

At the corner of a land not too distant from our own, on a hill otherwise indistinguishable from the many others on a rolling grass plain, there lives a tree. Though it once had a name, the name was not its own—trees have few opportunities for self-reference—and is now forgotten. The memory of people is dictated by their passions and desires, regrets and remorse, hopes and ambitions. The tree and that which it represents no longer figures in any of these.

The forgetting was gradual, as all such things are, and the process was neither intentional nor malicious. The question was whether to focus on what is urgent or what is important, and in what amounts; and the inhabitants of this particular realm had made their choice. They pursued productivity relentlessly, reworking their cities and themselves into ever more elaborately baroque contortions on the assurance of optimization. Meanwhile, around them, their world changed.

Think of this land like a coloring book, but one that requires constant maintenance. Without proper care, the vibrant hues of sunset will wash out to pastel yellow and pink, and with complete neglect, will vanish altogether.

Mother Nature, infinitely inventive, had designed several intricate mechanisms to collect the dissipating color and return it to the world. There was a bird like a peacock, but with ten times as many feathers, whose plumage sieved out miniscule particulates of color from the air and whose flights imbued these colors back into the sky. There was a family of clouds that collected color which escaped skyward, whose rainfalls and downpours dyed the ground below. And there were groves of trees whose roots stretched straight to the center of the earth, pulling the disappearing color toward their leaves to be carried by breeze for miles around. Of these wonders, only one curiously hardy tree remains. The others, from negligence and inattention, have gone.

And thus this vibrant ecosystem of color is fading.

From your perspective or mine, this is a shame: What will these people do in a world without color? But for them, there is nothing to mourn, for how can you mourn what you have chosen to forget? Perhaps, in several years, when the color begins to fade away completely, they will realize that something is amiss and act in concert to restore it. But perhaps the change will be like the forgetting: gradual, and—to a country whose values have shifted elsewhere—imperceptible. Until then, the tree will continue for as long as it can, shedding dulled leaves and sending color into a land which has forgotten it. A tree, after all, has little use for memory.