

Wind the Clock, Coil the Snake, Wrap the Bandage

a story by Anna M. Szaflarski

There are long nerve endings grasping blindly at the world, reading the surface like Brailled pages that are far too large for any finger to fully comprehend. They radiate out like a subway map and the further they extend, the less ground they're able to cover and the less communication there is between them. Eventually with some delay, fragmented messages return to the center, commencing a chaotic game of charades. The groping fingers switch from their mysterious field work to acting out compelling truths, transforming riddles into visible signs, schematics, maps and—in the evening computer display light—cast ghostly shadow puppets across cavern walls.

Their recollections were often contradictory, and little of it made sense. When needed, fantasy would supply suspension bridges between the few solid and graspable objects provided; giving birth to impossible monsters existing in a world saved from long erosions. Questions of doubt were filled with a disturbing model of order, and before noticing what they had done, the long nerve endings had put an irreversible narrative of a parallel world into motion. And like children with dollhouses, their audience got busy in recreating that world, wanting most of all to place idealized versions of themselves inside of it.

To make way for this so-called model, they needed to bulldoze an existing structure. They chose something that had previously functioned perfectly well as a social gathering place. And since they did not have the materials that they imagined they needed, they used the crumbled ruins as their clay. When they held the clay in their hands, however, they realized then that they had no plans for what they were about to build, and suddenly became afraid. Consequently the ruins laid in waiting.

I saw	something like	it myself	as a child, in
the early	years of Post-	communist	Poland. Across
the street	from my	cousin's	house stood
the halted	construction	of a	large hospital,
which was	intended to	become	one of the
physical	manifestations	of Western	progress. It
stood there	for years. No	one knew if	it was supposed
to one	day awaken	from its	slumber or rot
into the	ground. In the	meantime,	the compacted
metal,	concrete and	fiberglass	were being
encroached	on by rust and	seemingly	endless (and
audible)	drip of water.	A perimeter	fence prevented
anyone from	approaching	and	somewhere a
German	Shepherd	tirelessly	patrolled the
			labyrinths.

The poet, Ian Hamilton Finlay, once wrote that, "Certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks." The builders and/or destroyers of the structure and/or ruins, empathized with this paradoxical sentiment when looking at what they had done. Paralyzed with uncertainty they fenced off the area, and waited for more concrete guidance to appear.

At night, teenagers with stolen cigarettes climbed into the grounds, leaving little torn pieces of their clothing on the sharp fence edges. The place belonged to no one, to no time, and to no grander plan or scheme. It was a pubescent place, full of aimless energy. It became their palace, and very quickly the rubble was shifted, sifted and pressed and decadent furnishings emerged.

At the end of the street in a suburb of Canada there was a large field that had been leveled. The ground had been packed into intricate patterns from tractor wheels, and large segments of concrete sewage tunnels were left haphazardly throughout. Like Roman archways, they beckoned us. The curves suited our bodies perfectly. We drew on the walls with chalk; first our names and the names of those we loved. We had colonized the alien world. A small boy who lived three doors down and whom we barely knew, ran to the top of the tallest cylinder and sang, "I'm the king of the castle!"

Grass grew between the cracks of the ruins. Tree roots followed, twisting around the chaise longue and the tea tables. It began to sink into the ground and the teenagers scrambled to escape back over the fence again. One of them slept deeply and didn't notice that he was in immanent danger. The escapees watched from the fence line as their palace and friend was engulfed by a wild entity. It disappeared into a sink hole below that let out a rumbling belch.

A long summer arrived and had forgotten to bring rain with it. The teenagers, builders, destroyers and hopeful dreamers hid in shadows or waded in pools. The nerve endings travelled slowly like lethargic lizards and sent little word of what they sensed. The area that had been the centre of a community, then ruin, then palace, and then wild monster moved deeper into a blind spot in their minds. It dried and dried, and looked as if it had died, turning pale oranges and browns. Autumn came later and instead of rain offered wind instead. The crusty earth swept up into the air, through the fence and into the streets. Dust nestled into hair and into the corners of squinted eyes.

Next to the canal that connects Lake Ontario and Lake Erie there stood a mountain of sand. Brought by barges and cargo boats, the sand poured out of pipes held high in the air and piled up like the bottom half of an hour glass. Once settled, time had stopped. My father called us to jump into the van, to grab our goggles and snow sleds. He parked at the bottom of the pile and we burst out the back door, running to the top. We were sweating and out of breath when we got there. From the top we could see a tiny speck that was our father, shoveling sand into the back of the van. He was stealing little bits of time for himself. When winter came, the sand was spread across the icy streets of the city and the mountain disappeared as if some giant had come along and flipped the glass.

Street lamps were installed, which created peculiar shadows in the pit behind the fence. It was said that the boy who had disappeared lied petrified there, still asleep as if frozen by a dream of Medusa's gaze. When the rumours reached the ears of the boy's parents, they ran there to fill cups of sand to take home and place on top their mantelpiece. They posted a picture of the boy's sand on the internet and many people cried for the thought of their own children, washing the dust away with their tears.

They named the pit, the ruin, the former palace, in honour of the boy, and decided that the culprit of his untimely end needed to be found. The long nerve endings were out and far away, so the lynch mob grasped at one of its tails, so to speak, and began to walk along the length of it, all the time feeding it through their hands. They felt like they were walking in a circle, but progressively deeper into the earth, into the clay, past peat moss and limestone and chalk.

The nerve slid easily through their hands, guiding them as their vision waned. The curves became tighter and it became dark. They could hear the crackling of crystals forming and metals melting.

Twenty
years
from
now
you laugh at me,
and I
take it
with
a
grain
of
s a l t .