

Scattered

By Phillip Barron

The backyard trees turn darker, from distinct green leaves on brown branches to an oblique silhouette against a blue-gray sky, and I remember that I need to move the bagged mulch from the trunk of the car to the garage.

"I should do that before dark," I say to myself, as if saying it out loud will peel me from the comfortable wicker chair. Eventually, I make my way down the driveway, stepping over loose rocks, dirt and dried, harvested weeds.

Durham's finest, the men in washed-out blue, are start-and-stopping their cantankerous truck behind me. I am facing the garage when the squeal of brakes and clang of trashcan lids in the road hits me from the front. An echo. While the sound waves are bouncing off the cement facade, I think to myself, why don't echoes sound backwards? If mirrors flip images around, and turn my right hand into my left hand, then why can't echoes flip sounds around? I hear the men talking about last night's episode of some TV show, and I try to imagine what their conversation would sound like backwards. There is probably a simple explanation why echoes are not at all like mirrors, and it probably has to do with the speed of sound or something like that, but I never was very good at physics. I enjoy my private thoughts while I turn the key.

I open the door and flip the switch that sets the fluorescent tubes humming. Before the lights flicker on, the dank smell of wet cardboard and used motor oil assaults my nose. I've collected the oil in water jugs, and after each oil change I say I'm going to take it all to the city's waste recycling facility. Empty cans that used to contain cleaning chemicals, air fresheners, and spray paints sit alongside piles of soggy cardboard boxes too large for curbside recycling. They're not trash, so they can't go in the big green trashcan; they're recyclable yet hazardous, so they can't be recycled curbside; they're not a priority of mine, so they sit in the garage collecting dust and rust.

I recognize the familiar smells of unfinished projects, but when the lights finally brighten the room, something is different, out of place.

Five steps in front of me, scattered on the floor are the contents of an organizing box and its clear plastic drawers. Bolts, cotter pins, nails, drywall screws, nuts, basketball pump needles, mini-blinds hangers, and drill bits lay cast across the cold cement floor. Only that's not where I left them. Earlier when I parked my bicycle the box was hanging peacefully on the end of the bookshelf-turned-workbench, its contents quietly arranged by size and type in their proper drawers.

My first thought is that someone did this, that some punk got in and this is the chaotic result of his violent disregard for personal property. But my first instinct tends to the exaggerated and dramatic disaster.

Amid the scattered bolts and bike parts, I think about how someone got in here, who that someone might be, and why he wanted to smash my organizing drawer. It dawns on me that I am so focused on the small metal parts laying on the floor that I have not looked up to see if anything of value is missing -- to see if this unknown vandal is also a thief. My fixed-gear Fuji hangs in its place. I decide that if the vandal is also a thief, then he missed the opportunity to take the only thing I really care about. Satisfied that I'll still be biking to work, I realize that I have not looked around to make sure the vandal-possibly-thief is not in the garage with me.

I turn and take in the rest of the one-room garage. I appear to be alone under the humming florescent lights; I feel alone. But when I turn back to the scattered mess, I see the culprit lying right in front of me.

The retractable aluminum ladder, which I use to clean out gutter-clogging oak leaves each fall, normally hangs horizontally from two giant rubber coated hooks screwed into the ceiling. Despite the fact that I bought an electronic stud finder just to help me find rafters to hold the ceiling hooks, and despite the fact that the ladder hung from the same hooks for more than a year, summer heat and humidity teamed up to show me that I don't know how to use a stud finder and that a drywall ceiling can't support a 30lb ladder indefinitely. That I

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unwisely hung the ladder above breakables is now clear to me.

Realizing that there is no burglar, no vandal, and only myself to blame for this mess, I sigh, shrug, and decide to clean it up later. Probably when I take the oil to be recycled. With my flip-flops, I sweep clear a path for the wheelbarrow and schlep the four bags of mulch from the car to the garage.

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Phillip Barron is a writer living in Durham, NC. His works have appeared in the Radical Philosophy Review among other progressive publications and revolve around issues of justice. "The Outspokin' Cyclist," his column on bicycling, appears monthly in The Herald Sun.

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