

**Leah Souffrant**

**A Brief Meditation on Looking; or Why Instagram**

Sit and wait. At a café. In the waiting room. In my kitchen. For a friend. For my name to be called. For the water to boil.

We have many ways to take thoughts from the moment, to let time pass without feeling it, without living it, without seeing it. Often I just let my eyes take in the space. Sometimes I turn to a screen. Then I ask: What am I missing when I turn to a screen instead of turning to the room I am in?

I look at the table. I look at the wall. See how the strap of my bag bends, making shadows and cutting new shapes in the air.

Then I use my phone screen to capture this seeing, to slow it, to draw me closer in to the moment. And then to draw you into it too. I share it. Look at my picture of this café table, then turn back to your own room, your own table.

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To look carefully at something near at hand is to take a deliberate action. An action with consequences. I wonder at the action we take in looking and in sharing what we look at. I wonder if there is enough wonder, enough consequence, enough action.

I look carefully at the seam of fabric near my wrist. The stitch of thread is hidden under a tiny curl of fabric dark with shadow. The lines of the tight weave of cotton are visible more in one direction than another, making a tiny ribbed texture. The threads are all the same color, all from the same thread, yet their nearness and density, the way the light marks this shadow, makes them distinct. They are shades of darkness and light rather than one continuous hue. If I tell you it is a gray shirt, will you see it clearly? If I tell you it is black, how does it form, the light and the darkness? What are you noticing now?

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Having eyes open and able to see, we might imagine that we are seeing most of the time. Ask what you are seeing and you will begin to look. What are you looking at now? What might you otherwise have been looking at? Where will you redirect your line of sight, given this effort of attention?

We take in many sights in a day. Our vision is busy. We put it to work without slowing too much, unless interrupted by pain, a headache, a sudden burst of glaring light. Some of us are shocked more easily by the static of moving images and digital speed than others. Some of us are more attuned to colors. Some of us are children, where more seems new and newly noticed.

Sometimes we look toward the television together, my eyes fixed on the screen as you watch. Sitting next to me you say, “That reminds me of your mother’s dog” or “Do you think that scenery was fake?” Sometimes I am startled. I saw no dog, noticed no scenery.

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I look at the links of metal that join to make a bracelet. Round, in the light there is white, dark gray in incremental shades, a glimmer of pink from a distant red reflection in the room. One link, turned, might be a straight line of metal: I cannot see its curve, its circular movement. The rings repeat, one after another, each unique, catching a different light, settled at a different angle, a different distance from my eye, from each other. And I haven’t begun to look at the skin beneath the chain: my very wrist, my own body.

Can you slow with me over a knot of cloth? And does this slowing change how you see the world? Very little is dull if we pay attention.

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Looking down at the floor, a gray mat lies on wood floorboards. The lines of wood meet the mat at a tidy forty-five degree angle, and within the mat are small squares of elevated texture, creating a geometric pattern woven into rubber. The functional mat, set down on a rainy day in the office, becomes a surprising moment of elegant determination.

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The study of things disorients and reorients. The world becomes closer, more intimate as I look at its things and their textures with a loving eye, sharpening the edges by proximity, clarifying nuance by care of slow looking. The care to see the woven details of a fabric move me into it yet away from its way of covering the world. It becomes less a function and more of a thing.

Or, disoriented, the fabric becomes another world. A doubling pile of blanket is the ravine, is the mountain range. The blanket's unknowable shadows are the dim, hidden glens in a distant landscape. I take a photo, and what is the difference, looking at these, framing what I see and holding it still, between seeing the far off hills and seeing the curving blanket? You will see only what the dark and the light mark, the limits of the frame. You will see the soft or hard, but you do not touch any softness or hardness here. You do not hear the wind blowing from the distant river reaching just outside the shot. The meaning we make is the meaning of seeing anything at all. What are you looking at now? What are you hearing?

Emerson tells us that seeing the stars or trees around us makes us perceive something important, something transcendent. Perceiving ourselves in relation to the sky is a way of recognizing ourselves differently. This is not limited to trees and sky.

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I only see when slowing. Only when deliberate, attentive. Sometimes, bored and seeking a direction for the eye, to follow with the mind, I stop and find something to notice newly. I pay attention and my world changes. And I offer this to you that you too will see newly, and look away from my picture to your own very arm, the table before you, the blanket holding your worlds at night.

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Waiting for the train, I stand on a subway platform. It's night, and there

are few passengers waiting at the small station in the middle of residential Brooklyn. The fluorescent lights feel gray, dim, and the dingy cement floor seems to creep up. On one of the grimy tiled pillars there are spots. On closer inspection, the spots are blackened fingerprints from two outspread hands. The same prints appear in other places. How did the fingers come so dirty? Why did the body press them wide, stiff onto the cool tile? The wall comes alive.

The picture of the wall comes alive, but only if you see it. On the screen, notice the way the prints mark the squares, changing the tiles into a canvas.

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Sometimes in a restaurant, sometimes outside, or in the subway. Sometimes at home, letting eyes settle on the place, ready to see a newly framed corner, I make a new way of gathering close the familiar that goes missing most of the time. In my pictures, I offer a limited look, but all looks are limited. In framing that shows only a table's wood, my examination of it might slow you to see its grain. The curling lines, the worn ridges, the varying shades of brown. You might slow to look at your own table. I wish you would.

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