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## Gray Scale

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# Gray Scale

## Christopher Schmitt

This afternoon seems faint. Not much noise, not much activity. The summer air is thick without a cloud in the sky and seeming to be full of lonely hostility, the weight of the sun rests itself on my shoulders. But on occasion, a consoling breeze wraps itself around me, only for a brief moment, then would unravel and fade. With my legs crossed and the black book in my lap, I sit in solemn silence on the end of a wood bench and continue to wait for the arriving train. After what seemed to be a years worth of savored seconds, I lift the cigarette I had been holding in my hand then place it in my mouth. Giving a moderately arrogant smile, I light the end and watch it burn and hiss with the fury of armageddon. Then in the distance, looking past the smoking ember and through the heated, quivering light, a train approaches. I inhale some smoke and let it go.

-Time to see what chaos these tracks will bring.

The silver passenger cars pull up in front of me just as I uncross my legs and remove a tattered pencil from my pocket. I open the black book to the middle, a page marked with the folded edge of one of its neighboring sheets. The upper right, noted in black ink, scream the words - *to inspire* - from the blinding white paper. I think:

-Here's my chance. A grocery store of faces for me to document or distort to however I please.

So there I sit at the edge of city and suburbia, waiting for each set of eyes to tell me their origins, destinations, and everything between. I would sketch, I would write, they would pose, they would inform. But when the door did open, there exited no inspiration, only solitary, lifeless faces that indicate the continuation of an endless routine which brought them to their knees. I find suit after suit, briefcase after briefcase, left foot, right foot, left foot, right...all going up stream. I wait, search and hope for something, anything new, to jump out at me that was worth capturing, but it never came. They continue to walk while the page stays empty.

I breathe from the wrinkled cigarette-

The three of us came to mow my grandparent's lawn one afternoon while they were out of town, but it was my brother who ended up doing all the work. True my dad and I were technically relaxing, but we made sure to point out the spots he missed and give him an encouraging wave as he passed by with the lawnmower. Needless to say, I received my fair share of middle fingers that day.

"Do you remember how organized this garden used to be?"

I looked up from my book, first at the flower garden that was no more than eight feet in front of me, and then at my dad, who sat next to me, casually sipping his glass of ice tea. It was obvious that he was trying to recall every detail of what the garden used to look like, so I turned my head to examine it once more. He was right. Gradually, I began to notice that the small garden, which used to be so nurtured and vibrant, seemed to recently have been kept up only to stay alive. My dad continued:

"I never really noticed until now. I mean, before it was almost like a finished painting, every inch of space used, every object in its appropriate place. There was even a color scheme. It looked complete. But that element of completion just isn't there anymore. The vines are what give it away."

At one of the edges of the garden stood a three-foot trellis fence. A few summers ago, that very trellis was engulfed by the lurid green arms of the vine in which it was built for. I remembered thinking the vines must have such a vast imagination, that they dreamed of the sky, because every week it would stretch its arms further up. Higher and higher it would push on only to find an end to the trellis, and while the top of the plant cried 'no,' the bottom continued to drive upward from the ground as though jealous of the view. With no place to go, this hopeful vine came crashing down like a waterfall onto the rest of the garden. But of more recent, the trellis stood on a tilt, the vine it held became thinner, with only the motivation to reach half way up its ladder. Years of being let down brought this dream to an end.

"You know what I mean?"

I nodded.

"They're getting older, a little more distant, and easily tired. Keeping up with a garden is not something they want to do anymore. It seems that the garden has become more of a chore than a method of repose or a hobby. This deterioration is to lack of inspiration. No matter what you do, routine is unavoidable, then from routine gives way to boredom."

He stopped to digest and watch the lawn.

"You missed a spot!"

My brother gave us the finger.

-My lungs exhale the smoke as it dances around my face.

I grow impatient. Desperate to find some color among the elegant shades of gray, in a world where everything's been seen, where everything's been experienced, and we are apathetically bored as hell with it all. My mind races to try and find a fucking point to carrying on when all is just an incessant variation of the same theme. The pencil in my hand bends under the strain of the fingers that are strangling it.

Just as each sliver of wood is about to surrender and crack, I release my grip. Everyone stops dead, frozen in time, as if paused by a TV remote. The crowd disappears while I focus on two people as they walk down the stairs and get off the train. The mother in a blue dress turn to her right and walks down the train station sidewalk with her back to me. My pupils widen to absorb as much as possible of the infant child she holds in her arms. He looks directly at me and smiles, then becoming overcome with nervousness, burrows his head under his mother's chin. But little to his knowledge, I see him peeking back at me, so I wave. Not moving his head, he lifts his hand and waves back.

-Apology accepted, little guy.

In mid wave, the crowd returns to focus and continues their scurry up and down the concrete. The mother and her child disappear among the frantic. Only a dull sense of solitude is left in their wake.

I can't begin to imagine the amount of activity that must be found behind such curious eyes. A time when every sense brings in something completely new, something never before experienced. The mind of an infant that does nothing more than listen.

For a brief moment, sitting on the edge of the bench, I become the child. **PLAY.** I awake to a gentle melody that sings above my crib, the first time I've ever heard music. Through the bars, I study the sunlight that sits on the floor, then follow it from the ground up, noticing each spec of dust that circles in the warm light, and eventually my eyes are lured the world outside my window. **FAST\_FORWARD.** I make my first friend when I'm playing in the yard. My friend, the caterpillar, whispers to me that

we're destined for something big. His name is William. **FAST\_FORWARD.** From the safety of my crib, I reach for the moon that sits high outside my window, knowing that someday I'll grab it. **PAUSE...**but it's too far, now. **STOP.**

I draw from the cigarette and realize how much of a cruel joke it is that infant memories are relatively impossible to recall later in life-

"Can you remember the first time the world slapped you in the face?"

Riley, my friend since the time of recess and koodies, asked me that question while we sat on a park bench in the middle of a field. It was coincidentally darker than usual that night, so we figured it was the perfect place to knock down the twelve pack of beer he stole from a local gas station; welcome to the suburbs, where no one watches because everyone's trusted. In the middle of the park, sealed in an envelope of shadows, we sat, we drank, we talked, and Riley asked me that question.

"Think about it. And you better be honest, Chris."

It didn't take me long to answer.

"The first time I can remember was about eleven years ago, I'm guessing. So that would have made me eight at the time."

I thought hard.

"Sounds about right. Anyway, there was this girl, Nicol, that I would hang with who used to live a few houses down from mine. And one afternoon, her and I walked a couple of blocks to the local playground. That day was the first time I had seen someone who was homeless. All I remember is his scraggly white beard and that battered, tan cowboy hat, which sat so deep on his head that I used to wonder how much it must have weighed. His face...well...thinking of it now, I guess it kind of resembled a dilapidated house."

"Huh..."

"It's like, on the outside, the house looks rough and depressing, but when you really look at it, when you see what's inside, you find nothing. Vacancy. This bitter loneliness. That's the best I can describe it."

"Is that the whole story?"

"No there's more."

"Carry on, then."

"Well, after seeing him, Nicol and I felt so bad that, like every other child, we thought...no...we knew we could fix it. So we ran home and both of us grabbed every book we owned but didn't read anymore. We met again at the halfway point between our houses and put together this hefty stack ranging from *Junior Sherlock Holmes* to *The Babysitter's Club*. Up and down our block, stopping at every door, we sold each fucking book."

"No shit."

"Yea. And we made something like thirty bucks off those things."

"*Babysitter's Club*?"

"Nicol's."

"..."

"Anyway, here we are, beaming young faces that would make any superhero envious. We were about to save the planet, maybe even the universe, and we were only eight. Eat that Superman. The two of us ran back to my house, and speaking a mile a minute, we told my mom about our homeless cowboy, our indie fund-raiser, and about how we were going to go back to the park to give it all to him. Thirty dollars to get him back on his feet. Thirty dollars to start a family and get a job. Thirty dollars to succeed in life

and maybe win the Nobel Prize. Who knows, but here's the kicker. Do you know what happened?"

"If I already knew I would have stopped you a while ago. Plus, I have horrible memory, so if you already told me, I probably forgot. Fuckin' alcohol."

"After Nicol and I told her, she sat us down and explained to us how admirable of a deed it was. She praised us for the thought, for our concern. Then she told us that if we were to give him the thirty dollars to help get out of the hole, most likely, he would only spend it on something to further deepen himself. Though we may have had good intentions, it would only make things worse. She told us about that hidden truth behind everything and I swear, Riley, I almost drowned in hopelessness. I learned nothing in this world was that easy. Heroism has a downfall. So we split the money after that but I don't have a clue what I spent it on."

"That's a pretty hard slap."

"The first one always is. Superman was laughing at us that day, I know it."

-With a shallow sigh, I breathe out every molecule of smoke, watching it dissipate as my mind becomes too numb to think. The brightest blue may have dominated most of the sky this afternoon, but in my head, there's a shit-storm that rained cinderblocks of water and ice. And it's been raining ever since the clouds opened up. This weary crowd of exiting passengers starts to lessen, and my leaden head falls to the black book that rests on my lap. One vacant page that seems to describe everything. The words in the upper right still read - *to inspire* - and I become significantly dissatisfied.

I slam the black book shut, balance the pencil on top of my ear, and stand up. Directly in front of me, I stare at the doorway and realize it will only be so welcoming for a limited amount of time. I dive with each grain of sand that falls down the hour-glass; these seconds are mine. The gears of the train whine in anticipation for its departure, but I know it waits for me.

I sustain the last drag from the cigarette then, just before boarding the train, I let go and step on the shimmering ember-

*to inspire...*

A young boy sits on the edge of his seat aboard a train. Inside, there presents a collage of different noises. He can hear the dry shuffle of a newspaper, the anxious tapping of someone's foot, multiple whispering voices (which are only failed attempts at keeping private, one-on-one conversations), and the continuous click of the individual keys on a laptop. All are outcomes of separate and unique actions that when combined become nothing but frenzied sound, which can only mean the presence of a crowd.

This train is full of noisemakers, but the boy sits quietly, where in his hand rests a black book, and he becomes lost in the green tint of everything outside that passes by without a single sound. His mind focuses on the disruption of the peaceful outside and, at the same time, all that's chaotic on the inside. Perceiving a mile ahead, he imagines a loose bolt in the track that, when under the immense pressure of the train, gives way, loosening the rail only a small amount, but just enough to liberate this machine from its rails.

The second the trams are free all noise becomes mute. The boy is the only one composed as he feels the same way he felt as a child, riding the shaking plane that was outside the grocery store a few blocks from home. For a measly twenty-five cents, the timer would give him a minute to fly. His hand grip's the metal bar attached to the seat

in front of him and his other still holds the black book by his side. The only sound he hears on this train is his own faint chuckle. And while others scream in silence and clutch their loved ones, none of them notice the young boy who sits by himself and smiles. He faces forward, but his eyes are closed.

Everyone has been waiting for it to happen, but none were prepared when the train tips on its side. In a matter of seconds, the boy falls from his seat, and drops across the width of the train. He crashes on the side of the train that grinds across the ground, his body going completely limp at the moment of impact.

The young boy wakes shortly after and lifts his head; this train is no longer silent. He opens his eyes, but only manages to keep one open, the other continuously irritated by a stream of blood that starts from the top of his head. Panning from side to side, he sees nameless broken bones, head wounds, and a complete medical encyclopedia of other various injuries. Everything spirals together, until the young boy can no longer tell the difference between each sufferer, they all become the same.

He soon takes notice that the black book no longer rests in his hand, and his attention is now drawn to finding it. In a panic, his eyes scan and his hands fumble where they can reach. Everything starts to happen at a faster pace, and the compilation of each individual scream or cry builds in the boy's head until he can feel pressure from the bottom of his stomach. He doesn't know whether he will, as a result, scream or vomit every sound that pours into him.

Leaving behind the black book, the young boy climbs towards the green windows, which he knows, on the other side rests the open sky. The closer he gets, the more determined he becomes to leave everyone else behind. He props himself securely, and pushes as hard as he can on the window without a single budge. Again the screams drown his ears until the boy can no longer breathe. He makes a fist and purges his arm towards the window, striking it in the dead center. Nothing happens, but the noise from those below continues to pull him down. In a panic, he punches the window again, this time making a tiny crack. The noise becomes thunderous. He strikes the glass harder than before, with each attempt, leaving behind a red smear that only grows larger. A choir of a thousand screams from below. Again he hits the window...again...Again...aGain...

Silence once more. All of time seems to stop, except for the young boy and the falling glass. Alone, he watches as each green piece descends without a sound. He closes his eyes once again and feels every individual shard breeze by his face. Like a comforting wind when the sun is heavy, they wrap around him and feel cool to his skin.

When the clutter of falling glass ends, he opens the only eye he can and, as if on impulse, reaches up to pull himself out of the train. As his body exits, all wounds that he had inside the tram disappear, as if they never happened. There is no more blood in his eye, and he's seeing clearer than ever.

After finally lifting his entire body through the broken window, he pauses in a crawling position to gain his breath back. Soon he rests at his knees, then finally stands on his feet. Looking up, he sees nothing but endless blue sky and a distant, humble sun. Right then he wishes he had his black book, but he knows he doesn't need it. A day like this would never be forgotten. He notices, not long after he pulled himself out, the others from below as they follow through the same broken window, their wounds healing the moment they reach the fresh air. They stand with the young boy, quietly, but together, and watch the sky. They wait...

-I exhale deep then close my black book just after finishing the last sentence. Propping the dilapidated pencil back on my ear, I stand from my seat. This is my stop.