

Panopticon

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I

A concept that unsettled me when I first learned about it was the Panopticon — a circular prison with a honeycomb of cells facing inwards, and at the center is a tall tower with a watchman — but recently I've become fascinated with it.

I wonder what it's like to be an inmate in the Panopticon. The watchman might be observing you at any moment without you knowing it, but you're also given the ability to look into the cells of your fellow inmates. Our rooms are personal spaces: only you, the people you're close to, and sometimes, the people who have power over you, are allowed inside. But I feel that we would all understand each other better if only we could look into each others' rooms.

Sometimes at night, I look out my window at the building across. Most of the windows would have shades, and many of the others would have the lights turned off. Then there are those windows that, as bright rectangles of light, would pierce through the heavy and alienating black air that separated my room from theirs, like the eyes of a many-eyed giant staring back at me. The eyes, as they say, are the windows to the soul. Through these eyes I would see snapshots of the lives of creatures who lived across from me. Some rooms screamed and dazzled with a wild shower of colors and bold brushstrokes of memorabilia; some others were like a curated furniture store, arranged in a practical and just so manner; some had people inside.

There's something intimate about staring into somebody's eyes without speaking, and I try to share these moments with as many strangers in my life. Usually, they're not ready for that.

Looking through someone's window is an act that goes both ways: when you do it, they also look into yours. I leave my blinds up when I'm out of the house because my room gets too gloomy in the dark. I wonder if people in the building across ever look through my window, but then, I'm not sure it would be a fair exchange because I don't have much in my room. Even before I flew here from the other side of the world with two bags that, combined, weighed two-thirds of me, I never had many things. It's not that I couldn't afford things or that I didn't want them. Things just never wanted me.

II

Sometimes I wonder what it's like to be the watchman in the tower of the panopticon. He can't look everywhere all the time. I wonder how he chooses which cells to watch, or if he even watches any cells at all. I wonder how any of us choose. We're given two windows in our face to look out of, but there's an endless amount of things that demand to be looked at, and these things are constantly evolving to shine brighter and shout louder, desperately clawing at our windows and leaving scratch marks in their wake. Personally, I feel that we should spend more time looking through each others' windows.

III

I've never trusted smartphones, and I've only become more suspicious as they manage to con everyone else. We have so many things to look at, but we're looking more and more through the same glass windows. I remember when smartphones first discovered people, when they reached out with overtures of peace and friendship and mutually beneficial relationships. I don't trust people who claim to have good intentions. This puzzled my friends and family, all of whom had paired up with a smartphone at the earliest opportunity.

It was many years before I finally paired up with one of them, and even then, I only did so because you needed one to talk to girls. In the short time since they arrived on Earth, they had become the gatekeepers to now-essential acts of adolescence: sending silly messages throughout the day, and making silly calls throughout the night.

Some people complain that when we focus too much on the tiny windows of a smartphone, we close ourselves off to other people. I've found the opposite to be true as well: sometimes you need a tiny window to feel comfortable letting people peek in. I've spent too many hours having intimate conversations through my smartphone with girls who barely made conversation with me in real life. But I understand. We like to practice speeches or difficult conversations

with ourselves in front of a mirror, and usually we never actually have these conversations that we practiced. These girls could only bring out their stories while staring into the illuminated mirrors of their smartphones.

IV

Walking along heavily shrouded pavements in my home country, sometimes you find CDs hanging from the trees. These shiny discs of rainbows peek out from the shadows and watch as you pass by. While the elders around me say that these discs were mostly effective at scaring away birds, I was once told that they're meant to keep spirits away. I'm not surprised that spirits are scared of them. Even for me, with my physical body as protection, I always moved quickly through these passages. Usually my soul would leave my body for awhile and we'd find each other again once I stepped back into the sunlight.

V

We talk about space and time as if they're separate things. But years ago, a physicist told the world that the two things are interwoven, and true enough I've noticed that when you have more space, you also have more time. I come from a small country: there's an island, and the island is the country. You wouldn't be able to see us on a map. Or at least, a map that tells the truth. It's not easy these days to find a map that doesn't have an agenda of its own.

Because my country is small, everything is always being torn down and rebuilt — if you have a large pot of tea, but only a small teacup, you can only drink the tea one sip at a time: fill up one cup, sip three times, repeat. I'm reminded of a story my father once told me about a monk. A monk was serving tea to his pupil and had two cups in front of him: one was filled with stones, and the other was half-filled with tea. The monk poured tea into the first cup until it was filled to the brim. Then, he slowly added stones to the second cup, but tea kept splashing out. The monk leaned across the table, stared into the eyes of his pupil, and said, "This is why you don't drink juice at the start of a buffet."

My father intended this as a joke, but I think it explains why I don't have a lot of things. Things don't want me to spill over.

VI

Coming to this country, I'm amazed at how much space there is, and how old the everyday buildings are. And when I look closer, I realize that these buildings came all the way from many different time periods to enjoy the scenic view of

2018. Some come from the future, some came from the past, and some are from Western dramas you see on television.

It is very beautiful here. The buildings live without the worry of having to move out and find a new neighborhood, they live with the confidence that they belong here. There's enough space for everyone. And one thing that's still true no matter how beautiful a place is — and this is something that boys talk a lot about, but somehow it feels like a betrayal to write it down — no matter how beautiful a place is, it looks even better when there's a pretty girl inside of it.

I was down by the river (which are another thing you don't get a lot of in a small country) and there were fireworks. The lights were dazzling and the atmosphere was intoxicating, but all their beauty existed only to be absorbed into the glow of the face of the girl sitting next to me, and all of me was focused onto the glossy curve of her lips.

Later on, that same face was illuminated by the overwhelmingly bright light of her smartphone which was flashing with the vestiges of imaginary places and imaginary things sent from far-away people that were then plucked from the air and brought into her hands, like a magic trick. All smoke. All mirrors. This same face that, moments ago, stole my being; this face now looked dead. Her soul was scared of the shining lights from her handheld mirror and had fled to safety.

I'm not sure if it ever found its way back, because I'm not sure if the girl ever put down her smartphone.

VII

I'm curious why smartphones choose to follow us so persistently. They claim that they just want to know more about us so they can sell us more things, but what do they get by working together with the things that want to be bought? Sometimes I wonder what these tiny salesmen report about me. Do they complain when I toss them aside? Do they lean back in their chairs and peer wordlessly over the rim of their glasses, judging me as I tell them every detail about my life? Maybe things don't want me because I can't work with salesmen.

VIII

If I had more space, these salesmen could convince things to be bought by me. But I'm not the one who gets to decide how much space I have.

I'm reminded of a description of God I once read: God is a house with many rooms. But what did it mean if God didn't have enough rooms for all of us? I've always shared rooms. At first with my mother, then with my sister. I lived a year in a room that had six men; the beds in that room were stacked on each other and placed side by side; the room itself was tucked into a corner of a building with many rooms just like it. God was pretty small there. Now that I've moved to a larger country, it seems that God has grown bigger. Now I share a room with another boy and this room has more space than the room with six men. Now I understand why in my small home country, there were so many statues of the Laughing Buddha with his generous belly. It's nice to have more room.