

Still Frame

There was a zoetrope at the zoo that, when spun, would show man steadily reach his feet — changing from the hairy, ape-like *australopithecus* to *homo erectus* to *sapiens* then back again. The sketches in the zoo's zoetrope were strung together; motion turning them from still-scenes to living animations. The force with which you spun it dictated the speed of human evolution. But if you froze it — grabbed the spinning contraption mid-turn — you could stop time.

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Being car-less and in love, my friend ran 20+ miles to see a girl once on a whim. I could not do that. What if by the time you got there the spark had gone out, flying down your thighs and calves and out the tips of your toes? What then? What if you arrived only to find yourself changed by the getting there? I did not run back then, but I biked and loved the feeling of it. That movement was a way of being every self you could be cutting across time. You could feel yourself changing in every press on the pedal. It was some ET shit, riding around, feeling like flying. Some ET shit in the magic of it — thinking you could hop over the moon and freeze-frame with your body and wheels silhouetted by a chunk of shining cheese.

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Rooms are museums to self. They are time capsules and archives and libraries. In rooms we can wrap up history and put it behind four solid walls, a door. Preserve something that always evades us. Permanence. And maybe more than that. We can safeguard some of our past personhood. For this reason, it is always hard to visit my childhood home. To see my former selves in the scratches they made on the floor. To sleep beneath a two-pane window of broken glass and remember another me, an unhappier, angrier me who kicked it broken. To read the word “happy” written in pen on the wall, the first part of a date smeared off, only the year, 2013, remaining. A stamp I'd put there worried I'd forget the feeling. Being in that old room, seeing scars my past self made feels like walking through a gallery hung with pictures of me that I don't remember posing for. Like reading old journal entries I don't remember writing. Like remembering a life I lived but no longer fully remember.

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Before I learned to ride a bicycle, my mom bought a bike trailer and would latch it to the back of her Giant and pull us around. My sister and I would sit with this clear, plastic wind cover zipped over us and look up at the trees. They had green leaves and I would point to them and tell my little sister to watch, *they won't be there much longer*. And the next time I'd point and say, *those leaves aren't as green*. And the next time I'd say, *no, I'm sure they're turning orange*. Then I'd ask, *where have they gone?*

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In *300 Arguments*, Sarah Manguso writes: “You aren't the same person after a good night's sleep as you are after a sleepless night. But which person is you?” I respond: *Neither. The first. The second. Both*. I tell a girl I was formally diagnosed with bipolar when I was younger. She asks

me if I feel more like the manic version or depressive version of myself. I respond: *Depends. Who's asking?*

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At a lecture given on the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, Poland, a member of the museum's founding board explained how they told history. They used artifacts. The lecturer showed us a few. *This is a cloth smuggled out of a POW camp, on it is written 'they will kill me tomorrow.'* Here, you see a handmade nativity scene from a concentration camp. Here are suitcases from Auschwitz. I am reminded of the diary pages of Tanya Savicheva (1930-1944), a victim of the Leningrad Siege whose few words scrawled in a diary have memorialized her. Each page documents a different death. Page one: Женя умерла (Zhenya died). Page two Бабушка умерла (Grandma died). And continues. The last two pages read respectively, "Умерли все" and "Остала одна Таня" ("They have all died" and "I, Tanya, am left alone"). And she is left this way. The traces of her life, of those moments that make up a 'self,' are immortalized in these pages, now on display in the Siege of Leningrad Museum in St. Petersburg. In the same room hang pictures of grotesquely thin bodies starved during the two year siege. Bodies piled up — frozen in the harsh Russian winter.

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Biking past walkers, I get a single zoetropic view of them. They are frozen, they are there, then they are gone. A girl with her dog. A little kid walking out into traffic, her mother darting after her. A boy throwing a frisbee. People holding hands. People kissing. People sitting. Picnicking. People living. People fossilized in a slice of their shifting lives.

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Animator and artist Eric Dryer created a video version of the zoetrope. In a piece titled [*Copenhagen Cycles*](#), he uses laser printed images from footage he took while biking around Copenhagen to build animated sculptures. Recounting the creation of a new piece in the canyons outside San Diego, Dryer states that the stones were still and what animated the rock faces was human movement, *his* movement, as he walked through the quiet, water-carved stone.

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Roland Barthes calls photographs a 'temporal hallucination' in so much as the photographed object is 'not there,' only depicted. Yet, the photograph assures us of object's existence in the past. He writes: "History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it — and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it." Before Barthes' *Camera Lucida* was released, Sontag published *On Photography* (1977): "All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."

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Is it possible to be excluded from our own histories? Is it possible we are constituted of slices of time strung together by our own motion?

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The problem I have with memorials, with museums like the one in Gdansk is a problem I have no solution to. I only offer this critique: that to present artifacts like the hair, photographs, or shoes of those entering the Camps, preserves the victims as just that. The dead are absorbed by their death. Their lives — their selves — are defined by a moment. A freeze-frame. How far are artifacts from artifice?

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In Frank Browning's *A Queer Geography* he writes: "The identity of becoming is a dynamic identity. It acknowledges that 'coming out' is a fluid, continuous experience, more akin to Heraclitus' river, which can never be touched because during the time it takes to dip your hand into it and pull it out, it has moved somewhere else."

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The problem with time is that we cannot keep it though we pretend we can. As with the watch ticking on my wrist, as when someone asks *do you have the time*. And I reply *yes, 12:03, or 7:39*. Then, a moment later, the time I *had* evades me, fluttering away with the seconds. You can't *have* something that moves. That changes. But how we'd love to. Pinning butterfly wings and pressing flowers. Building museums and printing books. *Taking* photographs with a verb that implies that times and the selves we manifest within them are something tangible, something that can be *had, taken, kept*.

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Like time, we cannot *have* others. 'To have and to hold' is a wedding day dream. On the night I leave you, you yell *but you promised*. And I cannot say I didn't. And it stings. What I want to say is, *that was someone else*. But I am in the habit of thinking this. My thousand past-selves promising a thousand things to a thousand people, and I am not able to take credit. I want to say, *a promise is only as good as the person who makes it and but I am not that person anymore*. Instead I hold you and say *I am sorry, I am so sorry*. Because that person was me who made that promise, and at the same time I am not the person who could/will keep it for that other-me who told you, when you asked, if I would promise not to leave, that I would not, *I promise I will not*. I cannot help but think that was a cruel question to ask. And I also cannot help but think that a promise in itself will always be a cruel thing to give.

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I read somewhere about time travel, that the ultimate way to do it would be to copy your body, kill the old one, and transfer the duplicate somewhere else, so that when you awoke in the other place — the other time — you wouldn't be *you* anymore but a sort of regeneration, a clone. Somewhere else I read we 'theoretically' die everytime we go to sleep and wake up anew. I don't know about this. But maybe in each moment we do die a small death. Our skin sheds in bits, not like snake skin, which peels off in one piece. Not like the cicadas that leave their whole shells behind. In photographs we can see our husks. We look at our younger selves and wonder how we got to be *this, now*. "For the photograph," Barthes writes, "is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity."

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My mother tells me the one thing you should never get used is a mattress. She says this citing the old wives tale that mattresses double in weight after ten years. *That can't be true. Oh, but it is,* she says, *all the dead skin, the sweat. Trust me.* Then again, maybe I shouldn't get a used mattress for my own reasons. Sleep is so intimate. Beds, their own safety. In Emma Sulkowicz's performance piece *Carry that Weight*, she carried the mattress on which she was raped any time she was on the premises of the same university as her rapist. For a year. She said in an interview: "...I think the other part about beds is that we keep them in our bedrooms which is our intimate space, our private space, where we can retreat if we don't want to deal with anyone in that moment."

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A photograph can capture time, but so can a book. Marginalia in my own books, the lines drawn beneath phrases that once meant something to me, the highlighted paragraphs startle me. I see my notes and know that it *was* me who wrote them. And when I find myself disagreeing with what I underlined, I feel the urge to reject that other me. To say it was not my hand. Surely, it must have been another.

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"*Lolita*," a professor tells my class, "Is a book I read every year, and every year get something different from." The class waits as she pauses. "The first time I read it, it was about gender. The second time I read it, it was about desire. Now when I read it, it is about age."

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Then there is the book *Syzgy, Beauty* I borrowed from you not long ago. It was a book you were reading at the end of our relationship. I am not expecting to find you frozen between the pages. But there you are, and maybe there I am too in a highlighted sentence. The old me. The one who promised. "And in a couple of nights I am going to put my arm around him and he will not be you, just someone who is not you." You've traced over this in yellow. I read the sentence over and over imagining you curled up with the boy you now call 'love' and wonder if he is him or if he is someone who is not me. Then I keep reading.

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The first time I bring someone to my bed that is not you, I hesitate, sitting at my desk first and watching her sit where you once slept. I remember the first time I visited your bedroom after you'd moved on, wondering who had been in a place I called 'mine.' Now, my bed has known others. I have made it something that I can call 'a bed' without attachment. I have given up the idea of 'having' it. A mattress can hold the weight of a million former selves, a million former intimacies, a million tears spilled over nothing memorable now. Or it can be just a mattress.

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The images that make up a zoetrope show very little change from frame to frame. The legs of a horse lifted slightly up, slightly up, slightly bent, kicked back, then down again become a stallion running against a white background. It is with the zoopraxiscope (similar to the zoetrope) that in 1879 Eadweard Muybridge first proved there is a moment in the horse's gait when all four legs

are lifted off the ground. This fact was disputed until then. The human eye was unable to see through all the speed and dust of a trotting horse that it could hover as much as run. In the zoopraxiscope from Muybridge's study, a horse's black-silhouette is shown in the second and third frame with all all four hooves off the ground. Frozen there, mid-flight.

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My brother reads about buddhism and tells me the self is dead and I cannot completely disagree. But maybe the self is not dead so much as it is always dying. Always being born again. This is *Anatta*: 'non-self' or 'substanceless.' This is *Anicca*: 'impermanence,' 'the absence of the abiding self.'

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The word zoetrope comes from the greek *zoe*- meaning "life" and *-tropos*, meaning "turning." I hesitate writing this here — the metaphor too obvious. I'm beating the dead (or flying) horse. But I cannot stop thinking about it. Cannot grab hold of anything. Cannot grab hold of my self. Cannot stop the turning either. Cannot stop.

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When you're on a bike, if you're going fast enough, you feel it. There are those times when you look at the light posts on the side of the road, but they don't look like single posts anymore. They are one long line. One long line that keeps going and going and going. And you can't count them anymore because it's all become one thing. Just one note drawn out forever. And sometimes you'll stop. You'll get off your bike. You'll touch the posts. You'll try to freeze time.