

A Personal History of Staring

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Aristophanes, in *The Clouds*, claims that Socrates was indifferent to his own appearance and paraded through Athens barefoot, staring people down. A later scholar would write: "He had a characteristic way of looking at people which was unforgettable but hard to describe. We hear of him staring with eyes wide open, as his custom was."

A Chinese proverb says that for a clever eye one glance is enough, while a dunce may stare all day long. For philosopher and fool, temptation is great and restraint elusive.

A predisposed child, shy to the core and relishing distance, will ignore his mother's warnings of derision, blindness, and death.

It is late afternoon in Midtown Manhattan. A woman unfurls a small brown rug on the subway platform, oblivious to a swarm of commuters. She carefully adjusts the fabric and kneels on it, bowing until her forehead touches the surface. Stepping off the train at Fiftieth Street, I pause to look at her, alone in a corner. In the steamy innards of the New York City transit system I've seen, among other things, a mariachi band at eight in the morning, a boy with an aquarium full of tropical fish, and a surfer carrying his cherished board, but never anything like this. Riding the escalator to the street, I continue to watch her until a the man standing behind me asks, "What are you staring at?"

"That woman," I say, without pointing. "She's praying."

"Haven't you ever seen that?"

"Not in a subway station."

"She's praying toward Mecca."

"Yes, I thought so."

He does not speak to me again but his silence seems to say: heathen, a person can pray anytime, anywhere.

For the remainder of the escalator ride he stares at me as I, in turn, stare at the woman bent quietly over her rug.

Every morning for several years I've gone to a café with expansive windows overlooking a tree-lined street on one

side and an urban plaza on the other. There, at the same table every day, I watch the passersby—office workers and dog-walkers and gym rats and pretzel vendors and delivery boys and every kind of New Yorker, which is to say, every kind of human being—or I can take in nothing more than the empty air between the café and the tenement buildings looming across the street. What have I been staring at lately? Topping the list are the students who slowly make their way to class at the high school down the street. Some linger on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes while others straggle into the café to talk and eat fried egg sandwiches. I am three times their age and often they seem like another species. The boys perform secret elaborate handshakes. The girls greet one another with kisses on the cheek. One morning a group of girls at the next table passed around colorful packs of condoms. The students never stare back. They are too involved in their own drama and uninterested in me, despite my indiscretion. When they sit close enough I can listen while staring—listen but not completely understand. Although their words sound familiar I can't always grasp the meaning. They seem to speak a foreign language infused with English cognates. While staring I try to learn about this new breed of human and I try to remember: was I ever so young?

If proof exists for a staring gene then my predisposition can be traced to my father, a longtime gawker, as my mother has often referred to him. Catching him in the act, she'd snap, "Stop gawking!" One summer day, as we sat in our Chevy at a stoplight with the windows open because we didn't have air-conditioning, my father began looking at a young woman who stood hitchhiking on the curb. She was pretty and wore a very tight, short skirt. Perhaps because of the scorching heat my mother seemed unconcerned with my father's staring that day, but the hitchhiker became agitated. "What are you looking at old man?" she yelled. My father, not yet forty, briefly diverted his attention—a carrier of the staring gene can never look away for long—and as he turned back to the woman, a car

pulled over to offer her a ride. “How do you like *that*?” she scathed, opening the door to hop in. My guileless father stared until she was whisked away.

At the café and out in the world I, too, have been caught and chided. A stranger once said to me, “Didn’t your mother teach you that staring is rude?” But mother was too busy trying to reign in her people-watching husband; there was no time for gawker junior. A long-ago lover remarked in a disapproving tone: “You stare.” Contempt brewed beneath that undeniable fact and eventually we went our separate ways, mine a long but not unhappy path of solitary staring. But like passionate readers, people who stare rarely feel they are flying solo, and I, for one, am never lonely. I can go for days without spending time with anyone else. Staring provides uncomplicated companionship, and the hours or days alone can pass without boredom simply because there’s so much to look at in a universe which, as Galileo said, is a grand book that stands continually open to our gaze.

Despite the scorn for my habit, most of the time I can’t help it, and usually I don’t know I’m doing it until the spell breaks, as when the escalator transports me to the street level of the subway station and I stumble forward, stunned and disoriented because my eyes have been locked on a woman at prayer.

Locked is the operative word, for it is not mere looking. In “The Aesthetics of Silence,” Susan Sontag wrote: “A look is voluntary; it is also mobile, rising and falling in intensity as its foci of interest are taken up and then exhausted. A stare has, essentially, the character of a compulsion. . . .” Staring is more heartbeat than breath. A breath I can hold, a breath I can take in deeply to expel as I wish. The heartbeat cannot be willingly halted; it races or slows on its own volition. My staring happens like that. I am sitting with a cup of coffee and a newspaper, and suddenly, involuntarily, I disappear into a trance in which life seems not suspended but pulsing and amplified, vividly coalescent. Life comes together, meaning becomes apparent, and words that once evaded me dangle in the air.

What is so threatening about a stare that it drives a person to murderous rage? In the mammalian world it is perceived as potent with menace, as a precursor to aggression and danger. Our discomfort is primordial: the wild bear’s black eyes could be our last glimpse of life.

The stare precedes the hunt, aims the arrow at the heart while meeting the victim’s eyes; it opens a window to the predator’s hungry soul. “This guy was always staring at me and he made me feel uncomfortable.” So said a twenty-year old man from Albany, New York, who proceeded to stab and kill his offender. “I decided to have it out with the guy.” In the Philippines, a male nursing student was attacked by a group of men, shot several times, and died before arriving at a hospital. A police officer explained: “He was beaten up and shot dead just because he stared at the suspects, who did not like the way the victim looked at him.”

Looking directly at Medusa precipitated a bloodless death: the she-monster turned flesh into stone. In The Book of Genesis, the angels of God order Lot and his family to flee Sodom and not look back as the city is destroyed by fire; Lot’s wife defies the command and, as a result, becomes a pillar of salt. My mother said that staring would make my eyes *get stuck*—frozen hideously as in the face of a mask—and people would laugh at me for the rest of my life. Her warning failed to prevent my sister and me from playing a favorite game on summer days, when it was too hot to go outside: with our faces close, we’d look at each other until one of us lost the challenge by being the first to blink. During solar eclipses we were instructed not to stare at the sun or else we’d go blind. Ogle a stranger and we might get punched in the nose, or worse.

Narcissus could not look away from his reflection, but it was longing and grief that killed him, not staring per se. In my own version of the myth, the beautiful boy attempts to seduce his image, topples into the pond and quietly drowns. Often that is how it feels when I’ve succumbed to my stare: the self becomes submerged in stillness and clarity, and sometimes I neglect to take a breath, gasping for air without having dipped a toe into water. Unlike Narcissus, however, I never stare at myself for very long. A few minutes in the morning and at night is all I can take, and only for maintaining a presentable appearance. I don’t mind being stared at but I don’t want to be stared at for appearing unkempt. When it comes to mirrors, I’m a vampire. Mirrored rooms, especially restaurants, are repelling. I can’t enjoy a meal in a place where I am constantly averting my eyes from my own reflection.

I am not like the men in my gym who stare at themselves in the locker room. Young, old, flabby, thin, hairy and hairless, short and tall, they stare up and down and all around, turning this way and that to check the progress of a muscle or the bulge of a gut. They step back for the full-length view, gauging the slide to decay. One young man, after conducting his prolonged once-over, put his face up to the mirror and then, to my astonishment, pressed his lips to the glass. He walked away as if nothing peculiar had happened, as if his self-smacking was a common practice, and all I could fathom—besides the possibility that Narcissus filled his lungs with water while trying to kiss himself—was the realization that I did not, after all, love myself enough.

For a year I lived in Japan and was stared at often—in grocery stores, on the street, while riding the subway, and especially in the *sento*, the communal bath. Most Japanese men had never seen a naked white man. They watched as I soaped my body, watched as I rinsed, as I lowered myself into the scalding water, and again as I emerged listless and enlightened to the peculiarity of my blanched foreignness. My nose was relatively large, my arms and chest hairy, my speckled hazel eyes an oddity. Back home these features were unremarkable but now they fell under scrutiny through the warm mist of the *sento*, where I, too, stared. Before soaking in the bath, the men sit on low stools and scrub every inch of their bodies with a rag, then empty a pail of hot water over their heads and scrub again. In Kyoto or Tokyo or in the mountains to the north, this cleansing followed the same vigorous sequence. I never tired of observing the ritual, and though they had stared at me, my fellow bathers did not seem to realize that I was staring at them.

In Tokyo one morning I opened the front door and found four children accompanied by a man who had brought them to see—close-up—the neighborhood's *gaijin*. The children held out a box of chocolates as an offering. When I tried to speak in elementary Japanese, they scattered. "I'm sorry," their chaperone said in English. "They like to see you." And I liked seeing them. I wish they had stayed, but they had been scared away by the imminent threat of the strange becoming familiar. Later I ate the candy alone in my small apartment and never encountered those children again.

A long time ago, in a darkened classroom in London, a chain-smoking professor dropped a slide into his projector and there, upon a large white screen, appeared Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Even before I learned of the painting's importance, the five figures depicted on the canvas—prostitutes in a brothel—mesmerized me. Two have faces like African masks, two appear Iberian and another is Egyptian, but these features merely served as exotic backdrops for the women's unified and unequivocal stare. The longer I studied the painting—the longer I looked at it—the more it resisted revealing itself and the more it seemed to stare at me. In a new and modern contract with art the observer had become the observed, the appraiser himself judged for his complicity in the scene. Legend has it that when the young Spaniard first unveiled his painting for visitors to his Paris studio, a woman began to weep, a reaction which has been explained as a kind of nervous breakdown in response to the work's brutally raw sexuality. But I say no, it wasn't the sex at all. The woman probably had seen plenty of that, raw or otherwise, in art and in life. Instead she cried because no human had ever looked at her so intensely, so unrelentingly. A picture had regarded her with lusty ravenous greed, circumstantial evidence of Lacan's argument that the object we look upon gazes back at us.

Several times a year, when I visit the painting that first captivated me three decades ago, I experience what art historians have described as a startled self-consciousness. The prostitutes' stare seems to say: *what are you looking at buster? You're the one who has something to hide!* And what is it—what am I hiding? The shame of seeing my body in the locker room mirror? The persistent fantasy of pressing my lips to Picasso's canvas? A mere painting has stared me into submission and subjected me to the non-murderous peril: I've been stripped bare for all to see. The bona fide gawker hankers after this possibility as his daily joy, as affirmation and nourishment of his radically different constitution. By stepping outside the tenuous privacy of your home, he says, you assume the risk of being stared at, the probability of being exposed. Beyond the doormat stretches an endless stage flanked by eager spectators, and the only thing to do is embrace them.

On a Sunday morning in late winter, Marina Abramovic took a seat in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, four floors below the gallery containing *Les*

Demoiselles d'Avignon. In front of her was a table, and on the other side of the table, an empty chair that would not stay empty for long. So began "The Artist is Present," an averred performance piece that transformed an otherwise rude and unacceptable behavior into an institutionally validated form of art. For six days a week, seven hours a day, Abramovic remained in her chair and stared into the eyes of people who chose to sit across from her and stare back. The first person to sit down—a young man—did not get up until closing time, a sedentary marathon that impressed and frustrated those who had hoped to get in on the opening day action. Few others in the ensuing weeks demonstrated such resolve. Some lasted only minutes; they were motivated, I suspect, by the chance to say they had done it. Yet many endured for hours without looking away. One man sat with his arms crossed at his chest. Like the visitor to Picasso's studio, one woman cried, her marrow pierced by a gaze. For the more than seven hundred hours spanning two seasons, pilgrims patiently lined up for an opportunity to stare. Occasionally someone would leave the queue, discouraged by the long wait or persuaded by a companion. Still other patrons stood or sat along a square perimeter marked by tape on the floor. And what were they doing? Gawking, my mother would say, at the gawkers.

Outside the museum, on the sidewalks of Manhattan, non-staring life—the determined avoidance of eye contact—marched on. Within the gleaming fortress, "The Artist is Present" granted permission to take a long hard look at another human being.

I stood in line on two separate days for my turn with Marina Abramovic. Each morning, when I set out on my quest, an intense yearning came over me. I wanted it bad: to sit down, to stare in full glorious view of all who had paid the price of admission, and to do it until pain or exhaustion or museum guards forced me out. On the first day, a young woman in a bright red coat had seated herself in front of Abramovic. She sat and sat and sat, unmoving, seemingly not breathing or batting an eye. Six people stood ahead of me in line. They shifted their weight from one leg to another and checked their watches and sighed. They read books or sent endless text messages. The boulder draped in red would not budge. Hungry and tired, I withdrew from the line, and while walking away, deflated and unfulfilled, I noticed that the person who had moved up in my place

suddenly had the expression of a lottery winner. On the second day, the long line was strewn with young skinny art students who could survive indefinitely without food or sleep. I gave up again—too easily, in retrospect—but for an engrossing half hour I joined the onlookers at the sideline, content to be an eyewitness to the duel.

Watching another person stare delivers a high degree of enjoyment—a *ménage à trois* of staring. If you partake, be advised of the torments inherent in the orgiastic dynamic. Who deserves your attention at any given moment? And is pleasure possible if you are attempting, so very hedonistically, to stare at two people at once? The threesome is thrilling but players beware: one of you is bound to feel cheated.

Perhaps, after all, the fables had contained some truth, the motherly warnings some wisdom.

At home one evening, I saw a fly darting about in my peripheral vision. It flew behind me, disappearing, and I hunted it to no avail. But wait—I had not seen a fly in my thirtieth floor apartment in all the years I've lived there. Where had this one come from? Why now? I went to bed without seeing it again. The next morning, on a flight to California, I removed a book from my bag and began to read and there on the page I saw not one but thousands of tiny flies amassed, all moving in dreamlike half-speed. I closed my eyes and hoped that when I opened them they would be gone. But the flies were still there and now it was clear that they were not flies at all but rather countless black dots floating over the words and white space of my book. I looked up from the page and stared ahead. The locust cloud of dots quivered everywhere like a gauzy gray curtain dropped between the world and me.

In California, I went to an ophthalmologist who examined first my left eye and then the right. "Oh no," he said. And then again: "Oh no!" The retina of my right eye had been torn in so many places that it was shredded and detached, and the hemorrhaging red blood cells were causing the appearance of flies. "You'll be blind in that eye if you don't have surgery today," the doctor said. "Today?" I asked. It was the brilliant warm morning before Christmas Eve. "Right now," he said. Despite the urgent mandate, I remained calm and rapidly concluded that I had seen many great things and wonderful places with perfect vision. Blindness in one eye would not be so terrible. I would

still be able to read and to partake of visual beauty in all its forms, and to stare with one good, promiscuous eye.

At the hospital, a surgeon used lasers to mend the tears. He extracted the vitreous gel behind the lens of my eye and filled the cavity with a gaseous bubble. In the pre-op instructions the surgeon had said, "You'll need to keep your head in the praying position for a few weeks." With my head bowed, the bubble in my eye would exert pressure against the retina, keeping it in place as it healed. Unlike the disciple on her rug in the subway station, I was not religious, but for six weeks I prayed constantly, slept only on my stomach, and wondered if my circumscribed vision had been handed down as a penance.

Less than two years later, the flies returned. This time the retina in my left eye had been ripped open along the circumference.

Most people with torn and detached retinas have suffered from myopia or experienced a powerful blow to the head. I had no history of either. At a world-renowned eye center in New York, self-assured experts peered into the windows of my soul, poured blue and red beams of light into the dark well of my body. They stared into me as only Picasso's prostitutes could have stared, at once cold and searing and certain to expose all my flaws. Using devices of the highest technological ilk, they took pictures of a complex terrain of neurons and synapses overrun by streams swollen with blood. My retinas, it turns out, are afflicted by a genetic propensity for thinning, a condition known as lattice degeneration. Each doctor who examined me said this: there is nothing we can do, we can only keep watch, we can only observe. In my own mythology I imagine that my retinas have been worn down by the rudest and most gratifying obsession.