

WINNER OF THE THIRD PLACE EDITORS' PRIZE

On instant photography: or why I don't want to live forever, but probably already have

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There is a conjecture that time seems to pass more and more quickly as you get older. It goes like this: when you are 2 years old, one year represents half of all the life you've lived, your experiences, thoughts, feelings, and memories. But by the time you've turned 20, that same year that has passed is only 5% of your entire life, even less of your recallable life. And so it goes, the clocks ticking faster each second until each day, month, and year goes by faster than the last. Perhaps that would explain why as a kid a year felt like an eternity, and now I find myself wondering what happened that put 2018 three years in the rearview mirror. Or is it five?

Of course, there are explanations for this in both neuroscience and psychology. For one thing, objectively measurable "clock time" never quite aligns with our subjective "mind time." Researchers at Duke University recently found that the rate at which our brains process visual information slows down as we age, resulting in a "speeding up" of time as we grow older. Additionally, time may feel faster as we adopt faster-paced lifestyles; in part a consequence of attention-sequestering smartphones and in part due to the commodification of instant gratification.

I've seen this theory on time dilation employed in many ways, in mourning over the achingly brief time we have left and in longing for the luxury of protracted moments to which we may never return and in which we were blissfully unaware. From this perspective, the passing of time is a tune played in lament; sleep-deprived college students pining after all the preschool naptimes that went unappreciated. But there seems to me a very natural conclusion which is here overlooked: if the length of each lived moment occupies a larger time frame when we're younger, then in the instantaneous moment of our birth we are living all of our life at once. The decreasing snapshot moment divided by the infinitesimal existence; we lived in an instant infinitely.

We try so hard in life, I think, to live in some way forever. We make friends and babies and submit creative nonfiction essays to literary journals in order to stretch the fraction of time we can occupy. And we make art because we need to believe so much that, as Leonardo da Vinci said, "A beautiful body perishes, but a work of art dies not." But it's all a shout in the void. Not, I've decided, because we will never live infinitely. But because we already have.

In the winter of 2020, amid a global pandemic and nationwide snowstorms, I bought an old, broken Polaroid camera from eBay. It was a folding SX-70 model, one of the first ever made to shoot truly instant photos, and I fixed it up to work again. I had just moved back into my childhood home to study remotely for the semester and was looking for something to fill the hauntingly empty house. We had been renting it out since we moved away when I was nine and walking around it testing my Polaroid camera, I was struck by an ineffable nostalgia. Found in

the scrapes on the wall, carpet patterning, and sloping backyard were the times tables memorized in Mandarin, miles of wooden railroads, and summer gardens tended by my Grandpa.

Those last memories of my Grandpa, rekindled in the images taken of the overgrown backyard, caught me off guard. While he had come over from China to spend most of my early childhood summers with me, I was still that child and lived half a globe away when he died of Alzheimer's: a degenerative brain disease that reduces the fractional percentage of our past years to zero. Perhaps that's another reason why we still strive to live infinitely: whether it's from Alzheimer's or something else, everything we remember is eventually forgotten. The mathematical fragments of my life that my grandfather occupied aren't very large and only get smaller. William Faulkner wrote in *Soldiers' Pay*, "The saddest thing about love is that not only the love cannot last forever, but even the heartbreak is soon forgotten."

The resurgence of Polaroid instant photos in our generation has been criticized for representing a "hipster" pandering to a sense of nostalgia for a time we didn't live through. And that's fair, these Polaroids I took don't harken back to any time period I've lived through. I know that my memories of this house, which is something closer to my mom and dad's "early-parenthood" home than my "childhood" one, are like all memories: reconstructions built on faulty recall and present-day reminders. The eerie déjà vu more closely resembled the artifacts of photo albums and home videos than the actual instances. In truth, past years are not fractions of our lives, our whole life exists now. The fickle mirage of memory tricks us into forgetting that, as Pablo Neruda wrote, "no, the net of the years doesn't unweave: there is no net."¹ Within the white Polaroid frames, I don't think I see the past. I see the house I experienced in toddler playfulness, my parents younger than I can believe them ever to have been, and I see my Grandpa infinite in his garden.