

Third Place Article

Each Square

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Of the approximate five hundred and ten trillion square metres on earth's surface, no two are the same. Each is lined with differing coatings of grass, sea, dirt, snow, sand, and rocks while being adorned with earthly decorations. On some squares, trees grow from root-ridden ground while others hold humans, animals, buildings, rivers, the list goes on. At any given time, half of these squares bathe in sunlight while the rest lie in darkness. And between these two halves is the blurry, dusky line of twilight, where the sky is painted saturated swatches of pink, orange, and crimson red. A central equatorial band is warmed by the intense rays of the sun as temperatures dissipate to hard frosts and condensed breaths at the poles.

The loss of just one of these squares would see the loss of a completely unique ecosystem; one that would never be regenerated. Even if you lived five hundred and ten trillion lifetimes, you would never find another square metre quite like that one. Each region is carefully curated to comfortably house species of all varieties, adapted to these delicate conditions. From rolling hills to sunken valleys, arid sands to icy waters, and umbrageous trees to stretching plains, each component contributes to a biome perfect for its purpose. But, as much as each square of earth is distinct, they all merge into one system: a system characterised by a communal reliance that allows each individual part to thrive. Although humans generally regard themselves as dominant, powerful, and independent, the lives we live are facilitated heavily by other entities.

Each gulp of fresh air pervades from photosynthesising trees, while medicines flourish in dense undergrowth. Plates of food bear traces from far and wide, travelled over choppy seas to exotic places. Fertile soil births grassy tufts, speckled with flowering plants and grazed on by livestock. The quiet hum of bees drones steadily as they pollinate plants of petals and fruits. And nothing exists alone, everything in our common home is tightly interlaced. From sitting in the shade of a tree to the recycling of nutrients for new growth. All rests in precarious balance, intricately webbed into a perfectly cohesive, global complex.

But, if we don't show nurture, humanity can wreak havoc. We can cut ties and light conjunctive threads as fuses. Whether we realise it or not, our actions can ripple across the world, affecting strangers, strange plants, strange creatures. The mill of car exhausts and chimney smoke funnel to the atmosphere, hunched like smothering blankets over foggy skies. Their fibres of woven methane patch permeable gaps, sending waves of warmth to the earth below. Sheets of polar ice melt into the rising seas, and floodwater submerges low-lying lands. Storms rage as droughts prevail and the baking sun beats over burned organisms. Homes are wrecked - both of humans and of all other species. Litter-lined coast greets incoming winds of dirty soot, as marine animals are attacked by arrays of domestic rubbish. The prose of bird song turns to chokes and shrieks on lodged plastic shards. And the picturesque views from windows are concealed by layers of industrial waste amongst concrete labyrinths.

Militant troops trample ground, their minds clouded with thoughts of a distinct enemy and destruction. Gunshot billows a dusty haze from smoking rifles. And combustion and flame engulf vibrant vegetal hues with sheets of cinder. The battalions march battered paths: ones of torn grasses and indicators of fleeing animals.

Whilst the masses consume at alarming rates. Millions of materialistic hands grope at trends and fads. They don't see roots of suffering beneath surfaces of status symbols. And, poachers view the world through gold-tinted lenses. They don't see the gentle gleam in an

elephant's innocent eyes, only its protruding ivory tusks. And so, hunts for neighbouring species ensue: through bare, singed bushes and over tumuli of felled trees. The thump of frightened footsteps on ravaged lands. As wilted plants hang their heads loosely, watching, with helplessness, the man-made scenes of terror.

But, through cries of woe, our common home utters whispers of hope. It calls for our thoughts, our hands, our hearts to tend to its earthy gashes. While the trailing voice of one may seem insignificant, thousands of simultaneous, united words can roar for change. One hand can plant a tree, but a thousand hands can plant a forest. And one kind action can spur on movement of the masses. Because behind every differing, fleshy cover is the same pure heart. Just as the familiar beauty of our world shines strongly beneath buffering layers of evil. So, together, we can overwrite past mistakes and draft new chapters of care. We can drop our defences and form a force written in love, not hate. Even if we each repaired just one element in one five hundred and ten trillionth of the world, our home would surely be a reformed land. Because we can use our billions of hands, billions of words, and billions of hearts to create billions of changes. Step by step, square by square.