

Durable Materials for the Afterlife

Under the trolley, the vultures perch like gargoyles. I'm back in Los Angeles and you won't see me. I want to understand something about time.

I'm reading a poem on the Gold Line. I take the train now. I used to take the Metro with you. The poem is by Wallace Stevens and it says the truth is never enough, but I am trying to hide behind the meanings of words, so here is what it really says:

Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

The evilly compounded, vital I. Here is a fact. The word *you* is the same way, and you are the same way: a series of distinct figures, transparencies compounded over time.

I am a collector of inherited objects: facts, sea glass, secrets. The night we hiked up Echo Mountain, it wasn't a secret but it was a secret to us. I watched you watch the fireworks fluoresce over a Bruce Springsteen cover band tucked away somewhere in the San Gabriel Valley, a pearl of light stitched into the marled-wool chaparral.

Secrets are like pearls and they are most beautiful alone. We went to Echo Mountain again in class, months later. I watched you watch the back of Caroline's blonde head. I decided to grow my own secret. I didn't want a secret, I wanted love. But Dr. Standhill said *Los Angeles is your laboratory*.

This is not a secret, it is a fact: if you scream at the top of a mountain, any mountain,

your own voice will echo back. You're never alone, or you always are.

When I left you again, a time after the first time and before the last time, you drove me to the Museum of Jurassic Technology. I am a historian. You made me sad all the time. I emailed my editor that I'd be late.

You said *she doesn't mean anything anymore*, but I knew better than to forget the past, which runs like train tracks under everything: a forever museum like the one in *La Jetée*, which you hadn't shown me yet. My editor said *What is Jurassic Technology* and I said *The internet says the fragility of belief—impossible bestiaries; space ephemera; an aviary flooded with light and a flapper who serves you tea, transfixed by time; a pack of lies—*

Dr. Standhill prescribed Mike Davis for my broken heart.

In the 1800s, there was a hotel at the summit of Echo Mountain. They called it Echo Mountain House, or *The White City in the Sky*, and a man named Lowe built a railroad all the way up. My hometown newspaper said *it was like a huge stellar body*, beautiful like a pearl or a secret firework. Then it burned down.

Secrets always find a way out. I left you for the last time. I replaced you with another you and that was how I knew it was the last time.



I was blonde through college. You wanted to get married in the Temple of Dendur. We stayed at your grandparents' townhouse in the West Village, the same building where, years ago, my favorite poet had been born. The past was on our side.

You studied the ancient world at the University of Chicago. Your great-grandfather had been a famous imperialist. We went to see the mummies at the Met because you were morbid like that. I liked their evidence of having lived: the god-headed canopic jars, the little animals carved from precious stones arrayed in eternal parade in their long glass cases. The wall label said *Durable Materials for the Afterlife*. I felt like an object of fascination, but that was a secret.

I said *Suzanne doesn't like me* and you said *don't worry*. You kept things from me so I kept things from you. You used to run the Echo Mountain trails. They dynamited most of it away, but Lowe's old railroad is still in the ground. Every object has an afterlife.

I never believed you loved me. You needed me to believe you and I needed you to follow me down, down past the fireworks and the San Gabriels and into the catacombs. We couldn't be friends: too hard to do everything almost the same, changed crucially but slightly. I wasn't a child anymore, just barely; Dr. Standhill wasn't taking my calls. So I went down alone.



I looked around in the dark and I met you there, at the base of a mountain I couldn't climb. I asked you questions and you changed my words around. You had a theory of love; that was why it hurt. Of course I believed you. It had always hurt for me.

Changed around a little, words look like worlds. This is a secret and a fact: you can think yourself into love or out.

When my friend was a child, his father told him a series of facts about the world. This is a fact: ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The secret: time is the same as evolution. We grow up in the patterns of the past.

La Jetée is a movie about the truth. The truth is not good enough. A man sent back in time falls in love. He looks at her once and his fate is sealed. The past means death—the future, freedom. Complete simplicity. We know the end; of course he does not want to be free.

You told me a series of secrets, facts changed crucially but slightly. In *La Jetée*, you told me a secret about love. The past will eat you alive.

I study the Romans as they studied the Greeks. Even the past has a past in the eternal history of power.

When I was a child, my father read me a series of accounts of the world: mythologies, natural history, works of esoteric fantasy. From these origin stories I constructed my own facts. It is easy to imagine you have been the same way forever, will be the same way forever. Materials—material conditions—are durable like that.



When he defeated Antony and Cleopatra, Augustus Octavian brought the first obelisks to Rome. Wherever they were planted, they meant power—raised and raised again in a forever evolution, hewn from red granite, crowned with the Pharaoh's electrum or the Pope's bronze cross. It is a powerful thing to imagine the afterlife of objects; you, the lonesome witness of the oblique glare, arrayed across time like the ethereal relics of a flashbulb, or a firework, anticipatory images wrought in the fleeting visual memory of light.

The earth is drier than ever. It holds onto secrets like water, like the spine of an old railroad. You can always find what you're looking for.

I say *I'm sorry, a lot has happened to me*. A lot has happened to you too. We pass a secret back and forth. A secret is like power: it likes to take material form. This one looks like a rock, a craggy piece of dolomite. You turn it over to show me a crystal lodged in one of its crevices—a crystal clear and separate, separate from its surroundings and chemically distinct, formed centuries later in the shape of an ancient thing.

I'm tired of theories of the world. I'm tired of facts, of watching my back. I want to be surrounded on all sides by love, like a secret crystal, a mummy, a happy child. I'm back in Los Angeles and I think it's time.

And I could do it—forget the past—but we know better, don't we, now?

