

# The View from My Cubby

by [Ava Wolesky](#)

It was a quiet day in April when I began growing numb.

Each day of third grade, my teacher selected the hall runner who would turn in the attendance roster. Power is precious at that age, so I was understandably eager to have my turn. My job was to walk to the front office, hand the folder to the secretary, and not get anything sticky in the process. When I arrived there that April day, I was surprised to find not just the secretary but other teachers, even my principal, all with their eyes fixed on the corner of the room, on a TV I had never noticed before. President Obama was talking, saying that his heart was in Boston that morning. Realizing I was standing there, the secretary quickly took the folder from me and ushered me out of the room. It wasn't until later that I realized why that day was different, why Boston had to be strong. I was seven.

The numbness emerged as a defense. I don't remember when I hid in a cubby for the first time, but I remember the day my elementary school had the exit doors in my hallway replaced because they were too weak. I remember lunchroom chatter about something bad happening to kids our age somewhere in Connecticut. My parents told me not to think about it, not to worry. Somewhere along the way, these stopped being 'where were you when . . .' events. The pain became routine. Where this time? How old were they? My age? Questions with answers I wouldn't let myself comprehend. Ignore the news until the photos of crying families are gone. Don't let it affect you. It's too painful.

In his essay "Object Lesson," Teju Cole investigates the use of photography in moments of tragedy, attempting to understand how strategically poignant art might help combat desensitization. Cole argues that while spectacularly violent battle scenes may exhilarate and outrage a viewer, photographs that make viewers respond "'it's just like a movie'" fall tragically short, their cinematography distracting us from their "unstaged depictions of real, ongoing human suffering" (23). So how can photographs capture the toll of tragedy? Cole proposes an alternate, perhaps counterintuitive method: excluding humans from the scene altogether. He describes a photograph by Sergei Ilnitsky, that shows a kitchen, with a white gauzy curtain and a small table set with fresh tomatoes in a bowl. It's a standard still life, except that the floor is covered in dust and rubble, the table littered in broken glass, and the once spotless curtain now streaked with a violent red stain (23). Cole writes that in contrast to graphic war photographs that distance us from the human tragedy, for all their "jolt of tragedy," Ilnitsky's kitchen urges us closer,

evoking its former inhabitants: someone picked out those tomatoes, hung that curtain, and set this table. We recognize human life within the image, even as it contains nothing living, because these objects are “reservoirs of specific personal experience” (Cole 24). In this way, photographs like Ilnitsky’s prevent viewers from disassociating from what we see, forcing us to grapple with its painful truth – something I had avoided diligently.

In May 2022, a shooter killed twenty-one people at Uvalde High School in Texas, setting off a news cycle that’s become too familiar. Amid countless images of families wracked with grief, I saw one photo that hit Cole’s mark: an image of a paper-bound composition notebook that belonged to a student in the classroom, taken by *New York Times* photographers Tamir Kalifa and Callaghan O’Hare. The notebook lies open, revealing scribbles in thick pencil lead, one page covered with multiplication practice problems. The notebook was crisp, well cared for. That is, until a bullet tore through its pages. The notebook knocked me off balance. Years of numbness were no shield – the photograph cut straight through my calloused exterior to the seven-year-old in the cubby. Teju Cole argues that such object photography can create a certain empathy in viewers. But this wasn’t just empathy I felt; it was pain. A pain I had thought couldn’t hurt me.

There have been hundreds of photographs of children fleeing the scene, strangers holding one another, and the broken families of the fallen: heartbreaking and unfathomable, but common. The more of these I saw, the less I felt, as if exposure had severed a cluster of nerves within me. But I had never seen something like the notebook. This notebook belonged to someone, who’d chosen it during back-to-school shopping and used it to practice their math. Someone just like me. The photograph seemed to breathe, “alive with the terrors [it had] witnessed” (Cole 22). It had a soul, and I had no defense against the victim looking back at me. I felt everything, and it agonized me.

A notebook, a kitchen: we find life in these images capturing subtle moments of human touch, not in bloodied rubble or clinically clean desks. However fleeting, here is evidence of our profound humanity: the tomatoes we pick when planning dinner for the week, our handwriting in a notebook. These are powerful conductors for empathy because they focus on something we all share, the traces of life we leave in our wake. In capturing these traces in objects, photographers grasp at our shared experience, cutting through our desensitized surface to the soul beneath. It frightens me to leave the cubby. But it seems necessary to feel something, even pain, if only to remember I can.

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## Works Cited

Cole, Teju. "Object Lesson." *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 Mar. 2015. [www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/magazine/object-lesson.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/magazine/object-lesson.html).

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