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Peer reviewed

from The Undying Present

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Abstract

THE UNDYING PRESENT (Krupskaya 2015) unfolds in a time not unlike ours, in a city between worlds, in the space between bodies, in the camera's flat gaze and the eyes of a crowd that exceeds it.

Excerpts from *The Undying Present* (Krupskaya 2015)

The City of Margins is a set of ideas put forth by its ruling elite. Those who refuse it are banished or thrown into the realm of lunacy. We write stories but the city and its residents do not read. We burrow beneath the surfaces of glass and sheen. Every inch of space belongs to someone and no space belongs to everyone. Some people have no access to any space at all.

I pound through the streets with a cadre of bodies and thousands more. A cord is wrapped around our waists reminding us that we are present and connected. We move as one, as a singular commotion of shattered glass and burned garbage. The city reeks under our feet.

Thick air buzzes with anticipation. I tie my hands behind my back. I tie a handkerchief around my mouth and I blindfold myself. I stop breathing. I do not scream. The banging of drums and chanting voices echo across buildings during the day. A riot clashes with the forces at night. Windows are smashed in every building along the street. Bodies are smashed by police. I stand off to the side but I stay. I watch. Maybe one day I will fight. Maybe one day in the streets there will be millions instead of hundreds.

I look up at the sky. It is an immense mirror or a clear lake reflecting everything on the ground that has taken place or that will take place, over and over again. There is double action, double reflection—action/reflection—above same as below. I watch the scene projected in the sky. Shields crack. Blood sheds. Bodies run. The scene solidifies itself statuesque against the backdrop of the night sky like an ancient frieze in a museum of history. I see a face peering down through a crack in the screen. I shake my head to jostle the image from making an imprint. It fades from memory.

There are hundreds of bodies here but millions are sleeping. Almost all of the humans are sleeping. It is 6 a.m., it is noon, it is 9 p.m. They sleep.

Everywhere people are breathing in endless rhythmical un-resounding choruses. It is any day in any month of the year in any year. Anyone could rise on this day with desire for everything to be seized. We wake to the sound of talk radio, music or beeps, or the touch of the person next to us. We wake with a stretch and a yawn. Time wakes us and time puts us to sleep. We are being worn away by the minute clicking of little wheels. That has no image.

As we wake we carry regressions of sentiment speeding backward through every generation—back to the beginning before air was divided into straight lines running up and down and sideways slightly curved in the middle—through incomprehensible blurs of color that tumble out of existence barely alive and not even breathing, with

only sense and instinct, as we dwell in murky planetary ponds. In the instant we rupture through the dome of sleep we are flung forward and back through time. Then all is forgotten. A day begins.

I swing open the doors of my apartment building and step out into the city. Three choppers hover overhead. They have been surveying the city for days. Their blades pound into my body altering the rhythm of blood flow. Skin cells crawl. The muscles in my face are tense. Day and night windows rattle with the thumping blades of the machines. The air outside is bland and warm, nondescript. Leaves on branches seem to be quivering yet there is no wind. I look up at the sky and then back at the ground. I decide to walk down 14th street. I adjust the bag over my shoulder and begin walking.

A man stands against a cement wall at the corner of the block. He leans his back against the wall and looks down at his phone when I pass him. Across the street twenty-eight children walk in two neat rows. They wear white polo shirts. Some wear white pants and others wear khakis. White sneakers. The children are silent. A woman shuffles by with a shaved head and her hands shoved in the pockets of her dirty jeans. She is muttering to herself or to someone I cannot see.

After I turn the corner I begin to walk faster. Hazy dead sky pressing down, smog of phlegm choking the space around us. We are entering the downtown of the city. I carry the book under my arm. In my bag is the portfolio, a sack of birdseed, a bike lock. Some of these objects are put to use and some are props for another day. We sit on the curb for a moment to clear our head. It is another day like the rest. Another day of possibility.

I pass a building that is crackling. A sheet of glass crackles. It is a broken window. There is a hole where the impact happened and branches shoot off web-like extending out to cover the pane. The hole in my chest is where the impact happens and the rest of my cells crackle. The window sounds like icicles falling but nothing is falling. The glass holds itself together like the cells in my body hold themselves together. It is the crystallization of destruction. A riot takes place where bodies crackle with fury. They must make other bodies crack. Glass bodies. The war is present and not invisible.

I walk past crackling windows and over to the park. People are lying in the grass in sleeping bags. After crossing through the park I walk along a cold sidewalk shadowed by large buildings, banks and business conglomerates. More glass crackles. I turn the corner and descend into an underground transportation system.

The map is curled and fraying at the edges of the frame. The map is no longer there. They all want to read the same thing. If she turns her head it will cause such commotion that no one will ever recover. She keeps her hands in her lap, her eyes facing forward. The emptiness of the land reaches out beyond all points visible to the eye. She can't tell how far it goes. Neither can I from where I am standing. We speed over the city on rails and under the city in tunnels. The train howls. We close our eyes.

When I exit the station I am on the other side of town. People move past me in confident strides. I walk to the place where I work.

The mechanisms of the city predetermine my pacing though I cannot see or hear them. The mechanisms lie under the sidewalk. They sit behind windows. They perch in the crevices of buildings. They hover in the sky capturing movement.

The sound of an airplane is not frightening. We hardly notice the sound at all. The airplane is fueled by a collection of words. After one thousand pages we stop collecting. Words bring the plane down. The plane crawls on with brutal force. The presiding officer remains in the cockpit. A recollection can be amputated. A motion cannot be revised. One word can own a village. One village can rule an utterance. One oath can be confirmed in the presence of a handful of mighty denizens. We thumb the pages for a signal. We vow to remember. But memory is contingent. Mobilization is a tool.

I walk out of my apartment building to find a city on the brink. I will have to move carefully through the nexus. The City of Margins resides outside the zone of interference so I am unable to access my reservations. I don't sense anything out of the ordinary. I begin to walk.

After a few blocks I decide to activate the poet. I have to. I can't do this alone. The poet can get me to the Second City. That is where I need to go.

The poet appears. She explains that she will guide me out of the City of Margins and through the entrance of the chambers to where the Second City lies. But she will be unable to guide me back if I ever want to return. I say I understand.

She leads me to the community center at the corner of 14th street. I follow her down the stairs and pull open a metal door. I enter a small dark room and stand in the center of it. At my feet lies a plaque embedded in a large stone. I push the knob in the center of the plaque and two doors open. One is a crawlspace into the future. The other is blocked by a large unmovable brick that represents the past. Sunlight is creeping through the crawlspace.

I prepare for the process by tucking my head into my chest. When I emerge I am standing at the edge of a pier looking out into a vast sea that engulfs the pier on all sides. The poet is sitting cross-legged next to me.

I can see a large ship far off in the distance. The poet says that I can board the ship when it arrives at the pier and it might lead me to the Second City or if not there somewhere similar or just the same. I ask her how I will know it's the Second City. She shrugs. Maybe you won't.

All I can make out at this distance is an enormous stone sculpture that appears to be sitting at the helm of the ship. It is a bust of a man, a marble statue. I wonder who could be steering the ship if that huge stone is sitting there obstructing everything. I turn to ask the poet but she is fanning herself, refusing to look in my direction.

I pace up and down the dock pounding on my chest. I light candles. I read books. I try to prepare for the journey. The ship is approaching. It won't be long now.

I awake to find myself curled up in the corner of a dusty cabin in the lowest part of the ship. The cabin feels similar to a room I was in before but the memory is so vague and long forgotten that I am unable to access it.

A large map is plastered along one wall. It is disintegrated, barely decipherable. A wooden chest lies in the middle of the room. I open the chest to find a variety of small children inside all half alive. They are previous selves of me. Some more vibrant than others but all are lending to my current perception of things. They are chirping and squealing and trying to catch my attention so I will select them to bring along on my journey. I eventually become aware that there are also many animals in the room. The animals begin to distract me so I kill them all. Then I play a song. It is unidentifiable and it sounds like every other song about sadness and loss. I stand up from the piano and scramble up the wall to get out of there, exiting through the muddy door in the hallway, children screeching behind thick cement walls.

It feels as though I am trapped in a dungeon floating on the sea. I wonder if I crept through the wrong crawlspace back there but quickly put the thought out of my mind. I don't see the poet anywhere. I can feel her watching me.

I walk around the entire skeleton of the ship seven times underneath a glowing moonlight. At daybreak I find myself standing before the bust of a man, the statue steering the ship with his eyes. I climb to the top of his head in an attempt to overtake the statue and steer the ship myself but the structure crumbles beneath me. Luckily I don't break any limbs in the fall.

I am tired and I don't want to get up from the spot where I've fallen. I notice something hard jutting into my back. It is a lever to a swing door at the bottom of the ship. I peer through a crack expecting to see the ocean beneath me but instead I see thousands of people marching in the streets of a city below the sea with slogans and signs and megaphones.

The poet appears behind me. She says this city is an option should I feel compelled to descend into it. I do feel compelled but I want to keep a top-down perspective at least at the start. I peer down through the crack for a while. A skull gets fractured. A car is on fire and no driver at the wheel. A thin orange haze washes over everything, twisted metal stretching upward. A man opens his wallet and blood pours out.

Smattered through the crowd are the others. They band together and also each act on their own. But none of it matters to the crowd. In an instant they rise up, a blue light casts itself around them and sweeps them away. No one notices. The poet whispers: The others never had a chance. Many said their cause would have to be addressed later, not realizing it wasn't a cause but an understanding that needed to happen, and it would have to be the first thing not the last.

I ask the poet where they went. She says they are gathering to prepare for the fight. I can't bear to watch anymore. I have to enter. The poet nods her consent. I know I am destined to go there because there I am.

I climb down from the passageway over the heads of the people and drop with a plunge into the center of the mass of bodies. Inside are specks of marvel. It is euphoria and chaos combined. It's messy but it cleans slates, shedding clarity on every imbalance that exists outside of it, placing everything in question.

They say:

It was more than we bargained for and everything we ever hoped for. It was everything great and terrible. It was also none of those things.

They say:

Some people thought this was the beginning of the end of the big machine but we weren't sure if it was even the beginning of the beginning of the end of the big machine. We thought that it was possibly a moment in an endless series of historical moments that never gets beyond its moment.

Meanwhile, I am standing inside the belly of the march with my fist raised to the sky.

They say:

If you don't put yourself with the people then you are aligning yourself with those in power. You're saying that you are okay with the way things are. There are sides. Where you position yourself matters.

They say:

The barracks were huge storage bins sitting against the early morning light coasting along a stretch of calm glistening water that reached out toward the bottom of the city skyline. We were there. We stopped them. We broke things. We kept our clenched fists high.

In the meantime my ship has sunk completely into the sea. I can no longer climb out of the passageway for there is nothing to climb back to. I remain in the Second City—this reflection of a reflection, the future or the past—whatever it is I can't tell but the voices keep circling through the mess of forms that I absorb here in the former city, the future city, the city beneath the sea, or somewhere.

About the author

Syd Staiti lives in Oakland, CA and is author of *The Undying Present* (Krupskaya 2015) as well as chapbooks *Between the Seas* (Aggregate Space & Featherboard Series 2014), *In the Stitches* (Trafficker Press 2010), and *Verse/Switch & Stop Motion* (2008).