

THE BYSTANDER —★—

The Sound of Noise Pollution

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Of all the luxuries in life, nothing is more difficult to get, and preserve, than quiet.

In the middle of Chicago, I lived six feet away from a truck, bus and motorcycle highway. When spring brought the first breeze that made you remember that windows also go in the “up” position, the very next minute brought the roar of a Hog, shifting gears with a volume loud enough to make you bolt straight up from a deep sleep, as if you were a corpse suddenly achieving full rigor mortis. Noise pollution creates the need to keep windows closed, which creates the need to use a mechanical air flow system, which uses more electricity even in ambient room-temperature weather, which creates more noise from compressors, chillers and generators. The EPA reports that now indoor air pollution is worse than outdoor pollution, due to sealing up our homes to keep out the noise.

Moving to West Virginia was my best hope to escape the sound of sound pollution. Unfortunately, the dreaded leaf blower followed me here.

Leaf blowers actually do no work, if work is defined as the “effort to overcome obstacles and achieve an objective.” Removing leaves that were functional all spring and summer but now seemingly require a contraption of obscene inefficiency as the preferred process to banish them from the grass that they were meant to nourish and protect from the frosts of winter, makes as much sense as if homeowners decided that an entire tree must be uprooted annually in order to spare one centimeter of clutter onto the sod where they will drive their mowers next spring.

But the leaf blower is not just the blower of leaves. It is the demolisher of quiet, the ruin of silence, the insane logic that makes the user believe that the process of the stately elm shedding its chlorophyll-producing growth should be blown, not raked, collected or vacuumed, not even shredded for compost or mulch, by a shoulder-slung bazooka-like machine that pushes

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the foliage from one side of the pavement to the other, and that it is acceptable to force the blasting of it into the delicate pressurized canals of our ears, audible from hundreds of yards up the road.

There are specific, detailed ordinances against “Excessive Noise,” and according to Berkeley County law, a leaf blower far exceeds the 60-decibel level to qualify as *excessive*, but then it exempts those levels---and the time limit spent shattering them---for “lawn, garden or household equipment associated with the normal repair, upkeep or maintenance of property.”

But the Law of Community, violated by unnecessary, excessive, arbitrary noise and air pollution created by the decision of one leaf-blowing individual, is sadly being abused like some disposable ideal, much like the dead leaf from the tree, first being blown by the wind, then by a hostile invention that robs us of the luxury of our quiet. And in communities with homes on expansive yards that were purchased in order to enjoy the outdoors, where I rarely see anyone outside---these property owners now buy jet engines to maintain their cosmetic definition of nature, insuring that virtually no one else can enjoy the outdoors due to the noise of its upkeep, either by them or their neighbors. It’s a paradox, and an expensive, dirty one.

So, get rid of your leaf blowers and try letting the leaves lie where they belong, like people in so many other communities across America have done. Because if my ears can hear you from half a mile away, you have invaded my home just the same as if you had trespassed on my property in person.