

On Lawns

If you grew up in the United States, there is a fifty percent chance you grew up with a lawn in the suburbs. My feelings towards lawns were indifferent until my family moved to East Amherst, New York, a suburb thirty minutes outside of Buffalo. My parents built the house, meaning they allowed themselves to be persuaded by two different building companies to sign on to tremendous debt for their dream home. The result was a 4,641 square foot four car, four bedroom stone mansion for a four-person family with two small dogs. It was more than our finances could handle, and to this day stands as the family symbol for over-kill. Now, my mother and I live off working class incomes, myself due to graduate school and my mother due to under-employment. When I think of our stone upper-middle class mansion, I feel ashamed for the façade my family tried to pull off. I also feel hatred toward the root of the mirage: that damn lawn.

The front yard had a circle driveway with grass growing in the middle and down the sides. Trees and shrubs shouldered the house in beds of mulch while two stone lions guarded the doorway with ribbons around their necks to match the season. From the outside, we must have looked like we had it all. Our mansion only masked the issues that had been growing in my family ever since moving back from Tokyo. During the years we lived there, my father could be found in one of three rooms in the house: his office with

the door shut, his woodshop in the basement, or in front of the TV. We rarely had family dinners, for fear of impending awkward silence. The dream house crushed us, resulting in a huge mortgage, overwhelming credit card debt, and one lawsuit that my parents financed with my college fund.

We were out of our league, and everyone knew it. "Saw Jackie mowing the lawn the other day, looked like she was working hard," our neighbors joked. There was an expectation that if we built a mansion from the ground up in the suburbs, we could afford to pay someone else for the up-keep. Some of our neighbors had little to do with their yards, hiring landscapers to create and maintain the property appropriately for each season. Other neighbors went with a more basic plan through landscaping companies, their lawns mowed twice a week and their leaves raked up before the six months of Buffalo winter set in.

The idea of a lawn signifying wealth originated in England, where lush gardens fed off the constant flow of grey, rainy English weather. However, most parts of the United States are not like England in terms of weather. Up until the Industrial Revolution, lawns were luxury items whose maintenance only the wealthy could afford. Rich people who did have lawns either hired others to do the work for them, or bought sheep to keep the grass at a standard length. There are many black and white pictures of sheep grazing on the lawn of the White House. Now what purpose does the lawn serve? It's certainly not feeding anybody.

Walk into any outdoors store and see how many kinds of grass seeds and fertilizers there are to choose from. No doubt, someone will walk over and ask how they can help with your lawn care needs. The connection between luxury and lawn care lives

on in rows of seed, fertilizer, and riding lawnmowers.

My grass frustrations were first realized in my high school Anthropology class. We discussed cultural characteristics that are accepted as normal. My teacher, Mr. Miranda, gave the example of facing the doors once you stepped into an elevator. We giggled with quiet self-awareness while he encouraged us to “try facing the wall and see what happens.” He was the kind of teacher who probably would have fit in better on a college campus— he wore Peruvian ponchos in lieu of suits when he felt like it, and wasn’t afraid to tell public school kids that they weren’t trying hard enough to see outside their own cultural biases. It was as if he knew if he didn’t tell everyone there that Buffalo wasn’t the world, they would never realize it on their own.

He continued giving us examples to think about; “I mean, we live in a culture where people grow, water and cut a *weed*, and kill any other plant that tries to grow in it.” Recent NASA photographs estimate that lawns cover about 32 million acres of the United States, making grass the largest irrigated crop. If we are going to bother watering something, shouldn’t it at least be edible?

I lived in the East Amherst mansion from seventh grade through my graduation from high school. Much of my identity crisis issues stemmed from my peers’ expectations that I would dress and act like a rich snob. However, the contradictions between the implications of my mansion-house and the realities of our situation were too great for me to be friends with the other super-wealthy kids. I saw them as spoiled and stuck up, they saw me as strange and rebellious. Looking back, their reactions make sense to me, for why would someone whose parents could afford such a nice house come to school in anything less than designer jeans? Of course, I knew why. I’d started

working legally the day I turned sixteen, and took on caretaking jobs off the books long before then to make up for the financial gap my parents could not provide and my peers expected from me.

Summertime signaled the worst of my relationship with our lawn. The combination of intense sun for short periods combined with heavy thunderstorms meant a lot of mowing. In my self-centered teenage mind, it felt like my father purposefully planned to make me cut the lawn whenever I had plans. Many summer weekends, I would be in my room with my dog Moose, waiting for my best friend to call. She worked a lot too, so on our free weekends we would walk our dogs together, or go swimming in her pool. Her parents were definitely wealthier than mine, yet I had the larger house. Even then, I knew things about my family didn't add up.

My father's office guarded the door to the garage, the least obtrusive exit of our house. He stared at his computer for hours comparison shopping for new woodworking tools he'd never use while he looked out onto our front lawn from his office's bay windows. I would knock on the closed door, opening it slowly as he spun to face me in his swivel chair. I always felt like I was interrupting something, so I stood as close to the door as possible, leaving it open for a quick escape.

“Hey Dad? Can I go to my friend's house?”

“Well...” And that would be the first I'd hear of it. A long explanation as to why I needed to cut the grass, back and front, right now before I could even think of leaving. There was no way to plan for it. If I had tried a preemptive strike and cut the grass the day before, it would have been dangerous because I might burn out the grass, leaving dry brown spots for all to see. Waiting until tomorrow was out of the question, this was a

grass emergency. No matter how many times my father gave his explanation of the day, it never made sense to me. Too much water would make the grass grow long, which made it important for me to cut the grass before a thunderstorm. Then, when there was no thunderstorm, I would have to mow to prepare the lawn to be drowned in water by his automatic sprinkler system.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that one-third of all residential water use goes to landscape irrigation, nearly 9 billion gallons a day. A suburban lawn eats up 10,000 more gallons of water than rainwater each year. I can't help but feel embarrassed by such a statistic, especially when I think of the many times my father's prized automatic sprinkler system went off during a thunderstorm.

If I ever questioned my role in the lawn care duties, my father would say, "When you work hard and finally have your own home, there is a certain pride you feel about keeping it looking nice, and cutting your own lawn." To be fair, he had worked hard. The difference between his salary and his father's was great, but I still didn't see why that added up to me cutting the lawn. I also knew that we didn't technically own our home, and likely never would.

My mind has never been good with estimations in terms of measurements. I do know that mowing the lawn, front, side and back took me at least three hours. The lawnmower ran on gasoline, but when I held down the accelerator handle, I had to push diagonally right against its desire to veer left. My father was very particular in getting the correct lines on the lawn, just like a golf course. Though he rarely had time to mow the lawn himself, he always found time to criticize my line-making skills. Once, tired of fighting against the finicky lawnmower and bored of straight lines, I cut the entire

backyard in a spiral, starting in the middle then working my way out towards the black iron fence. He was furious.

In picturing the U.S., it is hard to imagine homes without grass yards. If the industrial revolution brought about such big changes in plant choice, what did yards look like before the grass craze? Apparently, the average American's front yard would consist of either packed dirt, or a small garden with flowers and vegetables. I cannot be the only one who finds this image slightly more appealing, if only for aesthetic reasons. The EPA's website provides suggestions for decreasing yard irrigation costs by re-naturalizing a yard with native plants and a habitat in line with the region. Letting a yard look how it should based on the environment the home is built in? The EPA seems to understand how crazy this notion might sound to the lawn-lovers out there, for it warns that this process can take two to five years, and despite the sharp decrease in yard work, "a neighbor may even raise a comment or two." Yes, a maintenance free yard might be too controversial for the neighborhood.

For the many parts of the United States that don't necessarily see a lot of rain, it seems selfish to boast a green lawn. Why fight against nature? I think if someone lives in a desert, they should be growing cacti, not grass. It is like having a pool in Buffalo; it doesn't make sense. If someone is lucky enough to live in a climate where green things do like to grow, why waste time and money on a temperamental and generally fragile grass plant?

I realized my father cared about how the lawn looked for the same reason that he bought a two-seater BMW, and why he couldn't settle for a smaller house. My father's insecurity with his background fueled his need to constantly prove himself. As the first of

his family to go to college, a mid-level engineering job was supposed to fulfill all the dreams. Instead, he worried if our house was the biggest, if his car was the newest, and of course, if the grass was green enough. He put our neighbor's opinions of himself over the issues in his relationship with our family. After my freshman year of college, I returned home to a divided mansion. I helped my mom pack up our sections of the mansion in preparation for our secret move-out to a modest apartment one town over. On one of my last days living there, my father broke our avoidance of each other to tell me to mow the lawn for the real estate agent coming the following day.

Let's face it, grass is boring. Even nice grass is boring. Show me a bed of sunflowers, or a trellises covered in vines. Show me a vegetable garden. Grass is nice to play on, and feels good on bare feet, but the costs of its upkeep are undeniable. Lawnmowers in the United States eat up 800 million gallons of gas a year, spike water bills and need constant attention. The incorporation of lawns into class identity plagues the suburbs, eats up family budgets, and in some cases makes for unhappy teenagers. If suburbanites want to be competitive over their front yards, they should at least plant something more interesting than grass. Personally, I plan to stick some rocks in my front yard and move on to things that are more important.