

Nothing Abides

By Cortland Gilliam and Brian Howe

Blindspotting

You see

what you can
you will
wish

Destiny manifested on high

rises for students disciplined
to hoard access and opportunity
like wealth like land like bodies

You see nobody/nobodies

no bodies around
no hands, just “help”
no mortar, no brick
just building designed

for your pleasure

your profit

your providence

You [forget], therefore [you are]

You see nothing

That made you possible

Your presence premised on omission

sidestepping history like sorrow

your inheritance, a blind spot

tucked away for safe keeping

But somewhere out of view something is growing nearer

The ground is swelling

pushing neatly laid brick

up and out

a silent resistance to trip over and into

a present/past

a now

a vision anew

Yet and still, you stumble knowing

There will always be something/someone to break your fall

Nothing Abides

Maybe you built a house that looks like an architecture office in a middle-class neighborhood.

Maybe you felt so shriven after buying an electric car you failed to atone for being able to.

Or maybe you could not afford one and thought this absolved you of more than it did.

Tell me a story in the fourth person, which could be a story with all people in it, or a story with no people in it, or a story about people you don't know and can't conceive of.

Maybe you mistook the ordinary for the ethical, the expedient for the essential.

Maybe you took more space than you needed because you feared you would be pressed into oblivion if you didn't, and you were right.

Maybe you worked so hard that you rose too high to see the mound of captured treasure below.

Or maybe you fell so far that you thanked this infamy when it caught you at the bottom.

Imagine a language in which a question is phrased as its answer about oneself.

Well, Orpheus always turns around. But maybe the body has forgotten more than it ever knew.

And maybe there's a reason that the word *infiltrate* is so much more common than *exfiltrate*.

Maybe you dreamed your father was concealed behind a cloud, carving each snowflake by hand and socketing shafts of light in the leaves, when in fact, it was your mother.

Maybe you tried to heal the land as if bandaging a poisoned limb.

Maybe you took the love and care that so many people need so badly and hid them in vaults buried deep in the earth or just poured them away through a hole in the sky.

Maybe you acknowledged the land as a contented sinner to a bored priest.

Nothing abides, Lucretius said, with chilling grandeur, but he was wrong. Everything waits, inhabits, withstands, though now and then the sun slips on the moon like a laughing mask.

They say a watched pot never boils, but our tragedy is that it does.

Maybe your blind spots were not just places you couldn't see into but places where you hid things—even yourself, the way children become invisible when they close their eyes.

Well, cry me a ladder.

Blindspot/Blind-spotting

You see a house that looks like
what you can afford
you will *infiltrate*
a middle-class wish with no people in it
Destiny manifested on high has forgotten
a ladder rises for students disciplined
built to hoard access and opportunity
like wealth like land like bodies
You see nobody/nobodies where you hid things
no bodies around your blind spots
no hands, just “help” you failed to atone for
no mortar, no brick buried deep in the earth
just building designed to see the mound
essential for your pleasure become invisible
you mistook your profit for being able to
exfiltrate your providence behind a cloud
You [forget], therefore [you are] our tragedy
You see nothing you don’t know and can’t conceive of
each snowflake That made you possible
Your presence premised on omission in which a question
always turns around sidestepping history like sorrow
your inheritance, a blind spot with all people in it
tucked away for safe keeping
But somewhere out of view something is growing nearer
The ground is swelling and then slips
this infamy pushing neatly laid brick places you couldn’t see
up and out into oblivion
Tell me a silent resistance to trip over and into
cry me a present/past phrased as
a now you dreamed
a vision anew you feared
Yet and still, you stumble knowing when they close their eyes
There will always be something/someone to break your fall and care

Nothing Abides

Maybe a house
shriven failed to atone
or afford this absolved
story, which could be a story
mistook for the ethical, for the essential
took space pressed into oblivion
and you were *right*
worked to *mound* –
a question this infamy cushioned at the bottom,
about oneself:
maybe the body has forgotten
there's a reason more common than
poisoned limb:
the land contented,
our tragedy
a cloud.
In fact, your mother
took the love people need so badly and hid
in the earth a hole in the sky.
Nothing abides, chilling wrongs, waits,
withstands; sun slips moon like mask, and
blind spots see places where you hide,
the way children become their
cry

Nothing Abides

Maybe **you see that you can will** a middle-class neighborhood.

Maybe you **wish** to atone for being able to **hoard access and opportunity**.

Or maybe **your providence** could not afford **your pleasure** more than it did **your profit**.

Tell me a story **that made you possible** in the fourth person, which could be a story with **no mortar, no brick**, or a story with no **bodies**, **premised on** a story about **nobody/nobodies** you don't know and can't conceive of **building**.

Maybe you mistook the **ground** for **wealth**, the **Destiny** for **inheritance**.

Maybe **you manifested** more space than you needed because you feared you would be **disciplined** into **neatly laid brick** if you didn't, and you were right.

Maybe you worked so hard that you rose too high to see the mound of **sorrow swelling** below.

Or maybe you fell so far that you thanked this **blind spot pushing you** to the bottom.

Imagine **keeping** a language in which **history** is phrased as its answer **around** oneself.

Well, Orpheus always turns **away**. But maybe **omission** has forgotten more than it ever knew.

And maybe there's a reason that the word **yet** is so much more common than **anew**.

Maybe you tried to **forget** the land as if bandaging a poisoned limb.

Maybe you **designed resistance** as a contented sinner to a **silent** priest.

They say a **safe** pot never boils, but our tragedy is that it does.

To break your fall you dreamed your **presence** was concealed behind a cloud, carving each snowflake by hand and socketing shafts of light in the leaves, when in fact, it was your "**help**."

Knowing you took the love and **land** that so many people need so badly, **you hid your past** in vaults buried deep in the earth, **growing your** hole in the sky.

Nothing abides, Lucretius said, with chilling grandeur, but **somewhere out of view** everything waits, inhabits, withstands, **sidestepping a present possible**

Maybe your blind spots **are not** just places you **stumble** into but places where you hid **something/someone**—**tucked vision** the way **students** become invisible when they **break**

Well, cry me a **brick**.

Nothing Abides

Maybe we outspread ourselves on a lawn like a living frieze in angles of light and shade.

Maybe we felt so convicted after rising in labor we failed to account for falling in power.

Or maybe it was just the ancient gravity welling from the storm drains that pulled us down, the stones converging on the grates, the earth drawn to itself.

Tell me a story in the shape of a well, which could be a story that moves in a circle, or a story that sinks in the earth, or a story that rises in a cylinder of stone.

Long grooves worn in views make the present hard to see. What now?

We build our towers from the ground up and rule them from the top down.

Make our bricks and burn them hard.

Pick up a rock and find a place in the wall.

Imagine a language with nowhere to hide.

Well, Eurydice feels herself disappear but has infiltrated more than we ever knew.

And maybe there's a reason that the word *appropriate* is spoken more often than *expropriate*.

Maybe I am just a tape

Recorder with a bitter conscience.

Heisenberg said that observing something changes it, but our tragedy is that it doesn't.

Maybe we dreamed our days were all a node within the cloud, a bodiless intelligence simulating the light and leaves, when in fact, this was all built by hand.

Maybe the bricks were left outside on purpose so they would be cold to hold.

I wanted to make a book that would derange men, Artaud said. As if that were what men needed.

Crack a white egg and out puffs the breath of an ancient tomb.

Well, even a dry water clock is right when you're out of time.

Blind-spotting

We see
what we couldn't
we wouldn't
must

Destiny
disciplined
to sow self-determination
like wealth like land like bodies

We see one body

mortar and brick

building – designed
for our pleasure
our profit
our providence

[We embody], therefore [we are]

We hear/see all

That made us probable
Our presence premised on holding

sorrow

Our inheritance a history

a safe

somewhere growing

The ground with joy
pushing

a silent

past

into a now

a vision made anew

Yet and still, we stumble knowing

There will always be something/someone to break

Blindspotting

We convicted
what we couldn't rule
we wouldn't say a watched
frieze must *adumbrate*
Destiny
Make our bricks disciplined
to sew our towers
like wealth with a bitter conscience
We see one white egg
in a cylinder of stone,
mortar and brick
with something to hide
building – designed somewhere out of view
in the shape of our pleasure
our profit is a mirror
our providence the ancient gravity
[We embody], therefore [we left out purpose]
We hear/see all of the land
That made us hide
Our presence premised on holding stones
simulating sidestepping sorrow
Our inheritance a history built by hand
I wanted to make a safe language
somewhere on a lawn growing contented
The ground boils with joy
pushing so hard that we rose
pressed into
a silent carving
a living frieze in the past
a now ancient tomb
a vision made out of time
Yet and still, we tried to heal
There will always be this infamy at the bottom

Nothing Abides

Maybe we constellated ourselves on a square in a spiral suggesting an ancient sundial.

Maybe we felt a weight move, a sense of stars long posed finally sliding down a curve.

Or maybe it was just

The earth sweeping our cities off the tables of the land as if it had been cheated somehow.

Tell me a story in the shape of a spiral, which could be a circle in search of self-knowledge, or a circle disguising itself as a line, or a circle that rises in a cyclone of stairs.

An uncurled story would stretch to the human heart and back. What then?

We assemble our stars secretly in the forest and wish on them eons after their deaths.

Story by story, a tower grows, struck through the heart of the golden mean.

The moon is a mirror that sees around corners, glimpsing the back of the golden rule.

Imagine a circle with something to hide.

Well, two bodies wear each other like masks. But maybe a furtive grace is their bright shadow.

And maybe a spiral is just a circle that has forgotten where it began.

Maybe I am just

A stripe of chalk, a story borne in a white line
That smears everywhere when you try to erase it,

A white point that spirals out like a circle running from itself,
A drain spinning back, a turnless maze, a handless clock.
Stonemasons cut to fit, but rock masons find to fit.

Adumbrate, adumbrate.

The collective noun for riches is *an embarrassment*.

Imagine my voice as an onyx mirror
In which nothing casts a shadow
Slowly tumbling end over end down a
Well where an ancient tragedy abides.

Nothing Abides

Maybe we live in shade.

Maybe we convicted labor to account for power.

Or maybe it was just ancient gravity
grating the earth

in the shape a story
that rises in stone

grooves. Worn views that make the present see

from the ground up

make bricks burn hard.

Pick and find a place in

language to hide.

Well, Eurydice disappears. The body knew

reason *expropriates*

a bitter conscience

observes changes our tragedy does not.

Maybe we dreamed our intelligence,
fact built by hand

Maybe these bricks were left purpose: to hold

what men needed—

an ancient tomb

to dry out time.

Nothing Abides

Maybe we constellated **our history** on a square in a spiral that suggested an ancient sundial.

Maybe we felt **Destiny break**, a sense of stars long **neglected** finally **pushing into a past**.

Or maybe **we just see anew**

The earth sweeping its cities off the tables of the land, **growing our inheritance**.

Tell me a story in the shape of **joy**, which could be **sorrow** in search of **self-determination**, or **the probable** disguising itself as **providence**, or a **building** that rises in a cyclone of **bricks**.

An uncurled **legacy** would stretch to **blithe indifference** and back. What **now**?

We **embody** our stars secretly **in the heart of our persistence** and wish on them eons after **our** deaths.

Story by story, a **vision** grows **nearer**.

The moon is a mirror **premised on holding**.

Imagine a circle with something/**someone** to **witness**.

Well, **we see one body stolen and remade**. But maybe a fugitive **presence** is **our** bright shadow.

And maybe **joy** is just **sorrow** that has forgotten where it **stumbled**.

Maybe **we are** just **an ever-present ground**

A stripe of **power**, a story **disciplined** in **jubilee**

That **sows patience** everywhere when you try to erase it,

Existences that spiral out like a circle **sidestepping** itself,
Bodies spinning back, a turnless **profit**, a handless **pleasure**.
Stonemasons cut to fit, but rock masons find to fit.

Adumbrate, skip-a-hole, adumbrate, skip-a-hole

Imagine **one** voice as an onyx mirror

In which **nobody** casts a shadow

Slowly **swelling**, end over end, down a

Well where a **knowing** tragedy abides.

The Abandonment

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice made a powerful impression on me when I was little and made of clay. Remember? When his wife is killed by a snakebite, a semidivine poet descends into the ecliptic light of the underworld. His song is so beautiful and sad that it moves the lords of hell, who promise that Eurydice will follow him back out on the condition that he must not look back. But as he retraces his steps, his suspicion of having been cruelly tricked grows and grows. Mere steps from daylight, he turns around, and perhaps her mouth shapes a silent word as she slips back into oblivion forever.

This story taught me some things about tragedy that it took a long time to see. One was that it's something that happens to a man. Because of his privilege, he's literally given the chance of a lifetime, which he wastes, undone by his pride, his self-certainty, and his fear, above all, of being pitied, which always makes him pitiable in the end. Another was that tragedy wells up from nowhere, armored in destiny, impervious to reason, lying not in the story but in its fate to unfold in just this way. I found the Orpheus tale terribly frustrating. How *could* he, when he was so close to walking right out of the nightmare, into the sunshine my people had dreamed onto the end of every storm? Yet no matter how you beg and scold him, it's no use. You can write it another way, in modern times, tell Eurydice's side, get them out of the cave and see what happens—but those are other stories. In this one, Orpheus turns around.

I was thinking about all this because ancient Greece is where the long eclipse we call the West began, this long catastrophe of amnesiac conquest, this American neopenthe we draw where the Eno meets the Lethe. And I had come to think of *Eclipse*, the community dance-theater ritual of which this writing is an emulsion, as being in the character of a tragedy: a disaster reenactment, a perpetual suffering machine, a story so long and heavy that it seems to have its own motivic force, an inescapable outcome blasted out of an unchangeable past. But as we processioned through campus on silent tracks, as we revolved around the Old Well, scraping away UNC's creation myth to hear the university's Black builders still humming in the bricks, I could sense what Cortland named: something growing nearer, somewhere out of view, which we were at once pursuing and being pursued by along these fated paths.

All around us were lines and points, shattered grids, symbols and signs, ancient undertows and rip tides, signals winking on and off in obscure affinity. Circle, penumbra, spiral, umbra. Metronome, pendulum, wrecking ball. White coffee. Black wine. Towers rose and towers fell. I was unfair to the rich, unfair to Lucretius, unfair to "you," unfair to *you*. Persephone's seed grew into Christ's tree, an infamous triangle sailed the Atlantic, and here we are, drowned in disaster, the dead gods on the left, the immortal cops on the right, the fire above, the gold below—or invert them, it makes no difference—and the long arm that comes from nowhere and goes nowhere, unseeing the arc of history, wiping the planets away. I don't like you. I am like you. When you're a good person you can get away with almost anything. So it's a question of how much blood you can drink. Aristotle thought that tragedy was merely a useful purgative for pity, one of the baser emotions, but he also thought that women had fewer teeth than men. In its Hellenic roots, the word *eclipse* could mean "the downfall," "the darkening of a heavenly body," or "the abandonment." Yet something always abides. Orpheus was torn to pieces in the end, but his head kept singing as it floated down the river, and his harp was fashioned into some stars that are still playing in our skies.

