

EPHEMERAL GRACE

The Timeless Art of Nature

AUGUST BROOKS

Watch as the rain falls, as it descends to the earth it graces first the trees. Droplets run smooth courses across every leaf and blossom, cleansing the giants from pinnacle to base. The rain consistently falls on the plant life below, the flowers, the shrubs, all grateful for the energy restored by this, nature's spectacle. The winds blow the outside life, causing all to sway and dance for the viewer. The redolence of the air is sweet and crisp and refreshes all that breathe of it. This all in all has assisted in creating a grand symmetrical odyssey, a silent opera dramatic and beautiful. Behind a simple pane of glass encased by its wooden frame, the splendor of the world awaits, ever-changing to arouse the soul, lighten the heart, and please the eye.

But the rain does not fall for you.

That is the first thing the window teaches, and it teaches it slowly. The frame makes a stage of what was never a performance. Set glass between yourself and the world and the world composes itself, obligingly, into scenes — and the composition is entirely your doing. The oak is not swaying for an audience. It is shedding load. The water on the leaf is not a jewel; it is a leaf finding the shortest route to the ground. Every ornament in the scene is a solution to a problem you were not asked to consider.

And still the eye insists. It cannot look at a field and fail to arrange it. That insistence is not a flaw to be corrected. It is the one credential we hold: we are the part of the world that looks back at it.

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Go down to the sea and the arrangement gets harder to sustain, because the sea will not hold a pose.

A wave begins as a swell without edges, a slow gathering nobody notices, and it arrives all at once. It stands, leans past its own footing, and comes apart. What is left is a sheet of water thin enough to see the sand through, sliding back, and for a moment before it goes the wet

sand takes the whole sky and holds it — a mirror the width of the beach, lasting four seconds, replaced.

Watch the small lives at the edge instead of the horizon. Sandpipers run down after the withdrawing water and run back ahead of the next one, and they are never wrong, not once in an afternoon. A crab goes sideways into its burrow the instant a shadow crosses it, and the shadow was yours. Shells lie polished by a process that took longer than your life and did not have polish in mind.

There is no cruelty in this and no kindness. The wave that scours the beach and the wave that lays a shell at your feet are the same wave. We call one destruction and the other a gift because we are standing there. Remove the observer and the water simply does what water does, and has done, since before there was anything on the shore to be impressed.

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The forest asks the opposite of the sea. The sea asks you to watch. The forest asks you to stop.

Enter far enough and the sound changes first — not silence, but the removal of one particular register, the mechanical one, so that what remains seems louder than it is. Then the light: broken into pieces by the canopy and laid down on the floor in patches that move when the wind moves. Then the smell, which is mostly decay, and which we find pleasant, and which is the smell of the forest eating what it was.

That is the part worth staying for. Every soft footfall is a footfall on the fallen. The ground is deep because the woods have been dying into themselves for centuries, and the trees standing over you are standing on the ones that came before, drawing themselves up out of the wreckage of their ancestors. The most peaceful place a man can find is the one where the recycling is most efficient.

Solitude here is not loneliness, and the reason is worth stating precisely. You are not alone; you are unattended. Nothing in the woods is waiting for you, and nothing is watching, and being unwatched for an hour will do more for a mind than a year of being understood.

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In the canyon the scale of the thing finally becomes honest.

The walls are layered like pages, and each band is an age of the world laid down flat and left. Red over ochre over grey, and every line of it a period long enough to make a human life a rounding error. You are looking at deep time from the side, which is the only angle from which we can see it at all.

Call out and the walls hand your voice back a half-second later, changed. The hawk gets the same treatment. So does the rockfall, somewhere out of sight, that runs and stops and runs again. The canyon does not distinguish between them. It is not listening. It is a shape that returns sound, and the reverence you feel standing in it is being generated entirely on your side of the transaction.

And the river at the bottom, which looks like nothing — a thread, a shine — is the whole cause. All of it, every wall and spire and cathedral of stone, was made by water that was not trying, over a stretch of time we can write down but cannot feel. The most patient thing in the landscape did the most violent work in it.

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The desert keeps the least and teaches the fastest.

A dune is a wave that has agreed to slow down. It has the same arc, the same leaning crest, the same fine cascade slipping over the top and down the face, grain by grain, in a rush too small to hear unless you are close. The wind builds it, and the wind is what will take it apart, and the wind has no plan for either.

Nothing here is decorative. The mesquite is twisted because straight growth would have killed it. The cactus is armed because everything alive out here is thirsty. The lizard is quick because slow lizards are eaten. Beauty in the desert is what survival looks like when you happen to be standing in the right light, and the light is the only part you contributed.

Then a storm comes across in an hour and shifts every dune, erases every track, drives the sand hard enough to sculpt stone, and leaves. What is there in the morning is not damaged. It is simply what the desert is now.

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Nature is the consummate artist, perfect in creation and in destruction — and I want to be exact about what that claim costs, because the sentence goes down easier than it should.

It means the same principle that opens the flower is the one that takes the field. It means the hand is not divided. The frost that kills the orchard and the thaw that starts it are one operation observed at two moments, and the operation is not aimed at us and does not know we are here. Every particle of grace in this piece — the sky held in wet sand, the shell, the light through the canopy — is a byproduct of something being ground down.

That is a harder proposition than a merely beautiful world, and it is the only one the evidence supports. Perfection, if the word applies at all, is not gentleness. It is the absence of waste. Nothing in this system is discarded; everything is reused; the forest floor is the proof and so is the canyon wall.

So the window was never a frame around a performance. It was a frame around a process — one that was running long before there was glass, and will run after the house has gone back into the ground it was cut from. The privilege is not that the world arranges itself for us. It is that for a short while there is something here capable of noticing that it doesn't.

Watch the rain.

— *August Brooks*

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