

Don't take a picture. It won't last longer.

TVs are available to us as we sit in a restaurant, pump gas, or cross the Atlantic at 30,000 ft. The average individual's audio attention span is probably about three minutes tops. Painted and malnourished skeletons in high heels are praised for their beauty on the runway and featured in two-page centerfolds of publications with readerships in the millions while the works of pioneering literary gurus are stacked carelessly on dusty shelves to be removed for involuntary perusal only by a few unlucky students. A musician with a scratchy voice, rhythmless drummer, and lyrics as dry as biscotti can make it big because he or she has a washboard stomach or posed in the buff on the cover of Rolling Stone. All of these examples serve as proof that our society is preoccupied with appearances.

I may be the ringleader of this visual infatuation. I can't help but glance at the paraplegic's hand heavily grasping the joystick as she whirrs past me on the sidewalk. Throughout the entire lecture, I must fight to concentrate on the role of Periclean democracy in ancient Greece instead of the lecturer's habit of swinging his chin around when he talks, how she always gets all but a few hairs tucked neatly behind her ears when she puts on her reading glasses, and how often he unknowingly smudges his nose with chalk dust. I admit, with mixed shame and pride, that I am an avid people-watcher.

Like a creepy, unwanted embrace, I slide the guilt of superficiality away and celebrate the fact that people-watching is an entertaining, therapeutic pastime and a universal involuntary reflex. People-watching, like a good loud cry, is therapeutic. Like an unopened pack of baseball cards or a question mark Dum-Dum sucker, it promises surprise and variety. And like that curiously-satisfying sound of sucking hard things up in the vacuum cleaner, it quenches an undefinable, yet universal sensory yearning.

In the lunchroom, a spot perhaps as alluring to me as a Hallmark store to Beanie Baby enthusiasts, I hastily settle for pea-filled entrees and thick, creamy milk in the race to claim the chair with the best view of the crowded room. I sprawl on the lawn under the sun's bleating heat to read a chapter of garbled umlauts and throaty growls, and find the intermittent stream of faces and fabric to be the sole barrier between my drowsy head and my less-than-stimulating German text. An impatient horn nudges me through the unheeded green light as I tear my attention away from the future of America skateboarding up the curb outside my window. The large glass pane of my front window becomes an activated TV monitor as the academic buildings regurgitate masses of unsuspecting actors and actresses hourly. The view is a sitcom, soap opera, drama, action, and romance airing all at once- like all good programs do.

I can recall few more satisfying times in my life than the laugh-inducing spotting of the family with father-son matching overalls, and mother-daughter matching denim skirts and bandanas. I had my own personal epiphany as I watched the angelic senior citizen on the puddly sidewalk rescue countless worms from a moist death-by-stomping. When my lungs feel like ignited coals, my boredom like the lead vest in an X-ray room, and my legs like they've run the circumference of Saskatchewan instead of a football field, the momentary passing of the fellow human renews my energy. With this passing, I am amused, if only for a moment, by the barely-there loin cloths called running shorts, touched by the maternal vibes flowing from the wheels of the stroller, humbled by the male form's ability to tone so beautifully firm, and amazed at the amount of muscle and cellulite that coexist in the world.

I can still summon pictures in my head of soccer cleats of nearly every player on my 10&under team. I vividly remember the haircuts and favorite outfits of my kindergarten classmates. Images of noses and mouths from my distant past are still almost queerly clear. I remember how the first grade acquaintance wore her pink stocking hat on top of her head, instead of covering her ears like I'd been taught to wear it. I recall how the girl in Mrs. Zeisig's class wore pink corduroys with a red velour sweater and stuck out her tongue when she colored. I have involuntarily memorized the peculiar, lumbering gait of the girl who gave me a construction paper Christmas card when we were twelve.

Now, I scrunch my eyes shut at the melancholy bodies whose troubles I can only imagine, and my worries melt away as I say a silent prayer that their burden be lifted. I feel the corners of my mouth curve upward at the curly hair, scrawny frames, and casually-slung shoulder bags that inflate my happiness with a small warm bubble. I am the absurdity of the girl hitching up her humongous jeans to save the frayed edges from further defacing by mud and water instead of wearing ones that actually fit cause she didn't know it was going to rain today and anyway that's how she likes her pants to fit.

Shamefully, I admit that as I say prayers and smile sincerely, I'm also wrinkling my nose at the mindless conformity of stretchy, black pants and baggy, cargo khakis, automatically deeming the wearers personality-less. My lashes drip with salt, as I realize that paradoxical weakness of my own character. Angrily, I drown the inhuman judgments in guilty poison and resolve never to let them surface again.

Funny how watching others provokes so many statements beginning with "I". When we look at others, we ultimately see ourselves. We see, in them, our own faults, foibles, and beauty and are given a rare outside view of ourselves which surpasses the capabilities of any mirror. We identify with the sadness, joy, and sheer humanity seeping from every pore of their beings, and with this identification are reassured that we're not alone in this mindless circus. Then, how could "staring", as it's negatively so often negatively connoted, be rude?

I once heard a very powerful speaker tell a story about a little girl in the grocery store with her mom. The girl, with her yet uninhibited irises and naturally tolerant pupils, saw a man with a severely disfigured face. Without a moment of learned hesitation or hypersensitivity, the little girl tugged at her mother's hand, saying, "Look at the man's face, mommy."

The girl's mother jerked her sharply away from the man, scolding

What's so rude about noticing another living, breathing, feeling human being? What's so rude about caring enough about the perfect stranger to notice their differences, their similarities, their visible contribution to the melting pot? Looking at others with our "windows to the world" is as natural as smiling, frowning, and loving a child fresh out of the womb. It is the instant that the foreign concept of "different=bad" seeps into the innocent flesh of a child, the instant the offensive look-away reflex is learned, the instant one is taught to alienate that staring becomes rude.

And yet everyday millions of eyes gracelessly avoid leg stubs and scars. Where did this idea of a socially correct, forced aversion of the eyes when faced with deformity come from? The word deformity, in essence, is merely the opposite of conformity, another negatively connoted concept. The only evidence that tells us that conformity is generally considered the lesser of the two evils is the silently understood approval it receives. When faced with people who have the same color eyes or similar hands, we don't feel the need to look quickly away so we won't appear to be staring. And once we erase the oppressive stigma associated with being different, we won't feel the need to look away from someone with hands shaped differently than anyone else's in the world, and everyone, deformed and conformed, will feel tolerant foreign eyes on them- just looking.

Admittedly, there's a fine line between staring menacingly, disapprovingly, or stalkingly and merely observing democratically. However, too many times we mistake the eyes resting kindly on us for an instantaneous, harsh judgment. It's the code of the thin, crinkling skin in the corners of the eyes that is so hard to decipher. There's the barely detectable crinkle of immediate absorption, approval, and dismissal. There's the hairline crinkle of potential compatibility and the deep bark-esque crinkle of obvious affection. There's the seldom-seen dry crinkle of indisguisable intolerance. There's the border-line frown crinkle of silent contemplation and curious indecision that's so often mistaken for intolerance. There are a million other crinkles all uniquely their own, and ninety percent of the time, there's no possible way of telling exactly what crinkle's happening at all. And so we must rest our insecurities on the bed of trust.

In one excessively liberal and overly refreshing class I'm taking this semester, we do this lovely exercise in which we move, in a circular pattern, to everybody in the class in turn and look straight into his or her eyes for several initially painful seconds. We sing a weird Sufi song to them about their beauty while making corny, sweeping hand motions. Expectedly, during the first few trials of the exercise insecure giggles echoed, shoulders squirmed, and eyes were nervously averted in the incense-filled room. But with the persistent opening of our eyes, we soon realized, there's no cause for squirming, no need to feel rude, no reason to look away.

"No reason to look away - in a perfect world," you argue. Who's to say our world isn't perfect? Who's to say there aren't a million eyes out there watching a million faces and thinking a million kind thoughts about them? Do we ever stop to ask people what they're thinking when their gazes fall on our unsightly blemish, recently butchered hair-do, or four-fingered hand? Maybe they'd answer, "I've never seen anyone wear a zit so well," "I was wishing someone would try that cool scattered-layer style," or "I wonder if it's easier for him to fit his hand in the can for the last Pringle chip?" Instead, assumptions of repulsion, distaste, and alienation flood our brainwashed response systems, and staring becomes rude. If, in fact, our world is imperfect, perhaps the imperfections lie not in the keen observer, but in the quick-to-react observed. Perhaps, we should pay more attention to the bodies and faces floating through our lives each day. Perhaps, we shouldn't teach our children to avert their eyes in the check-out lane. Perhaps, we should risk offending and look one second longer. Perhaps, we should remember that windows are meant to be opened.

-Amy Vaerewyck