

THE BRUSHSTROKES OF DESTINY

Onto a single square inch of paper, my photo printer can spew 5 million infinitesimal droplets of colored ink. Though individually indistinguishable by the eye, 120 million of these miniature orbs somehow amalgamate into a splendid photograph. A facsimile of life, innumerable individual details--each seemingly insignificant and unrelated to its neighbor--control the quality of the finished product.

Fifty years ago, Whittaker Chambers described his introduction to the beauty of detail. "Only those who really live close to nature can understand the elation I felt when I first discovered where the seagulls roosted seven miles from the sea, or the shallow stream in the dense woods where all the robins in the area bathed just at sunrise, or the one brook where a cardinal flower grew, or my first pinxter bush in bloom."

In stark contrast to Chambers' sylvan refuge, our house backs up to one of the city's bustling thoroughfares. But there is still a peculiar pleasure in observing details:

--Honking their way through the overcast dawn, seven Canada geese swoop low over our roof. Recalling how the trees at our last home obscured the sky, we scurry to the window for a fleeting glimpse of these winged wonders.

--The fog enveloping the neighborhood veils even the house across the street. As I peep out the door, the streetlight's normally distinct glow diffuses into an unattached, amorphous orange blob floating in the clammy soup.

--Except for the nandinas' scarlet leaves, our flower beds exude midwinter drabness. But deep within the folds of drooping foliage, a once-upon-a-time predator lies concealed. Brudderman, fur fluffed to maximize warmth, hunkers on guard, having neither claws nor speed that once allowed him to terrorize interloping field mice.

--Beside the street to the fitness center, a cloud of birds momentarily settles as one into a tall oak. And as if synchronized to my passing, they simultaneously alight, making a broad horseshoe sweep before turning in unison to follow their collective internal compass.

--Ker-CHUNK... squeak... click. Their morning game of hide and chase having escalated to unacceptable roughness, Maudie Nell has fled, diving full speed through the kitty door into the garage. Never having learned to use the door himself, Brudderman roams the house wailing plaintively, puzzling over the sudden and mysterious disappearance of his companion.

--Helium balloons, nudged by gentle air currents, bump with springiness against the ceiling. Vibrant on the day of Anna Baker's 19th birthday party, they gradually sink over the next week to lie like wrinkled prunes on the table... exhausted and depleted.

--The musty smell of an aging book puts me back in the old Engineering Library in Fayetteville amid formidable racks of newspapers and broad tables I never learned to like.

From the majesty of nature to the mundaneness of the home, the details I immerse myself into are the brushstrokes of my destiny. And if these details--my decisions, companions, aspirations, observations, meditations, activities--be good, so will be the picture of what I'm becoming.