

## False Blossoms

*I came to the city/ And lived like old Crusoe/ On an island of noise/ In a cobblestone sea/ And the beaches were concrete/ And the stars paid a light bill/ And the blossoms hung false/ On their store window trees.*

—Joni Mitchell, *Song to a Seagull*

Emphasizing the need for more authentic stimulation, Joni Mitchell illustrates the falsity of her city life, but in another song, Joni writes, “Night in the city looks pretty to me/ Night in the city looks fine/ Music comes spilling out into the streets/ Colors go waltzing in time.” Clearly, in this song, that falsity has its benefits.

In the traditional martial arts, “legitimacy” used to be measured by “origins”. The closer one was to the practice as it was in its original state, the more legitimate one was supposed to be. For decades people cared more about verifying their roots than if their art functioned as they expected it would. Authenticity was considered the measurement of value. Society tends to reward those people who are the first to achieve something. “Firsts” are advertised because they lure those who want to associate themselves with “authenticity” and “originality”.

But in business, those who get there first aren’t always the last ones standing. In fact, sometimes the second or third variation of a product is the one that catches on. Ford’s was not the first car built, but because Mr. Ford was the first to successfully work an assembly line, he overcame the problem of not being the first on the scene. Apple was not the first computer company. Match was not the first computer-dating site. But each leads their respective fields now.

Martial arts schools often conspicuously display their trophies and rank belts in their storefront windows or in their waiting areas. Photos of Sensei Schmendrick with Bill Wallace don’t mean that Schmendrick can kick. Four-foot high trophies don’t mean that Schmendrickian students always win their tournaments. The rank belts displayed may be those bought from a warehouse before anyone has earned them. These are sorts of “false blossoms” meant to lure prospective students into the garden. Just as Japanese restaurants often put plastic recreations of their menu offerings in the storefront window, so too must dojos put artificial representations of what might satisfy the martial arts appetite. The “false blossoms” are not bad *per se*, but sometimes people mistake the false blossoms for the real growing plant.

There are people who feel that plastic food is an art and they develop a “taste” for it, allowing it to nourish their aesthetic side rather than their gastrointestinal inside. There are martial arts students who see the four-foot trophy or colored belt as not only a symbol of what they have become but the bejeweled crown of their life’s achievements. They did not want to become a traditional martial arts master, not even a long-term practitioner, rather they wanted to become a trophy winner or a black belt holder. False blossoms having been harvested, they last forever as a sign of their one-time stroll through self-cultivation.

Others prefer real meals and myriad small trophies, not in metal and plastic, but in goals having been met, as transitory as they may be. The irony is that their signposts are impermanent but their nourishment is more complete.

Night in the city looks pretty to me, too. Cities are rife with the undeniable signs of civilization. Without the concrete beaches and light-bill-paying stars of the city, we would not have museums, plays, top quality restaurants, and educational entertainment. But it is easy to lose sight of the civilized parts, the cultured parts, and the authentic parts, when blinded by the lights.