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In the dark woods I lost my way

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**IN THE DARK WOODS
I LOST MY WAY**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

By
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ABSTRACT

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
I found myself in a shadowed forest.
For I had lost the path that does not stray
Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was,
That savage forest, dense and difficult,
Which even in recall renews my fear:
So bitter-death is hardly so severe!

Dante Alegheri
Inferno
Canto 1

Dante's passage refers to the losing of a spiritual path, but for me it refers to the destruction of the past, memory and self. My work deals with the loss of the past and the burdens of memory. It deals with the destruction of the mind and the body by time.

The path in the woods is continuously being destroyed and remade as we make our way through the forest. Landmarks recede into the distance and the unfamiliar looms ahead. It is possible to become unhinged in time and memory, but in the end it is the past that beckons, as if it were a long lost Eden we visited once.

After those who came before us are gone, we are cast upon the road with a bundle of collective memory. It is the carrying of this inanimate mass that changes us. A bundle of accumulated string. Laundry. Memory. Items to be carried wherever we go. There is no escape from the things we carry with us. They simple are. We regard them as actualities of living.

As we are lost we become transformed. It is time that both destroys and transforms the body and the mind. The nature of time is destruction and yet we continue even as we are destroyed, leaving only the memory of the past untouched, as we are able to remake it each day.

This work reveals the incomplete and half remembered. The pieces represent states of being that are metaphorical and real. They depict the metamorphosis of transformation by the ravages of time, as they are whole and unmade simultaneously. The work communicates the temporary nature of the present, as well as the various incarnations we take on throughout our lives.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray

Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was,
that savage forest, dense and difficult,
which even in recall renews my fear:
so bitter-death is hardly so severe!

Dante Alegheri
Inferno
Canto 1

In the dark woods I lost my way. The path unfolded, unfamiliar and menacing. I shifted the burden on my back and continued into the darkness, as the sounds of dogs barking in the woods grew closer. The path before me led only deeper into the woods, all my past certainties now useless as the earth shifted beneath my feet and I stumbled forward into the dark.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the narrator first becomes lost in a wood. The wording is ambiguous as the speaker somehow walks into some shift of language that knocks him off course. No matter how many times I have read the passage, I could never figure out how he came to be lost. The very way this passage is constructed relates the very nature of how we lose ourselves. Dante's passage refers to the losing of a spiritual path, but for me it refers to the destruction of the past, memory and self. My work deals with the loss of the past and the burdens of memory. It deals with the destruction and transformation of the body and the mind by time.

My journey to this work began when my parents both began their descents into dementia simultaneously. They lost everything that had once defined them: their home, possessions, money, friends, work and community. Their memories were held fast in some disjointed limbo. The mundane simplicities of life became the focus and people who had once known us simply disappeared. The destruction of my parents as people became the destruction of my family and the evaporation of those I had known in that past life. All physical evidence of our lives and identities are gone now, sold off or thrown away. No mementos remain, but scraps of paper and old photos. It is as though a yearlong fire had torn through our house and burned us from the inside. My parents are now forever floating through their own pasts and futures, having come unhinged from the linear narratives of their lives.

In Dr. Oliver Sacks's book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, he talks about the importance of each person's personal biography in creating the self.

“If we wish to know about a man we ask ‘what is his story-his real inmost story?’- for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not the least, our discourse or spoken narratives. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narrative- we are each of us unique.” p111

The narratives that were my parents are disintegrating even as I write this. The stories of those who came before them, their lives as Jewish immigrants in the Bronx and the very fabric of the past is disintegrating with them. There are less and less of us who remember and as they vanish I feel that a part of myself vanishes too. I feel that I am carrying the remains of an accumulated memory into the future. The physical evidence has been destroyed, but these remains grow larger and larger until they become almost like a companion and I could live a whole other life in the patchwork of remains. As time claims those who came before me I am transformed by my carrying of this accumulation, of something larger than myself.

Already the world is forgetting you.

CHAPTER 2. THEMES

Limbs as Metaphor

These are not my hands, but some others, strange and bloated, useless, sewn on hastily in the night as I slept.

I cut my father's hair and scrub his nails before cutting them. I ease the pain of his feet and cut the long, thick, yellowing nails of his toes. His hands barely grip the toothbrush and it slips into the sink. My father's useless hands, bloated and trembling, dance before him, mocking him somehow.

A piece of me has been taken, amputated at the last moment and what remains is the phantom limb. The impression of what once was as the mind recreates the sensation of what it could not go without.

The Destruction of the Body

Falling apart. The flesh contorted into soft rotten fruit and rubble. Missing parts. Bits of the face cut away to save the rest. The physical manifestation of time's relentless pursuit.

When visiting with my parents I would sit in the main room with the wide screen T.V. and the padded benches lining the walls. The benches were full of old people who had lost their minds and bodies. They sat hunched over, silent, not really paying attention to anything at all, intent somehow on some secret interior world. I remember most the woman with her face caving in, and how, in spite of this she spoke and ate and continued on in some fashion. The look of her body defied the imagination as time had recreated her into a new entity.

Burden

Inanimate mass. A bundle of accumulated string. Laundry. Memory. Items to be carried wherever we go. In the supermarket, at school, beside the breakfast table, there is no escape from the things we carry with us. They simply are. We regard each other as actualities of living. Our only real permanence, my stone, my ball of earth fills out my room when I sleep. For some this object looms too large and it defines them entirely. They cannot move around it or push it further, nor can they unravel it. All they can see is this burden filling up the room.

CHAPTER 3. NARRATIVES WITHIN THE WORK

Bound

Time binds us to each other. We both hinder and enable our progress as we hobble on as in a three-legged race.

My parents still live together and share an impossibly small room that barely manages to hold their bed. They are the last remnants of familiarity, holding each other up and tearing each other down at the same time. They do not care for each other like nurses and patients, but bicker and fight. For forty years they have lived together and now as they crumble, they continue in some strange symbiotic state. They carry each other on their backs, teetering forward and backwards, as if dancers in some odd, lumbering ballet. They dwell together between the real and the unreal. They are crumbling with three legs left between them. Like fruit grown together in some malformation of nature.

Turning to stone like Lot's wife looking back on Sodom and Gomorrah or Statues buried under the earth, their meanings now lost to us.



Bound

Aftermath

When the disaster is over, or the unseen calamity has passed, the consequences become clear. People are put out onto the road with their bundles, left to find their way to some other place.

My mother wandered. The familiar house and its contents gone. The landmarks once obvious, clear, the olive tree in the front yard, the corner of our street, gone. Day and night became one and she would rise at 4 AM and dress and take her purse and start walking, thinking the darkness made her invisible. When she grew tired she would sleep on the grass and when she was hungry she would eat until the police would find her and she would be returned home. Her purse of mysterious contents clutched to her chest she reentered the unfamiliar house on the strange street and sat down at the table to eat.

In the subways of Mexico City the small leathery Indian women carry huge bundles on their backs. They are small women who barely reach your shoulder and their ages are indeterminate, seamless, neither old nor young, but uniformly weathered. They sit before the metro entrance, selling corn, they ride the busses and they are interchangeable, like an apparition continuously appearing again and again, reminding me with their low burdened walk and gaggle of children. I imagine their burdens full of corn, or plastic toys or thread, the objects of necessity, or commerce, but soft and heavy and worn on the outside, a part of them.

After walking too long with his bundle I imagine Jacob lying under the stars to sleep. A rock for his pillow, put out upon the road at night, he could go no further. When I sleep I dream and sometimes these dreams haunt me. Am I dreaming about this journey? The calamity or the aftermath? Am I carrying my bundle into the night, or asleep, dreaming it all?



Aftermath

Legacy

I imagined my father slumped in his chair for days, unattended. These were my terrible dreams. Some part of him scooped out and not even the rage remaining. He is disappearing as the clock continues on and I run my errands. I have the photographs of him, but nothing else.

I have the photographs of my father, his high school I.D. and the childhood jewelry they salvaged for me before they went.



Legacy

The Archeology of Memory

One day when my brother and I were visiting my parents, my mother asked who the woman was who was waving at her. When asked to point her out, she pointed to the window. You could not see inside, but only a reflection. There in the window was my mother waving at herself and I knew that somehow this was some turning point in the loss of her. It was as though we had been taking a trip and just passed the state line. A landmark. It would have been easier had she forgotten us, but instead she forgot herself.

She stands propped up now, in danger of falling into some strange abyss that you fall into alone. There are animals below, waiting, bidding their time. My mother floats in memory and remembers the dead like they were alive and talking.



The Archeology of Memory

Moving Into Tranquility/Turning

The remains are important. Balls of yarn were strewn around my grandmother's apartment. I still have the afghans she knitted, though these are slowly disintegrating and show their wear. It's what the yarn reminds me of, being small and watching her knit. The dirt reminds me of my father and his shovel. Clearing off the piles of dirt as big as him in the hot sun, determined to win against the earth. Getting us to come over and help, letting us dig at the soil with our hands.

We are pushed on by our memories and deeds until they have taken on their own momentum.

My father falling apart, but the past pushing him along nevertheless. He always thought it was he who did the turning, but it was the other way around.

I read a newspaper article about a man and his wife who were immigrants living in Los Angeles. They had collected cans from the back alleys of Venice for 20 years to make a living and raise their children. At four A.M., before the trash men came, they would sweep through the streets on their bikes, collecting as much as they could handle. When the reporter asked them if they were tired and how they felt about their lives, they said "We are moving into tranquility now." I imagine them hauling their enormous bags of cans, riding through the darkness, empty streets blurring past, into the quiet.



Moving Into Tranquility



Turning

Max's Church/ The Supplicant

My parents left behind in their room a photograph of my Grandfather posing with my mother and her sister before their brick apartment building. He is serious, dressed in dark pants and suspenders and they wear white dresses with bows in their hair. The photograph was left with the discarded papers of old receipts and out of date checkbooks. No one ever spoke about my grandfather, the man in the suspenders. I heard he sold apples in the depression and that he had a bad heart and died young. So in this fragile piece of paper dwelt three vanishing lives that I was somehow connected to. My dead grandfather, my mother and her sister, and both sisters gone with Alzheimer's now like the long lost neighborhood. There they pose for the picture, frozen in time like ghosts.

They are symbols of fragility, nostalgia and the inevitability of destruction. Their personal narratives have disappeared and what remains are the narratives I invent for them. The neighborhood where the photograph was taken has been destroyed. The building has been torn down and all the people of the neighborhood are gone. The candy store my father's family owned is gone as is the Jewish temple where my mother and aunt had to sit behind a curtain with the women. They are now inventions, icons with a mythology and symbolism that has taken on a life of their own.

They remind me of the fleeting nature of my own present and the various states of being we take on throughout our lives.



Max's Church/ The Supplicant

Heads

Sleeping. Heads gone from lost statues, made from rubble or stone. My many heads and personas depict a metamorphosis into my present state as time keeps creeping in at the edges of my face.



Heads

Monument #1/ Monument #2

These are the monuments not quite made or unmade. White, pristine and unfinished, the extremities resting out of reach, cut up and disjointed as though left incomplete, halfway through a transformation. The bottom half separated from the rest, the body in limbo, disengaged from the vital parts.

The bust of a figure resting on a pedestal depicts portraits of conquering giants and noblemen, ghostly faces from the past whose names are forgotten now. Cut up faces that float in limbo and sit on shelves in the museum. My monuments are the drain holes of memory, of shoveling up the earth and forgetting. Monuments to the past and future. To the living and the dead. Remembrance and forgetfulness, being whole and unmade simultaneously.



Monument #1



Monument #2

Birds

The metaphor for the soul, bound and sequestered out of reach.

It is children who bury birds and have funerals for them. Put them in shoeboxes with tissues and leave them to rest like precious friends.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

The path in the woods is continuously being destroyed and remade as we make our way through the forest. Landmarks recede into the distance and the unfamiliar looms ahead. It is possible to become unhinged in time and memory, but in the end it is the past that beckons, as if it were a long lost Eden we visited once.

As we are lost we become transformed. It is time that both destroys and transforms both the body and the mind.

My work deals with the incomplete and the half remembered. The pieces represent states of being that are both metaphorical and real. They depict the metamorphosis of transformation by the ravages of time and are whole and unmade in the same moment. This work communicates the temporary nature of the present, as well as the various states of being we take on throughout our lives.

After those who have come before us are gone, we are cast out upon the road with this bundle of collective memory. It is our job to keep it and remember it, as it is all that remains of a past larger than us. It is the carrying that changes us.

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VITA

Debbie Kupinsky was born in Southern California in 1967. After high school she left for Syracuse University where she studied English and received her bachelor of arts degree in 1989. She spent the next seven years living and working in Colorado where she became interested in art and ceramics. In 1996 Debbie began a second undergraduate degree in ceramics at the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri. After receiving her bachelor of fine arts degree in 1999 she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana for graduate school at Louisiana State University. During graduate school her work changed from functional pottery to figurative sculpture. She received her degree of Master of Fine Arts in the summer of 2002.