

## Four tiles, from A Mosaic Day

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**Abstract** When we do ethnography—when we try to know people in general—what are we really doing? Are we cataloging their actions and beliefs? Thoughts and feelings? Kin relations? Maybe we are trying to empathize with them and see a little of what they do. If we could do that completely, would an unimportant leaf in the wind take on the meaning of a life?

**Résumé** Lorsque nous faisons de l'ethnographie – lorsque nous essayons de connaître les gens en général – que faisons-nous vraiment ? Cataloguons-nous leurs actions et leurs croyances ? Leurs pensées et leurs sentiments ? Leurs relations de parenté ? Peut-être essayons-nous d'éprouver de l'empathie pour eux et de voir un peu ce qu'ils font. Et si nous pouvions le faire complètement, une feuille sans importance dans le vent prendrait-elle le sens d'une vie ?

**Keywords** city; work; love

### After-noon

And they are getting on the bus wrapped in a month's salary of leather and elastic  
braced pants. He's utterly lost and lonely  
but he tries to ignore this with the tap tap of magnets in his ear.  
Later today he'll see his girl.  
Within the space of a dinner he will feel understood, betrayed, and finally abandoned to  
die  
in the spinning vortex on the crumpled trail between him and home.  
This he'll banish to a temporary death with liquor.  
Ethanol will creep into his skin working magic; a bandaid on an ever-bleeding wound.  
Later, looking round at all the faces  
looking at him  
looking for him to give them what he wants,  
bigger magnets framed by pulsing light and more poison will help him feel  
that the collective effervescence of raised hands and sweaty backs is equivalent  
to the collective effervescence of crying over the dead dream of belonging.

And they are wrapped in the soft small hand held in hers.  
Two births to perfection and now all she can do is hope to shield this little creature from the harshness of the wind in the warmth of her love.  
Never before has she so transcended herself to be inviolably invested in the smile of another. Granted it was a high-risk investment  
but death was lurking just round the corner and this was everything but that.  
They were heading to the zoo.  
Once before she had thought the zoo was full of nasty people abusing animals but the cheers of joy she would hear made any suffering worthwhile.  
He raises his orange shark motif capped head to look up at her standing there as if to ask if it is okay that the young man in the next seat hasn't gotten up,  
as if to ask if the sins of the world are because of his brief existence.  
She looks down and knows that he is all the insulation she will need  
to die in her bed warm and at home.

And they don't respond to a thanks driver and feels bad about it.  
All day long back and forth with a thousand disdainful voiceless jabs lobbed his way.  
Here comes on an old woman wearing a scowl,  
behind her a young woman with eyes and lips set with immobile condescension.  
And still early in the shift at that.  
Later the gabbling drunk fools will overtake his place of work to jeer at the too slow  
pressing on of the night.  
This thank you, amidst all the spray and thunder of perceived wrongdoing,  
cast across his ears first as a slight in the name of sarcastic ridicule.  
Thinking this he stayed quiet exteriorly but interiorly he cursed the breath that sustained  
that impudent effeminate young man.  
He remembers him from when he entered the bus at the middle door.  
With baggy orange bunny-hug and un-done-up hair he looks the picture of prideful  
egoism. Now, amid the hot endless buzz of the afternoon rush,  
he thinks that maybe that thank you had been nothing more  
than a well-intentioned reaching of a hand,  
a gentle reminder that all were lost  
on the route from 4th to 10th.  
Stopping quickly at the next light and hearing curses behind him he can't help but  
imagine  
he too is a passenger without recourse to the thoughts of others.  
He drives on smiling wistfully.

And they are trying in vain to brighten the day of those entering the train station.  
More often than not his papers are refused and he needn't say anything at all.

It isn't that he thinks one need take a paper to deserve a Have a good morning,  
he could very well say this to all,  
it is just that without some cap on his efforts at outpouring goodwill he would soon fall  
down in the street crossed over  
by fatigue both physical and emotional.  
The refusals don't bother him anyways,  
it is the quick passes made by those who do take a paper that irk his smiling offers.  
These fleeting meetings of hands connected by a few sheets of cheap newspaper  
are for him the heights of the day.  
Here, however briefly, he can hope to make the grinding of the daily commute home  
a little less arduous for all.  
Every once in a while,  
when there are no trains or buses dumping people to the street,  
he thinks that his job is a little like love.  
Here he stands in all vulnerability to the whims and rejections of others.  
To survive this he has learnt to expect nothing but to give everything.  
Without doing so he would have no reason to be out at all.  
And like love each rejection is sometimes made worthwhile as the arms of the crowd  
embrace him and one or two respond with a Have a good day too.

And they are getting off a train that had taken him to dust.  
Dust and behind it money  
and behind that  
a smile on his girlfriend's face.  
He's taken this exact train twenty-four days in a row and each one tired him more  
than the last till this day when he had stood afraid to close his eyes  
lest he be swept away and enter the work site somnambulant as a sleeping shark.  
Not that he's been anything else since day four.  
But to return home at the end of the day.  
Seven to seven but the last being the reason  
for the first.  
She had worked for some time at a restaurant carrying  
grease smeared plates with the occasional leftover crust that she would hungrily eat  
like a meal eaten by a fighting soldier.  
For months she said she was fine, not hungry,  
not at the end of some rope which if let go meant death.  
Finally, at the end of a day of nailing four hundred and fifty nails  
into soft wood harder than his calloused hands,  
he found her crying on the kitchen floor while streetlights outside flickered on to ward  
off the winter night.

After that he stopped taking weekends.

After that he stopped complaining about his bloodied feet and pounding ears.

Nothing in the world could cause his beloved pain and if he had to sell himself like slaves of old to masters not more kind but much more indifferent he would.

All for a soft hand to pat off the dust and soft eyes  
to meet his with a smile.

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