

Patient Forests Jaclyn Gary

Princeton, New Jersey isn't known for its hikes or mountains. In fact, depending on one's definition of these words, I'd argue that the town doesn't have either of these. Filled with lawyers, doctors, artists, and Ivy League students, Princeton doesn't necessarily come to mind when we think about outdoor recreation. These overachieving, competitive types create a bustling ecosystem where there is one unspoken but strongly heeded rule: you move fast. The quality of a day is measured in number of tasks accomplished or goals achieved, and it *will* be measured. Nature is viewed through the writings of Thoreau and the windows of family cabins in Aspen. Weekends are spent reading and at the theatre. The social currency of adventurous vacations is defined by flashy names and exotic destinations. Said a different way, the value of interactions with the environment is determined by how enviable that encounter is to how many people.

In the quiet corners of this frenzied network of socialites lies humble beauty. A striking contradiction to a community wherein experiences are constantly compared, evaluated, and judged, the preserves and



parks of Princeton are exquisitely understated. They lack photo-worthy attractions like

peaks or waterfalls but instead feature trees tall like big brothers, wise and calm in their stillness, packed so densely that I trust they'd catch me if I ran at full speed into them (which I often feel like doing). Murky streams slither through the trees like trailblazing serpents, providing a path along an otherwise dizzying maze of leaves and twigs. They



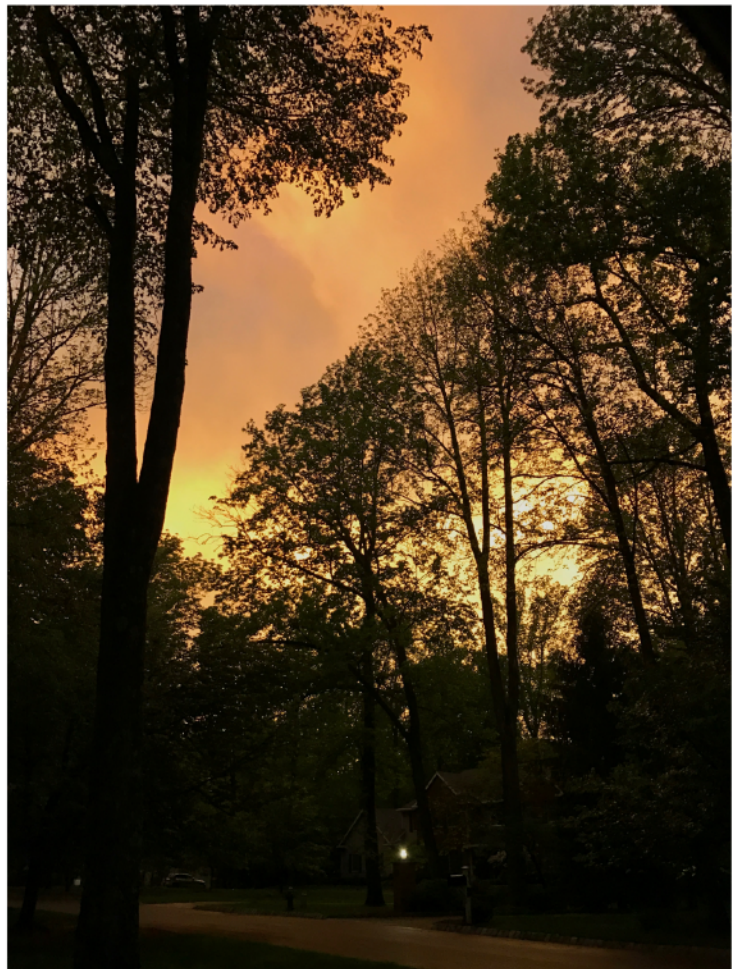
will sing to you, if you let them. Go slow, be quiet, and you'll hear symphonies. This is my favorite thing about the nature in Princeton: it doesn't force itself upon anyone. It will not point and wave and shout to prove its worth or its beauty. It incentivizes patience and stillness, two things that are hard to come by in town. As an adolescent, this was a great comfort to me. I always felt like the people around me were interacting with the world from a

completely different place than I was. I didn't want to have to fulfill certain criteria or meet certain expectations in order to be seen, understood, and valued. My peers may not have understood this, but the forest did. And it still does. Modest and expansive, Princeton's woods trust that those with enough patience will see and appreciate their beauty, and that those without will not find what they're looking for in the forests, and that's OK. This is one of the first lessons the trees taught me.

But it took me a long time to realize this. At age 18 I left Princeton without looking back. My eyes were fixed on college in Colorado. I was in pursuit of mountains and wilderness, or maybe more so the culture and community associated with these. Whatever it was, it brought me 1,700 miles West (and, ironically, to a few cabins in Aspen). The West is a great reprieve from the rigidity of Princeton, and I leaned into this. In my blanket rejection of my hometown, I lumped together the forests and the people into a neat and tidy box labeled "To Be Forgotten". It was easier that way. But as

I return to Princeton once or twice a year, the trees are still there, waiting, in their stoic way, with open arms. These arms keep me dry in the rain and fragment the sunset into stained glass windows. Fallen ones lift me up off the ground like a tightrope, toward my one-who-got-away, who teases me for my fear of heights that had become apparent. I tell him I'm clinging onto a neighboring branch for dear life.

He plucks my hand from the branch, kisses me, and places it back onto the tree. A bolt of adrenaline announces itself in my chest and squeezes my hip flexors before it pours through my achilles,



rooting my heels into the mossy log. The intensity of this grounding sensation is matched only by the weightlessness that accompanies it, as if I'm attached to both an anchor and a hot air balloon. Held, but not coddled; encouraged, but not forced. It is in this moment that the virtue of the trees quietly reveals itself to me once again. Princeton



forests lack the judgment that runs in the community's blood, gifting me the space to explore, stumble, get up, and do it all over again. I struggle to find this quality in people, but I have learned to wait for it. And the forests will be there. Dense, breathing, and watching, they will be there. And I love them for it.