a breeze that stays

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Breeze blocks have been a commonplace element in commercial and residential buildings since the mid twentieth century. The term refers both to generic lightweight concrete bricks which include *breeze* (cinders, or fly ash) in their aggregate, and ornamental wall blocks which channel air through a variety of patterned gaps. As multitudinous, elemental, they often lay hidden in plain sight.

Like a visual palimpsest, or an afterimage, the familiar patterned wall gaps of my childhood felt as though they had been following me – from my origins in the Caribbean – everywhere I went for most of my life. My naïve dream-logic assumptions first led me to believe that breeze blocks had also originated in the Caribbean, and at some point in history had since curiously been adopted everywhere else. This was admittedly biased, but it wasn't entirely unfounded. I knew that I could likely chalk the frequency of my observations up to mere coincidence, perhaps the *Baader-Meinhof* phenomenon, or simply the result of a banal symptom of mass production. However, as Henry Massonnet's *Monobloc* plastic chair[1] is an apt testament, modern ubiquities are usually embedded with their own transnational narratives. To gain the full picture, I decided I needed to reverse the order of pursuit.

What essentially began as an attempt to put words to the experience of leaving home, and finding pang-inducing traces of that home in other homes, unexpectedly also became a meditation on returning home, and finding that while other things had shifted in the transit of time, these traces had only grown bolder. Memory can be a slippery, incalculable thing, and what the mind decides to hold onto as a method of understanding the world – in my case, hollow concrete blocks – is sometimes trivial. But the simple act of naming this triviality can open up an entirely new way of seeing, just as looking through a small hole makes a scene become clearer.

Once I learned that these were called "breeze blocks", I couldn't help but linger within their poetics: a double entendre, blocks which contain breeze, or the blocking of breeze itself. An effort to harness or manipulate something so transient speaks, in one sense to artmaking, in another to the act of articulation, finding the right words. For this transience to be held within concrete naturally creates an interesting dialogue with architecture, the very structure of our lives.

To truly hold onto breeze requires emulating its movement, and as such, this text allows for errantry on the page. As Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant – who I return to frequently as a beacon – affirmed in his seminal *Poetics of Relation*, errantry can serve as a generative mode of thinking for those who have been displaced.[2] By resisting linearity and leaning toward deviation, giving into interruption, connections can form between the seemingly disparate. This wandering interprets the breeze block as a portal or passage to the distant and not-so-distant past, the here and not-so-distant there, attending both to the personal subjective, and the concrete objective.

In the absence of breeze is an overwhelming heat which sits heavy and stagnates. This is especially true close to the equator. Nothing stirs, everything is still. Still what? Stillness is, in one way, presence, persistence, but that's not what I mean. No, *still* as in without movement, without motion. Breath is a constant corporeal breeze, meaning the absence of breath is the only way to lie completely still. But of course, this is actually impossible while still alive, the

[1] The white plastic chair is the most widely used piece of furniture in the world. See Arnd Friedrichs and Kerstin Finger, *220°C Virus Monobloc: The Infamous Chair* (Gestalten, 2010)
[2] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (The University of Michigan Press, 1997) p. 18-20

tongue is never motionless in the mouth – even in sleep its restlessness practices how to form words.

Despite this, stillness can be thought of as an end, it carries a concreteness. Concrete is thought to be more closely aligned with death than it is with life, as Adrian Forty puts it in his sweeping work *Concrete and Culture*[3]. A slamming door of darkness, which denies breath, speech, laughter, is concrete in its ending, blocking the breeze. The idea of denial here is key, the first stage of grief: not everyone is given access to breeze – what is easy, lighthearted – and this is why its absence should be carefully scrutinized. When breeze is denied, everything is still. Still what? Well, for the most part still there, maybe just slowly suffocating. Though, in optimistic, maybe more practical terms, unfaltering. Light things wobble and waft in breeze – in stillness there is at least stability. No more frivolous fluttering.

Who determines this access or denial? We're only in control of our own breeze until someone else stands in the way, then it's no longer ours. Us laypeople, the ones who are made to lean horizontal so as to not impose any friction, are at the mercy of the controllers of the proverbial weather machine. And I actually do mean this to be conspiratorial, from the Latin *conspiro*, "to breathe together". Sometimes it feels like something doesn't want us to breathe together, wants to put an end to all that. Tao Leigh Goffe puts this more concretely: "Racism is the system that ensures Black people across the globe will die before others"[4]. Her latest book *Dark Laboratory*, another beacon, offers a revelatory point of origin for the global climate crisis – not the Industrial Revolution, but the wind in Columbus' sails, marking the beginning of colonialism in the Caribbean.

Like heat, some memories have a way of really lingering. Though *a breeze that stays* is inherently itinerant, it returns again and again to Jamaica, my country of origin, as a means of preservation, a form of archiving. I have genuine fears that this vulnerable island will be tapped of all its resources and sink into the sea in the not-so-distant future, that breeze blocks might be reduced to mere relics of the home that I and so many remember, fossils of what once was. Rather than dwelling on this we can share what breeze we have left – sometimes up close, held tightly against the chest – while acknowledging this looming threat. Today, for now, there is enough to go around.

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[3]Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (Reaktion, 2012) p. 9

[4] Tao Leigh Goffe, *Dark Laboratory: On Columbus, the Caribbean, and the Origins of the Climate Crisis* (Penguin, 2025) p. 51

Breeze is titillating, sensuous. From the old Portuguese *briza* (NE wind), its implication is typically one of ease, a transient steadying. Known for their avid seafaring, this *briza* on Portuguese sails is what allowed for their departure from the Iberian peninsula down and around the strait of Gibraltar to seize Ceuta from the Moors in North Africa in 1415 – marking the start of their colonial expansion, and the very beginning of European colonization. Édouard Glissant might categorize this fateful voyage as one of the earliest *tourbillons de rencontre*, whirlwinds of encounter, which set our modern relational conjuncture into motion.

In contrast, when the Taíno referred to winds in their native Xaymaca they used the word *hura.* Also incredibly avid mariners, they rowed dugout canoes through calm sea waters from island to island, creating a vast archipelagic trade network. Gigantic logs were cut down from the *ceiba* (silk cotton tree), partially burned, then hollowed out whole to fit up to 100 people. Rough seas and strong winds were stirred up by Juracan, their god of destruction – the word 'hurricane' finds its origins in Taíno encounters with Spanish invaders in the 15th century.

Hurricanes have a hollow central 'eye', felt on the ground as a brief breezy respite from the storm. Here in this reflective stasis the extent of the damage can be assessed. At the very back of my grandparents' yard in Spanish Town, a mound of gravel leads up to an insurmountable raw concrete wall, which overlooks the *gully* (deep man-made drainage canals) running through the back of all the houses in the community. During the near-yearly hurricanes of my childhood the gully would swell, and we would watch passively from the back door of the house as this wall breached, the gravel and the grass disappearing under murky cataract flood waters, reflecting jagged whips of white lightning. As the eye passed overhead the water would clear somewhat, and the wall would emerge with a dark band across it like a tan line.

Borders and delineations are never of any real use here, where half the mango tree stretches over the fence and dangles itself into the neighbor's yard at arm's reach. After weeks without rain in magmatic Jamaican summer the emerald grass would shrivel to brown hay. Sometimes I would look up to see black snow raining down from the sky in big chunks, and I would catch it in my hands and smear it into glittery grey on the brown skin of my little arms and legs. I later learned this was ash from someone burning mounds of garbage in a clearing a few houses down the road, embers cooled and carried over by the breeze.

My grandparents' house is small, one storey with a flat roof, made entirely of reinforced concrete breeze blocks. Throughout their community there are continuous building projects in progress or in stasis, neighbours making vertical additions of second or third floors. Concrete stairs seem to float above ground, leading to not-yet-existent levels. Barking dogs guard fences. Wrought iron balconies bloated between ionic pillars sit framed beneath high and wide arches, which might reveal a fan installed on the ceiling, or an exposed wriggling wire

meant for a lightbulb. Building plans are sketched on the backs of envelopes or church programs; piles of blocks and bags of cement lay in wait for months off to one side. Ribbed steel rods jut out like urchin spines from staggered grey blocks in the unfinished sections, reaching up toward the Blue Mountains and out into the future.

Scenes similar to the ones I've described are of course not particular to Jamaica. Adrian Forty explains that unfinished building sites like these are referred to as *castillos de esperanza* in parts of Mexico City, 'castles of hope': left open to elements outside of their control, the hope is that enough money can be saved for the expansion of a home to continue.[5] Some houses, however, are never meant to be completed, will always have rebar sticking out from this corner or that – property taxes in Mexico are reduced significantly if a home is unfinished. This state of perpetual becoming, of flight without landing, can easily be brushed away as being unclassifiable, outside the established frameworks of aesthetic examination. In his book *Autoconstrucción,* artist Abraham Cruzvillegas describes the form of continuous building in the Ajusco district he was born in as a "mode of construction that is beyond aesthetics, that dissolves in front of us into an organic and collaborative totality… a concrete manifestation of urgent needs and the capacity to improvise with the materials at hand"[6].

Aesthetics often transcend space, and in this case the aesthetic of the marginal, the vernacular, the 'developing', is rooted in varying states of porosity, the grey of weathered concrete growing darker. A breeze whistles through the common gaps these pores allow, carrying the daily scents of determination in adversity: of fried fish, stewed meat, hung laundry, sweat from heat and sweat from hard work.

An air of romance is necessary here to fan away mounting incessant frustration, which whines high-pitched in the mind like a dengue-ridden mosquito. There are parts of the world that are not used to experiencing leaks and breaches, that have not been conditioned to expect them – where people go in the hopes of escaping them, though often they follow in other ways. Precarity is an antonym of progress. As a modernizing force, concrete blocks were designed to withstand the elements, to be earthquake-proof, fireproof, waterproof, pest-proof, to keep precarity as far away from the sanctity of the home as possible. Concrete is the second-most widely used substance on earth, second only to water, and was spread around the world in hopes of making this reality ubiquitous – Glissant teaches us that vocations for the universal are rarely benevolent.[7]

Forty muses that while concrete tells us what it means to be modern, is a 'sobriquet of progressive', the material also has a 'telluric backwardness', a crudeness. Though this ambiguity causes him to rethink and contradict himself later: "Concrete is, we could say, untimely matter; it never speaks in more than one tense, generally the present, sometimes the

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[5] Forty, p. 41
[6] Abraham Cruzvillegas, *Autoconstrucción,* trans. Mike Gonzalez (Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2008) p. 12
[7] Glissant, p. 23. Cement manufacturing and concrete production accounts for nearly 8% of global carbon emissions.

future, almost never the past"[8]. For the global majority, perhaps a more accurate and less confusing tense could be Saidiya Hartman's subjunctive – what is imagined, wished or possible.[9]

A gentle stir of breeze can arouse wandering daydreams from fluttering curtains. Eyelids, too, are a porous, pliable barrier – when I close my eyes for a brief rest, the red-orange light is peppered with amorphous blue-green afterimages. These sometimes converge into recognizable forms, in the same way I project shapes of animals onto clouds. The longer I stay here, open and still, the more my heightened breathing slows. In the midst of overwhelming uncertainty, and as imposed barriers threaten to block its flow, enjoying the breeze can be a form of brief imaginative resistance.

For a great percentage of the world's population, dreams about the future involve crossing a border into the 'developed' world. According to data from 2022, Jamaica has the second highest rate of brain drain in the world, outranked by Samoa as the first, and followed directly by Palestine, Micronesia and Somalia. These so-called 'fragile states' have each been uniquely battered by colonialism's obtrusive and exploitative historical breach, the winds of which have only further complicated their respective atmospheres in the present. Opportunity here is often just out of sight, on the outer reaches of the horizon. Being in diaspora can be described as travelling toward the future – does this then relegate a fragile homeland to the intangible realm of the past, of memory?

Grandma *can't believe it's been 15 years* since I left Jamaica. She says this through the phone, a smattering of small boulders. *Time flies.* I wake up in the middle of the night in London covered in sweat, thirsty, buzzing, after a dream of the sun whirring above my head, rising and setting erratically as if in the hand of a discus thrower. I open the window.

There are days when being dislocated means the ground is not the ground, and is set to rupture at any moment. The surface is thin, and the hollow space beneath it feels endless, an abyss all the way down. If I will myself to envision what lies at the very bottom, I see mangled mangrove branches and their aerial roots above shallow stagnant water, sitting atop a base slab of cracked concrete – a crack not unlike Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007) installation at the Tate Modern, which is still visible in a fragment on the floor of the Turbine Hall nearly 20 years later only by virtue of its filled-in concrete scar.[10] In the case of my own lineage, and many many others of an ancestry defined by turbulence and *routedness*, this raised scar marks generational corporeal memory.

Salcedo's other concrete works disrupt domestic furniture objects through the material's engulfing presence, a reckoning with the perpetual instability and subsequent violence felt

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[8] Forty, p. 256

[9] Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts* (small axe, June 2008) p. 11. I'm borrowing this phrase, rather than the often quoted "critical fabulation", because rather than Hartman's continuous attempt at filling archival gaps, I'm more interested in projecting onto a non-linear present.

[10] Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth* (Tate Modern, 2007)

within Columbia, her home country. *Shibboleth* – the name of which is derived from the biblical test of identification[11] – is instead concerned with articulating an absence: the gap left in western conceptions of modernity which fail to address the lasting reverberations of colonialism and imperialism. A pervasive splintering crack extending through the length of the Tate floor forces viewers to look down at the uncomfortable chasm of truths which undergird all of our institutions – the shape of absence is always made clear by the aggregate of solid material which surrounds it.

Stuart Hall, always transfixed by modernity, echoes in his posthumously published memoir *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* that "the modern itself, like everything else, has been expropriated by the west".[12] He spent his life keenly aware of his place within history and the ways that "the present still carries the spectres of the past hiding inside it". We can say the present, too, is an aggregate, mongrel and creolised in the shape of the 'post-colonial'. But, churning as if in the spinning drum of a concrete truck, the present must remain slippery, is unable to settle into solidity. Language can only attempt to articulate this slurry, to pronounce its sediments – at best, to release it from its containment.

Both Hall and I were born in Kingston nearly 70 years apart, witness to considerably different versions of the island decades before and after Jamaica's independence from the British, respectively. We also both made the journey to Britain, *travelling forwards toward the past* across the Atlantic, albeit in entirely different circumstances. His nautical journey in 1951 to study as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford was the pivotal turning point in his life and made him part of a generation now called *Windrush*[13].

Even without the typical transatlantic hold-of-a-ship analogy, a teetering journey like this one can be quite nauseating. I often feel its phantom resonances, the *mal du débarquement*, as a constant dull hum that threatens to take my body out of my own present. Drifting somewhere in the threshold between seasick and homesick, the hairs on my arms begin to dance.

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[11] Holy Bible. In the Book of Judges, two Semitic tribes try to cross the Jordan River, and are asked by sentries to pronounce the word "shibboleth". The Gileadites pronounce the word just fine, but the Ephraimites can't pronounce the "sh" sound, and are slaughtered.

[12] Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Penguin, 2017) p. 221

[13] Roger Kershaw, *The Story of the HMT Windrush (1930-1954)* (The National Archives, 2022).
Many people are unaware that before the *HMT Empire Windrush* became known for carrying 800 passengers from the West Indies to aid in Britain's post-war labour shortage in 1948, the ship was originally a German vessel, the *Monte Rosa*, named after the second highest mountain in the Alps. During the war, the troopship was deployed for the invasion of Norway in 1940, and used to cart around 50 Norwegian Jewish people to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps in 1942. Once the Nazis were defeated the British acquired the ship as a prize of war in 1945. Nearly a decade later, after setting sail from Port Said in Egypt in 1954, the *Windrush* sank in the Mediterranean Sea.

Counterpoised in a grid formation, ornamental breeze blocks create a doubling effect, as a synchronous pattern forms at their meeting seams. Though their name and shape imply a level of functionality, allowing for cooling airflow, in the majority of cases their application is purely decorative, or used as privacy screens.

Tropicality, or the reduction of the Caribbean to trope, is a narrative treatment I often find myself frustrated by. Tropes lay limp like puppets, attract sharks like blood and bait. Turquoise water, coconuts with straws and black resort workers with open palms balancing drink trays fuel the obtrusive tourist economy, essentially the only thing keeping these islands afloat – the Caribbean is the most tourist dependent region in the world. But these strangers will never be made privy to the fact that the privatized white sands beneath their feet have likely been dredged from local public beaches, which have been rendered unusable. Or that the palm trees above are stripped of their fruits by hand every morning to avoid potential lawsuits in foreign currency from falling coconuts splitting open their precious heads. It may mean nothing to them to learn that clean water is siphoned from the trickling taps of all my family members to ensure that their resort shower boasts the adequate water pressure they're used to. But constructed tropes can act as a veil, make us spectral – what is seen can never actually stand for the totality of what remains hidden[14]. We can revel in a closed door, behind a concrete wall which obfuscates, in the face of so many prying hands and eyes.

[14] Perhaps Glissant's demand for a right to opacity, in life and language, was borne out of his native Martinique for this reason.