

## Paresthesia

With a deep breath, he opened his eyes and turned back to walk inside. Forty minutes had passed, and he had not moved. The sun had set while he had stared.

This peculiar new habit had started abruptly, and without conscious thought. One evening, five weeks ago, he had found himself stopped, stock still, on the edge of the hill outside his patio, staring. His hands had been in his pockets, his hood up over his ears, and he had just stood there.

The first time he did it he did not keep track of how long he had been staring, but he knew it must have been well over an hour: he had watched the sky go from blue to pink to black; he had heard the birds turn to crickets; he had smelled rosemary and smoke and a new smell that he knew, but couldn't place and that only came out at night. Sunlight was traded for lamplight across the plateau, and the mountain shimmered with the beams of cars.

At first, he thought he had suddenly, sporadically, taken up meditating. He hoped maybe he was becoming enlightened. But after some cursory research, he realized that this was not it; he noticed too much, remembered all the details. There was no "disentanglement from space and time." There was no *mantra*. It was more as if he was affectively shutting off. He still noticed things, all the things, and he made a mental list of them, but these things bore no emotionality. They simply were. He was an observer in these moments. It was only after, when recounting all he had seen or heard or felt or smelled that they garnered any meaning. It was only after that he noticed: the wind had blown harshly, but smoothly, and yes it *did* feel nice; with it had been carried the scent of wild herbs and smokestacks and yes, well, that *did* smell good; the spider had crawled onto his bare foot and bitten it, drawing some blood, and that really quite hurt and he *did*

*not* enjoy it.

Every evening, for the past five weeks, he went out onto his patio, took the six steps to the edge of the hill, and just stood. Rain had cut these moments of his short a few times, but like all else, he did not think of it as disturbing until he found himself back inside. A neighbor waved once, spotting him while walking his dog down the dirt road that led to his house. He noticed the neighbor, even turned his head towards him, but his hands remained in his pockets and a moment later he was facing forward once more. The neighbor, rightly confused and somewhat offended, never waved again.

He felt bad about that one a few days after and wanted to see the neighbor and explain that it was nothing personal, that he certainly wanted to be neighborly. But he had no idea how he would go about explaining why he didn't wave, especially not to someone else. He could hardly explain it to himself.

He wanted, instinctively, to say that he couldn't wave back, but that answer frightened him. It frightened him because all the other possible answers, "I was spaced out," "I was having an anxiety attack," "I hadn't recognized it to be you," they all felt like lies, and only inability felt like the truth. Inability to do what? Why did he feel so powerless? He was in control of himself, was he not? It was always he who decided when to return inside, and it was also he who experienced, and then reflected on, what he saw.

Yet, hard as he may try to think otherwise, he knew that he never would have been able to wave back. Something was stopping him. In those moments, those blocks of time spent staring, listening, feeling, smelling, something was disconnected inside of him. A cord came loose, some tether to meaning was left dangling and it all floated up, up, up out of reach. He was not *him* in

those moments, not really, he was just a body. He cared not one bit for what was happening around himself.

While his new habit had begun only recently, this feeling of distance, of delayed emotional and cognitive investment, was not new. Throughout his life, at any event of significance, there was a delay. And while, as he reflects on these events now, he feels either pain or joy, sadness or anger, he knows that in the moments of the events themselves he felt nothing; he was just there.

He also knows that in this system there is a pattern, a curve to the graph. Simply, the more deserving of emotional investment or response a situation is, the longer it takes for him to respond, to feel it. Small events with small value he feels very soon after, such as the nice-smelling rosemary. Large events, however, may take days, weeks, even years. It's difficult to tell how long it will be. He is certain, though, that the more time that transpires before he becomes affected, the more intense it will be. Shattering or uplifting; crippling or enlightening; they both take their time.

At eight years old, he turned back home during his walk to school, having forgotten his lunch. The door was open, so he didn't knock or shout, he just went to the kitchen counter to grab the brown paper bag. He assumed his mom, who had seen him off, was upstairs, showering or changing or doing whatever mystical things it is that moms do in the morning. Then he saw her, out in the backyard, still in her robe, with her back to him. In her right hand was a lit cigarette. She was smoking, something he had never seen her do, something he had thought she did not do, something he knew was bad. He didn't say a word, had no intention of doing so, grabbed his lunch without her noticing, and, for the second time that day, began his walk to

school.

Two and a half hours later, at lunch time, he began to cry. He felt scared, scared of the unnamed sickness he assumed his mother now had, angry at her and her lie of omission, angry at her shame, and sad that his mother now seemed different to him. Two and a half hours later, he was bowled over, racked with an array of emotions, completely at their whim.

At sixteen years old, he watched his friend die in a hospital bed at dawn from a cancer with which he had been born. They had grown up together, they came from the same neighborhood, and while their closeness had phased in and out in the past, their recent years together had been intimate and strong. The last words his friend said to him were “Man, I love you,” and he died laughing at a joke. He spoke at his friend’s funeral, people cried and smiled and laughed, and he carried his friend out of the church on his shoulder with a straight back and sure arms.

Three weeks later, he dropped an orange from his hand on the way back from the grocer’s and broke down on the frozen street. Unable to catch his breath, he sobbed and gasped, choked by an unbelievable grief. He could see his little gasps coalescing into steam in the cold air. Though he did not respond to them, he could sense the passersby that had come to check on him, console him, ask him if he needed help. He lost all feeling in his fingers and his toes and felt only pain and sadness deep in his chest.

At twenty-eight he asked his boyfriend to marry him, his boyfriend said yes, and suddenly they were engaged to be married. It was a beautiful, stunning autumn day, their third anniversary, and they had rented a medieval farmhouse on the side of a hill in Tuscany for three weeks. The air was full of smoke and rosemary, and a chilled wind blew north, strong enough to

make the trees whisper but nothing more. The sun was bright, and his now-fiancé beamed, crying tears of happiness, hugged him, and smothered him with kisses. They had been in love for five years, together for three, and now were devoted to remaining together for as long as they both shall live. His fiancé could not contain himself.

A month and nine days later, at four-thirty in the morning, while his fiancé slept, he awoke with a start, and stared down at the face of the man he loved. His heart burst and tears sprang to his eyes and, unable to contain himself, he ran to the balcony of their apartment and screamed with pure joy. He had never felt this happy, this excited, and when he felt his fiancé's arms slip around his waist, this much love.

At thirty-six years old he killed his husband with a pewter tea-kettle. It was close to midnight, during a hot summer in the city, and they had been fighting for six days. He was being shouted at, as he had been without cessation for the last two of those days, being called sick, a psycho, unfeeling and wretched. From behind him, his love called him a monster and a pussy, a cold-hearted, unfeeling man. He said that he hated him, that he was shit, and that he regretted their marriage every day. He said that he should hit him again.

As he filled up the kettle with water, he could feel his wrist ache, having taken most of the blow. He rubbed his chin absently, at the spot where knuckles had made contact. The words, carrying spittle, rained onto his back as the kettle filled. "Heartless, disgusting, a fucking nobody!" bellowed out behind him, over and over again, full of venom and intent. Once the kettle was filled, he turned off the tap, held the pot in his left hand, and swung fast at the source of the words behind him.

He felt the corner hit, and he heard a loud, dull noise. He saw the body fall violently to

the floor, eyes open with surprise, and blood began spilling slowly from his left temple. His husband was trying to speak, it seemed, but his mouth just opened and closed, with nothing coming out.

He stepped over him and crouched down, putting his knees on his husband's shoulders, like he had seen wrestlers do, pinning him down. His husband raised his right hand very slightly off the floor.

He could feel the heels sliding on the floor behind him, looking for traction, as he lifted the kettle over his head. With both of his hands, he brought it down as hard as he could onto the face in front of him, and he heard several small cracks and a crunch. His husband's hand fell down to the side. Twice more, he lifted the kettle high above his head and brought it again. Twice more, he heard a crunch. With the last hit, he was sprayed with blood. It tasted strange, like a penny dipped in sugar. Sweet copper. His husband lay supine, dead and bloodied, unrecognizable in the mess, on the hardwood floor of their apartment.

The investigation was long, but he had been quick and clean and could lie with conviction. It was left officially unsolved, and he was never charged, though he remains a person of interest in the case concerning the murder of his husband. When the investigation officially ended, he sold the apartment and bought the house in Tuscany. By Sunday, seven weeks ago, he had fully moved in.

Four years later, and every night he stands on that hill by the Tuscan house.

Every day he remembers what he has done, and every day he feels nothing. The cord is disconnected. There is no meaning attached to it, to what he did. Not yet.

There is the fear, however, which sits deep in his lungs and crawls softly under his skin.

The fear of that dive into the deep waters of a dark pond, looking for the muddy bottom, something solid to touch, to feel. Something that gives you stability. Something that gives you control. Something that tells you, even in this darkness, which way is up, which direction to swim. The one thing that saves you, that stops the dread, gives the tiniest amount of certainty. The fear when it can't be found. When it is forever out of reach, the comforting silt and rocks escaping the outstretched toes, and all direction, all meaning, is lost. This is the fear that whines behind his eyes every day as he stares. A fear of loss, but not of someone or something. He fears this loss of meaning, this loss of self. This loss of him. He is left swimming, paddling hopelessly in the dark. Why it leaves him he does not know, he does not want it to, but it always has. Tingling in his fingertips, he waits and waits, waits and waits for it to come back.

He can tell, he can tell that it is coming. The cord is in view. His feet will settle into the mud. He will have the direction. Then it will hit him, what he has done. He will feel its weight, and he will be consumed. He will be consumed by himself. He does not yet know how he will feel, but he knows it will be relentless, torrential. It should be arriving soon. And he is waiting for it. Smelling the breeze, the rosemary in the wind.