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THE STAGES OF POLAROID FILM

Philip M. Taylor

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Esther leans still against the white aluminum siding of my apartment building, her smoky brown curls cut succinctly across her face dripping with perspiration as she wrestles with the wind to light her tightly rolled cigarette. Her silvering glittered scarf pokes out from her home-stitched jade V-neck sweater in fluffs and wrinkles sparkles into the soft 4am breeze. Wrapped in a slender pencil skirt, the color of steel molded to the curves of her hipbones and belted in a streak of gold lamé across her waist, she holds the cigarette tightly in her pursing cherry lips. Her hands wrap taut closing her fingers to resist the escaping air.

“Need some help?” I ask placing my colorless palms around the small cracks in her thumbs as she rolls the metal alloy into flint sparks. “Are you having a good time?”

The heart of October finds Esther traveling across the state’s medians to where she lies slumbering the morning after every Fourth of July, Halloween, October 20th birthday celebration, until noon passes and we wake with gooeey eyelids and broken larynxes to the smell of her homemade soup simmering atop the methane burner. Once, she raided the Indian cupboards; lifted the sharp, aluminum-disk seals from tin cans; poured corn and string beans and zucchini and navy beans into a base of tomato soup; measured oregano, basil, bay leaf, and tarragon with her fingers dashing them into the bubbling pot; and served the best Great Depression stew that ever lit my taste buds.

“I’m always glad I come,” Esther replied. “Can I ask you something?” Her voice was a scratchy smolder. “You’re constantly taking so many pictures; every time I come you go through pack after pack of film. What’s that about? Are you afraid of missing something? It’s like you’ve formed this family here and you try to document everything. It’s like years from now you’re going to put it all together in one big scrapbook: Here, this is my life. I mean, I love the Polaroids, but what about the moment?”

Polaroid film works through a process of chemical reactions. The camera and the film together develop the portrait: the film is pulled from its compartment within the camera’s frame by a series of rollers ejecting, spitting the photograph from the mouth of the camera itself. As the white-boxed image expels through

the camera's mouth, the rollers burst a pocket of chemicals situated within the bottom margin of the photo. These chemicals, elementally polyvinyl alcohol polymers impregnated with iodine, are time controlled, allowing them to seep through every level, dimension, and layer, transforming the stark, black square of the film into that vibrant multicolored image the lens captured when you pulled the red-tipped button towards the camera's body. The film itself is composed of iodoquinine sulphate microscopic crystals embedded in a transparent nitrocellulose polymer used to polarize light. Bleeding through the negative image, the positive image of the photography appears in mere seconds. Raw Polaroid film is folded on top of one another with the intention that the photographs will emerge one-by-one from the camera allowing the photographer and subjects to view the image as it is colored by the chemicals. Packages of film typically include eight to ten exposures. The film costs approximately \$2.85 a print and requires 10-15 minutes to develop fully. For unique occasions, I typically purchase three or four packs of film and spend my night documenting, flashing Polaroid after Polaroid after Polaroid.

I watch Esther languidly move the tobacco to her lips pulling the nicotine vapor methodically into her chest, and then exhale dilatorily in one lingering breath so measured I should already have an answer but give none. She sees me not knowing and changes the topic of conversation to what has already happened tonight. One arm akimbo across her mild cleaving bust, the other midair drawing circles with the fire, she whispers, asking whether or not I like my birthday gift.

"It's pretty much amazing, but I really don't know what I'm going to do with it other than place it on a shelf with all of my other treasures." Esther and her roommate, Sarena, have given me a 1920s porcelain French mime complete with soot-black trousers, charcoal vest, beret, and long-sleeved candy-cane-striped crew-cut blouse. He is only missing one hand. For the most part, he remains erect in his wire stand, but is prone to flaccidity and must be perfectly positioned, the steel hooks clinging to his waist. I think that I'll place him between my oak trinket box and *Encyclopedia of Plants, Gardens, and Botanicals*.

We make conversation, pass half of an hour, light more cigarettes, and sit on the concrete slab in front of the security door. Our friends, lovers, acquaintances litter the back parking lot almost as thick as the bottles of gin, champagne, beer, and vodka on my straw colored countertops. Esther's eyes glisten wet hazel in the artificial light of early morning as I tell her that Polaroids possess me. My mouth spills out, ejecting film and secrets as Esther tilts her head from side to side.

For me, Polaroid film is a way to capture a moment in time, that ever-fleeting second between reality and illusion, history and fiction. In the act of photographing friends, lovers, myself, I identify moments with meaning and cement them within my memory. A chemically recorded history develops as I empty packs of film, placing the compounding pictures in heaps on my desk, taping them in geometric patterns across my walls, and flipping through them to restore where my memory has been discolored or gone dull. These photographs detail moments in my life: the progression/digression of relationships; split second flashes of dancing in living rooms; the way the light catches your face as you lie on the beaches of Lake Michigan, perch on the front porch with Pinot Noir wineglass in hand, dart above the overpasses bridging Kevin's parents' ponds, rest on the steps of ancient buildings this University has long forgotten. The difference between Polaroid and traditional film: the Polaroid is now. There is no waiting. The images effervesce so quickly I can measure the span between in blinks. Conceivably, these documents represent a fear of forgetting these moments, a phobia of being unable to connect the dots when the flashing bulb falls dim, the terror I feel when I cannot remember the way your face appeared last spring.

"Do you maybe want to take one now?" she asks.

"Now?"

"Yeah, so you will never forget this conversation or this night." Her hazel irises beam. "Let's go. Quick, before everyone else goes upstairs."

Esther takes my palm in hers, fingering my knuckles as we sprint upstairs so quickly our bodies would blur in the film. I open the back door.

"Where should we take it?"

"The bathroom," she replies.

We bolt the door behind us. Esther is in the bathroom tossing her hair like a lion's mane in the medicine cabinet's mirror waiting for me to come in, clicking flash in hand. I run into my bedroom to find my camera bent open in a scattered collage of Polaroids from the evening and quickly join her. Esther and I position ourselves on the edge of the tub so the calcium and lime stained tiles are seen latticing around us, my arm across the small of her back, her fingers delicately stroking my knee. I raise my arm at length, fumble with the bulky weight of the camera's body to find that red-tipped button, press it, press it again, and press it one more time hard, but nothing happens.

The film has all been spent; there is nothing more to develop.