Teaching Myself To See

Tito Mukhopadhyay

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I had set forth to enjoy the weather, inhaling the changing colors of the leaves. My eyes were my headlights, showing me the way. The chilled air tickled my nostrils. Texas was cooling and cooling fast that October morning. Like a metallic conductor, it heated or cooled with the slightest provocation from the tilting and turning earth. We were celebrating outside after a very hot spell of summer. Then came Hurricane Harvey! Now every morning felt like a mandatory clean up. The wind and rain seemed to be medicated after a manic seizure.

While I was walking along the familiar trail, I stepped across a bright yellow jacket, under which the head of a squirrel appeared and disappeared, playing peekaboo. I couldn’t figure out why someone would discard such a jacket, which was new, that far out on the trail — why they would let a squirrel take possession of it? There are so many things we expect to see and then there are others that surprise us. The jacket and the busy squirrel made an interesting island on the trail. All around them were knotted grasses and weeds, woven in a disorderly manner, matted with mud.

Knotted weeds always look like a complicated economics. The yellow jacket lay there like a simplified project and
the squirrel was the sole explorer. He had solved the economics of knots and reduced everything into a simplified system that worked for him. He knew what he was looking at. Many of us continue to search all our lives for the particular thing we should look at.

There is so much to look at! You open your eyes in the morning and begin to look. Where is the new packet of shaving blades? You have seen enough and before it is nine o'clock you have looked through the garbage and still have not found the new packet of blades. You will be seeing more! Why is the magazine on the kitchen shelf when it’s not supposed to be there? You will see things out of place if you are bothered by them. Everything in this world turns upside down and out of place during the day. You can be a squirrel discovering a yellow jacket on a path in the puzzling economics of life. And you can find what to look at like the squirrel and ignore the rest.

Long ago a primitive human being gazed up at the yellow orb in the sky and grunted out the sound “sun.” They who heard the word grunted out “sun” in unison, because the first grunt of the word was from the leader of their tribe whom they all revered. The sun was something that can’t be out of place. Then they told their children what to call that yellow orb, even if they wanted to call it more than a mere substance. Slowly, the next generation called the yellow light in the sky “sun.” They attached other things they saw to different sounds and soon they began to see the sounds they uttered — for when we hear the sound “sun” we cannot unsee the shape. We cannot unsee the light and we cannot unfeel the heat. The mind of the squirrel could feel the warmth under the jacket. He did not bother to label it by any name and complicate the simple pleasures of the autumn morning. The economics of complexity are a choice.
How complicated can we make our visual experience? As children, we learn the latitudes that ring the earth; against those latitudes the westerlies and trade winds arrowing this way and that with the explanations of the Coriolis effect. One day, we outgrow the knowledge to find the simple pleasures of the wind on our face during a morning walk. And then we are asked to focus on the yellow jacket of a hurricane. Talk about out of place! The Weather Channel zeroes in on Harvey the way Harvey zeroes in on the Gulf Coast. A simple drive to the grocery store is forbidden. Between you and the store is a flash flood waiting to get you. Does anyone wonder what squirrels do when wind attacks their trees? On what do birds and squirrels focus in that movement?

What forces us to focus when we have to jump on the platform from a moving train? Once in a station in Chennai, mother and I had to focus. Rushing to catch our train, we got up on the wrong train in the rush, because the train from Bangalore to Chennai had delayed us. We were catching the train to Howrah at Chennai. The time of the wrong train coincided with the train we were supposed to be on. We realized the mistake only when the wrong train we were on began to move. There was nothing to reason as I saw mother, in the blink of a moment, desperately throwing our suitcases onto the platform. She was then grabbing my hand to jump out — the next blink of the moment. I saw the ground moving further behind the train before the jump — that’s where the force of focus was that day. I believe I was nine. That day time was perceived as a series of blinks. When we talk about it today, the moment seemed complicated, and yet we focused.

I couldn’t have known that one day I would be walking on an American trail, learning to look at a squirrel under a discarded jacket, and wiling away the time.
What if the human and the squirrel exchanged places? His head popped in and out, teasing all of the theories that never matter. The complex world of information continues to weave and grow heavy with facts. All our lives we are gathering the garbage of facts to make sense of what we see. Touring NASA in Houston, I gathered a book with facts collected by the touring astronauts — every page was factual with the pictures they took.

One day, I could be dropping in on a desert to meet the Little Prince from the book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. And I will tell him what I learned from all of this seeing — “We are squirrels under the jacket called sky.”