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"EVEN NOW THERE ARE PLACES WHERE A THOUGHT MIGHT GROW—"

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When we went indoors in March 2020, our minds were racing.[1] The minutiae of a day suddenly demanded inordinate amounts of attention and everything had become an object of anxiety—What food is in the cupboard? How will we get more? Where will the children be able to run around? What must be avoided? Wear a mask? Wash hands? For the most part, academics were not among those called to any front line, so we stayed inside and merged with the internet. An hour by train became three steps from bed to desk. At 7 p.m. we went to the windows to clap and cheer. But before long we found our way into new routines that eased the tiny anxieties of having to figure out the newness of each day, leaving room for the large anxieties. Will the old ones be safe? How will we reach our families, students, colleagues, the people we work with? Do you have a fever? Would the hospital let me visit you? Will our democracy survive? What about the dead? Every day that the worst disasters passed us by, even those anxieties became more routine and perhaps, around that point, there came to be room for thought.

Somehow, the writers in this volume made their way to their desks or found a new place at the cleared kitchen table or patched together a makeshift office next to the washing machine, somewhere they could open a document and write. At the same time, they found that there were ways to think together even without being together in the same place, and they fashioned online an internet version of the nexus of meetings, lectures, dissertation defenses, and conferences that would have been the warp and woof of academic life in any other year. Sparing the earth a few thousand airmiles, we thought together in Zoom versions of all of the above and in new colloquia, not least the Thursday afternoon gathering of Jason Throop's Team Phenomenology, the place common to us all. As Arendt would put it, it was a place where thought was kept in motion.

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The questions were familiar but inevitably now had a new dimension. All the contributions here bring familiar thinking into a new place. So, if we were concerned before with the archi-political question of how we are to live together well, even if that concern had always meant being finely attuned to the "we" as itself open to question, we found ourselves asking it all over again as the wave of sickness and death rose. We marveled at the empty streets and squares of cities while that wave built out of sight behind the doors of retirement homes, hospitals and people's houses. We were told the data, and heard the ambulances in the street, but would rarely catch a glimpse of what so much sickness looked like and could not picture so much death.

The title of this piece is the first line of Derek Mahon's (2011) poem "A Disused Shed in County Wexford" from 1973. There—whether *there* in the line of the poem or *there* in the disused shed—it is not a matter of thought in motion or articulated in an exchange of ideas but, rather, a place of stillness and silence where a thought might grow—or it might not. The poem takes us to places of forgetfulness and oblivion:

> Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned
> To a slow clock of condensation,
> An echo trapped for ever, and a flutter
> Of wildflowers in the lift-shaft,
> Indian compounds where the wind dances
> And a door bangs with diminished confidence,
> Lime crevices behind rippling rain barrels,
> Dog corners for bone burials;

Perhaps these are imagined places, made real in the telling detail of their descriptions, or perhaps they are firsthand phenomenological accounts of scenes experienced in named parts of the earth. What is essential and piercing is the contingency in each case: someone might pause at the mouth of the mineshaft, listening, but perhaps no one ever does; somebody might pass through the compound and look at the lime accumulated behind the barrel, but maybe that never came to pass and never will. The world is full of unattended nooks, places known to no one living, places hidden from all but a few, places unheard-of, not quite remembered, yet to be discovered or rediscovered, places vastly remote and others close to where we are right now. That is to say, the world is riddled with contingency. It is a condition of worldliness, merely the case, neither here nor there.

But among those sites are places haunted by suffering, even cruelty, and our not knowing them is a cause for concern. Contingency is at work here too—the claim that emanates from such a place may or may not be heard—but now our failure to hear it is a question for us. The very universality of contingency turns out to be trivial, and dwelling on it turns out to be a way of ignoring the suffering that it not permitted to register. Once such a place—of unjust imprisonment, of industrial dying, of disposal—presents itself to consciousness, our not having seen it before is shocking. How can we not have known? What else have we failed to hear? What is it about our particular world and our way of being in it that makes some suffering imperceptible, some screams inaudible, and turns some hidden places into holes of oblivion, as Arendt puts it? How does any such place come to light, and what does the sight of it do? What brought Hart Island to light in April 2020? What did it call on us to think about the living and the dead?

"The ghost of a scream"

Hart Island, an island of just over a hundred acres at the western end of Long Island Sound, is part of the archipelago of islands and peninsulas that make up New York City. It is owned by the city. On Thursday April 9th, 2020—a day when more than a thousand people in New York died of COVID-19 as the first wave of the pandemic reached its peak in the city—photographer John Minchillo flew a drone over the island capturing scenes of mass burials (Sisak and Minchillo 2020). The images show a long trench, dug by a mechanical digger. A truck is parked at one end and wooden coffins are being transported into the trench using a forklift. Eight figures dressed in white protective clothes are stacking the coffins in the trench, three high and two wide. The figures walk across the coffins, carrying a sheet of plywood to lay over the top, and they spread earth on top of that. Six other figures in dark clothes stand nearby and sometimes help. A ladder leans against the side of the trench. The day is grey and cloudy. The water of the sound is calm. The trees on the island are bare except for a light flush of green on some high branches. Near the trench are several derelict red brick buildings with broken doors and missing windows, saplings growing through the roofs. Apart from the people working at the trench, the island appears to be deserted.

Minchillo worked for Associated Press and, on the news service's website, the photographs and video carry a warning of "disturbing content." They were widely distributed on television, online and in print media on that day and the days that followed, and the tone of the accompanying news reports was one of shock and the certain sort of horror we associate with the bodies of the dead. They were the images of a raw moment. The first confirmed case of the virus in the city had been recorded on February 29th and now, barely six weeks later, as many as a thousand people were dying each day, the morgues of the city were under pressure, the refrigerated trucks outside hospitals were not enough, and over a hundred bodies were being taken for burial on Hart Island each week. We knew things were bad, but just *look* at how low the virus had brought us. These should have been images from another time, but we had been dragged this quickly into the anachronism of stacking bodies of the unclaimed dead in mass graves on a scarcely known island in the Bronx.

Hart Island is a forbidden place. Administered by the New York City Department of Corrections (NYCDOC), it has been completely inaccessible to the public since the COVID lockdowns. It can be reached only by boat and, even before COVID, access was granted only by appointment and tightly controlled by NYCDOC. Visitors were accompanied by Uniformed Corrections Officers. Cameras and phones were forbidden though the officers could take polaroids if the visitors wished. Press were forbidden. When another photographer, George Steinmetz, launched a drone from City Island, half a mile away on April 15, 2020 and took photographs of the graves, NYPD officers confiscated the drone and issued a misdemeanor summons for "avigation," the infraction of taking off or landing an aircraft anywhere in the city that is not an airport. In a statement, the NYCDOC said: "Out of respect to the families and friends of those buried on Hart Island, we have a longstanding policy of not permitting photography of an active burial site from Hart Island. It is disrespectful" (Robbins 2020).

"They are begging us, you see"

The more we study the images and the more we learn about what we are looking at, the more there is that is unsettling. A shot that gives a wider view of the island shows open green cemetery space where between 850,000 and 1,000,000 unclaimed bodies are buried. The first recorded burial was that of Louisa Van Slyke, aged 24, who died of tuberculosis in 1869 with no known family. In the decades that followed, her remains were joined by those of infants, fetal remains, people who died unnamed, those who died with no-one to claim the remains, those whose families could not afford to bury them, or who could not afford to bury them just then. The rate of burial increased in times of epidemic, astronomically in 1918 when over twenty thousand victims of the Spanish flu were buried there, but also significantly in 1988 in the midst of the AIDS crisis in the city.

The record of burials is incomplete—some graves were reused in the 1930s, a fire destroyed part of the archive in the 1970s, and even now the markers at large cemetery plots could easily be moved—but details of location and identifying information are now logged, and the Mayor spoke of the 2020 COVID burials, like other burials at Hart Island, as a temporary measure. The coffins are marked with names. A photograph from 1992 shows a burial worker standing beside a stack of coffins with a name written in large letters in felt marker on the side of each one: George Cato, Howard Quatley, José Morales (Meier 2020). The name and the place of burial is recorded and the records kept by the Department of Corrections and later passed on to the Municipal Archive. Thus, the Hart Island cemetery can be thought of as a place for a body to rest as it waits to be claimed. It is unsettling to think that these bodies are not yet settled, not yet where they ought to be, not yet in the place where they can each be remembered, but we need not despair. They might yet be claimed.

It is still more unsettling to know that most never will be. About two thousand bodies are buried at Hart Island in a "normal" non-epidemic year; no more than about a hundred are reclaimed and disinterred. Even the NYCDOC (n.d.) acknowledges that the system of recording-keeping is unreliable. Those hoping to visit a grave (pre-COVID) were warned:

> If a deceased person's specific gravesite is either unidentifiable or inaccessible for reasons that cannot be remedied before the date of the visit, the requestor will be notified in advance of the visit and may be asked to reschedule. Alternatively, the requestor is permitted to visit an alternate gravesite or other location reasonably proximate to the requested gravesite.

Elsie Soto, a woman who discovered 25 years after his death that her father, who had died of AIDS, was buried there describes her visit in 2018. She was escorted by a correction officer to a broken marker at a mass grave. "They said, 'He's here in this section.' I'm like, 'But where?'" (Kilgannon 2018).

The shores of the island were partly eroded in Hurricane Sandy in 2013 and bones of the dead were exposed. The bones were gathered and the eroded shoreline reinforced, but not until 2019.

"We too had our lives to live."

The island has been a repository for living bodies too, sorts of people and sorts of bodies with little in common beyond being the focus of a social urge to put them away: Confederate prisoners of war (1865); people sick with yellow fever (1870); poor, sick women (1890s); the insane; prisoner grave-diggers; old men (1900); consumptive women; male misdemeanants aged 16-30 years (1904); old prisoners; excess prisoners from other city jails; members of the Navy and Coast Guard in need of disciplining (1941-1945); 3 German spies who surfaced in a U-Boat near Long Island (1944); more prisoners; male derelicts (1950); still more prisoners; drug addicts in rehabilitation (1966-1976); prisoners again (until 1991) (New York Correction History Society, n.d.). The white-clad workers in the Minchillo pictures are apparently contracted laborers but, in images from the 1890s by Jacob Riis (The Hart Island Project, n.d.) through the 1990s (New York Correction History Society, n.d.) and up until the first days of April 2020, the people pictured performing the burials were prisoners. Another video by artist Melinda Hunt (2020) depicts the final prisoner burial detail on April 8th. A Dickensian penitentiary practice that had survived into the 21st century ended then because the prison was in the grip of its COVID outbreak. In the painful drama of those days, the anachronism itself seemed shocking and inexplicable. Discussions of the island were sprinkled with words that emerged from another, older world: *potter's field*, *decedent*, *the indigent*, *the unbefriended*. A Mahon-esque forgotten world had been half a mile off shore all along and now it was before our eyes, brought to light by the scale of our present disaster. Who knew?

Many knew, though that knowledge could remain trapped in the routinized thinking of a work life, or the secrecy and shame that often surrounded AIDS deaths, or in the difficulties of articulating thinking in circumstances of poverty and incarceration. Dr. Stephen W. Nicholas recalled treating babies suffering from AIDS at Harlem Hospital in the mid-1980s. He asked a nurse about burial arrangements for one of the earliest victims. "She said: 'Oh no, these babies go to potter's field.'" Robert Ruggiero, who ran a funeral home that was one of the first to be willing to embalm the bodies of victims of AIDS, describes talking to the families of men who had died: "The parents would say, 'It's not our problem—just do what you have to do'" (Kilgannon 2018). A woman whose 76-year-old mother died during COVID-19 in a Brooklyn rehabilitation center agreed to a Hart Island burial because it was free. "I didn't have any money and, at the time, I was devastated and all over the place" (Kilgannon 2021). Hundreds of prisoners have worked the burial detail; until recently, those who quit were regarded as "disobeying a direct order" and punished with solitary confinement (Gross 2020). It is still the case that the pine coffins are supplied by CorCraft, the industrial work program of the state prison system. That is to say, knowledge of Hart Island has circulated all along through the hospital-mortuary-carceral-industrial complex of which it is a node.

We—any of us—*might* have known. Dr. Nicholas was shocked by the nurse's response, but also by an image. Artist Claire Yaffa conducted a 10-year project at one of the centers he directed in the 1990s; one of her photographs showed the small coffins of babies being buried on Hart Island. "It made me sick to see these crates stacked up and bulldozers just covering them over," Nicholas said. The image interrupted the passage of knowledge and the doctor began to press hospital administration to work with charity groups to fund private burials for the children. The Jacob Riis photographs from the 1890s were lost after his death in 1914, rediscovered and exhibited in 1947, and continue to have a vigorous afterlife. They became an object of artistic and political interest for Melinda Hunt in the 1990s and were the impetus for her *Hart Island Project*, which began in her desire to re-photograph the island as Riis had done a century earlier, using the same technology. A Canadian who had recently become a U.S. citizen, she speaks of this as her first act of citizenship: "[I was] trying to show something that was really invisible . . . At each stage something very new appeared. It appeared through the [archival] documents, it appeared through people coming to me with stories and questions that were unanswered" (Rosenberg 2010). It took six months for her to gain access to the island, and she worked on the photography project over dozens of visits in the course of three years, producing a volume of photographs 1998 (Hunt and Sternfeld 1998). But then came two more decades of activism including numerous Freedom of Information Act requests in order to set up a database of information on those buried, a class action law suit to make it easier for families to visit, a campaign resulting in legislation to transfer the island to the NY Department of Parks and Recreation on July 1, 2021, a new campaign to have the island designated a National Monument, and plans to erect a memorial to the COVID-19 dead of the city.

"Who have come so far in darkness and in pain"

In Mahon's poem, the one who pushes open the door of the disused shed carries a camera. Every day the world had waltzed in its bowl of cloud and, every day, the echo had remained trapped in the mine, the dog bones had lain in their soil, and the thousand mushrooms that strained towards the thin light that came through the keyhole of the shed door had waited. Now they were woken by the creak of hinges and the flash bulb firing squad, and the image of those neglected vegetal selves telegraphed their demand: *Save us!* Yes, of course, though which of us has the power to save? *Speak on our behalf.* We hear you, but how could we deign to know what to say? How could we speak for you without obliterating your voice with our own? *Do something*. Yes, but what? How? *At least do not close the door again*. There, on the threshold of a place where a thought might grow, we are called upon to hold open its possibility, to leave ourselves open to its growth.

An image on our newsfeed, an artwork, a student's comment; something opened the door, and we are no longer oblivious. Poets like Mahon, artists and activists like Riis, Yaffa and Hunt, journalists and photographers like Minchillo, Steinmetz and others have made us to see and hear. *Save us!* Salvation may be beyond us, though all their work and a year of pandemic might have prepared us for something else—pity, perhaps, or outrage or solidarity. *Do something!* What remains to be seen, though now we know that being together, sharing a world, and figuring out how to be together well means being with the living and the dead, and not just with those we have called our people and our dead.[2]

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[2] For a philosophical and anthropological consideration of the relation of the living and the dead after Heidegger, see Ruin 2019.

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