

Synthetic Nature

I grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a place where 300 of every 365 days are pure sunlight. That's 3,418 hours of direct sunlight every year. Until five months ago, I could count on my fingers the number of times I had seen snow, and fog was nothing more than a Halloween decoration. In the past month, I can count the number of times I have seen the sun on one hand. Pullman, Washington has a UV index of 3, which means sunlight barely pierces the clouds and never touches my skin. Compared to the 8 UV index I grew up in, this feels like raising a forest with a desk light. Always tinted and leathery, my skin was used to the constant layers of sunlight and sunscreen. Now, I am an ivory figurine hidden within a snowglobe, trapped in a bubble of winter.

Walking along the sidewalk, under the deep night sky, I passed under a flickering lamp and realized this was the first light I'd walked beneath in days. I couldn't remember the last time the sun was out, the last time the sun soaked my face and clothes in warmth. It had been months since I had been home, but I could see the glow of orange sun spots behind my eyelids, a short lived image that faded once I opened my eyes. There was no sun, no warmth; I saw nothing but a light bulb glaring at me, mocking me with its superficial light. I breathed in. Cold air rushed into my lungs. I was paralyzed until I exhaled and watched my breath force dancing particles into the air. As the cloud of moisture left my lips, a bright silver helium balloon danced in wires above my head. The deflated sphere yanked itself towards the sky, unable to escape. The balloon was filled with a natural gas, created to be a part of the atmosphere, and was caught in the wires of a man-made trap.

At eleven o'clock at night, the Washington State University campus was empty. I listened closely, expecting to hear crickets or cicadas, but heard only hollow steps, and the drum of

machinery in the background. The groans of heating vents being overused in the winter, the constant buzz of electricity to power lights, and the slight squeal of tires on frozen asphalt added to the unnatural symphony. I breathed deeply and waited for the rich smell of evergreen to reconnect me with my surroundings, but I could smell only burned rubber from the tires that raced out of the parking lot eight yards away. Instead of a walk through white clematis, sweet woodruff, and lavender that used to line this walkway in spring, summer, and fall, I traversed a concrete river. Nature was but a sideshow to buildings, paths, and roads.

Front doors creaked open and close, fighting the pressure of the free cold exterior air and the stagnant warmth that tried to escape this brick cage. Lights shut off, loyal to a timer rather than the tilt and movement of the earth. Windows, placed perfectly to pay tribute to the groomed rose spirea and red osier dogwoods, are blocked by 42'' HD TV's with pictures of Mount Rainier that advertised hiking trips to "get out and see nature". With 50,000 pixels, the screen imitated the reality found inches below the window it covered. Natural red and green stems have been replaced by artificially brightened, saturated, and magnified copies.

The prescription of a 10,000 Lux LED Bright White Light to treat seasonal depression is equivalent to giving someone a thimble when they asked for a water bottle. The white light faintly imitates sunlight in an attempt to naturally alleviate panic, anxiety, or frustration, yet it is sunlight that pours vitamin D over the skin, releases the knot in the throat, the clench in the jaw, or the glue that clouds the brain. Sunlight stimulates serotonin and melatonin, chemicals promoting physical and emotional equilibrium, sleep, and energy levels all with a blanket of warmth. A lightbulb merely brightens the room. The body's natural dependency on the sun creates a rhythm of activity. The sun, fresh air, and nature free us from suffocation and

responsibilities. Nature is an escape from the systematic oppression of daily life, screens, and machines.

Snow sparkled over the decaying leaves and bearded irises it was piled onto. The sound of tires trying to find traction faded. The dark sky remained pale with clouds, untouched by stars. Not even a plane disturbed the thick and heavy air. The weight of the clouds made them sink to inches above the sidewalk, and coated everything in a layer of moisture. The fog made the air difficult to breathe. Half a mile away, lights beamed from the football stadium, remained trapped within the fog, and placed the campus in a glowing envelope. Orion's belt and the little dipper, visible when five miles north of campus, remained hidden. Thomas Edison's once revolutionary creation of artificial light had transformed the skies into opaque clouds of light pollution.

Hours had passed enmeshed in this synthetic nature and 24°F, my body had become numb. The 50-foot evergreens towered over me, each one dusted in snow. An asymmetrical ring of brown pine needles surrounded the base of each tree, and a stark blue X was on every trunk. The fading paint cracked and peeled away from the rough bark. I took a seat on a stump, an evergreen previously deemed an inconvenience. At least a dozen other stumps wore the bottom half of the same blue X every standing evergreen bore. The collection of markings mapped a trail that would open the face of a half-acre hill. Layers of mature palouse thistles, at least a yard tall, lined the bottom of the hill. The thistles acted as nature's version of a barricade, trying to protect decades-old trees that are still vulnerable to the whims of a chainsaw. Daffodils desiccated atop the soil, their roots broken and mangled. Holes scattered the ground. An assortment of lavender and ivy lay in brown heaps. Footprints covered adolescent tulip bulbs. Shovels, hoes, and picks leaned against a dumpster filled with indiscernible dried plant matter. A dull yellow machine

towered over the dumpster with block lettering that said “CAUTION: Industrial Grade Wood Chipper”.

Snow began to fall. A sheet of white attempted to hide piles of dead roots, leaves, and pine needles. The evergreens no longer stood as tall, nor seemed as permanent. The guardian thistles were frozen and no longer appeared as impenetrable. The footprints remained untouched, yet the sprouts of new life were flattened. The life growing into this hill was crumbling, but the dumpster and machine remained full. Mankind’s will had taken over, so nature began to disintegrate.

Resources:

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