

Polaroid Snapshots of What it Means to be Alive on a Thursday Afternoon

0.

This is a project meant to preserve the truth.

I.

3 bottles of Campbell's Tomato Soup: six dollars, thirty-four cents. A mayonnaise bottle: two dollars, ninety-seven cents. A loaf of pure enriched white bread: one dollar, ninety-eight cents. One half pound of ham: four dollars, seven cents. One red apple: sixty-three cents.

It's the evenings when color doesn't penetrate even the outer crusts of sky that seem out of place. When the shadows from the brick walls of the neighborhood swallow the ground in a matter of confused minutes that one has to hold her things tight, lest they be lost in the transition. Me? I held onto my grocery bag.

The cross light blinked. I continued down the sidewalk for a while and then looked back. Something almost un-noticeable followed behind me, but it remained invisible to my eyes, hiding in the shadows from the brick walls. Just after picking up my rapid pace, I slipped on a greasy spot of the sidewalk, and the apple popped out of the bag. It rolled towards the street, turning three times, and then lay still. The fruit hung between two slabs of concrete on a crack in the uniformity. Runaway veteran. Or perhaps an individualist apple. I stooped to pick it up; the traffic light turned yellow, and all about me slowed with the cars.

I guess you could call a lot of the things in the day 'incidental.' The amount of toothpaste that comes out of the squeeze tube, for example. Or when a mushroom might emerge from the ground, a pattern elusive to even the most accomplished mycologist. Or where a mosquito nestles in the skin. Does it matter if he had gotten your left knee or your right pinky finger? I guess, in a similar way, I had chosen to settle down that particular night at 10:12PM to a soft hour of television. I filled a bowl of leftovers and emptied the trash, and the television wrapped me in a comfortable blanket of LCD colors and scripted laugh tracks, which I kept bundled around me on the walk to bed. Routine is such an odd thing, really.

The next morning, I awoke at 4:38AM. It was a light that burst through my window that did it. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to block out my senses, but a ringing inside my ears refused to yield to a lesser volume. My bedside table had on it my lamp with a blue shade, some crumpled paper, and the apple that had fallen on the sidewalk the day before. I grabbed the apple and took a lazy bite. The light about my room - that delicate slant - waved to and fro, and I watched it until it hypnotized me into a drowsy stupor and then to sleep.

An incidental hour later that morning, I awoke and brushed my teeth with an incidental amount of toothpaste. The ground crunched as my rubber soles met it, and the day passed in such a trance. A trance of the crunch of rubber on ground, I mean. Upon returning home, the routine of the late afternoon whirled around me and its evening counterpart led me to sleep.

A bright speck fell upon my left eyelid the next morning, sharp and piercing. Jolted, I looked to my bedside table but could find no clue as to why I could not sleep, though staring right at me was the apple I had bought two days ago. It was oddly preserved, the skin was still a warming red, and it had hardly any soft spots of flesh on it. In a fit of desperation, I bit another chunk of it, laid on my pillow, and felt an overwhelming sense of drowsiness.

Another trance passed before me the next morning. The crunch of rubber on pavement, fast-food straws and clunky backpacks, and an eventual return home after a satisfactory amount of interaction with the world, measured through graduated cylinders and supermarket scales. As I covered myself in bedsheets, I remembered an errand I had forgotten to do, and the sun slid further in its invisible trajectory. The shadows from brick buildings around mine swam together in communal darkness, and I fell asleep, though not before throwing the apple - collecting brown spots and a questionable texture - by my table away.

It would come as no surprise that the light which permeated my room the past few nights found me again that next morning. I could not shut my eyes, for the light was still there. I could not hide behind curtains, for it would snake around their fabric and push against my forehead. Grumbling, I fixed myself a bowl of oatmeal drowned in sugar. Glancing down at the trash can, I noticed my apple. There was something about the glance that attracted me to its mushy-brown exterior.

I picked the fruit up, wiped off some dust from the trash can that collected on its inner flesh, and investigated it. A few black spots began to appear around its untouched skin. The rest of it, particularly where the bite marks were, was dry and papery. It gave off a slightly stronger scent than before, reminiscent of store-bought vinegar, though still recognizable. Reason escaped me for that moment, and I bit another piece from it, chewed, and swallowed.

My skin grew white and glossy, and I felt like I knew what that un-knowable thing had been in the street. Soon, the shadows below me covered my feet. They swirled around like waves, reaching towards my ankles and then pulling away and then poking at my knees and then pulling away and then as quick as a blink of light they consumed me.

I.

The windshield fills with rain. The exhale of breath on metal. The cloud of water vapor inside of a lung escaping to the open world and collecting outside of the body. Just as the drops on the glass grow and connect to form large and twisted shapes, the wiper whisks them to the sides. Then, as if nothing had happened at all, rain starts collecting again on the windshield and the vapor leaves our bodies once more to meet the rain on the windshield and they join together together. This is all until a narrow sheet of rubber courts the glob of water in a romantic embrace yet shoves it to the side when the moment is gone. I'm trying hard to get at something that's big. Can you see it, reader? Can you hear the water collect on the glass and then drip, drip?

II.

I sit on the left seat facing the bus window. In front of me, an older lady sleeps with her mouth wide open. Her face is in the gap between the two seats in front of me and her mouth is wide open. She's holding an apple in her right hand, and a shadow covers most of her face.

The bus heaves and stops at Oxford Manor. An influx of passengers swarms in, some in business suits and others in t-shirts and jeans. I return to looking in front of me for a few seconds, and then I feel somebody sit next to me.

"What's your name?"

I turn to my right and see a little girl, not older than seven. Too short to reach the ground, her feet dangle off the front of the seat. "I'm Avery," I respond. The window behind her catches

my eye and I watch the ground pick up in a flurry as the driver pushes his foot against the pedal, but my thoughts are interrupted once more.

"I'm Morgan," she says. "What are you looking at?"

"I'm not sure. The front of the bus, I guess."

"Why?"

I don't have a response. Perhaps it was the repetition that caught me. The speeding up and slowing down, speeding up and slowing down, speeding up and slowing down, like deep breaths. Perhaps it was the haziness of the physical world when viewed from a moving vehicle. Maybe it was too late in the day to look anybody in the face and see beyond the clothes that were bought for her and the combed hair and the dangling feet and see past these things to the disheveled soul on an afternoon that was not notable in any-which way, a soul worn thin by day-to-day sneezes and the drop of water on skin.

"Helloooooo? Anybody there?" Morgan asked, interrupting my thoughts. "Well I'm going to my mom's house. She likes to take me to Braden Park on Tuesdays. Do you know about Braden Park?"

"No. What's there?"

"It's very very nice." She said, matter-of-factly. "There's this machine that lets you feed the squirrels if you give it a quarter. And a big oak tree that I've wanted to climb for a while. Mom doesn't let me do it. Well, she normally doesn't, except for today. She told me a few days ago that she'd let me climb it today. That's why I brought some band-aids." She showed me them. They were light blue. Something about them reminded me of the plaster on the wall of an auto factory, though I'm not sure why. "Have you ever climbed a tree, Avery?"

I think for a second. I remember the smell of my family's orange tree back when I was younger. Every April, the tree would grow fruit and the backyard would clothe itself in the scent's richness. I never climbed that tree, contented to sit down and stare at its vastness from below. Noticing the growing impatience of my neighbor, I quickly reply, "No I don't think I have. But I would like to. I really would."

"Then you *should*. Eric Neeble from next door says that it makes you very very strong to climb trees. He says that's why he doesn't eat broccoli. That he's so strong from climbing trees that eating broccoli would make him too strong and it's not good to be too strong."

"Do you believe him?"

She sighs, as if disappointed I would even ask such a question. "Of *couuuurse* I believe him. Eric Neeble doesn't lie. Everyone knows that."

III.

This is a project that sympathizes with the blurry photos on a disposable camera's film reel. The photos that are glanced at once and then thrown away. Those are where truth lies, after all, the blurs that capture the imperfections around us. The whirl of dull color.

V.

A rat skitters around an automobile factory. It weaves between hot pieces of machinery. The hissing of steam exhilarates its furry skin. The challenge is in remaining hidden. After all, when you boil down the next five minutes, the interval between the rat's gulping in the sunny air

outside of the factory and the successful return to its home in the peeling light blue plaster, the moments within these minutes are a binary of life and death. That's all, really.

The rat enters the smelly area of the factory. The people around the rat that are not rats but capable of speech would call this room 'the paint room.' It's slightly toxic if one were to remain there for too long without a mask, but the rat doesn't know that, and neither does the government, which issues sanitation inspections every five years. The rat's whiskers twinge with the sound of voices. These reflexes are carefully associated in the rat's brain to higher adrenaline levels and softer "plop"s of the rat's calloused feet against the cement below it.

Earlier in the day, the rat had left its cubby near the rubber station to venture out for sunlight. Rats like this one, of course, need at least three hours of contact with sunlight each week to restore the vitamin count in their bones, provide necessary vitamins to their hair follicles, and remain minimally healthy. Not having such access results in depression, misshapen bones, sexual sterility, and in some cases loss of teeth. Rats don't know this, but some chemical within them propels them to seek the outdoors every once in a while. The human voices grow quieter with each step that the rat sprints. The door flies by.

Now the coal room is the most dangerous part of a factory to run through, no matter how experienced the rat. That's exactly where our rat is now, you see? The rat widens and then narrows its eyes in focus. Not only is the room sufferably hot, but the most amount of workers are found there. There are coal workers, safety workers, maintenance, supervisors, janitorial staff, etc, etc. And on top of that there are cameras and acute heat sensors.

The rat takes a cursory glance around. To the right are four coal houses, each with approximately three workers and one supervisor. To the left is the coal preparation group, running between the left and right quickly are the safety guarantors, with clipboards at the ready. Four clunky tables of tools and utensils are before the rat, with low bottoms invisible to anybody at ground level. They're an ideal cover. The rat dashes under the first one. Any longer deliberation in the open would have promised a worker to have seen it. The rat shivers in the heat of the room, beads of sweat concentrating around its neck and back.

The rat jumps under the second and then the third table. Not soon after it escapes from the coal room and the room's subsequent heat will the rat find its cool cubby in the plaster. But the rat's not in the cubby yet. Instead, it's in the coal room. The rat bolts toward the fourth table but slips on the wet floor (recently mopped by the janitorial staff). It bonks its head against a leg of the table and involuntarily lets out a high-pitched squeal.

"What was that?", a gruff voice calls out.

"What are you talking about, Chuck?"

A mixture of voices adds to the heaving of sound of coal under heat and pressure, and the employees of the coal room unanimously decide that there is, indeed, a rat underneath the fourth table.

Panting furiously from the heat, the searing pain across its delicate nose and forehead, and the adrenaline from hearing human voices, the rat notices shadows begin to surround the table. The shadows grow closer. One might have thought that the people were brick walls, with the way they cast these shadows. Mentally equipped for such situations, the rat bolts to the right of the table, where the least of the people are, and darts in between the coal pipes and other obstructions at a speed too fast for the workers trying to capture it. It uses its whiskers to remain

balanced. A supervisor near the rat notices a blur approaching him, but the supervisor was busy thinking about how his wife looks without make-up and was thus too distracted to bother with the petty rodent.

The rat escapes the coal room, breathes the cooler, crisper air, and nears its cubby. At this moment, the moment right before the rat goes into its cubby, it turns a startling white color and a wave of serenity washes over it. The ticks of the clock next to the rat slow and magnify into cathartic booms. The workers pause their tasks and a wordless understanding settles over the whole scene. Perhaps the scene is felt by just the factory workers in the coal and rubber rooms, yet maybe in the smallest of ways the understanding spreads like a virus into the world at large and somewhere very far away a little girl on a bus looks out of her window in the absence of conversation with the old man beside her and recognizes the true shape of a cloud above the bus, but then just like that the moment's over. Everything in the factory starts back up again. The rat escapes into the abyss, and the blackness of the cubby dyes the rat's coat back into its regular murky color. The workers resume their tasks. The clock whispers of the passing time. Back in the coal room, by the fourth table, one janitor says to another, "We're going to have to tell management about it." The other nods silently, swatting a mosquito that had landed on his skin. The hand kills the bug on contact, the bug leaving existence with a drop of blood or two to its name. The other janitor picks the black speck off his skin - the speck smothered in sweat and grime with the mosquito somewhere in that mixture -, and he glances at it briefly before flicking it off his finger.

Things like this, they're binaries of life and death. That's all they are, really.

VIII.

Polaroid cameras by nature can never do a moment justice, though they're the closest way to get to a correct photo. It's right after the polaroid photo is taken, when the camera spits out white paper, that a moment is represented most truthfully. When it's still white. In physics, this concept is called "potential energy." But moments cannot be preserved forever, and the blankness of the photo begins to lose itself in swirls of color. It's as if those shadows, the ones from tiny brick buildings that visit you in nightmares and off-hand conversations with strangers, it's as if the shadows follow you and reach up your arms and hands into the photo you're holding. And they dye your life in micro-specks of color before you lose yourself and now you're holding a photo and the photo's no longer true. A part of the story is lost, but no effort is made to plug in the hole. The numbers continue, despite the gaps. *The numbers continue, despite the gaps.*

I'm trying to say something that's big and true. I'm trying to find a moment in a sea of words and phrases, and I don't have much to fish it out with. Can you feel the heaving of the waves? Can you hear the drip, drip, drip, of water against the windshield as the specks are wiped away?