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Sense

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Description

A nonfiction piece reflecting on the mixed nature of nostalgia.

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SENSE

RACHEL RATHBUN

What's the word for wishing I could latch back on?

Back to golden hour on that unremarkable autumnal evening at the end of September when I walk with so much spring in my step and sun on my skin that I feel like I am glowing like an illuminated saint. Hundreds of tiny flies swarm around just high enough on the paths so I have to wave my hand in front of my face as I walk to ward them off, but from afar, they look like the glittering wind, like motes of dust floating around on gusts in the sunbeams. The world feels stylized, coalescing into Van Gogh swirls for a moment before hardening back into pellucid detail.

I wear headphones so Tom Odell plays just loudly enough to form the soundtrack to my walk without blocking out the clop of my Mossimo boot heels on the hole-pocked concrete or the voices and laughter tumbling over each other from people I pass by. If I took an earbud out, I'd be able to hear the soft rush of the shimmering water gushing from the fountain nearby, and the quiet hush of the wind in the pines, and the shrill piping of the crickets and cicadas slicing through the air.

It must have looked odd when I faltered in my step and just stopped there, in the middle of the path, to look at the whole scene like it was my first time setting foot on the face of the earth. It felt odd to stroll without that usual urgency in my step.

Nostalgia, that's the word.

And what's the word for knowing I'll someday be nostalgic for a moment while I'm in it?

Someday, I'll sit by the window with a cocoa mug suspended between my cold, colorless fingers and watch the snow fall for the first time once again, and I'll remember when that heavy white sky had been gold.

Someday, I'll walk out onto my porch, still in my pajamas, while the uncut front lawn is still

brushed over with dew, and marvel at the cotton silence that's replaced that tumble of secondhand joy.

Someday, I'll catch my breath, hands slick on my knees and sides trembling, in an office stairwell, twelve minutes late, and remember when there was time not just to do but be.

It makes me want to try to drink the present moment in through my skin, experience it with every fiber so that maybe, just maybe, I'll have a better chance at fully calling it back to mind when I want to remember. I know it won't work—nostalgia has this opaque way of eluding full sensory recall—but trying is its own elusive kind of delight. Like trying to snare the wind between your fingers.

Bittersweet, that's the word.

But what's the word for knowing even while I'm nostalgic that there was nothing so very special about the moment I recall, nor so very bittersweet about the one I'm in?

Sometimes nostalgia is a two-edged sword, tearing seams through our contentment on the one hand and rewriting our memories on the other, recoding them into a spun golden haze that makes us forget our struggles in favor of a perfect moment we could never really have. It makes me forget the way the bugs in the sunbeams hit my face like tiny pieces of hail, the way my numb fingers will ache when I hold my cocoa, the allergies and congestion first thing in the morning when I'll walk outside, the way every eye in the room will focus uneasily on me for a moment as I make it to that meeting I was late for. All the little snakes and shadows and complications that make life feel real are dragged away in the undertow of an anesthetic wave. Is that merciful?

It's funny how I crystallize moments arbitrarily. Ordinary moments. Gold skies, first snows, meaningful smiles, solitary car rides, fifth listens on

new favorite songs. There's nothing very special or different about any of them, but they somehow stick in the spider's web of my recall with no hope of a solvent should I want to plaster the more important memories there instead. Nothing there is special except the fact that I am aware and present in those moments, come back from my own mundane flurry of thoughts and worries and pulled out of my own head, awoken to just watch and wonder at the world. Awoken to experience with every part of me.

Lucid, that's the word.