



What Matters

Our neighborhood has a sidewalk chalk artist, and I think she's a girl. Twelve, maybe thirteen. It's the curly-Q letters sprawled across the concrete pads I tread each morning in a loop around my neighborhood that I feel gives her age away.

Bloom where you're planted, she reminds us. Blue flower head, spindly stalk. Two yellow leaves, nodding up at me from the dirty sidewalk where my own feet are planted. I study her drawing, question her choice of yellow. I'd have gone with green leaves; for life.

Another reminder, feet away: *Keep calm and smile!* Jaunty yellow sun, wearing black shades. Pink *XOXO*, scampering off the corner of a concrete pad.

I visualize this sidewalk chalk artist taking a knee, scattering and surveying her palette of colors, choosing her tool, grasping it between forefinger and thumb, beginning her outline. Pink hearts, purple butterflies, blue flowers. Doing her part to color this patch of kingdom that starts at the corner of Washington, stretches down Fourth Street, turns onto Snow's Court, and rises to the Prospect Street hill.

Meanwhile, daily news reports on climbing deaths from COVID-19. Unemployment rates that rival the Great Depression in some parts. Racially-charged violence and protests sweeping the U.S. The world.

One morning, I spy a concrete pad turned into a tribute to the Disney Pixar movie *Up*. She's drawn the iconic yellow house, multi-colored balloons tethered to a chimney, ready to lift off into the artist's wide-open sky. Lavender lettering: *Adventure is out there!*

I imagine drifting through her portal, pulled along by bright bobbing balloons, lifting me away from what drags me down.

A section of sidewalk is crumbling where she's worked these imperfections into her design. After a weekend dominated by escalating global protests, I leave my house earlier than normal one morning. 6:00, but fully daylight. I blame the hot weather we've been having that makes it too sticky to sleep. The birds, too, that start their chitter-chatter outside my bedroom window before sun-up.

The sidewalk chalk artist has taken advantage of a giant crack, outlining the zig and zag in black chalk. It pierces a dusty red heart. I stop before the lopsided heart, the right side looping in a taller arc, the left side dipping into a longer tail, the crack cleaving through its center. I wonder, again, at her age. I assign her an old soul, this artist who captures with her chalk nubs our world's despondency in the moment. Her sketch, a missive for our current times.

Black Lives Matter pitted against strident shouts of Blue Lives Matter. All Lives Matter. Advocates for the latter unable, more likely unwilling, to see the missed point.

I step around her drawing, not wanting to walk over anyone's fissured heart. The concrete is grey and pitted under an overcast sky. The air damp, like it could start raining again. Further ahead I notice faint outlines of previous work, before the rain. A smudged pink blob, a stubborn streak of blue that didn't succumb to the storm.

In green chalk, I see it; a short, simple, rain-smeared message. A reminder to anyone coming upon it who may then walk away feeling, perhaps, a little more seen. Five-pointed yellow stars anchor each corner of the concrete pad. Her chalked letters curl and swirl in flourishes.

YOU matter.

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