

TRIBECA CITIZEN

The Recollections of Jane Freeman

February 17, 2015 • History



When artist *Jane Freeman* mentioned—in a comment on *John Willenbecher's* post about *Tribeca's pioneer days*—that she had some photos from back then, I emailed her to see if she'd let me run them. She was about to get a puppy, so we agreed that she'd have her hands full for a while. "I've also written essays, rather as John has done, about early Tribeca and how wonderfully strange everything once was," she added. And now she's sharing them with us. I find them marvelously evocative, and it's the kind of

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writing that this site—being mainly engaged with news—rarely showcases. Note that they're not necessarily in chronological order, and part two is forthcoming. The art is all by Jane.

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In Feb. 1976, when I was 26, I moved downtown to an illegal loft on Hudson Street. I shared the sixth floor with Jos. Schaffner Printing factory. The rent was \$250/month. My half (1,200 sq. ft.) came with four full-size dead trees, a rickety bed cobbled from odd planks, dried up paint tubes. Until I found someone to jerry-rig a bathroom, I used the men's room in the hallway and showered at the Y. The ceilings were so tall that eventually I had a bedroom-on-stilts built. I cooked on a hot plate, and balanced my dinner of soup on a window ledge, gazing over majestic, unpopulated, industrial spans, and sunsets over the Hudson. I'd climb out one of the enormous windows to dangle my feet on the adjacent rooftop. No one around, except the wolf-like dog that patrolled up there. I met him after my first trepidatious night in this new, dead-quiet, desolate, low-rise, 19th-century neighborhood. That first morning, waking at sunup (no curtains, no shades), I was aghast to see the wolf-dog staring in at me with feral blue eyes.



Before I left my tiny uptown flat, I'd cut out an article about Philippe Petit, who had just walked between the World Trade Center towers on a rope. At our first building meeting, I

discovered that Philippe was my third-floor neighbor. On the top floor lived the manager of a famous rock band. The building was filled with artists, musicians, magicians. Philippe would leave for work on his unicycle.

I had to leave the loft in 1982, when the building was sold to Howard Rower who was married to Alexander Calder's daughter and was a mean person. The first thing he did was plaster the doors with eviction notices. (The usual story.) I moved a few blocks north to Harrison St., to a four-story walk-up over a bar. The four-room railroad flat had reptilian green walls, seven cracked, boarded up windows, and no kitchen to speak of, or bathroom—just a toilet at the end of a long dim hallway. The previous tenants had been there for 60 years and had paid \$60/month. (Mine started at around \$325.) The two useless wall outlets probably dated from Thomas Edison's days. The gas jets in the narrow stairway were plugged. Each room contained an iron bed and a heavy armoire filled with Miss Havisham-type items. Since I wouldn't dream of taking up valuable square footage with furniture, I happily got rid of everything. Rattling about in four empty rooms, I dug up ten layers of linoleum, under which were newspapers from the Korean War, and beneath them, newspapers from World War II. And beneath them, wide-plank, 19th-century floors.

Besides eschewing furniture and home decor, I also abstain from using heat. When I moved in, the radiator at one end of the flat



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was broken and the other, which probably had stood near the blocked-up fireplace, was missing. I disconnected the gas line. Admittedly, this was in midsummer, when one can't imagine being cold. Every December I tape plastic dropcloths onto the windows, which don't keep the wind from blowing cold and debris through fissures in the old walls. Only when it gets below freezing out is it a mite too chilly indoors; but there are always hot baths, fingerless gloves, root soup and coffee. And the furry animals, to cuddle up to.

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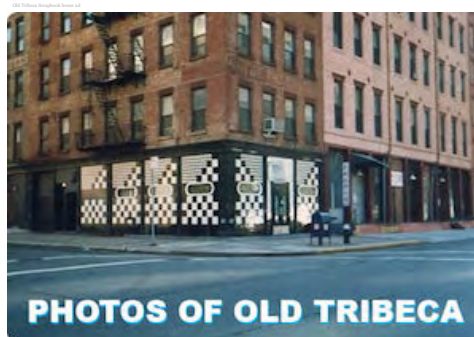
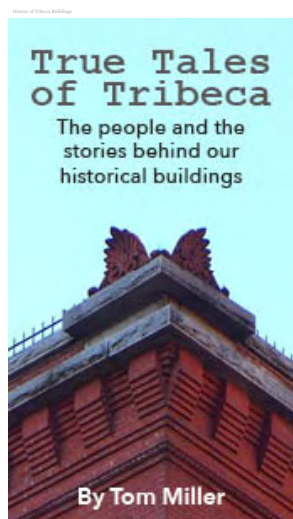


The previous tenants of this apartment left around 1980. I never met them, but there are stories about them. The Martinezes were in their late 90's, and even though the rent was affordable—\$60/month—they no longer could manage the stairs. The couple never went outside—two ancients prowling five dark rooms, bathing in a metal tub in the kitchen, two electric outlets that no modern plug would fit. The walls were painted a scaly, amphibious gray-green. Ten layers of linoleum covered the floor, beneath which were newspapers from the Korean War, beneath which were papers from World War II, beneath which were pristine, wide, dark planks. The seven windows were cracked, covered with plywood, and the wind gusted in anyway and through the leaky walls. The western windows, facing the river, must have had an ample view of ships offloading goods at the Mercantile Exchange.

I can imagine something of their lives by what they left behind: four iron bedsteads, old wardrobes and bureaus, jars of false teeth, and strange all-sorts collections in collapsing boxes. When they left for good, they left everything behind, so I was the accidental heir to their trove, an accumulation of half a century. I'm told that every night, Mr. M. supped at this corner window, then pitched his leftovers and beer bottles out onto Greenwich Street. I understand the pleasure of defenestrating things. I pinch off dead houseplant leaves, or a bit of fuzz, toss them into the breeze, watch their flight, and feel a miniature frisson of terror and vertigo. A mote loops brilliantly in a china-blue sky, changes tack, zooms to a balcony across the street, opts for the air again, soars free and finally disappears, as everything eventually does. From here, the high-rise balconies seem like pigeonholes, from which just about anything not weighted down could blow away in a strong wind. In fact, last May, the wind blew a terrier from his terrace,



Tribeca Citizen on Instagram



sailed him around and landed him safely on a balcony five stories down. It would be nice to get his point of view, as one who was jettisoned from on high and lived to tell the tale.

Thrills and chills at the edge of a ledge! I place a toy car on the sill and mentally squeeze into it, on the brink of doing a Thelma-and-Louise. Bon voyage, Mr. M.! Imagination lets one play safely, and enjoy a payoff of terror, which is in fact real. Wheel!

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Tribeca, 1980. Getting coffee at the bodega, I run into a neighborhood painter named Roy. I know him to nod to; walking my malamute Aleut, I sometimes see him with his shepherd, West, on West Street, or up on the West Side Highway: The truncated, disused elevation has become something of an unrestricted dog run. Roy apparently has forgotten my name, but he mentions, as an offhand invitation, a party tonight on Vestry Street. I give a "maybe I'll drop by" shrug.

Around 9 I enter a big loft space on Vestry. A throng of Isadora Duncans is leaping about in flapping Moroccan pantaloons, flying scarves and kurtas. The occasion, I learn, is a bon voyage for someone named Jacqueline, off to teach dance at the U. of Melbourne, Australia. I head for a paint-encrusted trolley converted into a temporary buffet: Twin Gallo gallons (red and white), punch bowl, Jarlesburg, Triscuits, pretzels, chips; pastel palette of dips as viscous as rabbit-skin glue. Hanging around the food are poet-types in black and purple with faces like albino rabbits, bodies like Scandinavian flatware. But most are artists, in splotched jeans half-devoured by turps and stand oil. As for me, I've been so busy lately with my factotum non-career, I haven't painted in two weeks. But I dress the part: Pearl Paint t-shirt, watch cap, jeans, and spattered penny-loafers with subway tokens in the slots.



Averse to dancing and noise, I pour myself a drink and wander off to explore the rooms partitioned unpainted sheetrock or paisley bedspreads hung from string. Art is everywhere—the gloomy first bursts of dubious potential, relieved by sporadic Fauve and Nabis posters. Pinned to one wall (made of a quilt) hangs a row of postcards that track

someone's cross-country itinerary. Another makeshift space defines a kitchen of sorts. Many of the books, in stacked crates, are in duplicate or triplicate—a telltale sign of someone's multiple relationships. The john is huge and gray; jerry-rigged shower with a plastic dropcloth curtain, strange toilet on a plinth. No sink: toothbrushes are in the kitchen, in a Bustelo coffee can.

Back at the refreshments, I swallow another Yellow Mellow. To my surprise, a guy beckons me to dance and it's too noisy to say no. Reluctantly I put down my cup. My partner shouts, "Are you a professional dancer?" revealing that either (1) he's drunk, (2) he has no sense of movement, or (3) I am faking it okay. His name is Gabriel (I think); he's in architecture school somewhere.

Pretty soon the balance fluid in my inner ear is spinning like Blue Whisk in a Maytag. I keep losing him. When the music abruptly slows and the decibels drop, he pops in front of me and takes me in his arms. The song is "I Only Have Eyes For You," by the Flamingos. And suddenly I'm back in seventh grade. Miami, 1961. Whenever a mid-afternoon rain-shower surprises us out on the Phys. Ed. field, we're sent to Study Hall for the rest of the period. Today, however, no such luck. We're herded into the gym, which is unctuous with humidity, trapped air and sweat. To our collective dismay, we're forced to dance. Above the groans and giggles, the desiccated Phys. Ed. teachers (white Bermuda shorts and polo shirts, whistles on cords around crepey necks, faces like leather handbags) warn: If we try to skip, we'll get F's in *Effort and Conduct*.

The gym is rife with pubescent reluctance. I'm poised to fight-flight-freeze. Barely 5' tall at age 12, I'm paired with a huge, damp boy with oily black hair. We face off uneasily. A slow song scratches to a start over the staticky PA: "I Only Have Eyes For You." Mine are fixed on his clammy, yellow-check, whale-like midsection. The boy wraps a log-like arm around my waist, engulfs my right hand in the Mazola-moist cavern of his left. He smells like Arby's roast beef.



Presently, in the malodorous atmosphere of Shenandoah Junior High, we awkwardly begin to shift from side to side.

After a while he starts getting creative and his dips deepen. Who does he think he is, Ricky Ricardo? Now I'm leaning so far to the left that my right saddle shoe lifts high above the concrete. My foot waves in midair and I am powerless. The boy is oblivious. The Flamingos croon on and on. I feel like a flamingo myself, wings clipped, teetering on one knobby leg....

It's not so bad, eighteen years later, here in Tribeca, shuffling anonymously to the Flamingos, this time with both feet down. Gabriel and I circle about the crowded room and find ourselves in front of a built-in wardrobe with missing doors. The shelves are crammed with wooden shapes and dusty-rusty tools, which remind me of the sculptures I'd just seen at the Louise Nevelson retrospective at the Whitney. An entire floor was divided into three rooms painted, respectively, black, white, and gold. The monochromatic sculptures, in their color-coded rooms, almost disappeared. As did I, dressed in black, lingering in guess which room.

Mrs. Nevelson arrived wearing gold and white robes, a wide-brim hat and her famous centipede eyelashes. A subdued hubbub ensued which lasted until 11, when she quietly slipped away. Hanging over the first-floor landing of the museum, I saw her climb into a long black car that had been idling on Madison. She drank something in the back seat, with three dark strangers—studio assistants? Sons? Their faces glowed like embers in the streetlamp. One of them looked like a boy I had an unrequited crush on in tenth grade, who never even knew my name. Now,

come to think of it, I can't remember his.

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I've lived a block or two from the Hudson River, in lower Manhattan, since February, 1976. In those days, we'd let our dogs run on the landfill beach and make sculpture out of stuff the river washed up. Most late



afternoons, when the industrial streets simmered down, I'd go to the roof to watch ocean liners, barges and tugs slip by in the transcendent hush. I'd transpose them into barks and brigs, and imagine Whitman's "forests at the wharves." He used the same metaphor in "The World below the Brine" ("forests at the bottom of the sea, the branches and leaves..."). I like this unintentional connecting of above and below. Living near water is conducive to going inside and sounding oneself out. The paradoxes we're made of come to light. "Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever," says Melville, who was born on Pearl Street at the Seaport and lived in New York much of his life.

Moby-Dick begins at the Battery. Melville, the mystical cousin of Whitman (and Ryder of course), has spun me a new apprehension of life entwined with water and the call to attend the mystical. On the brink of his sea voyage, Ishmael says, "The great flood-gates of the wonder world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose...there floated into my inmost soul...one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air."

Now little of the 19th-century maritime legacy remains in Tribeca. In the 90s, I tried to capture the old warehouses and domiciles in miniature, using indigenous found objects: a splinter from a crumbling loading dock became a miniature loading dock; a plank became a warehouse, a discarded painting some artist threw out became the wall of a tenement flat. What interested me then, before *Moby-Dick*, was the fugitive sense of age and of history, a desolate beauty on the brink of change. What interests me now, having read *Moby-Dick*, are the pointers a masterpiece provides to the timeless ineffable, and our delivery from the superficial mundane through archetypes such as Melville's "grand hooded phantom"—whatever that may be.



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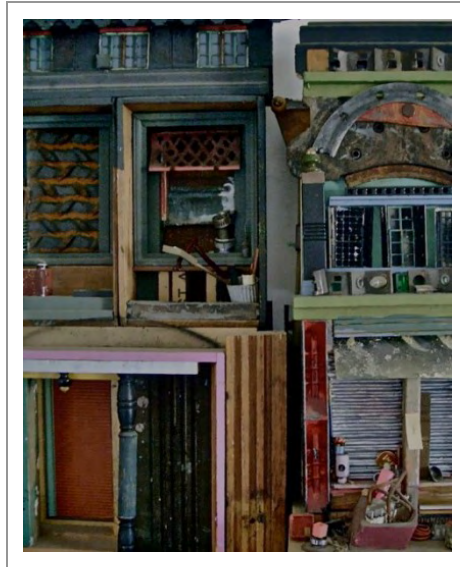
After the first snow, a few weeks back, I took the dogs out before anyone was about. We began in Staple Street, where I let them romp off-leash. Then we headed to the river, which was as soft as smoke. Finding untrodden snow in the city is rare, but that morning we made all the tracks. In the North Meadow, a pair of isolated pines, triangular like arrowheads, stood out in isolate splendor against the fallow lawn. The lotus pond was solid ice, except for a scattering of spidery black star-shaped cracks through which you could see the inky water. Yellow remnants of tall pond grass stood like wattles and thatch, and were topped by cotton-boll-like dollops of new snow. The surface of the pond was glazed and pebbly and impressed with leaves like textured leaf-and-petal stationery from India. Later the stars filled in. Still, beneath the impervious glaze you could see orange koi drift eerily, as if through mercury, perhaps asleep.



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What I loved best about Tribeca, besides the 19th-century buildings and the nearness of the river, were the police stables, which until recently were at the First Precinct, on Varick and Ericsson Place. Every day you'd hear hooves on paving stones, and occasionally a stentorian, air-clearing whinny. For a time in the '70s, just after I'd moved downtown, I worked the late shift at a Soho restaurant. I'd walk home after midnight along the deserted streets. Sometimes I'd stop at the Market Diner (long since torn down) on Laight and West, on the river. The clients in the wee hours were strange indeed—I remember four or five guys sitting in a booth, all with blue mustaches.

Early morning, at the river, I heard the horse before I saw him: a jetty steed named Cannon. His whinnying was so sustained and harmonic, his name could have been spelled the other way. For 20 minutes his neighing reeled and ricocheted like thunder. When he cantered off, I heard him from a quarter of a mile away. Once I asked his rider what the fuss was about. "He's a herd-bound horse," the policewoman explained. "He's calling out, hoping to find other horses."



I usually see only one horse at a time on the esplanade, though sometimes there are two. Sometimes Apple and Lee are tethered together at a fence. Lee, who belongs to Officer Sean, weighs 1600 pounds, is six years old, stands 16 hands tall, and is part Clydesdale. Sean weighs about 180, is in his 30s, is about 6'3", and looks part Viking. He answered my horse questions: the life expectancy of a horse is 40. He gets to run regularly in a paddock. Each breed has a different gait. The saddle weighs five pounds. And yes, he had named his mount. "How'd you pick 'Lee'?" I asked. Sean said: "It's the custom, when your partner is killed, to name your horse after him."

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Minutes ago, I heard an immense clatter of hooves. I looked out the window to see hundreds of police horses trotting down Greenwich Street. Horses of every color and many breeds—browns, greys, whites, blacks. Clydesdales, quarter horses, Appaloosas. The police stables are a few blocks away [they were moved, after this writing, in 2011]; I often hear the clip-clop of a horse or two on cobblestones. But this equine deluge was something else; a sustained, bountiful energy, a clarity of precision consonant with the brisk, joyous gait of fall. How remarkable to live near horses.

One cold, misty, full-moon night, I saw a woman emerge from the police stables with a jet-black thoroughbred. She led him to the quiet intersection of N. Moore and Varick. There was a suggestive pause, then someone else appeared, from the opposite direction. This woman was with an enormous black Great Dane. The two animals floated together, nose to nose, as in a dream. Was it an assignation? The great dog barely lifted his head; the ebony horse barely lowered his. They touched noses under the moon, then gracefully turned from each other and circled away.



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Tags: Jane Freeman

8 Comments

[Andrea](#)

February 17, 2015 • 9:19 am

Wow, what an amazing piece. The stories are incredibly evocative and so specific, it's easy to put yourself there. It takes a special person to live in a pioneering fashion, and I'm grateful that Ms. Freeman wrote about the experience and has shared it with us now. I especially enjoyed the horse stories. Her art is fantastic, the sketches, paintings and sculpture are all very expressive and full of memory.

[betty](#)

February 17, 2015 • 10:15 am

Thank you Eric. Thank you Jane. Magical.

[Sheila](#)

February 17, 2015 • 8:48 pm

That was really lovely in every way..thanks!

[christina](#)

February 18, 2015 • 12:09 am

thank you so much for this piece which was so entertaining and evocative. we moved into 1 hudson in 83 just after you left and had to deal with the maniac howard rower. your writing inspires me to put together my own recollections of

those times when you walked down the street and knew everybody. now it seems we are strangers in our own land. i like your paintings too!

Wicki Boyle

February 19, 2015 • 8:50 am

I moved on Moore in 1977 and have been here ever since and I was transported by your writing and images. The sound of the horses plodding away in the morning and jauntily clomping home at the end of a shift marked my days. I miss it.

Thank you e and jane

Richard Blinkoff

February 19, 2015 • 10:19 am

Jane: What a wonderful, wonderful piece. Thank you so much.

Huck's Mom

February 20, 2015 • 4:16 pm

Beautiful Jane. Thanks for sharing the writing and art work with us. Look forward to the next installment. Thanks Erik for putting it in the "Citizen"

SJW

February 23, 2015 • 8:07 pm

Wow, these stories are beautiful. Thanks so much for bringing them to us!

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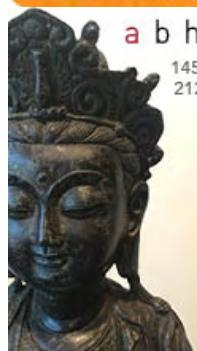
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Maybe Mercury is in retrograde, and accounts for a rash of bad manners from strangers that I've encountered recently. Maybe it's New York. Of course I don't blame planets or the city. I've learned to examine what part I might play in adversarial situations, for it usually does take two to tangle. But not always. In the cases described below, which happened over a span of two days, I chose to bow out rather than engage. The first incident happened when the dogs and I went to Battery Park. Castle Clinton, the early 18th century fort at the tip of Manhattan, was open to visitors. I ventured in, heading for the exit just opposite. A gigantic guard appeared, and bellowed robotically, like a siren in a gun-tower: "Dogs-are-not-allowed-here! Leave-the-premises-at-once!" That's clearly where we were headed, but he kept it up: "This-is-Federal-Property!! You-can't-be-here! Leave-immediately!" The dogs had their tails between their legs, and I felt like a trespassing scoundrel.

Half an hour later we got to our street, which was still being ripped up from end to end. No matter: a photo shoot was spread out right in front of my door. I stepped around the sweating stylist, two ethereal models, and a model Boston terrier getting treats to stay seated. During the 15 seconds it took to fish my keys out, I observed the fascinating rows of fabric-tightening pins and clamps at the back of each girl from ankle to nape. In the five seconds it took to shove the key in and turn it, the stylist sneered, "Are you able now to move out of the shot?" The photographers had yet to take aim, so what was the hurry? Besides, I thought, I live here. How is it that irrational sociopaths and jumpy power-mongers can make me feel like the world's most undesirable interloping scoundrel? Tails between legs once again, the dogs and I got ourselves upstairs.

Next day, on the way to Housing Works, the used-book store, I stopped for a take-out coffee. A man whined, "There's no Half and Half!" Sure enough, there was everything but Half and Half: Skim, Whole, 2%, Soy. Trying to be helpful, I said, "Just ask them, and they'll bring it out." The man snapped, "Don't tell me what to do!" My cue to be off.

At the bookstore, I headed for Art & Architecture. The section was inaccessible because someone had commandeered it. He was squatting in front of the shelves, knees apart, arms extended in a roadblock. He wasn't just balancing his squat. I hovered expectantly, hoping he'd emerge from his reverie and move aside. But this squatting, brachiating guy read each title, left arm along the rows, right hand fingering each spine in a proprietary caress. Beneath his armpit was a book on Sir John Soane that I wanted to see. I hinted: "Excuse me?" Coldly he turned his head and said: "I'm here now. I've got this section. It's mine. Go somewhere else." I said, "But this is a bookstore." He snapped, "At least have the courtesy to move somewhere else until I am finished!" I gave up on Art & Architecture and went to Poetry & Philosophy. As I paid for my finds, I told the clerk about the creepy man. He said, "Imagine what his life must be like." "Yeah," I replied. But I



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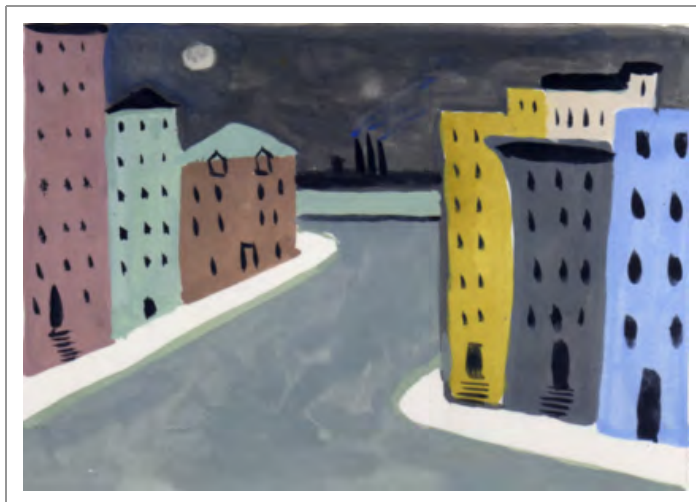
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- Assunta Madre
- Wisefish Poké
- Martignetti Brothers' bar
- German School Manhattan
- New York Vintners indoor farm
- Maman in Northwest Tribeca
- Au Cheval restaurant
- Regen Projects gallery
- Kiddie Academy
- Walker Hotel Tribeca / Blue Bottle
- 456 Greenwich hotele

couldn't.

.....



Through the peep-window in the front door I see a square of pines like a Christmas card. There's a thick phalanx of Christmas trees stacked all the way down the block, some encroaching against our building and, in an adjacent "neck of the woods," plenty more hemmed in behind the fence of the sidewalk café. This temporary forestation is both sweet and nettlesome, beautiful and unseemly.

The nettlesome part is that it's hard to get in and out of the house or down the block because of all the trees and people shopping for them and the commotion of a 24-hour presence of tree-sellers, who have brought the trees from Canada. They work in shifts around the clock and appear to sleep in their van. The unseemly part stems from my awareness that these beautiful trees are already dead. They've been usurped from the earth to be bought, bedizened, and dumped. I never liked the idea of hacking down vital trees to indulge brief human caprice. I wish people cultivated live trees to festoon at Christmastime.

There are many transient tree farms all around the city in this season. A few weeks ago, the traffic triangle on Sixth Avenue near Spring St. was dominated by a large tent full of Christmas lights and ornaments, boxes of tinsel, etc., and guarded by a great blow-up Santa who jumped about as Christmas music blared scratchily from an undisclosed source. The cut trees, most bundled in nylon netting, were manned by a burly guy in his forties who looked, appropriately, like a lumberjack. As I walked through the lot, he petted the dogs. Loquacious and country-friendly, he extended his hand and introduced himself as Billy. I noticed that his labial-nasal creases sparkled with wreath glitter. Billy identified all the different tree types and had me feel the Douglas firs for their suppleness. Since I'd never felt any needles before, supple or otherwise, I didn't know how to appraise his commodity. He confided that his trees had a bigger-than-usual "gift base." I guess I looked blank, so he explained that the more trunk exposed at the bottom, the more gifts could be piled there. I could see that more was definitely better.

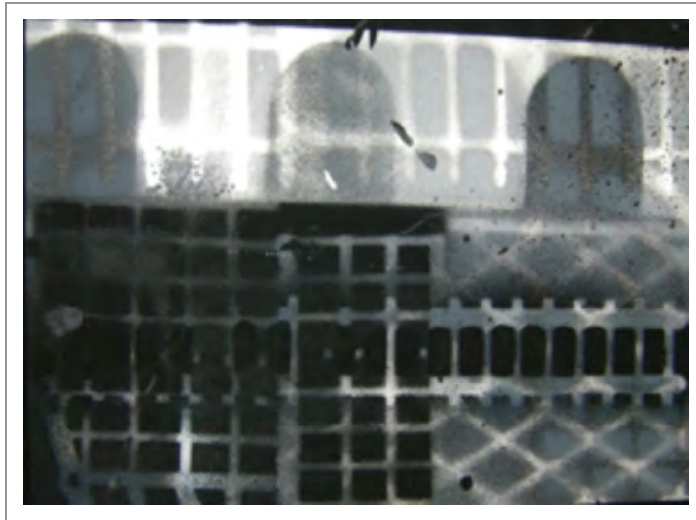
Curious about why people do what they do, I asked about his background. Turned out he had a Masters in cellular biology. Even



Tribeca Citizen on Instagram



more interesting, he'd spent many years working on large cruise ships. This I wanted to know about. He gave it serious thought, then with a conclusive nod, said slowly: "Being aboard cruise ships means a lot of heavy-duty introspection time."



.....

It is Christmas Eve. The landscape is quite empty; its colors are orchestral: henna-brown, a touch of brass, ample silver, ivory, ebony. Faint clouds smudge the oyster-pearly sky, like fingerprints. The north meadow is spread with tarps to protect it from frost. The tarps resemble sails drying out on a pier. They're a luminous sea-glass gray and luff ominously, mimicking in color and movement the Hudson beyond. Earlier, the tarps were dotted with hundreds of seagulls, skating to a muted duet of mournful foghorn and train whistle. And then the keening birds rose in unison, their whelken whiteness merging with the oyster sky.

Each branch and twig stands out in folk-art clarity, painted with a tiny brush. In one tree clings a passel of sparrows like remnant brown leaves. At the tree's roots grumbles a flock of puffed pigeons. Some Canada geese bask on the lawn like a fleet of freighters. There are a few Arctic geese, too. The koi in the pond are beneath a plywood shelter topped with stones, where they'll stay hidden 'til spring.

My mind is still on *Moby-Dick*. This week I built two miniatures of the Spouter Inn. One is the rain-damp façade, after this passage:

*Moving on, I at last came to a dim sort of out-hanging light
not far from the docks, and heard a forlorn creaking in the air;
and looking up, saw a swinging sign over the door with a
white painting upon it, faintly representing a tall straight jet of
misty spray, and these words underneath —"The Spouter-Inn:
—Peter Coffin."*

The other miniature is a construction of the room at the Spouter Inn where Ishmael and Queequeg stayed, before setting sail from New Bedford, on Christmas Day.

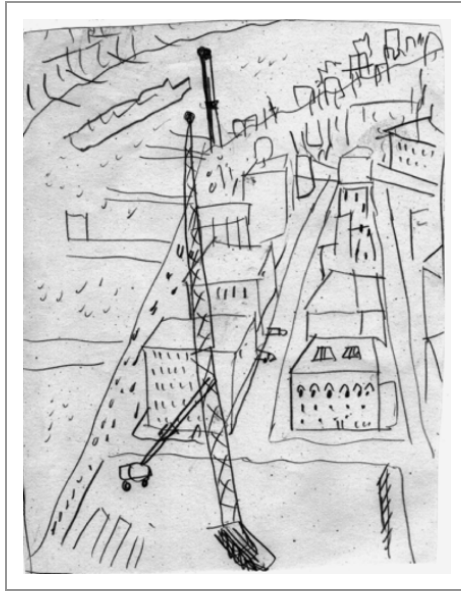
Tribeca's first bookstore (not counting Ruby's on Chamber Street, from long ago) has just opened. My first purchase was a pop-up *Moby-Dick*

by Sam Ita. As I was examining the real rope rigging in the book, I glanced up to the undulant mural of literary giants over the café. Next to Whitman, Melville sits close to a pipe-smoking Queequeg. A fictitious character may not be an author, per se, but Queequeg did copy out his glyphic tattoos on his coffin. Was this act the creation of a new literary genre, i.e., autonecrotology? In any case, I hope he's enjoying his Starbucks, for tomorrow he and Ishmael set sail.



.....

On holidays, Tribeca is quieter than a small town. In the rare absence of traffic, the dogs and I freely gallop across the West Side Highway. There's no snow; still the white denseness of the sky is suggestive of snow; it resembles, as well, a sweeping chunk of unpolished marble. And with the river trembling like crushed gray tissue, the sight—quite a gift this Christmas morning—reminds me of an immense, hoary whale.



Bordered by iron fences and lath bulwarks, the lawns by the river are “closed for the winter,” bedded under tarps. The children’s garden, where in August bloom sunflowers tall as lighthouses, resembles, with its neglected plots and weathered planters, a blasted heath. The colors of the vegetal remains span the spectrum of boiled green, but amid escarole and

chard, there spouts a stand of plummy grass, pale blond in the wan light, whose tawny feathered scrolls nod above a tangled skein of straw stalks.

Near the North Cove, construction has stopped on a high rise which, conforming to the curve of the land, resembles the hull of a ship being built, complete with looped lanyards, halyards, rigging and poles projecting upward like bowsprits. Webbed nets waft in the wintry breeze; bundled tarps mimic furled sails. A hoist-hook resembles a dangling anchor. Atop the heap is a cabin-like edifice that resembles a deckhouse. Above it all whips an American flag, like a ship’s pennant. This structure seems on the brink of casting off and sailing through the harbor to the high seas.

This nautical imagery comes from reading *Moby-Dick*, curled in my narrow, listing bunk-bed, in an unheated little cabinet-room, with struts athwart the ceiling, in the fo’c’s’le of a house on Harrison close to the water, which was probably a mariners’ rooming house when *Moby-Dick* was written. To keep warm, there are the dogs and cats, and Ishmael’s advice, from his bed at the Spouter-Inn, Chapter 11:

...to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.... if, like Queequeg and me in the bed, the tip of your nose or the crown of your head be slightly chilled, why then, indeed, in the general consciousness you feel most delightfully and unmistakably warm. For this reason a sleeping apartment should never be furnished with a fire.... For the height of this sort of deliciousness is to have nothing but the blanket between you and your snugness and the cold of the outer air. Then there you lie like the one warm spark in the heart of an arctic crystal.

.....

Tribeca, on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, despite the cold, stalwart farmers arrive on Greenwich Street to sell their produce. On Saturdays, when the neighborhood quiets down, Tribeca

resembles a country village, a felicity enhanced by these most welcome farmers. Shirley Bianco drives down from her farm in Bedford, N.Y. In minutes she sets up a white tent whose walls form dozens of skeins of beautiful wool, sheared from her own sheep and hand-dyed. Enclosed on three sides by thick, colorful loops of wool, it's like I'm inside a rainbow.

Shirley's passion is protecting the environment. She lives the opulent frugality of a latter-day Thoreau. The first time I talked with her, I was inspired to take up knitting again. I bought a pair of bamboo needles and a skein of fern-green wool. The best-smelling, best-textured wool ever. I've re-discovered how akin knitting is to meditation. Focusing on the needles and the yarn, you can get a knitter's detached high.

Today, the temperature is below freezing. To warm up, Shirley sits in her car with the heat on. My dogs Caleb and Tracy and I join her for a few minutes. Then I go home to fetch some of the soup I've just made—winter squash, root vegetables, red lentils, quinoa, star anise. We talk about the dogs, who are Shetland Sheepdogs. Shirley invites them to Bedford to herd her 55 sheep. It's now mid-afternoon, and Shirley disassembles the tent and packs up the station wagon. The sun already has begun to withdraw, but it's the absence of the woolly rainbow around her booth that quickens the dark cold.



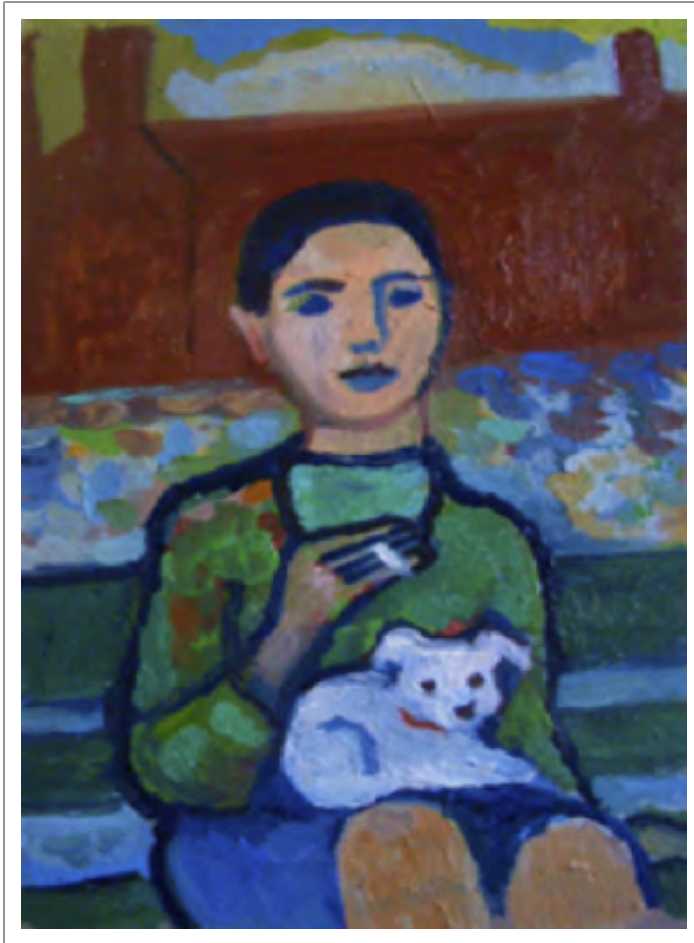
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Lately it seems everyone I know is suffering from one plague or another. I've heard reports of mice and fleas in apartments, rats in basements, termites in the timber of weekend houses. My neighbor across the street, who boards dogs, has had a sudden infestation of fleas. Another neighbor, who found a nice-looking blanket in the trash, now has bedbugs. Despite my animals, I haven't any fleas or ticks, thank God, though gnats swarm around the cat dish if left out too long; and huge flies buzz through the screenless windows to bang against the walls; and the ever-present drosophila scarf up scraps of onion skins and yam-ends. The moths must be having a field day in my sweaters. But no bedbugs, so far; my futon-on-plank must be too austere for bugs who like beds. And I'm pleased to announce that I've been mouse-free for five years now, ever since the arrival of Izzy and Poe. In the B.C. [Before Cat] era, I often felt furry-scurries across my pillow in the dark. Switching on the light and seeing the tiny things, I'd scream "eek!" as in those Saturday-morning cartoons whose plot involved an eeking, shrieking girl who, to escape a rodent, leaps onto a piano with a discordant crash. Contemptible behavior, but I did it too, minus the piano. Whenever I happened to surprise the mice by going to the bathroom in the wee hours, I'd

catch them cozily tucked into my shoes, like a family of Stuart Littles.

So no mice, rats, bedbugs, or fleas, but I do have one unwelcome nocturnal visitor. A mosquito. I think it's the same individual every night: an elusive, persistent, one-bug pestilence. It waits until I doze off to bite. Sometimes its whining whirr—like a microscopic vacuum cleaner or helicopter—wakes me, but before I can get the light on, I'm jabbed. Last night it was my right cheek. Reflexively I slapped my face, hard, and stumbled into the bathroom to assess the damage, clicking the night-light on. At three in the morning, when few of us are at our attractive best, I watched incredulously as a giant welt bloomed on my greenish visage. Of course I immediately thought of Gregor Samsa and hastily jumped back in bed. I wrapped myself up in the sheets from head to toe, hoping the bloodsucker felt sated. For the rest of the night, it seemed, I applied that juvenile remedy to allay the itch, which all Florida kids know. You inscribe an X in the welt with your thumbnail. But I'm open to other suggestions. My friend across the street, the one with the fleas, found an anti-insect lemon potion on the Internet. She recited it to me over the phone. It involves a lot of slicing and zesting, boiling pulp down into a tincture and thickening it into an ointment, etc. A lot of work for one mosquito, it seemed. Another antidote could be putting a mosquito net over the bed somehow, like they do in rainforests. The bugs will leave when it turns cold. If it ever does. A few minutes ago, as I walked sweatily down Hudson Street swatting at no-see-ums and scratching at my cheek, I overheard a young woman wail into her cellphone: "I came here for the fall foliage. I never dreamed it would be eighty thousand degrees in October." Yeah, eighty thousand degrees and still buggy.

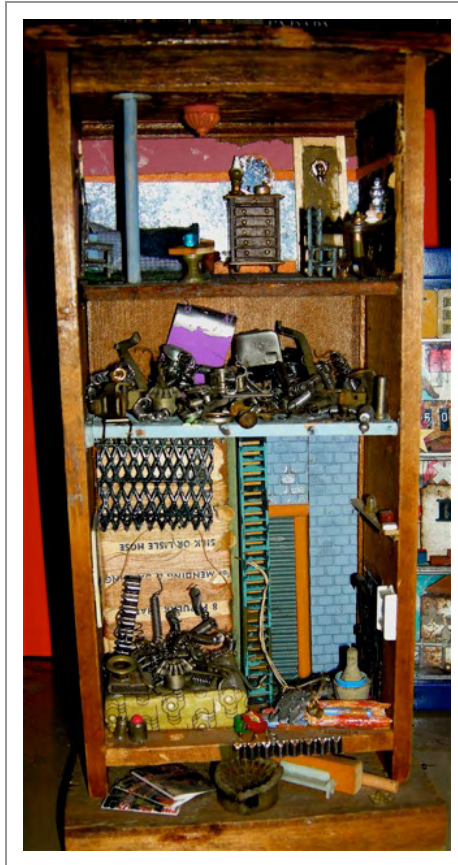
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Yesterday was the Tribeca Film Festival street fair, an occasion that affords an annual opportunity to leave this neighborhood for some destination northward, southward, or eastward. By last night, a covey of white tents and several bandstands had been set up. The unrelated bandstands, one of which was directly beneath my window, were set to broadcast a daylong amplification of static and stridency.

Around 9:30, the first bridge-and-tunnelers and pram-and-nanny families drifted into Greenwich Street. Five minutes later, the dogs and I decamped. North would take us to Chelsea via the river esplanade. East would take us to Tompkins Square Park, which has a great dog run (large, round, and the ground cover is cedar chips). But the most tranquil route was to head south, to the Battery.

I packed picnic lunches for the dogs and me. Also some reading, writing and drawing supplies. I brought *The Adventures of Frog and Toad*, and a random collection of peregrination essays: Rousseau's *Reverie of the Solitary Walker*, Hesse's *Wandering*, Max Beerbohm's "Going Out for a Walk," R.L. Stevenson's "Walking Tours," etc.; and a brief history of the *flâneur*, to complement the nomadic condition. Also in my backpack were a dog comb with long and short tines, and a summer hat for when the 53-degree morning chill rose to 70. When it did, as Accuweather predicted, I traded the teal watch-cap for a pink bateau.



We sat on the lawn at Battery Park. As I ambled through my ramble-essays, I harvested enough of Caleb's undercoat to fill a trash bin. The more I combed, the more soft white fluff came out. Tracy wasn't shedding as much, but was content to watch. When we weren't sitting, we kept on the move, sometimes perching on a park bench or on some dandelion-dotted grass. Once a homeless person with a cart of brimming gallimaufry approached, and began to confide in the dogs. Tourists drifted by, crooning:

Ohhh! I miss my dog! / Are those miniature collies? They're so cute! / I grew up with shelties! / Can I pet them?

We spent eight consecutive hours in plein air, a record for me. Around 5:30 we headed back, all of us transformed. Without his undercoat, Caleb was half his original size. Tracy seemed more confident. And gosh-golly-gee, I had survived a whole day without the Internet.

In Tribeca, the bandstands were playing their clashing final sets. The street was littered with paper plates, balloons, and remnant crowds. We went upstairs.

Oxygen-drunk, we retired early. I was lulled by the hollow-metal clangs of tents being disassembled, sailcloth whooshing to the paving stones and macadam—the thuds and bumps of set-striking. Those sounds reminded me of my first nights on Harrison Street, when I was awakened in the wee hours by cheese barrels thudding into the trucks at the loading docks below. That was 35 years ago, when Tribeca was empty, industrial, ignored, and very interesting.

Update: Comments have been turned off due to spam. To have them turned back on, email tribecacitizen@gmail.com.

.....

Tags: Jane Freeman

2 Comments

Stacey

March 16, 2015 • 7:59 pm

How beautifully written and painted, I didn't want it to end! I hope you'll give us a few more peeks soon. Thanks so much Jane!

Huck's Mom

March 26, 2015 • 1:46 pm

Thanks again Jane. Such a pleasure to read and to see your work.

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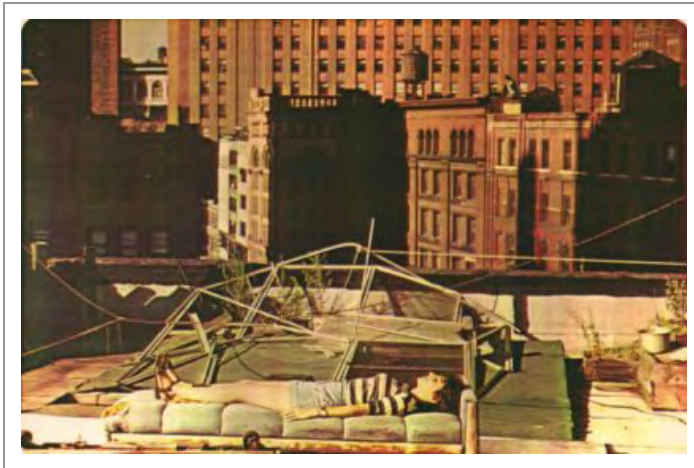
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TRIBECA CITIZEN

The Recollections of Jane Freeman (Part 3)

December 26, 2016 • History



Writer and artist [Jane Freeman](#), who has lived in Tribeca since 1976, shared some of her recollections and art with us [last year](#)—and now she’s letting us take a peek at a handful of her journal entries. These are from the 1980s: “When Tribeca was young,” she wrote, “when ships slid past my windows blasting salutes, commencing ocean voyages; when streets were still by dusk; before any school or supermarket or nail salon came; when the restaurants were all informal and stayed open after hours, and the coffee shops closed after lunch; when the view of the Hudson was wide, serendipitous, and ready-made, I was young, too...” Her paintings are interspersed throughout. (The photo at top—of Freeman lying on the roof of 143 Chambers in early 1980s—is by Harold Appel.)

1981

November 29 / Yesterday I bought twelve tubes of Winsor & Newton for \$52 and change. Also Donald Justice’s *Selected Poems*. All morning I’ve been vainly searching for something

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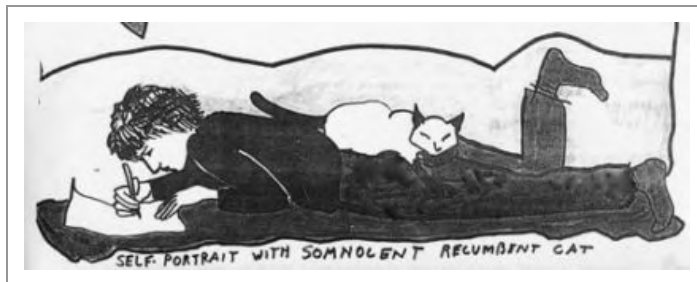
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classical on FM and have finally settled for jazz. I prefer jazz very late at night with beer. I thought Sunday morning radio was the providence of cantatas and partitas and such. Hmm. All those paints (few, really, considering the price) I bought intending, naturally, to resume painting, but I have been perversely writing instead. When I settle to write, I end up painting, or eating lunch, or suddenly remembering I had an appointment somewhere.



1982

January 18 / I'm writing this at Riverrun, a café on Franklin Street. Out the window, the streets are heaped with grimy meringue and the wind chill factor is below zero. I type with gloves minus woolen fingers. Since I don't use heat in the loft, walking around is not much chillier than sitting home typing, and so I stroll about the city hours at a time.

1983

July 8 / As Gertrude Stein said, quoting her brother, "It is awfully hard to go on painting." The other day Judith Goldman, who is writing a book on Jim Rosenquist, called and said to come on over across the street [Chambers] and have martinis with her and Jimbo, as she calls him. He is light and serious, a tow-headed fifty-something in a wrinkled Hawaiian shirt and baggy trousers. I'm painting him in his loft from memory (Jim and gin) with the hurricane-force fan in his studio blowing the Hudson in.

The phone rings thrice a day for an olive-importing company, which isn't here; I wonder if it ever was.



1985

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June 26 / Lately my luck has been of the ill variety. I had to come up with a huge amount of money, plus interest, plus certain fishy-sounding etceteras to pay off the criminal loftlord who once kept coyotes in a loft on W. Broadway and has been trying to evict us in scandalous ways. You should see what's happening to real estate around here. Construction and destruction in every direction. Jackhammers and pile drivers ravaging from dawn, skyscrapers burdened with additions. The streets are plugged with cars in perennial gridlock that regard pedestrians as bowling pins. I must not be the only street crosser who has noticed that Mack trucks speed up as soon as you step over the curb....

September 6 / Another wrong number calling for an olive oil factory; and for someone named Jeanette; and with an offer from the phone company for my calls to find me wherever I am; and for a contribution to the homeless people's fund.

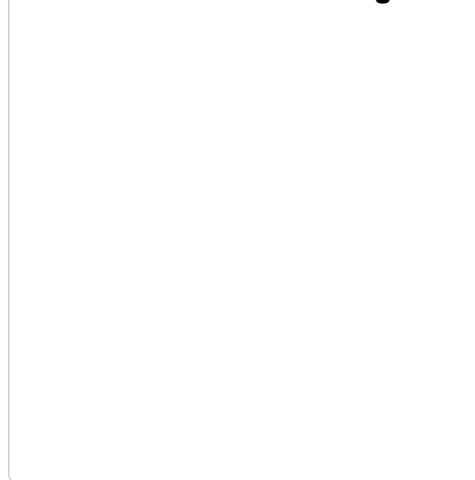
1986

July 27 / Last night, went for drinks on the 107th floor of the World Trade Center. Watched a rainy day end from way up high. Could see beyond the harbor, from the river to the bay to the ocean. Despite her recent superfête, Miss Liberty looked lonely in the rhino-skinned water. Whistler would have painted it: all grizzle-ashen, no lines, a few moist lights from south Jersey: soundless, colorless, stealthy. The picture window finally and incrementally retracted its view, like a TV just shut off. I watched Japanese businessmen sip opulently endowed cocktails. I nibbled on crab fritters and goat cheese, eyeing the sophisticated women who all seemed glossy, bejeweled, and strangely relaxed.

December 4 / I am having a one-person show this summer in a restaurant in the World Trade Center, which doubles as a gallery. This sounds like a big deal, with press releases and all, but actually the space, though large, is mediocre for showing art, unless they were to remove all the tables and banquettes. Alas, the restaurant cannot pretend to be a real gallery.



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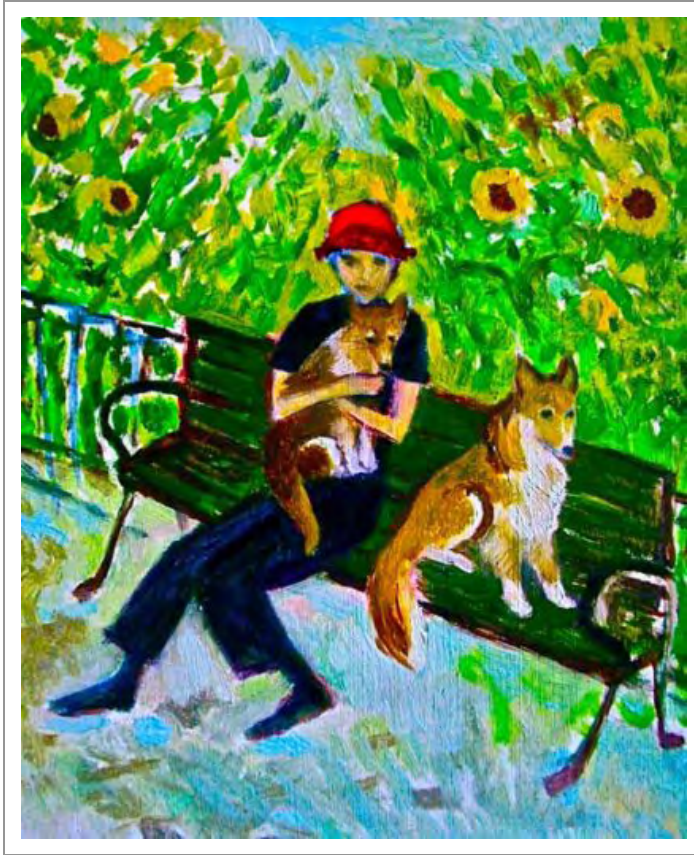
1987

February 23 / A life of art, reading, and reflection laced, of course, with worries of a financial nature and unavoidable interruptions. I've been practicing a macrobiotic way of eating for four months and it suits me. One evening, as I was feasting upon brown rice, lentils, seaweed, steamed kale and tofu, Jimmy Breslin called from Florida to see how I was getting on with typing his manuscript. Did I like it? Yes, I said, very much, though the cannibal scenes shocked my vegetarian mentality. "In fact," I warned, "I'm eating dinner right now, so let's not discuss it." "Oh yeah?" Jimmy said. "Whatcha eatin'?" "Oh, just some greens and grains," I said. To which he replied in his polite way, "You're fuckin' nuts!" and hung up.

June 18 / I have supper each balmy summer night on the lower Harrison Street roof, where I've installed my houseplants and wind chimes for the season. The dark descends, the lights go on and the buildings begin to look like sheets of slides. Such fascinating compositions people make in the light-box squares of their lofts. Surprising how many watch TV, with flickering images thrusting process colors in the industrial-size but cozy rooms. Sometimes a party starts indoors and makes its way roofward. But before the dark comes, the sky is pastel blue with chalky pink clouds.

I'm in a show at Rutgers called, rather redundantly, "The Autobiographical Self-Portrait." At the last minute, the curator

wanted to come by to see new paintings, but I had none. That morning I got up at six and painted five small oils on Masonite, which she accepted for the show. There will be a catalogue.



October 13 / I got a ticket for going through a red light on my bike at about 3 m.p.h., having first made sure the intersection was empty. In nonfreezing weather I like to pick up and deliver manuscript jobs to the publishers, zipping up Sixth and down Fifth (the only two bike lanes in the city, so far). Saving a dollar each way by avoiding the subway, I have managed to amass a small fortune. But on that fateful day, two patrol cops caught me gliding through a red light. They ignored the bike messengers streaming by, committing their daily infractions. The cops asked for my ID and reprimanded me for not having a bell. (I promptly bought one; its gentle ting-a-ling will surely be heard above the sirens, ghetto blasters, and yelling in the streets.) I was fined \$50. In high dudgeon, I said, "What if I don't pay it?" The cop said, "Then your driver's license will be revoked." I announced, "I don't have one."

1988

October 1 / A ferry voyage to Staten Island, and a late-evening walk in Lower Manhattan's empty, grisaille streets prompted a rereading of Whitman and Hart Crane. There are different ferry models: I prefer the older kind with pews for seats, though I usually stand fore or aft, hanging over the rail to hear the swash of the river against the craft's lumbering girth. There's a wide view of the sunset, the colors smeared and smudged. With a foghorn blast, the ferry pulled out of its berth, slid away from the pilings, and gained the bay. Twenty meditative minutes in the wind, vibrating against the water, smelling salt. The Statue of Liberty

wafts by in a vivid pallor. The city fades to dusk and lights come on like chalked dots on a blackboard.



1989

June 13 / The *New York Times* today published a photo shot from West Street, up Harrison. You can spot Edward Albee's loft, across the street from me. How strange to see the incursion of new condos to the south, in lots where we walked our dogs in acres of chamomile weeds.

Previously by Jane Freeman:

- [Recollections \(Part 1\)](#)
- [Recollections \(Part 2\)](#)

.....

Tags: Jane Freeman

3 Comments

RAPRPR

December 29, 2016 • 5:00 pm

Wonderful recollections. Knew her slightly from the naib. Loved the picture of her reclining on the roof of my building next to the detritus of my gazebo. Don't know whether it blew away, but I got tired of having to clean everything every day. We had wonderful time up there during a massive blackout in the-'70s. Lasted for days, as I remember.

REPLY

RAPRPR

December 29, 2016 • 5:12 pm

This is a comment on the first article, because comments have been closed. Jane, the dog was Woofier, Norman Kanter's dog. He was indeed scary looking with those feral eyes, but essentially harmless. Your article are terrific and I'm printing them for posterity!

REPLY

Elaine Springer

December 31, 2016 • 8:05 pm

It was a joy to meet you tonight, Jane. I love reading your articles about your life in TriBeCa! Thank you. Stay well and blessed – Happy New Year !

REPLY

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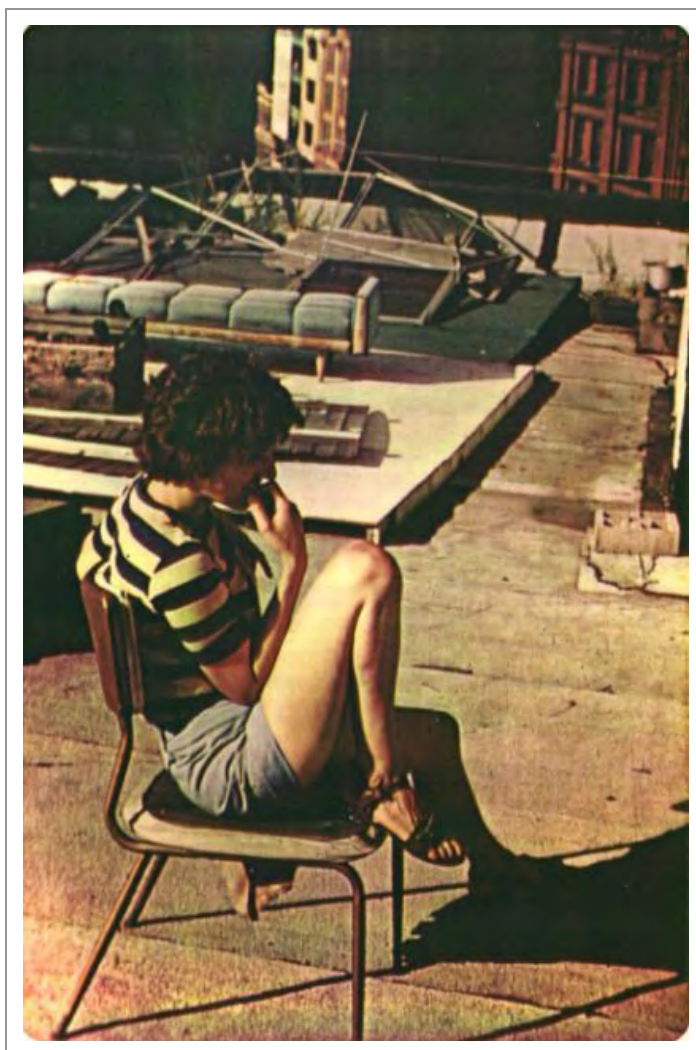


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The Recollections of Jane Freeman (Part 4)

January 16, 2017 • History




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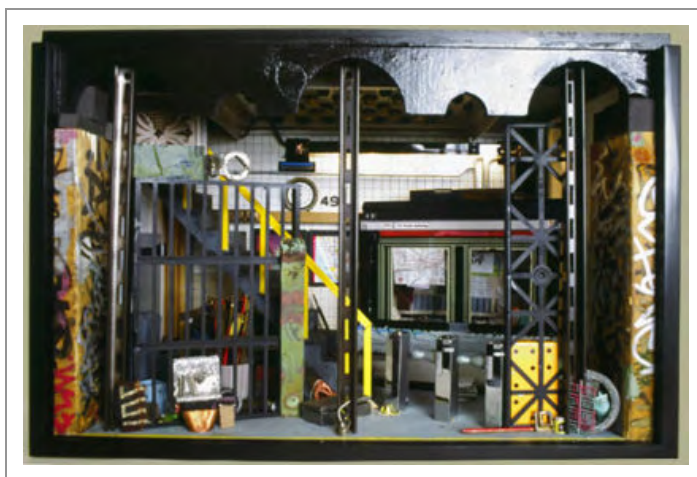
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Writer and artist [Jane Freeman](#), who has lived in Tribeca since 1976, shared some of her recollections and art with us [last year](#)—and now she’s letting us take a peek at a handful of her journal entries. [The 1980s are here](#); this post is about the 1990s, when you could still make art—such as Freeman’s dioramas, interspersed throughout the text—from materials found at odd-lot stores and discarded on the street. (The above photo is by Harold Appel.)

1990

April 23 / The sun is blazing with spring fever. It’s the stroke of six: martini hour uptown, cocktail hour midtown, Night Train hour downtown. Along Canal Street, Nancy Whisky Pub and Four Roses are in full happy-hour bloom—have been all day, actually.

I’ve been working on a miniature subway platform, whose grates, tracks, stairs, tollbooth, turnstiles, and tunnels all came from the streets—any interesting rusted thing I might find along the truck routes. Other than the filth of this practice of collecting, it is very much like beachcombing. Every day the waves from construction or traffic throw up new treasures to contemplate for a miniature scene. Also the job-lot stores along Canal Street, which sell just about anything, no two days the same: one day, overstock garden hoses and car alarms; another day, Taiwanese espadrilles and Mandarin-length press-on nails; yet another day, brass decanters and toilet seats. Foraging among my own junk at home, I made a carousel from a laundry detergent top, a sculptural book from Chinese mourning paper, and miniature books from bits of strapping tape.



June 27 / I’m typing some guy’s second, understandably unpublished, novel, with sentences like “The corporal reconsidered, and upholstered his gun.” (That upstages Danielle Steel’s unfortunate sentence, which I also typed verbatim: “Her eyes filled with tears and ran down her face.”) Disgusted with this debilitating expenditure of time, I said to my cat “Fur-Face, I am brain-dead. I’m going out for some quick, cheap, nearby culture.” In the shapeless, morgue-green T-shirt I’d slept in the night before, I staggered over to the World Financial Center. It was elegant old rush hour at the glass-domed, palm-filled Winter Garden, where young Brooks Brothers and Sisters with leather briefcases, precision haircuts, and bodies designed by Nautilus



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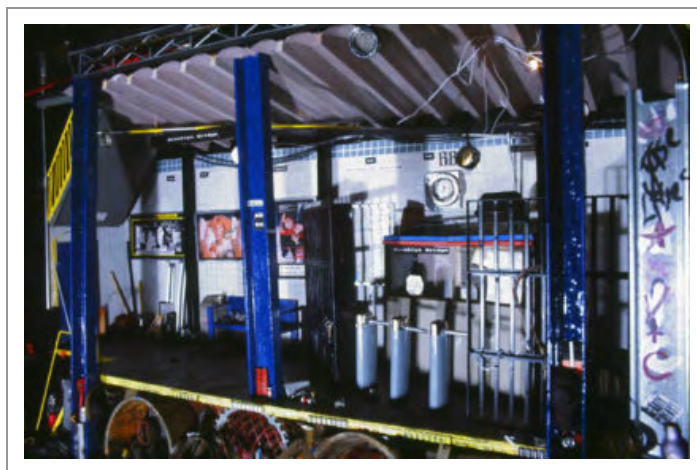
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zoomed about. I eased into a chintz-and-rattan seat at the Palm Court with a companionable \$3.50 glass of rosé and a soft Bach triple harpsichord concerto (soon seeing double, hearing triple), watching, till the sun sank, the yachts dock. Or watching, till the sun docked, the yachts sink. Then I went to Rizzoli, which had French pop playing, conducive to surfing varietal art books, and the new biography on Coleridge, which contains many portraits of same, his mouth always catching flies: S.T.C. astounded, probably, by bloody suns at noon.

I finished the miniature subway. There are rats in the tracks, and a spilled container of soup. The lights and speakers are faucet filters. I had a difficult moment determining what to do about the turnstiles; but just as I was wondering what on earth I could use, I looked down. At my feet was a Bic lighter. Perfect. The clock is my Swatch.



1991

January 1 / One afternoon on Astor Place, my friend Gordon and I were invited to be extras in a vampire movie starring Nicolas Cage and Jennifer Beals. We were singled out because Gordon was carrying a sack of laundry on his shoulder, which provided local color. We had to walk back and forth innumerable times in the chill, after signing away any rights to remuneration. On cue we were directed to look nonplussed for about fifteen takes, as a ragged, berserk Cage knocked his head against a brick wall.

I've been visiting the museums, which is both inspiration to paint and a reason not to. The Ryder show comes down at the Brooklyn Museum next Monday. I thought the Met's Mexican show had too few Frida self-portraits. A small, stage-like Dalí diorama built into a MoMA wall was cool, now that I was building dioramas. I wondered again, as I have done for 18 years, about that mysterious misplaced right nipple on the Cézanne nude.

January 29 / It's so cold that it would not be extravagant to hibernate under an electric blanket or turn on the space heater. Since it wasn't any colder outside, I ventured into the wind and ice and made my way to Soho, to an art opening for the late, great printmaker Sam Glankoff. In the gallery were so many big fur coats I could scarcely see the large prints on the wall. In hands were drinks; on each cheek, European-style, were kisses; and the prices of the prints were in the tens of thousands. There were



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catered platters of netsuke-like crudités. The classic recluse, Sam lived in a beat-up walk-up in Murray Hill and spent all his time making art. He looked like Robert Frost—straight hank of white hair, philosophic gaze, stooped mien. I'd met him when I was hired to transcribe interviews with the curator. Over frequent visits, we became good friends. We'd talk about art and, in between our weekly visits, he wrote me remarkable letters in a crabbed blue hand.

August 1 / The other day I walked 2.5 miles and back to get a certain kind of glue, picking up a lot of interesting debris along the way. The best spots are the abandoned loading docks whose strangely cozy, derelict bays are full of fascinating trash. There's usually no one around, not even derelicts. But I make sure, before taking anything, not to disturb what might be someone's moldy box-and-rag bed.



1992

January 12 / Everybody in New York is down with the flu. Down like computers. Down, but not necessarily in bed, for the queues I wait in for this and that are fraught with wan people popping throat drops, and leaving damp popcorn balls of tissue in the trash cans. I, too, am full of phlegm, rumbling like a cat, thinking of buying stock in the Kleenex, Nyquil, and Robitussin corporations. I darkened my little bedroom, hardly more than a sleeping slot, with a beach towel against the window, but at the bottom margin a band of lights stabs through like the shine on a pan.

April 14 / Well past midnight; a tented, cochlear quiet and a diffident air of spring. A light rain makes halos on the otter-bodied roads. Not one square of window light tonight. After dark, I left my apartment to shop for art supplies in the dumpsters, which sometimes contain the extraordinary contents of a building that's being renovated or razed—maybe 40 years of office furniture, curling ledgers, a lifetime of ciphers. One refuse bin in Soho leans in front of a shoji and tatami shop. Peering under its weighty lid, I was excited to find quality lacquered sticks. I filled my arms with them, planning to come back the next night for more. But when I arrived, someone else was at the furtive browse, rummaging under the lid! Hoping he was a minimalist, and would take minimally, he turned to face me. A crazed Dickensian bum, scratch-bearded, wall-eyed, and filthy. "Any good wood?" I ventured timidly. "Wood?" he roared, steadily unfurling odors.

“Well, what is it you’re looking for?” I asked. He squinted scornfully at me and growled, “Gold, sweetheart, gold!”

May 8 / An overcast Friday with no demands, no phones, no interruptions. Fed a friend’s cat (the only woman I know with black hair and blonde roots). Then I went happily on errands. Like many desultory downtowners in kneeless jeans, I carried a container of coffee with a hole chewed in the lid, the better to sip-and-stroll. I needed some wire for my next miniature, a vacant lot, so I went to Reliable Hardware on Canal. I wonder if Graffiti Remover is peculiar to New York: The store had several brands to choose from. The long-haired old guy who cut the wire wore heavy neck chains that had probably caused the curvature of his spine. He also wore skull-and-cross ear lavaliers, and was long on tattoos but short on teeth. While brittle and crotchety, he was mechanically polite. He spoke in a surprisingly callow, tenor timbre. I imagined him living in the Bond Hotel on Chambers [now the Cosmopolitan], in a tiny SRO (single-room occupancy *and* standing-room only).

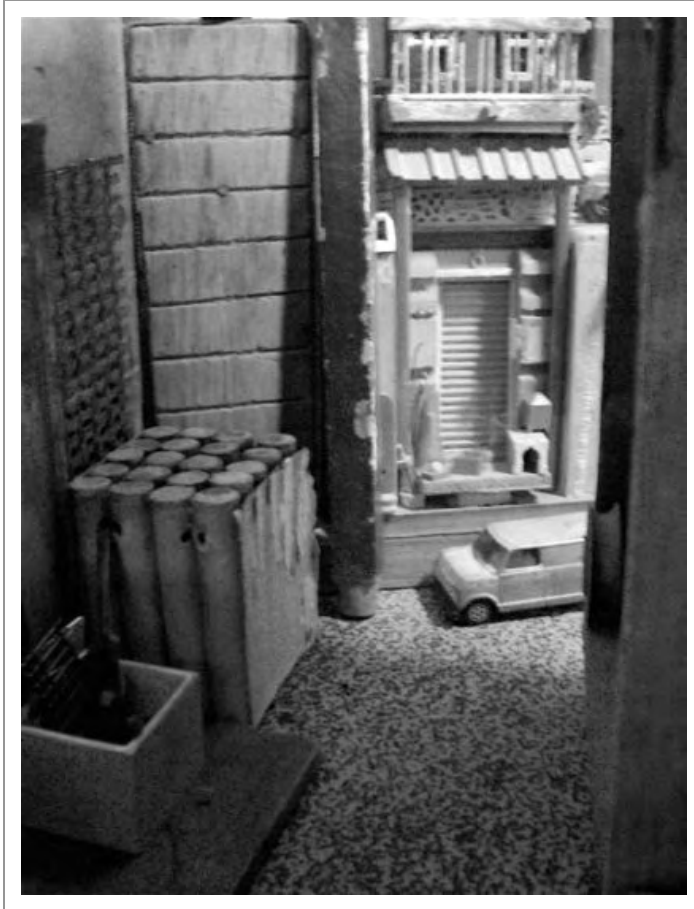


August 4 / Walking along the Holland Tunnel access road during rush hour, I stopped on the narrow median when the light changed. Traffic hurtled in five new directions, and the cops sorted themselves into new ranks, waving at the gridlock like

windmills or semaphores. As I clung to the alarmingly narrow median, eye level with lanes of angry commuters, a guy wafted by selling dollar roses out of a bucket. He engaged in brief chats with some of the cars. "How was your birthday?" he asked a resigned blonde in a red convertible, whom he seemed to know. "Yesterday was my birthday!" I shrieked, irrepressibly. The rube-faced rose-seller held out a long-stemmed flower and said, "Have my last pink rose, for your birthday."

On my birthday, with a storm brewing, I went to a yoga class led by an emaciated yogi in orange with snake tattoos circling his forearms, who could twist his body into Celtic knots. On the walk home, I dipped into a few bookstores and a couple of flea markets. A typical New York Sunday, with everything open and people sharing a contagious isolated languidness. Eventually I came to the new esplanade-park by the river. Hudson River Park is landscaped with some big minimalist sculpture (the sort cited as site-specific, though these works all seem to be on loan from somewhere else). There are grassy berms and playing fields, even a boisterous hemispheric waterfall on a pond of water lilies and papyrus. A Ned Smyth pergola with brick columns and colossal beams looks to be in a snit. I can't imagine what it's for, except perhaps to weather in. The powerful wind made everything flap. The celadon river was rumpled like an unmade bed, and littered with billowing sails like linen on a line. In the grassy fields, a smattering of jouncing kites were being managed by serious children.

I ended up in the Winter Garden, among the giraffe-like palms. I felt sorry for them, coddled as they seemed to be; they had an air of melancholy, as confined things often do. Their fronds, while not exactly crestfallen, didn't look chlorophyllic enough. I got an iced coffee and watched the people. You can tell New Yorkers from tourists by their summer pallor and by the tentative quality of their perching, as if they're loath to relax, even on Sunday. They seemed wound to spring to work, twelve hours hence.



September 27 / Being close to the river, we were supposed to get Hurricane Danielle, but she skirted Manhattan altogether, leaving only a grizzled old cloud-beard to sire merely a spate of spittle. It's calm, this late afternoon, the city in a rare lull. The postage-stamp windows across the street have gone charcoal-dark, except for one in the third row down, two across. A light switches on revealing a woman swinging between fridge and stove, making dinner in the nude.

December 17 / One of my greatest resources for acquiring junk is Alexander's, an antiques/hardware/odd-lot store on Chambers Street, but it's closing after 90 years. The third-generation owner, Mr. Alexander, let me explore all four dark upper stories, each filled floor to ceiling with paraphernalia, and hairline margins between the stacks to walk through. I used a flashlight and got filthy, but found promising objects for new miniatures: mechanical gizmos for a miniature boiler room/elevator shaft where no one but rats would like to be.



1993

May 31 / Wondrous to be alone at the river's edge just past sunrise, the city hushed in holiday emptiness. I was perched on a marble bulwark at the yacht docks, at North Cove near Battery Park City, drinking coffee, relishing the solitude. The river and skyscrapers seemed as much mine as if I'd created them. There was some elusive, ringing sensation of departure in the air, the way one's skin faintly prickles immediately after music ends. Several luxury craft were bobbing weightily: the *Elan* from Oregon; the *Majestic* from Florida; the *Simpatico* from Maine. Prow to prow they framed the minuscule Hoboken landscape in a wash of distance and dawn tints. The *Impromptu* from Santa Barbara arrived, its white eminence belittled rather humorously as it backed car-like into a berth. When a shipshape crew surfaced, my sole proprietorship of Lower Manhattan ended. The khaki-and-white-clad sailors tossed duffels below decks. One expertly hurled a thick line to the pier in a gesture of frolic and dignity.

June 26 / On a small parking lot at N. Moore and W. Broadway, Hollywood is constructing fake loft buildings and a coffee shop for the movie *It Could Happen to You*. There are 400 coffee shops in Lower Manhattan, but none of them satisfied TriStar Pictures, so they're building the set on this lot, which I always have used as a short cut despite the ubiquity of rats. The diner they're building—the Ideal Coffee Shop—looks like it's been there for a century; it has the right sinking-in-the-pavement look; and how well they fake weathered wood and old grime. The "brick" is just painted fiberglass; the walls are plywood; the "stone" sills are made of wood. Bogus tin ceilings. Everything fake, yet realer than real. The fact that it's make-believe is what's so interesting—a really giant miniature, and I'm already mourning the day the set will be struck, its existence sacrificed to celluloid.



August 19 / Just returned from Greenwich Village, where I sold some of my postcards to Paris Images. Then I went to a musty bookstore on Mercer Street that arranges its wares horizontally on the collapsing shelves. In this common grave of forsaken volumes languishes a wealth of hilarious titles: *I Denounce Soka Gakkai* by Dr. Hirotatsu Fujiwara, *Hair Length in the Bible* by Daniel L. Segraves, *Beyond Patching* by S.M. Schneider. I walked across Houston and down Hudson, choosing it for its barrenness, the noxious printing inks, and the eerie robotic clacking of grinding machinery. My aim was to induce a measure of melancholia, to get in a writing mood. Desolate walks usually do the trick. But the mood was broken by traffic jams. At each intersection cars breached the crosswalks. Rush hour certainly makes one feel trifling and mortal. I detoured to the movie lot again, to watch the filming. I managed to secure a bit of melancholy from the queasy "day for night" glower of strobes, and I saved a leaf shed from a fake tree.

Stretch limos were double-parked in front of Chanterelle. That reminded me: It was almost dinner time, but what to eat? I'm avoiding fat, sugar, dairy, meat, and anything fermented, which probably includes beer. That aroused melancholia, but not the creative kind. I went to the Delphi and had a hummus-and-grape-leaf sandwich.

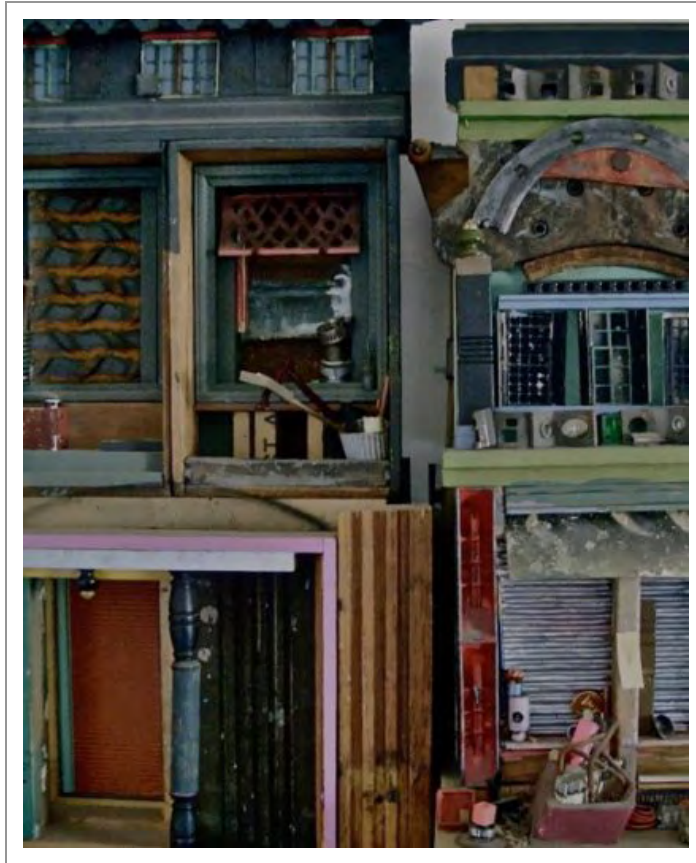


August 22 / Spent the afternoon at the Hudson River esplanade ogling the yachts: *Seahawk. Precious Moments. Majestic. Elegante. This Is It.* A pleasant petroleum smell. Something vaguely crustacean about the gangplanks. Trim glimpses of velvet liquor bars through sashed curtains and blinds. Then a stroll to the landscaped lawns, each bearing a “no dogs” sign. This is as slow-motion as New York gets. Babies in tiny sunhats lolling on parental bellies. An actor practicing monologues. The elderly on benches working crosswords, while a few others venture out on rented Rollerblades, complete with knee and elbow pads. To the east, beyond a foreground of weeds, Woolworth Building looms. To the north, the Empire State Building, a decal on a smudged sky. To the south, the Verrazano arcs, a scrimshaw wisp built of mosquito stingers. The Statue of Liberty, like any other tourist but with more flair, points out a biplane buzzing overhead, as a demure little sailboat adjusts its white triangle against the protective hulk of Ellis Island. Quadraphonic sound. The green scribble of tall grass whips and crackles like plastic streamers on a bike. Crickets nest in imported pines. Feathery weeds rock bleakly colored birds. On a brown flower a Monarch butterfly rides. Its vellum underwings are meticulously inked pathways on a made-up map.

November 13 / I decided to do something new: see a movie mid-morning, Midtown, midweek. So I left the cat, the computer, and my construction mess, skipped breakfast, and went with guilty pleasure to see *The Remains of the Day*.

What happened in the remains of that day: A giant beggar, handsome as Othello, steps through the E train singing “Lean on Me” in a rich baritone, shaking a cup of coins like a tambourine. A necklace of yellow beads like a curly phone cord hangs from his neck. When I drop a quarter in his cup, he meets my eye and holds my gaze. “Thank you, sister,” he says, then slides back the heavy steel door and moves to the next car, a one-man caravan of grace.

Later I go to LeRoy’s Coffee Shop, which offers sublime anonymity. (The movie people considered it for *It Could Happen To You*, but according to *The New Yorker*, it was too narrow.) There I have yellow linguini with gray clams in a parsley-flecked soup. The waiter, at once absent and intimate, leers condescendingly. I want to ask the Indian boy with the beautiful face who sweeps up what he wants to do with his life. He’s been sweeping for four years now, the time it takes to get an undergrad education.



1994

August 28 / Dusk. The sky is a powdered peruke. The landscape-face beneath it is swarthy. In this end-of-summer downtown evening I spent an hour in a tiny Tribeca bar on White Street. Traces of signage from its former life as a liquor store are ghost-written in the transoms: CORDIALS—IMPORTED AND DOMESTIC—COGNAC. I'm in khakis and a brick-colored T-shirt, thinking how I used to appraise the cost of a glass by how many pages I'd have to type to pay for it. My \$4 glass of Burgundy celebrates the end of three days indoors, building a miniature of Gramercy Park's National Arts Club, as well as several assemblages the size of hood ornaments. One can't be too precious in an age of minimalism, conceptualism, gargantuanism, and the return of the massive gestural stroke. I also wrote a magazine article. Now I'm appreciating the sconces with bare actual candles at the low ceiling, and the crooked old floors. A muted TV relays a horse stampede, silent explosions, and the soiled chaps of dusty cowboys. The Doors are pounding out "Break on Through" and "Back Door Man," the lyrical intimations of sex and mortality becoming clearer with each sip. The young waitress wears a frock with a bow at her back. She serves the drinkers inside and out. On the sidewalk is a single coltish tree that likely will outgrow its planter, if it isn't backed into by a parking car. I watch the small crowd of the young and sleek. One exception is a middle-aged guy in overalls who looks slightly derelict, though he owns half a dozen buildings around here. Small herds of Rollerbladers whirl by. The sky fades to black.

1995

October 22 / During breakfast at Leroy's Coffee Shop, the usually taciturn, elderly waiter, Arthur, revealed something of his provenance. He's a towering old coot, at least 6'4", maybe 130 lbs., with an Elvis pompadour and oversize rodent teeth. He told me that at birth he weighed 3 pounds. His dad took him and his twin brother home in a shoebox lined with cotton. Each time he buys shoes he keeps the box to commemorate the oddity of his beginnings.



1997

April 12 / Winter was mild, practically snowless; yet spring is as welcome as if there'd been blizzards. There are small signs of spring all about. Dim green things poke up from the cracks of rat-infested loading docks, not far from lavish restaurants with artful thickets of flowering quince, plum branches, and forsythia. Impromptu daffodils glare in coffee cans behind the smudged windows of working studios and rent-stabilized walk-ups, in contrast to gentrified lofts, where precious varieties like peonies are arranged in Steuben or Lalique globes.

I went to the Metropolitan Opera to see *Don Giovanni*. Afterward I followed droves of opera lovers into the subway. Sitting across from me was a handsome guy in an Indiana Jones hat reading the opera's playbill. I was reading *Don Giovanni: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal*. Our eyes met and when a great surge disembarked at Penn Station, Indiana Jones patted the empty seat beside him. I trotted over, saying, "You're not some kind of Don Juan, are you?" His name is Philip; he's from Poland and he speaks five languages. He's a mathematician here on some government grant doing research at NYU. We talked opera, of course, both of us rapturous about Mozart in particular. As we approached his stop in Chelsea, he asked if I'd like to go for coffee. I said okay but only in Tribeca, where I live, because of the late hour. So we went to the Tribeca Grill. And that was that, the end.

A couple of weeks later I had an encounter at the other Met. I wanted to get a drink on the cocktail balcony that runs parallel to the ancient Oriental pottery vitrines, but the loggia was packed. I moved along, looking for a place to sit. I spotted a handsome guy who looked European, sitting alone and writing. How absorbed he was, definitely a plus. I assumed he was writing a poem or a chapter in a novel, but maybe he was itemizing a grocery list or worse, I thought, still reverberating from *Don Giovanni*. Maybe he

was updating a catalog of amorous conquests. Clearly, we wouldn't be compatible, I thought with a degree of cognitive dissonance: I was in a T-shirt and jeans, in contrast to his sophisticated attire. Then a table opened up and I sat down and when a waiter came around, ordered a martini.

The string quartet sounded echoey and attenuated in the vast inner architecture. I pulled out my journal, jotting impressions, including a description of the man. I wrote: "I wonder if he's writing about me writing about him." Disgusted with myself, I swallowed the last of the martini and pulled on my beret to leave. To my astonishment, he suddenly was looming over me, asking if I'd join him for a drink. I felt like Zerlina enticed by Don G., and I thought: I would, yet I would not. But of course I said okay. In a series of rather comical backs-and-forths, I hauled over my knapsack with its drawing and writing stuff, Walkman, slip-cased Mozart operas complete with librettos, and the day's unread mail.

Turned out the guy's name was Philip, too. While Philip II was perfectly agreeable, and what young women would call a "hunk," he didn't have Philip I's flair and brilliance, which I could tell in two minutes flat. And he didn't come from Europe, though he was on his way to Italy. He came from Miami Beach and knew all of my Miami Beach cousins! And so that was that, the end of this story, too.



July 28 / Have you noticed that rain, especially the sudden heavy kind, sounds like applause? It actually sounds like lots of things as it batters down: the splitting of Velcro, the ripping of satin into rags. But mostly applause, and one half expects to hear "Bravo!" shouted into the acoustics of the night. Mosquitoes sweep in freely. Bitten, I switch on the bedside lamp and swat at invisibilities.

September 21 / Is today the autumn equinox? The weather has taken a curt turn. Yesterday the heat shimmered off the plaid of glass-and-steel façades, but this morning, I went to the river in shorts and a T-shirt and nearly froze. Water that was soft and languorous, mercurial as Mylar, is now jumpy and noisy under a bitter wind.

Around brunch-time here in Tribeca, I was coming out of

Commodities, the organic grocery, with a gallon of water and a bag of turnip greens, in time to see a commotion in front of Bubby's. In addition to those in a long queue who were drinking coffee while waiting for tables, there were dozens of people in a pitch of excitement. I heard cries and gasps and assumed, because of the stretch limo, that a celebrity was at large. I went across the street and asked a tall blonde what was up. With a French accent she exclaimed, "There is a rat! It ran down the block and straight into Bubby's!" *Ha*, I thought. Three minutes later, when I got home, I shrieked to see a little Beatrix Potteresque mouse peeping from a burner on the stove.

1998

September 4 / As an urbanite, I am a lover of rubble, at home with glass and steel. I used to think of nature as an embellishment, like garnish on a plate. But with summer comes a craving for nature, and every chance green tuft is a wonder. I went to Washington Market Park and found a spot on a wood-slat bench near the garden plots tended by neighbors. While the wind dueted with the sound of the traffic, I sat among the prolix little rectangles of blooming miscellany: hollyhocks, peonies like wads of tissue, day lilies and tiger lilies, marigolds, daisies, and rows of indeterminate green filaments trussed to bamboo spindles. Also, baleful furry blooms in browns and violets with petals downcast like eyelashes; and sunflowers whose leaves are so big you could wrap one around your middle and wear it as a skort.

All around new buildings are going up. The sky is gored with trusses, skeletal elevators, and red cranes that look like dinosaurs. But no matter how much construction there is, and how many towers go up, they can never fill the sky.



Previously by Jane Freeman:

- [Recollections \(Part 1\)](#)
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.....

Tags: Jane Freeman

6 Comments

safe as milk

January 16, 2017 • 12:23 pm

thanks. i had forgotten that it was ever like this.

[REPLY](#)

Dan Alterman

January 25, 2017 • 12:00 am

Hi. Jane, i love your recollections about Tribeca having moved downtown in 1980. Please keep them coming and see you around the neighborhood.

[REPLY](#)

jane freeman

February 4, 2017 • 9:17 am

Actually, I moved to One Hudson St. on Feb. 1, 1976.

[REPLY](#)

Huck's mom

January 26, 2017 • 6:10 pm

Thanks for sharing these with us.

[REPLY](#)

Larry Loonin

December 11, 2017 • 12:18 pm

Jane, I've read all of your posts thoroughly enjoying the read. I first moved into 84 West Broadway in 1977. I'm still there. I'm surprised we haven't run into each other...

[REPLY](#)

Joanna

January 12, 2018 • 6:34 am

These were amazing to read! Thank you so much for sharing them! There is a wonderful intimacy you had with your city.

"But no matter how much construction there is, and how many towers go up, they can never fill the sky." This is such a beautiful turn of phrase!

[REPLY](#)

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