

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Perceptions
By Amelia Diaz

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How do we perceive the world around us? Do we see it? Hear it? Touch it? Each of us lives deeply immersed in our own sensory experience, our own "normality," distinctly separate and unique—thereby rendering the entire concept of normality irrelevant. And yet, within our individual spheres, do we not seek to build bridges that extend beyond ourselves; bridges that facilitate our quest for camaraderie and communion? Perhaps we are motivated to undertake this quest by a need to understand the world around us, or simply a curiosity to see life through another's eyes. The reasons are as numerous and varied as are we ourselves.

I live in a world where touch, sound, smell and taste are the very fabric of my being, coloring the mundane and the magical, the gratifying and the disappointing. And so I draw upon the power of language—that universal canvas—to paint, if not a conclusive portrait, at least a rough sketch of some of the most unremarkable moments of my life; moments made notable only by the light of scrutiny.

WAKING

I have no substance. I am the merest shadow of being; a soul unbound. I flit between the worlds of dreams, belonging nowhere and everywhere. I can be anything and nothing.

Then, abruptly and irrevocably, something jerks me back to the solidity and immutability of

reality—music. It floods my ears with unnaturally loud and strident notes. I am drowning in the torrent, gasping for air; where I can think ... where I can hear! My leaden arm reaches from beneath the covers, searching for the source of the noise. Fingers slow and stupid with sleep finally stumble upon a hard, flat cool slab of aluminum—the phone. Its insistent vibration rips through my hand and up my arm, but I slide my finger up to the volume button on the side and the onslaught is quelled at last.

Thus released, I briefly contemplate floating away again. But my mind is unremittingly grounded in the waking world. It pushes at each sense until my unwilling body responds.

First comes sound: Slowly trickling into my awareness are the high-pitched chirping of birds; the low susurrus hum of intermittent traffic; the dissonant rasping of claws against the plastic bottom of a dog crate, loudly proclaiming that someone else is awake and ready for breakfast.

Now feeling: My blankets are smooth, but heavy, cloying and suffocating. But when I fling them aside, the air is too cold. I freeze and burn at once, a sensation which leaves me sticky and sweaty.

My nostrils breathe in the musty odor of a room gasping for a breath of fresh morning air. And with the smell, the taste of dry cotton in my mouth; my tongue a parched desert pining for water.

Thoughts accompany these sensations, becoming louder and louder, clamoring for my attention: Drink some water; feed the dog; open the window; take a shower.

But when my body finally does respond, it knows what to do first. Fingers reach for and find the cool leather case, perched within easy reach on the far side of the bed. The magnets release their hold and it falls open with a swish. Along the left side, the switch that causes Braille to erupt into being. My hands explore the familiar landscape of my beloved world of words. The well-practiced dance of the braille hands fills the room with its merry clicking. This comes before all else. And so, I write myself awake.

ARRIVED

A cool breeze caresses my face in wisps as I climb awkwardly from the taxi van. It is tantalizing, this breeze, scintillating with a promise of a pleasantly moderate day full of soft puffs of wind that run feather-soft fingers through my hair and smell like springtime; a day of playful sunbeams that come to rest on my arms and encircle my shoulders like the reassuring touch of a friend.

I feel strangely isolated here. This normally heavily trafficked street is at this early hour relatively quiet, with only the occasional grumbling vehicle dutifully shuttling its passengers to their destinations in varying states of alertness. The absence of the wall of sound created by countless cars whizzing past at top speed behind me is disorienting. I stagger under the unwieldy weight of the wide open spaces surrounding me.

Beneath my feet, the cement is smooth and unmarred, as yet lacking the detritus of discarded

candy wrappers, chip bags, dry leaves and other trash that will accumulate throughout the day to form a noisy carpet that my tired feet will tread upon when I return to the bus stop this evening.

On my back, the solid, dependable weight of French books and my Braille notetaker are nestled in my backpack, waiting to unlock their secrets. In my left hand, the worn leather strap of a leash gyrates and swings, following in the wake of my capering black Labrador. Her exuberantly prancing paws and wagging tail add their vigor and vitality to the symphony of the dawning day.

I pick up the handle of the harness bouncing on her back and loop the leash over the top, tucking it securely between my index and middle fingers. As she registers my movements, I feel her shift her energy and focus in preparation for our walk onto the university campus.

She shakes herself briskly, as if to cast aside the carefree pup and assume the role of attentive guide. My hand jitters from side to side as she shakes and I feel the slap of her tail against my leg. She adjusts her stance so that she is slightly ahead of me, causing the handle in my hand to become taut and my arm to extend forward just enough that I will be able to read her movements through the tension in the harness and follow her when she swerves around obstacles, stops for curbs and steps, or makes a turn. She is a coiled spring, waiting for my hand gesture and verbal command to release her and catapult us into just another routine day at school.

WAITING

My arm is slowly roasting. The strap of the seatbelt—which I have not bothered to remove in the lethargy of the afternoon heat—is the only thing keeping me from melting into an ignominious puddle on the seat. A blast of hot wind puffs a dusty breath into my face through the open window on my right. I duck my head to avoid choking and my lank, sun-dried hair flops haphazardly onto the nape of my neck, wilting out of its tight coil. I can't even be bothered to push it away. It's too hot to move.

The parking lot around me is an ocean, awash with small noises that reverberate strangely from a nearby building. The sound moves in waves, lapping against the wall of the building and falling back to the asphalt, each time growing smaller and smaller until another replaces it.

The building is in front of the car I'm sitting in and slightly to the right, and the echoes made by slamming car doors, shuffling feet, clattering grocery carts, whining children and careworn parents crash against its edifice from all sides. Each group of sounds seems to hit the wall at a slightly different angle: The shrill keening of the children rising above my head, the lower timbre of placating adult voices at around face level, the sharp thwacking of car doors and the metallic rattle of shopping carts closest to the ground, so that they seem to emanate from both the building and the asphalt at once.

Mexican music suddenly blares from the open window of an approaching car far off to the right, masking all other sounds with a tidal wave of the mariachi singer's broken-hearted angst. It engulfs me, reverberating not only in the parking lot but also in the confines of the car, blocking out all thought. Then the underlying throb of the engine ceases, abruptly choking off the music

and leaving the sun-baked landscape it flooded remarkably unaltered.

Decades later, I am roused from my stupor by the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps far off to the left. I jump when my mother speaks, not realizing how close she was until she opened the door.

The left side of the car dips and shakes as she gets in and pulls the door closed. The hum of the engine is followed by the whirring of windows being raised, compressing my field of hearing to the confines of the reanimated vehicle. I am deluged in cool conditioned air—refreshing as a drink of water—and the sun's hot hands are withdrawn at last.

LOST

This street corner could be anywhere. There's wet grass to the right, which I must be careful not to step in. My shoes are already wet from a puddle my dog somehow managed to avoid, but I didn't.

A yipping dog fiercely defends his territory from the corner house on Mystery Lane. I can't tell if it's coming from the house behind and to the right, or from the one across the street. My neighborhood is made up of residential streets, many of which are cul-de-sacs. This means that when a street dead ends, the sidewalk sometimes curves and it's hard to tell what sound is coming from which direction.

One thing I'm certain of, though, is that those dogs—for there are two now—are very small, but they mean business. One dog barks rhythmically, a high, carrying, piercing yip. The other sounds even more quarrelsome. His bark is a little deeper, but still shrill, and he vents his feelings in short, noisy bursts permeated by a few seconds of silence between each.

I experience the sound scape of my surroundings in layers. The uppermost layer is the sharp, brittle sound of the dogs' upraised voices. It ricochets off the sides of houses and can be heard from blocks away, I'm sure. Woven throughout the barking, there is the distinctive creaking chirping of summer crickets. The sound is like a current, as though I am an island and the crickets a river rushing by me on both sides.

Here and there I hear the hiss and sputter of a sprinkler, the murmur of voices, the opening or closing of a door or window, the plaintive cry of a child. All are indications that the houses are preparing to sleep.

The cool night air somehow feels lighter with the weight of the day removed. It is like standing under a shower with the setting set to "mist." I could stay here all evening, not even caring that I've gotten myself lost, just marinating in the life around me. The sounds, the smell of wet grass and of the intoxicating fresh night breeze, the feeling of freedom.

But my dog is impatient to continue our flight through this sleepy city: Head up, body extending forward, two forelegs pawing the ground, tail waving. She is frozen almost mid step, waiting for direction. I am tempted to raise my right hand and command her to go ... just go,

anywhere. I want to fly through the night, as much as she does, to weave in and out of trees and anything else on the sidewalk, to run across streets that are practically devoid of cars by this time of day. We have done this before, when I know it's safe and no one is around. Her gait is smooth and my faith in her strong enough that I know she will never purposefully let me trip or fall over anything.

But I can't run now. I must get us home before it gets much later. I reach into my pocket for my phone, type in my address and listen to the robotic voice of the screen-reader informing me that I am "0.1 miles" from my destination, just one street crossing and a right turn away.

As I prepare to head home, a thought comes to me suddenly—evanescent as the clouds that I'm told float across the sky, yet indelible as stars. We're all explorers in this life, explorers seeking safe haven. And in my case—at least most of the time—loving the thrill of the search.