

Irretrievable Breakdown

by Anya Liftig

Yellow piss snow was piled outside the window. Slushy puddles of ice pellets welled up on the corner. We had both given up the idea that there was anything romantic or charming about the layers of snow we trudged through. The weather was something to be endured, just another difficulty we put up with to live in this city, the greatest city in the world.

Inside, the radiator was turned up to broil, shriveling my nasal passages despite finding a formidable foe in the humidifier. Most mornings I woke up on a pillow splotted with flecks of red. My side of the bed was inches from the back window and when it got cold, I could feel the wind blow through the cracks around the frame. I tried any and all methods to seal it up—industrial plastic, caulking, construction foam, duct tape. I stuffed plastic grocery bags in the gaps between the panes, wadded up a years' worth of white and red Target bags into the holes. I fought the cold with thin layers of Saran Wrap stretched taut over the dirty glass.

At least it was better than the last place I lived where, when it rained outside, it rained inside. There I had rigged up a grey plastic tarp over the bed, hoisted with a complex system of pulleys made of rope from the dollar store. Living in this city always meant taking matters into my own hands as far as repairs were concerned. When things went wrong, I fixed the offending article myself or I learned to live with it. This was the same method I used on the leaky pipes under the sink. I removed what looked like the guilty piece and trekked back through the snow to the hardware store. I used three rolls of duct tape to secure its pathetically incongruous fixture. I wrapped the whole thing in cut up towels and

then wrapped those in another roll of duct tape. A fool-proof barrier. I could always fix things myself, even if they still looked more broken by the time I finished with them.

The apartment was once just his apartment, until he asked me to move in seven years ago. Then it became “our” apartment—all 375 glorious square feet of cozy, adorable basement studio of it. It was supposed to be a temporary nest on our way to a larger and hopefully, jointly owned place. A year packed in there together, tops. It would be an adventure, not unlike living on a sailboat. Every item had to nest neatly into every other item. There was no room for storing anything. At the grocery store, I bought only the smallest amounts—one roll of toilet paper at a time, one tiny bottle of dish soap, just enough for the dishes we washed in the Lilliputian sink. I decorated using miniature figurines—bits of my childhood Barbie collection. In the medicine cabinet, I displayed my tiny collection of thimble-sized porcelain houses. I stationed a few Smurf figurines on the faucet, not far from where Gumby contorted himself around the hand soap. I exploited the fact that our front door was made out of cheap steel alloy and turned it into a magnetic board with magnets made by cutting up misogynist ads in old issues of *Ladies Home Journal*. My sticker soaked love notes hung there, like a toddler’s artwork decorating a refrigerator. Using my sister’s abandoned pull-up bar, I made curtains out of fabric I brought back from Thailand. This was intended to create an illusion of privacy.

This apartment was in a brownstone, the most beautiful brownstone on the most beautiful street in the most beautiful neighborhood in Brooklyn, which, in case you didn’t know, and how could you not know, is just about one of the most beautiful and important places in the whole world. Inevitably, we were surrounded by inordinately beautiful people wearing crisp, tailored clothes, strolling beautiful children with perfect, cherry red pouts; children who thought artisanal thoughts while buried under layers of the softest goose down; children who knew the taste of capers before they knew the taste of failure.

Each week, on the eve of trash day, scavengers would rifle through the neighborhood garbage nabbing a slightly scuffed Eames lounge here, a crooked Knoll bookcase there. In fact, it turned out that there was a whole black market economy funded by our trash. Leave something out on the street and the next day, it would be on Craigslist, spruced up with a slap of paint and new knobs. There also appeared to be a neighborhood syndicate solely devoted to rummaging for cans and plastic bottles that could be returned for deposit. The tiny, wiry Chinese women were the most aggressive. They would shove you out of the way in front of your own can. And why not? Here were thousands of people who were so rich that they literally threw money out in the trash. It would have been criminal not to capitalize on the distinctly American combination of waste and laziness. It was not unlike living under a swarm of quietly hovering buzzards patiently waiting to softly peck out your eyes.

But even this oddball ecosystem was strangely beautiful and if there was ever any question about its merits, it was ugly in only the most beautiful, most significant way: five dollar cups of licorice-noted pour-over coffee, ice cream made from the milk of cows rocked to sleep every night with Ukrainian folk songs, letter-pressed note cards embossed with the ink of blueberries picked by workers paid a living wage, pimento loaf imported from the most ass-backwards county in Alabama. Everything was sourced, curated and sustainable, each moment a precious opportunity to be more authentic.

We lived below some of these beautiful people; only they were some of the most detestable people anywhere. People who treated us like poorly paid help, people who had omitted the words “thank” and “you” from their vocabulary in favor of Neolithic cave man grunts. People who thought we were serfs and they the lords of the manor. They assumed that because we lived beneath them in their illegal in-law suite, we were untouchables. Our sleep was not as special as their sleep,

our migraines paled in comparison to theirs, their mail was far more important than ours. Everything that went wrong in the house was our fault.

Once, the lord of the manor let himself in unannounced with designs on fixing the front window. Since he usually let himself in uninvited to turn down the thermostat, his new chore intrigued me. He removed his hammer from his tool kit and promptly managed to put a 3ft long crack in the glass. It was winter and the wind whistled through. He promised to come back and fix the damage within the week. But three months passed and I decided, once again, to take matters into my own hands. If we couldn't get him to fix the window, we could at least shame him into submission. I taped bright red duct tape along the crack and covered the whole thing with newspaper, pointedly not *The New York Times* or even the *Daily News* but rather, *USA Today*, a copy of which I could only obtain by sneaking into the Quality Inn in Gowanus. Anyone passing by would think that yes, the neighborhood was regressing, unbeautiful, that basically illiterate people lived in our building. Even our pot dealer who delivered to us every Friday night pronounced it ghetto. It wasn't long before the lady ordered her lord to fix the eyesore.

Their precociously blockheaded offspring only played with items they could kick or torture. They pegged us first with snowballs and later with rocks when we came or went. They nailed live insects to the back door and lit them on fire. They threw curveballs at cats, howling with laughter when the poor creatures absorbed the thunk. These blockheads squealed with giddy delight when they pissed in the drain outside our bedroom window—the scent of boy stink lingering for weeks. They giggled while they took their blockheaded shits in the backyard. One day in the spring the beautiful but horrible blockheaded mom went out to plant her tulips only to find herself excavating tiny boy turds. A few days later, she demanded her husband cover the whole yard with AstroTurf.

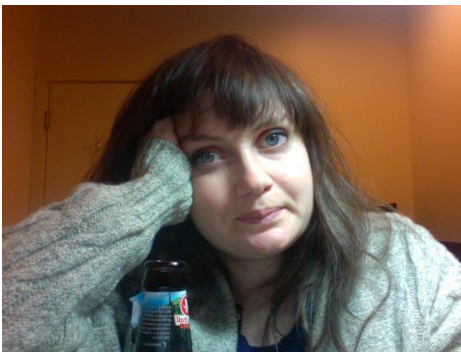
Technically, we had no claim on any of the backyard. I knew this wasn't written in the lease because we had no lease, more of a gentleman's agreement that we could live there and pay money. I looked enviously at the blockheads as they tossed basketballs, aiming not for the hoop but for the more important parts of each other's heads. All that lovely space out there, all it off limits. Occasionally, when I thought the horrid people had gone out to a BBQ with their rotten friends, or when I knew they were on vacation making some other place miserable, I would sneak out and lie on the fake grass. I'd stare up into the sky and pretend that I was tripping on mushrooms, watching the leaves morph and swirl like soft serve ice cream into one another. I'd roll up and down the breadth of the yard until I made myself nauseous. I'd look up into trees and imagine what it might be like to live in the curve of a question mark.

Once, in the middle of the winter, when there was almost a foot and a half of snow outside, I left myself out the back gate. It was midnight and I was barefoot, shivering in a t-shirt and panties. I walked to the far back of the lawn, where the plastic met the flagstone, and stood still, waiting for him to come rescue me. The snow burned my feet with cold. I looked up into the night sky and tried to imagine I was flying away from that place, sailing through the air on a plane to somewhere farther than far. After ten minutes, I couldn't take the pain anymore and I slipped back through the gate and fell into bed. I lay my freezing feet on top of his. Nothing. Finally, I said straight out, "I just went out in the snow in my bare feet and underwear and I looked up at the sky and tried to imagine that I could fly away from here and you didn't even notice I was gone, you didn't even try to find me even though I left the door open so you would know where I was. So you couldn't help but come and rescue me from the cold."

"Are you crazy?" he asked through a haze of sleep.

As if I would know.

This was just one instance in a season of similar celebrations. Another night, unable to sleep again, and done with my insomniac exercises—naming every word starting with the letter S, listing every female author I knew, every store in Herald Square—I got up and slipped through the curtain that we both desperately needed to be a wall. I walked to the kitchenette, opened the utensil drawer where each spoon was nestled carefully inside each other, and pulled out one of the old steak knives that my mom had given us. It had a worn wooden handle with several gouges—evidence of long, dutiful battle with my mother’s pork chops. I crawled back into bed and began to softly scrape my forearms with the blade, first on the left side and then on the right. My inner arms were white canvases when I put the blade on my skin. I hung on the threshold of puncture for a while, sawing silently, waiting for him to wake.



Anya Liftig is a writer and performer. Her work has been featured at TATE Modern, MOMA, CPR, Highways Performance Space, Lapsody4 Finland, Fado Toronto, Performance Art Institute-San Francisco, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, The Kitchen at the Independent Art Fair, Performer Stammtisch Berlin, OVADA, Joyce Soho and many other venues. In “The Anxiety of Influence” she

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