



LUC SANTE

**KILL ALL
YOUR
DARLINGS**

PIECES 1990 – 2005 INTRODUCTION BY GREIL MARCUS

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YOUR
DARLINGS**

A close-up photograph of a light-colored, possibly bleached, skull. Two dark, circular marks, resembling bullet holes or scars, are visible on the right side of the skull. The skull is set against a bright yellow background. The text 'KILL ALL YOUR DARLINGS' is overlaid in large, bold, grey letters across the center of the image.

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Kill All Your Darlings

PIECES 1990–2005

Luc Sante

yeti

To Barbara Epstein
1928-2006

I had intended to dedicate this book to Barbara back when I thought she would live forever. She did more than just edit five of the best things herein; she formed me as a writer. The dedication was never intended to have been a public thank-you note. I can only hope she had a glimmer of how much she meant to me.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank the editors who solicited, encouraged, and abetted the pieces herein (my apologies to those few whose names I have not retained): Tom Beller, Chuck Eddy, Anne Fadiman, Sean Howe, Andrew Hultkrans, Wendy Lesser, Greil Marcus, Susan Morrison, Annie Nocenti, E. Park, Ann Philbin, Rob Polner, Joy Press, Jason Shinder, Paul Smart, Matt Weiland, Eric Weisbard, Sean Wilentz, and Rebecca Wilson; also thanks to Robert Christgau. Special thanks to Jonathan Galassi, instrumental in both the first and the last items in the collection. Very large extra thanks to Greil Marcus and to Francesco Clemente, as well as to Raymond Foye. Thanks as ever to Joy Harjo. Big huge thanks to “Yeti” Mike McGonigal and Steve Connell for taking a chance on this book. And no end of thanks and love to Melissa and Raphael, my constant inspirations.

Most of the contents of this book have previously been published, often in somewhat different form and under different titles, in the following: “My Lost City,” “I Is Somebody Else,” “The Invention of the Blues,” “The Hunger Artist,” and “The Perfect Moment” in the *New York Review of Books*; “Riot of My Own” in *Mr. Beller’s Neighborhood*; “The Bandit King” in the *New York Times* (City Section); “In a Garden State” in *The Nation*; “The Injection Mold” in *Granta*; “Why Do You Think They Call It Dope?” in *High Times*; “Auld Lang Syne” in the *New York Observer*; “Strength Through Joy” in *Ulster Magazine*; “I Can’t Carry You Anymore,” “Teenage History,” and “Getting By and Making Do” in the *Village Voice*; “The Detective” in the *Threepenny Review*; “The Department of Memory” (first part) in *Bookforum*; “The Department of Memory” (second part) in *Modern Painters*; “A Companion of the Prophet” in *The American Scholar*; “The Ruins of New York” in *Francesco Clemente: Palladium* (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2000); “The Sea-Green Incorruptible” in *America’s Mayor*, edited by Rob Polner (Soft Skull, 2005); “Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say” in *The Rose and the Briar*, edited by Greil Marcus and Sean Wilentz (W. W. Norton, 2004); “The Octopus Bearing the Initials V. H.” in *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo*, edited by Florian Rodari and Ann Philbin (The Drawing Center/Merrell Holberton, 1998); “The Clear Line” in *Give Our Regards to the Atomsmashers!* edited by Sean Howe (Pantheon, 2004); and “The Total Animal Soup of Time” in *The Poem That Changed America*, edited by Jason Shinder (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006).

“Kill all your darlings.”

—writerly advice attributed to William Faulkner

“Et on tuera tous les affreux.”

—Boris Vian, title of book

INTRODUCTION

by Greil Marcus

As I read through the pieces Luc Sante has collected here, the phrase that came to mind was “hard-boiled.” As in a hard-boiled detective, poking around in a place where something happened, knowing that the clues will be less obvious in a neat, spotless room where it seems inconceivable that anyone was killed there than in a room so tossed by violence it seems inconceivable somebody wasn’t. Not that this book, despite its title, has much to do with mayhem in any conventional manner—unlike Sante’s *Low Life* and *Evidence*, or *New York Noir* and *The Big Con*—the last two, a collection of photos from the New York *Daily News* and a reissue of David W. Maurer’s 1940 study of con artists, merely introduced by Sante, but with such immediacy you feel his voice all through their pages. It’s not that a feeling of suspense is just as present—or more present. With the work for which Sante is best known, he writes as a historian, and the suspense is in the past. Here—where Sante is writing about New York City, cigarettes, drugs, and his own earlier years, but most carefully and intensely about music, painting, photography, and poetry—the suspense is active on the page, or even pushed into the future. Here, to be hard-boiled means to go in ready to get the truth out of the suspect, knowing that the crunch may come when the suspect begins to get the truth out of you.

When you truly put yourself face to face with a piece of art, it will interrogate you as surely as you might flatter yourself to think that you have interrogated it, because unlike an ordinary crime, a work of art is never finished. No matter how complete it might appear to the world at large, when a writer confronts a book or a painting or a song, nothing is settled and anything can happen. You can make the work new, or it can leave you exposed in all your stupidity on your own page.

It’s all in the tone, which for Sante means a quiet, calm, forceful attempt to get inside those people, places, artifacts, and memories that attract him, with a commitment to the subject at hand that is as passionate as it is modest. There is no hyperbole, or critical hysteria: there is no panic in the face of the writer’s inability to make a melody, an image, or a patch of words give up its secrets. Modesty is part of what it means to be hard-boiled: an acceptance that some secrets will never be given up. The tone comes out of empathy, on the one hand—empathy for the perpetrator, the artist or the art worker, the person or the act remembered—and it produces respect, for the reader, for the person who has to be brought into the story, the writer making his own story unfamiliar to himself in order to open it up to others. “Everything seemed possible then,” Sante writes of how Bob Dylan, in his book *Chronicle Volume 1*, situates himself early in his career, but Sante doesn’t rest with the cliché, which is to say he doesn’t insult either Dylan or his reader with it. He redeems the cliché, returns it to real speech, by making it speak: “Everything seemed possible then; no options had been used up and nothing had yet been sacrificed.”

The tone demands incisiveness and concision, a sense of what to leave in and what to leave out,

with Sante's startling argument that the blues—"the now-familiar three-line verse, with its AA rhyme scheme and its line length of five stressed syllables"—was invented, by a single person, on a certain day, in a certain place. There is a sociological setting that makes the notion seem ordinary—"The origin of the blues occurred close to our time, within a historical corridor that makes possible to place it among the early manifestations of modernism—between the automobile and the airplane, and not long after the movies, radio transmission, and cylinder recordings"—a setting that only seems sociological, because it is in fact moving toward a setting where sociology cannot go. In the invention of the blues took place on the broad, visible terrain of modern technology, it also, Sante says, appeared, and in an uncanny sense remained, "in an inaccessible back street of history, so that we don't know who or when or how or why, just that it happened." And then, with an economy and a cold eye worthy of Twain, or Hemingway, or Chandler, a story: "The very success of the invention must also have mitigated against anyone knowing who was responsible. Even if a front-porch guitarist was responsible, rather than an itinerant songster, it is easy to imagine that within twenty-four hours a dozen people had taken up the style, a hundred inside of a week, a thousand in the first month. By then only ten people would have remembered who came up with it, and nine of them weren't talking."

"It is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing," as Hemingway had Jake Barnes say in *The Sun Also Rises*, putting the phrase into the air. Sante's story is unbearable, because like him you are there and you aren't. You can't be and you cannot be. The detective never has to be more hard-boiled than in the moment when he realizes, like Jake Gittes at the end of *Chinatown*, that he will never solve the case, never bring the perpetrator home. The modesty is patent; the passionate critic walks away from his own mystery. The suspense is itself mysterious. As the critic walks away, the suspense doubles, moving from the suspense that gathers around an event that, like a planet beyond Pluto, can be inferred but not seen, to the greater suspense that attends the realization that a true event is defined precisely by its unpredictability: if the invention of the blues occurred once, in a certain place, at a certain time, it might as likely have never occurred at all. And then neither you or the writer who is telling the story would be who you are. Just as the existence of the blues and the self is patent, everything goes up in smoke.

The balance of modesty and suspense that creates the hard-boiled face carries Sante through his adventures in these pages; keeping that balance, he can take you to strange places, and pull the ground from right under your feet. I saw him do it once, on a night when many writers and musicians had come together to perform American ballads—the musicians to play and sing them, and the writers to read what they'd written about them. Luc Sante read a shortened version of the piece that appears here as "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say."

Sante began with the night that, in New Orleans in 1902, on a bandstand in a hot, stinking dancehall, someone heard what he thought he heard Buddy Bolden say—and then, somehow, weaving a spell of facts over the course of no more than ten minutes, Sante high-jacked everything—Bolden, his band, the building in which they were playing, the audience to whom Sante was reading, the building in which they were sitting—into the sky. There were other memorable readings that night, from Joyce Kilmer, Carol Oates, Sarah Vowell, John Rockwell, and Paul Berman, and shining performances, from "Omigod, Wise" by Bob Neuwirth and Jenni Muldaur to "Ode to Billie Joe" by Rosanne Cash to "Volver Volver" by Perla Batalla to "Barbara Allen" by Terre Roche and Madigan. But there was no moment that was greeted by the shock, and then the earthquake of an ovation, that followed Sante's last word. He was able to hold that hard-boiled tone without its ever breaking: speaking modestly, as if nothing were happening, the suspense built invisibly, so that it was only with the last word that anyone realized that from beginning to end everything was at stake, and all of that is in these pages.

MY LOST CITY

The idea of writing a book about New York City first entered my head around 1980, when I was a writer more wishfully than in actual fact, spending my nights in clubs and bars and my days rather casually employed in the mailroom of the *New York Review of Books*. It was there that Rem Koolhaas's epochal *Delirious New York* fell into my hands. "New York is a city that will be replaced by another city," is the phrase that sticks in my mind. Koolhaas's book, published in 1978 as a preface to the unfinished project of New York the Wonder City, seemed like an archeological reverie, an evocation of the hubris and ambition of a dead city. I gazed wonderingly at its illustrations, which showed sights as dazzling and remote as Nineveh and Tyre. The irony is that many of their subjects stood within walking distance: the Chrysler Building, the McGraw-Hill Building, Rockefeller Center. But they didn't convey the feeling they had when they were new. In Koolhaas's pages New York City was manifestly the location of the utopian and dystopian fantasies of the silent-film era. It was *Metropolis*, with elevated roadways, giant searchlights probing the heavens, flying machines navigating the skyscraper canyons. It was permanently set in the future.

The New York I lived in, on the other hand, was rapidly regressing. It was a ruin in the making, and my friends and I were camped out amid its potsherds and tumuli. This did not distress me—quite the contrary. I was enthralled by decay and eager for more: ailanthus trees growing through cracks in the asphalt, ponds and streams forming in leveled blocks and slowly making their way to the shoreline, wild animals returning from centuries of exile. Such a scenario did not seem so far-fetched then. Already in the mid-'70s, when I was a student at Columbia, my windows gave out onto the plaza of the School of International Affairs, where on winter nights troops of feral dogs would arrive to be fed down on the heating grates. Since then the city had lapsed even further. On Canal Street stood a five-story building empty of human tenants that had been taken over from top to bottom by pigeons. If you walked east on Houston Street from the Bowery on a summer night, the jungle growth of vacant blocks gave a foretaste of the impending wilderness, when lianas would engird the skyscrapers and mushrooms would cover Times Square.

At that time much of Manhattan felt depopulated even in daylight. Aside from the high-intensity blocks of Midtown and the financial district, the place seemed to be inhabited principally by slouches and loungers, loose-joints vendors and teenage hustlers, panhandlers and site-specific drunks, persons whose fleabags put them out on the street at eight and only permitted reentry at six. Many businesses seemed to remain open solely to give their owners shelter from the elements. How often did a doll cross the counter of the plastic-lettering concern, or the prosthetic-limb showroom, or the place that ostensibly traded in office furniture but displayed in its window a Chinese typewriter and a stuffed two-headed calf? Outside under an awning on a hot afternoon would be a card table, textured like an old suitcase with four metal corners, and around it four guys playing dominoes. Maybe they'd have a little TV set, up on a milk crate, plugged into the base of a streetlight, emitting baseball. On every corner was a storefront that advertised Optimo or Te-Amo or Romeo y Julieta, and besides cigars they sold smut and soda pop and rubbers and candy and glassine envelopes and sometimes police equipment. And there were Donuts Muffins Snack Bar and Chinas Comidas and Hand Laundry and Cold Beer Grocery and Barber College, all old friends. Those places weren't like commercial establishments, exactly, more like rooms in your house. They tended to advertise just the

descriptions; their names, like those of deities, were kept hidden, could be discovered only by reading the license tacked up somewhere behind the cash register. At the bodega you could buy plantains and coffee and *malta* and lard, or a single cigarette—a loosie—or a sheet of paper, an envelope, and a stamp.

I drifted down from the Upper West Side to the Lower East Side in 1978. Most of my friends made the transition around the same time. You could have an apartment all to yourself for less than a hundred and fifty dollars a month. In addition, the place was happening. It was happening, that is, there were two or at most three dingy bars that doubled as clubs, a bookstore or record store or two, and a bunch of individual apartments and individual imaginations. All of us were in that stage of youth when your star may not yet have arisen, but your moment is the only one on the clock. We had the temerity to laugh at the hippies, shamefully backdated by half a decade. In our arrogance we were barely conscious of the much deeper past that lay all around. We didn't ask ourselves why the name carved above the door of the public library on Second Avenue was in German, or why busts of nineteenth-century composers could be seen on a second-story lintel on Fourth Street. Our neighborhood was a chockablock with ruins we didn't question the existence of vast bulks of shuttered theaters, or wonder when they had been new. Our apartments were furnished exclusively through scavenging, but we didn't find it notable that nearly all our living rooms featured sewing-machine tables with cast-iron bases.

When old people died without wills or heirs, the landlord would set the belongings of the deceased out on the sidewalk, since that was cheaper than hiring a removal van. We would go through the boxes and help ourselves, and come upon photographs and books and curiosities, evidence of lives and passions spent in the turmoil of 1910 and 1920, of the Mexican Border War and Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* and vaudeville and labor unions and the shipping trade, and we might be briefly diverted, but we were much more interested in the boxes on the next stoop containing someone's considerably more recent record collection. One day something fell out of an old book, the business card of a beauty parlor that had stood on Avenue C near Third Street, probably in the 1920s. I marveled at it, unable to picture something as sedate as a beauty parlor anywhere near that corner, but then a heroin souk.

The neighborhood was desolate, so underpopulated that landlords would give you a month's free rent just for signing a lease, many buildings being less than half-full, but it was far from tranquil. We might feel smug about being robbed on the street, since none of us had any money, and we looked like junkies—as distinct from the crackheads of a decade later—would generally not stab you for a chump change. Nevertheless, if you did not have the wherewithal to install gates on your windows you would be burglarized repeatedly, and where would you be without your stereo? In the blocks east of Avenue A the situation was dramatically worse. In 1978 I got used to seeing large fires in that direction every night, usually set by arsonists hired by landlords of empty buildings who found it an easy choice to make, between paying property taxes and collecting insurance. By 1980 Avenue C was a lunar landscape of vacant blocks and hollow tenement shells. Over there, commerce—in food and clothing, say—was often conducted out of car trunks, but the most thriving industry was junk, and we alone made use of marginally viable specimens of the building stock. The charred stairwells, the gaping floorboards, the lack of lighting, the entryways consisting of holes torn in ground-floor walls—all served the psychological imperatives of the heroin trade.

Dealers knew that white middle-class junkies thrived on squalor, that it was a component of their masochism, and that their masochism, with an admixture of bourgeois guilt, was what had drawn them to the neighborhood. The dealers proved this thesis daily, at least to themselves, by requiring the

customers to stand for an hour in pouring rain before allowing them inside, for example, and the shifting them up five flights with interstitial waits on the landings, and then possibly, whimsically refusing to sell to them once they finally arrived in front of the slotted door. Of course, a junkie becomes a masochist by virtue of his habit, and any of those people would have done much worse to obtain a fix, but the dealers were correct to a degree. Some did indeed come to the neighborhood to revel in squalor, and junkiedom was part of the package, as surfing would be if they had moved to Hawaii instead. They were down with the romance of it, had read the books and gazed upon the poster stars. Junkiehood could happen to anyone, for a complex of reasons that included availability, boredom, anxiety, depression, and selfloathing, but many were tourists of scag, and if they wiped out as a consequence it was the inevitable effect of a natural law, like gravity. They had been culled.

For those of us who had been in the city for a while, squalor was not an issue. Most of the city was squalid. If this troubled you, you left, and if you were taken by the romance of it, a long regimen of squalor in everyday life would eventually scrub your illusions gray. At this remove I'm sometimes retrospectively amazed by what I took for granted. Large fires a few blocks away every night for a couple of years would seem conducive to a perpetually troubled state of mind, but they just became weather. I spent the summer of 1975 in a top-floor apartment on 107th Street, where at night the windows were lit by the glow of fires along Amsterdam Avenue. A sanitation strike was in progress, and mounds of refuse, reeking in the heat, decorated the curbs of every neighborhood, not excepting those whose houses were manned by doormen. Here, though, instead of being double-bagged in plastic, they were simply set on fire every night. The spectacle achieved the transition from apocalyptic to dully normal in a matter of days.

Two summers later I was living with two roommates in a tall building on Broadway at 101st Street. It had both a doorman and an elevator operator; most of the other tenants were elderly European Jews. Our rent for five large rooms was four hundred dollars a month. I note these facts because the other buildings lining Broadway in that area were mainly single-room-occupancy hotels, tenanted by the luckless, the bereft, the unemployable, dipsomaniacs, junkies, released mental patients—exactly the portion of the population that would be turned out and left to conduct its existence in shelters, doorways or drainpipes or jails in the following decade. What those people had in common was that they could not blend into mainstream society; otherwise there was no stereotyping them. For example, a rather eerie daily entertainment in the warmer months was provided by a group of middle-aged transvestites who would lean against parked cars in their minidresses and bouffantes and issue for perfect four-part doo-wop harmonies. You had to wonder in which volume of the Relic label "Golden Groups" series they might figure, perhaps pictured on the sleeve in younger, thinner, pencil-mustached, tuxedo-clad incarnations. For them, as for most people on the street—including, we like to think, us—New York City was the only imaginable home, the only place that posted no outer limits on appearance or behavior.

When the blackout happened, on the evening of July 13, 1977, it briefly seemed as though the hour of reckoning had arrived, when all those outsiders would seize control. Naturally, no such thing occurred. The outsiders seized televisions and toaster ovens and threepiece suits and standing roasts and quarts of Old Mr. Boston and cartons of Newports and perhaps sectional sofas, but few would have known what to do with the levers of society had they been presented to them in a velvet-lined box. But then, my friends and I wouldn't have known, either. For all the obvious differences between the SRO-dwellers and ourselves, we were alike in our disconnection from any but the most parochial idea of community. In the end the mob dissolved like a fist when you open your hand, and the benches on the Broadway traffic islands were repopulated by loungers occasionally pulling down

bottle hanging by a string from a leaf-enshrouded tree branch overhead.

The looters were exemplary Americans, whose immediate impulse in a crisis was to see to the acquisition of consumable goods. They had no interest in power. Neither did anyone I knew. We just wanted power to go away. Sometimes it seemed as though it already had. In those days the police, when not altogether invisible, were nearly benign, or at least showed no interest in the likes of us being occupied with actual violent crime. Almost everybody had a story about walking down the street smoking a joint and suddenly realizing they had just passed a uniformed patrolman, who could not possibly have failed to detect the odor but resolutely looked the other way. Casual illegality was unremarkable and quotidian, a matter of drug use and theft of goods and services, petty things. We slid by in weasel jobs, in part because we were preoccupied with our avocations and in part because a certain lassitude had come over us, a brand of the era.

The revolution was deferred indefinitely, then, because we were too comfortable. Not, mind you, that we didn't live in dumps where the floors slanted and the walls were held together with duct tape and the window frames had last been caulked in 1912 and the heat regularly went off for a week at a time in the depths of winter. The landlords were the primary villains and the most visible manifestations of authority. Very few still went from door to door collecting rents, but most could be physically located, sitting on the telephone at a secondhand metal desk in some decrepit two-room office, and that included the ones who went home to mansions in Great Neck. Real estate was a buyer's market, and owners needed to hustle for every dollar, and were correspondingly reluctant to make expenditures that would be any greater than the anticipated legal costs of not making them. At the same time, you could let the rent go for a while and not face eviction, because the eviction process itself would cost the landlord some kale, besides which it might be hard to find anyone else to take up the lease, so that a tenant who only paid every other month was better than nothing. We were comfortable because we could live on very little, satisfying most requirements in a fiercely minimalist style for which we had developed a defining and mitigating aesthetic. It was lucky if not altogether coincidental that the threadbare overcoat you could obtain for a reasonable three dollars just happened to be the height of fashion.

Suspicion in the hinterlands of New York City's moral fiber and quality of life, rampant since the early nineteenth century, reached new heights during the 1970s. Hadn't the President himself urged the city to drop dead? If you told people almost anywhere in the country then that you lived in New York, they tended to look at you as if you had boasted of dining on wormwood and gall. Images of the city on big or small screens, fictional or ostensibly journalistic, were a blur of violence, drugs, and squalor. A sort of apotheosis appeared in John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981), in which the city has become a maximum-security prison by default. The last honest folk having abandoned the place, the authorities have merely locked it up, permitting the scum within to rule themselves, with the understanding that they will before long kill one another off. The story may have been a futurist action-adventure, but for most Americans the premise was strict naturalism, with the sole exception of the locks, which ought by rights have been in place. Aside from the matter of actual violence, drugs, and squalor, there was the fact that in the 1970s New York City was not a part of the United States at all. It was an offshore interzone with no shopping malls, few major chains, very few born-again Christians who had not been sent there on a mission, no golf courses, no subdivisions.

Downtown we were proud of this, naturally. We thought of the place as a free city, like one of those pre-war nests of intrigue and licentiousness where exiles and lamsters and refugees found shelter in a tangle of improbable juxtapositions. I had never gotten around to changing my nationality from the one assigned me at birth, but I would have declared myself a citizen of New York City had such

stateless state existed, its flag a solid black. But what happened instead is that Reagan was elected and the musk of profit once again scented the air. It took all of us a while to realize that this might affect us in intimate ways—we were fixated on nuclear war. So while we were dozing money crept in making its presence felt slowly, in oddly assorted and apparently peripheral ways. The first sign was the new phenomenon of street vendors. Before the early 1980s you never saw people selling old books or miscellaneous refuse from flattened boxes on the sidewalk. If you truly wanted to sell things you could rent a storefront for next to nothing, assuming you weren't choosy about location. But now, very quickly, Astor Place became a vast flea market, with vendors ranging from collectors of old comic books to optimists attempting to unload whatever they had skimmed from garbage cans the night before. Those effects of the deceased that had once been set out for the pickings of all were now the stock of whoever happened upon them first. The daily spectacle was delirious, uncanny, the range of goods boundless and utterly random. You had the feeling you would one day find there evidence of your missing twin, your grandfather's secret diary, a photograph of the first girl whose image kept you awake at night, and all the childhood toys you had loved and lost.

What it meant, though, was that people who had previously gotten by on charm and serendipity now needed ready cash. It also meant that there now existed consumers who would pay folding money for stuff that had once been available for nothing to anyone who read the sidewalks. Part of the reason the *Luftmenschen* had to have dollars was the vast increase in heroin traffic, caused by a steep plunge in prices. All of a sudden people who had been strictly holiday users were getting themselves strung out. While this was happening the neighborhood was filling up, rapidly. Every day the streets were visible more congested than the day before. The vacancy rate fell to near zero. Speculators were buying up even gutted shells, even tenements so unsound they would require a fortune to fix. Was the fall in the price index of junk connected to the rise in that of real estate? Street-corner theorists were certain we were all marked for death. It was obvious, no? If you OD'd or went to jail your apartment would become vacant, and legally subject to a substantial rent increase. A folklore emerged, with tales of people paying rent to sleep on examination tables in medical offices, of landlords murdering rent-controlled tenants or simply locking them out and disposing of their chattel. Whether those tales were true or not, everyone spent increasing amounts of time in housing court, battling the fourth or fifth landlord in as many months, who all but treated the property as vacant. The neighborhood was subjected to lifestyle pieces in the glossies; a crowd of galleries sprang up. You could spot millionaires making the rounds in old sweaters.

The more I felt I was losing my city the more preoccupied I became with it. I gradually became interested in its past, an interest that grew into an obsession. It was triggered by what seemed like chance—by things I spotted on the flattened cardboard boxes on the sidewalk. On Astor Place I acquired for a dollar a disintegrating copy of Junius Henry Browne's *The Great Metropolis* (1864) and, a week later, Joseph Mitchell's incomparable *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, a 1940s paperback with a ridiculous cover that almost dissuaded me from picking it up—I had never heard of it or him. In a heap of miscellanea on Seventh Street I found a pristine copy of Chuck Connors's very rare *Bowery Life*, and took it home for fifty cents. In a parking lot on Canal Street I bought a stereoscopic card of the Second Avenue El; a table outside a junkshop on Thirtieth Street yielded lithographs pulled from nineteenth-century copies of *Valentine's Manual*. These things were mysterious, slices of a complex past of which I had little sense. I was already fascinated by the strange process whereby the glamorous city of the 1920s had become the entropic slum that was my home; now I was discovering that the slum had far deeper roots.

One day, probably early in 1980, a film crew commandeered Eleventh Street between Avenues

and B and, with minimal adjustments, returned the block to the way it had looked in 1910. All they did was pull the plywood coverings off storefront windows, paint names in gold letters on those windows, and pile goods up behind them. They spread straw in the gutters and hung washlines across the street. They fitted selected residents with period clothes and called forth a parade of horse-drawn conveyances. They were shooting a few scenes of *Ragtime* (Milos Forman, 1981). After the production was packed up a week later, the Dominican evangelical church on Avenue A held a sort of exorcism ceremony in the middle of the intersection. I hadn't paid much attention to the goings-on, but I had been struck by how little effort was needed to conjure up a seemingly unimaginable past. When I walked down that street at night, with all the trappings up but the crew absent, I felt like a ghost. The tenements were aspects of the natural landscape, like caves or rock ledges, across which all of us—inhabitants, landlords, dope dealers, beat cops, tourists—flitted for a few seasons, like the pigeons and the cockroaches and the rats, barely registering as individuals in the ceaseless churning of generations.

And now everything was up for grabs. The tenements were old and unstable; the speculators were undoubtedly buying them up for the value of their lots. One day in the near future they would be razed and containment units at least superficially more upscale would be built. Maybe the whole neighborhood would be reconfigured, the way Washington Market and the far Lower East Side were swept, to the point where whole streets had disappeared. Within a decade, all of us who had lived there in the last days of the tenement era might seem as distant and insubstantial as the first people to move in when the buildings were new. I told myself it was inevitable. I remembered Baudelaire's warning that the city changes faster than the human heart. I thought of my grandfather saying that progress was a zerosum game in which every improvement carried with it an equivalent loss, and decided that the reverse was also true. I considered that at the very least nobody in the future would have to contend with a stiff wind sucking out an entire loose windowpane, as had once happened to me. Then I pictured the high-rises themselves falling inch by inch into ruin. I bore an old-timer's resentment toward the children of privilege who were moving into tastefully done-up flats and about to start calling themselves New Yorkers, even Lower East Siders, and might spend decades without once having spent a winter sitting in front of an open oven wearing an overcoat and hat, or having to move pots and pans and furniture by subway in the middle of the night, or having bottles thrown at them by crack dealers, or having to walk home from Brooklyn in the rain for want of carfare. But it was for more than personal reasons that I wanted to prevent amnesia from setting in.

Now, more than a decade after I finally finished my book *Low Life*, the city has changed in ways I could not have pictured. The tenements are mostly still standing, but I could not afford to live in any of my former apartments, including the ones I found desperately shabby when I was much more inured to shabbiness. Downtown, even the places that used to seem permanently beyond the pale have been colonized by prosperity. Instead of disappearing, local history has been preserved as a seasoning, most visibly in names of bars. The economy has gone bad, but money shows no signs of loosening its grip. New York is neither the Wonder City nor a half-populated ruin but a vulnerable, overcrowded, anxious, half-deluded, all-too-human town, shaken by a cataclysm nobody could have foreseen. I don't live there anymore, and I have trouble going there and walking around because the streets are so haunted by the ghosts of my own history. I wasn't born in New York, and I may never live there again, and just thinking about it makes me melancholy, but I was changed forever by it, and my imagination is manacled to it, and I wear its mark the way you wear a scar. Whatever happens, whether I like it or not, New York City is fated always to remain my home.

THE RUINS OF NEW YORK

Francesco Clemente's Palladium frescoes, 1985

Late in 1985 a previously unsuspected volcano suddenly reared up from the floor of Upper New York Bay, about midway on a lateral line between what were then Bedloes Island and Governors Island. At 9 A.M. on December 19th the peak was observed just above the water's surface; by noon it had risen to one hundred meters; by sunset it was ten times higher. Apparently, few people took notice, few still showed alarm, and hardly anyone took action. In view of what we know about the extreme self-absorption and narcissism of New Yorkers, this indifference is less surprising than it might at first seem. When the volcano erupted, shortly after midnight, the city's inhabitants were pursuing the usual course of nightlife, skulduggery, and chaos. The entire island of Manhattan—all but the peaks of its very highest buildings—as well as significant portions of the other boroughs of New York City and most of Hudson County, New Jersey, were buried by molten lava.

Their misfortune is our boon. Five centuries after that epochal disaster, we are in the unique position of being able to observe a single night in the life of the past, flash-frozen and preserved as if in amber. Wherever we dig we find the whole panoply of human activities in the great metropolis encased in fine white ash but otherwise undisturbed. We see thieves holding guns to the heads of grocery-store proprietors, prostitutes leaving grimy hotel rooms bearing the wallets of drunken clients, policemen in uniform clutching envelopes filled with cash in the hallways of ghetto drug dens. We see sex slaves in leather harnesses cowering in expensively appointed dungeons, clergymen of high rank sharing drugs with naked schoolchildren in the crypts of great churches, fresh corpses rolled up in carpets in the trunks of limousines arrested in flight on the peripheral roadways. Everywhere we dig, it seems, we find exchanges of money, sex, drugs, and death.

New York in 1985 was an open city, where everything was permissible, like a gold-mining or oil-pumping boom town of the previous century. The infusion of capital in this case came primarily from real estate. After more than three decades of neglect, following the mass exodus of the white middle class to the suburbs after World War II, the children of that white middle class were rediscovering the city's possibilities. Its industries had in the meantime died off or moved, real-estate prices had plummeted, and whole neighborhoods lay nearly vacant. The potential profits were enormous, and it didn't hurt that the city's dangers added a glamorous frisson. It cannot be coincidental that the art world, which since the early 1970s had been marked by an austere, consciously anticommercial conceptualism, suddenly rediscovered flash, publicity, and marketable objects. Photographs of the period show artists looking like bankers, wearing expensive suits and smoking large cigars.

The city's remaining elite had formerly clustered in certain uptown neighborhoods, fearful of venturing into the crime-ridden districts further south. By 1982 or '83 their focus had been redirected thanks in large part to the art world, and they began actively to colonize the area known generally as "downtown." The epicenter of nightlife at the city's twilight moment was a large building called The Palladium, appropriately situated on Fourteenth Street, traditionally the boundary line between uptown and downtown. Built a century earlier and known almost all its life as The Academy of Music

it had originally been an opera house that catered to the old families and discouraged attendance by the rising new-money class, who took their revenge by building the Metropolitan Opera, which soon eclipsed its rival. For decades afterward it had been a movie house and then, in the 1970s, a concert hall given over to the more aggressive and déclassé forms of popular music, from glam to metal to punk.

The entrepreneurs who purchased the building in the early 1980s entirely reconfigured it, removing the banks of seats and all but a memory of the proscenium stage, converting it into a multilevel dance palace. The Palladium was intended to unite all the subcultures of the city's nightside, which had each formerly been segregated in its own separate clubland. The atmosphere would blend and mingle and conjoin: black hip-hop kids from the Bronx and gay disco habitués who left clubs at noon, art punks in thrift-shop clothing and gossip-column celebrities in fifty pounds of makeup, working-class Latin Americans for whom dancing was an exact science and junior Mafiosi for whom spending money was an article of machismo, fashion-forward nebbishes who liked to pretend they were robots and sullen Jamaican Rastas who danced by moving their ribcages a fraction of an inch on the off-beat. There would be trust-fund teenagers who lived in vast lofts and hitchhiking teenagers who slept on floors, club veterans who could remember nights twenty years earlier at Cheetah or Arthur and saucer-eyed hopheads who couldn't remember the night before, speculators and drag queens, graffiti writers and tourists, runway models and leather fetishists, squatters and rock stars, artists and drunks. That at least was the theory, although surviving first-person accounts suggest that many were excluded for lack of money, and merciless gatekeepers excluded many more for want of physical beauty.

The Palladium was situated on a block that was itself a microcosm, bounded on one end by a twenty-four-hour doughnut shop whose clientele seems to have consisted mostly of transvestites and at the other by a cut-price steak restaurant that served burnt gristle to the indigent. In between were located, variously: a decorous whorehouse staffed by large, motherly women from countries to the south; a gymnasium of historical significance to the art of boxing; an enormous billiard parlor favored by old men who carried knives in their socks; and the ruins—they were already then ruins—of what had been for decades one of the city's most fashionable restaurants, fallen out of favor when *Gemütlichkeit* passed into obloquy, reduced by that time to a horror of racing vermin and liquefying plaster. Over all of these the Palladium loomed, a beacon in the night.

As we dug through the layers of the Palladium we were staggered by the press of bodies, so dense it was nearly impossible to make out the decor, even the architecture. We were thus confronted by a dilemma. Our policy as archeologists has been to leave sites untouched as much as possible, since for sound scholarly reasons we cannot consider locations without their human component. But in the Palladium we were often incapable of threading our way through the rooms. Even the toilet stalls, intended for one person, were each crowded with as many as four or five (participating in sex acts, ingesting drugs, or often both at once). We could only surmise what the sound levels must have been like—imagining the noise of the crowd in addition to the volume that would have been produced by the formidable amplification equipment. The Palladium is the only location so far in our excavation to have confronted us with this problem of massive crowding, since the disaster struck after midnight, when subway ridership at that hour, for example, was relatively sparse. We divided into two factions, which immediately dubbed themselves the “purists” and the “pragmatists” and fought bitterly for weeks about whether to clear the rooms or keep them as found. Finally, good sense prevailed, and we unanimously decided to empty one area as a test case, leaving the rest of the building as it was.

We settled on an upstairs corridor, the walls of which appeared to be painted with figures. We brought in a bucket-loader and cleared the space, packing each individual cadaver in polyethylene f

future examination. What we found underneath surprised and disoriented us. Naturally we'd had many occasions on the Manhattan dig to refer to our formations in classical archeology, but the uncovering of the corridor gave many of us the irrational sensation that we had accidentally stumbled upon a location far older than 1985 AD. We recovered our balance when we considered the style of the paintings, the enjambment of surfaces, the chemical composition of the pigment. Even so, the hallway—a simple Palladian arch at either extremity, a few Ionic capitals, the walls daubed with frescoes predominantly in reds and yellows strikingly reminiscent of Pompeii—continues to fill us with an uncanny feeling of dislocation. We realize the qualities of the iconography that are specific to the times: the large isolated organs of sense, the occasional linear allusion to “wild style” graffiti, the parade of drunken or drugged or dead human heads around the archway, to name a few examples. And yet, given those colors, the impression that the finish looked somehow ancient even when it was new, the images' palpable mixture of abandon and aftermath, anxiety and serenity, we cannot help but ask ourselves a question that can never be answered: Did the artist have a premonition of what was about to befall the city?

2000

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