

Flash Art



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2 Toyin Ojih Odutola, *A Forbidden Impulse from A Countervailing Theory*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Toyin Ojih Odutola.

3 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. Winter 1976*, 1976-2003. Courtesy of the artist; Thomas Erben Gallery, New York; ESSEX STREET, New York. Pinault Collection. © Senga Nengudi.



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LETTER FROM THE CITY

by Ivana Bašić

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Ivana Bašić, Ungrounding, 2020. Pencil, ink, charcoal, marker on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

New York, August 2020

Was it the stillness of the deserted city that invited them to surface? Or the hundred-year-old life beneath us, making its last farewell to Earth? We couldn't tell. The creaks from the floorboards upstairs had disappeared one day in March and hadn't been heard again.

In the apartment below the two of us, the mistress of the house was taking *her* final breaths. We saw *her* in the bed by the window, still looking at the mailman and the gray stray cats. One hundred years, slowly seeping through *her* mouth.

One of those nights is when we first saw *her*. She flew from the dark recess above the kitchen cabinets, straight toward us. For a split second, I saw a tiny bird caught inside our home, looking for the way out. She dropped to the floor, shed the blur of the wings. A twitch. Contours sharpened. There were no feathers. No crown or beak. In their place a stiff, amber shell. Compound eye. Motile antennae. Inexpressive. Mute.

The swing of a book. Hissing sound and crackling of armor. Death. Nausea. Thick milky sap with no smell, no weight to its appearance, oozing on the floor.

On those nights all of me was slowly blackening from my own plankton, just as matter from the roach was yellowing, and my gradual blackening was keeping track of the passing time.

Next night, she ran toward us, blending with the spalting of the wood. Crush *her*. Collect *her*. Encounter *her* again.

*Since time does not progress.
But revolves.
It seems to circle round one's center of pain.*

The night after, two of *her*. She had been multiplying. She had been expanding.

*Cilia, blinking cilia that keep calling.
I too, who was slowly reducing myself to whatever in me was irreducible, I too had thousands of blinking cilia, and with my cilia I advance, I protozoan, pure protein.*

The insect comes from another planet, more monstrous, more dynamic, more insensate, more atrocious, more infernal than ours. It carries the ancient ambivalence, at once demanding and repelling our intimate contact. The insect is an alien presence that we can neither assimilate nor expel.

In the morning, on my way out, she was in *her* bed by the window. Eyes barely open. Withering body sunken in the sheets. Wig sliding off *her* head. When I came back that evening, the blinds were drawn. And though I didn't know it when I took off the dusty shoes, we were now the only ones living in *her* house. The moment I stepped in, two of *her* were sitting patiently on the lid of the kitchen bin, as if they were expecting me. As I turned around another one was running fast toward me.

Panic filled the shrinking space between us. Reject them. Crush them. Collect them.

We were being pushed out, expelled from the house. They were multiplying and growing as *her* old body was fading away. *Her* death was their permission — I thought they were telling us.

Until finally, on my way to bed, I saw a pair of long antennae, poking out from underneath the fridge. Another one. Yet this

one was barely moving. An inert mark on the floor. She had licked it, the poison. I kneeled and looked at *her*. Only the antennae are still moving, as if looking for the last signal. And that was when she told me:

*It doesn't matter;
It is only the body.
It will soon be over.*

* * *

The force of a receding life presses another one into its place. The indifference that dulls the loss of any single being. Neutrality and its weight. Empty streets swollen with neutrality. Terror of nothing to take you and nowhere to go. Like soft wind that wraps around you, dissolving you. Neutrality was everywhere. Neutrality that is you. The taste of water. Dust. Silence. Semen. The taste of protein. The taste of you. The air we breathe but can't smell. The white viscous nothing leaking from *her*. You was all there was.

*I had reached the nothing and the nothing was living and moist.
I sense that all of this is ancient and vast.
It is a nothing that is the God — and that has no taste.*

Wetness is where life is. Dryness, desert, dust are all loyal agents of death. Dust's craving for moisture, its hydrophilic nature, is propelled by its propensity to evaporate the same moisture it first arrested. Reduction to dust is the absolute reduction.

* * *

There I stand in all the dust and stillness. Extracting *her* out of the rock. For hours and hours. Studio as an excavation stage.

She was conceived as a symbiotic being. A sympoetic being. Of my human self, a Mantidae, soft pink alabaster, an Opiliones, and particles of dust. Quarried in open pits, *her* forming body was found twenty feet below the surface of the Earth.

I have been building *her* for years. *Her* slow emergence holds the space, as I walk and speak, breathe and grieve, leave *her* and come back to *her* again. Liquefied, dissolved from *her* stomach enzymes, self-ingested and regorged into a new form.

*I shall create whatever happened to me.
It will be more scratching than writing as I am attempting reproduction rather than expression.*

Extracting *her* bit by bit. Throughout the days, tending to *her* wounds of soil, *her* swollen veins of sand and dirt. Pressuring *her* into taking form. Then encountering *her* spilled on the floor of my home, throughout the night.

My floor sticky from *her* insides, my hands calloused from *her* becoming. Expelling *her* and delivering *her* at once. As I was wrapping *her* in a plastic bag, to hold *her* moist, to keep the desert out,

I was seeing, with fascination and horror, the pieces of my rotten mummy clothes falling dry to the floor, I was watching my transformation from chrysalis into moist larva, my wings were slowly shrinking back scorched. And a belly entirely new and made for the ground, a new belly was being reborn.

Voices: Ivana Bašić, Clarice Lispector, Reza Negarestani, Steven Shaviro, James Baldwin, Oscar Wilde