

Things That Do Not Exist

*Those things that do not exist
are looking for their names
in order to escape from the humiliation
of inexistence,
to make what is not yet. But
that which does not exist also
exists.
Life is made up of things that
do not yet exist.*

—Joseba Sarrionandia, Basque poet

The day that I went crazy—nearly two years after the death of my father—and searched the Museum of Modern Art for bombs, I was still trying to understand what it means to not exist. During that visit to New York City in the summer of 2021, I was so desperate to find the exact location where Pablo Picasso’s anti-war masterpiece *Guernica* had once been displayed, that the empty space between paintings in the museum had become more important to me than anything in the material world. I had even convinced myself that I would be able to *feel* the exact place where *Guernica* had hung in exile, safe from destruction during the Spanish Civil War and subsequent Fascist dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

As is often the case when attempting to understand the past, I did not have much information to guide my search. I knew that on September 10, 1981, MoMA curators had returned *Guernica* to Spain when a democratic government had finally been established, thereby fulfilling the instructions Picasso had given for the painting prior to his death. I knew that the night before *Guernica* arrived in Madrid on a commercial flight, curators had lifted the enormous

mural off the wall of its third-floor gallery at MoMA, removed the canvas from its wooden frame and rolled it up in a shipping container specially made for the masterpiece. The only other evidence that I had of *Guernica's* existence at the Museum of Modern Art was what I carried in my backpack: a small book containing a black-and-white photograph of the painting depicted on a single unidentified white wall, likely one of hundreds if not thousands of walls at MoMA. The photo was a poor reproduction with a vague caption, published in the waning years of the previous century.

Despite not having specific gallery information, I was certain that the air raid sirens and high-pitched whistles of falling bombs would return me to that place of destruction. The marble floors of the building would shake, the walls implode. The skin on my face would burn in the blast, my lungs gasp for breath. Wandering dazed and confused—dust covering my clothes—I would run toward the ghostly shrieks in a smoke-filled room. I would pass confused museum patrons, who—out for a casual stroll that Sunday afternoon—were oblivious of a woman weeping in the stone rubble. I would fall to my knees before this mother clutching her dead child. I would see blood on the walls.

When I was a teenager growing up in a violent home in Wisconsin, I was obsessed with Pablo Picasso's war-torn *Guernica*. Even though I learned in an art class that the negative space between things—the nothingness of unsaid words, long silences, and even greater distances—is often more important than positive space, I still clung to those things in *Guernica* that are the subjects or areas of interest in the painting: I was unable to look away from the weeping woman holding her dead child, the wounded horse writhing in the dust, the soldier reaching for something that is no longer there.

I understood the importance of negative space, but it had nothing to do with art; I did everything I could to create distance between myself and my father. His sudden bursts of anger came without warning, much like those German and Italian aerial attacks on the small Basque town of Gernika one sunny afternoon on April 26, 1937. There was always so much yelling, stomping, and swearing over minor irritations: an unexpected day of rain, grass that grew too quickly, a broken lawnmower. My father yelled at anyone who stepped on our two-acre property: those poor Jehovah Witnesses, mail carriers, and gas meter readers who tread lightly as they circled our home. Like these strangers, I learned to stay away from my father, but I did not have many places to hide. I wrote poetry behind the closed door of my bedroom and painted canvases in the basement. I knew exactly how many rooms separated us in our house. When I ate silently at our dining room table, I measured the distance between our bodies with empty chairs and then—as an adult—with long car rides, different time zones, meteorological seasons, and borders between states. In all circumstances, I measured the distance between my words until I finally realized that it was easier to say nothing. My father never really knew me.

When I left home to attend art school—miles and miles from home—I learned from teachers who had already experienced death in all its different forms—that the most profound creative expression stresses the tension between positive space and negative space, between existence and non-existence. I understood this to be true Picasso's *Guernica* where there is so little negative space, so little nothingness between the larger-than-life survivors of war in the painting that they crowd the canvas; the dying soldier—grasping a small flower—hits the hoof of a horse with his hand; a woman dares touch the sun with a lamp she extends into the darkness; even the gaping mouths of the bull and weeping mother share the same sour breath. In my study of *Guernica*, I learned that negative space in a painting can only be defined in relation to its

positive space. Non-existence, then—especially in the context of war—is not always about the dead. Sometimes it is more about those ghostly souls who manage to survive.

While it is true that all the things in our observable world—exploding bombs, burning cities, murdered civilians, and mass graves—rightfully demand our attention, physicists remind us that this form of matter only makes up approximately 15% of our universe. Surprisingly, the other 85% is not nothingness, but something else that scientists believe exists, though they have yet to detect it directly. This something that appears to be nothing is called *dark matter*.

When my father lay dying in his long-term care facility, he was surrounded by the empty and stark white institutional walls of his room. His roommate, however—a bedridden and rarely conscious soul—had around him all the artifacts and memorabilia of a life well-lived. His family had displayed these memories salon-style—a form of display at museums where art is hung in crowded groups from floor to ceiling—completely covering the walls on his side of the room. There were photograph collages of this elderly man with his happy family surrounding him at birthday parties and holiday celebrations. There were postcards from his extensive travels, framed honors of military service, a Harley Davidson metal sign, Green Bay Packer pendant, and Milwaukee Brewer flag. There was even a clock that said *It's Miller Time* across its bright face. These artifacts—the relics of this man's life—lovingly placed in such a packed shrine, allowed no room for my aching emptiness.

I felt bad about the sharp contrast between the empty walls on my father's side of the room and his roommate's living area, but the truth was that I was too tired to decorate walls. I was too tired to try and create something out of nothing. For the better part of the year, I had traveled from another state to visit my father every weekend. I had also taken on the

responsibility of caring for my homebound mother whom I loved but did not like as a person. If nothing else, I was exhausted from a lifetime of trying to wish into existence a close relationship with my father, and so the walls above his bed remained empty.

Not much is known about the dark matter between things. Similar to negative space in a painting, dark matter can only be observed indirectly through its effects on the physical universe, particularly in the speed that galaxies rotate. Everything around us is spinning so fast—deadlines and work schedules, mutating viruses, and falling bombs—that there is simply not enough mass, not enough gravity to hold it all together. Somehow life does hold together, though. Because our universe does not simply fly apart, physicists theorize that there must be some other type of mass—dark matter—that is not yet detectable. Gravitational lensing is one example of how scientists can indirectly detect dark matter. This phenomenon typically occurs when light bends around large objects such as stars or galaxies in the universe. Scientists have discovered that gravitational lensing can also happen when there is nothing visible, not even a star or galaxy. Light seems to bend around things that do not exist. These things that do not exist are called dark matter.

Even though I had no energy to decorate the empty walls that surrounded my father, my eight-year-old daughter drew cheerful pictures of our small family—my father in the center—all holding hands in the void like a fragile chain of paper dolls. She lovingly rendered this art when we visited him during the last few agonizing months of his life. In the drawings we have bright eyes and smiles on our faces. My father sits in a wobbly wheelchair that was hastily drawn. He has a bright half-moon mouth that covers most of his face. There are even thick black arrows to identify each person's role in the family—*Grandpa*, *Grandma*, *Mommy*, *Daddy*, and *Me*—as we

float in the empty white space of the paper. There does not appear to be enough matter—not enough of anything, really—to hold us all together. We should have all flown apart, but for some reason this did not happen. Eventually, I half-heartedly taped my daughter's artwork to the wall above my father's bed; they were drawings of a family that I did not recognize.

Perhaps the things that do not appear to be in our 15% of observable universe—all those unfulfilled desires and abandoned dreams, every unsaid word and unrequited love—really do exist in some form that cannot be detected by humans. Maybe most of life is about reaching into the void for these things. Maybe most of life is about haphazardly taping art to an empty wall *in order to escape from the humiliation of inexistence*.

When I arrived early that afternoon on the third floor of the Museum of Modern Art where *Guernica* had once been displayed, the floor was quiet. There was no indication of the Pablo Picasso masterpiece that had symbolized my childhood—no falling bombs, no machine gun strafing, no gunpowder residue—only a special exhibit of Paul Cézanne that showcased the artist's luminous pencil and watercolor drawings. I found myself caught up in the echoing walls of the present, moving with a hushed crowd from room to room until I left the exhibit in frustration, despite the calming effect of Cézanne's landscapes; *Guernica* was over three thousand miles away in Madrid and I was one thousand miles from my childhood home. There was a lot of negative space between me and the rest of the world.

When I returned to my father's room to collect his belongings after he died, his bed was empty. There was no real indication that my father had even existed in that room for seven

months, except for my daughter's drawings on the wall. The sheets on my father's bed had been changed; they contained none of the fluids that escape the body at death. The fabric smelled—not of my father's urine or decomposing flesh—but an impartial and indifferent bleach. These clean sheets—pulled, pressed and tucked under the mattress—would always hold unsaid words; my lips would remain pressed tight, my mouth closed. Next to the empty bed, there was no plastic cup of ice water. The dresser had been cleared of single-pack moisturizers designed to soothe the dry and gaping mouth of my dying father; he too had lost his ability to speak.

When I completed my inventory of everything that was no longer there, I opened my father's closet and threw all his flannel shirts and cotton pants—each with his name sewn inside—all his stained boxers, worn socks, and flattened shoes into black garbage bags. I threw all these things away as quickly as possible—avoiding any comment or sentiment—until the only things that remained to show my father's existence in the room were my daughter's drawings of our happy family. When I finally did remove the drawings, slowly pulling away the blue painter's tape on the back of each one—the way MoMA curators so carefully removed a fragile *Guernica*—there was nothing left to show so much loss. I left that room and never returned.

In 2010, the year that my daughter was born, physicists at the University of Michigan discovered a way to create matter out of the empty void of nonexistence. It is well known that at the quantum level, there is no such thing as nonexistence in a vacuum. Instead, there is a balance of matter and antimatter or particles and antiparticles. This antimatter cannot be observed by humans—one cancels out the other one—but with the use of a particle accelerator and high-intensity laser, physicists have forced matter and antimatter to collide in a vacuum, creating

new matter in an intense explosion that is much different than those aerial bombs that leveled Gernika to the ground during the Spanish Civil War. If there is no such thing as nothingness, then—if matter can be created out of nonexistence—then perhaps there really is hope in the face of death; there will always be a swirling pool of possibility.

This was all too much for me to believe, though, when I searched for *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art. In the dark depths of middle age, nothingness was not a swirling pool of possibility; everyone I loved was suddenly dying. In the empty void of long-term care—where men and women slumped in wheelchairs abandoned in hallways, their heads bowed to wheezing chests, their hearts empty—my father died in a bed where perhaps twenty other people had died before him. I knew that in this strange singularity—this artificially created vacuum—his empty bed would be filled in a matter of days with yet another person close to death, and so I had no sense of possibility in this empty void. I only had the understanding that between the stark white walls of long-term care, matter that makes up only 15% of the universe would suddenly appear out of nowhere—usually the result of a tragic fall or terminal illness—and then just as suddenly disappear into nothingness.

That afternoon at the Museum of Modern Art, resigned to the fact that I would never find the exact location of *Guernica*—I stumbled upon Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* in Room 502 on the fifth floor of the Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Galleries. Van Gogh had painted this masterpiece from the window of the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy where he had spent one year—confined within empty white walls—recovering from mental illness. My experience with the painting that afternoon was unusual; I found myself more drawn to the negative space in the sky than any other art element. In contrast to the suffocating vacuum in Picasso's *Guernica*,

Vincent van Gogh's negative space dances with life. Stars burn bright above a small town nestled at the foot of a sweeping blue mountain range. In the town there is a church steeple and a few homes—still lit with the living and the dying—that glow late into the evening. Above this quiet town, the air swirls with short concentric lines surrounding the crescent moon and exploding stars. Van Gogh applied thick lines of paint to the negative space, giving the electric blue sky a three-dimensional effect. Even though the short swirling lines might be mistaken for tracer missiles closing in on innocent targets, I did not see death and destruction. Instead, I gazed deep into the watery depths of an ocean that was both breathtaking and beautiful. Waves of ethereal energy in that starry night—swirling with so many unsaid words and abandoned dreams, so much lost love—were *looking for their names in order to escape from the humiliation of inexistence.*

When I left the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, despite never finding the exact location where Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* had once been displayed, I walked out of that institution the way I walked out of the room where my father had died. On the other side of emptiness there was a vibrant city. In that great city of dreams—where refugees and immigrants had left behind so much loss—I was struck by all the life around me: peddling street vendors, fast-walking pedestrians, wailing sirens, foraging pigeons. Subway trains rumbled beneath me. Steel scaffolding held up the sky. Maintenance workers tossed black garbage bags on the sidewalk; soon they would be hauled away and buried deep underground. The late afternoon sun streamed rays of light between the dark buildings. I knew that in a matter of hours, the starry night sky would be swirling with endless energy and possibility, even if I would never be able to see it; there were too many tall buildings and too many bright lights. There were too many rooms

lit up with the living and the dying. There were too many empty hearts and too many rooms with nothing on the walls. I knew that at home—in my own empty room a thousand miles away—I still had my daughter's drawings of a happy family.

Perhaps someday I would hang them on the wall.

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