

Missing Mountain

SANWAL DEEN

I saw a glimmer of white radiating from between the haze and the conifers, taking up half the sky. It was Mt. Rainier. I had been waiting all year to get to “Sunrise” and see the volcano in all its splendor.

But in the next fifteen minutes, Rainier disappeared; the haze from the surrounding wildfires was so strong that it cloaked the entire mountain—all 14,410 ft of it. I couldn't believe my eyes! How can one of the world's largest volcano just...disappear?

I got out my 4x5 linhof, and went on to search for the mountain. A bloodshot sun was trying to mow through the haze in radiant streaks. But Rainier was nowhere to be found, so I kept walking.

While I walked, I thought about my childhood in Islamabad where mountains and trees had surrounded me and I had played with flowers and listened to the birds sing. The world had seemed like a musical sheet, alive with chords dancing in harmony, distinct but connected. As I grew older, the trees were stripped naked and chopped off for the city had begin to grow. Where there were once trees, there were now megamalls. There were no more birds and no more birdsongs. Over the years, both the summers and winters started getting hotter and hotter. The river hidden in the heart of the hills that I went to with my family had dried up. The city became noisier and noisier, bustling with the sound of car horns. Eventually, the rental prices increased to the point that my family was forced to leave the city. We retreated to the mountains.

Standing atop the cliff searching for the rivers and the valley and the mountain in the striped and speckled forest, a pang of pain shot through my heart. It made me think about Islamabad, and all the beauty we lost, beauty that can never come back again. I felt like we are at risk of losing more trees, more music, more birdsongs.

In the red flow of sunlight, two wildflowers swayed in the wind. A bee came atop one, buzzing with contentment.

I placed my tripod on the dusty soil and tried to make a picture but the smoke was too thick. All I could see through the glass was a slate of tawny-white. I couldn't even tell what to focus on. I didn't feel like I was taking the picture with light—I felt as if I was smearing the film with ash and dust and dead trees, coating the base with soot.

I thought about a conversation I had had with Maggie: she told me that she wants to leave Seattle because she feels that the earth is protesting: there are too many people causing harm to these fragile ecosystems. Looking through the ground glass, unable to focus on anything, I finally understood what she meant.

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This morning, a cold drizzle came pattering down the bedroom window, stretching like silver scepters falling across the dark background of the city's depths. Seattle's air seems breathable again. A feeling of freshness has come over me, like the smell of the wildflowers peppered throughout "Sunrise." The haze is finally going away. I stand by my camera and wonder—how long will it be until it comes back?

