

STILL LIFE

Apparently time has stopped. Or at least slowed to a crawl. I'm not exactly sure when it happened; I just woke up one day and noticed that the drips from my bathroom faucet were hovering in mid-air. Outside, the trees were bent in a heavy wind that I couldn't feel. Their leaves rested in empty space, folded and curled but motionless. I plucked one like an flower and put it in my pocket.

Despite this astonishing temporal phenomenon, my life hasn't changed much. I still go to work every day. Traffic is about as slow as it ever was. Although the computers at my office now run like Tandy 386s, there's still a near-endless supply of paperwork so my job isn't really affected by the freeze. But I've found it hard to stay focused on work. There are a lot of distractions. On the corner of 50th and Roosevelt there is a fairly serious accident in progress, a head-on collision between a small sedan and a pickup, and judging by the perceptible motion of the vehicles as they squeeze into each other, they must be going fast. I reach in the window of the sedan flying up off its rear wheels and buckle the driver's seatbelt for him. In the parking lot of my work there's a guy who's been falling off his bike for almost a week. I put a pillow on the area where I'm guessing he will land. I worry about interfering much more than that. If I move them out of their crashes, who knows what effect such a reversal of momentum might have

when time resumes? Long after I'm gone, their spines might retroactively break against my well-intentioned arms.

Physics are strange now, but I'm trying to adapt. Since time is frozen nothing moves on its own, at least not at a natural rate, but I can still forcibly move things however I want. If I throw a ball, it will stick in the air exactly where I release it. Outside my own personal proximity, there is no noticeable gravity or inertia. A while ago, for no reason really, I hoisted several waterfront joggers into the air and left them there, arranged in a mid-air star pattern. They will slowly drift back to the ground and my composition will dissolve and disappear like an ice sculpture.

I've been doing this sort of thing a lot lately. Yesterday I went to a bar and stacked all the billiard balls into an impossible pyramid. I poured a beer into the air and kneaded it into a pirate ship. I kissed a woman I could never even talk to in the moving world and wrote "You're Beautiful" in the air with her cigarette smoke.

It's a shame no one can see my work because some of it's rather inspired. Certainly more inspired than anything else I've done with my time in the last few years. I remember dreaming of being an artist back in college. I even took some pottery classes. Then I blinked a few times and something transformed me into a forty-eight-year-old claims adjuster who lives alone and eats a lot of frozen pizza. It's tempting to see this time-stop as a miraculous second chance handed to me by some second-class angel trying to earn his wings, but let's cut the Capra and be realistic: how much can I really change in a few frozen seconds? My new art career will end in a beer-soaked bar-top and a pile of bruised joggers. If any bystanders

happen to notice that half-second of shape and symmetry, they will probably just rub their eyes and keep walking.

I think I'm starting to let the whimsy of this diorama world get to me. Maybe I should take a vacation to clear my head. God knows I've already done about a month's work in what will probably turn out to have been ten seconds. And I have to admit, even with the ability to be everywhere at once and ignore the laws of physics, things are getting boring. When the slowdown first happened, I had fun with it and did all the obvious stuff you'd expect someone to do in this situation. Punched my boss, stole some Hot Pockets, did a few things to the receptionist that I'm not especially proud of. But enough is enough.

Where should I go? Anywhere requiring flight is impossible; it would take a month just to get through the safety demonstration, and even if I somehow smuggled aboard a few years' worth of food, I'd be insane by the time we landed. I can't drive either; at full throttle my car's pistons fire about once per minute, so even if I steal something from the Ferrari dealership downtown, my top speed is going to be around ten inches per hour. The only forms of transportation I can still use are a bicycle and my own two feet, and I don't think I'm in good enough shape for a cross-country triathlon. So I may have to face an unpleasant truth: I'm stuck here. Not just in time but in place. King County, Washington may be my fenceless prison for a very long time.

I avoid this question because it terrifies me, but I need to start asking it: what if time never restarts? What am I going to do with my life if this is the whole scope of it? Prisoners often use their jail time to improve themselves. They lift weights, they read books, they find Jesus. But what if I'm facing a life

sentence? What good is becoming a better person if you can never share yourself with anyone? What good is knowledge and understanding if you never get to apply it?

So lately I've been trying to look beyond myself and see if there's anything else out there to grasp at. A bigger picture of some sort. For instance, what are the implications of my unique role in the slowdown? Why am I the only ticking clock in a world that's come unsprung? Is this all just for my own amusement, or do I have some kind of duty? There's a young girl on my street who was just starting to trip on a curb the day I walked out into the halted world. Dazed as I was at the time, I forgot about her, and today I noticed she had completed her fall. Her forehead was resting against the concrete, the skin had begun to split, and her skull was actually indenting a little. I flipped her over and set her down on her rear, but that head wound could turn out to be serious. Is it my fault? Was I supposed to catch her? Is it my job now to stop bullets and reel in bridge-jumpers, extinguish house-fires and take keys from drunks, flush bags of heroin and put condoms on cocks? If time never restarts, am I supposed to spend the rest of my life roaming the country and fixing all its problems, protecting the powerless and directing the powerful, tying bullies' shoelaces together and exposing corrupt officials?

The idea is absurd. Staggering in its bleakness. I could work tirelessly for the next fifty years and earn only a few fortunate minutes for the rest of the world. But I have to ask myself...what better do I have do?

I had a dream last night. I was an old man. I had spent my entire life in this mid-sized American city, wandering the quiet streets, watching all the people frozen in mid-step, paused in the middle of their many diverse dramas, the entire

world like a single frame of film to be studied for decades by historians and conspiracy theorists. I'd written books about every block in my neighborhood. I'd made every passerby a character, every car and fire hydrant an important plot device. I'd done my best to guess who the people were and what their stories might be. I'd dug through their wallets and studied their faces, trying to know them so I could bring them to life. I'd done what I could to keep everyone safe and to right any wrongs I came across, but I'd also tried to live a life of my own. I'd had a relationship of sorts with that woman I kissed at the bar. I stood in front of her for about an hour so that she could see me, then took another few hours to pronounce "Hello." I'd had to be very patient, and I knew I was never more to her than a specter who flickered in and out of existence over the course of a few months, but for me it was a life-long love affair.

In this dream I knew I was near death. I didn't know how old I was or how much time had passed in the moving world, but my bones hurt and I could no longer hear the deep, guttural drone that was the city's noise reaching my ears one wave at a time. I had taken a few brave journeys by bike into neighboring states, but I had always come back home to these streets and their amber-trapped inhabitants. I watched people slowly complete their falls and car crashes, their business lunches in posh cafes and their orgasms in the backseats of cars. I'd become so familiar with every detail of this place and its accident-prone citizenry that I felt like they were mine. Most of the people had never so much as perceived me much less spoken to me, but I found that I loved them; I loved even the idea of them, and what surprised me the most is that in this

dream, as I prepared to die and move on into some thick molasses heaven, I was happy.