

Bonsais

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I can't avoid it. Every morning when I'm going to my work by walking and I pass the corner of the Summit Ave and Moore St, I look to my right, to the next corner. It's an almost automatic and unconscious movement, but I do it, as I was checking if that three-floor maroon building is still there in its own place. It is as if I had some hope to see our life back to that place. However, I know that the place I want back is not that one. The place I want back is not a physical space at all; the place I'd like to have back, to live again, it's a place in the past, a period of time that is finished, but which is endless in my memories and dreams.

Now, during the first days of October, when the trees of the streets are changing color, coming from green to yellows, browns, and several reddish tones, our building seems to be part of the environment, the same color of the leaves of the red maple tree just in front of it. Now, during the first days of October, when the leaves are falling leaving the trees as a dry and cold corpse, I see that place as a leaf which fell from me, dry and lifeless. Now, during the first days of October, I remember when we realized that fall was our favorite season, for its endless colors, for the life we felt inside of our place. Now, during the first days of October, I remember fall does not mean death, but it is just a phase, just a time that will pass, and will pass fast, I hope. Now, during the first days of October, I see our building as if it is falling among other reddish leaves, and I wait for the next spring.

It was the first week of September, two years ago, when I moved to that apartment. It was on the third floor of that white building at the corner of Portland and Moore. It was the perfect spot to live, close to my job, close to the Mississippi River, in a calm and safe

neighborhood full of trees and birds. The apartment was a two-dorm one, with both windows turned to the south. In the first time I slept there I woke up with the sun coming directly to my face. I had never woken up in this way and I loved it. I had slept in my old couch, my only furniture in that day, and the sun reached me there and cheered me, bringing energy to my first day in that new apartment.

Later on that day I went to IKEA to buy a bed. I chose one, I chose the mattress, I chose a pillow and a blanket, but when I was almost leaving, I saw some bonsais. Something in those small trees called me and I stopped in those shelves looking at each one, almost analyzing them. I touched their small trunk, their tiny branches, and I felt life coming from and through them. I felt as those short beings were overflowing energy, maybe a stagnant energy they were keeping in their minuscule bodies. I didn't know, but in that moment I was choosing what was my first bonsais. In that very moment I was choosing my life for the next sixteen months. After almost thirty minutes I chose three bonsais, I forgot about the bed and the mattress, and everything else. I bought a shelf unit with four shelves, and all necessary utensils to keep my trees in good conditions. On the next day I walked just a few blocks until A. Johnson & Sons Florist and I bought three more bonsais. No, I decided to buy a bit more, seven, just to make a good number, ten. But, you know, there were four available shelves; maybe three bonsais in each one will be better. So, I bought two more. On the next morning the sun in my face had a beautiful shape of trees and leaves, shape of life.

The next weekend I bought another two shelf units. One friend told me about a good place to buy bonsais, which was in Bayport. I went there, I bought just a few more of those adorable trees, and I spent all afternoon over there, talking and learning about them. Sunday

morning I walked on Selby Ave and went to some antique stores. In one of them I found one table that was exactly what I needed to put in the middle of the bonsais' room. I needed space to take care of them. In this same store there were two old shelves that I had to buy. They were truly beautiful. They were dark, made of chestnut wood, with some embossed designs all along the sides. I had to buy both of them. You know what? They were there exposed in the store with two bonsais. They were there just as decoration, the seller told me. No, they were as a sign saying me I should buy them. They were not being sold, but I bought both of them as well. You know, this was not just a simple coincidence. It was more like serendipity. These two bonsais, the owner of the store told me, were cherry bonsais. I couldn't believe when he told me those small trees produced fruits. I bought them.

I returned to the Bayport store to check about the fruit trees bonsais. It was true, they existed and I didn't know. So I ordered some of them; twenty, to be exact, of all diversity of fruits I found. Mr. Price told me about other store where they had several other plants. He told me that orchids and lady-slipper can live close to bonsais and that is good to them. Come on, orchids? Orchids are disgusting, don't you think so? They are too sexual to me with those long stalks and those delicate flowers, usually in tones of pink and white. It seems to be as a grotesque and brutal male that is deflowering – literally – the innocent and pure flower.

Once back home, I decided that one bedroom would be the green bonsais' room, with bonsais that do not produce fruits and old furniture. The other bedroom would be the fruit bonsais' room, with fruit tree bonsais – for sure – and modern furniture. I was accustomed sleeping on my old couch, and it was more than fine to me.

When the cold weather started, both rooms were full of plants, as well as my living room, which I reserved for other sorts of plants in the first moment. However I never found any plant that was more beautiful and pleasant than bonsais. So I used the living room to place other of those small trees. I started to rearrange them, bringing those one with flower to the living room, for the smell and for the presence of the pollen that, for some reason, makes me really happy. After the first blizzard in November, I realized I should care about the weather conditions inside of my place. I bought the necessary equipment to keep the bedrooms in good conditions of temperature and humidity. So we could face the winter very well. Those were the happiest Christmas and New Year's Eve of my life.

When summer started there were six shelves in one room and five in the other one, all of them full of bonsais. From the outside of my green building it was possible to see my small forest. Yes, "small forest" was as some neighbors started to call my place. Several times I was surprised with some birds inside of my place, when I left the windows opened. It was usual I wake up with the sound of the birds. Somehow I was proud of my small forest. I was proud of having true life around me. I felt I was not alone anymore, I was plural, I was we. I stopped talking about my place, my life, my problem, and so on. When I noticed I was talking about our place, our lives, our difficulties to better survive in such strange environment to us, a modern city.

You know, plants need land, they need space. To place a plant in a small vase is like to keep a bird in a small bird cage. It is like a man in a jail. I know plants don't walk nor fly, but they have roots. Their roots need space to grow up.

One night I listened to them, I could hear their complaints; I listened to their groans of pain, that kind of pain we feel when we are wearing a too small pair of shoes. So I decided to create a small seedbed in my living room. There I would be able to better take care of my plants. They would have more space and land to grow up. It was the best idea I ever had. My plants simply loved that spot, it was perfect. So I decided to build more of them. I pushed my couch to the wall that was close to the kitchen. In this way I was close to the kitchen, to the bathroom, and to the exit door. It was more than I needed to live. In the rest of the living room I created four seedbeds. First I took off the carpet, than I placed a first layer of stones, other layer with bounders, then the land. I bought good soil, the black one, with good manure mixed in it. I also bought some worms to keep the soil airy. You know, this is really important to the health of the plants.

This worked so well that in the first week of October, one year ago, I did the same in the two bedrooms. I placed my thirty shelves all around the apartment with the smallest bonsais, or with those ones that needed more care. In the bedrooms I created two big seedbeds. Bonsais were spread all around my apartment, sharing space with some other vegetables, but just few of them, basically some vegetable to eat. I knew I was creating a self sustainable place to me. Maybe, soon, I would not need to buy any other food.

In the middle of my living room there was the most beautiful bonsai ever, a dwarf cherry bonsai 80 years old. It was completely full of flowers. You should have seen it. It was unbelievably beautiful. My plants made me happy and proud as never before I was. I loved when I was taking care of them and some neighbor stopped looking at us through the windows.

I knew they were jealous for not having such gorgeous nature in their homes. You should see how my plants started to grow up faster and healthier with all the space they had.

In that time we realized that fall was our favorite season. Our house was colorful, with a good odor in the air, and the birds were coming frequently to share our space with us.

I just did one mistake. Surely I was imprudent. I should have asked for some advice from a specialist before doing it. When I planted the bonsais in those big seedbeds, they started to grow up. You know, they had space to do it. I had planted some of them close to the walls, so they grew up, reached the level of the windows and more. Soon I had a beautiful second wall, a natural one, made by my bonsais, inside of my apartment.

Everything was going very well until December. Last December 11th was the worst day of my life. It was Saturday and it had been snowing since 12am and snowed during the entire day. It was freezing cold and windy. However our windows were closed, so we were warm and in peace inside of our greenhouse. But, you know, people don't care about their houses as we do. They don't keep their houses in an adequate temperature and humidity. They should keep their houses dry. Everyone knows that.

They knocked on my door at 6pm. It was my landlord and three crazy neighbors I had never talked to before. My downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Davis, said that there were some plants growing up in her ceiling, and my both neighbors, of the right and of the left side, said that roots were coming from the bottom of their walls and uncountable worms were walking in their apartments. I tried to explain that it was not my business if they didn't keep their homes as they should. More important than this, I could not understand what their problem was. Was it not great having some plants or having the nature coming inside of their places? I invited

them to come inside my apartment and I got really confused with the hysteria I saw on them.

My landlord, Mrs. Fritz, was a fat lazy lady who covered her nose saying that my place was smelled stench, as rotten stuff. Come on, nothing was rotten in there, it was manure, it was the smell of the nature, I told her. It is not my problem if she had never gone to a farm in all her life or to some real natural place. It was not my fault if the nature she knew was on National Geographic, which does not smell at all. She should enjoy and be grateful to me for making her building a healthier place to live in.

Mrs. Davis was freaking out over nothing. What is the problem of having some plants in her ceiling? I offered her help to take care of the plants and I tried to explain how much money she was saving for not having to buy the plants, but she could not listen to me. I guess the snow drives people crazy. They stayed during the entire day closed in their apartment without being able to leave, so they started to see things, to create issues where there was not necessity to do it. I was still arguing with my other two neighbors when the fat Mrs. Fritz arrived back with two policemen. You know, this kind of people do not care about nature. They just want to follow the rules, but there were no rules about bonsais, I guess.

They kicked us out, me and my plants. They took me to the police station, and I had to stay for almost one month in the jail. I could not see what they did with my plants. I never knew if they killed or if they allowed my trees to live in another place. I know I have to pay a bail and a kind of penalty to the real estate for I do not know what. I know that finally, on the New Year's Eve, I left the jail. There I saw what nasty smell really means, what it is to be far from nature, our nature; and what it is to live inside of a vase, without room to my root grow down.

These last days I have remembered those months. But you know, I remember more of the days when we lived together, sharing that place, than the days I spent paying for an unfair and absurd punishment in that cage, for having done nothing wrong at all. I can remember clearly the texture of the leaves and petals of my plants, their aroma, and the flavor of my vegetables. I can remember how nice was reading a book, drinking, and eating sitting in that soil. I remember the taste of that place in my mouth and I salivate with such memories.

Now, during the first days of October, stepping in these dry yellow leaves on the sidewalk, I do not know if I miss that time or if I am happy for having lived it. Now, during the first days of October, when all trees change colors, I also changed my color, and I am blue. Now, during the first days of October, I see one dead leaf close to my shoes, I take it and I break it in my hands, I hear the noise of it being crushed, I smell its odor in my fingers, and I taste the flavor of the cycle of life. Now, during the first days of October I see that brown building and I wait for a new white apartment, maybe in the next spring, maybe later, maybe sooner, but where I will be able to truly live again.