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The Sea Is History

Derek Walcott

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Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea
has locked them all. The sea is history.

First, there was the heaving oil
of nothing, heavy as chaos,
then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a lonely caravel,
and that was Genesis.

Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning;

Exodus.

Bone soldered by coral to bone
on the tilting sea-floor
mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow,

that was The Ark of The Covenant.

Then came through the plucked wires

of sunlight on the sea-floor

the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage
as the cowries clustered white on the manacles
of the drowned women,

and those were the ivory bracelets
of The Song of Solomon,
and the ocean kept turning its empty pages

because this was not history,
then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors
who sank without tombs

brigands who barbecued cattle,
leaving their charred ribs like palmleaves on the shore,
then the foaming, rabid maw

of the tidal wave swallowing Port Royal,
and that was Jonah,
and where is your Renaissance?

Sir, it is locked in the sea-sands
out there past the reef's moiling shelf,
where the man-o-wars floated down;

strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself,
it's all subtle and submarine,
through colonnades of coral

past the gothic windows of sea-fans,
to where the crusty grouper, onyx-eyed

blinks, weighted by its jewels like a queen,

and these groyned ribs with barnacles
pitted like stone,
are the cathedrals,

and the furnace before the hurricanes
and the bones ground by windmills
into marl and corn-meal,

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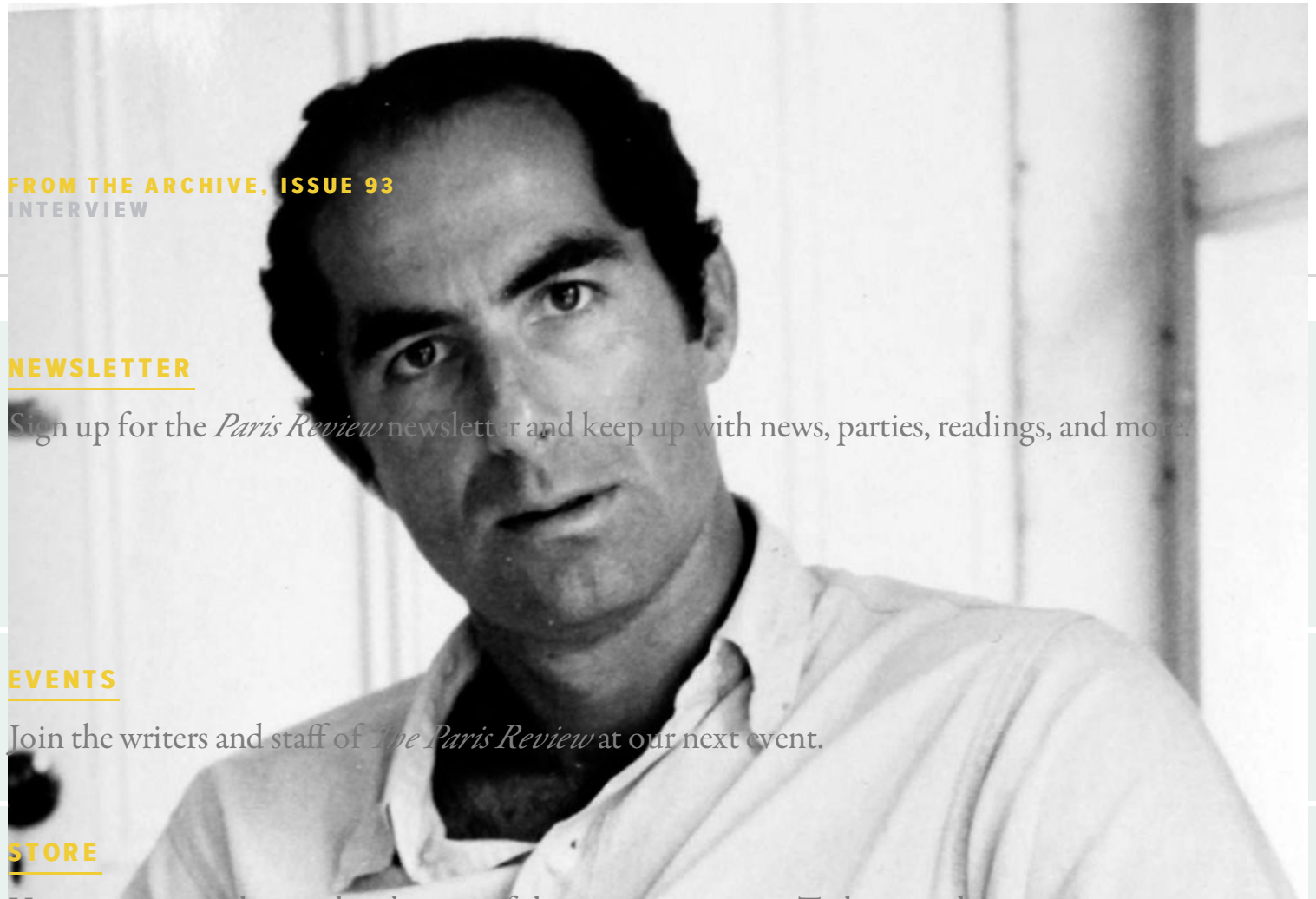
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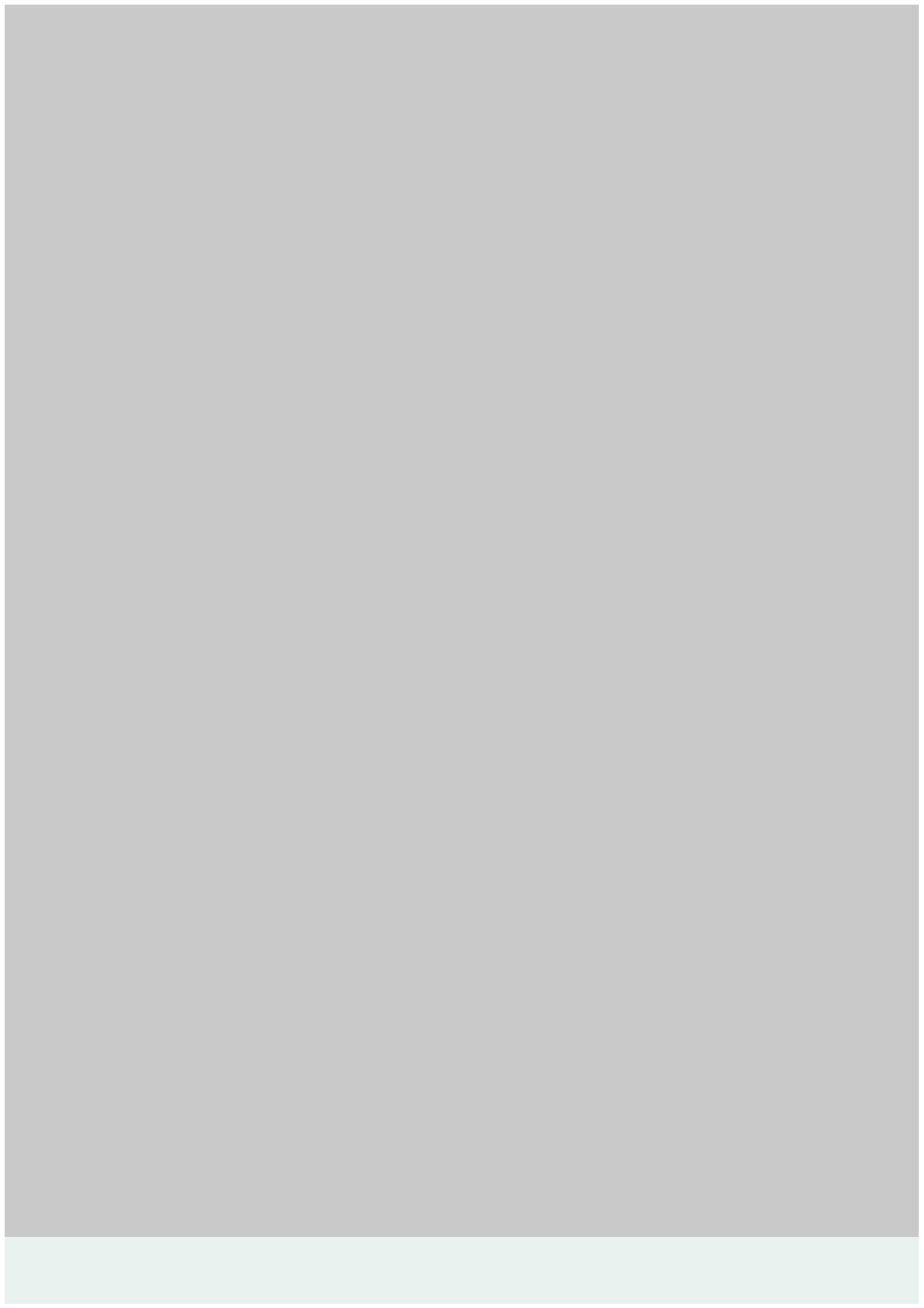
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