Teaching Myself To See

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Another afternoon in July.

The sun shone that day, too. The buildings seemed to scribble their shadows on the pavement. I was in a car moving across the light. My own dark shadow was moving with me.

Shadows are darkest when sunlight is brightest.

Charcoal patches below everything moving or static under the sky.

Through the glass window, in the mirrors, I saw a world dripping with colors grounded in their shadowy grip. I saw these colors on cement, on grass, as traffic signals materialized and dissipated — a rhythm ushering me away and into their waves or ripples. I rose; I plunged. Waves of streets moved through my body; the world emerged and escaped — an armada of fleeting colors. Buildings were ships at anchor on a sea or mirage of light, anchored by the rims of shadows.

I was the stick-man of a science diagram talking about wave-lengths and frequencies attached to the sun. I was linked to it with its own steady flowing light waves. As if the world were just a page and anyone could stare at it. My brain broiled, my thoughts smoked, my imagination
spilled frothing. My shadow was a black hole to gravitate me towards escape.

I could be a puppet. A puppeteer could be moving my hands and cooking my thoughts under some bigger plan. A grand puppet master called Sun pulled the string-like waves whenever he wished to change the shape of my shadow. It was utterly elastic: my shadow could stretch and shrink more than my actual bones and skin.

The July sun in Texas has a tactile intent: it wants to touch everything it sees. The July sun that day had a dispute with the clouds over sharing space in the sky. It knocked away all the feeble clouds that tried to patch shadows on parched patches of ground. July sunshine has the darkest shadows.

Let me tell you about shadows. There’s more to say.

Shadows become my visual destiny when the sun throbs closer to my head, like a glowing heart. It loves to melt that scented candle that you placed some time ago and forgot to carry inside. Was that a pumpkin-scented candle?

I was inside a moving car that day, teaching my eyes to look beyond mere shadow. I was learning to admire its neatly done outline—as if a giant pair of scissors had snapped the light strings around it to create its distinct borders.

It lay, half on the seat and half on the floor to my left side, faithfully waiting for me to wave my arm. It turned with the turns of the car. I was waiting for the luminous puppet master to tug the strings so that I could wave at it. The architect of shade is always the light.
While teaching my eyes to understand my shadow, while urging my eyes to look around for any waves outlining it, I was learning once again how to un-detail the world. There are just too many details under the sun! Un-detailing is zeroing out all of the visual load you have to deal with — and there are many of them! You say there are two apples? Place their shadows under my shadow. There will be zero apple-shadow. Shadows will blur your best mathematics.

To un-detail a face, when faces are just compositions of skin around the eyes, nose and mouth, one has to subtract many factors. When you un-detail a face, you must subtract the name of the face-bearer; you must eliminate unnecessary activities such as labeling a face as pretty, ugly, bored, excited, sleepy, or worried; you should not feel pressure to finalize whether the face is familiar or unfamiliar, or could be familiar. You just subtract everything out and leave the essential human shape.

Shadows teach me subtraction without numbers. With the shadow of a visually impaired person or a hearing impaired person, I will subtract the impaired part along with many other details, yet still let it exist in a flattened shape. Talk about eliminating Autism! It isn’t a science project, however. You must simply look at the shadow. Looking at the shadow will let you subtract the medical terminologies and still keep the human being intact.

No matter how you look, every flattened patch of a person called shadow will blossom under light, mathematically squeezing out the details. Removing details, shadows leave a residue that is neither matter nor energy. Einstein wouldn’t have found them worthy of the energy–matter relationship.
Shadows teach me how to add. When my shadow spreads on a table, the table stops being a table. It becomes something more. I have seen shadows float on water and sink in water, ignoring the laws of floatation. And shadows pattern the walls, yet remain unclogged by the extravaganza of colors. It is a mad-holy vision.

Shadows do not differentiate. They form a perfect equation. A king will have the same property in his shadow as a beggar. The pride and prestige of the king are just a patch in a shadow. Even the eager expectation in the beggar’s expression wouldn’t be allowed in the general rule of the stoic shadow. We are all equals — socialism in shadow!

Pick a round pebble and pick a gold coin. Shadows will not give a dime.

Living, non-living — every entity has a right to at least a shadow. If anything is democratic and non-judgmental, it is the shadow, that ancient philosopher of democracy.

Shadows have contributed to the light of my education. I remember my mother teaching me how to trace my shadows when I was learning to hold the pencil to write. Because I had good visual attention towards this thing, I was motivated to trace the outlines — shadow of a ball, a hand, a rectangular page or a ruler on the cement floor when she held them high against the light, long before I learned to write the curving C and O or the hard straight lines of K and N. That was years ago. Those shadowed days of my childhood froth and spill.

My shadow sat idle, yet it had an outline. It was a faceless shape, shifting with the orientation of the car. I cannot remember where I was going that day. When I see shadows, I let them pull me with them, shape me up, lead me on.