

# Scraps of something.

Josh Brown.

There are scraps of paper, old envelopes, blank sides of essays torn-up and slipped into a pile beneath my bookshelf. I flick through old notebooks and these scraps fall out. Amidst it all, the hurried mess of scribbles are the urgent, the necessary – the most exciting of all finds, captured on the closest thing to hand. My favourites fall from a great thick A4 pad, spiral bound but so wonderfully thick and tome-like; worn at the edges and carried on my back through the wintry streets of Toronto, up and down the subway stairs. Hitting the street I would pass those great air vents that feed heat from underground malls and long corridors of shopping, up into the Canadian day and night. One afternoon there with wind chill, it hit -33 and we felt it, Ivan and I, turning the corner on to the great north-south line of Dufferin that whipped icy piercings off of Lake Ontario, up and down those set-square roads to the distant north. We turned on to Dufferin and wearing little more than thin school-like trousers and white shirts from the Salvos on St Clair, our faces burnt with the shock of it – like nothing we'd ever known! Our bones screamed! We dived into a bank and stood there beneath heaters that work like none in Europe can imagine! It was cold beyond cold and on those streets atop those vents, people slept – people sleep. In broad daylight, as the rest of us shuddered from subway to coffee shop or office or back down into the warmth beneath, men and women would stretch out in sleeping bags warmed by the effluence of our constant desire to buy more and to be kept warm whilst doing so. God knows what warmth they got from lying there but every lunch-time as I walked to watch the ice-skaters in front of the town hall, it horrified and humbled me.

I can still see one skater now – I watched him from the library café in fact, where I'd sit thinking of how I'd pluck up the courage to ask out that girl in the office that always looked so good. I remember he walked up to the desk in such a way I imagined him to be some official from Health & Safety or Planning or some such soporific body. He was dressed in smart, sharp suit, his hair receding slightly and, from afar, he seemed serious and dull. But within minutes, a quick change into skates and there he was, tie and jacket flapping in great majestic waves like a creature of the sea as he soared around the rink, hands behind his back as he side-stepped, turned, glided backwards, attacking the short straights. From the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor the rink was little more than the town hall's icy doorstep but Torontonians would approach it as if paying respects somehow, to their country's most abundant asset. The city now a mass of concrete, tiny bursts of green and earth barely visible beneath it all, amongst the bodies and the great humming back-and-forth of buses that passed up and down the gridded veins of the first city I felt was mine, or could become so had I stayed.

And so, the scraps of paper! I remember I was temping in an office for some ghastly market-survey company, putting 'packs' together – replacing old literature with new or some such task. Four or five hundred to do in an afternoon and I'd tear in half each piece of paper I'd pull out, saving the blank empty space and hiding them beneath the leaflets. I had myself set-up perfectly in a little side room somewhere and I made sure I never ran out of work. *Never* run out of work if you're a temp –

when there's nothing for you to do, your money stops. Either that, or you have to look busy all afternoon. It's more trouble for them to think about what to get you to do or whether to send you home, than to just sign you off at the day's end. If you have to look busy, do it on your own terms.

And so, I would pack and unpack the bloody packs. I would do things with ridiculous precision, calculating that taking 2 seconds extra on each envelope would take me up to lunch. I would be *occupied*, however mundanely, but would avoid the greatest cost of all – counting down time, wishing life away! There is no greater sin surely, but it's forced upon us all – at bus stops, at desks, on tills, on hot Uttar Pradeshian trains, your heel pushing still from a cut on a toilet door weeks earlier, unable to heal in the filth of it all, and there with half of India squashed in with you, staring at you and your wife's long blonde hair. Cockroaches hopping around unnoticed like sparrows. Rats spinning round and round a million times beneath the seats, up the walls somehow – all of it inches from your heel that glistens and crusts and now *pulses* with desperation to be anywhere but there. On long endless evenings of immortal politeness when you stare through the walls of some friend of a friend of a friend's living room, listening to them go on about their new kitchen, wondering how on earth you steered your life to that very moment – why you never found people in *your* living room, *listening to you!* Your only solace the wine, which of course your host watches over, feeding it to you in dribbles that you suck and hold in your mouth, urging the alcohol out on to your tongue, up to your brain – *numb me, numb me!* And you can't enjoy it because you don't know when the next dribble is coming – you don't know if the evening is nearly over. You are but a body in a room that knows nothing, being talked at, being told inconsequential things for no reason other than that the host has never had someone tell them to *shut up* – just shut up for *five fucking seconds!* And you in your whimpering ways you are not to be that person, not tonight; not with mere dribbles of wine to keep you conscious. And all of us knowing how short and truly precious time must be, but living within the constraints of decisions we've made, the people we've allowed ourselves to become. And it is this that stops me from walking away, from screaming, from tearing-up table cloths and casting scores of 'hosts' off into the night through windows or onto pretty, precious lawns they can't shut up about. If only the wine would stop laughing at me. If I could suck the cork out of its deep red neck...

But anyway, the scraps of paper!

It's dangerous, I'm learning, to look back to the past too much – but when I do, these scraps fall from that spirally tome. They are the desperate, secret scribbles of a former me, packing, unpacking, re-packing packs! I would hear the door open and know I had at least a second and a half until anyone could peer around the frame of my boxy, windowless cube. And so I'd write and write and write, almost as small as I could so I could cram it all in – the things I'd seen, the subway faces, the bodies stretched out on vents, the skies so blue it broke my heart, the walks home in the snow, late-night traipsings in stupid bars on Dupont. On Saturdays I would head to Kensington Market and roll around in the wash of Friday nights, my dear sweet woollen hat, brown and yellow, that I have long since lost and that it almost brings a tear to think of never seeing again – to wear it now years on would be to hold the hand of a dear friend long gone; to walk gently with them one more time, through giant other-worldly forests, along beaches where the wind blows in from

Japan and brings with it glass buoys – those great treasures I hunted for on Vancouver Island. I still dream now, not in daydreams, not through conscious, waking knowing of any sort, but in *real* dreams, of being back there. The dream recurs and it is of approaching heaven. I drive along a coast line that curves-in deep, like a half moon and somewhere to the west is a kind of natural escalator, a belt of some sort travelling up and there I am racing along this great cliff-top that rolls on and on...but somehow I wake before I make it. In the dream itself I am so happy, so peaceful, so teary-eyed with joy that I am about to make it back to whatever it is out there...

But then I wake and am here again! And that's no bad place, although it makes me laugh as those around me buy houses and set their lives in place. And of course I laugh not at them but at myself and life *itself* in fact! It has equipped me with nothing one would need to be able to buy a house: focus, determination, serious application of self! And money can go throw itself from some precious window anyway – I've had enough for falafels in the deep chill of Saturday afternoon in Kensington Market! For coffee - for the food to get me here. To share. It is an endless battle for all of us – seek it out and it hunts you. Talk about it too much and it becomes far more than scraps of paper.

Which brings me back...I have a lifetime of these scraps and scribbles and, sitting still now, I've started looking back through them, wondering what on earth I've kept them all for – for who? Memories are a strange currency. But what are we without them? We all live these brief little bursts of something. Some of us grasp it real quick and get the fuck on with it, others flounder away in the sensual – the drunkenness, the adrenaline, the blood and guts and sex of it all; expiring one night in a gutter, on a mountaintop. We are strange things no doubt. And that great friend and enemy sits by us all as we hunch-up in front of screens each evening. We catch ourselves, we snap out of it! We remember childhoods of screen-less wonder: that field of poppies on the edge of town...the walks with parents together, by the riverside and lying in that long grass not knowing quite what was happening between them – that it was coming to an end and that without me, without us, it would have been just another end. But we were its continuation as we would forever be. Perhaps we would be an endless torture to them both! Were we the physical, the permanent reminder of failure? Of something lost? Of something that should not have even been and that they must toss back and forth every other weekend?!

Forgive me – I know this isn't true, nor could ever be. I see now as age cuddles up to me a little, that life is not all rolling round in late-night moonlit wonderings of what could and might have been. There is beauty in it all – in the heartache, the devastation; in all that makes you cast time aside and cry to take it back again. How odd to be conscious in all of this!

And outside as I write, tourists gather together in the sun, on the steps of the museum, posing for photos and it takes me back to Angkor Wat, where I stood and paced, waiting for my wife and our friend to appear amongst the white faces. We'd drifted off in the ruins somehow and I couldn't find them anywhere so headed for the exit gate. On the other side of this ancient path (the makers of which could not have imagined such mayhem surely!) I stood and watched it all. "No thank you", I said fifty, sixty, seventy...three-hundred times to invitations to buy water, fruit,

bracelets, bags...After a while I disappeared into the background, just waiting in the incomparable heat. And as I became someone else, just another face, no longer an opportunity, everything seemed to slow down – the frantic buzz of it all subsided from my simply being still and able to see it all for what it was.

And that is life: a million meetings of immense and minuscule consequence. It is moments alone on the shores of great lakes as the sun goes down – as it comes up! It is everything you've ever done and ever failed to do, all you've seen and failed to see. It is absolute heartache for no and every reason; for the simple fact that it must end. It is there every day beyond the screens. Within them. You must look, you must see. You must take the fruit offered you and offer back your own. And above all else you must know that it is unknowable and that nothing matters, even though it all does beyond measure.

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