The Last Page: Something From Nothing

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I was thinking about Namibia again.

In village after village, artists and craftspeople had spread their wares by the roadside, sitting cross-legged on the warm sand as they wove baskets of grass, or shaped old telephone wires into delicate animal sculptures, or carved elaborate bracelets from slices of PVC pipe. There were always several displays of black sandals, fashioned with a rectangular rubber sole and matching heel- and toe- straps—the same sandals worn by nearly every person we passed, or at least those who were not barefoot. I realized that the shoes were made from tires—artfully sliced, glued, and knotted—only after noticing footprints on the sand that echoed the stripes of a car’s worn tread.

It wasn’t until several weeks later that I tried a pair myself. My group was staying at a tiny village near the Angolan border where we were gathering plant data for a local conservation organization. We were camping just outside of the community, which consisted almost entirely of Himba tribespeople. For the most part, the Himba had little interest in us—and, not wanting to offend, we kept our distance from the village.

After work each day, I liked to explore. I often visited a marble quarry, a brilliant white, otherworldly structure about a mile from the village in the surrounding foothills. It looked as if an enormous mouth had taken a bite from the base of the mountain, leaving gnawed-off blocks of white rocks, sharp edges, tiered shelves leading down and around the cavern. The marble faces were cool even in the sun, and cut perfectly flat and surprisingly rough, like fine sandpaper. Little chips of it were scattered about and glistened in the light. The quarry had been funded by Chinese developers, but, once the marble was lifted from the ground, they discovered—realized—that the roads to the village were too rough to drive the blocks over, and the entire project had been deserted.

On this day I was sitting in the shade of the marble, dozing against one of its cool walls, when I heard a voice and the sharp clacking of hooves on stone. I turned and saw coming up behind me a Himba girl, her body covered in its cool walls, when I heard a voice and the sharp clacking of hooves on stone. I turned and saw coming up behind me a Himba girl, her body covered in its cool walls, when I heard a voice and the sharp clacking of hooves on stone. I turned and saw coming up behind me a Himba girl, her body covered in its cool walls, when I heard a voice and the sharp clacking of hooves on stone. I turned and saw coming up behind me a Himba girl, her body covered in

The girl brought the shoe close to her face and pinched the sole hard, watching how the rubber flattened under pressure. She examined the bottom, then traced around the smooth edges with her fingertip. To my embarrassment, she brought it to her nose and sniffed. Finally, still turning the shoe over in her hands, she looked back to me. “What’s this?” she asked in careful Afrikaans.

I was surprised that we spoke a common language, and even more surprised by the question itself. “It’s a shoe,” I said.

“No.” She gestured to the sole itself. “What’s this? Is good.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

The girl slipped off her own sandal and placed it, and mine, beside each other on the marble floor. She touched hers. “From tires,” she said. She brought a hand to her skirt—“from cow-skin”—and to the beads around her neck, “from paper.” Then she touched my shoe and waited.

“It’s just—rubber,” I said. “It didn’t used to be anything else. I bought it at a store.”

“Bought what?” said the girl. She wrapped her arms around her knees and sighed, frustrated.

“I bought the shoe,” I said. The sun was setting over the mountain, and the long slant of light brought the abandoned quarry into startling relief; the angles of the ledges sharpened, then vanished, as plane by plane the quarry fell into shadow. I looked at the girl beside me, now tracing lines on the marble with the tip of her painted finger, and felt as if I had been kept from something my whole life. “I’m sorry,” I said. “That’s all it ever was.”

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This is an excerpt from Braverman’s longer essay, “Wasteland,” which examines the disposal and reuse of waste in Maine and Namibia.