

The Hill

Every day is a new sequence of swipes on a plastic screen. A slight tilt of the head becomes a burden on our necks and spines, already evolved into a new species of human. Our bodies adjusting to accommodate our ever-shifting desires.

On the bus back from school, not a single pair of eyes blinked or shifted as the vehicle lunged its way forward. The portals of our eyes remained connected to a world sewn into the fate lines of our palms; a world so vast and diverse now condensed to a single swipe of a finger. I too did not look up, descending to only finger painting with these advanced and elaborate motions on the canvas of a new realm.

As the bus started to reach the peak of the hill, I scrambled down the stairs, feet acting on their own accord with my eyes still attached to my screen. A leaf suddenly spun into the corner of my vision behind the bus doors. It was then carried by the wind to another windowpane or its fate under the prints of a tire. A bit of color snuck into my vision, however, they were not the usual colors. The glass enveloped me, tinting everything with muted colors that drenched me. I was drowning in a pool of black.

My feet impatiently tapped the ground as I began my daily sequence of swipes. Left, right, refresh, reload.

The bus suddenly halted at the peak of the hill, dispersing my thoughts.

“West 64th and Adena Street,” the announcer said.

It was my stop. The doors pulled themselves open, and I got off.

The next day was a repeat.

You could see me swiping away furiously, the history of art reduced to the smudges on a screen which we constantly wipe in hopes of efficiency. Zooming in and out, I shifted focus. While looking down at my phone, another leaf caught my eye. It persisted on the window next to me, the wet melted dew plastering it on the border dividing me and the outside world. The wind battered the leaf, its delicate touch against the hard surface of the barrier. It was encompassing the hues of autumn, boasting life in its veins despite being detached from its roots. It was now standing, spinning on its edges uncontrollably towards the top of the open window.

I grabbed it before it slipped away and just grasped it in my hand. It was glowing, but it was a different glow than my phone. I let go.

I felt as though I was in a snow globe, an artifact subject to nature's wrath. All I could do was observe.



School. Screen time. School. Lunch. More school. Screen time.

Standing under the plastic shade, I continued to impatiently reload my screen and look up periodically, searching for any signs of a large vehicle. The bus was late, and on top of that, I had to get home to babysit my brother. I texted my mom and took a glimpse of the path ahead, of the hill rising into view beyond my glowing screen.

Even though my legs disobeyed my command, I consciously thought about walking, lifting one leg and then the other. Technology, a puppeteer whispering into my fingers to reach for the plastic screen, but I refused. Tying strings to my legs, I cut them with each step I took.

I was flooded with memories of the hill; where the leaves piled, where flowers sprouted, where birds sang. Memories of beautiful scenes embedded in my genes. The glorious fields once rolling with footsteps, another era where vibrant colors spilled on an artist's palette has become muted, the monstrosities and beauties separated by walls of glass. Where sandals danced into lush green grass as I discovered new things, like patches of yellow buttercups, and crafted ringlets of flowers. I looked back to the area where patches of yellow buttercups grew. Only a grey clump of withered grass stood there, breathing into the soil of buried bones.

Small discoveries now long gone, sucked into the depths of sewers lining littered roads. The closer I reached the top, the harder it was to keep up with my commands. Left foot up, right foot up. Keep going. The last bit of energy in my mind started to drain as nature slipped away. I was a reflection of a society that tamed nature, kept it in check. Nature's breath extinguished and encased in glass, and trapped; nothing less than a small insignificant piece of plastic buried by footsteps of tourists on streets.

The last bits of energy started to slip from my feet, as I crunched pebbles down the hill with each step. We cage nature in a snow globe when we are the artifacts in the glass box, subject to observations and nature's wrath; we put nature on a shelf high up, where only when we go up to dust it, do we admire it.

I could now see the hill for what it is.

It was as if the artist's palette of autumn shades was being diluted by a pool of black paint. The painting of nature, assimilating into screens. But black always comes last in the painting.

I took my final step and reached the top of the hill. I was home. I looked below me. I was the Wanderer above the Sea of Fog.

The bus passed by, the one I took every single day. Passengers were seated, as usual, engrossed in themselves. I was one of them, I thought to myself, where talking was exotic, how advanced that our vocal cords are not even required to communicate with one another.

My ears tasted the silence now spoken to me.