

Once, in a Holy Land

*On God's little mountain in
Waterbury*

Matt Salyer

For though the head frames words the tongue has none.

And who will prove the surgeon to this stone?

Geoffrey Hill, "God's Little Mountain" (1959)

The world I grew up in was impoverished, bruised, and Roman Catholic. If Waterbury is less so now, then it is diminishing into the mere economic measure of its impoverishment, a regional statistic. Once it was a *world*, and mine, because I had little conviction that anything beyond its twenty-eight square miles of church steeples and machine shops and landlorded tenements and boarded-over brick facades mattered; *world* because there the patient, sullen people of my grandfather's time displayed their lives on the back stoops of shambling "three-families" like beaten rugs. When I decided that I wanted to be a writer, it was not because I wanted to differentiate myself from this unfortunate city. It was because I had fallen in love with it and wanted to recover all its broken pieces and become them, preserve them, record them, repair them. Waterbury was hard-scrabble nostalgia and I was its archaeologist. I traced roses, run to weed in the chain-link lawns, from where they choked the streetlights' long, haughty necks all the way down to roots that cradled the head of some plaster St. Joseph, buried for luck. I found and recorded jars of nails, whiskey on high shelves, banisters run from stolen gas piping, a black crucifix.

All these relics fit together in a reconstructed past. Perhaps, because relics of Catholics, the relics bled, saturating the comings and goings of immigrant generations: Irish hands ground to nubs in the press-gears; the accidental cooking of human skin in the brass foundries; the Radium Girls, leeching their glow into the slum apartments the City made from Waterbury Clock; old J__ Z__, the

landlord with the broken nose; the tenants he hung over the back porches while his son watched, learned; Z___, the brick-shithouse Albanian who locked the doors and beat a dozen men nearly to death in the old Brooklyn Café; M___ A___ (La Mano Nera, the Black Hand man), who did business with my grandfather and walked the little girls down to St. Lucy's; the little girls at Notre Dame, scrubbed, hair brushed, fidgeting serenely in their mantillas and white gloves as the hard men put on their killing faces and led the Virgin downtown on a painted float.

Within the city, the rough granite face of Pine Hill is the highest point visible, its unapproachable outcroppings, crooked and graffiti-covered, overlooking the steeples of Saint Anne's and Saint Francis Xavier's and the flat, tarpaper roofs of brick bodegas and South End projects that huddle around them. Follow a narrow backstreet up the crags and the twenty-eight-square-mile world, exposed in miniature beneath you, begins to look like a carnival painting by Breughel. At the hillcrest, a handful of trailers houses the last pantsuit nuns of the Religious Sisters Filippini, shut behind their curtains. Past the shabby convent, there is a plastered wall, a padlocked iron gate, and a painted plaster sign announcing that you have come to Holy Land, standing at the axis mundi of Waterbury like a scrap of hair on the rim of a drain, the lights of hermetic neighborhoods splashing up the sides of the sink until they perish, falling off the horizon's edge to Neverland.

Begun in 1953, Holy Land was built over the course of forty years by a local attorney named John Baptist Greco. First-generation, a shoemaker's son, Greco had studied for the priesthood at one point but never received his ordination. Like his namesake, Saint John the Baptist, he was more hermit and folk prophet than cleric. He attended Yale Law School on a scholarship, took the bar, and returned to Waterbury, where he opened a private practice downtown. He refused to take on divorce cases or clients who would compromise his devout faith, and preached repentance on street corners

during his off-hours. In 1953, he purchased the land on Pine Hill with the idea of building a kind of Catholic Disney Land, enshrining neighborhood pieties for the postwar road-trip generation. “Bethlehem Village,” which opened in 1956, was Holy Land’s first iteration, built mostly by Greco himself. Then the blue-collar men came and helped when they could, lugging up cement blocks and rolls of chicken wire, auto salvage, broken refrigerators, scrap granite from the grave-masons, and mixing concrete and plaster, molding catacombs, painting faces of saints and sinners on more than two hundred scaled dioramas that depicted Bible stories and Catholic hagiographies, a lurid Cecil B. DeMille world on a dollhouse scale.

For decades, Holy Land drew the ethnic faithful from the same Northeastern households that tuned in regularly to watch Archbishop Fulton Sheen’s *Life is Worth Living*. By some estimates, over sixty thousand tourists a year came, upwards of three hundred buses on a given weekend. Like the red-caped Sheen, whose televised lectures defined the social imagination of my grandfather’s generation, Greco’s homespun theme park exerted an unabashed pull of showmanship and pietistic devotion, promiscuously mixed with an innocence that resists derision. The families of third-shift foremen from Trenton, New Jersey, and Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, could hardly afford the trip to Rome or Jerusalem, but they could pass through Holy Land’s gates and amble like giants through miniature reproductions of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Rome, and follow the Stations of the Cross up to a paved Calvary. Each year, Greco added to the spectacle, populating the Hill with dramatic martyrdoms of department-store mannequins, adding a massive Hollywood-style sign that renamed Waterbury “HOLY LAND U.S.A.,” constructing a towering Cross of Cor-Ten steel and pink fiberglass panels. To this day, the Cross, night-lit in neon, is the most recognizable feature for miles, marking the downtown convergence of Interstate 84 and Route 8 like a pin on a map. Growing up in Waterbury is to come of age, as I did, under that Crucifix’s constant whirl and radiance.

I never saw Holy Land in its heyday, but when I, an Eighties child, was digging moats and building fortifications for GI Joes under my grandparents' azaleas, Greco was still alive, still at work on his religious theme park, still the Old Man of the Mountain. I could see his Crucifix each night through my grandparents' living-room window when I kissed my grandma goodnight. Our house, nestled precariously on the rim of the world, had been built eye-level with Holy Land. In the late Fifties, when Greco was building his salvage dream-kingdom, my grandfather had been building his own, moving my grandmother and mother and uncles out of their second-floor walk-up to an enormous single-family, built from scrap and called-in favors, that overlooked the Country Club where the Masters had refused his Irish family admittance. Both men built for a future they envisioned: a respectable, aspirant, but distinctly ethnic and Catholic America that seemed just around the bend with the advent of Camelot and Vatican II.

By the 1980s, that future had become the unrealizable nostalgia that Waterbury felt for Waterbury, and through which the town held little boys like me in the thrall of the Naugatuck Valley's stubborn old men, the gigantic makers from olden times. The ninety-year-old Greco died in 1986, a day after he came down from the mountain. In his last years, he had been forced to close the park for renovations. Highway construction demolished the Catacombs; a fire burned the Garden of Eden to plastic fumes. He had planned to rebuild, living like a Desert Father in an austere trailer, trusting God, a dying man desperate to maintain the panoramic world that he had imagined, constructed, and repaired for decades. Perhaps he was not so different, in this regard, from the God of the Mountain he illustrated.

By the time I was old enough to sneak past the pantsuit spinsters, shuttered Holy Land, with its homegrown architecture of persistence and dilapidation, seemed perfectly attuned to the realities of Waterbury life. That had been Greco's point from the beginning: the tactile dioramas, made from commonplace materials taken from

the mill town, translated the epic, iconographic imaginative landscape of *King of Kings*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Samson and Delilah* onto a human, realistic scale; the emphasis on scenes of the Holy Family invited viewers to imagine their own domestic suffering as both dignified and central to Waterbury. Crude concrete tablets throughout the theme park reminded visitors that “We Are the Body of Christ. If One Member Suffers, All Members Suffer.” Holy Land itself was an immense projection of the Catholic Mass, an elevated sacrificial altar at the heart of the city. The Old Man of the Mountain was its priest, but its local spectators were more than tourists. Their literal contribution of work and materials to the spectacle’s production expressed a Roman Catholic understanding of their human condition within Holy Land’s *Commedia*; they were *imago Dei* because they, too, were makers of little worlds.

When I first went there, more than a decade after Greco’s death, this argument seemed to have been carried to its theological conclusion. I saw the crumbling Gethsemane, eaten by the elements, the broken signage reading “Kings Tombs.” A victim lamb, cast in concrete, waited for slaughter beneath condom wrappers, old Nikes, dried puke, and coins cast for good luck. Eyes of the saints, broken in their plaster skulls, stared mutely at me through the serpentine scrub all the way to Golgotha, the “Place of the Skull,” where the God of the Mountain died. What I inherited from John Greco was not an aspirant, symbolic notion of the human person as artist, and the artist as *imago Dei*. I inherited a fully articulated Catholic model of the realist for whom rotting symbols are nothing more than the promiscuous accidents of raw observation. When I stood at the axis mundi of Holy Land, beneath the Crucifix’s murderous kitsch, I stood within a landscape that mirrored me, that overlooked the landscape that made me, we two bound together as an expression of the *felix culpa*, the paradox of being a maker of eternal symbols, ruined by time.

WATERBURY—A 19-year-old man was charged Sunday with raping and killing a 16-year-old friend whose body was found near a closed and run-down religious attraction in Waterbury. Francisco Cruz faces charges including capital felony, murder and sexual assault in the death of Chloe Ottman. Her body was found near Holy Land USA on Saturday, a day after her family reported her missing. Cruz was the last person seen with Ottman, but initially denied having anything to do with her disappearance, said Waterbury police Capt. Chris Corbett. After being questioned, [Cruz] led police to the body and confessed to sexually assaulting and strangling her, Corbett said. Cruz and Ottman, both of Waterbury, had been friends for about two years and walked together to the mostly deserted Holy Land USA on Thursday evening, Corbett said. Cruz was behind bars in lieu of \$5 million bond on Sunday and was expected to be presented in court on Monday. He could face the death penalty if convicted. (*Waterbury Republican-American 19 July 2010*)

The article frames a photo of Francisco Cruz, nineteen, of 17 Hickory Street. I remember Hickory Street, a South End side block sucked behind bricks, halfway between Daily's, the market where I bought loosies and saw my first shooting, and the halfway house where the living dead sit to wait for work. I cannot decide if I remember the face. There were so many side streets when I was a rover there, so many apartment doors, and so many little boys who answered the doors when I came to collect. I wore black leather gloves and a necktie and made a point of adjusting both when I asked for their fathers. I'd walk into the apartment uninvited and grill a sophomore sister in an oversized Tweety-Bird shirt, no underwear, sometimes a neighbor who was watching the kids stoned. I'd run a gloved finger along the laminate rim of an entertainment set while the toddlers shat on the floor. If there were a father present, this would humiliate him—not his domestic chaos but the fact that I, a man in a tie, saw—and he'd call cursing and pay his debt. If there were no father to pay, which was a two-of-three chance, I'd

return the next week and take the rent-to-own furniture. I would always give the ma'am of the house a choice between the bedroom set and the big-screen. I grew to hate looking at the blank, submissive, hateful eyes of South End sons and I continued to wonder, long after I quit looking for their fathers, what manner of men they would become.

I look for someone's son in Cisco Cruz. Like a high-school prom, the ritual of a criminal arrest does not end until the chaperones commemorate the event with an embarrassing picture. The mug-shot happens in the bowels of the Waterbury Police Department; take a left down the hall where the crack-hags get dumped to piss on the speckled floors and clamor at the ghost-faced boys in holding. At his arraignment, Cruz shuffles into the courtroom like an X-Box zombie, his customary prey. Hands and feet manacled, manacle chained to manacle, he's flanked by a pack of marshals who guide his long, awkward body to the left-hand side of the bench, jeans slung on his hipbones where they billow and bunch. Someone has sewn a patch on one of his ass-pockets, emblazoned with bright-thread dollar signs. He's straight g on down *from da rapes 2 da napes*, but waist up, he is only Francisco, and every bit the boy who avoids mama's calls when he walks his girl Chloe up Washington Street to the Holy Land gate, bullshitting and sweating and curling his awkward body under his coat-hanger spine as he stumbles to pace her.

For such Lost Boys, the enduring appeal of a simulated life online is its abrogation of hard scrabble ghetto cause-and-effect for the psychological repose of living unscathed within an empyrean of constant gamers, Facebook friends, and simulacra avatars. When I found him on Facebook, long after his arrest, Cisco was not Francisco Cruz, nineteen, of 17 Hickory Street, but a photo, a ghost, the fiction that he wanted to be long before he had even contemplated raping and killing Chloe. On his homepage he is *Cisco Ninja*, which is to say *no one*. His profile photo shows a body poised for action, covered head-to-toe in tight-wound black cotton. The face has been

replaced preemptively by a black mask and a photographer's shadow, obscuring the eyes that stare back at you until they're black-masked, too. Wrenched from his mama's South End living room, Cisco Ninjaa's dream-kingdom has been calculated for appropriate contrasts: the picture's background is a nondescript white room with a white faded carpet, white pulled curtains stained tobacco-tan where the sun pushes against them from the other side. The antagonism is not between the sun as fatalistic time and the speaker's desire for ebullient life; it is between the sun's illumination of a real, uncontrollable world and Cisco Ninjaa's anonymous living-room fantasia, which extends the triumph of death as far as mama's curtains.

It's as if a child, having cut the ninjaa's outline out of mama's curtains, discovers no illuminated world behind it, but only a black cutout in the room, positioned in a *Mortal Kombat* fighting stance—*like in the movies, bend the front knee more, shift the weight, good, arm over head, so he's holding a katana* (a ninjaa needs a katana)—an avatar as a bogeyman that can be stepped into and through. Those friended learn the bogeyman is from Bridgeport, Connecticut, lives in Waterbury. Its favorite films are *Ninja Assassin*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *The Last Airbender*. It reads Stephen King, romance novels, and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Its favorite quotations include the phrase “for now,” Kuja's lines from *Final Fantasy IX*, and the admonition: “Whether your words are lies created to deceive me or the truth I have searched for all my life, it makes no difference. You will rot.” It's a fan of pages such as *when I say “what are you doing today” I really mean “let's hang out”* and *I Hate It When People Take What You Say Completely the Wrong Way* and *Guys Who Will Like You For You And Not What You Will Do With Them*. It even makes “emotive” faces at you, :} ;[:o, like that.

How different the arraignment face is. It sags with the grandiose burden of girls from the Brass Mill Mall who want to just hang out, winces before the somber existentialism of unaffordable tattoos, attempts the tortured appeal of a Barnes & Noble Café Rimbaud. See

it, Francisco? That's Cisco. When they arrested him, they photographed his face for you. From the front, the long capital V of his jaw mimics the sharp neckline of the drab green T-shirt below it. A razorline wisp of moustache rests like eyeliner along the edge of the soft, almost feminine mouth. The nose's long bridge droops with the weight of a bulb where the nostrils flare, and on either side the deep equidistant almonds, the plaintive doe eyes, hang glassine beneath slick eyebrows. Crisp lines scar the tallow skin, all hues and murkiness save where the brow breaks with blood-brown acne and deep blemish. He is, after all, mostly a teenager, not quite twenty.

In the police photograph's unyielding wound of time, he has already raped Chloe and forced his thumbs down on her throat. He has already driven his knife slant through to touch the place that his thumbs pressed. And when she was dead, the initial reports believe, he raped her again. And when he was done, he hid her in overgrowth near a doll-sized Jerusalem, a junkyard for lost saints. Where is this on his face, a map of lines sunk in a handful of skin cream? From the front you see only brown and black acne and deep blemishes, and the wide shoulder bones that he hasn't grown into yet, the boy who knows he's a boy.

In court, he wears his Brooklyn black-rims, unsynchronized to the unblinking machismo of Waterbury. He wore them to the big-box mall that the speculators built when they tore down Scovill Mill, and where, suburban rumor has it, teenagers lurk under cars in the parking lot to cripple your ankles with razors. He wore them home-ward through South End haunts to mama's fire-escaped kitchen, his glasses an epithetical sign of difference, of his misconstrued heart that could only articulate itself through alt rock, iPhone apps, anime films, zombie survival guides, and the backstories of role-playing games. In the South End, they knew who he was by reading that courtroom face, the way he moved it, the way he carried it above his bone shoulders: *look at this mari, fucking maricon; nah, nah, son, my boy Cisco, he's just into all that cartoon shit.* He kept aloof from

the stark, night-lit world of The Street and they left him, in turn, to his own devices: plans for Chinese tattoos drawn in the margins of secret notebooks, G-chat extraterrestrial cosplay, and the unsexed companionship of Hot Topic parochial girls whose fathers had five-to-go for municipal pensions.

When Cisco started to grope Chloe under the Cross, she struck his glasses. "I got so mad at her," he recalls. "I hate when people hit me on the face." Maybe it wasn't only sexual rejection that prompted his rage. Chloe's spurn enunciated the raw fact of Cisco's existence in *this* world, wiring the limitless possibilities of his fantastical inner life of online games and Facebook posts to a single irreversible circuit of bodies in time. The long, less-travelled lines of the Metro-North cling to so many industrial necropolises, and each one is home to its full share of Ciscos, covered in hand-me-down munge, Lost Boys whose sadomasochistic propensities bear only a surface resemblance to the violent commonplaces of urban life, a simulacra of the bonelike eloquence that makes neighborhood vernaculars of honor and blood-exchange cohere and remain within their long-proscribed bounds. When he declares "I hate it when people hit me on the face," Cisco is not articulating the social code of an underclass. He is confessing, however unawares, that he is not hard enough to flourish within the dozen or so blocks that bound his walking-distance world. But the blood-tongue of Waterbury manhood, familiar to me and Cisco both (although, for better or worse, it came more natural to me than him) is no mere macho strut. The Street shows a visceral contempt for such sensitive, Byronic misfits precisely because a Cisco's violence is often the least predictable and the most pathetic.

Before Chloe died, "she gasped for air like two different times," Cisco admits. Perhaps each successive brutalization of her took on the character of a killer's revision, a rapprochement of the limit-experiences that he so desired to get right in the avatar-world. In one sense, it is precisely this paradoxical admixture of egocentrism

and self-abnegation that makes Cisco such a thoroughly postmodern killer. A day prior, Cisco Ninjaa was full of ebullient aimlessness, the impotent exhilaration of his own power games. Recast as his avatar, unhinged from real bodies in meaningful time, he was the latent inverse of what we often seem to imagine as the great positive license of post-modernity, the Foucauldian promise of reconfiguring culture, tradition, and ethics as a “free play of signifiers,” a circuit of endless self-projections unburdened by shame. Black-masked, Francisco became a dropped pin, a place holder of the human:

16 July 2010 at 17:30

Cisco Ninjaa: Whats everyones plan for today?

MM: nothing same as usual! lol

Cisco Ninjaa: Gotcha

ML: Nothing ... hahaha ima kidnap u :p

K-JK: dunno lol

Cisco Ninjaa: O.o.

MM:

A dance of pictures, hahaha, a gap like a missing daughter.

O.o.

I have thought about Chloe’s murder for four years, partly

because its thematic contentions, reversals, and paradoxes are almost unbearably novelistic. On one level, her violent death presents me with a skeleton outline for the only novel I want to write, but that novel is not really about her. The basic crime narrative involved simply provides what Edgar Allen Poe would describe as a convenient “unity of effect”—theme, setting, plot, tone, characters, and so forth—for articulating something about the growth, imaginative stagnation, death, and nostalgias of a Catholic Northeastern manufacturing city. In fact, the illustrative value of the Ottman case is so high in this regard that a realistic account of the events and key ac-

tors surrounding Chloe's rape and murder at Holy Land can only be articulated through the communal, symbolic terms established and tightly-held by this cultural landscape.

I suspect that this makes both Waterbury and Chloe seem less real, more melodramatic, and more gothic, to middle-class readers for whom realism is the business of describing Connecticut suburbs to Brooklyn—the quiet desperation of Shoreline commuters, the high-toned bird wives who listen to *All Things Considered* in showroom kitchens, the white clapboard houses in Litchfield where spindling olden-time candles describe the season to the season through the windows. But because I, in turn, cannot quite fathom the existence of real lives in Cheever Land, I am not concerned foremost with the moral problem of narrating to *them*, stories of the outsiders and the unwanted, the unreal. But Chloe's life-world, both subject and setting, is also an unwilling audience, and I am bound to its public moral landscape in a way that the "purer" artist, Francisco Cruz, was not. "The death ... of a beautiful woman," Poe remarked, "is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally it is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover." But I do not love Chloe Ottman. I think I might have seen her once or twice in passing, nothing more. Nor do I think I would have fallen in love with her when I was seventeen. However, I cannot turn her into a character without separating myself from what I *do* love in spite of myself, the real polis of the living and remembered dead for which Holy Land was the great communal expression, and for which Chloe's death was a real communal tragedy.

Almost immediately after the story broke, mourners built and subsequently abandoned a makeshift shrine of votive candles near the padlocked gate and someone left a rose bouquet to die near the Crucifix wiring. Chloe was—or became—much loved and grieved, but like most tragedies in Waterbury, this one was meant to be buried as well as remembered. Nevertheless, countless Facebook memorial pages canonized her selfies in a pastel heaven, her unquestionable

salvation sealed with emojis and sentiments written in a cursive tattoo script. And when Investigation Discovery covered the murder on an episode of *Frenemies*, pages like “Happy 17th Birthday Chloe Ottman” began to attract the distant and occasional bereaved who debated vengeance and forgiveness beneath pictures of a doe-eyed girl learning to look doe-eyed for a camera phone. Most uttered sentiments like “Tragico!!!” or “In my opinion Francisco should be kill because of what he did” or “Always in our hearts.” A contractor from Neelyville, Missouri, given to reposting memes of squirrels that read “PROTECT YOUR NUTS,” wrote, “You never met me. But I seen your story on tv. I can’t believe what happened to you. I will keep you alive in my family.” Similarly, a man from Hamilton, Ontario, wrote: “Please her friends dont let this woman be forgotten like the rest. I don’t know u Chloe but I even miss u.”

Less than a month after Chloe’s murder, I returned to the foot of our town’s famous electrified Cross, her last place. I had not been there since I was close to her age, and my big surplus-booted feet crushed the rosehips and white-cotton cloves against its concrete base like a centurion. I thought about James Agee, who wrote that “a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he *exists, in actual being.*” *Once, that seemed like enough reason to write. Writing, after all, is a kind of forensics.* At Francisco Cruz’ sentencing, the presiding judge, Richard Damiani, described what happened to Chloe Ottman as “the most horrific statement of fact that I have ever come across.” But although Waterbury is unflinching in its acceptance of the fact that the horrific, the sadistic, is often life as it “*exists, in actual being,*” it is also *unflinching in its proprietary silences. What little remains of the Old Man of the Mountain’s culture of faith is its ethos that “We Are the Body of Christ. If One Member Suffers, All Members Suffer.”*

Not surprisingly, the State Attorney’s Office in Waterbury, which has handed down a disproportionate number of Connecti-

cut's death sentences since 1989, plea-bargained Cruz's case to a sentence of fifty-five years. No one wanted a lengthy appeals process, a media trial, a public defender's narration of Chloe Ottman's brief life. Because a victim is "much huger" than whatever might be said about it, we must be cautious about whom we disclose its presence to. This is as much for our sake as it is for others, for the victim we show also discloses much about who we are and who we are not. I am not the great realist that James Agee was, nor am I a clever fabulist like Francisco Cruz. I wish that I could have been a saint like the Old Man of the Mountain or the eighth apostle. I am not. But I am a good dog to station beneath a Cross. I will wait for my master and bury the bones of our pack.

