

Capitulated Memory

Anna Davis

The before is all I have to live for now. I can feel it like the stale air coming into my lungs and leaving with each breath I continue to breathe. The now sparks nothing but dull fear and the inevitability of death. I know I'm in a basement, I've memorized its contents without even meaning to in the years I've been here. I assume its years, though I can only tell the days pass from the little bits of sunlight and moonlight that flash through the boarded window. When I try and remember how I got here, I come up blank, so I go back further. It's my ritual, until I can remember. I go back to the beginning, *her* beginning, the me from before.

From my spot on wet, moldy concrete, I remember.

The me from before was a curious creature, completely foreign and, yet, close—still so close. She lived on the edge of East Harlem, close enough to the Upper East Side to claim its affluence but not close enough to actually have it. She loved animals but could never get a pet because her apartment building wouldn't allow them. So, she would take the train to the nearest park on the East River and watch the birds.

The birds were her favorite because they could fly. They were all different colors and if you got really close, you could see the different variations in their feathers. One time at the park a bird dove after her because she had made the mistake of eating her lunch on a bench too close to a flock. She had a habit of doing that—learning things too late.

I wish the bird had picked me up and taken me into the sky.

When she got back home, she had to explain to her Mami why she had scratches along her arm.

“I just tripped on the sidewalk outside, Mami. I'm fine.”

Still, her mom got on one knee in front of her seat on the side of the tub in the bathroom and kissed each cut, bandaging them carefully with cartoon Band-Aids.

“You need to be more careful, *mi bailarina*, or next time Band-Aids might not be enough.”

If I picture it really hard, I can hold the me from before in that moment, see her Mami's long black hair tied up in a French twist from work, her heels bowing at the sides as she kneels in her grey pencil skirt. At first her Mami's concern is in vibrant color, but as I continue to hold it in my mind, the picture fades. I start to see how she might look now, my Mami, aged gracefully, but still older—much older.

The lines on my Mami's face are more defined but her skin is still smooth, not dried and decayed like mine. Her hair isn't as long as she used to have it, but it still goes down a little past her shoulders—still dark without any dye. She's wearing a different work outfit—a more sensible pantsuit, the navy much more vibrant and unmarred compared to my long tattered navy t-shirt, the only clothes on me—but she'll never give up those heels and my bare toes clench at the thought. Her face morphs, her mouth straight and unwavering. Her hands fall away from my arm as a tear mirrors its way down our cheeks. I don't brush it away. I shake the image away before I can watch her walk away.

During the summer, the me from before went to the park almost every day. If her Mami knew she was taking the train alone, the scratches would be the least of her worries. But she never did, at least her Mami never got to let her know one way or the other.

I like to imagine the park is the first place the me from before discovered birds but it couldn't have been because the first time she went to the park, she already wanted to fly so badly she tried to jump into the river.

Sometimes I imagine she fell in and kept falling on her back into the black, down beneath the riverbed.

When she was young, she couldn't get to the park herself so she had to rely on her imagination to take her high overhead. She was destructive—I mean, *rambunctious*. She was wild. She was free.

She would spend recess jumping off the side of the jungle gym and almost hitting other students. She would be the first to line up for recess to try and get to the swings first—a coveted spot. If she succeeded, the teachers would have to pull her off of it to give other students a turn—and to save her from jumping off. She would climb on to the rickety shrub that barely passed for a tree and perch as high as she could.

None of her fellow students took to her love of flight, content not to break any bones, but that didn't stop her. She didn't want to hang out with those spoiled white kids anyway.

Her favorite thing was birds, most of her conversations consisted of birds, and she wanted to be a bird when she grew up. That is, until she went to her first ballet.

Her Mami got tickets from some rich guy at work to see the production of *Swan Lake* by the New York City Ballet and she had never seen swans before. She wore her favorite white dress and when she saw that swans wore white too, she never wanted to take it off. From the moment the swan princess Odette leaped across the stage, she wanted to be a ballerina.

Her Mami somehow round up the money to pay for classes and she put her all into learning how to be like Odette. Her free spirit was channeled less into destruction and more into grace. Instead of jumping off of the furniture, she danced across the floors and did barre exercises with a folding chair in her room every morning. She still went to the park and admired the birds, but mostly for more space. She would do pique's along the bike path and saut de chat away from oncoming traffic.

She didn't even realize she was getting good, she didn't care about that. But then her teachers were encouraging her to go further, to take more classes, to go to training camps and speak to agents.

But instead of listening to them, instead of working towards her passion, she got less and less focused, less and less invested. She was a caged bird in the dance world, where she was once flying free.

The me from before was approached by scouting agents from Joffrey who offered her a spot three years in advance. Neither of us got the chance to take them up on their offer.

She slowly moved away from the dance world and into the real world.

“You're never in the house, mi bailarina, I never see you anymore.”

“I have a life, Mami, you should get one.”

“You're fifteen, what life can you live out of the house all night?”

The slam of the door was the only answer she gave.

But she didn't want her Mami to call the cops again, so she went straight home from the studio that night instead of ditching classes and going to the empty lot to drink vodka and shoot up to feel alive.

She took the same route she always does, she stayed on the right path. But this time the me from before became the me now.

I pause and try and hold the image of the darkened street in place, to continue on the path, to live the rest of her story, but I can't.

I never can.

The night turns into the black river surrounding me and sending me falling down into the deep, down into the underground. I can't stop myself as I feel the slow rush of wind on either side of me. I try to reach out to grab the last vestiges of her, in her pink leo and her ballerina bun. Our fingers cannot touch, I miss her no matter how many times I relive it.

I go back to imagining the park before I let myself land back on the damp concrete of the basement. The grass brushes against my calves as I spot my turns with the trees surrounding me. I can feel the sun breaking through the gaps in the leaves, heating my muscle toned body. I'm not weak anymore, I'm not skin and bones. I jump into the air and land soft. I curtsy and her Mami is there clapping—not mine, not the one weathered by age and missing me.

When I start to run towards her, my eyes rush open to a tapping from the one small window at the top of the wall. I fight the disappointment in favor of curiosity, sliding my bones across the floor. Through the boards slat across the window, I see a white bird flying away. Like a swan. The me from before would know that it's a northern mockingbird. But the me now hopes. Hopes for that one sign.

There is no me from after. When I try to imagine her, I just see the black swallowing me whole. I don't know that there will ever be more than that.

So I content myself with the memories of the before.

The little white bird tilts its head at me, as if to ask how I came to be here. If only I knew, little bird.

It taps its beak against the dirty glass of the window. I stand, leaning against the cold wall, transfixed. It tries to fly, it jumps and flaps its wings but falls, twice. Another bird lands next to it, bigger and greyed, rather than pure white. It helps the other bird, pushes it up with its bigger body and as it flies away, looks back at me one last time, picks a stick up from in front of the window, and flies away.

Something in me clicks.

I feel a force of strength, pushing from behind me, pushing me to fly.

I push up off the wall to stand straight. My bones crack with movement. I step out from the wall, with my right hand against it for balance. I put my left hand out gracefully, step into first position, and I dance.

It's dark in between the slats by the time I have lost the rest of my strength, so I retreat to the mattress on the floor of the basement. My chest loosens. He didn't come today. I close my eyes and think about the swans dancing gracefully across the stage, across the window slats, and flying away. When I wake up, I'll take my spot on the cold concrete and remember.