

Summer Reading

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I have a problem. It's a serious problem because I can't ignore it, rationalize it, or forget about it, and it has fundamentally changed how I engage with the world.

My eyesight has rapidly degraded over the past decade. And while I don't know for sure that blindness is in my future, my problems go beyond simple eyestrain or acute light sensitivity or anything an ophthalmologist has been able to help me with beyond recommending stronger and stronger prescriptions. I'm forty-five years old, and my vision has gotten worse with age, as it does with every human, but apart from that, I experience a throbbing in my left eye and a burning sensation in my right. It's a pain that migrates through my skull, radiates through my teeth, and will escalate into a spiteful demon fever if I don't simply stop reading. Sometimes, for relief, I have to wear a cold mask—think Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, when he's telling us about his morning routine—and for the rest of the day strive to look at absolutely nothing closely, just stay behind dark glasses inside dark rooms, if possible. I've been living on a steady diet of black coffee and fat blue Naproxen gelcaps.

My right eye has always been astigmatic, but a few years ago, I noticed that it was perpetually dry and often cloudy. Due to this, I see everything with that eye through a grey wash. With the healthier of the two, everything looks like a garishly oversaturated film, like a Will Farrell comedy from the mid to late 00's. The glands in my right bottom eyelid have stopped working, an irreversible condition, and one many people suffer from. A few prescription treatments, unobtainable because they are prohibitively expensive, could help, I have been told, and I've tried every brand of eye drops with little to no success. At best, the drops slough off and give the flesh around my eyes a pink rheumy look, and many of them make the burning worse, especially the cheaper concoctions that are full of glycerin.

At my last eye exam, I learned that my left eye is astigmatic now. So, teamwork at least. My ophthalmologist's comforting words were these: "Your eyes will fall off a cliff over the next ten years."

But the real problem is that my life is almost entirely textual. I write constantly. I read, reread, and revise all day, and even through amber, blue-light-blocking lenses on a monitor set to nine on the brightness setting, nothing really helps the pain.

I hate to dramatize something so ultimately trivial in a world as beset with genuine tragedy as ours is, but writing is what makes me *live*. And to write, I must type and reread and scribble and revise and all that goes with it. Even if I abandoned all other reading, I'd still revise and edit. Also, I teach Basic Writing, Intermediate, and First-Year Composition, which equates to hours of reading, commenting, planning, and staring at screens.

I had to make a lifestyle change; one I didn't want to make. I had to change my reading habits where I could in order to slow down the degradation of my eyesight, to try, if not avoid the cliff, not go barreling over it, hellbent.

First, I gathered my towering to-be-read stacks and loaded them into my car. I sold some, donated others to free libraries, kept essentials—critical texts, instructional guides, and my desert island books: Shakespeare (I'm not made of stone), Merwin, Anne Sexton, Etheridge Knight, John Berryman. Poetry has been a lifeline during days when I could only manage a few minutes of reading. I kept very few novels.

This move made more sense as I realized that most of what I'd been hoarding could be checked out with the library cards in my wallet. More importantly, I recognized that I should have done this long ago, eyesight issues or not. I realized that I'd been building a tomb for myself out of these books for years, and what's worse, I was unable to focus on any one piece because my mind was always looking ahead to what to read next. Even when I thought I was reading for pleasure, I was really only digging a hole to hide in, crafting my mask in an Earnest Becker *The Denial of Death* kind of way. Making the proverbial 'educated fool' out of myself, quite literally.

So, in the summer of 2024, I did what would have been unfathomable a year earlier: I spent the summer purposefully not reading. Or, more precisely, reading in small increments while paying careful attention to how doing so affected my eyes. Some days,

after five minutes of reading, they were shot. Other days, I could manage an hour, most of this time spent working to one degree or another.

Yet, I realized something more profound: my obsession with accumulating books was a romanticized hobby, an identity marker that had been eating up my life for more than two decades. I'd spent years searching for life and living a life within books while, in a sense, neglecting the life I was living. And if I'd not been neglecting it, I damn sure hadn't been looking closely at it or admiring it at all. The more I looked, the more I noticed the much more fascinating clockwork of life.

To put it another way, when I stopped trying to get lost in the words of others, I started reading my life and the world around me.

I read the clipped rhythmic hooing of the blue-grey mourning doves, an unmistakable sign of spring's ever-returning greenness in my corner of the world.

I read the purple lilac bushes blooming in the thick windbreak that lined the farmland next to my yard—Whitman's lilacs.

I read the many blue jays and occasional cardinals, no white snow to stand out against, diving into the hedgerows and slipping through the branches, as slick as ribbons. I read the three-foot-tall cranes that glide over the fields to the creek, but haven't yet read one standing on the twiggy legs that stick out straight when they're in flight.

I read the hawks with blood in their eyes that wait, perched on power lines, scanning the fields for small things to kill like cruel gods.

I read my black-and-white tomcat, "Tuxedo Joe," as he dashed into the first row of soybeans and leaped out at me, paws flailing like a jungle cat. I read him pretending to hide as I taunted him with *"I hope no wild animal savages me as I walk out here defenseless."* I read him as he sprung out and slap-boxed my pant legs and house shoes. I read his cousin/brother, "Thom Thumbs," my polydactyl grimalkin, built like a pit bull, with seven-toed paws that look like catcher's mitts. I read Joe's tough-guy act—his snorts and growls when Thom gets too close. I read Thom's silence as a sign that he's not worried in the least.

I read the love triangle between Joe, Thom, and their girlfriend, Crooktail and the battles I broke up with a bucket of water more than once.

I read Thom Thumb's twin sister lying in the field on Memorial Day, her still body surrounded by turkey vultures. I read the four kittens she left behind, and later, I read Reddit kitten forums and labels on kitten milk. I read the flea comb and traced verminous black dots all through their fur. I read three of them as they grew up too fast and disappeared, off to make their fortunes. I read Slowpoke, a long-haired ragdoll with a swatch of grey encircling his right eye, who stayed at home to live with Dad just a little while longer.

In my mind, I drafted, revised, read, and reread *Memoirs of a Single Cat Dad* many many times.

At dusk, early in the summer, I read Venus as it chased the setting sun—a bright jewel in pursuit of the fading light, a sight visible for only a few days each year.

I read the corn spiders in their lethal webs spin up grasshoppers. I read a mother carefully suspend an egg sac far too late in the summer for it ever to hatch. I read it still clinging to the back of the garage.

I read the disembodied hind leg of a rabbit, the bloodied pigeon feathers, the gory single outstretched wing left beside the driver's side door of my car by Joe, Thom, or Crooktail.

I read the King Woodpecker who battered the top of a telephone pole in the driveway looking for fat wood bees and their larvae—the same one, I suspected, who hammered on my deck at sunrise, making a bass drum out of my bedroom wall.

I realized that I had been reading to escape, using books as a narcotic to distract myself from a reality I didn't want to face. And in doing so, I had been missing the very thing all creativity seeks to capture—the colorful minutiae of life itself.

With care, I might slow the decline of my eyesight. But strangely, making this change may be one of the best things ever to happen to me. It revealed a narrative more vivid, more alive than any that could be imagined by a writer or consigned to the pulpy dead body of a book.

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