

## 128 TIMES

*Sitting in Maria Hernandez, I urge some sorcery to conjure up an American bison right there. Let it roam, I say. I've seen that plaza get pretty wild.*

I lived in the Red Room. It's a small bedroom on the second floor of 128 Manhattan Ave., and it gets its best light in the morning. The window and door granting access to the cloistered terrace face not the city but the trashed courtyard of a church, once the tallest building in New York City. You can hear the church bell chime in the daylight hours, always a minute late to the hour, God busy playing cards with the liopleurodon.

At dusk, the light passing through the stained glass windows of the church peeks into the Red Room, as if I dwelled at the bottom of a cenote and the fae above me, shedding the refracted light of votive jewels. The Most Holy Trinity would probably not approve of the gay sex had in the Red Room, so close to its columns and tapestries. But I had found it divine.

On the terrace, there's a random wall poking up where murals can be painted. As I say farewell, I have a face to look at. Boss Lady, I call her, in the shades, with the bling. A Mongolian-Australian artist painted her one day, a friend of the downstairs neighbors I never visited to drink airag.

They say the Red Room is cursed, but it's blessed me in spite of its malevolence. I look up into the corner of the room sometimes and I see aquatic reflections coming from the stagnant puddle that collects outside my window. I see down below some beat up cars, junkyard paraphernalia; eye to eye I see a tree that leaves so late in the summer; above I see a rooftop exit, a shack atop an apartment building; higher, I see the planes, the clouds, the never seen, ever remembered stars.

When people say New York City is the center of the universe, I scoff, but the way this room looks at certain hours is like inhabiting the clockwork of a heart, always one minute behind.

I step outside and make two rights to enter the Montrose stream. Upstream there's Baby Blues, and Brooklyn Ball Factory, but downstream I get to walk before the church doors. Once, I saw a series of unlatchings and followed doorway to doorway, entering the sideways, liminal spaces between my residence and God's. That one time I walked all the way up to a side door and paused to feel the stained glass shimmer over me, like a blanket that wraps you before opening the next door. I never did. I walked back onto the street and crossed myself.

At the corner of Montrose and Graham, otherwise known as Avenue de Puerto Rico, is what some, a very few few, might call Little Taipei. This nickname is justified mainly by the Win Son establishments. Bakery and restaurant making eyes at each other across the intersection, an appreciation for the island state flourishes. I met the manager for both Win Son sisters on solo dates, me, myself and I craving noodles or milk buns or the like. Sem is their name, a name I

gave to an elk plushie I got from a gift shop in the Humboldt redwoods. *Sequoia sempervirens*, the unlikely shot caller when it comes to jiǔ cài pancakes and 'alishan high mountain' oolong.

Yun Hai, the Taiwanese pantry only a stone's throw from the bakery, is the spot that sold me on Little Taipei. The gourmandise of Taiwan is wondrous and colorful, the store reminiscent of a past I don't know but dealing in futures so tantalizingly close, it's a taste away. One drop of the maqaw pepper hot sauce will flip your buns and you'll believe it's your body that's spicy and the sauce is the refreshing gasp that absolves you of this dire heat. I think the gac fruit juice has its own intrinsic spiciness. *But it's just a fruit!* you'll say. To which I'll respond *Oh no, nothing in Taiwan is 'just a fruit.'*

I remember talking to one of the employees, Yozen, who, when we first met, told me the characters for her name mean 'increase again.' She said that the belt I fashioned from a sash of black and white flowers was really cool, just when I was thinking it might be too crafty. She's the one who knows how to talk up fruit, and I always love it when I see her in the store.

On warm days there will be sidewalk sales. I want to say that this stretch of Montrose is historic for these mini flea markets, but I can only speak from 2022 onward. I purchased my writing desk from a man who frequently collects money for his wares on the left side of the street. On the right side of the street, a sweet lady who bakes brownies sold me a small backpack that howls *adoooooooo* everytime you open it. The architecture changes wildly and rapidly each block, so that depending on where you stop to tie your laces, you could be in front of a big auto garage, a pastel New England style home with a porch, an über moderne apartment in über gray, or the Brooklyn Tree, a restaurant you can spot from its mural depicting a plot of land with a healthy tree, unsullied by development. I wish it were a tree I could actually discover. The tall structures in the skyline I've come to find beautiful are all man made. Human ingenuity does lose its charm, especially when it overpowers the landscape, an ironic choice of word in this sense.

As you approach the Montrose L stop there's a classy doughnut shop across the street called Dunwell Doughnuts. It's also where I go to print things! The menagerie of jelly rolls (music), jelly rolls (pastry) and safety protocols. Here it feels like the pandemic of 1918 is a more recent memory, and the mass-produced 3-ply masks and print-and-go kiosks are the real relics. Very *The Last Unicorn*. The doughnuts here are scrumptious and mature, the gain from growing up and no longer being able to bear the saccharine confectionaries of Blinkies or Royal D's. And yes, also the loss.

No one spends too much time there; it's implicitly discouraged. But once you leave you have the choice to descend to the L or plow further into Bushwick via Johnson Ave, my favorite run of blocks in NYC. It's the desolation that pulls me down it, the urban decay creeping over my lens of what I consider eye-catching: once a cliff, now a claw. Once a meadow, now an unscuffed lot. Once the blinking lights in the mountains, now the glow from warehouse windows. I pass another Netflix HQ (here's looking at you LA) and glance up at the movie posters for *Pinocchio* and *White Noise*. Right there, on the corner of Bogart, is Ichiran ramen. A Fukuoka-based establishment that made its way overseas, the ramen served here is one of intention. The

private dining stalls are intimate, not interpersonally but intrapersonally, opening up a single room for you and your savor. I've come here by myself and with friends dear to me. I came once for a date. It's the only place I regularly redeem my points from their rewards program. I'm enchanted by its brow, its unique dining atmosphere, its unshorn Japaneseness, its remote location on a street bereft of other businesses or points of interest. It's the kind of place I'd love to smoke a cigarette outside of and catch a meteor fly into Earth's orbit. I'd love to feel that it wouldn't be the end for it. I envision a pretty crash site.

—*Tadaima!*

—*Okaeri!*

(These are the words of coming home)

Yet, these red walls—my earnest attempt at blood orange— are now the faces I leave behind. The ones who must stare back at my three roommates, who must stare at the landlord and debt collector grinding my name in their teeth, who must stare at the slob, the sycophant and the deboned man on the floor. I'll hold the hand of the poet, the lover, and the mischief-maker when I close the door for the last time. These walls have absorbed only more red than when I put the color on myself: the redness of insides, the redness of eyes open too long, the redness of my own lip, quivering at what exists within these walls as much as what exists without them. I feel all the wasted time in my sleeve, all the rejected hours that could have turned blood orange. But they were red, and so I've had to emerge from this primal state and call myself a man of the city. Constantly mastering and de-mastering, the sight of this color evokes the same pulse of losing control as it does of uniting every cell in my body to accomplish one deed. The focus of blood. At once inhuman and humane. This, my friends, is a great scrape. The kind someone else has to point out and tell you *you're bleeding*.