

Fireflies

I stir, thinking that I hear a voice outside in the dusk. When I get up from my desk to investigate, I realise that it is somehow not as dark outside as it should be. Out there, where the ground slopes upwards towards a line of trees in the far distance, a strange veil of light has fallen. It distils into droplets as I watch: points that shut quietly on and off, one after another, so that the valley is, I now realise, sparkling. Fireflies. Thousands of them.

I want to show someone, to go and rouse the other retreat residents from their rooms and say, *look!* But instead, I just stand there at the edge of the valley and watch.

Dear Tereza,

Thank you too for reaching out and for our conversation on Tuesday. As the thoughts settle, it turns out that dialogue with you represents something new for me, churning up a layer that I didn't quite foresee... But that is a good thing, and I'm open to the timing of it.

Populations of fireflies appear to be in decline. But it's difficult to tell because they are so hard to study and, ironically, despite their luminescence, difficult to spot. The main reasons for the decline are habitat loss, pesticide use and light pollution. Even here in the Central Italian countryside, it is the same. Really bright lights, I read, can blind them.

Over dinner earlier in the evening, I learned that one of the other writers, like me, has monocular vision – a lazy eye. We commiserated with one another over the memory of the corrective patches we had to wear as children, after which I told her about my work, and we spoke of photographic fixity, mastery and vision, and also of love. Now, she comes out of her room too, and we look together. She gets out her phone and tries to take a picture, then delights in the resonance of the fireflies' stubborn unphotographability. *They're unfixable!* she says, remembering our dinner conversation, *blind spots!*

My mother has the same condition but experiences it differently. She admits to routinely avoiding looking people directly in the eye in case they can perceive it. She is ashamed, I realise. Is she actually ashamed because of the misalignment of her eyes, or it is an after-effect of a lifetime of pre-emptively avoiding peoples' gazes by averting her own? Which way around does the shame go?

Either way, both of us struggle in space. Navigating where we are in relation to other objects; like a camera, lacking a perceptual sense of depth. I am told that we, and others like us, have an adaptation whereby we are especially good at judging the relative sizes of things – a replacement visual strategy that enables us, more or less, to know how far away they are.

I step out beyond the terrace onto the uneven ground, aware that my altered perception makes me more likely to stumble. I suddenly fear I might vanish altogether, recede as the fireflies recede from my vision and then return – intermittently, unpredictably – one by one.

Dear Jenny,

I had to google the phrase 'churn up' as even though I got its meaning, roughly, I was interested in the specific translation – 'to break up or disturb an area of ground or body of liquid.' What strikes me every time I share this part of me with someone who went through a similar experience, is the repeating pattern, how similar our stories of violence often are. I was also touched when I read that our conversation might be the first time you had spoken with someone who actually went through the same thing. When I was reading your email, I had a fear in my stomach that I will come to a sentence where you politely apologize, but say that you cannot continue talking, cannot come and see the photographs.

We try to photograph them, Nabeela and me, grasping at frame after frame. But each image decomposes, giving way to the darkness of the hillside, which becomes deeper as the night air grows cold and we go inside again. The fireflies don't blur, they pixelate, the technology trying to compensate for the lack of light and specificity by softening edges that shouldn't be softened, merging the edges of forms that

don't have any business merging, while the border between the hillside and the darkening sky remains too sharp, too hard. The light encroaches unnaturally on the edges of the land in our pictures, beginning to consume it.

What they're doing, I later learn, is signalling to mates. And then, when they've found what they're looking for, *they go dark*.

Dear Tereza,

I totally understand the doubts about what it means to share your story and how it will be received. You and your work are part of the solution and the way forward from the kinds of invisibility I am writing about, so for that reason if no other, it could never be a burden. How about Thursday 11th?

This valley is not a vista, but a void. I am pure body, all edges, vulnerabilities (there are snakes. I could misstep and fall. I'm suddenly convinced that I can hear the blood in my veins). As always, I worry about my inability to see things that are right in front of me. When I tell my therapist of this worry, which is constant – like I'm always in some very particular and specific kind of *fog* (figuratively speaking, of course) – she tells me that on the contrary, I am not that special. She means it as a kindness.

When I Google 'photography + fireflies' at least the first 50 search results are practical guides on 'how to photograph fireflies', because, even for professionals, it is so *hard*. Points of phosphorescence whose purpose is to illuminate nothing but themselves and one another. (*Phosphorescence*: is there a relationship between this and early flash technology? I make a mental note to find out.) I remember something Walter Benjamin once wrote, about early photographic history being consigned to a 'fog' – the obscurity of lost records and impressions. (I add a note to find this reference too.) Nabeela's camera is better than mine, but still they do not stick. The points of light glitch and drag across the surface of our screens, taking on different shapes.

Dear Jenny,

The title – I took it from the document I wrote spontaneously on the day of you coming to the studio, capturing my thoughts after you left. (Attaching it below again for reference) We spoke about everything being impossible, and it was that word (along with invisible) that really felt engraved in me after that meeting. Impossible to see, impossible to capture, even to fully remember. But I changed the title only now, for making this PDF, for you.

The fireflies keep gleaming, star-like. Prickles on touched skin, specks that could be too-much light or could just be empty points of blindness. In a photograph, there is no difference.

Jennifer Good
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