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## Haunted by a Memory I Never Lived

Carlos Hiraldo

I am haunted by a memory I never lived. My mother and father are sitting in their house in Brooklyn with my baby sister watching the 1969 moon landing. Born in 1971, I wasn't there. But I spent my toddler years in the waning residue of excitement about the landing and listening to adults talk about where they had watched it. As a child, I was baffled by how vivid this event that occurred without me was to people of my parents' age. Except for some surviving pictures of the living room, I never knew the house in which they saw Neil Armstrong take a giant leap for mankind. My father burned it down within a couple of years of purchasing it and collected the insurance on it, because, as he repeated anytime I asked him, "suddenly, within a matter of months, the street went from all white to all black," or as he actually said in the Dominican-Spanish of his time, *una balsa de morenos*. My dad didn't realize or didn't want to admit that he was among the first blacks or *morenos* in the *balsa* to move into the area. So I, a man who spent his formative years after his parents' divorce living in Washington Heights, Manhattan, as a border in the apartments of Dominican immigrants, am fascinated by that day. The moon shot. American flag in an alien world. A house in Brooklyn. New York City. My dad. Property owner. Less than a decade after immigrating as an exile from Trujillo's dictatorship. The American Dream. Burnt to the ground because of the grimy, earthly meeting of U.S. racism and good old fashioned Latin American racial self-hatred.

The day the moon landing was witnessed from a house in Brooklyn pops into my mind over and over again. A memory I have never lived. My beautiful young mother in late '60s garb, my handsome young father sporting a cream colored *guayavera*—it was July after all—and my fourteen month old sister huddled around a black and white TV. I see my sister sitting, sleepy, leaning against my mother's curvy brown body. She is not yet terrorized by my parents' dysfunction. They must have gotten along better at that time. At least, they still got along well enough to conceive me later. I even see details of the TV set. Large but not large enough to be its own distinct piece of furniture like so many big TVs of the time in the homes of the well off. It probably was more like the TV in the apartment in which I spent my first five years on 171<sup>st</sup> street and Haven Avenue,

a predominantly white, quiet and clean reserve amidst the already brewing chaos of 1970s Washington Heights. That TV was big, metallic, boxy, but small enough to sit atop a cartwheel stand like the ones used by hotel employees when they bring around room service. It had rabbit ear antennas and also the now-forgotten round UHF one. It had big round knobs: VHF for English-language channels and UHF for the two Spanish-language channels, 41 and 47, available at the time. I imagine my parents sitting on a beige, plastic-covered sofa with a mix of trepidation and awe. The grainy black-and-white images beamed down from space in an otherwise sparse, empty living room with a few toys on the floor.

Where was I during the moon landing? *Mami, a donde yo estaba antes que naci?* I often used to ask as a child. Each time I asked as I got older, she would recite variations, from sweet to mean, of a tale that consisted in her going to heaven, speaking with God, and picking a soul to come down as her little boy. The different versions morphed through the years from my mother competing against many would-be mothers for my precious soul to her generously picking out a soul no other mother would want. That story of being in heaven with God before I was born and having forgotten it all after birth provided some comfort for about the first ten to twelve years of my life. It not only accounted for a pre-life existence but also for the randomness of my embodied life. Coming from such a clearly failed union, I often wondered as a child how I would have been had my parents never met. Today, the consolation my mother's stories provided, and speculation about who I would have been had another mother picked me, have long faded away. Only dark questions hang in there with dread hooked to their punctuations: Where was I before I was born? Where was I when Kennedy was shot? When Lincoln? Where was I when the dinosaurs roamed the earth? When the Earth formed? When the big bang occurred? What will I be after this? And only a tepid, eternal darkness answers back.

Of course, the tepidness itself, in the same way I understand heaven, Buddhist reincarnation, and Nietzschean eternal recurrence to be, is an illusion, a byproduct of the dread entailed in imagining the end of one's life: "no sight, no sound, / No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, / Nothing to love or link with."<sup>1</sup> We come from the void to eventually return to it forever. For eons in the past, retroactive eternity, there was no I, Carlos Hiraldo. That's dreadful enough. But that feeling, originally nurtured by adult talk of the moon landing, gets complemented by the realization that the nothing I was on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1969 was not as definitive as the nothing I will become after this life. I was potential then. When I am dead I will be less than that. I, like Philip

Larkin's "Aubade," take no consolation in "specious stuff that says No rational being / Can fear a thing it will not feel." This is the secularist's get outta jail free card, as false as a divinity and so much more vacuous. Larkin's response is correct. It is exactly the lack of feeling or perception that we fear so much that, as Freud explained, we can't even imagine because, "whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators."<sup>2</sup>

Death is an unfathomable nothing, absolute and perpetual, not temporary like sleep or medical anesthetic. If most of us were told that the next time we lose consciousness it will be permanent, we would do everything within our powers to stay awake. Sleep, often incorporating the sounds and smells of the environment in the dream state, does not connote an absolute loss of consciousness. Those close to sleepwalkers and sleep talkers can attest to that. For its part, an anesthetic state, deeper than sleep, and perhaps physically closer to death than most might want to imagine, maintains the dual promise of being temporal and bringing us back to full consciousness with a firmer footing in life through medical intervention. Death is absolute erasure. To understand it is impossible for a mind experiencing itself as the center of creation and therefore unable to countenance erasure. So we dissimulate. We invent religions and ideologies, notions and work-arounds. We imagine our lives as contributing to the world, to a cause, or at least to the preparation of our children. Teachers, lucky us, get to have so many children that we forget the great majority.

The writer, the artist, and the diligent worker has the added hope of living through his or her work. But being discovered by a new generation provides no substitute for the fullness of living, the envelopment of the senses by all that is, and the overwhelming physical reality of feeling. When your name is uttered after death, the sound doesn't carry beyond this world. The existential consolation of work lies only in losing oneself to the struggle. Its effect on the mind is like that of any drug: a solace inviting perdition. Even in this society, there's such a thing as too much work, too much commitment, where we can lose sight of interpersonal relations and the inimitable joys that can arrive with unplanned time. While seeking the consolation of work, we should remember that what we do is not who we are. Who we are is self-aware, aging, dying apes, and what we do is try to stave off that reality through work.

In the midst of existential anxiety, I sometimes find consolation in the words of a legendary American politician I otherwise deem overrated. Bobby Kennedy's "Mindless Menace of Violence" speech, given to The City Club of Cleveland the day after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., surmounts the anger, hurt, and chaos that

took over much of the country at the time. Kennedy succinctly put into words what binds us all:

we can perhaps remember—even if only for a time—that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life, that they seek—as do we—nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can. Surely this bond of common faith, this bond of common goal, can begin to teach us something. Surely we can learn, at least, to look at those around us as fellow men and surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its time-stamped sexist language, it's amazing to read and hear on the internet such a powerful existential truth openly stated by a public figure giving a political speech, a rhetorical mode usually geared to deny innumerable more mundane truths. The type of existential perspective evoked by Kennedy's speech can lead to an understanding that most of us are trying to do the best we can with the limited brains and time we have on Earth. It can foster empathy for each other when we inevitably fall short on occasion from even meeting this tenable goal. In this way, perhaps we may slow down the perpetual motion machinery that blindly pushes us to strive and to compete, that led my father for example to buy a house in the hopes of reaching white, middle-class status, and later burn it down to incinerate his African ancestry. Such a perspective demands that we see each other as potential partners and mates helping one another cope with an ever fleeting existence as opposed to rivals and adversaries to be outdone in school, at work, and in life. Perhaps if we as a species were able to remember, like Wallace Stevens, that "death is the mother of beauty,"<sup>4</sup> my parents would not have been searching for wonder and awe on a black-and-white television screen in July and would have found it in the breathing, technicolor of each other and their little daughter.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Larkin, Philip. "Aubade." *Poetry Foundation*.

[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48422/aubade-56d229a6e2f07](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48422/aubade-56d229a6e2f07).

<sup>2</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Reflections on War and Death*. "Our Attitude Towards Death," translated by A. A. Brill and Alfred B. Kuttner. Moffat, Yard & Co., 1918; Bartleby.com, 2010.

[www.bartleby.com/282/](http://www.bartleby.com/282/).

<sup>3</sup> LittleDesertFlower78. "Mindless Menace of Violence (by Robert F. Kennedy) FULL." *YouTube*, YouTube, 28 Mar. 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhANTymDIYk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhANTymDIYk).

<sup>4</sup> Stevens, Wallace. "Sunday Morning." *Poetry Foundation*.

[www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/2464](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/2464).