

On The Theft of Dreams

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Prompt:

Environmental Writing Competition 2024 -
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I am sitting near the back of the bus, looking out at the hills of sleeping giants, the sentry saguaros and the stagger of empty five bedroom houses. The friend beside me scoffs, “The most beautiful part of the desert— and they build houses for the rich that are only here in the winter.”

The desert is dizzying. Driving up the mountain I am warmed by the waving, gentle saguaros. All desert folks acknowledge that the cactus are people themselves, and it is hard to not believe it once you see them intertwined like lovers, or slumped over like old men, or once you realize they have skins and bones, upright skeletons just like us.

We enter the city, flat four lane intersections, low sun-bleached strips of shops, windows darkened as if eyes squinted against the sun. I say into the air of cheap leather and scuffed shoes, the thought welling up out of me, “Here is the place I have felt most like home,”

He is quiet for a moment, the city is disorienting after days in the mountains, the roar of the highway a persistent buzz in the back of our skulls. Then he says, “Yeah. The desert accepts all travelers,”

The first few houses I lived in in Arizona were down a dirt road amid cholla and tarantulas, the only things in walking distance the meandering arroyo and my bus stop. The Sonoran Desert lives in a basin, mountains carry her— past the buildings you see them, and out of the city you can almost touch them. Climb up one and the

cacti retreat, break way to evergreen and aspen, trickling rivers and heaps of snow.

For my sixteenth birthday we went to Patagonia. Growing up in the Tucson area, I only had a vague idea of Patagonia, Argentina, and found out about it much later. To me, Patagonia was a small manmade lake a couple hours south-east of Tucson, bordered by scraggly grasses and cat-tails, with a quaint and charming town. The true marvel of this area is Sonoita Creek, a riparian ecosystem in the desert that runs year-round, with towering trees. Looking at it from afar and above, it looks like a parade of trees marching along down an otherwise empty lowland.

We walked down the creek, barefoot, crawdads sliding past us, amazed at the oasis. Birds sang a riot above us. It's almost too much to bear now, the knowledge of it, and the love of it. Three months later I heard of the mine. The beautiful, ecologically diverse place where I wandered in the water, picked mint in town, went to the hummingbird garden, is now slated to be mined for metals to power electric cars. The irony— to take advantage of ignored nature preserves, where the signs are cracked and peeling but still the rivers run and the birds sing, in order to supply the conscious wealthy with the materials to make them feel better.

I lived in Arizona for seven years, and observed many such circumstances. The people who live here, so in love with the sun, the yapping coyotes, the prickly pear fruit, the blooming ocotillos, even the obnoxious bloom of the palo verde trees, experience frequent destruction of their home and themselves. Water is stolen beneath our feet, small family's wells run dry as the ranch next to them digs their own well deeper. Water is diverted to grow acres and acres of alfalfa that will be shipped out of the country— the water that we do have is poison: zinc and rust and heavy black particles. I watched the mines churn water into poison and mysterious cancers begin to grow under my friend's skin— not from drinking said water, but from showering in it, washing dishes in it, simply being within the proximity of the wound of the earth.

I am going to place something in your hands— it's small, no larger than a hummingbird, with small bones and a fast heart. It is the

dreams of a child. I am asking you to clasp it in your hands, hold the bzzz up to your ear, and listen to the echo.

When I was young I did not question longevity– my dreams were full of it. To look out the window and see green-grass and dappled light, to have my own quiet farm. It was as I got older, as I watched the crops we planted die and farms go out of business with the violent shift of the seasons, that I realized these dreams need water, healthy soil, and clean air.

My friend told me that there is a tree that she has been climbing since she was a small child. That there were low hanging branches that she could just reach with her outstretched hands. She explained to me that the parks and recreation cut back the branches, and once again she can only just now reach the lowest hanging branch with outstretched hands.

Look closely at your little hummingbird. We are locked into an act of theft. We are robbing ourselves of hope. We are stealing childhood- we are stealing the magic a tree can make when there is a child in its branches. We are robbing ourselves of beauty and wilderness and sixteenth birthdays spent walking barefoot down Sonoita Creek. We are sacrificing rain. We are sacrificing soft-bodied creatures and things with feathers. We are supplementing ourselves with old ideas and zinc and manganese.

I wish for the stories we have to tell the future generations not to be wistful recreations of something that has bygone, but stories of success, of places still green and breathing. To visit my hometown and for there to still be the monsoon rains, the birds still singing, and the saguaros still waving in greeting, in homecoming.

Yes, here is what I am clasping your palm around, my hands enveloping yours, and then letting go. I am giving you the anger, and I am giving you the hope.

Tags:

Competition

Shortlisted

United States

Environment

Footnotes

There is a poem by Nicolette Sowder that I remember at the time of writing this titled "May We Raise Children Who Love Unloved Things" It is a beautiful poem, and is what I remember when I am

speaking of my love for the desert, with all it's spines and snakes
and heat.

Other Pieces by Author