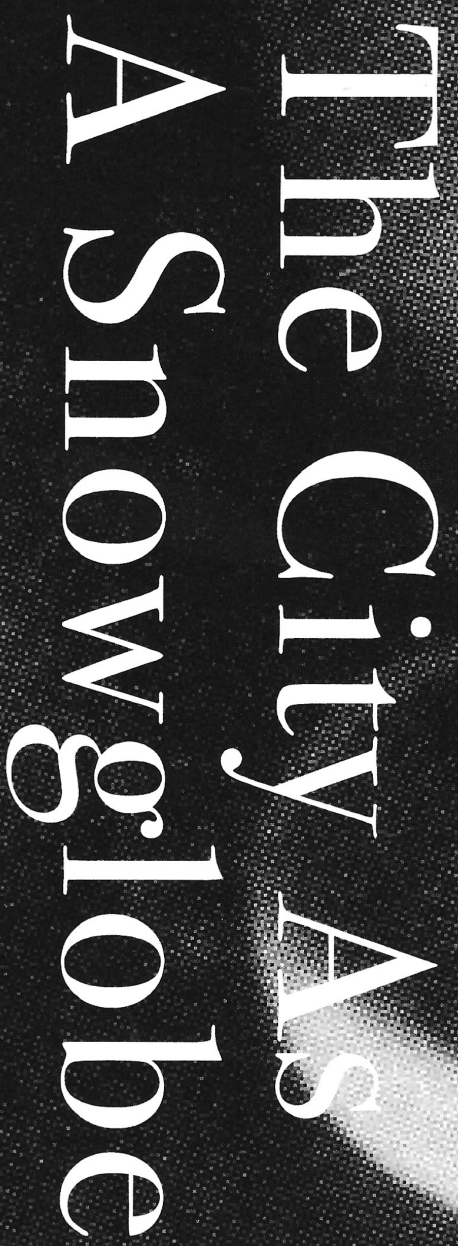


written by will harrison

Let's pretend you are a teenager. Let's pretend you are seventeen and you have just taken a $15 bus from Chinatown to Chinatown with your best friend and the two of you have been listening to Nas' Illmatic on your iPod nano for the past hour or so. You've been in stop-and-go traffic all throughout Queens, you've passed over the Kosciuszko Bridge, you've marveled at the way the headstones in the nearby cemetery mimic the serrated blue strip of skyscrapers out beyond. Suddenly—as if you'd fallen asleep for a moment, the final throes of the trip passing you by—you are stationary, holding your suitcase to your chest. Out on the sidewalk you feel naked, unprepared, fragile even, as if the slightest gust might blow you straight to Poughkeepsie.

You will never forget it, this moment, so crystalline yet dream-like: standing beneath the shadowy awning of the massive Buddhist temple, your young, hungry eyes making an assemblage out of this intersection. Over the years, this corner, Bowery & Canal, will always remind you of your high school self, will always be your own personal diorama. Each time you pass it by, you will latch onto one, two, maybe three of its details: the immense gold dome of the HSBC Bank, the glossy onyx face of the Manhattan Jewelry Exchange, the forever-unreachable "Pasta" tag looming on the billboard above the temple, the curling brick façade of the Confucius Plaza apartments, the great blue strip of bare sky overhead, and, finally, the granite arch and colonnade atop the Manhattan Bridge, that Greek Revival gateway replete with carvings of bison, clipper ships, lions, men on horseback, and the god Mercury flanked by two businessmen wearing top hats.

This will always—even in its quietest moments—feel like the gateway to the universe. And over the years, you—or rather I—will imagine said gateway as a sort of portal where time runs flat, unspooling on top of itself as if all the moments of our lives were both preordained yet somehow novel.

It was in this hypnotic state, hallucinatory but lucid, that I recently entered the brick-and-mortar Happy99 store on Forsyth Street, in the shadow of the bridge, around the corner from the bus station at the center of my life. It feels fair to call Happy99 an anomaly, a uniquely contemporary business that also feels ripped from another era. Walking up Forsyth, curling around the base of the bridge, passing the street vendors selling greens and fruits and live crabs, shuffling through a warm autumn mist, I felt a bit like I was inside a diorama as I approached the storefront itself, eyeing its taxi-yellow awning that blended perfectly with those on either side.

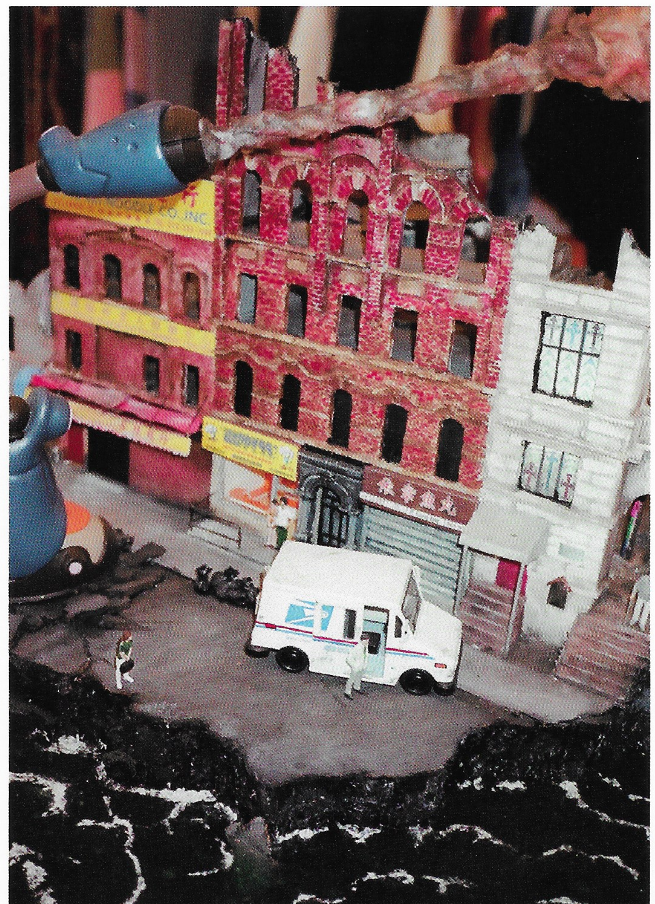
Even the very existence of this storefront was a wonder unto itself, I thought in this moment of initial approach. Nathalie Nguyen and Dominic Lopez—the couple behind Happy99—had started out making digital renderings of shoes and clothes, after all. And while it was certainly a thrill to manually flip through the rack of shirts and hoodies and shorts, I was mostly just enjoying the mounting sensation that I was inside the bedroom of the coolest teenager in the world. On the wall opposite the clothes, Nguyen and Lopez had installed a riotous assemblage of items, a colorful tapestry that included one-off samples from their personal archive, keychains of Sonic the Hedgehog, Sailor Moon sticker packs, action figures from the Sanrio universe, and countless other prepackaged, brightly colored, nearly edible trinkets.

At the very center of the store Nguyen and Lopez had configured their true masterpiece: a fantastical yet impossibly realistic diorama of the very block upon which we stood. There it was, the store itself, with Nathalie and Dominic standing out front alongside each other, calmly, as a gigantic robot tore the roof off their building. To the left, there was an exact replica of the Wing Kei Noodle Co. (its roof intact), and to the right, a similarly precise replica of the Greek Orthodox church next door (its roof destroyed). With no miniature Manhattan Bridge to hem things in, the street was in a state of total disarray, its concrete buckling to reveal a rush of water, into which a DHL truck and a police car had tumbled (ACAB). The USPS truck out front of the store was safe; the box truck with the massive, multi-colored fill-in from MOIST that I'd just passed out front was tipped over.

After buying a souvenir style t-shirt and chatting briefly with Dominic I left the store in a state of lucid, muted delirium, still feeling like I myself had been shrunken, miniaturized, and was now walking through a model version of New York's Chinatown. Moving north on Forsyth with the bridge to my left, I drifted into Sara D. Roosevelt Park and decided to sit on a bench to thumb through my book and watch the men power-walk around the small track. I had become obsessed with the idea of my own inaction, with the notion that I was too distractible to do anything but sit on the sidelines of reality, commenting on the things in front of me before forgetting them once they'd passed out of sight. I was an inert critic, a wandering Jew, a lonely stoner, I thought to myself, immediately disgusted by this stream of lazy truisms. The cinema of the city was too much for me, that's why I'd become so fixated upon this universe that surrounded the base of the bridge. I needed everything to be frozen, still, shrunken—a tableaux, a miniature.

Whether or not I was actually reading Walter Benjamin that afternoon is beside the point. Sometimes we enact order retroactively, building our little stage sets and shoe-box miniatures that will explain the world to us, order it, elucidate its otherwise meaningless patterns. You will have to grant me this, forgive me for it, the urge to pack up my library and desk and laptop and bring it all to Sara D. Roosevelt Park, where I found myself that day, floating above the city with everything suddenly at my fingertips. Looking up at the oak trees, at the blistering sun now peaking through the clouds, I could see him, my forebear, Benjamin himself, toiling away beneath the green glow of a banker's lamp, beneath the massive dome of the reading room in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in the year 1940 at the height of the war, with the Nazis closing in on Paris and his very identity—secular, spiritual, Marxist, mystical, melancholic, Jewish—under attack.

"The true picture of the past flits by," he wrote in that great library, still failing to leave Europe despite pleas from friends, colleagues, and his ex-wife Dora. "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." Which images were flashing before him in that very moment, as he poured over his notes, as a brilliant shard of sun emerged and then bloomed upon the carpeted floor beneath his feet? Sometimes life is a tiny snowglobe carried by a refugee: crystalline, portable, prone to sudden bouts of obfuscation. Was it Berlin he thought of, Berlin, to which he knew he'd never return? By that point, he'd known for at least eight years that he would never again witness the staging ground of his childhood, that long gone place of melancholy, wonder, and comfort.



In Berlin Childhood (I am shuffling through my books rapidly, with burgeoning haste), Benjamin wrote of "the almost immemorial feeling of bourgeois security that emanated" from his grandmother's apartment, an apartment in which death had no place, since the rooms themselves had "no place in them to die." In the mind of a child—a mind which an older Benjamin re-configured on the page—"the street became an Elysium for me—a realm inhabited by shades of immortal yet departed grandmothers." And yet, for an adult Benjamin (and for me), it must have been impossible to read this reflection and not think of death. Where does one go to die? Not Berlin.

And so I keep reading of Berlin from my little desk in New York, building another diorama inside the one surrounding me. Moving along the page, I hear of Benjamin's childhood classmate, a certain Luise von Landau, who became for him the symbol of death. After hearing of her passing, "when I now passed by the banks of the Lützow, I would always cast my eyes in the direction of her house," he wrote. "It lay, by chance, opposite a little garden that overhung the water on the other bank. And this garden plot I gradually wove together so intimately with the beloved name that I finally came to the conclusion that the flowerbed on the riverbank, so resplendent and inviolable, was the cenotaph of the departed child."

For years, Benjamin had toyed with the idea of mapping his entire life, hoping to find a form that would allow him to include every street, alleyway, or plaza that he had passed through. If such an expansive project seems like a repudiation of a death he knew to be rapidly approaching, his mastery of brief, allegorical miniatures seems to reflect a sort of acceptance or encouragement of it. "The only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory," he had written in his postdoctoral essay, The Origin of German Trauerspiel, which was rejected by the University of Frankfurt in 1925, sending him to a place darker than melancholy. In the 17th century Trauerspiel, or baroque "mourning play," a young Benjamin had found a genre that successfully converted time and experience into space, taking a panoramic conception of history and breaking it into elaborately staged tableaux that could be frozen, taken apart, and then mined for deeper meaning.

It is easy to see the appeal of freezing history in such a way: a methodical, protracted approach gives one the impression that time is plentiful, expanding before us. By reconfiguring life as a series of stills, a stack of photographs, a sequence of scenes in an unreal theatrical production, a writer can construct a place of refuge amidst the ruins of experience. Even when darkness threatens to blot out all else, memory appears as a structure unto itself in Benjamin's writings, as in his collection Berlin Chronicle, a series of fragmentary, miniature reflections intended as a teenage companion to Berlin Childhood. In one such fragment, Benjamin reflects on the death of his peer, the poet Fritz Heinle, who committed suicide during the outbreak of World War I, days after the German invasion of Belgium. Circling around his friend's death, temporally as well as spatially, unable to utter the term "suicide," Benjamin fixates on the space in which they met, a Meeting House where young political activists such as themselves would organize. "No matter how much memory has subsequently paled, or how indistinctly I can now give an account of the rooms in the Meeting House, it nevertheless seems to me today more legitimate to delineate the outward space the dead man inhabited, indeed the rooms where he was 'announced' than the inner space which he created" in his poems, Benjamin wrote.

Written from a position of exile, while Benjamin was darting around a rapidly changing Europe, these words unfurl like some subterranean trail running beneath a city wiped off the Earth's face. "You will find us lying in the Meeting House," Heinle wrote to Benjamin, and sure enough, this was where the then-twenty-two-year-old critic found the forever-nineteen-year-old poet, lying dead alongside his girlfriend in an apparent double suicide.

If "the past can be seized only as an image," as Benjamin wrote in the fifth of his Theses on the Philosophy of History, then perhaps we—perhaps I—can be forgiven for attempting to restage an image of the past so that it can be utilized as a temporary dwelling space in the present. Twenty-six years after the death of Fritz Heinle, Walter Benjamin sat in the Bibliothèque Nationale, beneath the great dome of the reading room, at the height of the war, composing his theses as he postponed working on his opus, that massive, over-grown manuscript we now call the Arcades Project. I can picture him now, thinking of that long-suppressed image of his friend's lifeless body lying alongside

his equally lifeless girlfriend. Or perhaps it was not Fritz Heinle he considered while staring up at the ceiling, perhaps it was not the Meeting House in Berlin but rather the camp in Vernuche, the labor camp from which he'd only recently been released. The passage from Paris had nearly broken him, that forced march through the woods alongside three hundred other prisoners, all of them German émigres detained by the French authorities. In Vernuche he'd made do, delivering lectures for which he was paid with cigarettes and sleeping on the cold, stone ground until straw was found, his weakened heart still keeping pace.

I am writing, it must be noted, from the vantage point of the present. It is simple enough to build a miniature this way, to sit at one's desk and create a tiny, shoddy model out of the life of a dead man. In Sara D. Roosevelt Park, in the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge, the children are still kicking a soccer ball, the men are still looping slowly around the track. In Sara D. Roosevelt Park I am composing this essay, muttering to myself, wishing for an outcome that cannot and will not be. After leaving Vernuche—his release coming only after the intervention of the PEN international writers' group—Walter Benjamin returned promptly to the Bibliothèque Nationale and renewed his library card, all but securing his fate. Writing to Greta Adorno in January of 1940, only five months before the Nazis invaded Paris, Benjamin confided that he was anxious about completing his opus, his Arcades Project, adding that he was not willing to put the book at risk, even if it meant risking his life.

Read in its present form, the Arcades Project is dense, sprawling, the kind of book that induces an almost schizophrenic delirium. Utilizing a wildly atypical structure—titled sections that contain personal reflections, analyses, and many, many quotes from outside sources, some of them attributed, some of them not—it is a book that attempts to do something impossible, that is to swallow 19th century Paris whole. If Benjamin did not quite succeed at this project, he can be forgiven; no writer could ever recreate an entire city, much less a city of the past, the very city that gave us our current conception of modernity. Named for the iron and glass covered shopping arcades which defined this era of Parisian architecture, Benjamin's project reads like some never-ending sketch made by a master architect. It is the opposite of his compact, structurally sound allegorical miniatures, a colossal model outgrowing the studio in which it is arranged. In Benjamin's mind, reality—the physical reality of the city in which he wrote—mixes with memory, the imagination, and all the fanciful inaccuracies that these modes induce. Walking through the Place du Maroc, "Not only city and interior but city and open air can become entwined," Benjamin wrote. "And intertwining can occur much more concretely." Thus the Place du Maroc in humble Belleville—the Plaza of Morocco, if you will—can contain what Benjamin calls an "interpenetration of images," becoming "not only a Moroccan desert but also, and at the same time, a monument of colonial imperialism." This sensation, "ordinarily reserved for intoxicants," was something he wanted to give to us, his present-day readers, so that perhaps we can begin to see the contradicting layers of the cities, streets, and intersections that surround us.

And so he refused to leave, insisted on reporting to the Bibliothèque Nationale, insisted on finishing his unfinishable life-sized model. For despite its hallucinatory quality, the Arcades Project could not be completed off-site; it needed to be fed by the Paris that Benjamin himself lived and walked about in. When the Nazis invaded France on May 10, 1940, he remained unsurprised and yet he remained put. Even as they advanced, the Nazis, Benjamin remained in the capital, the city of light, finally leaving the morning of June 14, the same day that Paris was overtaken. By late afternoon a flag bearing a swastika hung from the Arc de Triomphe. An entirely new city had been born.

From Paris, Benjamin traveled south, alongside his sister Dora, heading towards Lourdes and then to Marseilles. It has been said that he took only a suitcase containing a gas mask, bathing supplies, and a manuscript, likely the Arcades Project, which was more important to him than life itself. Whether it was inside his suitcase or his jacket, Benjamin also brought a fatal dose of morphine, one which he had already carried around Europe for years, the elixir waiting like some Luciferian talisman. While in Marseilles, that sooty port city, Benjamin received the news that his friend, the philosopher Max Horkheimer, had procured for him a non-quota visa providing entry to the United States. What he lacked was an exit visa from France; by this point he knew that the Vichy security forces would happily hand him over to the Nazis.

In Marseilles, Benjamin met with Hannah Arendt, his old friend, as well as her husband Heinrich Blücher. He also crossed paths with Hans Fittko, whom he had initially met while interned at Vernuche; Fittko, a German anti-Nazi who had been on the run since the 1930s, and who had—alongside his wife, Lisa—helped smuggle several refugees out of France, suggested that Benjamin travel through the Pyrenees and across the border into Spain. From Spain he could make his way to Portugal, and from there he could sail safely to New York.

After a month in Marseilles, Benjamin boarded a train to the seaside village of Port-Vendres, near the Franco-Spanish border, travelling alongside Henny Gurland, future wife of Erich Fromm, and her teenage son, Joseph. In Port-Vendres, the party met with Lisa Fittko, who would lead them to the Spanish town of Portbou. Fittko had been alerted that the most direct route through the Pyrenees was now manned by Nazi troops and so she led the group westward, higher into the mountains, on a path she feared would be too taxing for Benjamin and his fragile heart. In her memoir she would recall how Benjamin, at forty-eight, resembled a much older man, and yet, that day, he traveled valiantly, making his way up the shady rockface as Henny and Joseph Gurland took turns carrying the suitcase that they called his "burden," the suitcase that—we will recall—contained an entire city. After several hours, the group reached the summit. From there they could easily make out the massive blue expanse of the Mediterranean, the pale green curl of the Costa Brava, and the small outcropping of orange roofs that made up the seaport village of Portbou. At the summit Benjamin found himself on the verge of cardiac arrest; Joseph Gurland and Lisa Fittko carried him through a vineyard as they made their way down the mountainside and into the village of Portbou, deciding to leave him under an olive tree as they set out to look for proper lodging.

From here the story gets increasingly vague, enshrouded by the opinions and memories of individuals. In Sara D. Roosevelt Park, in the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge, with the sun going down, I am blinded by the events I am trying to recount, blinded by the diorama I have strained to create for you. What we know is this: in the tiny fishing village of Portbou, the Spanish police caught up with Lisa Fittko, the Gurlands, and Walter Benjamin, denying them asylum and vowing to send them back to occupied France the next morning. They were to be held overnight in a small hotel that had been turned into a makeshift prison, for, that very same day, the Spanish government had changed its policy toward refugees, arbitrarily deciding that any person crossing the border without Spanish citizenship was subject to detainment. Even though this order was only enforced for a few days, and was fully rescinded in two weeks' time, it remained in effect that day, September 26th, 1940.

While I sometimes feel that I have spent time inside the room that Benjamin himself slept in that night, I am mistaken, for the room I have constructed in my imagination is far more comfortable than the room in which he likely found himself. Sometimes the room is quite simple, outfitted with cream-colored stucco walls, wide windows, a single candle, and a Persian rug. Other times it resembles an American motel room from the 1970s, containing a bunny-eared television, shag carpeting, a moth-eaten lamp, and a St. James bible. Of course, I am well aware that this habit of imaginative reconstruction is an exercise in denial, an attempt to avoid the reality of what occurred that night. For whether it was a Stalinist collaborator who killed Benjamin, or the far more likely historical assumption that he consumed the morphine he'd carried with him for several years, the final result of the story is the same. By occupying the room in which he lost his life, by reconstructing it over and over again, as a series of stills, tableaux, miniatures, I find myself living inside of an infinite threshold, attempting to bury the very notion of death, the very legacy of history. In Sara D. Roosevelt Park, in the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge, I am typing rapidly, my keyboard and books and notes suddenly warped by the tears running down my face, for no matter how hard I try, no matter how vividly I imagine the stars radiating above the Mediterranean that gruesome night in Portbou, I cannot forestall the inevitable. I can only give you this diorama I have built.