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Constructing Meaning from the World: A Fusion of International Fiction, Poetry and Essays

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**Constructing Meaning from the World:
A Fusion of International Fiction, Poetry, and Essays**

“My books are gone. My books are gone.” Crying to my mother on the phone about the loss of my furniture, kitchen supplies, and personal mementos, it was the one sentence I kept repeating. All of my college possessions had been destroyed, and the loss felt a numbing shock, like someone had woken me from deep sleep with a punch in the stomach.

Before I left to study abroad in Australia last spring, I stored most of my college possessions in the basement of a friend’s apartment building, planning to move them into a new apartment the next fall. When I returned to St. Louis last August to retrieve my boxes, I was met with a newly refinished laundry room, instead of a padlocked storage compartment filled with my boxes. The apartment building’s basement had been completely re-done over the summer, and the construction crew had destroyed everything in the basement. Upset about the loss of my things, I was slightly comforted by the fact that most of them could be replaced. However, the loss of my books made *me* feel lost. It was as if part of my being had been incinerated, and its ashes scattered across the city.

I remembered many of the books I had stored, but I couldn’t remember them all. I knew that my autographed copy of Robert Olen Butler’s *They Whisper*, found at Subterranean Books one rainy winter afternoon, was gone, but how many other books that I couldn’t recall had disappeared with it? There were used books by Philip Roth, new books of poetry, and a well-worn copy of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a gift from my friend Josh with his notes and ideas scribbled in the margins. Though I knew I could replace some of my lost books, new

copies wouldn't be the same. I wanted my exact copy, the one with certain pages folded over, or a slightly bent back cover. The one found at a used bookstore, or given to me by a friend.

My books are a record of my inner musings—they mark my reading tastes and their growth, the preoccupations of my mind, and the places and people that are important to me. Losing them was a loss of objects that triggered memories of bookshops, friends, and afternoons spent reading in bed, a loss of a piece of my identity. When I began the process of rebuilding my book collection, it was like constructing a new framework for my thoughts. All I had was a small box containing books from home and my trip to Australia. Among its contents were Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* and David Mitchell's *Number 9 Dream*, both from Australia; John Barth's *The Floating Opera*, bought at a used bookshop in Auckland, New Zealand; and *Sailing Around the Room*, a book of poems by Billy Collins, one of my favorite contemporary poets. Those books, and five others, were the lone occupants of my new bookcase's top shelf. In the ensuing months, as the number of books on the shelves slowly increased, I still felt a twinge of something—sadness, regret, loss?—when I looked at my new collection. Now, that inexpressible feeling has disappeared. Examining the colorful procession of spines oriented both vertically and at a variety of horizontal angles on my shelves, I feel content.

My new collection of books, a documentation of the patterns of my mind, is considerably different than my lost collection. Out of necessity, it is a smaller collection; a book must resonate strongly for me to add it to my shelves. Many of the new books are by international writers such as Haruki Murakami, Peter Carey, A.S. Byatt, Eduardo Galeano, and Milan Kundera. Though some of these authors were present in my old collection, they were sprinkled among books that were predominantly written by American and British authors. My interests and tastes as a reader have widened as I've been exposed to new writers, both while in Australia and the United States. There is now more nonfiction on my shelves—a collection of essays by

Susan Sontag, Eduardo Galeano's imaginative rendering of Latin American history, and a cultural studies book on urban living by Jonathan Raban.

As much as my new collection is more sophisticated in scope and genre, it is inextricably tied to the preoccupations of the old collection, and my ongoing fascinations as a reader. I am still an avid reader of poetry, and there are books by Seamus Heaney, Anne Carson, and Denise Levertov on my shelves. The same types of fiction still interest me—I look for something with a distinctive prose style, something that intrigues me when I read the book cover, and something that will challenge me to think in new ways. Many of my books, just as before, are used, because I find the adventure of combing the shelves of a used bookshop delightful. Finally, most of my collection is from the 20th (or 21st) century. The writers of this time period complement and inform my interests in the psychology of human interactions, the isolation of modernity, and the process of constructing meaning from the world.

Though it was never something I particularly noticed in my previous book collections, when I examine this new collection, the insignias at the bottom of book spines stand out. FSG (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) appears frequently, as do Norton, Knopf, and Picador USA. I have a few books with the Sceptre insignia, a British imprint. These tiny symbols represent some of the places that I hope to work in the future. After graduation this spring, I plan to move to New York and pursue a career as an editor at a publishing house—I want to be a professional reader. My interest in working in publishing is a direct outgrowth of my love for books; it has also informed how I view my books, and the books that I buy. My growing consciousness of the company behind the physical book has heightened my sensitivity to things such as cover art, typeface, and paper quality. A book is a physical presence, and as I add to my book collection, I am now alert to that presence in conjunction with the thoughts and ideas within its pages.

I recently made a trip to New York City that became an inadvertent opportunity for the growth of my book collection. In order to gain a better understanding of the publishing industry,

I set up a series of informational interviews with editors at six different publishing houses. An unexpected benefit of these meetings was that they always ended with a gift of two or three books. An editor at New Directions gave me the collected poems of Denise Levertov when I told him she was the first poet I ever read. Two days later, an editor at Simon & Schuster gave me three Hemingway books. Of these gifts, the most exciting book is one I received from an editor at Norton. *Crescent*, by Diana Abu-Jabar, is on her spring list, and hasn't yet been released in bookstores. When she told me it will be released in April, my eyes got large and I exclaimed, "You're giving me a book that no one else has read yet!" At that moment, I felt the thrill of being behind the scenes, of being a person who helps create the books filling shelves in stores, libraries, and homes all over the world. I was hooked. As an editor at a book publishing company, you are the *first* reader, the reader who recognizes the appeal or spark of a piece of writing, and makes sure that writing is shared with other readers.

I am a reader drawn to books that allow me to question the pattern of my thoughts and method for constructing meaning from my surroundings. My book collection—spanning poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and writers from Australia, Japan, and Portugal—represents places I have traveled, hours I've spent in used and new bookstores, and my constant yet changing intellectual interests. My books are a physical record of my fascination with the world. Losing my books last August forced me to build a new, smaller book collection; these new books resonate strongly because their numbers are so limited. Altered by my margin notes, worn by being carried in my backpack, and transformed by their strange juxtapositions on my bookshelves (a collection of Japanese stories next to a book of Billy Collins' poetry has strange implications), my books suggest my past, and gesture towards to my future. Their procession of insignias reminds me that someday I will work for FSG, Knopf, or Norton, helping to produce books that will grace the shelves of other people's book collections. One day, I will add a work of literary fiction or poetry to my shelves that I collaborated with a writer to bring into the world. Sitting on my

shelves amidst Haruki Murakami, Anne Carson, and Italo Calvino, that book will be my first answer to the questions that preoccupy my mind, the beginning of my dialogue with a collection of books chosen carefully, one by one, for their fascinating interrogations of the world.

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