

formulating saint Laurent

* * * * * **part one** * * * * *

There is a moment in walking, when time stops. It slows down in fact and the tips of the fingers, the taste buds of the tongue, begin to have silent dialogues with the nostrils and eyes. It is in these quiet conversations that our body detaches from the sidewalk it is walking on and engages with the objects around us. The same conversation that detaches our body from that specific place is simultaneously recorded entirely through our body. The following is a dictation of numerous dialogues overheard on the portion of Boulevard Saint Laurent between Rue Sherbrooke and Rue Rachel--->

Situation eavesdrop **one** (the fire-hydrant):

“There are 15 on the sidewalk east and another 12 of our brothers on the west. You pass us everyday with little regard. Our skin tastes of metallic, chipping paint. Perhaps you can taste the rust on our square hinges where the men come to unscrew us. We can still hear the ringing in our ears from their visits. The sirens are so loud, but it is all made better when we can feel the coolness of the liquid pressure inside flowing out. When the men visit, it always smells of smoky soot, fire and ash. I wonder if you smell the visits from the dogs on our corrugated shell.”

Situation eavesdrop **two** (the brick):

“Side by side we are set, one atop the other. Pardon the stench of fresh oil-based paint. Someone came along just recently and decided to hide our innate kiln fired clayness. Now, our pores cannot breathe and the raindrops slide down our faces like they do on your slick poncho. Can you feel the softness of the mud from which we once came? Lick the new shiny paint...yes, lick. It is glossy against your tongue where we used to be dull, rough, and tasting of earth. We know we live in a world where face lifts and nose-jobs are now the norm, but this resemblance is sounds so plastic. You cannot even see the way our shoulders are linked one to the other anymore because of the prosthetic. We do not taste like the tomato skin we now wear, and do not like the suffocation one bit.”

Situation eavesdrop **three** (the traffic light):

“Stop! I command all of you. I have the ultimate power, in my circular eye you look back at me with waiting. You must be patient because of

me. Your entire body hesitates, gives you that one moment to look around and see the sidewalk you are standing on. The smell of the fresh bread begins to...Stop, I tell you! Get back, get back...wait for just a moment longer. Oh I see now. Ugh...that awful garbage truck behind the line...I understand your impatience, but you have to realize I only have my three eyes and no nose as you. I glare at you and the 4 wheeled shiny things that fly below me. All of us play this staring contest game. Can you feel the extent of my gaze? It is the mere distance of the intersection and yet between my eye and your pair, the separation is nonexistent.”

Situation eavesdrop **four** (the rose):

“They say I smell of passion, of sensuality and romance. In between the couple I separate the air in a fine line that is drawn on the table cloth. I can sense both noses smelling my soft petals. Perhaps they are counting the “I love you’s” and “I love you not’s” to my center. The woman reaches out and touches my petal that has fallen. In that touch she imagines the cheek of the man before her yet suddenly smells the cologne of a past love. Had I been just a shade paler or even a shade darker, I wonder if she would have relived this memory?”

Situation eavesdrop **five** (the tomato):

“Smiling to myself, rubbing shoulders with my friends, ripening slowly on the vine, many have come with their grimy fingers touching our silky skin. I have been told that I am on a journey. I wait calmly for one of those hands to pick me up and touch me to their nose. To be held with a care that will prevent my bruising...I wonder if my purpose is saucy or complimentary saladry. How will they know when I am ready? All the while I wonder if you realize my insides are turning from hard to soft, the seeds within moving more freely.”

Situation eavesdrop **one + two + three + four & five** = a 3 letter word which smells, tastes, feels, looks and sounds like

r e d.

How does one write about colour? In the instance of the fire hydrant, the traffic light, tomato, rose, and brick, instantly an image appears in the mind. An object that is red, no

doubt. What kind of red do you imagine? It is impossible to perceive Saint Laurent without the colour red...without fire-hydrants, traffic lights, roses, tomatoes, and brick. How would our bodies know when to stop? Do you know, and I mean really know, what the red of the tomato tastes like when you choose it from the marché? And the fire hydrants, is it possible to think of this particular red without thinking of water? Where do these connections begin? Is it in the context around the red (meaning the table on which the rose sits, the avocados that lie adjacent to the pile of tomatoes, the sidewalk that holds the fire hydrant)? Already our minds begin to conceive of the green avocado, or the grey sidewalk...the context of Saint Laurent begins to take form.

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There is a moment in walking, when time stops. It slows down in fact and our wandering eyes are able to record what they see. It is in these quiet observations that our body detaches from the sidewalk it is walking on and engages with the objects around us. The same observation that detaches our body from that specific place is simultaneously recorded entirely through our body. The following is a series of observations, notes taken of various onlookers seen on the portion of Boulevard Saint Laurent between Rue Sherbrooke and Rue Rachel--->

Situation onlooker **one** (the pedestrian):

He passes the red, red fire hydrants, one by one, barely glancing at their presence. His bright, yellow down vest stands out against the other pedestrians' blacks and greys. Each of them is walking with an enclosed determination, eyes wide shut, ears openly plugged to the conversations happening around them, including the chatter of the red fire hydrants. The yellow of the trees above make the man look like a fallen leaf, scattered amongst the other oranges, browns, and mustard greens gathered at his feet. He looks up, pauses, and sees the sky is blue today. His eyes squint at the sun. The contrast between his yellow parka against the blueness and unnoticed red fire-hydrant behind composes a picture perfect scene.

Situation onlooker **two** (the transient):

Behind her the red, red brick acts as a backdrop. It provides the stage setting for her play. Over and over she recites her lines, "Can you spare any change today? Any change, please?" Her clothes are a dark, olive green, or is it yellow? One cannot be sure as there is a dullness of time and grime embedded in the green/yellow fabric. A stark difference to the newly painted, shiny red bricks. Above her head she wears the yellow and red fluorescent lights of Cinema L'Amour like a halo, and the lines of green

fluorescence sprout from her shoulders like wings. Together, the yellow, red, and green are brought into a becoming around her, the only thing that weighs her down is the red brick wall.

Situation onlooker **three** (the car):

There are three cars in front between him and the red traffic light. A white van, forest green sedan, and one orange moped. He doesn't see the people in the vehicles, only the cars themselves. To the right and left at the corners, a woman in a striped green and orange hat, another man, in a yellow coat holding the hand of a child with a matching yellow backpack. To the left, an elderly woman carrying a brown basket of overflowing green vegetables, even some yellow plums. Next to her a group of students in matching red shirts huddle together, almost swallowing up the old woman. But in front there is the white van, the forest green car, and the orange moped. When will the light turn? Ah there...now 1, 2, 3...go before we too are swallowed by the red shirts.

Situation onlooker **four** (the waitress):

She comes and places a silver ashtray next to the red rose on the table between the couple, both of which dressed in tops of black somberness. The tabletop is a mustard yellow, matching the squares on the adjacent wall, intermixed with mirrors which reflect all sorts of dark red scarves, hints of orange shirts, jeans of dark, dark, blue, and coffee browns. She herself is wearing an inconspicuous top of brown, slightly browner belt, and slightly less brown pants. Amongst all the shades of autumn, even the moving woman of brown does not stand out. All that she sees are the spots of red roses floating above the sea of yellows, oranges, and browns.

Situation onlooker **five** (the grocer):

He stoops down to pick up the fallen green avocado, carefully placing it back in place next to the box red tomatoes still attached to their vines. His feet take a slow shuffle across to the other side where the yellowish pears, play games of contrast compare with the yellow bananas, granny green apples, grapefruit oranges. He wears a humble, white laboratory type overcoat. White perhaps to show his authority over all the reds, yellows, greens, blues of vegetables and fruits alike? The cash register too, the man's weighing station, is brown and black. Before each of the green broccolis, yellow lemons, or red tomatoes can make their passage to adventure, they must all pass through this humble white, black and brown border.

Situation onlooker **one + two + three + four & five =**

a 6 letter word which smells, tastes, feels, looks and sounds like

c o l o u r .

How does one write about a street? In the instance of the pedestrian, the transient, the car, waitress, and grocer, instantly an image appears in the mind. Here the image is a collection of colours, no longer red alone. What appears as a backdrop setting for the colour red, is actually a palette of other colours which onlookers comprehend almost unconsciously. It is impossible to perceive Saint Laurent without colour...without pedestrians, cars, waitresses, grocers, and transients. The questions begin to arise: Would the tomatoes be so red or avocados so green without the old man in his white, white jacket? And the transient in front of Montreal's last x-rated theater, would her clothes be so dull without the fluorescent red and yellow sign above her head, or the red shiny bricks behind her? It is in the careful juxtaposition of onlooker with the overheard conversation of colours that setting and place appear...the context of Saint Laurent begins to take form.

* * * * * **part three** * * * * *

There is a moment in walking, when time stops. It slows down in fact and our steps fall in tune with the rhythm of the city. It is in these quiet settings that our body detaches from the sidewalk it is walking on and engages with the objects around us. The same setting that detaches our body from that specific place is simultaneously recorded entirely through our body. The following are descriptions of such place settings as experienced on the portion of Boulevard Saint Laurent between Rue Sherbrooke and Rue Rachel--->

Situation setting **one** (the sidewalk):

Here is where it all happens, where pedestrians of every colour make their decisions and paths created. It is the connecting link between Rue Sherbrooke and Rue Rachel; the thread that ties all the colours together pin-pricked into the urban fabric by the stitching together of the red fire hydrants.

Situation setting **two** (the building):

This is the framework, lining the street on either side. The transient in dull green and browns can be found before many of these colourful backdrops, each reciting their lines over and over. Sometimes red brick, other times

transparent to the colours within. Often times, the faces shown have markings of colour themselves, the red, black, green, blue, yellow, purple, orange spray can marks of many the tag. One by one, they line the street, like soldiers in line, shoulder to shoulder, colour to colour. Here they are not imposing, the red brick neither stands out too much nor tower too high but becomes the perfect accent in the built fabric of colours.

Situation setting **three** (the street):

This is the mobile line of divide separating the sea of colour in two by a black expanse of asphalt and grime. Atop its surface, spots of colour in the shape of cars pass in one of two directions, sometimes four at intersection crossings where red lights dangle in the blue sky. Men in yellow parkas wait at the corners, overlooking the four wheeled, coloured cars that pass before them. From the car, the only thing that exists is the blackness below them and the three spotted lights above. That and the occasional red stop sign or orange traffic construction cones. Amongst the stationary backdrop, everything seems stationery from the view of the car, all the colours speed up and disappear in an instant. The time of colour here is changed.

Situation setting **four** (the resto/café):

The waitress all in brown weaving in and out between the red rosed tables, a typical scene along this storefront culture of colours. Sometimes the waiter is in green and not brown, others sporting jeans, and not all wear red flowers on yellow mustard tops. The chairs can be blue and shiny brushing up against a tablecloth of orange. The ceiling may wear a colour of shimmery gold, or even green and red spotted lights. Inside, the wait staff's colours mix and intermingle with the pedestrians who have chosen to partake in the ephemeral painting. For a brief moment, their own yellow umbrellas and green galoshes will add to the composition for all street onlookers to view as they please.

Situation setting **five** (the marché):

From the street one peers through the window and sees the grocer wrapped in his white jacket, the box of vine red tomatoes behind. The pedestrians barely notice the fine relationship of colours, throwing vegetables and fruits into silver baskets haphazardly and without care. This store which sustains both the street and literally the people, sells colours galore in bushels and pairs, cartons and jars. The shop storefront becomes a painter's palette, only here nearly all the colours are edible.

Situation setting **one + two + three + four & five =**

what smells, tastes, feels, looks and sounds like

saint Laurent.

* * * * * the key formula * * * * *

if

one =(the fire-hydrant :: the pedestrian :: the sidewalk)

two =(the brick :: the transient :: the building)

three =(the traffic light :: the car :: the street)

four =(the rose :: the waitress :: the resto/café)

five =(the tomato :: the grocer :: the marché)

then

**one + two + three + four + five = saint Laurent of
Montreal.¹**

¹ 2005 December 12, A Reflection to Reveal Place with a Capital "P": I remember driving across the US-Canada border at around 10:30pm nearly four months ago exactly. There was nothing but a vast darkness of flatland. After about half an hour of driving, finally a deep glow of lights emerged along the horizon that I would discover to be the city of Montreal. Anxiety, and thoughts of last minute chances to turn back crossed my mind. What was this Place I was going too? Would it be a Place for me at all? Or merely just another stopping point on my journey of 30 cities in the last 365 days seen through a tourist's eye?

Place is a term that has so many meanings and connotations, at least in the sense of the dictionary. For the most part, it is a noun used to denote location. The "sense of Place" has been written about time and time again as a phenomenon in which humans identify themselves strongly with a particular geographic location. "Sense of Place", in the simplest form, can be said to refer to as sense of belonging. Place can be applicable on many different scales, from the small comfort of one particular room in a person's home, to the macroscopic fabric of an entire city. "Elements that turn space into a Place are memories, feelings, social connections and the presence of others, cultural rules and conventions."

I was in the passenger seat of the car, eyes wide open, soaking in every sparkle, glow and shimmer of the city scene at night while passing over the Pont Champlain which seemed to float above the Saint Lawrence river. I was going to live on an island, an island of lights, what a wonderful thought. Already the Place of Montreal was taking form in my mind's eye.

The first encounter with the space of the city is often that of the street. Whether walking or driving, certain streets will resonate with an individual and find themselves repeating, becoming part of a routine from which the Place of the city emerges.

There seems to be a blur in my mind between the bridge from which I crossed and the arrival at boulevard Saint Laurent. I was spit out from the tunnel mouth of the Autoroute Bonaventure and suddenly engulfed with the colours and life of this street called Saint Laurent. I still, at this moment, felt as an outsider. My mouth remained closed and quiet, observing merely just another space in another big city. I would later discover that this boulevard, this particular street, is where the Place of Montreal, in its entirety, revealed itself to me, and I, in turn, revealed myself to Montreal.

Place can only take shape over and through time. It takes "dwelling" for the full set of possibilities of a space to take shape and into a reality of Place. Augustine wrote, "Our hearts are restless, until they find rest in Thee." Although he speaks here in spiritual terms, it provides a wonderful example of the meaning of what it means to dwell, and also of the importance dwelling has to these ideas of Place making.

It did not take me long to find my routine and my near daily walk down Saint Laurent. Here it is, only four months later, and my feet meet the sidewalk with comfortable familiarity, knowing where the cracks and construction hazards lay, even knowing the number of red fire hydrants along both sides of the street. My eyes learned quickly the precise moments to look into building storefronts that are now my favourite eye-candies. I would pass my small city marché, envisioning the garbage cans of beans that called my fingers to touch them. Upon leaving my home everyday, I would approach Saint Laurent with curious eyes, straining them to see into my mustard yellow café-resto-bar retreat, a Place in itself that I can easily call my-home-away-from-my-le-Plateau-home. Nostalgia begins to set in (a notion in itself deeply connected to Place), and I can hear words being whispered into my ear, "I have walked around the same streets so many times, and then seen a Place that had been hidden to me."

Space begins its careful evolution to Place through the small & microscopic, often overlooked, yet essential and extremely integral details. Take for instance, the concept of colour. There have been so many ways devised to study colour. Some find it best to look at the interaction of a colour with another colour. Others look at the interdependence that form and placement have. Even still others study the quality of light, its intensities or hues. And beyond this even are ideas such as boundaries, limits, connections. For a moment, one is lost in the descriptions of these searches, and confused whether one is actually speaking of colour or rather the very nature of Place itself. By choosing to carefully look at the smaller detail of colour, a specific colour in fact, a revealing of the macrocosm of a Place can unfold.

Saint Laurent began to reveal its life to me, far beyond just thru the eye of a tourist. I began to see recurring themes along Saint Laurent while walk-walk-walking, particularly that of the colour red. The red of the fire hydrant, the red of the brick, the red of the traffic light, the red of the rose, the red of the tomato, all small microcosms for which my memories of the space of Saint Laurent unfolded into meaningful Place. The reds of each of these triggers and constructs a mental image in which pedestrians, cars, waiters & waitresses, elderly grocer men, and homeless people all take presence. In turn, I can see, really see, the sidewalk on which my feet walked, the street besides my walking, specific buildings and signs, spaces to eat and drink, other spaces to buy fresh vegetables, all of which create the Place of Saint Laurent of Montreal.

Although first encounters and first impressions with a city may happen with the street exterior, there lies a deeper, more intimate street interior that provides the setting for Place-making memories, feelings, and social connections to occur. Beyond the physical observations of colour, Places contribute to collective memory, and they function as emotional and cultural symbols for our lives.

At some point in time, I recall looking around me, and seeing a table full of faces, familiar and warm as compared to the now frigid outside snowy sidewalks. I could see the secret unobserved life of Saint Laurent in the conversation, and not just the physicality of the red rose sitting before us on the table. Somehow, I was now part of the street, swallowed deep into and beyond its exterior skin. Now as part of the blood flow, I found myself smoothly transitioning between café, sidewalk, marché, street, another face just as vividly present as the grocer, waitresses, and homeless people I once observed from such distance. It is the laughter of one, the kind sophisticated look of another, the soft tender touch of fingers, the exchange of crepes and bracelets, and the role-playing of dress up that makes me belong to this street; that creates a Place for Montreal within me. It is in small microscopic moments like these and those fleeting glimpses of memory where the entire street of Saint Laurent, and in turn Montreal, unfolds before my reflective eyes. With only four days left, I find myself retreating back towards the US-Canada border from which I arrived, driving away from no longer just a space in that vast darkness, but rather from the Place of Montreal in which I belong.