hart Island seemed to specialize in disappearances. Boaters set out for its shores and neither they nor their boats were ever heard from again.

"Very dangerous currents near there," Goss observed.

"These aren't people *capsizing* in *current*s," Kirby enthused. "This is our own Bermuda Triangle, right offshore of the Bronx! Oh, Ronny, it must be so thoroughly haunted the ghosts can't tell where their own edges are. I can't believe we've never used it before."

They'd make up for that now: had Kirby told Goss about his new outboard? "I just put her in the water in Port Washington. *The Lynda Lee*."

"No, Kirby."

"Yes! Hart Island is practically across the street from my marina. I can see the ghosts shaking their chains without leaving my dock!"

"'*Landing Strictly Prohibited, Warning, No Trespassing, Danger, No Landing, Violators Will Be Prosecuted to the Full Extent of the Law*,'" Goss read from the colorful printouts of photographs taken of the island by passing boatmen.

"When have signs ever stopped us?" asked Kirby.

It was Goss who won the argument, but Kirby continued to binge on Hart Island. He read about the insane women and the unredeemable boys, the prisoners of war and the prisoners of rehab, the unclaimed dead, unexploded ordnance, and unsolved disappearances. He and Goss began a thriller set amid the sinking islands of Jamaica Bay and involving crooked Transportation Security Agents and Haitian zombies, but still Kirby kept up with his Hart Island research, in the furtive spirit most men would bring to marital infidelity or embezzlement. He couldn't leave Hart Island alone.

One afternoon in mid-September, he found himself at the marina in Port Washington with a fishing rod and no one to fish with. His boys had gone back to college. His wife, Lynda, had flown off to San Diego for the weekend with her sister. Goss and his wife were at their place up in Wellfleet. And so Kirby was alone with the *Lynda Lee* and his rod and reel, but he didn't feel like fishing.

He could see Hart Island, a grimy interruption in the broad, low profile of City Island behind it. It was a magnificent day, the sort of day on which the sky seems like a noiseless explosion of

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Melinda Hunt in collaboration with Joel Sternfeld

Adult Mass Burial with Pages from the Hart Island Burial Record Books (top)

New Mass Grave and Mussel Shells with Pages from the Hart Island Burial Records (bottom), 1992

Photographs, rag paper, photocopies, and steel

Two parts, each 42 x 48 inches (106.7 x 121.9 cm)

Luke Rafferty

Hart Island Approach, 2012

Digital photograph

blue, the kind of day on which no one could possibly hold ignorance against his fellow man. The blinding dazzle of the sun upon the brisk little waves, the wholesome clarity of the breeze, the busy watercraft plying their ways on separate errands it was nobody's business to hinder—who was barred, on such a day, from setting foot anywhere that he wanted?

Kirby striped his aging nose with sunscreen and piloted the *Lynda Lee* out of the harbor. Port Washington swiftly receded behind him.

After having pored over so many photographs, Kirby felt a warm thrill as the island grew large and encompassed his vision. It had the sort of broken beach that suggested the entire thing was constituted of crushed brick that had been dumped in the spot over hundreds of years. Kirby cut the engine, dropped his anchor, and splashed out. He had his black Moleskine notebook and his smartphone in a Ziploc in his pocket.

The island was larger than he'd thought it would be, and perfectly silent, though he could see the planes descending to LaGuardia, the Whitestone and Throgs Neck Bridges stitching air, all manner of maritime traffic crisscrossing the water. The ceaseless action of the city so near on all sides it seemed close enough to touch, yet on the far side of some transparent membrane which swallowed not just sound but that quality of reality which isn't the visible, or the tactile, so much as the certainty of one's own reality touching upon it. Kirby had the sense that if a second boat approached, and he waved welcome to the person at the helm, that person would stare straight through him and be deaf to his voice.

He struck out across a great green meadow, marred everywhere with collapsing boxes of brick, sudden gouges, mole hills of smashed cinder block—yet somehow uncompromised, all the more primeval for these few signs of taint. It was the pasture of Kirby's boyhood. Striding through the waist-high grass, Kirby swung his arms. A pervasive sense of well-being took root and grew swiftly within him. Periodically he passed over a stripe where the pasture was scanty and understood that there once were paved roads crossing over this space. Distant hulks of dark brick and limestone grew closer, disclosed to him their high, shattered windows, their Gothic rosettes, their smokestacks interrupted halfway, terminated in severed brickwork like a mouthful of black, rotted teeth. The past! Here it was, shyly stepping toward him like a spinster in her tattered lace dress. It was all right—he could see just how lovely she'd been. "You were beautiful!" he cried, taking pictures continuously—it was wonderful how many pictures these smartphones could take. Great old trees had grown up at the backs of the buildings, in some cases right through their roofs. As he emerged from the bower of stately deep shade, a sound stopped him dead—not the breeze in the leaves or the creaking tree boughs but an engine. He moved trunk to trunk through the trees until what lay on their far side had come into sight.

It was a very different landscape—the scene of a war. All trees and grass were stripped away, and the bare earth was laid open in trenches wide enough to drive through and deep enough to obscure a grown man. And indeed there were men in the trenches—Kirby saw only the tops of their heads, moving industriously. A heavy-duty truck with its back door rolled up was backing slowly toward the trench. It halted just short of the scar in the earth and receiving arms stretched from the otherwise hidden men down in the trench. The truck's cargo began passing rapidly out of the truck, into the trench, out of sight.

The cargo was narrow pine boxes, quite small, which the men carried four at a time. Each bore a large number scrawled on in pencil. Had Kirby been asked for his guess, he might have said each box contained a double magnum of wine, or perhaps a snub-nosed machine gun. The boxes were going into the trench stacked eight deep, in rows ten boxes wide. The men worked quickly—the truck was already half empty.

Kirby quickly concealed his phone as a man wearing the uniform of a corrections officer, with a gun on his belt, got out of the truck and then looked Kirby's way. Of course!—Kirby realized. These were the prisoners, burying the dead. But the boxes were so oddly small.

"Took your sweet time!" the corrections officer shouted at Kirby, approaching. At the same time Kirby's breath went out of him. He knew what was in the small boxes.

"How can you pack them in like that?" Kirby cried angrily. "Their loved ones will never know where they've been buried!"

"Isn't that what you're here for? And you're already three or four hundred behind."

Each box's position in the edifice of death had to be recorded—God help him, this was not Kirby's strong suit. He wondered if this was a nightmare, for things did look peculiar. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a plane approaching LaGuardia, with the defunct PanAm globe painted onto its tail. But there was no time to muse. After many false starts, Kirby devised what he hoped was an adequate system. "Maybe I should be doing this on my phone," he muttered to himself. Perhaps there was an "app"—but he was too slow with the phone; he didn't have the time to figure out its time-saving features. He did his task the old way, in the black Moleskine notebook, in pen.

Seeing him so hard at work, the officer grew friendlier. "Smoke?" he offered.

"Oasis Menthols?" Kirby marveled. "I haven't seen these since I was in high school!"

"So you're a comedian, too," the dour officer said.

Goss had called Ken Bassanelli as soon as he'd hung up with Lynda. Bassanelli, retired, wasn't one of these dull-witted city detectives, idiotically insisting that Kirby must have led a "secret life" and was even now cruising the U.S. Virgin Islands with a mistress in the boat he'd named after his wife. Bassanelli still had his connections, and with just a few well-placed phone calls he had gotten himself onto Hart Island. He'd gone with a group who'd petitioned the city to visit the graves of their loved ones, laid to rest, for whatever sad reason, in the potter's field of a million lost souls.

Bassanelli said, "They put them in the ground a thousand at a time—separate boxes, but all stacked in one grave. Even the stillborn babies."

"My god," murmured Goss, feeling glad he was already seated.

"But remarkably, they're able to pinpoint each body's location. They've got some crazy coordinate system, from decades ago. It's literally scribbled by hand in a little black notebook. No one seems to know who came up with it. Classic New York." Bassanelli laughed, without mirth. At length Bassanelli added, "Ron—Kirby never set foot on that island. Corrections has its sentries posted day and night, and they would've noticed a guy in a boat. They don't take very kindly to trespassers."

"I need to go there," Goss said.

"Ron," Bassanelli gently reproved him. "There's no grave there for *you* to go visit."

They sat a long time without speaking. "Kirby was sure that Hart Island was haunted," Goss finally said. "Frankly, Kirby was nuts."

Now both men were laughing and weeping, recalling their friend. Bassanelli poured whiskey.

"To Kirby," Goss said.

Melinda Hunt in collaboration with Joel Sternfeld

Baby Trench, 2006

Film still from *Hart Island: An American Cemetery*

Running time: 66 minutes

Jacob F. Weiners, Jr., *Children from the Bethlehem Orphanage with the Chilton Paint Factory*, 1905. The Bethlehem Orphanage was a Lutheran institution that raised orphaned children of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

COLLEGE POINT

The College Point peninsula lies at the juncture of the Flushing River, Flushing Bay, the Bronx River, and the East River. The western side is directly across from LaGuardia airport, the north looks out toward Riker's Island, and the east lies under the shadow of the Whitestone Bridge. College Point is named for St. Paul's College, which existed from only 1835 to 1850. Originally farmland, the area was gradually transformed into a waterside recreation area, with visitors spilling over from the piano manufacturer William Steinway's bustling North Beach resort, which in its heyday featured no fewer than fifteen concert halls and a sprawling "goulash pavilion." By the turn of the century, hotels and saloons sprang up along College Point's western and northern shores to accommodate the overflow of people. As the area continued to develop, many elegant Victorian homes were built, some of which remain today on shady streets towards the north.

Powell's Cove offers a startling contrast with the west side of College Point peninsula's shoreline, which, with the exception of the massive St. Lawrence Cement factory and a few remaining dilapidated bungalows, is a largely decaying industrial wasteland, much of it cut off from public access. Some of the bungalows are guarded by crude scarecrows, made from little more than an old sheet covering a ball on a stick with two circles drawn on for eyes. The sanitation garage where trash is loaded onto barges lies directly across from LaGuardia Airport, creating a potentially lethal combination of seagulls and airplanes.

In 1852, Conrad Poppenhusen, an immigrant from Hamburg, Germany, moved to what was still a rural village to expand his business operations and build one of the first major industrial complexes, the American Hard Rubber Company (also known as the American Rubber Manufacturing Company and Enterprise Rubber Works), which produced the then newly developed vulcanized rubber for Charles Goodyear. Poppenhusen founded College Point by incorporating the neighborhoods of Flammersburg and Strattonport, named for colonial families that settled the area.

Poppenhusen's rubber company was to provide a utopian ideal of work and life for his employees. His vision included homes and parks, the First Reformed Church, and the Poppenhusen Institute, housing one of the first free kindergartens in the United States. This kindergarten was structured around the ideals of the German philosopher Friedrich Froebel, whose radical educational system is considered to have contributed to the aesthetic and pedagogical proponents of the Bauhaus. Notable artists and architects educated in Froebel's principles include Frank Lloyd Wright, Buckminster Fuller, Wassily Kandinsky, and Piet Mondrian, among others.

Poppenhusen was also responsible in part for the first electric transportation system, the Flushing and North Side Railroad, connecting College Point and Flushing with ferries to Manhattan. Ultimately, these lines would consolidate into what is now the Long Island Railroad (L.I.R.R.). Other industry in the area included silk ribbon factories and breweries.

College Point also has a history of aviation. The Flushing Airport was located here and was New York's busiest airport until it was replaced by North Beach Airport just across Flushing Bay, which was expanded and renamed LaGuardia Airport in 1939. EDO Aircraft Corporation, the second oldest aerospace company in the U.S., was founded in a shed here in 1925 by Earl Dodge Osborn, the inventor of aluminum floats for seaplanes. Dodge Osborn came from an old New York family whose wealth derived from the copper trade. Osborn's early designs were used by pioneering aviators Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and Admiral Richard Byrd. The business later expanded to design and manufacture electronic equipment for the military and the commercial aerospace industry.

Much of the northern coast is now residential. A park named after a local sculptor, Herman MacNeil, is on the site of the former Chisholm Mansion, where Mayor LaGuardia summered in 1937. A century ago, Tallman's Island, off the north shore, was a popular picnic site. Now connected to the mainland by landfill, the area is a sewage treatment plant. Verdant Powell's Cove occupies most of the eastern shore of College Point, retained as parkland partly in exchange for thirty-one acres taken to expand the National Tennis Center in nearby Flushing Meadows, where the U.S. Open takes place.

Top: Jacob F. Weiners, Jr., *Frederick Kellner's Barbershop*, 1900. **Bottom:** Jacob F. Weiners, Jr., *Men of the Tiger, Democratic Club of College Point*, 1897. The tiger was the fierce mascot of the Big Six, a lower Manhattan volunteer fire company whose chief was William "Boss" Tweed. The tiger was also a favorite animal of the legendary Chief Tamanend, a Lenni Lenape Indian chief who negotiated a peace treaty with William Penn in the early 1680s. The Society of Tammany is named after him.

Top: Portrait of Conrad Poppenhusen, 1870. **Bottom:** The Flushing Airport was New York's busiest airport, until North Beach Airport, later renamed LaGuardia airport, was expanded across Flushing Bay.

Posthumous Letter from Conrad Poppenhusen to William Steinway

Nelly Reifler

Dear Wilhelm,

The clouds seem peculiar from here. For one thing, I may be a cloud—I'm not sure. My fingers drift and shred, curl into shapes—it's a whale; it's a trumpet; it's a *Franzbrötchen* from the Konditorei Kemm—then scroll back into my hands. My hands in turn swirl and roil, and at times I feel thunder in the pillow of flesh (or what used to be flesh) below my thumb. Lightning zags up my wrist. A constant wind blows clouds over and under and through me: I never imagined, standing as I used to stand, in my old form, at the water's edge at day's end, that those clouds above me were so swift, so forceful. We could not know, until we ascend, that clouds carry souls.

People speak of flames consuming structures. Flames do not consume structures. Flames consume people, and structures conceive and gestate and birth flames. I did not change my clothing or take my bath for four days, Wilhelm, when Hamburg gave birth to fire. Did I ever tell you that? Up here, memory and dreams, daydreams and idle fantasies blend and shred, inexact as everything else. If I hold my head together with my hands, Wilhelm, I can think clearly enough to sort out the occasions on which we dined, our little excursions with the wives, and the railway meetings, from the many times I imagined talking with you in a different way. That is: I imagined often, when I was solid, when gravity held the soles of my feet to the earth's surface, that we were men who might be able to conduct a different sort of colloquy. I imagined that we could talk about our souls and humors.

I wanted to tell you about the shapes, Wilhelm, from which I could not find relief. I thought you might understand.

The Hamburg Fire Brigade made a jolly company. The men and I—we were so young—oh, and it was all so harmless—used to play a sort of charades that poked fun at the city officials. We used to drink *doppelbock*, and there was an amusing arms-locked dance that had no name. We tended and exercised our half-dozen horses by day and washed and shined the engine. Such was how we passed the time in the firehouse. Now and then, a fire would erupt. The very small ones were most common. A kitchen fire that left a charred hole in a wall. A stray hot coal that set an apple barrel stowed in a basement, too damp to burn in earnest, smoking. Once: cigar ash that secretly held an ember, dropped carelessly into the hay bales of a stable, killed a single mare. We'd hurry to the scene on our company's fire trucks (two of them with three horses each), and always—more or less—came out the heroes. Until May 5, 1842, the most spectacular fire I had fought was a coal barge that went up in flames. We had to push upriver in the fireboats. It was too late to save the crew of three, and I thought that the worst thing I would ever see was the corpse of the captain, flayed and stripped and blacked by heat. That was March of the same year. My shift ended and I went home to Bertha. She smelled it on me, the smoke of human flesh. She drew the water for my bath and ran the yellow soap up my arms, my back. My own skin was so pink in the water. I remember that she washed my undershirt herself. She would not hand it to the washerwoman with the rest of our household laundering.

May had started dry and windy. (I often imagine *weather* up here in the eternally wafting mists. I *miss* weather: arid, rainy, hot, even bitterly cold. At this very moment a cloud is drifting through my belly.) I was still wearing my long coat that night, on my long walk to the firehouse.

The lookouts started ringing the church bells just as I was arriving. Then the horns began to sound nearby. I wonder, Wilhelm, if you remember these things? Or were you young when sirens became commonplace? At any rate, I barely had my hat off before Oscar, one of the fellows,

came charging toward me with my helmet and rubber boots. I joined the men in the stable yard. We got the horses harnessed quickly, and they were already trotting through the gate as I was buckling my second boot and grabbing onto the runner of the carriage.

By the time we reached the center of the Altstadt, several houses on Deichstrasse were ablaze. I do not, Wilhelm, need to tell you about the horrors of that great fire. I saw three of my boys from the brigade die, and many others. A mother and a child, and an old woman who had taken a sleeping draught and was not wakened by the smoke nor the noise. And others and others. The days and nights were all as one, hours and minutes indistinguishable from one roaring, blazing alley to the next. However, Wilhelm, what I have desired to tell you is of the arrival of the shapes, the shapes that took hold of my mind sometime during the course of the great fire and that never left me.

I recall distinctly: somehow cold with sweat and exhaustion, yet also hot from the conflagration, I was dashing madly, running to help a brigade that had arrived from Kiel. Then I saw it. The fire leapt onto the spire of the Nikolaikirche. I could not move. I was never able to say what came over me then; in truth, I never told a soul. I did not continue to the Kiel brigade. Rather, I felt myself tucking into a stone archway. I watched the church burn, Wilhelm. I watched it change from a solid structure into a womb of flame and smoke. And as it changed, its skeleton revealed itself amongst the flames. And the revelation took the shape of an evenly arrayed series of tall, spindly teeth. They must have been the Nikolaikirche's vertical beams, but my mind only saw the black lines, black and narrow, with flames licking the interstices.

Wilhelm, I am attempting to get at something. I have always thought of you and me as two faces of the same door, a door I suppose between our old world and America, hinged by progress. The shape of the burning Nikolaikirche made a physical impression on my mind, and from that day forward, every time I closed my eyes, I saw the near and narrow teeth and the spaces between them. I saw that shape when I lay down to take my rest in the evening. I saw it when I blinked in the sun darting off the Atlantic. When moving to unlace Bertha's corset, I found that its boning became the indelible shape of the blazing Nikolaikirche.

The passage to America carried me on rough waters; the motion and the illness suppressed the shapes for a while. No sooner had I settled into the apartment and begun working than the dark vertical teeth appeared again. Now they followed me not only when my eyes were closed, not only in my dreams, but also whenever I faced a wall that was brightly colored—especially when I stood before a yellow field. Bertha and Adolph arrived in America, and we built the house in College Point. And Wilhelm, it was then and there that the strangest aspect of the whole matter came to be: the shapes apparently leapt from my mind! Out, out into the world around me.

The American wooden fences up and down the roads—picket, as they are called. The masts of ships anchored in even array. Even the stripes of the seersucker suits worn by men at summer soirées aligned with the shape of the burning Nikolaikirche that was etched into my being.

You might remember, Wilhelm, hair combs used to be made from whalebone. When the kind men of Goodyear granted me a share of their vulcanizing process, it took all of ten seconds for me to know what to do with it: I had to reproduce the shapes in mass. This, I believed, would exorcise them from my mind. So Poppenhusen vulcanized rubber combs were born. You saw our plant on Flushing Bay. I remember how you clapped and then shook my hand again at the sight. Nobody knew that I would often arrive before sunrise, long before the first workers, and sort

Elizabeth Albert with Marie Lorenz

Party Barge in Deep Decline–Approach from *The Tide and Current Taxi*, 2005–present

Digital photograph

Elizabeth Albert with Marie Lorenz

Party Barge in Deep Decline–Interior from *The Tide and Current Taxi*, 2005–present

Digital photograph

through the lots of combs. Each comb we manufactured was a perfect replica of the shapes that both romanced and haunted my soul.

Bertha died not long after we moved to College Point. At that point I began the projects you so admired—the schools, the library, the Institute. I may flatter myself to think that some of your work in Astoria was inspired by me. We were half a generation separated in age, but there was—I'm sure you would agree—a common sense of what was essentially right and good for people. Yet somehow we of the male sex are kept from the kind of easy intercourse that womankind has built into its very makeup. We cannot bridge the gap, even when we have such similar purposes.

Now I am drifting and my fingers are stretching and curling, and I can see everything. I am made of mist. There is no gravity, and my heart is a ball of rain. I'm looking down at Queens, and I can see you, and I can the streets and dogs, the horses and horseless carriages. One day, you came to see me in my office, Wilhelm. I sensed that you were distraught. Yet we only discussed matters of the Long Island Railroad project. That day, Wilhelm, you were shaking. I had my secretary pour you a glass of kirsch, and you were standing as you brought it to your lips. Sit down, Wilhelm, I said, and I waved my hand in the direction of my favorite chair. You sat with a shudder. You looked into the bottom of the glass. When I offered you another draught, you declined. I should have said, What is it? I should have asked what was troubling you. But just as nobody would ever have suspected that a man as successful and solid as I was haunted by the shape of a burning church, I could not accept the possibility that you were haunted also. If only we could have spoken of these specters. But instead we spoke of land variances and banks.

I have read your diaries, Wilhelm. Yes, I really can see everything. I know that on that day your union with Regina was approaching its end. I know your suffering, and I know that your heart was breaking. There was one other time when I thought I might be able to speak with you the way I wanted, the way I have begun to do today: Years after Regina left and I was living in Hamburg once again. The shapes were still conjoined with my mind, but I had grown used to them, I suppose. I visited you and Ellie. After lunch, we perambulated, and we stopped at your factory. You showed me the innovations in the workshop in Steinway Village. In the showroom, there was a new model, the largest grand piano I had ever seen. When you asked the piano maker to open the lid, we all drew near. We peered into the piano's belly. And there it was, once again: your piano's strings were the dark lines standing in even array, the shapes of the Nikolaikirche, the shapes of my dreams.

Time, as I said, is strange up here. I have seen Bertha in the distance, her own limbs formed of mist and wind. I haven't spoken with her yet; it is up to the atmospheric humors to bring us near each other. One learns to trust that when time is never ending, every possibility is an eventuality. I am finally free of my shapes, though. Perhaps because I can see them everywhere from above the Earth. College Point itself is made of lines, even rows of vertical lines reaching for the bay.

Mary Mattingly

Continent, 2011

Chromogenic dye coupler print

40 x 40 inches (101.6 x 101.6 cm)

The steamer *General R. Slocum* burned and sank on June 15, 1904. Some passengers survived, but most burned or drowned in what would be New York City's worst disaster prior to September 11, 2001.

NORTH BROTHER ISLAND

North Brother Island inhabits twenty acres in the East River, lying almost equidistant from Rikers Island and the Port Morris section of the Bronx. In its present state, the island is covered with vines and trees that practically swallow up the skeletal ruins of a slew of abandoned buildings. It is completely off-limits to the public now, but in the past, the island was either a refuge or a hell for those suffering from various afflictions.

In the late 1800s, New York City was stricken with numerous infectious diseases, including smallpox, cholera, yellow fever, typhus, and typhoid fever. In 1885, the city assumed control of North Brother Island in order to build an expanded Riverside Hospital, which had outgrown its current site on Blackwell's Island. Great waves of immigration brought yet more infectious disease patients, and the hospital expanded several times. At the turn of the century, the hospital expanded yet again to accommodate victims of tuberculosis and a polio epidemic that in the summer of 1916 claimed approximately two hundred victims per week, about ninety percent of them under the age of ten.

Typhoid Mary was North Brother Island's most infamous resident. Mary Mallon was a healthy-looking, hard-working immigrant and carrier of typhoid fever. In 1907, an epidemiologist named George Soper was investigating a typhoid outbreak in a family where Mallon had been a cook. He traced her career back to 1900 and discovered a succession of outbreaks that had originated in homes where Mallon had worked. She was, it turned out, a healthy carrier. Since she showed no symptoms of typhoid herself, she couldn't believe she was spreading disease and thought herself unjustly persecuted. When Soper asked for blood and stool samples, Mallon became enraged, threatening him with a kitchen fork and barricading herself from the police. She was apprehended a few hours later and confined to North Brother Island to live in isolation with only a dog for a companion. She was released in 1910, on the condition that she not cook or handle food for others. For the next two years, Mallon worked in various hotels and restaurants using aliases, until twenty-five people at Sloane Maternity Hospital contracted typhoid fever and "Mrs. Brown" was found to be Mary Mallon. In 1915, the Board of Health declared her a public menace, and she was again sentenced to North Brother Island, where she remained until her death in 1938.

North Brother Island was also the site of a terrible tragedy. On June 15, 1904, bodies began washing up on her shores. Some were alive, but most had burned or drowned in what would be New York City's worst disaster prior to September 11, 2001: the sinking of the *General R. Slocum* steamship. The "limp, charred bodies were laid out in long rows among the grass" according to *Munsey's Magazine*.[2] There were six hundred by midnight and more than four hundred still in the river, almost all women and children of German descent who had set out that morning for their annual picnic on Long Island. Early in the voyage, children complained of smelling smoke, but were hushed by their parents and ignored by the crew. When the captain finally acknowledged the emergency, he ordered the ship to go full steam ahead to North Brother Island. The wind and speed hastened the spread of the flames and made it impossible for tugs and fireboats to catch up. Onboard the ship, the neglected fire hoses were rotten and burst upon use. All but one of the lifeboats had been nailed down, and many of the thirteen-year-old cork-filled life jackets disintegrated in the water.

After World War II, the island began to house healthy boarders from the overflow of dormers at local colleges such as Columbia University, City College, and Fordham University, enrollment of which had swelled from the GI Bill. By 1952, the city reclaimed the island, adapting the hospital's old tuberculosis pavilion into a rehabilitation center for teen drug addicts as an alternative to jail sentences. Problems arose with racial tension amongst the patients and corruption among staff members who accepted bribes and prostitution from the patients in exchange for drugs. Insufficient funding left the grounds poorly maintained and overgrown with weeds. The island became a hopeless place where many attempted escapes ended in drowning.

Riverside Hospital finally closed, and the island was abandoned in 1963. The city has offered it for sale a few times, and many ideas for its future have been tossed around, but none of the plans have come to fruition. The island is now governed by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation as a sanctuary for birds, including black crowned night herons, great and snowy egrets, and glossy ibis, all making their homes amongst the ruins.

Top: Bodies from the *General R. Slocum* catastrophe on the shore of North Brother Island. Over a thousand people, most of them women and children, perished. **Bottom:** Riverside Hospital in winter, c. 1930. The hospital cared for patients suffering from typhus, typhoid fever, smallpox, cholera, and yellow fever. This was not a hospital for wealthy patients, but for the indigent and derelict of New York City.

"TYPHOID MARY"

MOST HARMF

The Extraordinary Predicament of Mary Mallon, a Prisoner on New York's Quarantine Hospita

By Dr. Wm. H. Park, New York Board of Health.

The Extraordi and Dis

The Official

Some

Mary Mallon, the Foreground Figure, Resting in Her Cot in the Convalescent Ward.

Top: This article on Typhoid Mary (Mary Mallon) appeared in the *New York American* on June 20, 1909. **Bottom:** This is the one-room cottage where Typhoid Mary lived out her days with her canine companion. The cottage overlooks the East River, but the inland side has no windows.

Bodies by the Sea

Elizabeth Gaffney

September 15, 1907
Blue and bright white, a sparkling day. I am out of gray yarn.

Sometimes she daydreamed of bodies washing ashore as she sat in her chair by the window.

The boat had sunk three years ago, long before she ever came to North Brother. That was the first time Mary'd heard of the island. A thousand women and children drowned or burned when the steamer *Slocum* went down.

She glanced over to see if the dog, Tyrone, could see them, smell them, but no. He slept on, twitching and groaning.

She stared out the windows at the view: riverscape, cityscape, skyscape vaster than the city itself permitted. Not quite the coast of Ireland, what with the oil tanks just across the water, in the Bronx, but still the air was good and damp enough to let the skin breathe. And here she sat, leading a life of indolence, when her mother'd never rested an hour straight.

It was a dream, a life of ease—if only she had chosen it freely. It was a foreign prison, which might have been tolerable if only Freddie were there with her. They might have enjoyed the solitude together. If only Carrie Bowen weren't out there skipping along the shore like it was the coast of Maine, counting the bodies the way she used to count anything—lobster boats, seagulls, lady's slippers—practicing her numbers. Four hundred and eighty, four hundred and eighty-one, four hundred and eighty-two. Mary tried to calculate how many minutes it would have taken the child to count to a thousand.

She wondered how she was going to survive without any company other than ghosts. Reading, knitting, housekeeping—for what? As for cooking, she could hardly bring herself to do it, just for herself. Only such a very few of all the people she'd cooked for in her time had ever taken ill. People did take sick, just on their own, after all. It was the doctors' own fault if they couldn't help poor Carrie, but Mary was the one who'd been made to seem the devil. And now here she was, forbidden even to break bread with anyone.

There were twelve windows to her panorama, nine panes each, making 108 little windowlets. She'd counted them and she'd cleaned them with sheets of the *New York Times* that was brought over daily on the ferry, once she'd read every word. Flashing in the sun, the windows wrapped around three sides of her small cottage. You couldn't ask for a brighter or airier place. It was almost a cure for the loneliness. She looked at the sweater in her knitting basket, still short an arm and no yarn left. More was on the way, but for now, she got out her tatting instead and peered through loops of white thread at her own hand.

November 2, 1907
Greenish and greasy, like dishwater, overcast. A strange woman is knocking at my door.

She peered through loops of white thread—the curtains she'd tatted—at a strange woman's face.

"May I come in?" said the visitor. "I've brought you a parcel."

"Just set it down on the step," said Mary.

"But I'd like to speak with you, too, if I might. Would you walk with me to the ferry landing? It isn't cold."

"Oh, I see. You're a nurse. They haven't given up on the samples, after all. Are you shy or just too tactful to ask up front?" It made her sick, what the doctors wanted from her, a scoop of her

Joel Meyerowitz

North Brother Island, 2006

C-print

24 x 30 inches (61 x 76.2 cm)

Joel Meyerowitz

North Brother Island, 2006

C-print

24 x 30 inches (61 x 76.2 cm)

own waste everyday. She had refused to comply.

"I don't know about samples, Miss Mallon. I'm nothing to do with samples."

"What *are* you to do with, then?" asked Mary, curious in spite of herself, and wrapped her stole more firmly around her shoulders.

"I do work at the hospital, but I'm only here to be sociable. I heard about you, being in quarantine. You see, I've already had the typhoid myself."

"Have you then?" She reached for the knob, turned it, and stepped out the door.

It was a warm day, for fall. The stones crunched beneath their feet.

"I'm on the children's ward. I gather you've worked with children."

"Naturally, when the families I worked for had them, I fed them, washed them, scolded them when they needed it, and put them to bed at night."

"We have many children here, in quarantine. They need someone to visit them, teach them, care for them."

"Is that what you do, you teach? I thought you were a nurse."

"I am a nurse. They need more care than we nurses have time for."

"Are you asking something of me?"

"We could use your help."

"You don't worry I'll make them sick then? The others do."

"They're sick already. What they need to heal is time and kindness."

"Who says I'm kind?"

"What you are is *here*. You're here when their mothers can't be."

"I've never been sick a day in my life, you know. I'm not sick now. I'm as strong as an ox. It's a travesty."

"Consider this: It's like a gift to them that you are. That's the wonder of it."

"Some wonder, locked up on quarantine island."

"You must be so bored, with just your needlework and your magazines."

"I've got Tyrone, haven't I?" Mary said, nodding her chin at the yellow dog that walked beside them.

"I'm Addie, Adelaide Offspring."

"Are you, then? Good for you. I don't guess I need any introduction."

"No, Miss Mallon. You're known to me. That's why I came."

January 2, 1908

A cold, pale sky, like shreds of white lace on the ceiling of the heavens.

"I came to say how pleased I am. How well it seems to be going—your work with the children."

"Milk and two sugars, isn't it?" asked Mary.

"Why yes, that's right. Thank you."

"I never forget how a person takes her tea," said Mary.

"So, how are the children? Are you enjoying them?"

"Oh, well. Some of them are brats, and some are lovely. That's just children for you. I like a little girl called Gwendolyn more than most. I'd like to see her make it home."

Addie smiled. "She might yet."

"Best thing would be for her to be home, with her mother."

"Speaking of which, how stands your appeal?"

"I wrote to the judge again. I told him I sailed to this country for my freedom, not to live in a jail when I've done no crime."

“That’s a pity, but you must keep it up, Mary. Eventually, they’ll see how unfair it is. It smells good in here.”

“It’s a raisin tart,” she said, thinking about Carrie Bowen, whose favorite it had been. And then she hesitated. “Care for a slice?”

“Yes, thank you. I would.”

“It’s too cold to walk today, I think. Would you care to play a game?”

“That would be lovely. Backgammon?”

They set up the board, each with their pieces on the other’s side, and moved them round in opposite directions toward their separate homes. Mary, as ever more ruthless, was willing to step on Addie’s men when they stood alone. It wasn’t that Addie didn’t care to win, but she couldn’t bring herself to send Mary, who was so trapped, there on North Brother Island, back to the start.

When Mary won, she smiled.

“Would you cut me another slice of that tart, Mary?” asked Addie. “It’s delicious.”

January 25, 1908

The sky is oatmeal today, dull and lumpy, snow coming.

“Cut me another, Mary,” begged Gwennie, holding up the chain of paper dolls, little boys in short pants joined at the toes and the hands. “But make it girls this time—girls in dresses, with pigtails!”

“Oh, you! Girls are more difficult, you know.” But she’d always cut out girls for Carrie Bowen. She could do them just as deftly and quickly as any other figures. Her reluctance came from elsewhere. It was the last chain she’d made for Carrie, the one the girl had colored in so carefully, when she was ill—collars on their dresses and rosy cheeks and all. They were perfect in a way that paper dolls weren’t meant to be. Mary had crumpled them and watched them flare up in the grate when she was cleaning the sick room, afterward. She hadn’t cut out paper girls since then.

“Please, Miss Mary, won’t you try?”

So Mary folded another sheet of newsprint like an accordion and took up her small sewing scissors. Snip, snip. It didn’t take her long. She handed one end to Gwennie, took the other herself and shook the cutouts gently till they bridged the gap between them like a merry gang of schoolgirls, all black and white, their heels and skirts flying in the wind.

“When can *I* go outside and play, Mary?”

“Soon enough. It’s too cold now, but soon enough. First you need to rest, rest and drink your broth, little one.”

Gwennie was feverish and shallow of breath. Her hands were translucent. She couldn’t make it to the toilet, much less the door to go outside and play.

Mary thought of Fred, as always, and of the child she and Fred might have had, if she hadn’t been carted off. She’d always fancied a daughter, a girl who would grow up like Carrie or Gwennie, sweet and pretty and clever enough (just not too)—but not sickly. She’d cared for too many sick children in her life. She knew a child of her own would have been strapping and healthy.

She thought of the letter she’d written Fred the week before. Returned to sender. He’d moved on and not informed her. Maybe he had him a new girl. Why wouldn’t he, sharp man like Fred with his wavy black hair, those deep-cut lips and dark eyes. If they’d married, would it have gone any different? She wondered. They’d talked of marriage, but the truth was, it wasn’t easy for a married girl to get work in the better houses. People wanted girls, not women.

He wouldn’t have come with her, even if he had been allowed. She knew that. It wouldn’t have been enough for him, the quiet life on the island. Anyhow, they were strict about it. No

Joel Meyerowitz

North Brother Island, 2006

C-print

30 x 24 inches (76.2 x 61 cm)

visitors. No visitors at all to North Brother Island. Now she pined on the weekends when Addie wasn't there to discuss the news or play backgammon.

Mary didn't know why she enjoyed playing against Addie so much. Addie always let her win, like she was some child. Every time, she told Addie, *Play for the win, this time, or it won't be any fun*.

March 2, 1908

White ice rimming the dark channels. Gwennie passed in the night.

It wasn't a surprise. She was dressed to be buried with the best of Mary's tatted lace collars round her neck.

Addie and Mary walked all that morning, round and about in as good a circuit as they could hope to do on their rotten little island with its overgrown shores and icy crusts of snow, not to mention the raspberry prickers, which seemed to have been sharpened by the ice.

Once they were back at the cottage, Mary opened the package Addie always brought on Mondays: sundries such as thread and yarn, according to what Mary had ordered—it was more gray wool, more sweaters for orphans—and the Sunday paper, but this time also a piece of mail.

It was from Fred. He'd been in jail. For nothing much, pickpocketing. *I dreamed of you, when I found the wherewithal to dream, in that place with its walls of stone and bars*, he wrote. He wrote that he knew now what it was like to be cooped up. *We were together, in our separate prisons, for that while. Did you feel it too?*

When she finished the letter, she thought a moment and then read it aloud to Addie.

"You know, I envy you," she said.

"How could you envy me, a prisoner without free will?"

"Because you have love."

"I haven't his flesh. I haven't his child. I haven't even his company, damn it all," she said. "All I have is the thought of him."

"And me," said Addie.

"And you."

February 19, 1910

Pink, orange, blue and flaming gold. Is it possible I'll miss this view?

Mary Mallon was quarantined on North Brother Island from 1907 to 1910, after being identified as the cause of several typhoid outbreaks in and around New York City. On North Brother Island, she met and was befriended by Adelaide Jane Offspring, a nurse who worked at the quarantine hospital. Mallon repeatedly petitioned for release from custody and was eventually granted her freedom in 1910, on the condition that she never again work as a cook. In 1915, during a typhoid outbreak among the patients at Sloane Hospital for Women, she was discovered working in the kitchens under the name of Mrs. Brown. Mallon, who never believed she was a vector of the disease, was arrested and returned to her cottage quarantine for the remainder of her life. The friendship between Mary Mallon and Adelaide Offspring lasted from 1907 to Mallon's death on the island in 1938. Offspring, who was retired by then, returned to the island to nurse Mary Mallon in her last week of life.

A version of "Bodies by the Sea" was published in Conjunctions*, Issue 66, Spring 2016.*

Eugene de Salignac, *Blackwell's Island Bridge from Ravenswood Shore*, 1907. The Blackwell's Island Bridge was renamed the Queensboro Bridge in 1909 and in 2011 was officially renamed the Ed Koch Bridge. Ravenswood was a quiet and exclusive hamlet of the village of Newtown, bordering the East River in what is now Long Island City.

BLACKWELL'S ISLAND

Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Island) is a long, slender slice of land in the middle of the East River, running lengthwise between Manhattan and Queens. It spans the length of 51st and 88th Streets in Manhattan. Dutch settlers named it Hog's Island, having purchased the land from Native Americans as a fine place to let their pigs graze. It then changed hands several times before Robert Blackwell acquired it in 1717. The farmhouse of one of his descendants, James Blackwell, still stands a few blocks north of the Ed Koch Bridge, formerly the Queensboro Bridge. Until a subway tunnel was built in 1989, the best way to get to Roosevelt Island was from the Manhattan side via an elevated tramway suspended high above the river by cable.

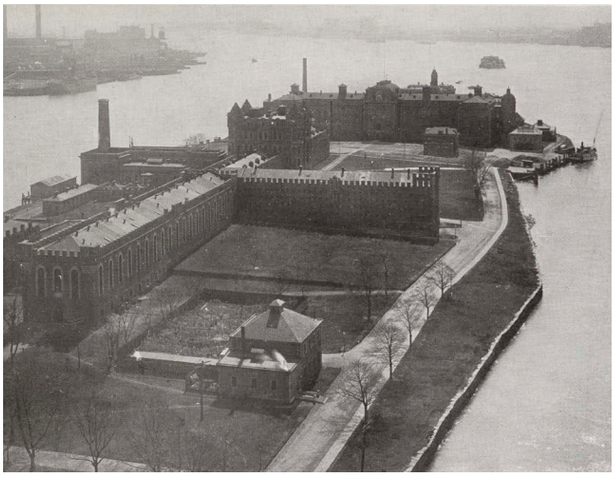
For almost two hundred years, the island housed New York City's main penitentiary, as well as a number of other "correctional" institutions. The city purchased the island for $30,000 in 1828, and in 1832 Blackwell's Penitentiary was erected. Inmates were made to work in either the workhouse shops or in one of the other city institutions that had also been built on the island, including the Penitentiary, Charity Hospital, Alms House, Hospital for Incurables, and the Asylum for the Insane. The Gothic revival ruins of the Smallpox Hospital still stand at the southern end of the island. This facility was built in 1854 and was the only hospital dedicated to treating the disease at that time. All of the island's buildings, as well as its surrounding seawall, were erected by convicts.

In his *Lights and Shadows of New York Life*, James D. McCabe, Jr., describes the penitentiary: "The entire building is exceedingly strong. The floors are of stone, and the stairway and doors of iron. The convicts are clothed in a uniform of striped woolen garments, and are supplied with a sufficient amount of bedding and with an abundance of excellent but plain food. The allowance is about one pound of beef, and a quart of vegetable soup at dinner, ten ounces of bread at each meal, and one quart of coffee at breakfast and supper, to each man."[3]

By the late 1800s, the island became associated with poor conditions, abuse, drug dealing, and scandal. A brave twenty-three-year-old journalist named Nellie Bly (Elizabeth Jane Cochran) convinced her editors at the *New York World* to let her get herself committed to the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum so as to investigate conditions. She called it a human rat trap, writing that it is easy to get in, but once there, impossible to get out. She wrote of abusive nurses, neglectful doctors, and inedible food. Her articles were later published in a book, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*.

In an effort to change the island's image, New York City made a number of improvements and in 1921 renamed it Welfare Island. On at least one occasion, Welfare Island hosted a celebrity guest. On April 19th, 1927, Mae West was sentenced to ten days in the women's workhouse and fined $500. According to the *New York Times*, West, who was both co-author and star, was accused of giving an obscene performance of the play *Sex* at Daly's Sixty-Eighth Street Theatre. She was charged with violating Section 1140a of the Penal Code, because the play was thought to corrupt the morals of youth and others. Judge Donellan stated that he had lived all his life in the theatrical district and had never felt that the success of the stage depended on the capitalization of filth. He went on to state that New Yorkers are not a puritanical people, but a moral community, calling New York the most moral city in the universe. Upon completing her ten-day term, West declared that her imprisonment gave her material for a dozen plays, and, as a final gesture, she endowed the prison library.

The island was renamed after president Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1973 and was transformed into a residential community, its master plan designed by Philip Johnson. Another celebrated architect, Louis Kahn, designed a memorial park dedicated to FDR named the Four Freedoms Park, which finally opened late in 2012, nearly forty years after Kahn's death. Kahn's spare design is paired somewhat incongruously with a colossal disembodied head of FDR based on a 1933 sculpture by Jo Davidson. Roosevelt originally stated the Four Freedoms in his historic January 6, 1941, State of the Union address: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Excerpts of the speech are carved into the granite that surrounds the sculpture of his head.



Top: Blackwell's Island Penitentiary prior to demolition, 1935. **Bottom left:** W. H. Davenport, *The Dark Cell*, 1866. By the late 1800s, the island had become associated with poor conditions, abuse, drug dealing, and scandal. **Bottom right:** This view of the south end of Blackwell's Island, looking southeast, shows the Penitentiary in the foreground, and Charity Hospital and Smallpox Hospital in the background.

Top left: Nellie Bly, c. 1890. Her courageous journalism exposed the horrific conditions at the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum. **Top right:** Mae West as Diamond Lil, 1928. In 1927, West was sentenced to ten days in the Welfare Island women's workhouse for corrupting the morals of youth. **Bottom:** Drug-addicted youth at Roosevelt Hospital with a record player, c. 1950–60. The young man holds an album of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 in B minor, "Pathétique." The hospital's rehabilitation program was part of a new, less punitive, and more therapeutic approach to treating addiction. The most documented problem of the time was narcotics abuse.

House from the Bottom

Amy Shearn

The rent is cheap on Roosevelt Island, née Welfare Island, née Blackwell's Island, née Varkens Eylandt, née Minnehanonk. Right away the mother commiserates with the spine of land, its smartphone-Googled history. She, too, has gone through several different selves.

When the mother steps off the MTA tram—her son shrieking with delight at the surreal flight over the river—she feels certain she's exited the city. How is there anything left to discover? And yet they have been transported to a town outside of time, like something from one of those dubbed *Twilight Zone* episodes she'd watched as a child, studying for clues about America. There is a chime of doom in the air. A foolish part of her takes comfort in this. Dread has always felt like home.

The mother and the son wander down the center of the silent Main Street. Or maybe they have died. Or maybe she has dreamt that whole previous chapter of her life—the chaos of the city and the affair with her boss at the department store—had that only been a Dinko Šimunović novel, read years ago in school and regurgitated in her fugue state?—and her son's birth and the father's departure and her landlord raising the rent and finding this address in the Craigslist ad and looking it up and realizing she'd never even known that people actually lived on this strange island, suspended between boroughs like stray punctuation. She checks her phone for the address as they walk—past a small strip of pizza shop, hardware store, bodega, and then nothing but churches and quiet—but she already knows she will take the apartment. There are some feelings you trust.

The apartment is in most ways correct. The building is Stalinist, lacking in charm. But it's been a long time since she cared about charm. Charm is for people without children. What matters are the two bedrooms, a decent-sized kitchen in which to cook dishes from home—Pašticada, Crni Rižoto, Brudet—fishy concoctions she can occasionally get her son to try. Downstairs, another family with another young son. Outside, a peaceful playground. All in all, a miracle of city real estate. Too good to be true, almost.

It is only at night that the troubles begin.

The island whispers its history in the dark. For a while the mother tries not to listen because, hey. Come on. She isn't crazy. And uncrazy people don't hear islands whispering their histories in the dark. Uncrazy people watch television and eat chips and update Facebook about their great new apartment. She tries that.

Probably the mother is tired. She has just moved, after all, which she's done enough times in New York to know it's always harrowing, but boring. Probably she is only exhausted from working forty hours a week on her feet, squeezing women into shapewear like some demented sculptor, and then picking up her son from ABC, the best daycare she can afford. She is embarrassed to admit that being a single mother is harder than she'd anticipated, that she isn't exactly doing a bang-up job. There are no extra lessons, no baking projects, no trips to the beach. She gets through each day surprised she got through it. And she's pulling herself up by her bootstraps, she is. But bootstraps, as it turns out, lead only to the end of the boot.

Maybe the sound she hears is only one of the other families in the rental tower, a wife grieving, a child on strike. Another crappy relationship like the one she was just in. Maybe it is merely a trick of the wind. It's been years since she lived on such a small spit of land. Maybe she heard it decades ago in Dalmatia and she just can't remember. Maybe her inner ear is imbalanced from all those tram rides. Acoustics change on an island. Wasn't the East River once called the Sound

River? Maybe it has always made its own sounds and it's just that she has never been here to hear.

Finally, having lived in the apartment for a week, having heard the calling nightly, she becomes convinced someone needs her help. What if this is a nightly rape, ritually ignored? She won't be statistical proof of America's cruelty! She leaves her son drooling onto his plush dino and locks the door and dismisses the thought, *That was that, now I will never see that boy ever again*, shakes her head, rides the elevator down and walks out across the flagstone courtyard, past the never-used tennis courts, down the broken sidewalk, toward the hushing shore. She walks like a woman in a movie that the real her would watch muttering, *no, no, NO*. She is a sensible woman, not much given to flights of fancy, not even so whimsical as to purchase the patterned tights they sell in ladies wear.

Her brain scrambles for a way to explain, therefore, the small girl she sees standing at the water's edge, skin blackish in the dusk, white dress, catching the city lights briefly before disappearing.

The mother has lived in this country for ten years, the whole time in the city, and in an old-school attempt to assimilate into her new self she speaks, reads, thinks in English. She parents her toddler in English. She gives him the American name she heard most incessantly on playgrounds when she walked through them on her restless pregnant strolls: Aiden.

She drops off Aiden at daycare an hour before she has to leave for work—she's been shuffled to ladies wear now that Aiden's father, though it seems odd to call him that, finds it unsettling to work alongside her—because the boy has been waking up at a wolfish hour not long after she goes to bed, and frankly, she's a bit tired of him. It's only natural, she tells herself, to need a break between *Now put on your shoes and keep them on!* and *Why don't you try on the 34C and see how it fits?* There is still unpacking to be done, a million to-do's to tick off, but instead she walks the island. It's not as eerie as it is at night. She doesn't see any children screaming into the sound, of course. She probably never did.

She has been reading, reading, reading about the island. Like her, the island's history weighs more heavily than is normal here. Her own life's layers are not so easy to research. For an hour straight after dropping off her son, the mother walks and tries not to think.

She makes discoveries: the chain link fence looped around the ruins of something. Of the smallpox hospital. Because she is a mother now, she fights the temptation to scale the fence. There is something so familiar about the remains.

At the northeast tip of the island sits a stone lighthouse. No one knows exactly who built the structure, though she learned from a trip to the Roosevelt Island Historical Society that there are legends of nineteenth-century madmen from the asylum constructing forts and preparing for battles their tortured minds saw coming. Googling as she walks, the mother learns that for years a stone nearby was inscribed:

This is the work
Was done by
John McCarthy
Who built the Light
House from the bottom to the
Top All ye who do pass by may
Pray for his soul when he dies.

Spencer Finch

The River That Flows Both Ways (Hudson River, June 12, 2008; Early Morning Effect 9:20 am, Late Morning Effect 11:29 am, Noon Effect 12:10 pm, Afternoon Effect 3:54 pm, Evening Effect 1:08 pm), 2011

Pigment-infused handmade paper

Five panels, each 18 x 24 inches (45.7 x 61 cm)

The mother closes her eyes at the tip of the island, tries to imagine the then of it. Even now, in the salty tidal straight, hunkered down like a turtle that lost steam halfway up the road, sits the island. On the island are the city's castoffs. It's a tidy way to do it. Lunatics in the Octagon, smallpox at the hospital, criminals at the prison, the poor at the almshouse. The brick buildings hulk in the grass, as if dropped by giants. Only the most perfunctory of roads snakes from one to the next. A lighthouse. Forbidding fences. And now, the orphans. There is no clearer way the city could express how it feels about these children. Barricades corral them, as if the children might leap into the water and pray for a merciful mermaid, a hungry narwhal, a pirate ship looking for recruits. As if any of them had that much hope left.

There is no bridge. Prisoners attempt escape now and then, lured into the river by a cool breeze flickering over them as they break rocks, quarrying the very stones used to build the seawall that keeps them apart from the world, the breeze like a woman calling, *Come, come*. But to escape you have to swim.

There is no tram. To get up, to get into the air, you must ascend the spiral staircases of the Octagon tower, in that asylum Nellie Bly infamously exposed in 1877. But to ascend you have to somehow struggle out of a straitjacket, wrench free from your chains, be released from your cell.

At night, when her son goes to sleep, the mother reads Nellie's book *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, glowing on her cracked Samsung smartphone, in her bedroom with all the lights off. Nellie writes: "I looked at the pretty lawns, which I had once thought was such a comfort to the poor creatures confined on the Island, and laughed at my own notions. What enjoyment is it to them? They are not allowed on the grass—it is only to look at. I saw some patients eagerly and caressingly lift a nut or a colored leaf that had fallen on the path. But they were not permitted to keep them. The nurses would always compel them to throw their little bit of God's comfort away. As I passed a low pavilion, where a crowd of helpless lunatics were confined, I read a motto on the wall, 'While I live I hope.' The absurdity of it struck me forcibly. I would have liked to put above the gates that open to the asylum, 'He who enters here leaveth hope behind.'"

Is it any wonder the island is haunted? Overpopulated with the worst kind of ghosts—madwomen and criminals and starved children—changelings and rusalkas and kelpies and nixies—watery, shifting beings with unseeing eyes. Spirits so accustomed to being trapped they don't even attempt to float across the river; like cats who don't think to walk through a door even when the screen is missing.

"What a mysterious thing madness is," Nellie wrote.

One of the other women at the playground suggests it. The mother is chagrined. Why did she mention the wailing at night, the figure at the shore? Why did she have to say the word "ghost"? That might have been fine back home but Americans hate death. She should have known better.

The one who says it is Alex's mother, a pretty black woman who has married an ugly white man. This Aiden's mother will never understand, but oh well. They have no good way to talk about race in this country, even after all they have been through. The mother has learned that unless you want to be thought racist, you are meant to pretend you don't notice it exists. Alex's mother furrows her brow, says, "Maybe it would be good to have someone to talk to?"

"You mean, you've really never heard it? So much bad stuff happened on this island, you have to admit that." The mother usually speaks with almost no accent at all, but when she is upset, like now, it shines through like a flashlight under a sheet, and it unsettles people without

them even knowing it; it makes her sound spooky and other. She hears her accent slipping out and regrets having spoken at all.

The other mothers look away. Alex's mother hands her a card. Her own therapist, a wonderful woman. This is America, this is 2015, and going to talk to someone doesn't mean you are crazy. It only might help. She's been under so much stress, the mother has.

But she knows where this is headed. Her walks have become nightly. Her walks have become *crazy*. Even she can see that. Thankfully Aiden is a sound sleeper, their building seems sturdy and safe. Because every night now she walks across the island and all along the shore; the mother knows, if you listen hard enough, stories are washing up with every tide. The little girl, yes, but the imprisoned men too, and the lunatic women. You can rename the island, you can repossess the ruins. But the ghosts of New York City get spiritual rent control. With ghosts there is simply nothing to be done.

The nice ladies who run ABC daycare wonder about the environment at home. Aiden seems very emotional, they say. He is very sensitive. The mother does not say, "And why is that a problem? Aren't we all humans? Wouldn't it be more troubling if he lacked feeling, like the rest of you robots?" The mother does not say, "His father." She nods and assures them everything is okay, perhaps he is unsettled by the move. Possibly it is the aggressive ghosts squatting on this island. No, she doesn't say that. She smiles and thanks them for their concern.

She has always tried to be easygoing because she thought people would find her agreeable and then want to help her. She thought that was what Americans did. But now she thinks maybe she's just been confused by all the smiling they do here, all that gratuitous grinning. Now the mother has a sudden thought: can it be that she has been wrong all along? Acting in a way she thought was easy-going, has it merely given people permission to dismiss her? Has she been wrong about herself all this time?

She watches Aiden's cartoons with him, feeds him the plain noodles that are all he accepts this week, gives him a bath, puts him to bed. She sings lullabies in his ear until he is asleep. Then she slips out of the apartment, into the light early-fall rain, walking quickly and quietly toward the shore, stopping to lift a nut or a fallen leaf.

Sure enough, there it is, there she is, the girl who weeps by the sand. The mother moves toward her like a guard, cocky and full of authority. The night sky is never very dark in the city, and tonight an orange haze illuminates the skyline. There is Manhattan, just out of reach. On either side of Roosevelt Island rushes the East River. Standing on the bank one can see the opposite shores, articulate with detail. The mother forgets, usually, that they too are islands. Of course we are all islands in our own ways but also literally they are literal islands: Manhattan a knobby handless arm, Long Island feinting east like a severed leg.

A hundred and fifty years ago, the prisoners could watch the rich cruising past on pleasure crafts. So the lunatics could enjoy the currents musically shunting trash barges out to sea. So the city's poor, impressing even Charles Dickens with the horrors of their workhouse, might have stood in the open air on that municipally appointed island refuge, and made out the masts bobbing in the harbor, the freedom flags of others. So the smallpox victims dying in the hospital might have watched smoke curling cozily from chimneys. So a mother could almost see the lights wink off in the midtown department store, in which a handsome boss (his real family tucked in an apartment tower far uptown) woos the next wide-eyed makeup-counter girl. All this looking in on life. Signs written in a language they all can read, saying, Life is elsewhere. Just across the river. Close enough to touch. Entirely out of reach.

50

At the edge of the sand stands the girl, white dress whipping in the wind, black hair. A mother would braid it tight and neat, but there is no mother. There is only the girl. The river is the color of the sky and the sky is the color of a rock.

The mother walks toward her. She keeps walking, waiting for the impact. The mother stands inside the girl now, ice-cold, and can't move. She lives, for an infinite moment, in the girl's head:

Jane has not said a word in thirty days. Jane is ten years old and knows full well how to talk. Sometimes, Dr. Smith says, she doesn't know how to not talk, but no more getting what-for in lessons when she ought to be listening and starts giggling with the girls instead. No more anything. They come to Blackwell's Island and Jane clams up, just like that. If it were another era, someone would say Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or even Depression. But it is 1863, so they say Hysteria, and prescribe rest and drawn curtains; if she were more important she would merit real treatments, like water immersion, spinning stools, electroshock.

Of course Jane can't stay still in the room. The muted light pulls down over her mouth, suffocating as smoke. She stands at the shore and watches the water and beyond the water on one side is Manhattan, where her past lives, and beyond the water on the other side roll the farmlands of Long Island, Queens, and Brooklyn, where her heart lives.

Jane has given up hope the way some men give up drinking. The worst thing has happened. Not the Draft Riots destroying half of Manhattan. Not the fire at the Howard Asylum for Colored Orphans. Not the way grown people burned down their home, because they are orphans, because they are not slaves, because they never will be, because there is no real reason actually but it's even more terrifying to think that there could be no real reason. Smallpox, cholera, yellow fever—none of it is anything next to adults with torches. The flames, the sounds of glass splintering in air, the shouts of the crowd.

By some miracle the mob let them pass. The men and women torched the asylum. Some stormed inside, ransacking the fine chapel and the lovely parlor. Jane can't think about it, can't stop reliving it. She never wants to see what the asylum looks like after all that. One of the smallest girls took a Bible as they raced out. How she wishes that like the child she thought a book would help them. But something does help them. They escape, all of them.

She was made of stone when they passed through the mob. White women, even Irish women from the sounds of their voices, screamed shaming words at the mob, about how they were children, about how the children hadn't done anything. So they weren't stoned or torched or lynched.

Jane didn't look up at any white faces as they went. She held Renie's hand and Renie held her hand. She looked down at her own scuffed boots. She was made of stone. Stone was safe.

Now Jane wants to howl into the wind. She wants to get off this island. What has she done, other than keep living? And this sentence—watching free people boat down the river, seeing the glimmer of Manhattan at night. Dr. Smith tells the children they are safe here, safe until the city settles down and the new orphan asylum can be built. Safe among the swill of the city. Cozy in the garbage heap.

So she won't talk. Not until she is alone by the river. Because after all she is alive, she is not insane, she is not a prisoner, she is not a slave, she is not in the workhouse. Not yet. For now she is a girl and she is free.

The mother turns, runs back up the rocky shore, across the crumbled cobblestones.

The mother is going to stop. She promises herself this time is the last time. She pretends not to have a history of self-destructive behavior. Maybe she used to be silly and credulous, lethally eager to please. But this is the new her, the reinvented her, the island her. This her is the only

sane person here, the Nellie Bly of her own life. This her is different, is in control, cannot be kept down by anyone or anything. This her puts her son to bed and tucks him in with Dino and as soon as she even suspects he is sleeping begins anew her nightly prowls. The island sticks its fingers beneath doors, between casements, beckons. It isn't only the orphan girl of course, not here. Now she hears them from the smallpox hospital, the poorhouse, the asylum. The mother will gather their histories like berries in the basket of a girl in a fairy tale. They always turn out okay in the end. Don't they?

Her heart thuds, terrified and therefore the only sensible part of her. She's read ghost stories. She knows the spooks are symbolic, the ghosts merely psychological quirks materialized, signals that the main character is empty inside. The ominousness is as self-serving as a storefront psychic's generic prediction—*A change is coming*—applicable to anything, anyone, anywhere, signifying nothing.

But she is not empty inside. And nothing is changing. And for the mother whose child is sleeping alone upstairs, nothing is symbolic.

She walks the perimeter of the island. It stretches before her. It grows as she moves. She can walk forever and never reach where she started.

"House from the Bottom" is an altered excerpt from The Keeping Room*, a novel-in-progress.*

Alexander Alland, *Industrial Plants along Queens and Brooklyn Shores of Newtown Creek*, 1939.

NEWTOWN CREEK

Newtown Creek, another of New York City's tidal estuaries, is now virtually lifeless. The creek's bottom is coated with a ten-foot layer of toxic sludge nicknamed "black mayonnaise." The sludge is composed of myriad pollutants, including hydrocarbons, metals, and industrial solvents, as well as naptha and benzene, carcinogens known to cause a variety of neurological problems. Many of these toxins remain in the environment, and the longer they do, the more harmful they are to human health. Long-term effects may be developmental problems or cancer. Like most of the waterways surrounding New York City, Newtown Creek is a tidal estuary that once flowed through wetlands teeming with fish, shellfish, mammals, and birds. In the eighteenth century, Dutch and English families cultivated the area, growing primarily wheat, as well as rye, barley, corn, hemp, flax, tobacco, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. Of particular value was the potato, a crop completely new to the first settlers. The creek was used by these farmers to load and transport their produce to market in nearby New Amsterdam, later New York. In the early nineteenth century, wealthy New Yorkers enjoyed the creek for boating and fishing. According to the Wildlife Conservation Society, before the area became toxic, species dwelling in the Newtown Creek area included gray wolves, beavers, mountain lions, river otters, masked shrews, black bears, heath hens, spotted sandpipers, scarlet tanagers, timber rattlesnakes, spotted turtles, marbled salamanders, green frogs, and northern short-tailed shrews.

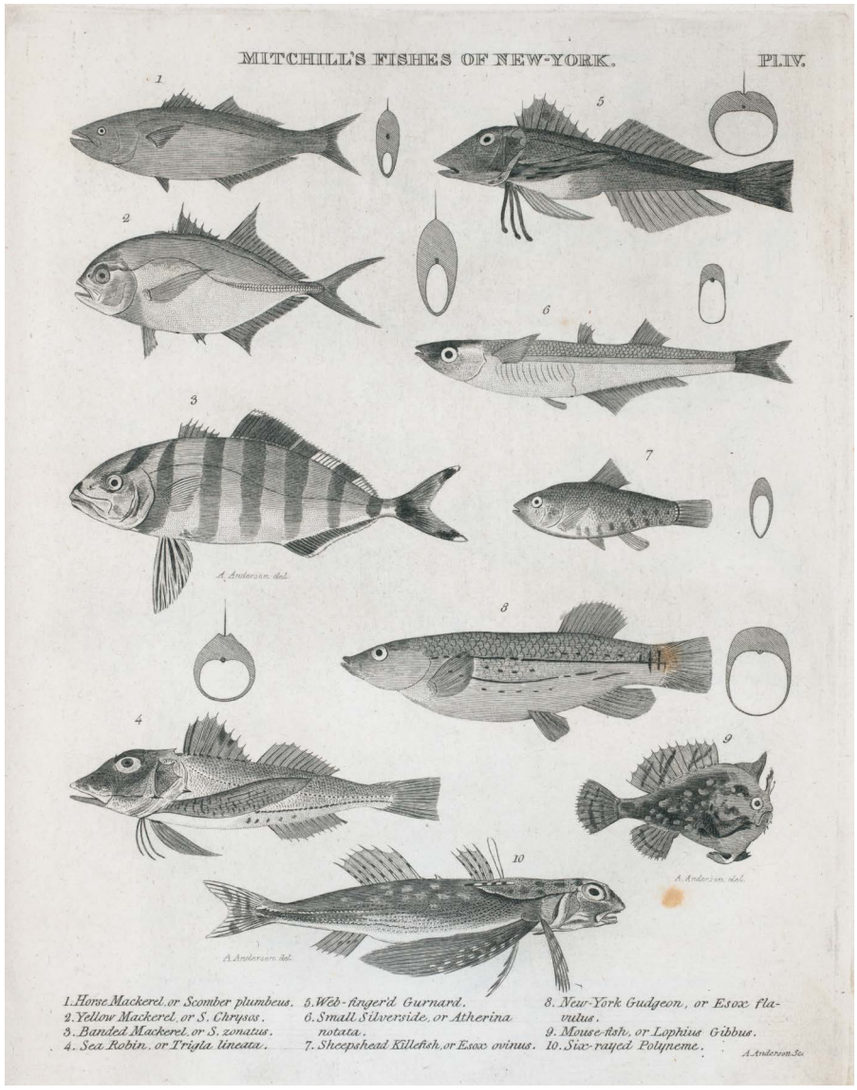
By the mid-1800s, the banks of the creek were lined with industry, the most prominent businesses producing oilcloth, kerosene, coal, paraffin, fertilizers, and lumber. "On warm sunny days, a quivering envelope of nauseous fog hangs above the place like a pall of death," the *New York Times* reported in 1887.[4] In 1891, the 15th Ward Smelling Committee arrived and witnessed liquid and solid, chemical and organic waste from refineries and fertilizer companies being dumped into the water. Rotting carcasses sat unapologetically outside the sausage factory and the dog pound.

In 1919, a huge fire at the Standard Oil Factory released millions of gallons of oil that leached into Brooklyn's water supply. In 1950, there was a massive explosion when chemical vapors spontaneously combusted underground. The blast ripped open a ten-foot-wide hole in the ground, blew twenty-five heavy manhole covers skyward, and shattered the windows in hundreds of buildings. The explosion was considered to be the result of the 1919 Standard Oil fire in combination with years of petroleum and other industrial pollutants leaking or being poured directly into the canal and the soil and pooling underground. Although no one was killed, nothing was done to cap the leak or clean up the spill. Decades later, a Coast Guard pilot flying over the area noticed a huge black plume of oil flowing into the creek, most likely caused by the 1950 explosion.

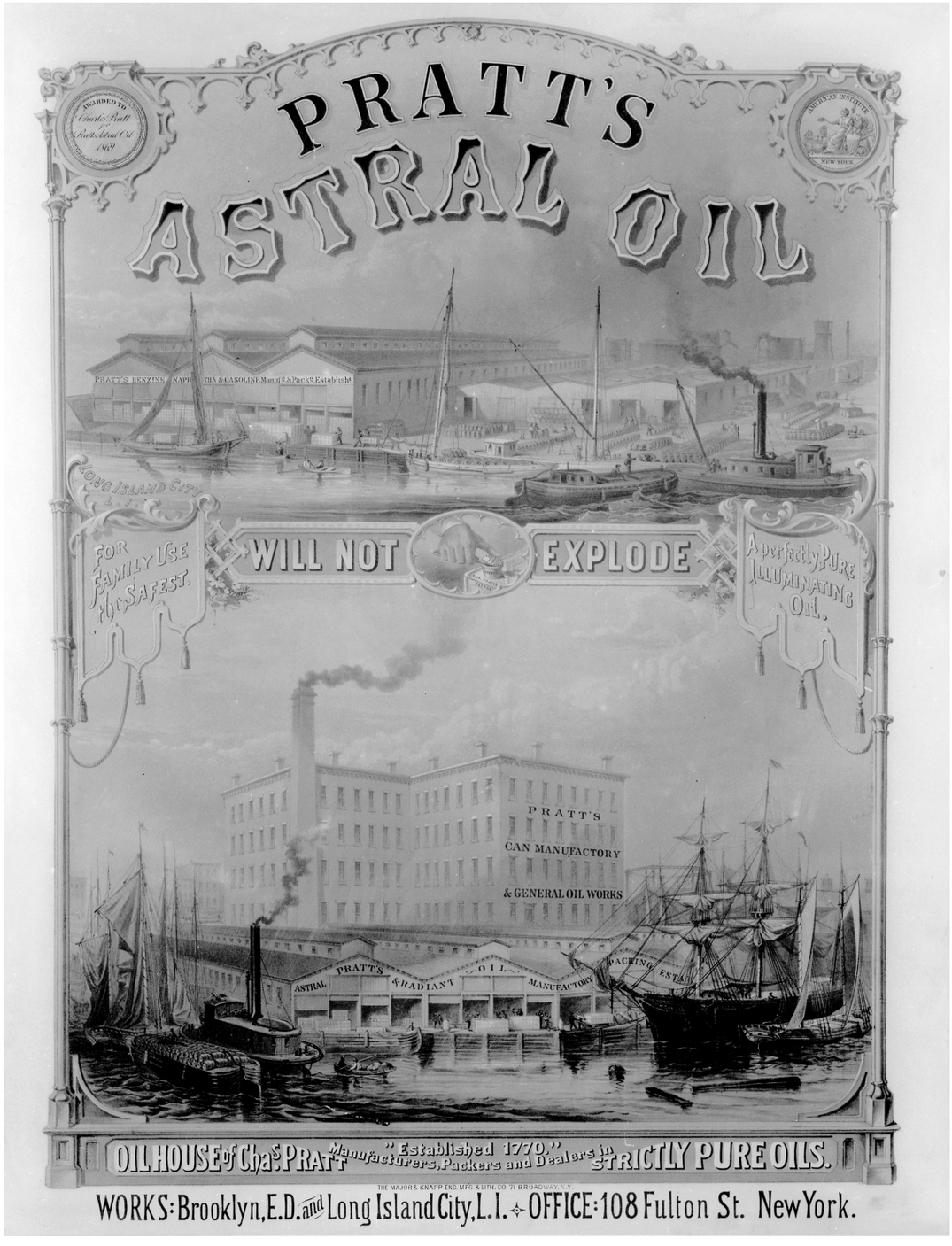
By 2010, this subterranean spill contained from 17 to 30 million gallons of oil and toxins, more than the *Exxon Valdez* and Hurricane Katrina spills combined. Until the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the Newtown Creek oil spill was the largest in U.S. history.

In October 2010, Newtown Creek was designated a Superfund site, a government-mandated cleanup that the EPA estimates will take at least fifteen years and cost over $400 million.[5] Even at this cost, the result will most likely be a partial cleaning, with remaining toxins capped and left undisturbed. In addition to the EPA-led effort, filtering devices to capture trash in the creek are being installed; similar ones have been effective in the Gowanus Canal and the Bronx River. These devices do not, however, help with the toxins and raw sewage clogging and poisoning the creek. As with the New York Harbor and the Hudson River, wildlife will likely return but will continue to be affected by PCBs and mercury, among other pollutants.

Probably the most noteworthy site along the banks of the creek is a cluster of silver domes sitting atop cobalt-colored drums, dramatically illuminated at night. This is the largest of the city's fourteen wastewater treatment plants. The New York City Department of Environmental Protection recruited a group of renowned architects, engineers, and designers, and with citizen oversight created an innovative structure and site. These "Digester Eggs" function somewhat like a human digestive tract, breaking down organic waste into water, carbon dioxide, and methane gas. Their function, along with their shape, has earned them the popular nickname the "shit tits." Lying between the wastewater plant and the creek, artist George Trakas has created a beautifully designed and informative public nature walk.



Top: Aerial view of Newtown Creek, 1966. **Bottom:** An engraving from *Mitchill's Fishes of New York* by Alexander Anderson, published in 1815. These fish once populated the now lifeless Newtown Creek.



Advertisement for Astral Oil, c. 1870. When Astral Oil arrived in 1867, Newtown Creek became the center of the oil refining business. John D. Rockefeller acquired Astral from Charles Pratt and by 1880 controlled over a hundred stills along Newtown Creek, employing two hundred workers and refining three million gallons of crude oil per week. Oil leaked each time petroleum was loaded from still to wharf to schooner. Waste from the distilling process was simply dumped into the creek or into the soil. In 1880, an estimated 300,000 gallons of toxic waste was produced weekly along the creek.

Unfathomable

Bill Cheng

It started with the dreams: almost every night, laying on the foldout next to Hannah. They weren't like normal dreams. He saw things, heard things. Sometimes he'd wake up crying, not knowing why. Hannah found him once in the laundry room, his head propped on the edge of the utility sink. He was babbling. The neck of his shirt was stained with sick. She called to him—"Bobby?"—and he gazed through the blades of light, trying to understand where he was, what he was doing. It'd been this way ever since the move. Hannah's parents let them set up in their basement. He'd brought next to nothing—a duffel of clothes, a backpack with his laptop and charger. To commemorate the day, he scratched together a hundred bucks and took her family out to the city for a steak dinner. In front of everybody—Hannah, her parents, her brother Warren—he got down on one knee and said he knew things would be tough, but he would be there for them.

"You're the only family I need," he said. Everybody cried.

That night Hannah had one of her headaches and went to bed early. He showered and brushed his teeth, then went downstairs. He closed his body around her small form.

This could work, he thought.

Then the dreams came.

He could remember only snatches. A smell, a taste. The feel of something cold and smooth and sharp. He couldn't place it exactly. It crowded behind his eyes: a shape, an idea.

It'd take all day to get himself right. He felt weak, distracted. He'd walk down the street, jaw clenched, the air brittle. In her brother's truck, he took Hannah to her appointments—her internist, her therapist, the radiology lab. He drove her to her support group and sat double-parked, listening to the radio, watching the streetwork. Road crews in hard hats were digging up vacant lots. They cracked through concrete, turning over the yellow earth underneath. In the upper registers of his hearing, he could hear something droning. And it came to him, falling like a bolt. The thing he'd seen.

It was alive beneath the creek.

From the river, a cleft of water tendriled into the borough—a three-mile stretch bulkheaded along a fringe of scrapyards, warehouses, defunct factories. Warren showed him how to get to the waterline. They climbed down eroded earth to a stretch of dirty beach. At low tide, they walked across a carpet of shell matter and wild mussels inflamed over loose rock until the smell turned them back.

He listened to the frequencies over the water, the crystal receiver shivering in his skull.

It was out there. Buried in the silt.

That night over dinner, Hannah's mother told a story:

"When I was a little girl, I had an uncle that used to work at Beechum's. It was on the water. It's tore down now but they used to make soap. They were in all the groceries. Beechum's. My uncle worked in their rendering plant."

The kitchen was small, crowded in by bills and magazines and crossword puzzles. Now and again, Bobby could feel someone's foot under the table clip against his ankle.

"They would get these animal carcasses—cows, and horses and pigs and things—there were these machines that ground them up, then load the bits and ends into these large vats."

"Ma," Hannah said. She closed her eyes and massaged the ridge of her brow. "Please."

"You always knew when they were rendering. You could smell it—my God that smell. You couldn't get away from it. And all the waste, well you just dump it right into the water."

"That's awful," Bobby said. He pushed bits of boiled chicken around on his plate.

"There were a lot of factories back then. Everybody did it. It was just easier. We didn't know any

better. Now we know. Everybody in the neighborhood knows somebody with a problem with their liver or their pancreas or their gall bladder. It's not normal."

"Ma. Can we please."

"I'm not saying anything, Peanut. I'm stating a fact. Everything these days is bad for you. Everything has chemicals in it now. Our food, our clothes. In the soil. But you can't think about it too much. I mean, there's no telling what's going to happen. You just have to live your life. Isn't that right, Bobby? You have to be an optimist."

No one said anything.

Hannah's father worked something over on the inside of his cheek. They watched him, grunting. He reached in with his fingers and set the tooth on the edge of his plate.

Warren set him up doing odd jobs for a set of residential properties in the converted warehouses on the north end of town. They replaced boilers, changed out lights, sorted the trash for pickup. When a tenant died or vacated, they hauled the abandoned possessions to the curb. After work, they'd stop at the donut shop. Sweets hurt his teeth but he liked watching Warren eat. He was a big man with big fingers but he moved them daintily, licking his thumb and tamping bits of powdered sugar off the tabletop.

"We came here a lot as kids—Hannah and me."

He pointed to a spot at the rear.

"We sat right there. We'd have a view to the door so we could see people come in. They were our neighbors, our friends. Everybody knew each other."

At the table now, a pair of grown men mugged with their donuts in front of camera phones. Warren glared and sucked the side of his thumb.

"Now look at this fucking place."

Warren leaned back in his chair and squared off his shoulders.

"There's a poison out there, Bobby. It's killing all of us, surely but slowly."

Bobby said nothing. Out in the street, the light was coming down, and they watched it go.

Everywhere there were signs: on telephone poles, in signal switches and traffic lights and mailboxes and the sides of delivery trucks. He read ancient symbols buried in graffiti—ziggurats, the Eye of Horus, masonic triangles camouflaged in loops and daggers. He bought a notebook and copied the shapes. It was a code. Repeating, alternating. It printed onto his mind—he'd stare and feel the meaning coalesce then dissolve.

He was changing. In the mirror, his skin had turned chalky and the lines deepened around the eyes so that they bulged. He noticed a tenseness whenever people had to talk to him—cashiers, bank tellers, strangers on the street. Even with Hannah, he'd catch her watching him as if she didn't know him at all.

These were the end times.

When her headaches got worse, Bobby took her in for an MRI. On her scans, over the massy florets of her left hemisphere, was a knotted star. He recognized it, though he couldn't say from where. He stared and something in him slotted into place.

On his laptop, he watched videos of oceanographers drifting down shelves of coral and anemone. The ocean floor was a moonscape. They looked like space men. Slow, ponderous in their bubble suits, their visors like the black of an eye.

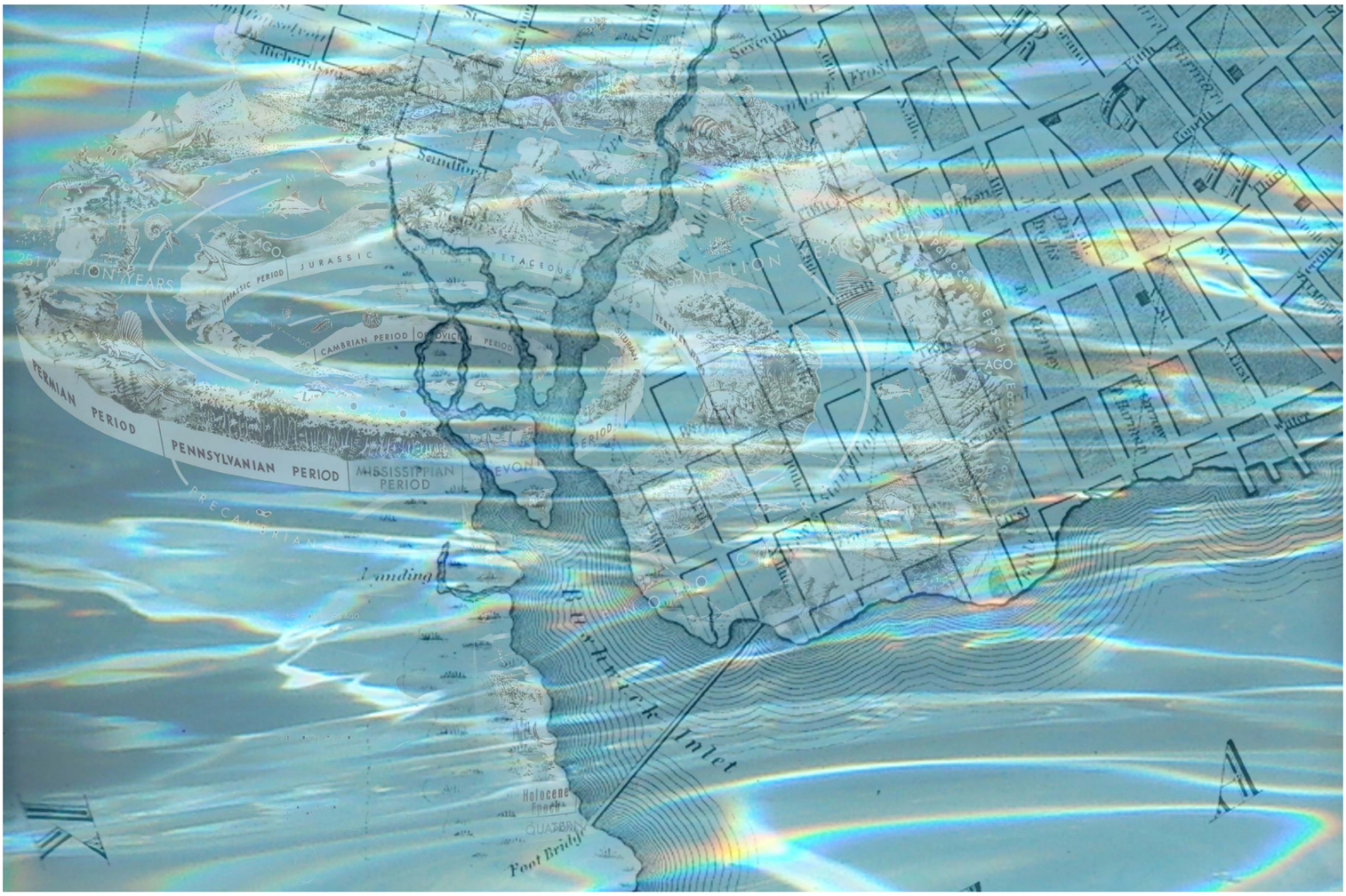
He drew up his plans.

Eve Andrée Laramée

Phelps Dodge Copper Refinery on Newtown Creek from *Finding a Diamond in the Middle of a Muddy Road*, 2013

Ink-jet print

20 x 24 inches (50.8 x 61 cm)



Eve Andrée Laramée

Finding a Diamond in the Middle of a Muddy Road, 2013

Film still

Running time: 6 minutes

He scavenged parts in derelict apartments: raincoats, camping gear, heavy-duty gloves. The landlord didn't care just so long as it was gone. The former tenants had succumbed to age or disease. There was no shortage of medical supplies; they left behind plastic tubing, respirators, oxygen tanks. Bobby would go from room to room, picking through layers of tectonic garbage—stripping wires from television sets, ripping the lining from medical beds.

He posted his sketches on message boards and waited for feedback.

The design was basic. The creek at its deepest was less than twenty feet so the pressure would be minor. The outer skin he made out of stitched sheets of PVC and neoprene, draped it over a skeleton frame he'd made out of a parakeet cage. Inside, he rigged a battery pack to an electric blanket and sewed it into the Mylar lining.

It was calming, laying out the pieces, fitting them together, adjusting the measurements. He sealed the seams with epoxy, then four layers of electrical tape.

He was a warrior—a knight-errant—in his battle armor.

It was hot inside, heavy.

In the shower, he turned the dial as cold as he could get it.

The spray rattled against the patchwork.

He felt nothing.

Hannah walked in on him, startled until he pulled off the helmet.

"What are you doing? What is this?"

He could not explain it; he knew how it would sound. But he was going to save her. He was going to save everyone.

"Take me somewhere," Hannah said. "I just want a day where I don't have to think about anything."

So he took her into the city.

They went to the museum and snuck in popcorn in her handbag. They looked at dinosaur bones, and ice age monsters, and sightless trilobites embedded in stone.

Their time had come, too.

In the Hall of World Cultures, he lost himself in Tibetan death masks, Mayan burial urns, Indonesian funeral shrouds. At the Egyptian exhibit, they got separated and he backtracked through the pressing crowds, panic damming in his chest. He found her alone on the staircase, sitting on the bottom steps. She was pale and fanning herself with her pamphlet.

"Can you get me some water?"

He searched for a vending machine.

Would there be a museum of him and Hannah, frozen in their expressions? Two vague human forms, petrified, under millennia of rock.

When he came back with a bottle of water, she was sweating.

"I'm seeing spots," she said.

"Do you want to go home?"

"I just want to rest a little bit."

He took a seat next to her and massaged her neck.

"Did you shut the door?" she asked.

Bobby looked at her. "What?"

"If you didn't who is going to make me."

"You're not making any sense."

She covered her face with her hands.

"Sorry," she said. "I know. Sorry."

Sleep was for the weak. At night, he'd stay up, make adjustments on his suit, then at three, he'd put on his sweats and go out to the driveway. He did lunges and knee bends and military push-ups. Then he'd run, five miles through the dark into dead ends and blind alleys, along alien streets that ran in strange geometries—not his neighborhood but its shadow twin. His heart drummed hot thick blood. But he felt strong. Capable. At dawn he dosed himself with coffee and Red Bull and went to work. He and Warren went from building to building, fixing the sinks and radiators and toilets of owl-faced hipsters.

One of them wanted a couch moved down a four-story walk-up. Some shrill twenty-something was threatening to withhold the rent until it was down.

"Can you not scuff my walls please."

They joggled the couch through the hall. When she went into the bedroom to take a call, Warren zipped down his coveralls and pissed on the carpet where the couch had been.

That evening, Warren and Bobby's boss, the landlord, came by the house. The man was old and paunchy, and with him were the woman and her husband. They stepped out front to speak.

"That's them," she said.

"These people say you ruined their carpet," the landlord said.

Warren squinted. "Ruined?"

"You. Or you. They urinated on our carpet," she said.

"I don't know what you're talking about, sweetheart."

"They showed it to me, Warren. How do you explain it?"

Warren opened his arms.

"I don't know what this all is. Maybe it was their dog."

The husband scoffed. "We don't have a dog."

"Look, maybe you don't have a dog, maybe you do. I don't know. I don't know if you're on pills or smoking or—"

"Warren, don't come in tomorrow. You or your friend. You don't work for me anymore."

Warren stared at the man.

"Okay."

"Do you understand."

He shrugged and rolled his head to the side. "Okay, I don't work for you anymore."

"I'm sorry, Warren."

After they left, Warren took off in his truck without a word. A few hours later, Bobby got a call.

"Come meet me," Warren said.

"Where are you?"

"I'm parked outside that bitch's building."

They sat and waited.

"What if she doesn't come out?"

"She'll come," Warren said.

The windows fogged, and from time to time, Warren had Bobby wipe the glass with his sleeve.

"Do you believe in evil, Bobby?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you believe that evil exists in the world?"

"Yes," he said.

"And it is the duty of good men to destroy it?"

"What're you going to do to her, Warren?"

"You're a good man, Bobby. You're like me. You recognize evil when you see it, not like most

people. Most people are asleep. They've lived with it so long, they don't even know it's there when they see it."

At eleven, they watched the husband come down the steps with the trash.

Warren got out of the truck and crossed to the building.

Bobby watched.

The man looked at Warren uncomprehendingly, then staggered and collapsed. There was a dull crunch. The man was on the floor, trying to cover his face and neck, while Warren stomped. After five or six minutes, the man stopped resisting. His body lay limp. Warren was red and panting and sweating. He climbed back into the truck, started the engine and drove them both home.

That night, Bobby couldn't get his mind to settle. He sat parked in the driveway, thinking. He stared up at the sky, at god knows what, scanning through the radio stations. He could hear it—its heart beating under the static. It was April and it began to snow. Small specks of white flurried down from heavenward. He turned on the wipers and it smeared a gray arc across the glass. No, not snow, but ash.

He whispered a prayer, a ward against evil, and when he was ready he drove down to the creek, where he could get to the water. He parked the car, then suited up.

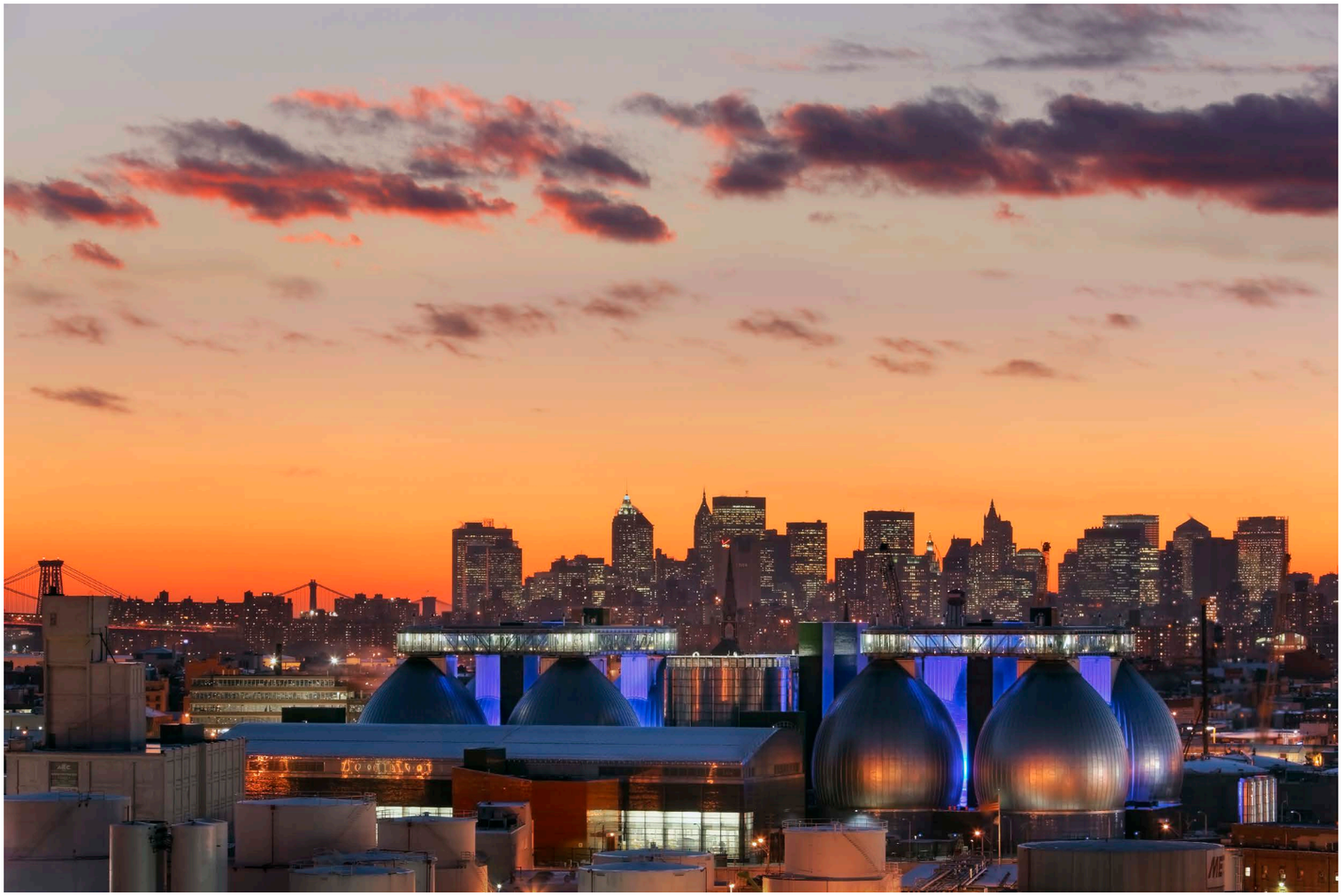
He tested the batteries on his flashlight, turned on the camera inside his helmet.

He was shaking. He lowered himself onto the beach and began walking. For a few yards, the grade was mild. The seams were holding. Then the ground dropped off, and he was submerged, tumbling down through the depths. Even with the flashlight, he couldn't see more than a few inches ahead of him. Then, suddenly, there was the shock of ground, and he said, Oh god oh god okay I'm okay.

The suit held. The visor began to fog and he turned on the heater.

He was getting closer, he was sure. Something large swam up against his legs, then slipped away. He aimed the light in sweeping arcs. Up ahead, a shape glimmered, beckoning him forward. He stepped closer. The light began to falter and he smacked the battery pack. It was in front of him, where it'd always been.

"Hello," he said.



Ennead Architects

Newtown Creek Wastewater Plant, 2009

53 acres

Berenice Abbott, *Oyster Houses, South Street and Pike Slip, Manhattan, April 1, 1937*. The George M. Still and N. P. Housman Oyster companies with piles of oyster shells in front and the Manhattan Bridge above.

SANDY GROUND

It is hard to imagine that what is now the chemically saturated Arthur Kill was once so rich in oysters and other wildlife that it was famous throughout the region as early as the seventeenth century, and by the nineteenth century had become an important part of Staten Island's economy.

A few miles away from Arthur Kill is the community of Sandy Ground, initially established by free black farmers and joined later by oystermen and their families who came up from Maryland in the 1850s. Maryland's free blacks were thought to be a threat to slavery, and harsh laws were imposed to inhibit their growth. Especially affected were black oystermen who were prohibited from owning or captaining their own boats. Many relocated to New York State, where slavery had been abolished in 1827, and settled in southwest Staten Island, where they could continue their livelihood as oystermen. Sandy Ground is located away from the coast, where land was historically cheaper, on high ground halfway between the well-known oyster beds of Prince's Bay to the south and the port of Rossville on Arthur Kill to the west.

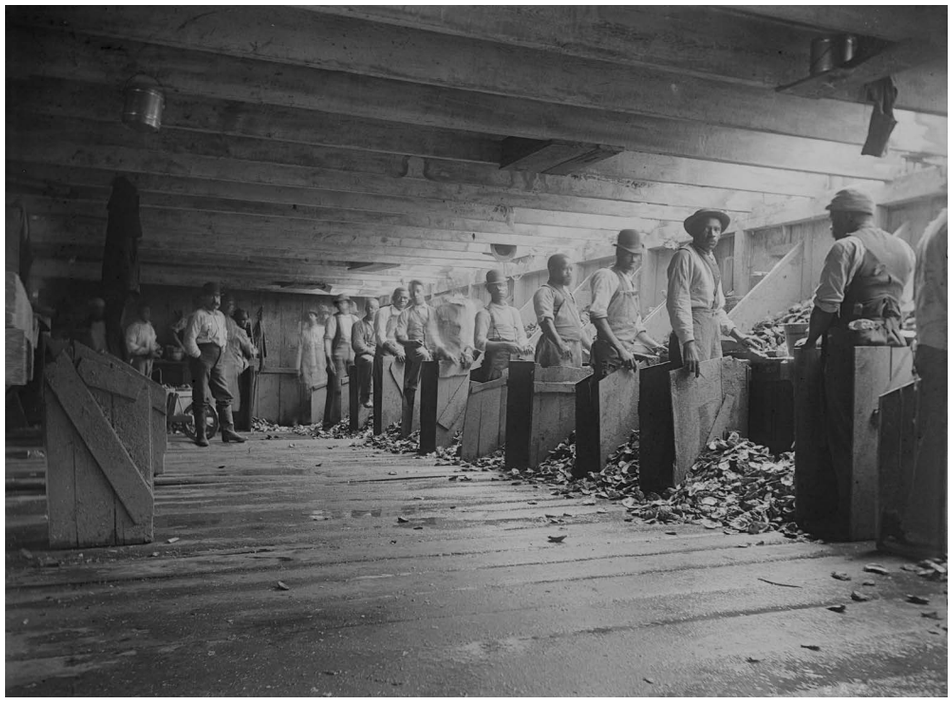
Over time, these families were joined by other escaped and freed slaves from Virginia, Delaware, and the Northeast. Many had escaped impossible situations and greatly appreciated the opportunity to build a strong and prosperous community. The golden age of Sandy Ground was in the 1880s and 1890s, when there was a thriving population of two hundred and over fifty homes.

Sandy Ground is considered the third free black settlement in New York, after Seneca Village—located in what is now Central Park—and James Weeks's property purchased from the Lefferts family in what is now Bedford-Stuyvesant. It has long been thought that Sandy Ground was a station on the Underground Railroad. A 2012 exhibition at the Sandy Ground Historical Museum presented evidence that a well-known Underground Railroad Agent, Louis Napoleon, an associate of the prominent New York abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, had lived in Sandy Ground beginning in 1856.

In 1916, a series of typhoid outbreaks were traced to the oyster beds of the increasingly polluted waters around Staten Island, Atlantic City, Lawrence (Long Island), and other locations. At the time, it was not unusual to "fatten" oysters by temporarily placing them in sewage-polluted waters. Even without efforts to fatten, pollution found its way into the oyster beds, and continuing outbreaks of typhoid and cholera created an "oyster panic." The New York Department of Health ultimately shut down the oyster business, effectively halting the primary income of most of Sandy Ground's residents. Those who stayed adapted—blacksmiths and ironworkers now created tools for farming and building; others went to work in factories. In 1963, a terrible fire destroyed many of the homes, hastening the community's decline.

In 1974, Sandy Ground was given landmark status as a state and national historic site. It is also protected by New York City landmark status. In 1979, the Sandy Ground Historical Museum was created to preserve the community's heritage. Oprah Winfrey donated $10,000 to initiate a church library and children's education program in 1990. Today, development of the southern end of Staten Island has created a largely white suburb that occupies what were once Sandy Ground's fields and woodlands. What remains of the original settlement are a few houses and the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church—the community's focal point since 1850—which still plays a vital role for the thirty or so families who worship there despite having to commute from other areas in Staten Island and New Jersey.

Joseph Mitchell's essay on Sandy Ground, "Mister Hunter's Grave," was published in his book *The Bottom of the Harbor*. In it, George Hunter laments the changes in Sandy Ground since the waters of New York Harbor became polluted and the local oyster business failed: "The way it is now, Sandy Ground is just a ghost of its former self. There's a disproportionate number of old people. A good many of the big old rambling houses that used to be full of children, there's only old men and old women living in them now. And you hardly ever see them."[6]



Top: Lewis Wickes Hine, *One of the Smallest Negro Oyster Shuckers that I Found on the Atlantic Coast. Usually They Do Not Work the Negro Children. Varn & Platt Canning Co. Location: Bluffton, South Carolina*, 1913. **Bottom**: Alice Austen, *Men Opening Oysters, Annapolis, Maryland*, 1894. Maryland's free blacks were thought to be a threat to slavery, and harsh laws were imposed to inhibit their economic well-being. Although there was plenty of low-paying work, Maryland law prohibited African Americans from owning or captaining their own boats or businesses. Many relocated to New York State, where slavery had been abolished in 1827, and settled in southwest Staten Island, where they could continue their livelihood as oystermen.

Top: Captain John Pedro, pictured here with his wife Eliza Weeks Pedro, was a whaler and came to New Bedford, Massachusetts, from the Cape Verde Islands. His grandson, William Pedro, Jr., lived to be 106 and was considered to be the unofficial mayor of Sandy Ground. Theresa Herrin, William's granddaughter, lives in the house he once owned. Olivia Moody, another granddaughter, lives in her family's house next door. Captain Pedro is the great-great-grandfather of Sylvia Moody D'Alessandro, the director of the Sandy Ground Historical Museum. **Bottom left:** Thomas McAllister, *Oyster Stand*, c. 1900. Oysters were so plentiful that they were sold for a penny apiece from street carts and were enjoyed by rich and poor alike. **Bottom right:** Mr. and Mrs. Harry Hicks, c. 1900. In addition to the abundance of oysters in the nearby waters, Sandy Ground had soil that was particularly well-suited to growing strawberries, tomatoes, and asparagus. Families prospered by taking their produce by wagon to sell in the Manhattan markets. Others went into business as blacksmiths, boat builders, and basket makers, whose wares were needed to carry the huge loads of oysters.

Recollection, Sandy Ground, 2016

Stacia L. Brown

In the earliest days our fingers slicked with silt every whichway we roamed and the boys puffed
they chests when we challenged 'em from our seats in the naked grass:
And what you 'posed ta be?
They'd cup one palm close up under
they boastin' chest, wield what little
bit of twig they managed to whittle,
swing they other free hand
in the swiftest arcs 'crosst they cupped palm,
jiggle it cross the air just so, then drop
both wrists to they waists and beam:
We be oystermen.

They say
in the days 'fore even we remember
wasn't no end to oysterin' in Sandy Ground,
say one day them oysters just came
bubblin' up on barren land—
land the white man was fixin' to forsake
and free folk found 'em first,
dug they hands down in that silt near 'bout by accident and fished theyselves out a future.
This 'fore oysters was any kinda delicacy, 'fore you ever hear anyone claimin' them slippery
dickens made men more fit for kissin',
'fore pearls became near priceless when you put 'em on a string.

Our daddies were real oystermen.
They slit bits of muscle away
from cup and lid, to the tune of hundreds a day.
Shells clattered at their ankles, castanets of glorious debris.
Even now, as an ancient woman, in a home rebuilt on ash, in a town where the briny beds have
long been emptied and even the echo of oyster-noise has long fled,
there is no richer memory of music
than that of those falling fetters.

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Net Worth: Sandy Ground's Harvest

Kamilah Aisha Moon

Where is the water
we can wade in as captains,
not captives? Drag nets
& till loam the color
of children's faces?

We'll go there—to Prince's Bay
& Arthur Kill, sharpening
oyster knives the whole way,
chanting songs of Zion
to guide & gild worn shoes.

Pearl-seekers, if some weeped
it was while we worked,
dredging up succulent lives
we were never meant to have.

Ancestors sleep beneath
rich oyster beds & the sea
recalls those who survived.

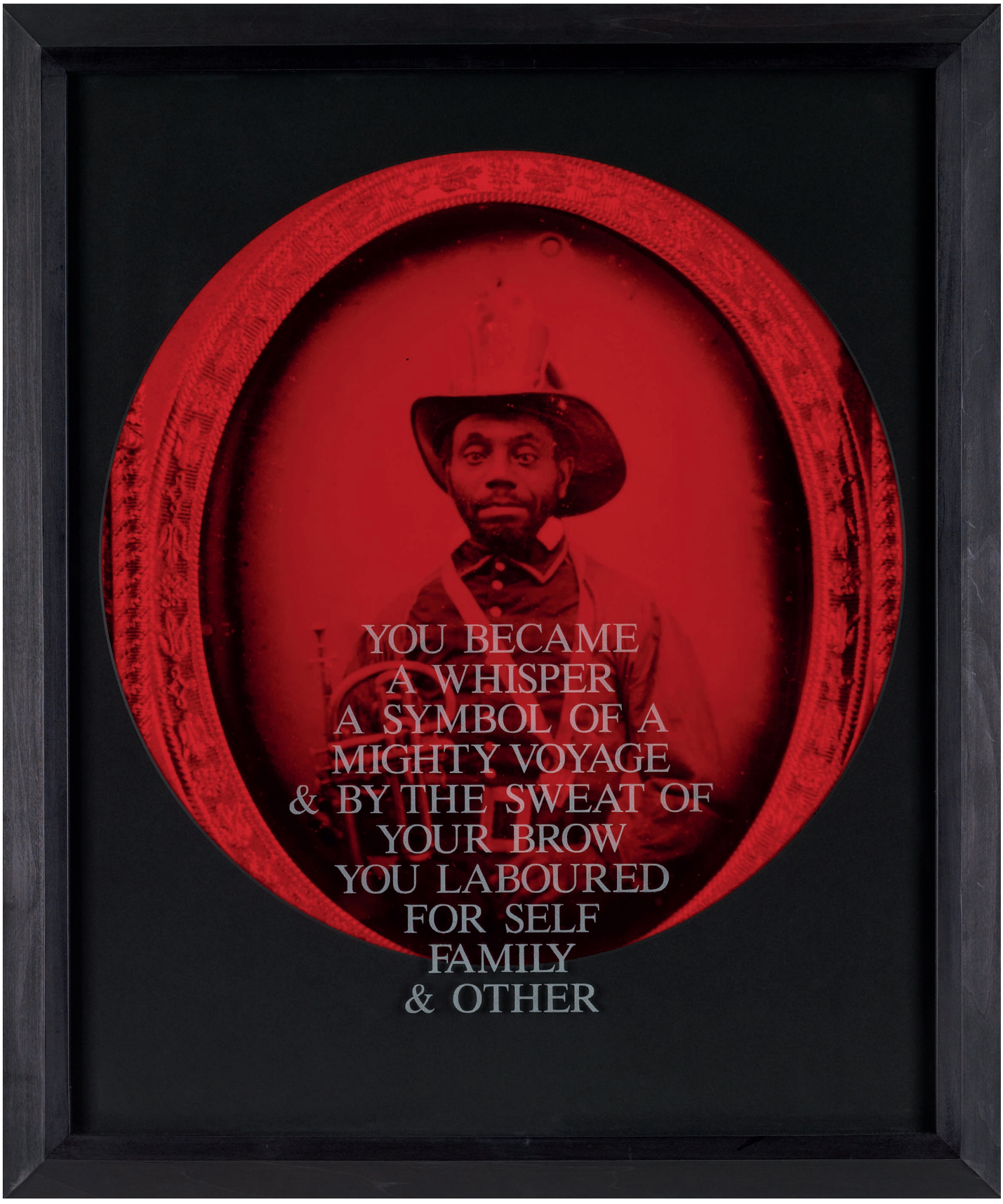
Forced to pry this country's
treasures, we kept hope fresh,
the luscious heart of each catch
intact. Finally, a place
to harbor dreams.

Sandy Ground was ours,
a promised land cracked open
by our own hands. All other ground
was sinking sand—here,
we waded until self-appointed gods
troubled the water (Lord,
they still trouble us
& our water, have mercy).

When the salt of our sweat
could no longer save
tainted bounty & fire feasted on homes,
many shielded our eyes & set out again
to find new shade, trees & water
that would love us back.

A new generation fills restored,
landmarked pews—
brilliant Black Pearls
dressed to the hilt
humming hymns,
singing our names.

What's left of us resides
all over the island,
inside of clapboard too resilient
to burn.



Carrie Mae Weems

You Became A Whisper, 1995–96

C-print with sandblasted text on glass

26 ½ x 22 ¾ inches

Jules Geller, *Ahoy There Skipper*, 1949. This photograph of a dispatcher with a megaphone looking out the window to a passing tugboat and moored ships on the Gowanus Canal appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle*.

THE GOWANUS CANAL

Standing on the shores of this oil-slicked, sickly green, long-abused waterway, it is hard to imagine that on this very site, soldiers of the Continental Army retreated from the British during the Battle of Brooklyn in 1776, the first battle fought following the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On August 27th, 1776, the poet William Henry Hale, in his "The Trilogy of Gowanus" wrote, "Hail the Gowanus Creek . . . Hold back the hordes of the ruthless invader, let not the minions of tyranny cross."[7]

The Gowanus Canal, likely named after the Canarsee tribe leader Gowanes, is a tidal estuary and salt marsh located in south Brooklyn that, during Dutch colonial times, was the site of a tobacco plantation and mills belonging to the Denton, Freeke, and Brauwer families, among others. Six-foot tides pushed salt water into the creek, creating a brackish mix ideal for oyster beds; the Gowanus was famous for its oysters "the size of dinner plates."

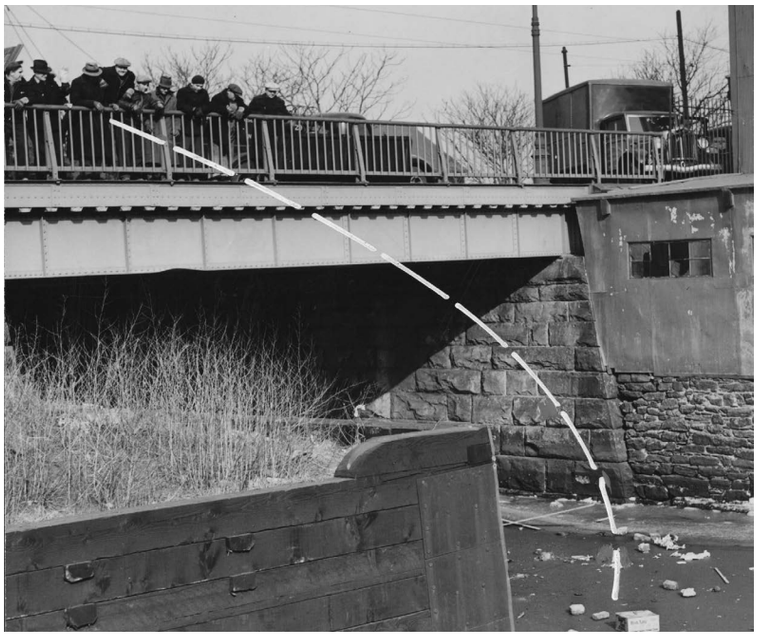
The canal played a vital role in New York's industrial revolution. In the early 1850s, the 1.8-mile-long Gowanus was canalized and grew to become a major industrial waterway, its shores populated by lumber mills, oil refineries, chemical plants, and tanneries; soap, fertilizer, and paint manufacturers; cement factories; and other heavy industry. In just a few years, indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste and raw sewage poisoned the water, and by 1910, the canal was almost solid with sewage. With its opaque and sickly pallor, it became known as "Lavender Lake."

Over the years, several attempts have been made to remedy the pollution by circulating the water and flushing it into New York Bay. All of these efforts failed, and additional plans were abandoned when the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway was built, and much of the canal's cargo transport was replaced by truck. By 1978, less than fifty percent of the canal's shoreline was in use. After more than a century of neglect, the water was so polluted that light could only penetrate about two feet below the surface. The amount of dissolved oxygen was calculated at only 2.8 parts per million (ppm). Fish require a minimum of five ppm to survive.

The water's condition dramatically improved in 1999, when a new pump was installed, flushing approximately 300 gallons of oxygenated water through the canal every day. Since then, geese, fiddler crabs, flounder, shrimp, mussels, killifish, and jellyfish have been spotted in the canal. However, the underlying sediment is still highly toxic, and EPA tests of local striped bass showed the canal to be polluted with a long list of contaminants such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are formed during the incomplete burning of coal, oil, gas, wood, and garbage. They also found quantities of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs; mercury, lead, and copper; and other debris, much of which is leftover from industry dating as far back as the 1860s.

The Gowanus Canal was designated a Superfund site in March 2010, and the EPA began its ten-year cleanup effort in 2015. At the same time, grassroots organizations have begun various remediation efforts. Sponge Park, a joint effort between the Gowanus Canal Conservancy and dland Studios, a Brooklyn-based architecture and landscape architecture firm, would line the banks of the Gowanus and include a variety of ecological systems, each using native plants that naturally clean toxins from the water. Sunflowers, pussy willows, and duckweed all process heavy metals, and beach rose, pond weed, and white clover can process PCBs. The Gowanus Canal Conservancy has a dedicated group of local volunteers who meet several times a year to shore up the banks of the canal, pick up garbage, plant trees and shrubs that leach toxins from the water, maintain tree pits, and map the area.

Despite the pollution, the area is still active and populated by small businesses, homes, artists' studios, and, more recently, large blocks of luxury loft apartments. However, many of the original factory buildings and carriage houses are still standing. One huge, handsome ruin of a brick building, the Brooklyn Rapid Transit power station, built in 1902, stands empty, covered with graffiti. For years, it was referred to as the Bat Cave, home to junkies and squatters. The building was purchased in 2013, and it is rumored that it will reopen as art studios. But for now, the only tenants are raccoons, which live in the tunnels under the building and have been seen washing the tomato sauce off their scavenged pizza crusts in the noxious waters of the canal.



Top: James Smillie after Alonzo Chappel, *Battle of Long Island: Retreat of the Americans under Gen. Stirling across Gowanus Creek,* 1860. The Continental Army retreated from the British during the Battle of Brooklyn in 1776, the first battle to be fought after the Declaration of Independence was signed. Struggling across the creek at high tide, many soldiers drowned or were easy targets for British muskets. **Bottom:** For much of the twentieth century, the area surrounding the Gowanus held a reputation for mafia-related violence. The canal has long been thought to be a dumping ground for mob victims. This 1946 photo, which appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle,* shows the bridge over the canal on 3rd Avenue between 3rd and 4th Streets. Two local youths found four guns and two hundred rounds of ammunition on the iced-over canal. The white dotted line most likely indicates how the ammunition was tossed off the bridge and onto the ice.

Top: This 1904 photograph shows the east bank of the Gowanus at 3rd Street. Through the smog, one can see a huge brick building, the Brooklyn Rapid Transit power station, built in 1902, which now stands empty, covered with graffiti. **Bottom:** John Rubens Smith, *Guann's Near Fort-Swift, Brooklyn*, 1817. This landscape drawing of a rural area in Brooklyn depicts cattle grazing on a dirt road. Ships travel through what is likely the Gowanus Bay and the mouth of the Gowanus Creek in the distance.

Oracle, Ocean, Opening

Ben Greenman

In a suburb of a large northern city in the United States—the largest, in fact—there was a man named Dan who lived by himself, in a modest house filled with paperback books (most read, few reread), compact discs (almost all mothballed, replaced by electronic files on two poorly organized hard drives), pairs of expensive sneakers that had seemed like a good idea at the time (one pair was based on a popular comic strip, and featured asymmetrical shoes—the boy from the strip was pictured on the left sneaker, the dog on the right), and a laptop computer (new, fast, expensive). The man lived simply enough, had for a decade, since he had been ejected, via divorce, from a more demanding life. Most nights he made himself a salad when he arrived home, though on Fridays he ordered a burger at a dark-wood pub near his office and watched basketball while he chatted up the young woman behind the bar. It had been the same young woman for a while. Her name was Leanne. She had majored in forensic psychology, which struck the man as bracingly and almost erotically practical. "You'd think so," Leanne said. "But sadly, no. Lots of kids flocked to the major because of cop shows on TV. It has one of the highest dropout rates in the country, for the same reason. People expect to be all Bam! Pow! Zoom! but it's usually a long slog."

"Bam! Pow! Zoom!" he said. "Like Batman."

"Who?" she said. He assumed she was joking.

Once, about a year before, in the thick of the holidays, he had attended a party at the apartment of one of the pub's other regulars, Gus. "Call me Captain Gus," Gus said, because he lived on the water, down in Brooklyn. At least Dan thought that was the reason. If there was a stronger reason, no one had ever mentioned it. Nothing in the house was nautical. Nothing suggested authority. There was only the water, a rancid canal that snaked, or rather wormed, through the neighborhood in which Captain Gus lived. People said that apartment prices were going through the roof, which seemed like a mixed metaphor, or at least a collapsed one. "Captain," Dan said anyway, shaking Gus's hand heartily.

That night Dan had driven down into the city for the party. He had worn exactly what he usually wore in the office, which is what he usually wore at the pub: dark jeans and a white shirt. "But inside I'm dressed much more casually and festively," he said.

"Hilarious," Captain Gus said, already turning to greet the next person. The next person was Leanne. She was dressed far more demurely than at the pub, which meant that she looked far sexier. In fact, she was wearing the same uniform as Dan: dark jeans and a white blouse. Dan didn't point it out.

"Did you drive?" Dan said.

"Train," she said.

"Oh," Dan said. "Let me know when you're leaving and if you want I'll give you a ride home."

"Aye aye," Leanne said.

"Hilarious," said Captain Gus, turning back from shaking the hand of the next guest, an older woman in a low-cut shirt.

Dan and Leanne had gotten along famously at the party, so much so that they soon became shy, and then unaccountably bold. "If we were in the real world," she said, "I would have you take me home with you."

"We're not in the real world?" he said.

"Giggle," she said. They never made it to her house. They sat in Dan's car by the canal and you know what. They transacted business—whatever business was possible in the space available

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to them. Her shoulder was sweaty either from the night air—the canal fed into the ocean, and on humid nights, there was something of a sea-spray—or from effort. They lay there and cooled for an hour until he was sober enough to drive her home. “Don’t be a stranger,” she said, though the next time he came into the pub she said “Hello, stranger.”

About a month later, after one more car-based session (done primarily for nostalgia, and not near enough to water to succeed in this regard) and one old-fashioned knock-it-out at her apartment, Leanne had ended things. She had been hinting at it for a few days. “We’re not exclusive,” she had said. “I’m seeing someone else,” she had said. And then she was gone. Dan had sent her an email. “I think of you more often than I thought I would. I find myself talking to you sometimes even though you’re not here.” He meant to be fully earnest. He was trying hard at the tone. Leanne emailed back so quickly he wondered if she had even read his message. “Hilarious,” she wrote.

And so, Leanne gone, Dan got back to the rest of his life. There were other women in it. He had a woman who came to clean once a month—it had been more frequent when he was first divorced, because he had been anxious about letting things fall apart, and also because he felt that there was something erotic about watching women clean—and a seventeen-year-old daughter, Jenna, who was supposed to spend every other weekend with him but generally arrived late Friday afternoon, dumped her bags in the spare bedroom without a word, declined an invitation to eat dinner with him, and instead went out with friends. Dan wondered how he had gotten old enough to have a daughter like this, but only until he looked in the mirror, at which point it all became clear to him: he was forty-eight, the grey hairs in his beard becoming more numerous by the week and the hairs on his head retreating as if they could not bear to watch. He had his eyesight, though, which—he liked to say—was the reason he still had his jump shot, which he liked to show off in the driveway early on Saturday mornings, before it got too hot.

Dan worked at a company that produced financial literature for large banks, a job that he had taken when he was thirty and which he had performed dutifully in the years since, salary growing slightly all along the way, office increasing in size twice, the last time five years earlier, when he was moved from a small corner office that made him proud to a larger office down the hall that confused him slightly. Though he did not feel derision toward his job and sometimes even experienced satisfaction, it was not his passion—nor, for that matter, was basketball, nor his stationary bike, nor his daughter, nor his ex-wife, nor the friends who came over on some Sundays, nor his computer, nor his sneakers, nor his CDs, nor even Leanne or the short list of women who, like her, he had bedded since his marriage. His chief love in the world was his library of comic books.

He would have been the first to object to this characterization, and he would have been right, in a sense. The word library suggested leather-bound volumes arranged imposingly on shelves, and his collection was composed of loose issues stored in shallow boxes, though he took the care to organize them by date. It was also not a library in the sense that it was not comprehensive and had no ambitions in that direction. Comics, as a whole, encompassed many different kinds of stories, but Dan had strict limits to his taste. Dan liked superhero comics and superhero comics only, and had remained steadfast in his predilection since he was four years old and he had sat on the floor of his older brother’s room, paging through issue after issue, amazed first that men could fly, but soon amazed at other powers, too—at X-ray

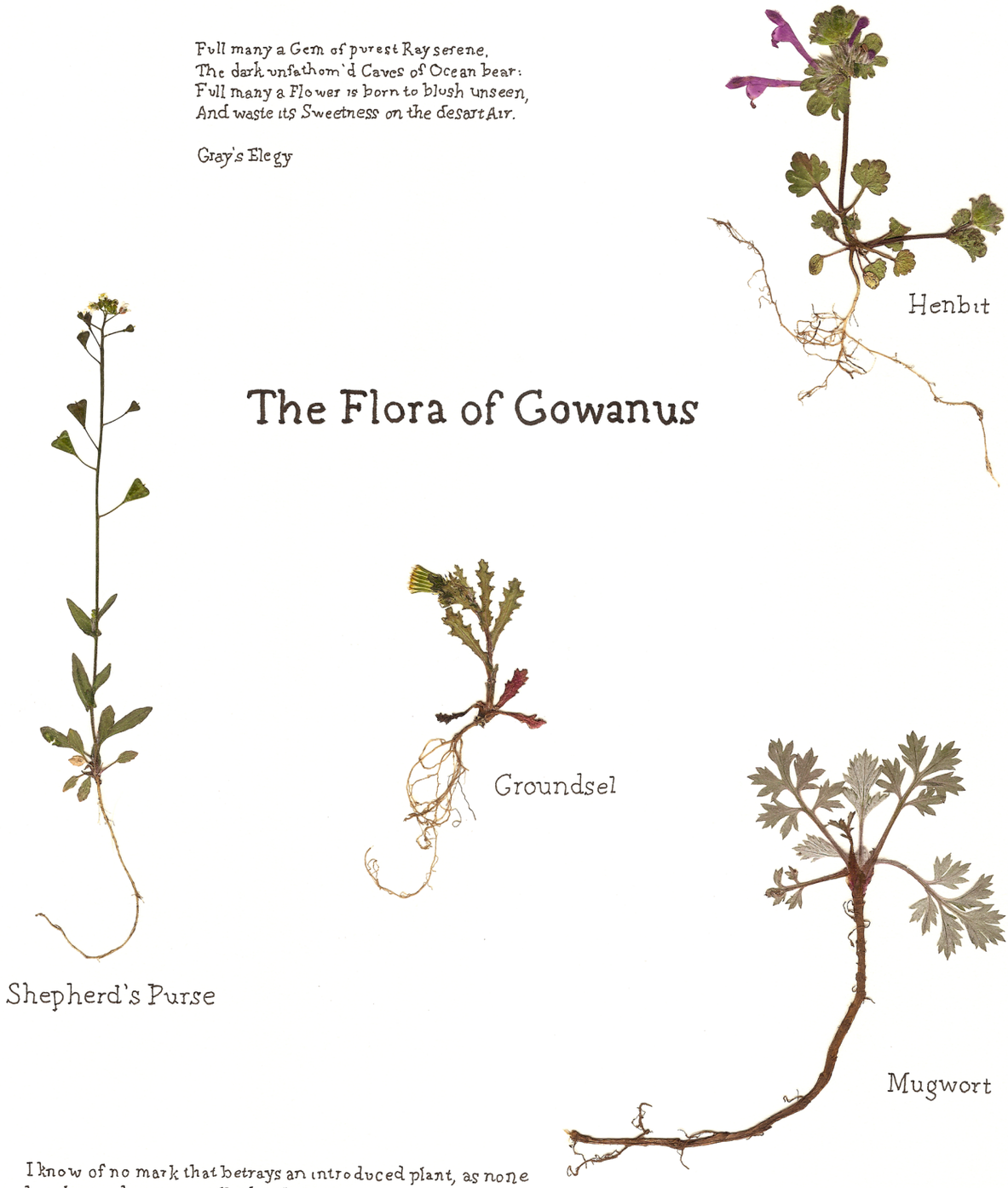
vision, at telekinetic manipulation, at invisibility. But most of all he had been amazed by the wonderful sameness of all the stories: the childhoods that familiarized the future heroes with the possibility of doom, either in the form of a destroyed planet or a destroyed family or some other disaster; the moment of realization regarding the failure of impersonal justice and the concomitant need for personal redress (or, in some cases, revenge); the costume that helped negotiate the shift in identity from frustrated vigilante to mysterious being; the trusted inner circle who the hero alternately confided in and was called on to protect; the villains who were almost but not quite equal matches; the sidekicks; the love interests; the names. He liked the heroes who were born on Earth, even if they were at some later date inhabited by an alien spirit or called out into space for special training. He was not certain about the wisdom of capes on costumes, though he had a fondness for a cowl. He preferred those heroes who were accompanied by sidekicks, though he had some reservations when the sidekicks were not protégés but rather figures of comic relief. And he had a soft place in his heart for the earliest wave of heroes, who were little more than hard-bitten street fighters wearing eye masks or slightly showy hats. His brother, who was older, had already formed his own opinions on these matters, and Dan found that the two of them had zones of disagreement (his brother loved capes, hated cowls) but also significant common ground: they agreed, for example, that an alter ego was best when most absurd, when disguises were so preposterously thin that anyone of even average intelligence could have seen right through them. “It’s like a costume but the costume is being normal,” he told his brother, who stopped what he was doing and turned slowly and said that it was a pretty smart thing for a kid to say. His brother had been eleven then. Within four years he would star as a shortstop on a traveling baseball team. Within eight years, he would be dead. Cancer came for him, a rare variety that the doctors never promised they could cure or even slow. As he got thinner, it looked like he was getting older, like he was speeding away from Dan through time. The evening after his funeral, Dan locked himself in his brother’s room and read through every comic.

Those same issues were still with him—the summer after his brother died, when his parents had converted the room to an office that everyone was too afraid to step into, he had reluctantly removed the comics, storing them in a shallow box under his bed, and that box had slowly filled with other issues, some featuring the same superheroes that he and his brother had read about, some focusing on the adventures of new heroes he discovered on his own, and soon enough he had filled a second box and then a third, and the boxes had stayed with him throughout middle school and on into high school, traveled with him to college (where it inexplicably became a source of prestige again, even earning him, in his sophomore year, a triumphant sexual episode with a painter named Ruth, who was widely considered to be the most beautiful junior in the dorm and who had sought him out to ask if she could look at his collection, because she was trying for “a kind of Lichtenstein-influenced thing and wanted to see how it was done,” and who had spread the issues out on his bed and then spread herself out on the floor next to it, skirt riding up, eyes cast down in thrilling mock-submission), earned pride of place in his first apartment (a mahogany chest at the foot of his bed), had briefly been consigned to the hall closet when he and Jillian had married (she had not understood the appeal), had returned to prominence when they moved from that apartment into a house, and then had been installed on semi-permanent display after she had left him. It was eight boxes now that held almost four hundred issues, along with a ninth that included related miscellany: an oversize crossover issue from the early eighties that united two story lines in a theoretically exciting but ultimately unfulfilling manner; posters; a sheet of vintage stickers; a price guide that he had purchased at the conclusion of his marriage, thinking he might sell off some of

Marie Lorenz

The Gowanus Canal, Aerial View from *The Tide and Current Taxi,* 2005–present

Digital photograph



James Walsh

The Flora of the Gowanus, 2008–present

Pressed plants, pigment marker

Overall, 8 x 12 feet (243.8 x 365.8 cm), dimensions vary with installation

his comics, but realizing soon enough that this was only his depression talking, which left the price guide in pristine shape, hardly used, maybe still worth something itself; buttons for an imaginary presidential campaign for one of the heroes; and a few dozen DVDs that, having been liberated from their cases, were stored in paper envelopes or left to rattle around the box. “Some people collect antique cars,” Jenna used to say when her friends would come over, rolling her eyes as she spoke. At other times, she would come into the den while he was reading and plant both feet and tell him in no uncertain terms that he was losing himself. “This is for a child, not a man,” she would say, and though he tried his hardest, he could not detect any actual concern in her tone. In that she was her mother’s daughter.

One morning, as the light of the sun filled his bedroom window, he found that he had in his mind a vivid image, a panel from a late-seventies comic in which the hero, in a bright yellow suit, reached down to pat the head of a boy who looked very much like the hero had in his youth, with the same dark eyes and curly hair, except for the fact that he walked with crutches and leg braces as the result of a virus that the hero had unwittingly allowed to ravage the city when he had to dive down to the bottom of the ocean to drown a massive nuclear device that could have spelled the end of the Earth itself. The device had detonated on the bottom of the ocean, and the hero had used his power of expansion to extend himself over the blast area and contain its force. The resulting radiation had not killed him, but it had changed his powers, robbing him of some (he could no longer fly and possess super-strength at the same time), granting him others (he could now read minds, to some degree, and also enjoy brief periods of invisibility). He was not the only one affected by the bomb, though. It had also shaken alive an ancient marine fungus that had risen to the surface. Spores had fanned out across all seven continents. For the most part, they were benign, but to a small number of people—boys, mostly, with curly hair, intelligent and sensitive and also genetically predisposed to a lung condition that would, under ordinary circumstances, remain dormant—they could be fatal. The hero understood what he had done. He had put these boys in danger. But what choice did he have? He had been forced to choose between two evils, and he had chosen the lesser, though that lesser evil had descended heavily upon some. The boy in the hospital was one such victim of the lesser evil.

Dan had reread that issue before going to bed, and it seemed to him that story was making a point about how heroism traveled from generation to generation, which was not an uncommon theme, given the number of times that a hero would adopt a young man and groom him for future heroism, but that it was being made with more sadness and subtlety than in other cases. He had read ahead in this particular series and knew that the boy with the crutches and braces would never become a hero, that he would in fact die in a hospital room surrounded by his family and friends, including the hero, who was in his civilian guise as deputy mayor Robert Grace and as a result powerless to do anything. Dan found the issue with this hospital scene, reread it carefully, finding his throat thickening with tears as the young boy bid farewell to the hero, and then, in the drowsy pre-coffee morning, went back to bed for a few minutes, where he imagined that he himself had drawn an epilogue in which the boy’s spirit passed out of his body into the hero’s body, fusing the two spirits. The hero flew at previously unattempted speeds over the ocean, pulling up a wall of wake. In the blur of the drawing, both faces were visible. Dan could not draw at all, or he might have tried. Instead he went to sleep. He dreamed a scene where he was part of the fictional world of the comic, and also part of his own life. Specifically, he dreamed the night where he and Leanne had gone to his car after the party and screwed in the back seat. In his dream, they were half-naked, as in life, but the air was

Nathan Kensinger

Toxic Playground, 2012

Ink-jet print

11 x 14 inches (27.9 x 35.6 cm)

filled with bright green wriggles. They breathed them in. Were these the marine spores? Were they giving him powers?

The next morning, Dan called his friend Donald, a former college classmate who was now a professor of literature at a prestigious university—and the person who had given the fullest and most articulate account of the theory that superheroes served as the culture's dominant myths the same way that gods and demigods did for ancient Greece, or knights for medieval Europe. "Hello," Donald said, and without prelude Dan started right in on the story of the marine spores, the way they had started in the issue and then penetrated his dream. "Hold on," Donald said. "I don't remember the one you're talking about."

Dan drew in a sharp breath. Donald's recall of the comics was as good as his, if not better. How was it possible that he didn't remember? Dan hurried down the hall to his bedroom, where he had left the comic book on the table. He opened it quickly to the final page. But it was not the story he remembered. He flipped through the rest of the issue, looking for the boy, the bed, the grave face of the doctor, but he could not find it. He mumbled a few words to Donald, and hung up the telephone.

It was a weekend now, and so he spent all day with his collection, searching for the story about the dying boy with curly hair, still unable to locate it. Monday morning, after another night of fitful sleep, he felt a dizziness in his head and a heaviness in the pit of his stomach, and he called his office and told them that he would be working from home, though after about ten minutes of work he closed his computer and drove down to Captain Gus's neighborhood. His dream had brought him there. He pulled onto the street where Gus lived. He got out of his car into the warm night. He stood on the edge of the polluted canal, breathing deeply. If there were spores, he would let them transform him. He did not remember going home, and in the morning he woke to a room that looked unfamiliar. When he spoke, he did not recognize his voice. His mind had left him, or he it.

The first order of business was the costume. He had once, in college, gone to a masquerade ball as a superhero. "What else?" said Donald, who was dressed as a Civil War general, when Dan had emerged from his room. He had designed the costume, which was still with him, packed into a box with his diploma and some LPs. He went into the closet to find the box and unpacked it carefully: the long-sleeved gray top with a small red circle centered on the chest; the black cotton pants, which had looked almost like tights at the time but which were now back in style; the more colorful accents of belt (bright yellow) and socks (bright red). He tried on the top and was pleased, and then a bit dismayed, to find that it fit him perfectly; he had not gained very much weight since school, he reasoned, and he had lost muscle through his thirties. He needed another element for padding. He went back to the closet and found, in another box, a fencing shirt that he had been given early in his marriage. His wife had wanted him to take up an athletic hobby, and when he had confessed to her that the idea of fencing had always appealed to him, she had bought him the shirt and a coupon for a lesson, which he never redeemed. The shirt still had its tag attached; he read it and learned that it was made of a special high-strength fiber stronger than either Kevlar or steel wire. He pulled it on. It was small, which was ideal, because it acted as a kind of corset, and when the gray top with the gray O went on over that it appeared as though he had gained ten pounds of muscle. The pants were snug but not too snug. Only the cape was especially problematic; it had become tangled up in the wire spine of a notebook and ripped down the middle. That was fine with him. He had included a cape reluctantly, because Donald had mocked the idea of a superhero without a cape. He could settle for a cowl. And then it came to him: he had a hooded sweatshirt

that he had bought for playing basketball on mornings when the weather was cold, but the material had been too shiny, almost metallic, and he had become embarrassed to wear it, especially after a passing teenager had yelled at him from a car. “Hey, Mr. Spaceman,” the kid had said, and then flicked a cigarette out of his window. He retrieved the sweatshirt from the closet and put it on. The blue shone as if polished; around the neckline he could see a tiny bit of red where the edge of the cape, now a cowl, came through. He took the sweatshirt off and went into the utility drawer. He was looking for a pack of Velcro patches he had bought years before, thinking he had invented a new way to hang his shoes, but he was wrong. Now he took one patch and affixed it just behind the right front pocket of the sweatshirt and took another and affixed it just behind the left front pocket. Their other halves went onto the lowest corners of the sweatshirt, on either side of the zipper. He zipped the sweatshirt up and looked in the mirror. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of something: maybe it was a house fire, maybe a bank robbery, maybe The Red Hammer or The Scorpion coming to town to wreak havoc. In one motion, he unzipped the sweatshirt with his right hand and folded the flaps outward, fastening them to the patches behind the pockets, at the same time using his left hand to raise the hood up over his head. He practiced the transformation a few times until he was confident that he could do it almost automatically.

Next he went outside to his minivan, which had been the family’s first car after Jenna’s birth. It had served them well for years, which was why he had felt a slight pang of guilt when, a week before his fortieth birthday, he had taken delivery of a sleek black sedan, passing the minivan to Jillian in place of her old unreliable convertible, which she had brought to the marriage and parted with reluctantly. “It’s safer for you and Jenna,” he had said. In the divorce, the minivan, almost twenty years old, had come back to him. He had never liked it especially well. The color wavered uneasily between gold and a kind of pinkish hue. The rear row of seats, which folded up from the wheel well, had a broken latch that left them permanently flat. The fabric on the roof drooped in spots. But now in his eyes he saw that the vehicle was perfect. He went outside, in costume, and sat in the driver’s seat, where he started to see the minivan as a kind of plane that could soar through the air if required but that spent most of its time earthbound. He remembered seeing planes as they taxied across an overpass by the airport, and how majestic and massive they looked, and his minivan looked that way to him now, and he turned the idea around and around in his head until he decided that he would call it the Power Plane, and then he got in the Power Plane, and he turned on the radio, and there was a news report about a fire across town, and he imagined racing over there in his costume and putting out the fire and rescuing whoever might be trapped in the building.

He was heading back up to the house, happy that he had found a name for the Power Plane, when it occurred to him that he had not yet thought of one for himself. He could take his time, marinate in the various options, page through old issues of comics for inspiration, or else he could just pluck a name from the air, which is what he did: The Oracle. He knew that the small circle on his chest would have to serve as an O. That was never in question. And while his origin story suggested the possibility of The Ocean, the truth is that he had been granted his powers by spores from a canal. The Oracle went inside and tried to sleep.

He woke in a panic. It was not yet two in the morning. He had been asleep for under an hour. “What troubles my sleep?” he said out loud. The answer came to him. He had forgotten one of the most important aspects of being a hero: he needed a love interest. Most of the male superheroes had an intimate, a mortal but not quite ordinary woman who they loved but could not quite approach. This woman allowed them to focus all their goodwill toward humanity. Without her, the notion of saving the species was too abstract. The lady love was also vital

in creating their identity, or in setting the proper balance between their two identities, for she knew the hero in his civilian life but had no notion that he was capable of incredible deeds. The hero desired this lady love (usually while disguised as their alter ego) even as they themselves (in heroic form) were the object of desire, imagining that if they could only show their true self to their love interest, they might be truly complete. So long as this unity was impossible, the hero was engaged in a constant process of revelation and concealment.

The Oracle needed a love interest. But where would he find her? The Oracle got out of bed, put his costume back on, and stood in front of the mirror. The mirror was a portal. The portal spoke. The portal instructed him to drive back down to the canal, to the place where the spores had first entered him and transformed him.

The Oracle leapt into the Power Plane and drove down to the canal as fast as he could. He got out and stood at the water's edge, breathing in poisoned air. Just then, he heard a voice. It was a woman's voice, laughing. It was a familiar voice. He turned to see Leanne coming around the corner, and he was about to step toward her when he noticed that she was not alone. She was with Gus, and he had his right arm draped across her back. His fingers dangled down onto her breasts. The Oracle coughed once loudly and Leanne half-turned toward him. But he was in the distance for her, in shadows. He coughed again but she did not wave at him. She did not call out his name. Perhaps Captain Gus was not Captain Gus at all, but rather a villain who had stolen his identity. Perhaps he was The Black Claw, half-man, half-eagle, an ancient malignant force. The Oracle squinted. It was not The Black Claw. It was someone ever more evil: The Icer, the most dastardly of the new crop of villains. The Icer could implant a false idea and then freeze the mind so it was not capable of any new thought. Was Leanne in The Icer's clutches? The Oracle watched as Leanne disappeared into Captain Gus's doorway. He went back to the van, reclined his seat until he could see the second-floor window of the Icer, and tried to detect any sign of life. On the driver's side of the Power Plane, the toxic water of the canal glistened in the moonlight.

The Works Progress Administration initiated a sewer project on Shell Road in Coney Island Creek in 1936 to treat sewage from local residences and businesses. This photo is likely taken from the bulkhead construction at Shell Road, where Coney Island Creek was filled in. The F train crosses from mainland Brooklyn onto Coney Island on Shell Road.

CONEY ISLAND CREEK

Coney Island Creek in Brooklyn, once known as Gravesend Creek, is home to an assortment of ghost ships, rotting piers, and a small stranded submarine. One comes across this strange and haunting sight by walking through a thicket at the southern edge of the little-used Calvert Vaux Park. It was reported that Vaux, the celebrated co-designer of Central Park, became depressed late in life from lack of appreciation of his work. On a foggy evening in November 1895, he visited his son, who lived in the area, went for a walk along Coney Island Creek, and was later found floating in the water. It is unknown whether he took his own life or, disoriented in the fog, lost his balance.

Coney Island Creek is the only remaining creek in the vicinity that was not filled in as Brooklyn developed. It was originally a small, meandering waterway ending in marshlands. Ambitious plans for transforming the area into a thriving port—a Brooklyn rival to Manhattan's Seaport—inspired Thomas Stillwell, descendant of early landowners in the Coney Island area, to canalize the creek, connecting it with Sheepshead Bay and renaming it the Gravesend Ship Canal. Though wider and deeper than the creek, the canal was still difficult for ships to navigate, and when the boroughs consolidated in 1898, the plan was abandoned. By 1929, sections of it were filled in to enable rail and car transportation.

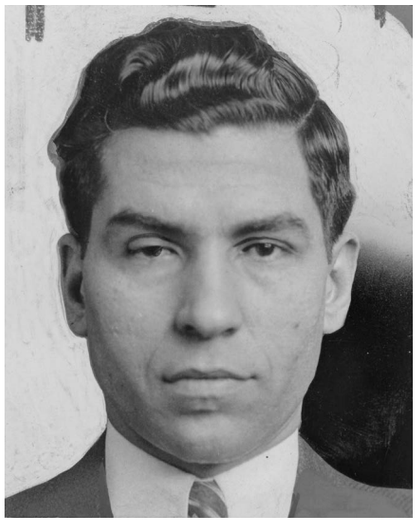
During Prohibition, Coney Island Creek was a frequent stop on Rum Row, a watery pathway for schooners smuggling illegal liquor from Canada, the Caribbean, and Europe. Part of the New York City operation was run by mafiosos like Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano, and Vito Genovese, with funding by the gambler Arnold Rothstein. Others involved in bootlegging were "Big Bill" Dwyer, one-time owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers and other sports teams; Joe Masseria, boss of the Genovese family; and Frankie "the Undertaker" Yale. In the 1920s, rumrunners could often be seen with the Coast Guard in hot pursuit.

Brooklyn Borough Gas leeched pollution into the creek from the 1890s to the 1950s. Excavated debris from the construction of the Verrazano Bridge as well as other unmonitored dumping added to the murk. No one knows exactly when the ghost ships, an assortment of barges and fishing boats, began appearing near the mouth of the creek, but local residents remember playing on them in the 1950s when they were still floating. Some of them are said to be old whaling ships whose owners did not want to pay to have them properly disposed of. They would haul them to the creek and burn them down to the waterline.

Jerry Bianco, a former shipbuilder, constructed the *Quester I* submarine from repurposed materials and bargain yellow paint. He planned to find the wreck of the *Andrea Doria* and its unclaimed treasures off the coast of Rhode Island. Before her maiden voyage, though, a storm tore the sub from its moorings and lodged it in the mud far from shore. The small, faded *Quester I* remains glued to the spot, decaying.

The Army Corps of Engineers has identified abandoned ships in other parts of the city, but not here. The creek sludge is so toxic that disturbing the wrecks would release a torrent of dangerous chemicals into the water and air. Some ingredients in the unsavory soup are NAPLs (dense and light non-aqueous phase liquids), which are contained in fuel, oil, tar, pesticides, and other substances. PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), a subset of NAPLs, are considered highly damaging to soil and aquatic food chains. They are mixtures of individual chlorinated compounds manufactured prior to 1977, often found in old fluorescent lighting, electrical equipment and appliances, plastics, oil-based paint, and more. PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons) are mostly caused by the incomplete burning of carbon-based materials such as wood, oil, coal, and garbage. Metals include barium, cadmium, copper, lead, mercury, nickel, and silver, some of which are found in batteries, petroleum, paint, and other material. Long-term effects of the aforementioned toxins may include lung and skin cancer; adverse effects on the immune, reproductive, nervous, and endocrine systems; fetal defects; and liver and kidney damage.

CSOs (combined sewer overflow) are yet another cause of pollution in all of New York City's waterways, a result of the very old sewer system that was designed to fulfill multiple functions. It collects rainwater runoff, domestic sewage, and industrial wastewater all in the same pipe and delivers it to a publicly owned treatment plant. In the event of heavy rain or melting snow, the sewer's capacity is exceeded, and excess water, including raw sewage and industrial waste, is released directly into rivers, streams, estuaries, and coastal waters. A full ten percent of the CSOs in the United States are in New York City.



Top: This map of New York Bay and Harbor from 1845 was based upon a trigonometrical survey under the direction of Ferdinand Rudolph Hassler, superintendent of the Survey of the Coast of the United States. The creek is just above Coney Island, partially separating it from the rest of Brooklyn. **Bottom left:** Charles "Lucky" Luciano, c. 1930. Luciano was the head of the Genovese crime family and one of the fathers of organized crime in the U.S. He and his partners ran the largest bootlegging operation in New York, and during Prohibition, Coney Island Creek was a frequent stop on Rum Row. **Bottom right:** The Coast Guard stopping a rumrunner off the coast of New York City, c. 1920s.

Top: Jerry Bianco, a former shipbuilder constructed the submarine *Quester I* from repurposed materials and bargain yellow paint. He planned to find the wreck of the *Andrea Doria* and its unclaimed treasures off the coast of Rhode Island. This 1971 photo shows the *Quester* being hoisted in preparation for her maiden voyage. **Bottom:** Lobster traps piled on the bank of Coney Island Creek, a reminder of bygone days, when shellfish from these waters was safe to enjoy.

Junkwater Sovereign

Nicole Miller

Where we live now, there are two points of view: the backwash lull of the creek or the gray expanse of the Atlantic. Near the sea are the lever-and-fulcrum workings of all those machines: the enormous dial of the Zenobio orbiting at Luna Park; the chain dogs of the Cyclone clanking as they grip the roller coaster cars; the phantom track of the Spook-a-Rama and the dark ride's mechanical devils, its cage rattlers and wolves that lurch and leer in the underground grotto.

Around the point, where the creek clears the channel, are all the dead machines: the scrapyard heaps near the Stillwell Bridge; the rotting fleet of ships stranded in the stream by the tide or scuttled; the conning tower of that failed submarine rusting in the channel—the *Quester*, which floundered years ago, according to my father.

Between the creek and the sea, the Bowery is bright with shot lounges, arcades, clam bars creep show Funny Face, Deno's Wonder Wheel near the boardwalk turning *June July August* like a huge revolving clock.

On the day the dome appears on the beach, the sky is a late-season gray. The wind comes scavenging over the sand near the Steeplechase pier, where the kids have put up the dome, though only one of them—a thumbsucker with paperwhite hair—is a kid. The rest are older. A Buckminster Fuller forgery, says my father, bolted together from PVC, a blue plastic tarp for a roof.

The markered sign says DOMES4☮.

This isn't a place for carnies, my father says to one of the kids. Not carnies, says the kid. He wants to introduce us to someone, the person who engineered the dome.

Not *engineered*, says my father.

Master Shadrach has a gray head of dreadlocks and tattoos worked into both of his arms. You guys like star science, he says.

Someone's dog dives from the back of a pickup truck and runs down the beach to bark at the water.

Ginger will read your stars, says Shadrach. Ginger I guess is the girl crouched in the sand with a poster-board sign that says private nightclub though it's hard to tell what they're offering. She wears overalls and a crown of braids—not like the other girls on the beach. She's younger than Shadrach but older than the boy who has her looks and older, I guess, than me. I think she's prettier than Miss Coney Island and if she'd only look up I could tell her this by the way I'm watching her with my eyes not like Shadrach who can't stand still.

Tweaking, says my father. I don't want you hanging around down there got it?

He was shaving in the mirror, scraping the blade of the razor down the slope of his cheek. I was standing in the open doorway watching while he seemed to search his whiskered chin for something he'd lost or forgotten. He was barely back from the war. I watched him with wonder, the way I'd regard the wheezing llama at the petting zoo—the way I once approached the red-bellied piranha drumming a captive beat in its tank. He was that exotic. After he left for work, I picked up the Schick from the edge of the sink and used it to peel off the faint pair of eyebrows that gave my face its cautious expression, which was the beginning of getting to know my father.

Those years my father was a speck on the map—Kabul, Kandahar—my mother sat at the kitchen table drawing hexagrams in her book.

She's always searching for an image language, some way to picture her luck. She has several

methods. I've seen her throw coins, their patterns surfacing on the flat Formica, heads or tails. Sometimes she pulls medicine cards from a deck that she shuffles with rifling precision. Badger signals anger. Coyote is a trickster. Grouse leads you along a spiral path. She spends hours consulting the book, humming in little triumph, bearing the medicine of coyote or grouse as though she's solved the riddler's dilemma.

My father disapproves of her habit. He advocates prior planning and procedures, the assessment of risks, the deliverance of facts. He has a way of divining the future too, which isn't the future, he says, but the past. My father's a student of history.

There were longhouses built by the Canarsee near the saltwater marshes before the Dutch arrived. They drove posts into the ground and put up poles of hewn logs. They built arched roofs in a grid pattern held together by strips of bark. Picture a structure that uses the principle of tension instead of the usual compression. A house that straddles a central backbone or stem like a human or tree.

Why don't things fall down? Any structure will hold together with the right arrangement of compression and tension. Buckminster Fuller, following nature, enclosed in the lightweight shell of a sphere the largest volume of interior space with the smallest surface area. Or think of a spider's web. A spider's web, my father says, will float in a hurricane.

He points to where the top of the dome has already begun to buckle and cave, but I'm watching the kid with the paperwhite hair padding barefoot and shirtless through the sand to the boardwalk bathroom. He says, They've done it all wrong.

My father is a student of history, but my mother feels that she has no past. She's talking to her friend Christine in Hawaii—a different island in a different ocean, which is why these late night phone calls.

Why is it with him I can never remember what sort of person I used to be? Sometimes I think he can only imagine other people's past.

I picture that island of live volcanoes and dead-drop water falls, the whole thing floating greenly on the warm salt skin of the sea. Not like our island, dropped by a glacier like a diabase turd.

In fact, we married because of the plumbing, says my mother. Mine wouldn't flush.

Lying on the floor of the living room, I examine the stereo system, the dials. MAX VOL. Mute.

And what about luck, my mother says. Luck has its place in the scheme of things. Remember when we went to Saratoga to play with the jockeys? You always liked things that were little. She wants to preserve this picture she has of Christine on a spotted pacer.

When she hangs up the phone, she looks at the clock. Which part, I say.

Which part what?

Which is the part she can't remember. Does she remember the time last year when the boys made me jump from the Parachute Drop and I did and I broke my ankle? Does she remember the year I had chicken pox blisters and she drove me out to look at the lighthouse? Does she remember my first grade teacher who smoked cigarettes in her car during recess?

How would I know that? she says.

What about the day I was born.

I was sitting on the edge of the bathtub desperate to shave my legs, she says. You were three days early and I nearly dropped you driving over the train tracks what a jolt, she says.

What else? I say. Before that.

Before that there was nothing else. You wouldn't mind would you getting my glasses? She holds out her deck of cards. Pick one.

Is it the cards or my mother's way of seeing the future that makes me feel afraid?

She says, Your fortune isn't found in the future. The cards only show you what's already here.

Pick one for me please, I say, but it doesn't work like that. We all have luck our own luck, which isn't that another word for grace?

Shuffle and split. Fan the deck. You again! says my mother. Rabbit leaps from the medicine cards to teach you about fear. The Dutch called the animal *konijn*, she says. Imagine an island planted in spring and spread with the skins of muskrat and otter. Think of what one day appeared in the distance, arriving over the waves like a ship. *Coney*. An island named for fear.

Ginger and the boy are standing under the entrance to the Wonder Wheel wondering maybe what it's like to *go up it's great*. Are you making a movie or something, says someone. Ginger tells the boy no and pulls him back toward the boardwalk. Miss Coney Island stands at a tilt in her glass case *25 cents to fall in love*. The boy wants one of the Limoges-inspired treasure boxes sold in the booth next door. *Skin the wire feed the clown watch her dance to the end of love.*

I watch them argue over a hot dog in a paper sleeve. I like Ginger's faded freckles, her braids, the boy she keeps clamped to her hand. I want her to turn and see me, wanting maybe to be one of the local attractions.

She pushes through the shifting crowd, the boy lagging behind her, watching the people, sun-slicked and squinting. She's tugging him forward, walk faster, move.

At the shooting gallery on Surf Avenue, a cast-iron soldier parachutes down from the ceiling. *Remember Pearl Harbor*. The little revolving tanks and planes orbit the sun of an enormous target, this background bulls-eye glinting *oh*. The guy in the booth isn't wearing a shirt, which is maybe how he gets the girls to play. The way he gets Ginger to play is he lifts the barrel of the rifle to his temple. *Please sweetheart*, he says.

Not Ginger, but the boy who wants to feel the butt of the gun pressed to his cheek. Breathe and squeeze, I could tell him, the way my father told me once. A pair of .45 caliber slugs waiting in the palm of his hand. Put it this way, he said. You can learn sooner or later, but later there won't be time.

I follow Ginger and the boy in the direction of the pier. Far down the beach, the dome sits on the sand like something dropped from the sky, the blurred edges of the tarp flapping in the wind. It looks like something I saw in an old comic book once: a drop city in the New Mexico desert, a domed settlement of spare parts and scavenged surfaces mirroring the light. It looks like a beachcomber's prize: some shard of the future dug up from the past.

I climb the steps of the pier where fishermen bait their hooks with small crabs they pull from an Igloo cooler. They send long lines reaching down to the water for blackfish, skate, stripers, fluke. Someone has brought a boom box and a plastic bag filled with bread for the birds.

From the pier, the sea goes out and out. Not like the creek, which narrows around the point and runs aground near the parkway. Here, the water goes for miles, the pier the only point of entry.

Ginger doesn't see it that way. She unbuckles her overalls and wades waist-high into the surf. I watch her wait, counting the waves. They come in groups of seven. The saltwater wall is rising, but she waits before diving finally into the tide, which swells around her and carries her back toward the shore where the boy is watching, too.

On the pier, one of the kids from the dome is trying to sell something to one of the guys with a fishing pole. Though the day is warm, the kid is wearing pants and a hoodie, and his face is studded with acne. I saw you once before, he says. Didn't I see you?

We walk back along the walkway and down to the dome where he lifts the flap of the tarp. Inside, it smells like the back of a wet dog. There are bare mattresses dropped on the sand and

Marie Lorenz

Coney Island Creek, from *The Tide and Current Taxi,* 2005–present

Digital photograph

Elizabeth Albert

Wooden Wreck, Coney Island Creek, 2012

Digital photograph

sand spread over the mattresses and a massage table set up at one end. At the other end stands a set of metal bars strapped with cords of rope.

Gray-headed leader with dreadlocks Shadrach ticking to his high. He has something to say to this kid. Why the fuck is he talking to Rick? It's not enough to talk to Rick, he tells the kid. He wants the kid to leave. He wants to know if I'm a reporter. Are you a reporter, kid? Are you familiar with the medium of erotic spirituality? Come back tonight, he says.

Think of what there is to fear. For the student of history the answer is *fire*. Remember the white columns of Dreamland rising in dark pillars of smoke? The performers in their bunker gear helpless to put out the blaze. Bostock's lions loose in the streets, their tails swinging like torches. Think of the wooden stalls of the Bowery lit up. The smoking wheels at Luna Park. The Steeplechase ballroom, ten-cent admission to the smoldering ruins. Fire on Mermaid and Surf. Fire set by children. Candles in the attic, faulty wiring, arson. Fire sparked by the elevated train. A house on fire. Bungalow fire. The Ravenhall fire. Fire at the Boardwalk pavilion. The fire that demolished McCabe's. Someone calling fire in the hole.

Not the sea but the creek, says my mother. The water came from the creek and the sewers. The basement was filled with five feet of water because the storm rose up from the ground.

Because my father leaves nothing to chance, he keeps careful plans wrapped in waterproof bags. Rations of water in plastic jugs, MREs hoarded in the hall closet, flats of #10 cans stacked under the stairs.

Surge is a word my father uses. Troop surge. Storm surge. A surge is a place where a thing gathers mass and momentum, threatening to grow. The last time the storm came, my father packed the trunk of the car and we drove north up the Major Deegan. Laying in the daybed at Aunt Leonie's, I listened to the wind surging in the trees, I heard Aunt Leonie's breathing surge in the darkness.

Still here was the shock of the boardwalk when we returned. It was the seagulls that I remember, the gray horde touching down on the wreck of the beach. I saw the birds swarming the soft wood of the boardwalk, picking at the debris broken toys plastic bags seaweed tangled wrack and trash. I saw front loaders at work and neighbors aiming their phones while my mother threw rice for the gulls because bottle caps are bad for the birds. There were looters at the Rite-Aid, said my father and fighting at the Ocean Towers.

A storm or the revolt of an anonymous horde—it makes no difference to him. He keeps a hand-drawn map in a plastic sleeve, a northbound route over glacial till toward the Palisades crowding the Hudson. Stick to the cemeteries, he says. A cemetery always occupies the high ground.

He's taught me to braid rope from the long weeds that grow in the margins of the empty lots. He's taught me how to shoot a gun. Ease up. Remember the order of things. Breathe and squeeze, he said. Three men in windbreakers and baseball caps, my father's friends, muddying the soles of their shoes in the yard. Brocka had a gun he built from a kit. The others had military issue. They took aim at the blank unmoving target, that silhouette the size of a man.

My father has a plan my mother does too I believe—badger heron grouse—though I am often stalled by the numberless options, the open vault of the world.

Now he's watching the weather, charting the progress of storms in the Atlantic. He's mapped the wasting the wasting of the barrier islands along the coast. He forgets when he repeats himself. What did you do to your jeans? he says. They were never like that before.

Don't look at me.

I am going to look at you.

Find something on TV, says my mother. Mm? Or go outside.

The sky is crowded with scudding clouds—some vast atmospheric drift. We're entering peak season, says my father. From the roof of the house, I can see the rides churning at Luna Park and to the west, the noiseless radio tower of the old Parachute Drop. In the sky, the clouds are shifting, letting light descend in long tunneling shafts. I slide down the shingles and drop onto the tar-paper porch.

After the storm, we'd stood on the muddy bank where the seam of the creek had opened and split, a fat roar like the rush of one of the roller coaster cars. The ground is not always the same, said my mother. *It can be a stick sometimes, or it can be a stone. It can even be water*. We saw a coin-operated rocking horse nodding in the foam. Suzuki Roshi, she said.

Near the boardwalk, I pass chain link fences, empty lots, dummy arcades where real arcades haven't been built. Inside the park, all the races are rigged. There are fire engines, jets, motorcycles, trucks, fleets of vehicles on a fixed axis, airplanes spinning in place. There's a replica of a rocket ship pressed into an alley. A landscape of animated fakes and blinking simulations designed to respond to an urgency that no longer exists or hasn't yet been invented.

Is it possible the apocalypse has already arrived? Maybe we live on this narrow strip of land as on some sudden eruption in time, poised on the blade between *before* and *after*.

On the corner of Stillwell and Surf, the Shore Theater stands behind a barricade of scaffolding. Squatters have broken the windows and seized the ballroom upstairs.

Later there won't be time. What does it take to store up time and guard it from reversal or ruin? The ancients kept time in their standing stones, but we require moving parts.

Maybe I should carry a backpack. I could carry a pot, but I couldn't fill it with time.

Under the darkening sky, the loose wind picks up the screams coming from the park, the screaming gulls overhead. A speaker somewhere sends a dark howl through the walkway at Deno's where I pass beneath the dragon's glare.

This is not a game, said my father. Not some Shoot the Freak. He put the gun in my hands and I faced the target, that ghost of a threat standing upright at the other end of the narrow lot. Couldn't clear the lenses of my glasses could I? Again, my father said. Not a game not like that human target near the boardwalk *shoot that freakin freak*. As a kid, I used to dream of that freak, his mute halfhearted duck-and-cover in the rain of the paintballs and the rant of the carney *shoot that freak in his freakin head*. My father never let me play.

He took me instead to the shooting range, where his friends were and my own bad aim, where the freak was finally handed a weapon and told to fire. Think of what there is to fear. Some of it is in you and some you have to make up for somehow. It was the way that I apologized afterward to my mother that disgusted my father for weeks.

The dome is sinking under the hood of its tarp. It looks like a dying circus animal, like one of the elephants at Luna Park broke loose and stunned by a dart in the leg. There's an old expression, my father says. *Seeing the elephant.* Gold bugs going west used to paint the side of their wagons with charcoal or grease: *Have you seen the elephant?* In the great gold rush, the elephant appeared like one of my mother's medicine cards, an augur of danger or hardship. Once you've seen the elephant you can never go back.

Peepshow slit in the flap of the tarp. *Looka looka looka.* Here is something new: Ginger hanging in the dim light of the dome, suspended from cords of rope swinging slightly, her skin trussed in thick knots.

For a moment, there's only the flapping tarp, the great turbine chugging of the sea. The art of Shibari, Shadrach is saying, his shaky hands rigging the rope. He's strapped Ginger's arms behind her and gathered her legs in rope as well. Her breasts are pale and peeled, her face like something seen through glass.

Rope drunk, says Shadrach. He's talking to the kids propped in the sand or sprawled across one of the mattresses, a few stoners dragged from the beach. The knots in the rope, Shadrach is saying, are positioned against her pressure points to put her into a trance.

It's hard to hear what he's saying from here. His words get gathered up by the wind and pressed flat by the sound of the waves as they scroll across the sand. I feel rain beginning to pelt the back of my neck. Over the water, lightning shears the sky. The storm is quick and violent, challenging the midway, clearing the boardwalk. To hear, I have to climb inside.

Under the dome, a few free-standing lamps are powered by an old diesel generator—that sonic engine is not the sea but this throbbing machine. The space is dim and the air is thick with a smoky haze, as though I'd been dropped down a mineshaft.

Across the room, Shadrach is using his hands like a paintbrush, Ginger the canvas the rope rigger's art. It doesn't hurt her at all, he says.

I watch Ginger where she's hooked by the rope like a fish. Like a body known to accept a good that is less than some other good, like a real girl who plays a mechanical girl onstage with the lurching composure of a false body no not false only fixed firmness the resolute sameness from day to day the proud sovereignty of the junkwater freak.

That crackling sound on the roof of the dome is the sound of rain, and now the generator is sputtering and the wind is tugging at the skin of the tarp. Shadrach is working the rope down over Ginger's ankles.

Shadrach, my mother told me once, was a Babylonian slave. There were three of them, actually, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego. Actually, they were made an example of, fed to the fiery furnace for refusing to bow to a graven image. The three men in the fire were as shocked as anyone else when their flesh refused to burn.

This Shadrach isn't in danger, I think. Neither is Ginger, hanging there on the knife-edge of time. Tomorrow or the day after next—when someone from Scarsdale complains or someone from the Parks Department shows up—Shadrach and Ginger and the other kids will dismantle the dome. They'll make their way down the coast, headed south for the season to some other beach, some bonfire alley where they can peddle peace or pills. They'll seek out the sea, because the creek—where the *Quester* lies quietly rotting—the creek knows the limit of things.

Who does that leave? Whose disaster has not yet appeared, whose future hasn't yet stalled in the mud?

There's that dog in the doorway with a gull clamped in its jaws and the boy following behind like an anxious setter. He has something to say to his mother. He's searching for her in the haze. He's sorry about the bird, the way its feathers have gone rag-damp and limp inside the mouth of the dog. It isn't his fault he would never feed the dog something like that. I know that and I tell him and I take his hand and lift the flap of the tarp to lead him back outside so he won't feel guilty when he sees his mother tipped over there in the darkness.

Good luck or bad luck, my mother asked, to be plucked from the flame by the emperor's tongs?

At home, there's a cold smell in the hallway, my father's watch ticking on the kitchen table where my mother sits with the radio on. Where were you, hm? she says. This white-hot fortune this father's failsafe. I see the two of them there in the house: my mother who believes that she has no past, my father, who disbelieves in the future though he is making plans.

Barren Island homes, c. 1935.

DEAD HORSE BAY

Dead Horse Bay lies in south Brooklyn near the old Floyd Bennett Airfield, on the edge of a large parcel of land that is now part of Gateway National Recreation Area. One particular stretch of beach is covered with glass bottles, bones, ceramic, and other detritus. There is so much glass that as the waves lap the shore there is an audible tinkling, much like a faint wind chime. This beach lies on the coast of what was once called Barren Island. From the 1860s to the 1930s, Barren Island was largely avoided because of its terrible stench. It was the site of a small community of Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants who worked at more than a dozen animal rendering plants where vast numbers of horses, no longer of use for transportation or other labor, were turned into fertilizer and other products. After the carcasses were stripped of any usable material, the boiled, chopped-up bones were simply dumped into the water.

Between 1859 and 1934, twenty-six plants operated on Barren Island, their tall smokestacks visible in the distance and their overbearing stench fouling the air for miles. Not only horses ended up on Barren Island. All of the city's animal carcasses—in fact until 1918, all of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx's household garbage—arrived there by ship to be sorted and boiled down. There was a hierarchy of job status; at the top was sorting bone, followed by sorting metal or paper. At the bottom was rag picking, where the bare hand was necessary to get a "feel" for the material. The job of dealing with the tons of rotting fish was reserved for those considered the lowliest: the island's small black population. Residents lived in drafty wooden cabins, weathering epidemics of diphtheria and typhoid, went for years without a doctor or nurse, electricity, or a post office. People wore salt pork wrapped in flannel around their necks to ward off disease.

Barren Island endured a variety of plights. One day in 1905, with a sudden and deafening crash, the eastern portion of the island sank, taking with it an entire factory and creating a massive whirlpool. Many of the terrified inhabitants, convinced that the whole island was sinking, jumped into the water rather than waiting to sink.

By 1909, Barren Island had become overrun with wild hogs, rooting and snuffling, growing fat on the plentiful garbage. When inspectors came to the island, none of the inhabitants would admit to owning the hogs. The agreed upon solution was a massive hog hunt. The police arrived with guns and rifles. One officer reportedly exclaimed, "If Roosevelt were only here! It was a big mistake he wasn't invited,"[8] referring to Teddy Roosevelt, who had once served as the city's police commissioner. As soon as the first shot was fired, it became clear who owned the hogs. There was a sudden frenzy among the inhabitants as they called to the hogs and put out corn to entice them into their yards and homes, waving their fists at the police and cursing them in Polish and Italian. Many of the hogs were smart and speedy and raced to the marshiest part of the island, where they were safely out of reach.

Pelts from the rotting carcasses at Barren Island were for sale. But in 1916, a number of people died, including Wanda Belote, a six-month-old baby who was poisoned by the anthrax spores later traced to her little cat fur outfit. A ban was thereafter placed on all pelts purchased from Barren Island. In 1936, five acres of thriving marijuana plants, some nine feet tall, were discovered on Barren Island, being munched upon by happy milk goats. The squatters who owned the goats denied any knowledge of the "loco weed" and assured the police that goats showed no ill effects.

When the automobile became the standard mode of transportation, the horse cadaver businesses closed down or moved away. Barren Island's last occupants were evicted in 1936, when Robert Moses condemned the island to build Marine Park Bridge. The site then became landfill and remained so until it was capped in 1953. Grassy dunes and paths hide any sense of what is underneath, until you take the path through the dunes to the beach. Toward the southern end of the beach, there is a rupture in the roots of the sumac trees and grass that now cover the dunes. Each time the tide rolls in and recedes, it pulls out more and more stuff: shoes, toys, bottles, bones from the breeched landfill. The beach is covered with an endlessly changing landscape of objects stretching back at least 150 years.

Top: A woman bends over to pick up scrap iron on a debris-strewn beach at Barren Island, c. 1935. **Bottom:** Sam Brody's 1938 photograph shows an animal disposal plant. The island's natural topography made it ideal for this purpose: at low tide animals could walk to the northern coast of the island (now connected to the mainland by the Flatbush Avenue extension), while ships could load cargo off the deeper water on the southern coast.

Top: Boys with their dogs coming down a snow-covered street lined with one-story houses on Barren Island, c. 1938. **Bottom:** A 1931 photograph by Eugene Armbruster shows picnickers and automobiles on Barren Island near the Old Incinerator, where garbage was burned.

Eventide

Ravi Howard

A half-mile ahead of us at the old turn road, a motorcycle kept straight when it should have gone right. The headlight swerved into the darkness, through the salt marsh and toward the bay. What the bike hit, I couldn't tell, but the headlight went sideways and into a rise of sand. I listened for hollering, hoping for it, because at least then I'd know the driver was alive. I didn't see anybody in the wash of the headlight. All it showed was the trash that collected in the grass. Prohibition had turned bottles into contraband, but Dead Horse Bay was not a drinking beach like Coney Island or Rockaway. This was a place to toss out bottles, so the glass—some broken already and the rest soon to be—left a thrown rider with no merciful place to fall.

I stopped the truck where the road was wide enough. My daughter slept under a blanket next to me.

"Somebody's in the water," I told her. "You wait."

She stood, and got a bit closer to the windshield, but still there was nobody up walking and not a sound. I ran over to the motorcycle and lifted it quickly, hoping to get the weight off the man, but what it rested on was a dune, man-made, a railroad tie with a hill of blown sand. The top edge had been sifted by the spokes of the whitewall tires. There was no one underneath. I saw the rider sitting a few yards away on a stack of railroad ties that kept the sand from the road.

"Careful," he said. "The crankcase is still hot. I'd hate for you to get burned after I got myself off in one piece. Praises be. Didn't realize I was off the road."

"A hard corner if you don't know it. Needs a marker. Used to be an old turn road they used for horses."

He looked to where I nodded. Only one of the slaughterhouses still stood, and instead of dead horses it was filled with brokedown carriages. What remained of the horses was in the sand. The smooth bits of white on the shore looked as much like coral as they did bone. Hermit crabs had made houses of hollowed pieces.

"I owe you a thanks and God bless," he said. I saw the collar then, underneath his coat, a circle of white a bit wider than his neck. The preacher spoke to me like we were in a vestibule.

"Might have been a little heavy on the gas. On my way to see a sick waterman, father of one of my church members. First Sunday and all."

"Visiting the shut-in and liable to be one."

"Rev. Harris," he said. "Call me Samuel. I'm over at Bridge Street. African Wesleyan church in Brooklyn."

"We can get you back on the road. Got a truck across the way, we can load your motorcycle and give you a ride."

"No, sir. I'm fine, if it can crank, then—"

But his claim of being fine was untested. He put weight on his feet and doubled over, favoring the right leg. He eased back down then, leaning back and stretching his leg out straight. I saw the problem. Whatever made that hole in the bottom of his shoe was still stuck in his foot. He tried to cross his legs to get a look at it, but the movement set off the pain again. No telling what it was. Sometimes the surf had enough mercy to bury the trash, but sometimes a rusted bit of metal took a razor's edge. Sometimes the bones broke to slivers. Since the city started draining the marsh, the splintered pieces sat upright and ready to cut somebody.

I called for Clara, but she was already in the back of the truck I drove for Dr. Weston. She had purchased a Harvester truck and made it into a four-wheeled clinic, treating Negro fish pickers and farm hands from Brooklyn up through Rockaway. She let Clara help her with bandages and the light cleaning of wounds.

Clara had two hand lanterns lit and had spread out a few of the blankets my wife sewed.

"Something in his foot," I told her, and after a quick hello we helped Samuel into the payload.

He watched Clara as she cleaned the pliers. There was gratitude in his face, but a little worry, too. A teenager ready to dig into his foot.

"She pulled a fish hook out of me when she was ten," I tell him.

"I don't doubt it. A calling like any other I imagine. So you found your blessing sooner than most."

"Dr. Weston's let me help for a while now," Clara says.

"Please give the doctor my thanks for using his provisions. Let me know what I owe. You and him."

"Her. Third Negro woman to practice medicine in New York state." She held the light closer to his foot. "Not sure what number I'll be."

She got Samuel talking about back home: Choptank River and Cambridge, Maryland, a fiancée moving up in the fall. That was a trick she'd learned watching Dr. Weston, let that talking work like a little ether to take his mind someplace else before she sent the pliers into his foot. A quick wince was all that Samuel seemed to feel as she freed what had cut into him.

"Horse bone. Maybe whale," she said, placing the bone beside them and pressing a cloth to his foot. He jumped a bit with the chill of peroxide.

"I guess it could be worse. Could have been my bone that needed tending," Samuel said, his voice loosened by relief. "I have a bottle of turpentine at my place. Soak this old foot, and I'll be good as new."

"You might need another sort of bottle once the feeling comes back. It'll hurt sure enough," I told him. "The law's not keen on alcohol, but I guess a taste of whiskey is between you and the Lord."

Clara gave me the look of teenage children, a bit of judgment they knew better than to speak. She didn't care for me talking common and neither did her mother. But the man was in the back of the truck with a hole in his foot, so a little loose talk was just fine.

"Protestants and Catholics drink different whiskey. I know that much. What kind of liquor do Wesleyans drink?"

"The ones back in Maryland make their own. At least the ones I knew and was kin to."

While Clara cleaned the wound, I examined Samuel's shoe, bending it back and forth.

"Your foot's better off than this sole. Leather's fine, but this sole was in its last days before you crashed. Clara has a young man you should visit. Richard."

The look she tried then didn't hold. As much as she hated a bit of teasing, she knew I liked him. Hearing his name brought her smile on a bit.

"He works for a cobbler in East New York. We can send you over to him. He's trying to stay in my good graces, so he'll fix you up. Can make a decent pair of shoes if you give him time."

The reverend looked at my boots, the ones I could carry across broken glass or bone without a bit of worry.

"He make those for you?"

Clara looked at me again. She knew the story of the boots, the man I'd taken them from and why. She'd never heard me tell a stranger, and probably wondered if I would.

"No. These came from a man I used to work for."

I phrased it so that it was not a lie.

"Only thing I brought with me when I came up here."

The reverend was still looking at them, good boots, seasoned but not worn down after twenty years. "Proper gift."

"The best I could think of."

I had told Clara about the night in Alabama, where I'd come from and why I left. Her mother taught her to swim, so she would never be afraid of water. Dr. Weston showed her wounds so she would never fear blood. I told her about folks who aimed to take everything, and that she might have to take something in return.

Nathan Kensinger

Telephone, 2006

Ink-jet print

14 x 11 inches (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

I carried a few of my fishing things in the back of the truck, just because I was liable to stop on any bridge to see what would bite. It was an old habit. Pulling my next meal from the creek or bayou. That was what I was doing the night I ran into some trouble. Or trouble walked up on me.

All I was doing was minding my line, and a man, Beaux Charles Jr., familiar to anyone in that stretch of the Baldwin County, told me I owed him money.

"This bridge is incorporated. It's the town of Blakely now. You need a license," Beaux Charles said.

"The city ends at the road. Bridge is the bridge. No place else."

"Incorporated now. You know what that means?"

"Means you want what's in my pocket."

Beaux Charles had two men with him who were something close to deputies. They were in shadows behind him. He was standing in the middle of the bridge with a narrow flask light glowing in his pocket. It was something he'd started to bring in the new year and they all wore them during Mardi Gras, too. I heard they carried them in their tailcoat pockets, making their masks and bow ties glow while they marched down Canal Street. The light that Beaux Charles carried showed his game warden badge, no bigger than the doubloon he might have thrown in the parade. He'd gotten himself elected, or chosen, in a city his family near about owned.

"You got to pay a fine," he told me. "Fishing without a license."

He pulled a book out of his pocket and wrote down my name. He knew it without asking. His people owned three commissaries in Baldwin County, and they shorted us on everything we bought, but went heavy on what we owed. Half the county would die with debt still on their books. So I came to the water for a reason, to eat something I wouldn't spend weeks paying off. All I owed was the patience to wait for a fish.

"If I had a nickel for fish I'd go to the pier. Buy a snapper."

"No money in your pocket is another fine. Vagrancy."

He wrote in his book a bit more, then he stared like I owed him more talk on top of money. I'd said enough to get myself shot or beat. But the words that would bring me harm were nothing but the truth, so there was no running for it.

The float bobbed on my line, and what I would eat that evening was hooked, liable to tangle my line on a low branch and break free.

"You wrote my name in your book, Beaux Charles. I'll settle. Now leave me be."

The men behind the game warden didn't look like friends, but they were on his payroll and would be on me if I fought. So I thought better of it. I turned and sat on the top railing, let my feet on the second, listened to the hush of the water broken by that fish, a big one it seemed, down there testing my line.

"If I lose this fish then I don't have to pay. You can clear my name."

I figured Beaux Charles had a pistol under his jacket, and if not his men did indeed. If they moved, I'd fall back in the water, swim through the dark and hide. I could check my line when they'd moved on.

But Beaux Charles wouldn't do a thing but put another mark in his book, like his mama did at the commissary. Making folks pay for any cross word or stare with more interest. A thumb on a scale.

"You're still on my bridge."

I lifted my feet straight out. "My ass is on the bridge, but not my feet. What's the fine?"

I waited for him to reach under his coat but he didn't. He came on me quick, with two hands on my collar. I grabbed him in kind, took the knuckles on one hand, the wrist of the other, and I lifted with everything I had. I got a good look at the brand new boots on his feet as I kicked his legs out from under him and fell back over the railing, carrying both of us down those ten feet into the creek water.

These twenty years later, I have tried to make sense of the horse slaughter, the last bit of harvest of a dead thing. I was raised in a tabby house, with bricks made of oyster and bone. We took the

last of something living, both meat and the bone of it, to do our living in return. It could go too far, well past the gleaning into something worse.

Beaux Charles and his people were planters once, but their best harvest was in our pockets, taking every honest dollar, and with a mark in a book, laying claim to the next. Once they knocked me down to the grist, all they had to do was let me be. But he didn't, so I dragged him down same as he did me.

The flask light showed every bit of terror on his face when we fell head first into the creek. The seal around the bulb held for a few seconds then flickered and left us in the dark. If he'd held me, he could have drowned me easy. I could have done the same. Instead I broke loose and swam into the flooded branches of a cypress tree and hid while Beaux Charles turned around looking for me, the tail end of his air bubbling out of him. He stopped spinning and looked up. As set as he was on finding me, he wanted that next breath even more. He followed his bubble to the surface and I swam behind. When he was close enough to touch the rippling, I grabbed his boot. His fingers broke the surface, but that seemed to bring the panic, his hands feeling air that he couldn't breathe.

Beaux Charles was not a curious man; he didn't have to be. As the aunt who raised me said, a man like that didn't know how his drawers made it from the hamper to the wardrobe, never mind the scrubbing to clear out his stains. People did his worrying for him. So I enjoyed that bit of wonder in his face, that man who had always seemed so sure. His face was a question. I answered him with a turn of his boot heel and shook it, enough for that foot to come loose and for him to rise to the surface. While he was gasping, I grabbed the left boot, because half a pair of ten-dollar boots wasn't worth a dime until I had the both of them.

While Clara wrapped Samuel's foot, I walked the bike over to the road. I knew more about four wheels than I did two, but it looked to be in good shape. An Excelsior with a blue shade on the metal. The only sign of damage were the scratches in the chrome. The whitewalls had nicks in their coating, but no punctures. It rolled just fine, but the riding I couldn't really know.

As I pushed the bike onto hard packed sand, it moved easily. I saw Rev. Samuel and Clara in the light of the hand lanterns. He pointed out toward the water, and maybe they were swapping stories of the Chesapeake water he'd traded for this, just like I'd left the Mobile Bay.

Once I swam from that creek, I left home and left my name back there, too. In case Beaux Charles sent people looking, I would be somebody else. Besides, I had the same last name as he did, and it had cost me more than it ever got me. A county full of namesakes, and barely any kin. When I married Augusta, I changed my name to hers. And who I was, who I would be, started over.

My feet found a puddle or two, but my boots kept me dry and surefooted. Any bit of dust or scrape I'd polish while sitting on our front steps. When Richard came calling, sometimes they'd join me while I used the polish I made, beeswax and olive oil. I added a little color when it was called for, squid ink or oxblood. Richard would bring me a bottle of what he mixed and sold to the dapper Brooklyn men. The colors had names. Autumn Maple. Moonlight Gray. Eventide. Names are funny because of what they tell you to see.

Whoever named this place Dead Horse Bay could have done better than calling it exactly what it was. They could have followed Richard's conjuring. I thought about that gumption when I was bringing my boots back, making them look brand new again. Take a little bit of new truth on my fingertips, and put a fresh coat of it everywhere. And the light that fell on my boots wouldn't show the scrapes and the wear, only a luster that hid those bits that were better left underneath.

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Marie Lorenz

Near Dead Horse Bay from *Archipelago*, 2013

Film still

Running time: 1 minute 42 seconds

The Rockaways boardwalk as it was in 1903. In 1920, New York City took on an expansion project that took over ten years and resulted in a beautiful and extensive boardwalk made from tropical hardwoods. In 2013, Hurricane Sandy swept it almost entirely away.

JAMAICA BAY and the ROCKAWAYS

O there are Voices of the Past,
Links of a broken chain,
Wings that can bear me back to Times
Which cannot come again;
Yet God forbid that I should lose
The echoes that remain.[9]—*Adelaide Procter*

This narrow eleven-mile-long peninsula of Long Island lies to the south and west of Jamaica Bay. "Reckowacky" was originally home to a small tribe of Canarsie. The name can be translated into "place of our people," "lonely place," or "place of waters bright." It was originally purchased by the Dutch and was then the property of several English landowners before being purchased by Richard Cornell, an ironworker from Flushing who settled in Far Rockaway in 1690.

Rockaway's miles of wide beaches covered in soft sand have long made it ideal as an oceanfront resort. The Marine Hotel, built in 1833, was frequented by New York City luminaries such as the Vanderbilts, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Washington Irving. By the 1880s, the railroad extended all the way to Far Rockaway, bringing larger audiences and increased business opportunities. In 1897, the Village of Rockaway Park became incorporated into the City of Greater New York, and further development of the outer boroughs into working class neighborhoods along with increased access via the Cross Bay Bridge and the Marine Parkway Bridge shifted the area's demographics.

"The Playground of New York" began a steep decline following World War II, as the wealthy sought more distant and exclusive resorts. Most of the grand hotels became rooming houses or were destroyed by fire. While the growing middle class sought beaches elsewhere, returning war veterans and the continuing migration of blacks from the South created an increasingly high demand for housing. This offered an opportunity for the controversial Robert Moses, then the head of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, to change the landscape of the Rockaways.

The Housing Act of 1949 freed up federal funding for Moses' ambitious housing plans. Making his case for razing much of the area and replacing it with high-rises, he offered this rationale: "Such beaches as the Rockaways and those on Long Island and Coney Island lend themselves to summer exploitation, to honky-tonk catchpenny amusement resorts, shacks built without reference to health, sanitation, safety and decent living."[10] Land on the Rockaways was cheap or, better yet, free—when seized by the power of eminent domain.

Before Robert Moses, it was Fiorello La Guardia who pressed for clean, affordable, modern housing to be made available to all citizens. He targeted the slums along the waterfront as the first to go, declaring, "Tear down the old, build up the new. Down with rotten antiquated rat holes."[11] The large-scale housing projects begun under his tenure in the Lower East Side and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, were soon followed by the Red Hook houses, considered in 1940 to be a great success, "a Versailles for the millions."[12]

Although the Rockaways, Red Hook, Gowanus, and other housing projects were designed for efficiency, they were not designed to withstand severe weather. One bad storm was capable of reducing Rockaway's wide swaths of beach into thin strips of sand, which all but disappeared at high tide.

The Rockaways tell a particularly poignant story of the shifting nature of the waterfront. It has followed the trajectory of much of greater New York City in its transformation from wilderness, to farms and resorts, to bedroom communities and housing projects. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy in 2012, much of the peninsula was damaged beyond repair. Many residents, despite losing everything, are fiercely devoted to the waterfront and cannot conceive of living elsewhere. What happened in the Rockaways forces us to consider how we are going to face similar recurring events. We can rebuild on raised foundations and replace the wooden boardwalk with concrete, but we must also tend to the ecological health of our surroundings. If any good has come out of the terrible loss of life and property Sandy inflicted, it is that we can no longer ignore the threat to our coastline. We can agree to take thoughtful action to respect, protect, and maintain our waterfront.

Top: People swimming in Jamaica Bay near B85th Street, 1939. The building in the background was blown away in the Great Atlantic hurricane of 1944. **Bottom:** The Arverne (sometimes spelled Arvern) Hotel, also known as Colonial Hall, was one of a number of elegant hotels with "bathing beaches" located in the Rockaways at the turn of the twentieth century. This photograph was taken in 1903.

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The Raunt in Jamaica Bay, pictured here c. 1910, was a marshy island community named for the Raunt Channel, which runs through the marshes of Jamaica Bay. It was home to many popular fishing clubs, but after years of decline was razed and became part of Jamaica Bay's bird sanctuary.

Sticks

Antoine Wilson

One summer, we keep seeing the same kid on the beach, ten or eleven years old, buck teeth, black hair, eyes like brown marbles. I don't know why he fixates on S and me, but it seems like every time we hit the Rockaways, he finds us. "Teach me how to surf?" he asks. The first few times, we shine him on. Then we consider the idea. Why not? We ask him where his parents are and he points into the neighborhood. Other side of the tracks. He's wearing cut-off khakis. We ask if he has any trunks and he says he's okay in his shorts. S has a 9'0" so he takes the kid out on it. They're already in the water when the kid tells him he doesn't know how to swim.

The horizon is a local infinity, a respite from the city behind me.

I look back at the shore, at the church spires up on Beach 84th. Saint Rose of Lima. The first saint born in the Americas. Apparently so beautiful, she disfigures her face so men won't pay attention to her beauty. Her virtue is in her lack of vanity—that much is clear. Nevertheless, to take a thing of beauty, a natural thing, and mar it, disfigure it, seems to me anything but virtuous. Saint Rose could be patron saint of the Rockaways.

After diving off my board in a closeout barrel, I swim for the surface, but just before I reach air, my leash yanks tight. At first, I don't comprehend what's happening. I try a couple more strokes for the surface. I've been held under for extended periods of time, and I've always prided myself on my lack of panic. You come up eventually, no point in fighting it. But I'm not coming up. It dawns on me. My leash is wrapped around one of the sticks—wooden pilings from old groins—submerged below the surface. My board's gone to one side, my body to the other, and the leash is hooked around the piling. This comes to me in a flash, and I swim as hard as I can out to sea, thinking I can make it around the stick to my board, freeing us both, but I swim right into a hunk of wood. I use the last of my strength to pull myself into a ball, and tear the Velcro off my ankle. I surface with a gasp, get hit by a wall of whitewater and slammed into another one of the sticks, which knocks the wind out of me. I'm in pure survival mode, trying to swim for the shore. I bodysurf in and crawl onto the beach before collapsing, face in the frosty sand, gasping and coughing, spitting up aspirated seawater. I sit up, finally, and watch my board, leash still wrapped around the piling, tombstoning in the surf. There's another version of me still down there, attached, succumbing.

On the platform at Broadway Junction a young black guy in a puffy jacket and beanie points at my boardbag. "What's in the bag?" he asks. "Art project," I say. My stock response. He gives me a withering look, then says, "Thruster? Quad? Fish?" I tell him it's a 6'1" Coil. He nods a few times, looks me up and down, and says, "You're undergunned today, bro." He's right. When I get to the beach, it's way bigger than forecast.

K never misses an opportunity to tell people that he was here, in the water, on 9/11. "It was such a beautiful, clear morning," he says, shaking his head, as if weather had anything to do with it.

I'm living in a space in Williamsburg that could only in the most generous terms be called a loft. Fifteen of us live there, on a floor hastily subdivided with plywood and drywall, paying meager rent to G, a pothead impresario whose father bankrolls the whole enterprise. If there are blueprints, they've been drawn by a spider on LSD. One morning G offers us a ride to the beach in a stolen car. We're all about fucking up the car but he stops us because he's planning to sell it. A few years later I hear that it was actually his grandmother's.

When the surf is pumping, you can tell who the locals are because they jump off the one specific rock that puts them into a rip current straight out into the lineup.

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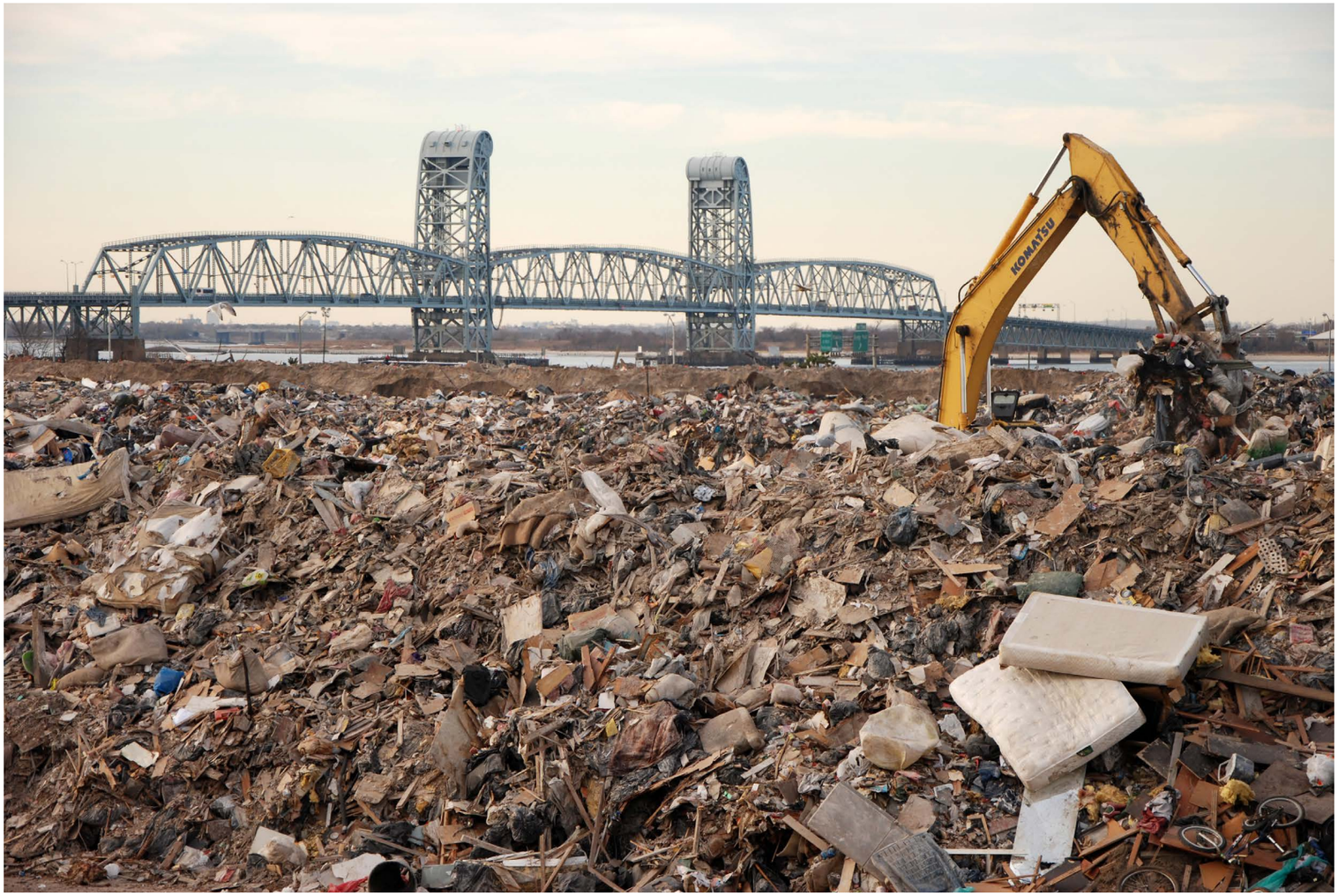
Nathan Kensinger

After Sandy, Belle Harbor, Queens, New York–November 1, 2012, 2012

Ink-jet print

11 x 14 inches (27.9 x 35.6 cm)



Nathan Kensinger,

Demolished Homes, Jacob Riis Park, Queens, New York–November 16, 2012, 2012

Ink-jet print

11 x 14 inches (27.9 x 35.6 cm)

I meet K in the water in the mid-2000s. Tells me he lives in a house a few blocks from the beach. He tells everyone this, even though his primary residence is a Manhattan apartment. His Rockaways bungalow is a sort of weekend surf shack. After Sandy hits, he goes to check on his place. It's basically fine, but K is overwhelmed by the devastation in the neighborhood. He takes vacation from work and goes down every day to do what he can to help with the cleanup. He bonds with his neighbors, most of whom he didn't know before. Afterward, in the water, he's considered a local. Now, when he talks to people about his house, he doesn't pretend to live there.

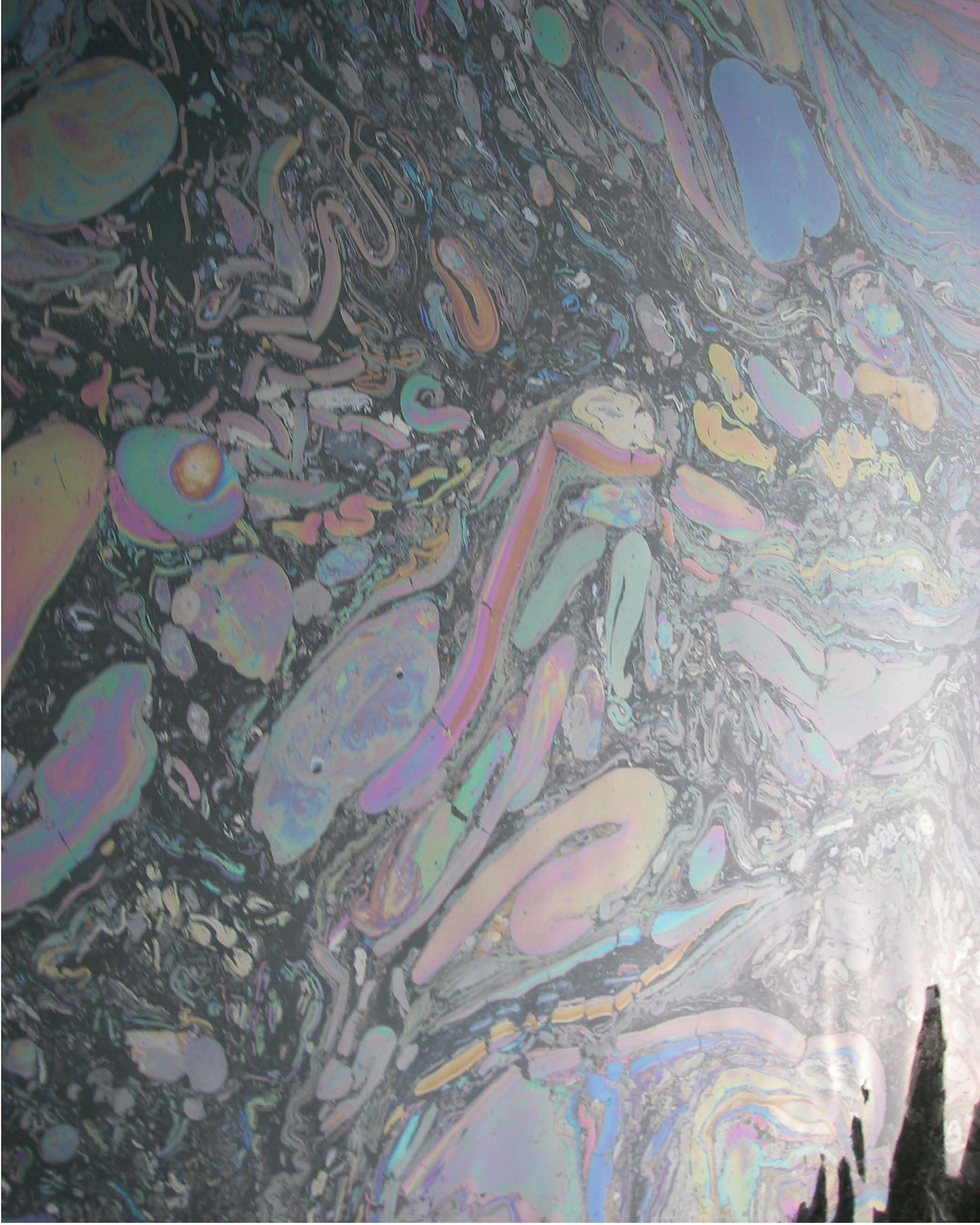
It's the middle of August, sweltering hot, and there's some leftover hurricane swell in the water. The beach is packed, umbrellas everywhere, as if someone tilted the city and everyone rolled onto the sand. Crazy metallic leopard pattern swimsuits, incomprehensible tattoos, neon Speedos next to sweating Hasidic kids, a guy in cut-off jean shorts and wraparound shades carrying a giant American flag. Part of the break is closed off because the city is trying to remove the sticks with a crane and a barge. Anywhere with any shape is wall-to-wall funboards and kooks. S and I leave our boards at K's and walk up the beach toward Belle Harbor, surreptitiously smoking a joint. Right as we're about done with it, a guy approaches us, a down-at-heel version of Mike Damone from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. He asks if he can have the roach. Sure, says S, why not? He hands it over and we keep walking as the guy stands there sparking it with his lighter. Not twenty seconds later, we hear the hoot of a police siren behind us. We keep walking.

On a small day, G finds a horseshoe crab shell on the beach and paddles out with it on his board. He rides a few waves with the shell, picking it up from the deck and waving it around once he's up. In the lineup, he holds it in front of his face and says, "Luke, I am your father." When he cuts his foot on a broken beer bottle near the boardwalk supports, I feel like a bit of cosmic justice has been meted out.

In the winter, even with my thick hooded wet suit, I get an ice-cream headache on the first duck-dive, no matter what. I try pre-cooling with snow on my face, swishing cold liquids, swishing warm liquids, but nothing works. I hope against hope that it'll ease up, but the second duck-dive only makes it worse. I have to wait it out. My head hurts so bad I'm blinded. I let the swells push me in, try not to vomit from the pain. In ten minutes it will all be over and I'll be riding waves.

It's a September afternoon and the waves suck. But the water's warm, and getting wet with K and S beats sitting behind a keyboard in Brooklyn. We're talking about money and kids and getting older. The light is just beginning to drift toward evening, and a pod of humpbacks appear way on the outside. In silence, we watch them roll and drift and laze and blow. Something weird and organic wraps itself around my bare foot—I think it's a fish at first, then a heavy jellyfish—and I reach down to release it. Turns out it's a disposable diaper, the gel pack saturated with seawater. I test its weight in the palm of my hand, then throw it at S.

I'm at JFK, waiting on line at the Shake Shack, eavesdropping on the couple in front of me. She's in high-waisted jeans and a polka-dot blouse, he's got a bushy beard and Matuse wet suit sticker on his laptop. He points out the paneling on the restaurant, tells her that the wood is actually recycled Rockaway boardwalk, salvaged after Sandy. Epic, she says. I step out of line and head to my gate.



NOTES

1. The earliest known and probably the only true "potter's field" in New York was located where the Surrogate's Court Building now stands, in lower Manhattan. This is where colonial potters built their shacks and ovens. It was near the city's almshouse, workhouse, and debtor's prison. Around 1755, it began to appear on maps as the Old Negroes' Burying-ground and during the Revolution became a common cemetery for colonial prisoners who died in captivity while the British occupied New York.

   Other potter's fields were located throughout the city. The one at the north end of Madison Park lasted only briefly, as the yellow fever epidemic of 1796 swept through, claiming 1,300 lives in two months. It was then filled and used as a military parade ground. Next, the city proposed to use six-and-a-half acres of swamp located on what is now the Bowery and was then the only route west through the fields to Greenwich Village, and a fashionable drive for elegant New Yorkers. Loud opposition was heard from Alexander Hamilton and many of his neighbors, who owned country homes in the area. However, this site was filled with the dead from various epidemics until burials were ceased in 1825, by which time 10,000 people were interred there. By 1840, all traces of the area's use as a potter's field were gone, and the area had become Washington Square, surrounded by elegant homes of the Delanos, Roosevelts, Brevoorts, and other wealthy New York families.

   The city then found a site on ten acres between 40th and 42nd Streets. Prison laborers built a stone wall topped with posts of Georgia pine and locust wood to detract grave robbers. Those lost in the Great Fire of 1835 as well as three cholera epidemics were buried here until they were disinterred and transferred, making way for the Murray Hill receiving reservoir, part of the Croton water system. The potter's field continued to move, first to a site that was later occupied by the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, then to Randall's Island, then to Ward's Island, and finally, in 1869, to Hart's Island.
2. Herbert N. Casson, *Munsey's Magazine* (December 1904). New York: The New York Historical Society, microfilm, pp. 324–30.
3. James D. McCabe, Jr., *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1872), p. 637.
4. "Long Island Nuisances," *New York Times*, August 16, 1887, p. 5.
5. As of April, 2016, the EPA site status on the Newtown Creek explains that it is overseeing a nearly complete remedial investigation carried out by six "potentially responsible parties" (PRPs), including oil, gas, and electric companies that continue to operate along the banks of the creek. The investigation examines toxins in the water and sediment to assess human health and ecological risk. Once the EPA determines that there is sufficient data, they will require these PRPs to conduct a feasibility study and will ultimately decide on some kind of remediation.
6. Joseph Mitchell, *The Bottom of the Harbor* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), p. 137.
7. Charles Michael Higgins, *Brooklyn and Gowanus in History: The Battle of Long Island, August 27, 1776: The Past Historic Neglect and the Present Historic Duty of Brooklyn*, Volume 5, Issue 1 of *Kings County Historical Society* magazine (New York: Brooklyn Eagle Press, 1916) p. 13.
8. "Hunt Wild Hogs on Barren Island," *New York Times*, March 17, 1909, p. 18.
9. Adelaide A. Procter, "Voices of the Past," in *The Complete Works of Adelaide A. Proctor* (New York: G. Bell, 1905), p. 92.
10. Lawrence and Carol P. Kaplan, *Between Ocean and City: The Transformation of Rockaway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 15.
11. Fiorello La Guardia, quoted in Nicolas Dagen Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 13.
12. Fiorello La Guardia, quoted in Jonathan Mahler, "How the Coastline Became a Place to Put the Poor," *New York Times*, December 3, 2012.

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ABOUT THE SILENT BEACHES PROJECT

Elizabeth Albert is a Brooklyn-based visual artist and associate professor at St. John's University in New York. She has received grants and fellowships from the NEA/Mid-Atlantic Arts Council, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Inc., Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, Byrdcliffe, and the MacDowell Colony. Her paintings are exhibited nationally and are in the collections of the Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, and the Naples Art Museum, Naples, Florida. *Silent Beaches, Untold Stories: New York City's Forgotten Waterfront* is based on the exhibition she curated for St. John's University in 2013. www.elizalbert.com

Underwater New York is a digital journal of stories, art, and music inspired by the waterways that surround New York City and the objects submerged within them. By providing a platform for new creative work and facilitating opportunities to engage with each other and the city itself, the mission of *Underwater New York* is to help its audience envision the city in a new way, through the landscape of the sixth borough—the waterways.

Since its founding in 2009, *Underwater New York* has published the work of more than 130 contributors, hosted events and excursions in all five boroughs, and collaborated with partners ranging from small galleries to established museums and institutions, bringing arts, literary, and waterfront engagement programming to diverse audiences across New York City. Through its digital journal and programmatic events, *Underwater New York* seeks to foster community, collaboration, creativity and diversity. *Underwater New York* has been profiled in the *New York Times* and *Time Out New York*, and its events listed in publications such as *The New Yorker* and *New York Magazine*.

Underwater New York is edited by Nicki Pombier Berger, Helen Georgas, and Nicole Haroutunian, writers who met in the Sarah Lawrence College M.F.A. program. Nicki Pombier Berger is an oral historian, artist, and educator. Helen Georgas is a librarian and associate professor at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York (CUNY). Nicole Haroutunian is a museum educator and author of *Speed Dreaming*, a short story collection. *Underwater New York* was one of the original inspirations for the *Silent Beaches* project. www.underwaternewyork.com

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Elizabeth Albert
Silent Beaches, Untold Stories:
New York City's Forgotten Waterfront

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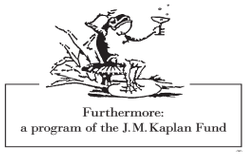

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