

There is a triangular building with an open center near San Francisco's Union Square. The Phelan building (I pronounce it Feelin), was built a few years after the 1906 earthquake and resembles the Flatiron building in New York City, with long scalene sides meeting at the intersection of O'Farrell and Market Streets. In the early part of the century the Flatiron took the publishers of New York into her Kandinsky belly and the Phelan building became the hub of goldsmiths, stone-setters, re-stringers, watchmakers, gem-cutters and diamond dealers in San Francisco. The tradition of jewelry-making in this space has sustained and expanded to include many diverse people. They cram into tiny offices with tile beneath them white enough to spot a fallen gem. Between ten floors, tradesmen fly up and down the elevators and stop at wooden framed doors. They look over their shoulders on both sides down long hallways before knocking with discretion and urgency. The Phelan building is one of the few places left where Venetian blinds are still pulled apart with suspicion to see who might be at the door.

And now tech is moving in. Big tech, small tech. Bearded tech and clean shaven tech. The first few floors of the Phelan have already been occupied. As of 2013, all of the remaining jewelers are being forced to vacate the building to make way for new startup offices.

Since I was in a basket, I have been accompanying my parents to the Phelan building. This has been the one constant geographic location in my life. I know its people, its smells and its sounds. I raced down the marbled hallways and hid in one of the great triangle's points. I mischievously took the freight elevator in the back of the building knowing it was only for the bringing up of goods. There was once a cafe on the ground floor with a decor of trellis over mirror and the owners knew my order by heart. I greased my hands with a grilled ham and cheese while we waited for some rush job to be done upstairs. All the characters who worked in the Phelan became my second family, a family I couldn't speak about to my friends at school because my parents told me to keep quiet about the jewelry business. There were a dozen or more characters that we paid regular visits to: Hong Song the Korean gem cutter, Jimmy from Hong Kong, Setrak and Jean-Pierre the watchmakers, Marc Martini the French goldsmith, Walter Dikhaut from Germany, who had one of the first electronic drum-kits set up next to his bench. They were mostly older, but there was a new school too, like Jennifer the jewelry designer who had a serious cocaine habit. She went in for surgery and I learned what a deviated-septum was. Together they made up my international freak-show of forgers. Though there was an element of the unclean, this did not preclude kindness or generosity. Jimmy gave me a Gameboy one year for Christmas with the Ninja Turtles game to go with it. I wrote a thank you letter to him in my best 3rd grade handwriting but he refused to learn English.

Adornment is one of our oldest practices. Evidence for jewelry making dates back to 75,000 years ago, even older than Napster. In Europe, Africa and the Middle East, precious metal and stones were used by early societies much in the same way they are used today, to mark ritual and the meaningful experiences in life. Jewelry represents class, love, religious ceremony and something to remember

your Grandmother by. Elaborate jewels are found in nearly all royal courts, starting with the head-dressed Sumerian queens. In Egypt, the Pharaohs were entombed with ornate turquoise and gold jewelry to enjoy in the hereafter. And somewhere in Florida, Brad walks into a Zale's and buys the diamond he'll propose to Amy with. It is the rarity and lustre of the metals and stones that give them their initial power and attraction for us, we in turn imbue them with our own metaphysical properties and symbols. There are few objects in life whose symbology is universally agreed upon. The wedding band for example is a wearable symbol of devotion. This mutual understanding cannot be said of more mundane objects like my friend Ray's van, which he says stands for freedom. Crystals too, in the more esoteric canons, take on a whole host of healing and protective powers. Even the most dilettantish of new age healers knows that amethyst helps along with spiritual awakening. Hong Song once gave me a tumbled Tiger's Eye that I carried around, I didn't realize until later that it was warding off evil like a pocket policeman. In the middle ages metals became the focus of alchemical work, the subject of treatises on the mixing of various metals and liquids for the attainment of an unknown healer, like the after-school kid mixing up suicide sodas at the fountain. Actually, gold has inert properties that are remarkable. It will not tarnish or wear over time, even if left on your nightstand for a hundred thousand years. For this reason it has become the essence of the philosopher's stone, unchanging and rich with eternal power. Conversely, lead is known for its corrosive nature, a companion to sulfur thought to be possessed by the devil. Heavy stuff.

What goes on inside the Phelan is something like a Gepetto's workshop cum Grand Bazaar, with a hint of a secret society. You enter the Phelan Building through glass doors that read: *Chemicals found on premises have been known by the state of California to cause cancer.* The building is poorly circulated and there is the smell of acid and lead solder in the air. Every office is a mess and Jimmy's is no exception. There are two large tanks in the corner filled with oxygen and gas, the kind that party renters use for mass balloon blowups. Tubes run the mixture to his desk and a burn a constant Vestal flame through a torch with an electrical tape handle. The most recent items in the room are the Costco mailouts Jimmy has saved on his formica desk. Everything is covered in dust. There is a Chinese calendar that dangles on the wall opened to the never-ending year of the Rat. Broken jeweler's scales, mallets, boxes filled with outdated catalogues make sitting space impossible. You center yourself in the middle of the room and hope for another earthquake-free year. In one corner there is a upturned log that Jimmy hammers out gold on, like something from a medieval blacksmith's shoppe. His bench has a million tiny tools and pieces from forgotten projects, with a tray that catches bits of fallen gold to be collected later and melted down for scrap. Husbands and wives would riot if they knew their wedding ring was being sized in these unkempt quarters. Jimmy answers his phone and speaks with a brisk Cantonese accent. *Hallo. Yeah. Yeah. Now? No good, no good! Very difficult job. Very difficult. Tomorrow. Tomorrow.*

You are either in or out here, trusted or untrusted. New faces take time to get used to here. If you want some work done you have to know someone and you don't know someone and you can't just knock on a door unannounced. It's jewelry after all, the target of heists ancient and modern, and

everyone has to protect themselves. Throughout my years visiting the Phelan, I have known many jewelers who have been robbed inside the building, some at gunpoint. The stakes are high here. Because of the inherent danger, there is a clandestine energy to the building that scorns outsiders. This mafia-esque attitude also lends itself to an exploitive atmosphere, resulting in the some unfortunate but accurate stereotypes of jewelers. For an objective observer, some of the less than kosher deals here may seem to cross over into scamming territory. Sometimes gold and stones get lost during a job. Sometimes the price goes up because its Tuesday. Sometimes the job doesn't ever get done. You can be sure that if you are a new customer, the charge will be outrageously high, an unfriendly mix of extortion and initiation. Amongst the people who work in the Phelan there is an agreed upon way of speaking, of acting and of handling goods. These are type of dynamics that form when a group decides it is a group. Expressions of acknowledgement between men (and a few women) with briefcases in the hallways who say with their faces: Everything is good here. They pass by each other with knowing glances like Freemasons seeing an fellow at the post office. These artisans are the same strong-nerved characters who set up booths in a Venetian square five hundred years ago, swapping stories of Silk Road hardships. The terminology they use is practically impenetrable to the unacquainted: lost wax, filigree, nacre, baguettes, lobster clasp, spring ring, keystone, bezel set, shouted with all the requisite hand gestures of the ancient marketplace. You start to get the rhythms and start to feel like you are apart of something and then you think: Is this really going on in San Francisco in 2013?

I went up to see Jimmy recently. I don't make it to the Phelan building much anymore but when I heard that he was being evicted I wanted to check in on him. He has occupied the same office on the 3rd floor for nearly 30 years. When I walked out of the elevator, the 3rd floor was dark and vacant. I was told Jimmy had been moved temporarily to the 10th floor while he looked for another building. I found Jimmy working out of a closet with no running water. He told me that he fills up a bucket from the bathroom each morning. I asked him how he was doing up here. No good! No good!

Next year the tiny offices in the Phelan building that have stood for a century will be demolished in favor of single floor landscapes. I can only speculate as to the decor, but I hear that steel and glass are in this season. There will be cubicles of some sort, or if cubicles are no longer the accepted fashion, some half cubicle that fosters a more communal workplace environment. One thing is for sure, there will be screens. Screens large and small, screens to really get lost in. The contrast between handcrafted work and whatever passes for a job these days in San Francisco is almost too explicit to speak of without falling into sentimentality. The new King Midas is turning everything into ones and zeros, the gold is finally tarnishing.

The Phelan building stands as a such an obvious testament to these changing times. It can be a metaphor, but it is also real and very upsetting. Jimmy and Hong Song and the jeweler's school on the 9th floor really do have to leave the building and with them the unique culture that has formed over the last hundred years. The new tradesman are already filling the halls of the Phelan with

different tools. Working with raw materials is working within an app. Jimmy's useless calendar is some shared cloud auto-updating nonsense so Brad can make every meeting ever scheduled. A man carrying an envelope of hundreds is now rounds of funding.

*Change is good! You can't stop change!* That is a fact. But you can lament loss. The micro-culture of jewelry making at the Phelan building, with its underbelly of wildness, is just one of the many that will be ebbed into in the coming years, eventually giving away to nostalgia. In Venice Beach, both Google and Microsoft have become neighbors to the insane cast of characters, dealers, scammers, artists and performers that make Venice Venice. Microsoft has issued a public statement to the Venice Beach city council announcing: *We are looking forward to meeting members of our new community.* I hope a sun-swept stoner eggs the building. It's not that Google and Microsoft are inherently bad (although they are), it is that the uniqueness of these communities is so essential for an interesting and colorful life. What we need is more underbellies, with cues taken from our ancestors. More weirdos and uglies. The dark furnaces of out-there-ness must always blaze behind the scenes.

During the next few months I will pop in to the Phelan Building to see my old friends. They are struggling, not only with the evictions but with the changing jewelry business. A slick new company called Blue Nile has made it so customers can order wedding rings online. They aren't handmade, but they are cheap and they'll ship to your door. On the website, you can browse diamonds in a 3D format. In San Francisco, there will be something of a jeweler's diaspora in the coming year. Where the trade was once centralized at the Phelan Building, it will now spread to an office here or there, or some place that allows gas and flammable materials to be used indoors, most buildings have laws against that now.