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THE GREAT BOOK OF CATASTROPHES

“When he was a baby, I would carry [my little brother] up and down the stairs even though my parents told me not to hold him unless they were watching. I knew even as a seven-year-old that I was putting him in danger. But I had to put him in danger so I could protect him from danger.” —Jonathan Safran Foer, “Emptiness”

In standard erasure poetry, the words of the source-text get whited-out or obscured with a dark color, but the pages in Foer’s new book, *Tree of Codes* (November 15, 2010, Visual Editions), have actually gone under the knife, rectangular sections physically excised using a die-cut technique that resembles X-acto artistry.

We openly admit: our creations will be temporary. We shall have this as our aim: a gesture.

The result: chinked, rectangular cut-outs around which remaining text floats, reminding us of the shape of floor plans (albeit for buildings made of nothing); they produce windows and doorways to portions of up to ten successive pages of text at a time. Approached this way, we confront morphemes, words, and phrases that get revealed, repeated, and then covered up.

Something stirred in me. The feeling of no permanence in life transformed into an attempt to express wonder.

Like a disrupted pantoum built from the half-thoughts, mumbles, and pooling associations of a madman, language waves at us through these X-actored text-windows, disrupting the surface-texture of the page. The composition not only interrupts normal saccadic rhythms but in effect forces us to read the book back-to-front at the same time we’re reading it front-to-back, perhaps

nodding at the process of reading Hebrew, which in relation to English is read backwards.

All attempts are transient and easy to dissolve. reducing life is not a sin. It is sometimes necessary. There is no dead matter," he taught us, "lifelessness is only a disguise."

Lifting the pages up one by one, we discover a lyrical semi-narrative delivered by a single narrator, characters (a father and mother), a single plot-point (the father's death), and a shift in setting (the movement from an Eden-like garden to an urban frontier).

My father would walk along like a gardener of nothingness, outside of the surface of life. he seemed to scatter into fragments, an enormous featherless dignity

A primary concern of any erasure-artist is authorship and Foer's book is no exception.

He suddenly collapsed and folded up. Or perhaps he had been exchanged for another man?

Futzing with Bruno Schulz's book *Street of Crocodiles*, Foer gets extremely intimate with the Polish writer; Foer is writing a book with, through, and for Schulz by un-writing the original.

"I'd love an empty page of Bruno Schulz's."--Foer, "Emptiness"

This is an age in which there is much debate about the relevance of books to our fast-paced, byte-obsessed culture, but we've yet to come across any conglomeration of text, hyperlinks, images, and ads in the sidebar that presents a more chaotic and multi-dimensional reading experience than this book. This is the end of reading; this is the future of reading. This is the end of writing; this is the future of writing.

out of the depth of yesterday i wanted to turn inside out. I wrote in a notebook, added it all up. with eyes like miniscule mirrors, i could not contain the groaning, swelling, deep pulsation of the enormous awe, those colossal exuberances. the only living and knowing thing was me.

“I felt light,” says the narrator midway through *Tree of Codes*. At this point the reader thinks, too, of the book itself, which, composed of half-empty pages, feels to the touch too light. Pick up the doctored book-object and it weighs less than the eye says it should.

It seemed he might disintegrate, i grabbed with trembling hands. he became smaller and smaller, wilted into a petal of nothingness.

So, too, when we separate the gossamer-thin pages one-by-one and examine not just the words written on each page but also the space through and *past* these pieces of paper, we have the uncanny experience of looking *through* empty picture frames.

One could see wavily reflected in the display windows the inhabitants of the city—creatures of weakness, of voluntary breaking down

Turning pages, the reader’s hand (accustomed to a physical understanding of the page) literally measures subtracted weight. This tactile emptiness lies at the heart of the book’s attempt to plumb anti-spaces—landscapes unrecoverable at the levels of text, paper, geography, and memory—which are excruciating to Foer, whose entire oeuvre is an attempt to recover, through art, the dead bodies of the Holocaust and a demonstration that such an attempt is not only impossible but wrong (“to write a poem after Auschwitz” etc). The book is both hospital and crypt: the thousands of tiny rectangular spaces are both beds and graves.

the wretchedness of that generation, unmarked by the presence of a soul, made of

cardboard, empty inside

Straightforward written language, Foer is suggesting, cannot dependably access such material without cheapening the debt. What does it mean to toss out, to make detritus of, what you adore?

the great book of catastrophes, copied a thousand times, incessant draft, relentless flowing bleeding.

Foer bores his curatorial-knife into Schulz, deleting beloved words from his favorite book and lodging himself deep inside the tragic home of that father-text. Perhaps more than ever in this new book/formal experiment, Foer gropes towards a poetics of absence and, in his own words, “a shaky and uncertain line of indefinite basic sadness.”

“I’m sorry for my inability to let unimportant things go, for my inability to hold onto important things.”--Foer, “Emptiness”

This text, chaotically rich in texture to the eye and the fingers, is a bleak and ravaged document obsessed with its own compositional choices. The loosely narrative lyrics Foer carves from Schulz’s *Street of Crocodiles* often fashion metaphors and justifications for the second author’s tender, literary vandalism.

How beautiful is forgetting! what relief it would be for the world to lose some of its contents!

We sense that Foer tries to find solace inside loss but that he also fears such efforts are only “an invention of loneliness confused and unconnected.”

*It’s the tragedy of loving; you can’t love anything more than something you miss.--
Foer, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

Tree of Codes is concerned with landscapes rural and urban, with maps, with

rooms, and especially with coverings: masks, wallpaper, paint, shadows, curtains, “a delicate veil” filling a window, old murals, tablecloths, and secrets.

And yet, and yet – the last secret of the tree of codes is that nothing can ever reach a definite conclusion. Nowhere as much as there do we feel possibilities, shaken by the nearness of realization. the atmosphere becomes possibilities and we shall wander and make a thousand mistakes. We shall wander along yet not be able to understand.

Foer also takes an obvious interest in puncturing surfaces: “Reality is as thin as paper,” he says, slicing through the pages of his source-text, simultaneously obscuring Schulz’s stories and revealing new dimensions inside of them. “Only the small section immediately before us is able to endure, behind us sawdust in an enormous empty theater.” There is no doubt that his preoccupation with surfaces and coverings is both *ars poetica* and a reference to one aspect of Bruno Schulz’s biography.

my father alone was awake, wandering silently through the rooms.

Not long before he was shot to death, Schulz was commissioned to paint a fairytale-themed mural in the home of Felix Landau, the Gestapo officer who protected Schulz the last few years of his life. For decades the paintings were forgotten and lost, hidden behind layers of whitewash in the pantry of a private residence. Recently, though, the brightly colored figures were uncovered by Polish researchers, only to be summarily removed by an Israeli leftist group, Yad Vashem, which transported them to Israel.

This is love, she thought, isn't it? When you notice someone's absence and hate that absence more than you love his presence? --Foer, Everything Is Illuminated

In the tiny, square window at the top of page one of *Tree of Codes*, the reader encounters Foer’s first revision of Schulz: a partial glimpse of the phrase “bright hoarse,” constructed from laying the phrase “hoarse with shouting”

over the phrase “the bright silence.” The concept of “hoarseness” relates to Foer’s project of silences and layers, but it is probably also an eerie visual pun on the word “horse,” which was the first recognizable figure researchers discovered while scraping away the white paint that had covered Schulz’s vibrant murals. *Tree of Codes* is codified on a nearly infinite number of levels, most of which will remain hidden to Foer’s readers.

Full of ideas and projects, I wanted a night that would not end.