Other People's Ruins

BARRIE JEAN BORICH

RUIN ITSELF A KIND OF RE-CREATION. Scenic and falling. Hollowed out. Jagged. Stairs broken. Wood rotting. Coming apart, the past dissolving. My past. A community past. Or decay. Wood. Plaster. Cement. Skin.

I found out my old Dixie Square was still standing when a colleague posted a ruin photo on social media.

The colleague was from the theater department. He wanted to make a stage set that looked like this wreck. What would play on this crisscross of exposed fretting, down these disintegrating stairs, over the pebbled and chemical-wet floor of this broken, what? Whose masterpiece? I did see what he saw. I might love the show he would make of this.

But I also saw what he did not. I knew this place.

Your mother's car. Her pursed lips as she drives. Halsted to Sibley Boulevard to Dixie Highway, a road that your dad says goes all the way south from Chicago to Miami. Sooty sky and powerlines, past the Jack in the Box, the Marathon station, the scrubby patches of weedy prairie lots and store signs that use the word Dixie. The drive to Dixie Square is just 10 minutes, but feels longer in the back seat, your little brothers poking to get you mad.

I tried to tell my colleague. Remember the mall torn up by a car chase in the first Blues Brothers movie? That's Dixie Square, opened when I was seven years old and it was a big deal back then, before the Blues Brothers' trashing, when enclosed malls were still new.

These were the years just before the shutdown of steel mills where tens of thousands worked every day, children and grandchildren of people who came to the Beautiful City, like my family from Croatia, Poland, like Italy, Mexico, like the Great Migration exodus from the Jim Crow South. (*Your uncles and your friends' fathers work there, and even your father did, before he was a teacher; everyone has someone.*) The industrial south side of Chicago was teetering, nothing arriving in the steel industry's wake. Dixie Square was a locust of the far south side and near south suburbs, home of millworkers, schoolteachers, and cops. My people, I guess we could say, though the relationship is uneasy.

You are a dreamy teenager but you never imagine staying here where everything always looks the same but feels like breathable atmosphere collapsing, though you will not have words for how well you know you will leave until hiding in your room with a cassette recorder and the radio, you tape songs you like off the Chicago underground stations that broadcast only at night. The first time you hear them play Bruce Springsteen, just before he is famous, they call him the new Bob Dylan and then play the song about running and you roll your eyes at the Dylan part, nothing like Dylan, but the words of the song, the like us and the born to, the wrap, strap and engine, Joni Mitchell is your spirit but that song your precipice. Much later people your age will tell you Lou Reed or David Bowie pushed your generation over, and (though you will not forgive them for spitting on Joni) Bowie and Reed will seem so much cooler than old reminds-you-of-your-cousins Bruce, but we don't get to choose our death trap, our engine.

When I was in junior high my mother took me to Dixie Square on payday shopping trips to Penney's. Payday was every other Friday and that's when we might get things from the store not already on the list. Hippie style had made it to prime-time TV—Goldie Hawn dancing in a bikini with fake tattoos, the Partridge Family driving to their teeny-bop popstar gigs in a mod-painted school bus. I talked my Mom into buying me my first pair of stovepipe bellbottoms at Dixie Square. Golden orange with black blotches. Too abstract to be animal print, but wildly spotted, way outside the lines, at age 13 looking like freedom. Stores were dream portals, and I needed those pants, even more after my mother called them hideous.

You think when you wear these pants you will be someone else, right? Someone from the place you will someday be? No, not yet. All you think is that you need.

The south and north sides of Chicago are contradictory conjoined twins, with shared architectural characteristics and mini-metropolis neighborhoods on both sides, but the dee-luxe build-up on the north side is matched only by ruins on the far south. I am southside by birth. The imprint is as constant as the lakefront.

I am now, like my theater-of-ruin colleague, a middle-aged college professor in an arts discipline. On the day he posted the photograph I was still living and working in that pretty little city a day's drive west of my half-sick Chicago. I don't know where my colleague grew up but it was somewhere in the South; that much I heard in his honey southern accent, how he wore the place he was from.

In Minneapolis-St. Paul we both lived away from what made us. I loved the bicycles and gardens of my didn't-grow-up-here city, and the old school caucus democracy, and the politicians who (unlike in Illinois) hardly ever went to jail. The queer arty vibe of Minneapolis, suspect in industrial Chicagoland when I was young, permeated everything from city murals to natural food coops. I'd grown accustomed to students who said words I had to learn to live without when I moved back to Chicago, words like "thank you for your queer tattooed femme fabulousness."

Yet I knew what those students didn't see. Underneath this garden was the wreck I'd left, the toxic mill plains, only part remediated. Occasionally, while living in Minneapolis, I would meet someone who was from the same side of Chicago as me and whether or not we would have hung out in high school, in Minnesota we bonded. Yes we would say, eyes meeting, fist bump. This is why, Dixie Square, the ruin the photographs, the jolt in my chest. Yes, I saw the stage set of this dripping rusting wonderland but for what kind of show? Comedy? Tragedy? Choreopoem?

I'd seen, and even loved, ruin art before, staring willingly, for hours, re-finding and losing my inarticulate center there. (*Looks like the you they can't see.*) My colleague didn't tell me where he'd found the photograph but probably the same place I find such things, embedded into the deep image archives of the

web. These images of my old mall were everything that falls apart and everything that survives, like all the drug and booze addicts I know who have made themselves over after getting sober, like my longtime plan for a new tattoo, words I've repeated under my breath for years, from Eliot, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish.

But that's Dixie Square, I kept typing to my colleague, even when he showed no signs of understanding. We went there. For school clothes. Maybe I was missing something, those nods or blinks lost when we talk to each other in digital spaces, but I was unable to find words to convey why this mattered.

A year later I moved back to Chicago, to the north side, not the south, but back in proximity to who I used to be. In my first few weeks at my new university job I discovered pierogi for sale in the checkout aisle of Dominick's, an old city grocery chain with a store on my campus. Look. How wonderful. I can pick up a packet whenever I want, on my way to the train after work.

I posted a pierogi picture on social media. The same guy, my former colleague now, asked "what is that?" He didn't know pierogi? He'd never been to a diner where lifer waitresses in polyester uniforms and white aprons served platters of Polish dumplings swimming in butter and sour cream? I never told him about my little Polish grandma in her South Deering two-flat apartment kitchen, one of the last of the old Polish ladies to stay in the neighborhoods after the steel mills shut down, making pierogi with Philadelphia cream cheese instead of Polish white cheese, because dat's what they have in da store over dere, see?

I know I can't justify judging my friends on their fluency in vanishing Eastern European cuisines, yet how could one of my defining affections be so invisible, even more so now as the Dominick's chain has shut down too, and the store on my campus is now a Whole Foods, and some of what I do to keep my ruins away is try not to eat floury, cheesy foods anymore, so I never did grab a pierogi pack on my way to the train.

A problem of autobiography is that the backdrop any of us consider evident may not be what others can see. When we say I know that place, we mean I am that place, but a problem of art is that this knowing and being has no bearing on someone else's stage set. My problem? The artists problem?

You learn to slouch sideways in those stovepipe pants, one hip higher than the

other, the head cocked, maybe hands on hips, better with a wall to lean against, the constancy of brown brick and cement. Kept. Contained. Can't fall?

I studied photography for a short while when I was first in college, and one of my teachers was a self-portraiture artist. He made images of himself standing against a backdrop of what he thought of as text without meaning. What. He. Thought. He started with his body against a chalkboard filled with Chinese characters. He was not Chinese. He did not read Chinese. He stopped making this series of photographs when he realized, he told us, the characters had meaning for someone.

Well, lots of someone. The white male center of his gaze is glaring now, but when I was eighteen all my professors, even the occasional woman, put white maleness at the center. The photographer's realization then seemed to us, his freshman students, profound, as everything our professors said to us then seemed to us profound, which makes me laugh, now that I am a professor myself. What he did in his self-portraits next, he told us, his hair rumpled, unkempt around his ears, his workman's jeans baggy and held up by a skinny belt, was substitute images of mathematical equations. Yes, yes, brilliant, all of us nodding, scanning the formulas that meant nothing to us and still mean nothing to me, though of course mathematicians know what the equations mean. What system of symbols does not hold meaning for someone?

I don't remember if he told us the reason he was trying to portray himself in an atmosphere without meaning, the self out of context, the body willfully displaced. Maybe he too was running from what made him. I've yet to re-find the photographer or the photographs, and I can't justify judging art from memory, but I do recall the photographs were arresting, black and white, his facial features crisp, his chalky backdrops pressing against his rumpled head. He was a visiting artist and I have no memory of his name and don't know if he took the work further, but I remember the photographs I took for his class, a project that was his idea, a series about the women in my dorm, two side-by-side renderings of each, one image on her dorm bed, her objects and posters framing her body, and another against a blank background. I didn't know what I was doing then, but he may have been onto something about the ways our spaces make

or unmake us, or who we are out of the context of our making, or maybe even how spaces confine. We never talked about what I was seeing, or trying to see, and I didn't wonder. Tough luck that I am more interested in the project now than I was then.

You pose her on her bed. Her hand is relaxed against her thigh, her head falling back against the pretty poster, a Monet, water and blurry flowers. Her hair is feathered and her bangs fall over one eye. You don't know yet what you are making, or where you are running, but tell your dorm-mates this is art and so they do what you ask, and you like this, that they are interested in your interest in them. The camera gives you permission to look at them, at women, without looking away when they look back.

What is borrowable for the purpose of art? Equations yes, language no? A dorm room, a cement wall mottled with years of new school year paint, a mist of chalk dust, of steel mill smoke stinking of sulfur, of old mall demolition grit? My grandfather who was always drunk and left spent cigarette butts floating in the toilet. My mother who has still never told everything about him, her father, naked, his lunging hands in the dim steelworkers' apartment light. Streets a neat line of brown brick bungalows, each one either holding back or hiding some broken story. What is the line between artifact and language? Between worlds that were once one thing and are now another? How can we accurately read a stage-set if we don't know how it came to be?

There is no now before there is then, but what came before, what was once clean and nice and new is no less broken. Human-made places are inherently broken because humans are inherently broken.

But are they? Look how my backdrop is showing here.

Dixie Square has been called the most famous abandoned mall in the world and 30 years after the Blues Brothers smashed it up the site became an urban explorer destination. I don't blame the daredevil ruin kids, some of them same ones taking the photographs, for wanting to look at the decomposing staircases (*did you walk down them once?*) the tattered paint hanging like draperies (*there is a sign that says USE OUR CHRISTMAS LAYAWAY PLAN*) water-stained walls that were once 1960s hip, psychedelic even, now resembling impressionist

paintings (*to each their own Monet*) and floors strewn with rubble (*once slippery tile, high ceilings, indoor built to feel like outdoors, made to feel nicer than actual southside Chicago outdoors*). Ruin art is time, change, loss, re-seeing, still life writ large. Maybe ruin requires an interloper's gaze. Maybe ruin can't be art unless the artist is looking at other people's ruins, maybe that's the difference between ruin and damage. One is aesthetic. One is something else, a haunted inner outline some of us carry, those of us who get out before the ceiling caves in. Knowing that might make ruin art what? Less beautiful. Better made.

But today even my gaze on Dixie Square is that of an intruder. It's not my Dixie Square. My parents retired from public school teaching and moved to a golf course on the Florida panhandle. One of my brothers lives on a developed former cornfield in Central Illinois and the other on a hill in the beach suburbs of L.A. I live now in the gardeny far north side of Chicago a block from the lakefront, a neighborhood so far north I didn't know it existed when I was a girl, and I haven't lived near Dixie Square since I was eighteen. By car, from where I live now, it takes me at least an hour to get back down there.

I did drive down the weekend after I interviewed for the job that moved me back to Chicago. Three decades after it closed Dixie Square was finally in the process of being torn all the way down and I wanted to see the not-art place before it was gone for good. Not my Dixie Square. This was palpable the moment I arrived. When I was a girl the whole area had been interracial, in accordance with who worked at the mills. Now I stood out. My rental car was a red MINI Cooper (*your northside hipster car*.) My blond hair (*white girl*) was long. Even though the weather was chilly and my tattoos (*Fabulous Tattooed Femme*) were covered. I was clearly not from around here. Anymore.

On my way there I'd driven by our old family homes. The house on 142nd, good brown brick, had a new fence and was still standing, the last house before the train tracks and power line prairie, but the other on 166th Place was a little bit ragged, in need of paint along the trim. I was sitting in the car squinting into the window that used to be my bedroom, the one I climbed out of late nights (*this way to freedom*) just to walk around, when a man and woman opened the front door and stared back. A brown-skinned man and a light-skinned woman with a baby on her hip frowned and fidgeted. Oh. I'm sorry I rolled down the window to call out. I used to live here.

Ah. The man nodded and then he smiled. We thought you were a realtor.

Oh no no. I inched the car away as I talked, waving, I'm sorry, Bye-Bye. Why were realtors sniffing around here? What about me was giving realtor realness? Embarrassed by my looking I pressed the gas harder and sped up around the corner before I thought to just get out and talk, ask them if they were more worried about gentrification or collapse.

You huddle in cars, drinking the booze we siphon from our father's basement bars. You carry yours in baby food jars. Slouching friends. Born to this running, or what feels like, and driving so stoned you press on the brake not the gas but still feel the whoosh of wind through windows. Baby, like us, we think we are running. We think we can run.

Dixie Square was fenced in and blocked by a green tarp. The demolition had begun, one of the walls already bashed in by the wrecker. I tried to climb to the top of the MINI Cooper to get a good photo with my phone, but then almost slid off, so reconsidered. I couldn't justify nearly breaking my neck without even knowing what I was trying to see. The not-garden inside me. The wreckage coming when I was a kid, not fully arrived until after I left. Long gone: Penny's. My old bell bottoms. Most of my slouch. All of my grandparents. My mother's long green wallet with the gold clasp that she carried in her right hand on Friday afternoons when we went out to payday shop. Remaining: the ruins. The damage. The land, a golf course once, a prairie once. A brownfield. Embedded toxins, awaiting remediation. Mine. Not mine. A stage set. The director's eye, or is that the developer? An open space promised to the people who live there now, but how likely?

You do not want this backdrop. You run toward another. You need to believe the world is building. Not falling.

Lives living here still, coexist with shadows of cinema sedans and broken glass, with a girl begging her mother to let her dress like the girls on TV, like a girl who would leave, with America's first suburban mall, 50 stores under one roof, 72 degrees for year-round shopping comfort, with a random art gallery of industrial decay. The wrecking ball swings. Heavy walls. Rubble. This particled air. My self-portrait here sets against a backdrop of empty space.