

Object Impermanence - Maisie, Year 10, NSW

Babies are thought to develop object permanence somewhere between the age of four and seven months. Studies differ, and so do the opinions of experts. Whatever the age, the consensus is clear. Somewhere between the time the baby is born and when it grows to be a functioning person, the notion is instilled; just because your mother's face has disappeared behind her two hands, she has not disappeared completely. The same distinction is made by most animals of a higher intelligence; all primates and some corvids, both dogs and cats.

I was never afforded this ability.

Something in my brain never developed, or maybe I'd had it once and lost it for whatever reason – professional opinions differ. What is completely clear to myself and the endless slew of doctors I'd seen was that I have what they call "object impermanence". Though I am subject to endless explanations from well-meaning disbelievers, I never grasped what it meant to know that something exists even once it strays from my sight.

"But that's impossible, surely!" they'd say. *"If I left right now, you'd know I still lived?"*

It was a terror I'd learned to bury – the jolt of displacement, the bereavement of the everyday. Disappearance became normal for me, the horrifying lack of limb commonplace. Upon waking each day, I shake with relief as I see with my own eyes that the world still exists. That I still exist.

Despite these shortcomings, I am able to live a relatively normal life. I live with my mother, I work at a warehouse. My aunt Kath is visiting us at the moment – she seemed to come out of nowhere. Although I am told she visits often, I cannot know anything of her beyond what I see. Sometimes my mother will talk of her, and each time I will hide my surprise that she still exists. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

Over breakfast, we discuss amnesia. Kath sits to the right of my mother around our small wooden dining table. A psychologist, she was always the most interested in my condition.

"I was reading something recently, it likened lack of object permanence in infants to short-term memory loss." She took a knife from nothing and began to butter her toast. "I thought of you, of course, isn't it true that you forget anything outside of your line of sight? Have you considered treatment for memory issues?"

"I hadn't thought of that, no," I said.

Kath continues. I entertain the conversation but have little confidence in the content of her speech. I remember things just fine, I only have difficulty with the concept of continuation. I know my mother once existed, I can remember her clearly as anyone would; her strong hands

and lined face. I only have trouble when you ask me to remember that she still exists. Whenever I look away, it's my instinct to grieve.

After breakfast, Kath's dog paws at the door, so we walk to the local cafe. It's still early, the sun's light is weak and pale. Frosty streets are bathed in a superficial warmth that never seeps deeper than the dermis. Kath and my mother talk in disembodied voices to my left and the dog yaps at the passing cars. I gaze upward at the trees, they are soaked deliciously thick in cognac-coloured leaves.

A familiar sorrow pools in my chest as we walk on and they leave my sight. I mourn everything I come into contact with, because it is the briefest of contact before it is exiled from my mind. Objects come into view as if being born, imbued with a life under my gaze and dashed as I turn my attention elsewhere. The streets I walk are fickle miracles, the feeble and erratic lashings of a fire. I stare for as long as I can. I will the flames to leave me burnt somehow, just to have something longer lasting.

At the cafe, I order a coffee. My mother and Kath talk between sips of espresso, her dog lapping at a water bowl on the ground. I press my palms tightly to the ceramic cup, feel the warmth radiate through to my core. I hold my hands there until the espressos are drunk to the dregs and the warmth has long since left, my coffee is cold and untouched.

Kath is saying she'll be going soon, she pulls at the dog's leash and my mother takes her phone out of her bag, noting the time.

"Do you want me to drive you, Kath?"

"No, that's fine, thanks Molly. I'll take the train."

They both stand to leave and I leave my cold coffee behind on the table. We walk together then part ways halfway back to the house, Kath takes the left street down to the station. I watch her for as long as I can. She gets smaller and smaller and finally she's gone like a far star extinguished. My throat burns and my heart weighs heavy; I let the heat behind my eyes fade until it's lulled to a small, cool sadness. I file Kath away with the brandy leaves on the trees.

In the afternoons, I have to be reminded of the warehouse. I leave my house like I am leaving forever and drive down roads that read like magazines.

My co-worker Rachael and I have become friendly over time. Today, while we are binding a particularly large order with tape, she tells me that her cat has died.

"I know I shouldn't be so upset, but that cat has been with me forever." She rubs her eyes, sore and red from crying. "In the end it was lymphoma, isn't that funny? Just like my dad. They were both so sick, though the cat went quicker."

“I’m sorry,” I say, because there isn’t much else to say.

We work in practised fluidity, wrapping and labelling and sending away. I do not mourn the packages as they leave. I do not dwell on the cat. I let them wash through me like the order forms pass through our hands – touched and considered but never staying in the one place.

Each evening, my mother picks me up from work. I have since forgotten that she is extant, the blinking of the newly familiar car lights reminds me. It’s a game of peekaboo; she removes the hands from her face and I can let the relief rush through me like an infant – reacquaint myself with the house that I didn’t know was still standing. My object impermanence has dashed any homing instinct I might have possessed as well.

Over dinner, she recounts her day. “Lyle was sick again, so I had to pick up his shifts. Bertie came round, you know she’s a talker. Her son’s in med school, so, you know, she’s very proud.” She takes a sip of wine. “Still, I could do without the conversation. You know how I am when I’m working.”

I take bites of warm food, sips of wine. I tell her about Rachael and her cat, I speak about both in the past tense.

At the end of the day, I lay my head down to sleep. When I close my eyes the world disappears with it and I exist in the void between cornea and eyelid. My narrow cone of vision is steeped in darkness, and there is nothing for me to prove that anything still exists. *Is this why babies cry, why they refuse to sleep? I wonder. Is it because they fear, more than anything, the sudden disappearance of everything?*

I can’t stand the gambling that goes with sleep. With nothing that can be trusted to be, I can only hope against hope that there will be something in the morning. That the sun will rise once more.

“But surely you know that!” Those well-meaning disbelievers explain to me, *“The sun has come up every other dawn, hasn’t it?”*

I can only tell them that I’ve woken up every other day, too, and surely one day that wouldn’t be the case. A mayfly will come into this world in the spring to leaves of evergreen, then die before knowing anything of autumn. They’d look at me strangely. They’d ask me then, if I truly was what I said I was, how did I stomach it? How did I live like I was cupping water? Everything flickering like flame, arbitrarily bursting and yelling out in violent disjointed displays, either beautiful or macabre.

I never know how to answer. The snapshots of my world exist truly and only for the moment, there’s nothing I can really tie to it, nothing to tie it down with either. Emotion seems to stick more than the cause for it does. There is only so much that will stay in front of me for long. I

can only lay down and fall asleep, dreaming of a shrouded sun. Upon waking, I can only shake with relief that it exists. That I exist.