

Where the light falls, or where caffeinated bodies congregate

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This place is a fishbowl refracting energy from the confluence of traffic and pedestrians along Main and Kingsway. Glancing across the counter, I notice the light falling on an empty glass of water and the two cups of coffee adjacent to a woman at her laptop; their placement resembles an hourglass. What is she reading? Stacks of stapled papers. Course readings, articles from peer-reviewed journals, probably. She appears immersed in the material.

Unlike me: I'm so distracted! My coffee, grown tepid, has lost its appeal. I look to my list, a scrap of hastily scrawled notes transferred from yesterday's list:

- cover letter
- conference abstract
- email Granny
- Skype Laura...

I overhear someone ordering a latte with "unsweetened almond milk." The barista replies, "I'm sorry, we only have sweetened." The customer mutters something about how unnecessary it is for almond milk to be sweetened. I admire the barista's poise; she seems neither as bitter nor as jaded as you'd expect her to be.

I've tried to avoid almonds since someone told me it takes 1.1 gallons of water to cultivate a single almond in California. I haven't bothered to fact-check this. I was put off by the realization of how unsustainable our food cultivation practices can be, but my decision not to purchase almonds is really just a stand-in for how estranged I feel from the food I consume. I acknowledge that this gesture is somewhat futile.

I understand why coffee houses have been aspirationally nicknamed "innovation hubs," as places where people congregate to discuss and galvanize their ideas. But here, in this fishbowl, few people are chatting with each other; most are staring into their screens: reading, emailing, writing cover letters, messaging, more emailing. My rationale for getting work done in cafés is driven by a somewhat illusory perception that the café is an extension of public space. It is seemingly a relaxed social space that appears inviting and all-accommodating to those who have the means to partake. Perhaps this atmosphere of caffeinated distraction serves to form a pronounced space that drives a heightened need to attend to those tasks, before distraction promptly commandeers you.

The woman across the counter now appears to be consulting a book; perhaps she is checking a reference, fine-tuning an argument, or clarifying a point. Her contemplative mode and apparent productivity of writing seems so far from my distracted observations. This distraction does lead me to find familiarity in a seeming opposite, and my mind keeps turning back to how familiar the woman looks.