



4-25-2014

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.23.11>

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Recommended Citation

Paden, Jeremy Dae (2014) "the angel of dead & dying towns," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 23, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.23.11>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol23/iss1/11>

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the angel of dead & dying towns

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This poem is part of a series of contemporary angel poems I have been working on for the last few years. In this series, I use the figure of the angel as a witness to modern life.

This poem takes part of its feeling from the lament. The book of Lamentations begins, “How doth the city sit solitary! how she is become like a widow!” And part of it from the related medieval poetic tradition of the *ubi sunt*, the where are they now? It is, in both these senses, a *memento mori*.

The genesis of this poem came from driving out west a few summers ago. Both of my grandfathers were from Texas. One was from a small town with a few gas-stations, a Dairy Queen, and a high school, the other from an unincorporated community with little more than a crossroad and a masonic lodge. One is barely hanging on in West Texas heat, the other is about to completely sink into the dirt of Central Texas and disappear from maps and memory. This got me thinking about cities and towns and how and why they die. And who witnesses and remembers these places along the way. Who, that is, keeps a map of those cities? Who charts the lives the people who once populated those streets? What might the task be of the angel assigned to watch over cities as they disappear?

Some cities and towns, like Pompeii, are destroyed through acts of God; others, though, like Carthage and Tenochtitlan, through human violence. And then there are the Flint’s and the Patterson’s and the Bridge Cities, there are the towns my grandfathers were from and countless others throughout the American heartland that, due to pressures both civic and economic, are dying. Towns and cities that are “moving off” the map, either because of dwindling populations or because people would simply rather skip over them and forget them. Much prettier is the gentrified Bronx than the decaying Flint.

Also, the final image, Tenochtitlan buried under Mexico City, recognizes that the world is a palimpsest—that cities of long standing are built on the ruins of previous settlements.

If the act of remembrance and marking a place down is an act of mapping, this poem tries to map those cities being lost to war, to economic pressures, and to natural disasters.

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recites every morning the names
of those destroyed & abandoned
Gomorraah, Carthage, Pompeii

as if to say at least, at least
the condemnation of god
has not yet visited, at least

should the angels of inspection
come looking for hearth & bed
room & table will be found

if only it were enough
to worry about the florist
undertaker, preacher's wife

still tending daisies & hydrangeas
still setting flowers in vases
should children think to visit

the brightness of the sun
that parches the grass & bleaches
the brick leaves nothing hidden

& Caesar's mercenaries
still prowl, levees still burst
O Qusair, O Grand Basam

Flint, Bridge City, Patterson
somewhere below the rubble
Tenochtitlan lies buried