

Losing Face

One of my favorite books is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. I read it for school in the eighth grade and have revisited it any number of times over the years. In glorious, haunting prose, Wilde's dark Neo-gothic morality tale of a young man in Victorian England who makes a Faustian bargain to stay forever young, while a portrait of him ages before his eyes, reflects the existential turmoil of losing my vision and what I would be willing to consider trading of myself to halt the process. Dorian lives a libertine life of debauchery, and his portrait takes on all of the pain and scars of his sins. Spoiler alert—Dorian eventually commits suicide when he hates what he sees in the painting, slashing it with the knife that will be the weapon of his own demise. To me, the novella is about the price you pay for self-deception if you believe you can deny the truth that paints the portrait of your life. It is also about looking in the mirror and being able to live with what you see.

When I gaze into the mirror in search of my reflection lately, I wonder how Dorian's story might have turned out had he been spared the ability to see the portrait he loved and then loathed. I am witnessing my own disappearance as my face vanishes before me. When I close my right eye, I can still see the details of my features—my nose, my teeth, my beard. But I have to concentrate and move the tunnel of my left-eyesight left to right and up and down to scan my face in its entirety. If I find the right spot, I can see just over half of myself on a good day. If I close my left eye and look through only my right, my head becomes a soft blurry moon. My baldness gives me a sense of shape, but my features are no longer there, replaced by an opaque hovering cloud, like chalk erased from the board. There is an outline of a person, but that person does not have eyes or a nose or a mouth. That person is a smudge. When I look with both eyes, half of my face is covered by a blurry mask akin to *The Phantom of the Opera*. Every time I look, the mask has taken more real estate.

I have been blind at night and in all of the moments when my crumbling retinas try to adjust to changes in light for quite a while now. I was always able to recover enough in daylight to see the differences in things. in faces. in colors, in



shades and incongruities. Now I am being robbed of that last ounce of dignity. I choose that word carefully. It is how it feels in the moment. Like Dorian, I am scared of what I see and pissed that I cannot do anything to reverse the relentlessness of loss. My vanity is getting a swift kick in the jewels. Unlike Dorian, I know I will heal in time because soon I will not care about mirrors any longer.

My one-way-ticket journey on the Amtrak to blindness breezed through another station when I could no longer see the strike zone or when the pitch was thrown when watching a baseball game. I never knew what happened in a football game until the announcer called the play. I could not see balls being passed, thrown, hit, or shot. I could not see plays develop. I went from spectator, which implies viewing, to listener. I learned to adjust because I love baseball. I just experience it differently now, asking a lot of questions of my companions, listening for the crack of the bat or the snap of a ball hitting a glove. If I focus, I can still slowly scan the positioning of the players and what is happening on the bases. But just as my face is disappearing, so is my ability to distinguish most any detail I try to see. It is still worth it to sit in the sun and drink a cold one while the game plays around me. I will always enjoy listening to a game on TV or the radio. That will never fade away.

One day when I was in my early thirties, I was walking up ninth street in downtown Minneapolis to catch my morning bus to work. I felt the last vestiges of my thinly veiled attempt at hair blow up from my scalp like a toupee had come unglued as the chilly northern wind swept past my ears. By the time I got to the office, I decided to acknowledge my fate and embrace life as a bald man. I took my lunch break and hit the Great Clips down the block, plopping into a chair and asking the stylist to shave what remained of my thinning crop. My status as a bald man was confirmed when it took two days for anyone to notice I had a clean dome. I left for lunch with hair and came back completely bald, and nobody picked it up. I was already bald in their eyes. Embracing follicle-futility was such an obvious choice, an inevitable denouement. I have been shaving my head ever since. I am a bald man and that is just the way it is. I wish losing my vision had moments of clarity and confirmation like that.

As details dissolve into fuzz, comfort can only be felt when bruises on the body and soul heal with the passage of time. The soft beat of the inevitable ticks like a metronome, infallible and relentless. At times, you are given respite and the demon dances away. Cold angst turns to warm seawater waves lapping onto the shore. The ebb and tide feel natural and steady, the pull and push harmonize with the melody of the simple act of existence. The dimming of the day is peaceful before anticipation of the unknown tomorrow. You just have to find it.

As my face vanishes in the mirror, so do the faces of all that I love and hold close to me. I think that hurts even more. It is a prickly pain that jabs at the space above the heart where the throat begins. It feels like the flickering ghosts of all the fireflies I caught in jars when I was young are singing my breath in vengeance. Smiles are now remembrances of beautiful art I once saw at a museum. The color of eyes and the joy and pain behind them are now short poems woven in imagination. I read faces by hearing voices, picking up the ultrasound of sighs, grunts, laughs, and the flow of breath through the mouth and nose. I long for the instant gratification in looks of recognition. Hearing laughter is half of an incomplete equation. I cannot know a flirtatious glance, making me feel lonelier than I ever thought I could be. As I lose connection to faces, I feel like I am losing my way. I know that this will change as the prickly pain softly recedes into the sunset. It is just another reminder of the impermanence of the exterior we build our lives around.

In losing visual connection to faces, I find myself focusing on the story my own face composes. Not being able to see what is happening on the faces of others makes one all the more aware of how others are viewing yours. Is my smile right for the moment? Do I look like I am frowning too much? Do I have resting-jerk-face? Is my face not telling people what I really feel inside? Is it telling them too much or maybe betraying my true thoughts unintentionally? I spent a lot of time squinting over the years, scrunching my eyebrows and tensing my forehead into scraggly lines. This was often mistaken for disapproval or anger, and labels were placed on my general countenance accordingly. I hope this unfortunate side effect has dissipated, as I no longer need to squint at what I cannot discern. When I laugh, does my mouth open too wide? Am I masking the tears well enough when my heart breaks? I can no longer

interpret response or revelation in the looks of opaque ovals with voices animating their movement. I do the best I can to remember that those faces are always gauging mine. It is a challenging transition for the ego and the id.

My narrative iterates in seasonal syncopation with the morphing of my senses. A hazy snow is falling around me as the fall beckons winter. But it is not a bleak winter. In the silence of the leafless trees and the soft white blanket covering the ground before me, I will warm myself with imagination and the deeper connection of living energy and love given and received. I will author a different story describing a world imagined and remembered to invent a world anew. I will gaze in my own private wonder at the faceless in reverence to promises yet to be made.

As my face disappears, my heart will take on the work of replacing sight with love. My blood rushes in the certainty of life left to be lived. I suppose there will be plenty of moments of realization of loss as the current buzzes through me. I welcome them. Though I will soon no longer be able to see my fading portrait, I will love the story it tells all the same.

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Adam B Perry grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio and currently resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He holds a BA in Political Science and Theatre from Wittenberg University and an MA in Theatre Studies from The Ohio State University. His career in the creative sector stretches from Broadway stages to Hollywood film sets and includes six continents and over thirty countries. Adam has been gradually losing his vision to a degenerative retinal disease since his youth and identifies as a person with blindness. His writing is testimony that disability is an alternative life experience filled with challenge and reward in the search for grace and purpose. His writing is featured in Kaleidoscope Magazine, bioStories, and Watershed Review. "Losing Face" is an excerpt from The Fuzz Diary, a collection of personal essays and creative nonfiction exploring his journey with blindness.