

DETRITUS

1

Is it true that we're built for metamorphosis? In Philadelphia, pausing above his plate of Salisbury steak, Samuel Delany said (when asked): "The chrysalis breaks apart to form the wings." Intact, the image of a wooden floor came into my mind, luminous and gritty with everything that sloughs off: skin cells, tatters of lime-green silk, sawdust the colour of hay. Back to the meat.* Yes, something has happened and there's no way not to know that it has.

*On the corner of Lansbury Drive was a butcher's shop. The floor was swept each morning, then covered with a thick layer of sawdust. My father preferred the feathery, hand-sliced ham with the boundary of fat around it, like a frill. I am not sure how a person like my father, the son of a priest, became a non-vegetarian. Answer: war. His father died of an overdose at forty-five. How? I am descended from murderers, on my father's side. Hope nobody ever reads this. So unlikely. Let's keep going. Is the detritus what the book excretes?**

What receives the blood? I'm no George Saunders, but I, too, spent twenty years teaching a variant of a seminar on narrative and architecture.* Each semester, I invited an architect and a poet, or a builder and a novelist, to be in conversation. Once, I sewed them together, with red thread I'd brought with me to class. How will they go to the toilet? How will they separate when it's time to leave? The question about the blood came from one of these seminars. Afterwards, I drove home to the usual revolting chaos, at odds with the elegance of such a thought.

***In Jaipur, I visited a bridal chamber. The walls and the ceiling were embedded with tiny mirrors. A candle was lit and then the doors were closed. We were surrounded, or so it felt, by a thousand stars. This is beautiful, or was, except of course if you are the bride, which is to say, in the era in which this chamber was in use, a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl.

2

How will you collect the detritus?**** Then make something. From that.

3

Detritus has no identity. It has no presence. It does not have relentless qualities, qualities that we might describe as “real” or “less than real.” Is this true? I am thinking of the swarming, inky municipal dump by the Kashmir Gate, larger than a small hill, and volatile. Seams of milk-red flame cutting through its fizzy surface, here and there.

When the lights go out, the detritus is illuminated from within, by social bacteria that produce their own energy. An eerie glow. In this sense, detritus is displaced by its counterpart, electricity.

Is detritus the way we distinguish between the body and the building?

I asked you to build a bridge by destroying it first, as my uncle did, in the 1980s, when he worked as a civil engineer in Iraq. So, did you destroy it?

4

The “abyss between sentences,” as Gail Scott said, decontextualized.

5

Antlers, acrylic. ****I’m trying to make a list of everything we discarded, precisely because it did not leave a trace.

6

I trained myself, after each performance, to analyze its detritus. Rose petals (Tucson), soot (Winterpark), chunks

of dirt from the parking lot (Jackson Hole), charcoal on a white sheet (Seattle), paper (Los Angeles), blood (Boulder). I studied the stains, traces, and remnants as a form of divination, though the word “divination” does not occur once in the culture that I am from. Think through the charnel ground instead. Study the ash. Can we read the fingernail or vertebra, the cloud in the sky? Incarnation is pre-emptive. Writing these words, I recall waiting for my uncle on the ghat, blocked from approaching the pyre itself. Girlhood is pernicious. ***** Nevertheless, when a cobra slipped across my little brown foot, I did not flinch or move. Now I can tell you your future, said my uncle. And he did.

7

In the same way that the fragment was a unit of transformation, detritus became a source of shame once it constituted the bulk of what it was I wanted to say, or could. There’s more I could say about this, but I think it will have to wait until I come to Vancouver. Do you remember when I came to Vancouver, and vomited all over my room at the Sylvia Hotel? I had contracted norovirus on the plane from Denver. It was awful. In border control on the way home, I felt so weak I did not immediately understand that the man standing next to me was Gene Simmons, and that the people with him—all in black leather, and talking too loudly for the context, an airport line—were his entourage. Something else I remember was the kindness of the women in the workshop I gave on the last morning of my visit, in a space called The Big Room in Chinatown, having missed my own reading the night before. The door was locked and so we made use of the corridor as our venue, the place where we belonged and that we might then analyze. In the lunch break, the writers returned with warm steamed buns, dumplings, seaweed, nuts, and figs from the market below, placing them on a communal table. Thank you, I said, after my first, experimental nibble. I remember the green boots of the poet who placed a cup of tea in my hands. Perhaps I was looking down. ***** Perhaps I was on the floor. Later that day, at the symposium itself, a man stepped over me with a snort of disgust. “Are you *comfortable*?” In that moment, I understood his displeasure but did not have the strength to explain myself. Gail Scott was reading from *The Obituary*. She said: “A body with certain features, bleeding . . . it’s hard to do this in contiguous sentences.” And: “The space between subject and object is closed up.” Yes. It was.