

eredita



There's always a certain amount of respect that we give to the dead and dying. We shield the eyes of those closest from their withered and wounded bodies, we lay them in wooden beds and cake their faces with nude goop that tries to mask the rainbow death paints onto their skin and cover up their rot with cloth. We pray for their spirit and are left to construct a legacy with the shards of memory we retain. That's where all the respect is, really; there's not much glory in dying itself.



A fallen soldier doesn't look nearly so brave when we see a photo of his remains splattered into dirt so you couldn't pull the two apart. Imagine, for a second, and... no, we don't quite respect that. At his funeral though, we imagine his family, chests puffing with pride and tears with images of him standing tall and young and proud, uniformed and poised like a hero, an icon, a legend. He is decorated with pretty medals and pretty stories about his valor and value. Even though the death couldn't be more grotesque, he's laid delicately to rest in a place he won't roll over, whatever due respect paid, a legacy secured. His memory is not gore and filth like his end was, it's glamour and it's glory.



How, then, does one capture a neighborhood in pieces, a neighborhood silently being absorbed back into its earth like flesh falling from bone? I could (and did) go around and snap photos like it's an autopsy and the remains of trattorias and nonna's houses were my evidence: the decades-built outline of grime where a sign used to be, a tale passed by word of mouth about the old woman that lived upstairs who only spoke in Italian (Sicilian, to be exact) and lived there since the 70s and gave away bread for free. I, the unpre-scribed medical examiner, did my duty and collected all of these vestiges until I realized the puzzle I put together looked a lot more like the soldier in pieces. Remains in dirt are no way to pay respect to anywhere someone once called home, let alone thousands.



We like to pretend that we're above glamour, but isn't the soldier standing tall nicer than the one mixed into mud? The flag waving behind him might just be printed onto a paper roll, a cookie cutter mold for the fabrication of an ideal where hundreds, thousands stand proud and tall just like him and most end up the same, but it's definitely easier on the eyes. We prefer this image even to the serene, cake-faced and concealed but ever-real body in the coffin. So, let me paint you a pretty picture. Let me write you an obituary.

When Little Italy wasn't so charming and its main exports were illness and violence instead of pasta and vintage clothes, it housed nearly 10,000 newly American Italians in a space that blanketed two square miles. Tenements offering shelter for an unbeatable \$10 in rent became homes to families and restaurateurs and shopkeepers, each bringing a chunk of their original home into their newly defined space. This enclave matured into a microcosm of its roots, rapt with feasts and festivals and all that Italy could offer on a few downtown Manhattan streets for decades.



With each few years that passed, though, that lucky group of people who lived their American Dream trickled out and past the bounds of the neighborhood, and sure as the place matured, rent (ever-sadistic) began to ascend. With climbing rent came higher prices, and the cost of meals went from single digits to double, triple. Those who stayed tried their best to hold on, like the seniors in houses held for so long that they still paid their now-controlled old \$100 in rent until they too died, or were inevitably bought out. Such is the natural cycle of things; life giving way to death little by little and people fading away. With SoHo and its charming but absurdly overpriced boutiques grinding down one side and Chinatown's decidedly not-quite-Italian barrage of eateries and markets gnawing on the other, today's Little Italy is hardly a few blocks on Mulberry Street; the exact number depends on who you ask. Apartments that were once tenements sell for millions. As of a 2010 census, not a single resident of Little Italy was actually born in Italy.



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The image of destruction is the truth, but too new to be a memory. The images of the neighborhood in its heyday are preserved in more films than you could count on fingers, so familiar now that every face in them could be anyone's. The color and sound and cuisine and culture become immortal in them. This legacy, like the man that once stood proud and tall, is its own kind of history, one that will remain long after the strewn flesh and bone have sunken into earth.