

CHANGING SKIES

CREATIVE NONFICTION

2025



UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

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THE PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC and MISSION ZERO

HINDSIGHT PRESENTS

CHANGING VOL. IV SKIES

A NOD TO THE NATURAL WORLD



HINDSIGHT PRESENTS
CHANGING SKIES
creative nonfiction

2025
VOLUME FOUR

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FROM THE STAFF

The fourth edition of CHANGING SKIES collects creative nonfiction focusing on environmental writing. Climate change understandably dominates many forms of media. The changes happening in our world are unavoidable, impacting life as we know it. This edition of CHANGING SKIES aims to speak to this, integrating perspectives connecting to culture, reflecting on seasonal emotions, and reminiscing on the before, as well as bringing attention to what is happening now.

Having published much on sustainability in our sister journal, Hindsight, and our first ever publication, Journal 2020, Scott King's Mission Zero funded our first themed issue, CHANGING SKIES. Committed to helping CU students fight climate change, money from Mission Zero's fund was generously donated to HINDSIGHT. Since our first publication in 2022, the journal has developed into a contemporary form of activism, reflection, and connection.

Whether poetry or prose in all its forms, our contributors look at more than the landscape, or rising temperature. They find the beauty, emotion and depth in our world, representing perspectives that give us a glance at the many ways we overlook what surrounds us. The pieces in this issue focus on place, and the importance of humanity's existence in connection to our world. CHANGING SKIES encompasses all walks of life as we navigate challenging environments paired with our equally disruptive political and economic condition.

We'd like to thank all of our contributors. We could not make CHANGING SKIES happen without your beautiful prose, poetry, and artwork. And to our readers, we thank you for your support. We hope you enjoy. 🐾



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FOREWORD

SUSAN MORAN

During my nightly stroll in my neighborhood in Boulder, I often pause to listen to the clicking mating calls of katydids and cicadas, and to savor the crackling sound of the fallen maple and cottonwood leaves as I walk on them. On this night in late October, I notice, wistfully, that the dimming insect chorus has gone silent, swept away by the first big frost. I hope the lonesome male that I heard last night found a last-call dance mate before he died.

As an environmental journalist of more than two decades, I have traveled to several continents and U.S. states to report on how humans are altering (generally harming) the natural environment, on how a changing climate is altering human lifestyles and communities, and on how some humans are attempting (sometimes successfully) to find ways to better coexist with other species. I often return home feeling a mix of heartbreak, inspiration, and humility about how little I know of the world I inhabit. My perspective shifts as I sort through my field notes and reflect on conversations I had—for instance, with a Maasai community leader in Kenya talking about how difficult it is to love and protect elephants when they’re invading farmers’ fields and scaring children; and with a rancher in northern Montana who said, “Don’t call me an environmentalist, but I sure like how these wind turbines on my wheat farm bring income that helps keep my family alive.”

When I read some of the essays and poems that you’re about to read in this publication, I was struck by some overlapping themes, such as intimacy, empathy, guilt and grief related to our often-destructive human relationship with the planet. And by how inseparable protecting the planet is from preserving our own hearts and souls.

In “Evergreen”, Jackie Herbach’s aging, arthritic narrator speaks to a potted tree that has been left behind by landscapers without being properly planted in a garden: “Cypress? Is that your name?” I said excitedly...In him, I saw myself. Older, dryer, and thirsty, but an entity showing resilience, wisdom, and experience.”

In her essay “As the Autumn Pasture Burns,” Micaela Edelson weaves together her reflections and observations in the aftermath of the 2021 Marshall Fire. “Yet I feel as I’ve experienced an ecological trauma, a transformation of my pasture and my heart. The spaces in between grieving stretch as if nothing has occurred.”

Joanne Furio finishes her one-sentence essay, a 500-word apology for using plastic, fossil fuels and other planet-warming conveniences, with this: “...I literally

disintegrate into non-recyclable tears—when I tell my father how guilty I feel about the world we are leaving my children and how it’s too late now for excuses.”

And Cade Yoshioka, in his poem “Postnaturalism,” opens his broken heart to the natural world that is being shrunk and parched by humans: “asphalt paved over fields / for grocery store parking lots / we’ll lie down on the tar / & melt like ice”.

I’m reminded by these writers that when we open our senses to the world around us, we touch into our own hearts and feel a call to act as well as a call to pause and pay attention to both our external and internal landscapes, and to the spaces in between that connect them. ✨



SUSAN MORAN is an environmental and science journalist, an editor and an educator. Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *Popular Science*, *Nature*, biographic and several other publications. Susan is also a host and producer of KGNU Community Radio’s science show, *How On Earth*. She also taught reporting classes at the University of Colorado Boulder as an instructor for about nine years.



art by JUSTIN HEIN

AS THE
AUTUMN
PASTURE
BURNS

MICAELA EDELSON

On December 30, 2021, the Marshall Fire tore through the Colorado Front Range, flattening over 1,000 homes, 6,000 acres, and my backyard pasture in which I spent many autumn days. The fire stopped 100 yards from my backdoor, sparing my home. In addition to grieving for the altered climate and for those who lost so much more, I grieve for my altered relationship with the pasture that brought both comfort and inspiration just months before the trauma. This is my elegy to the autumn pasture.

It's the fourth day of autumn and the aspens are flaming. There is a golden glow of autumnal decay; a light before falling into winter's dark. The aspen crown that usually reigns behind the ponderosa pines now boasts black and bare branches that twist towards tomorrow, when they'll fall to the earth, impregnating the ground with a fertile giving of dead carbon. I don't see the pines. I don't see the browning needles or the thirsting roots wondering where wetness went. I only see the bloom of aspen's fire.

The house still stands; the pasture is black, the neighbors' homes are gone, the animals are scared, the townspeople are sympathetic, the emergency responders traumatized, and the snow blankets all the evidence. Only the downed pergola reminds of a disruption. I sit in the same spot I sat five days ago. So much has changed, but also nothing has. The Christmas lights still sparkle, and the floorboards still creak.



Flames braid over the browning log, in and out of one another as fire's fluidity entices me to swim. A dragon appears; his beard and blow intermingled in one fiery expression. An eye extinguishes and relights in seconds, the second the same. A dragon evolving into and out of itself, into and out of its breath. Another glance and dancers twirl in chaotic symphony, alighting ragged splinters, scars from the axe's cut. The dancers disappear, succumbing to flames like sperm permeating the log, urging to go deeper into the giver of energy, of life. September nights around the campfire enchant me. Flames call.

Hours of Twitter scrolling, refreshing, scrolling. Thursday's tweets are cries of concern as residents who smell smoke and fear are unsure of their evacuation status. Friday focuses on the wreckage, media posting of flattened subdivisions. The fire is still blazing, but the snow is expected to arrive. Two are missing. Saturday sprouts GoFundMe accounts for the fire's victims. Mostly middle and upper-middle class homeowners. I wonder how renters are faring, if their social circle can offer similar outpourings of generosity. Four are missing. Sunday, I stop scrolling, able to return to my farmhouse

and unpack what I thought would be my surviving belongings. One thousand homes flattened, one hundred yards more and mine would be the same. I sit in a state of normalcy, but also disbelief, but also gratitude, but also grief.

It's the thirty-fifth day of autumn. Trudging through October pasture to find my way home, dying straw greets my calves, reaching for life's dynamism before winter brings stagnation. Over green cattle gates, swerving past piles of poop, through the trail that only exists by trees' absence.



Blackened blades of grass crunch against my boot. Light snow falling clings. Several smoking patches highlight still hot dirt. Paths no longer exist. Rose hips sing bloody against the black. The lone robin strays nearby. Red and black. A survivor.

I find the bench under twin aspens. Gold jewels intermingling with the brown and dying—past, present, future, emblemized on a branch. They hang over the bench, a memorial installed twenty years ago in honor of the late Giff Pfeifferberger who lost his life at forty two.

One found, one dead from smoke inhalation, two still missing.



The bench had seen the seasons shift, Giff likely had too. The bench had embraced fallen leaves on their journey to decay, had shielded the microecosystem underneath it from passionate snow, and had shaded the soil from sun's fury.

I place my blanket a yard or two away from Giff. Uninspired by anthropogenic monuments, I opt for the ragged welcoming of sharp grass and crunching leaves poking through thin fabric. I acknowledge my trepidation that I am not as pure nor as worthy as the golden leaves bringing oxygen and leaving topsoil to embrace the earth unhindered. My decay in this world will also be beneficial, not for what I give as my body and mind deteriorate, but for what I will stop taking.

I've felt a fiery fear before. Two summers ago in Oregon, the wildfires never reached my backyard, but it still painted the sky orange and permeated the air with flavors of burning conifers. I grieved then for the burning of half a million acres across my forested state, I grieved for the half a million temporarily or permanently displaced, I grieved for the altered climate my professors said would come in 2050. But the fire was extinguished, no acquaintances harmed, no daily reminders, no burn line visible outside my bedroom window. Fields of wheat continue to twinkle under the full moon's dusk. Autumn deer, drunk on courage, only flinch as I pass by.



Two weeks after the fire, snow melt paints checkerboard mosaics. Fresh moisture against the dry and dead, ice against fire. I pass downed branches and smear my hands with soot as I place one upright, fixed in the frozen ground—a memorial to the fallen, or perhaps a plea for normalcy. The sun casts shadows of blue, intermingling with spots of bright, patches of black, strands of green, kaleidoscope dizzying until my vision blurs bloody against the bright white of winter. The burn still smells. Broken reeds poke through winter’s blanket. I miss the cattails.

October sun streaming through veined leaves. Skies are bluer behind gold aspen leaves. I stomp on cattails to help in their decay, fondling them, aiding in their release, ignoring the wind. I only get lost now in the pasture. The trails are charred and blanketed. I know the benches, the downed tree, and the pasture of severed reeds. The rest is overwhelming. White expanse towards anything and nothing. Before I had a path to guide me, I trusted that it led to where I was going. But disruption doesn’t care for paths. Now I wander wondering what path the fires will take next, what manifestation. I wonder where I should go. I walk the path the fire took. Everywhere. But still before the fire fell, I walked—leading the way for grass to burn, for prairie dogs to be displaced, for fear to settle. I walk the not-path home. “Cigarettes?” My roommate asks, smelling my entrance from the ash. Not today.

Fields of cattails guide me. Heads high while dying, they shelter as I plough through. Brown phalluses turn to autumn snow at eager hand’s malrestraint, needing to soften death’s sharpness, needing to bring whimsy to the sullen world. Cattail snow, follow me to the end of the earth. Cling to my peeled sweater, tangle with my kinky hair, hold me like wishes to the stars, trust that you’ll germinate under my guidance.

Blueness harvested from the sky to store in my heart from when the skies strayed orange, when the gray plumes blossomed against the wind. Blue skies and white ground. An ordinary Coloradan January.



It’s the fifty-second day of autumn. Late October haze knows no master, defies the purity of autumnal fallings: leaves, rain, expectations. Late October haze reminds of the summer when wildfires ravaged against the forests that we burned first. The cold stings, but late warmth itches; discomfort for the known reality, for the unknown future. Snow on distant mountains brings reassurance.

With each passing day, the grief is punctuated with forgetfulness. What fire? The displaced likely don’t forget, their grief likely does not falter. Nothing happened to me or my home, just the grass I used to walk. Yet I feel as if I’ve experienced an ecological trauma, a transformation of my pasture and my heart. The spaces in between grieving stretch as if nothing has occurred. Has it? No growth, no bouts of grief, no shouts of gratitude for four walls and a roof. Just snow falling into stagnation, a stillness to remind that the universe cares not, that time never stops.

The trees are never naked, what remains are just dead and clinging like a brown mesh of thorns entangling in the branches. The geese clatter overhead as they make their way south. Brown and black fuzzy caterpillars emerge to traipse over crisp leaves and reading blankets.



The geese settled after the fire. Hundreds of them now gather talking. Webbed tracks in the snow mingle with cylindrical shit to tell me where they’ve been. Is this South? Were they displaced by the fires too? I make my way along the path and geese retreat. Squawking in a flurry, they flock onwards. But my path isn’t set; and as I progress, I encroach again on the flighty avians. Like the fires forcing humans to flee, like the humans that caused the fires, I am forcing them away. Will the displacements keep coming east from the Rockies, north from California? Will we settle to find the fire knocking next door, will we keep flying away from the blaze that follows? They flee as I approach once more. What might take flight at life’s plight. How nice to not have material attachments.

Autumn feels over. The solstice hasn’t passed but the leaves have all departed. It’s the seventieth day of autumn. The southern sun shines on me through a slanted gaze, but only for a moment before moving west to illuminate the dormant oaks and yellowed grass surrounding. Still briefly, I held its embrace.

The robins flock from tree to tree creating a mass twinkling of beating wings. They clatter as I pass. Can they sense their world has changed?



It’s the eighty-ninth day of autumn. I reach for the remaining cattails. Breaking from their firm grasp on the stalk, they expand, the sun breathing halos through—a field of angels giving themselves to the wind. Pollen tufts cling to synthetic wool. I cling back.

The snow is nearly melted. I’ve convinced myself that with each melt, the blackness of the burn lightens, the smell of cigarettes less penetrating. And maybe it’s true. But there are still patches as deep as dark as night, there are still olfactory sensations urging me to reach for a habit I’ve surrendered two years ago. A habit to settle the grief caused by a cousin of its ignition. A reminder of the plumes of destruction with each exhale. I don’t reach for a cigarette; I reach for a pen.



The wind howls between bare branches. Angst-filled and angry, she races through phantom leaves. Unstopping in her force, she is shouting for our attention. Will we pay her any mind?

The snow is gone, the brush is gone, the pasture I once knew is gone. Yet I stay on the surviving yellow path, faint in its presence. I stay on the path lest I disturb what has already been, lest I blaze another path for the next fire to follow.



It’s the tenth day of winter. The wind shouted in the morning. The fire came by noon. ✨





art by JACK GERALD

DURING A
STORM
IN FORT LAUDERDALE
COURTNEY HITSON

A reporter strains to stand amidst a frothing coastline’s gritty lips. Behind her, a man kitesurfs and grins, his teeth like stalagmites of wild pearl, dripping a laughter in decibels too high to be heard.

Before this, the scruffy filmstrip of last week stuck to his heel in squares: overheating under the watch of his foreman, eight overdraft fees, and the insurance company’s second denial of his flood claim.

But today he’s chosen a charming violence. The ocean’s advance of waves, indifferent and liberated of intention. A water that doesn’t need to deny the ordeal, it drowns him in.



THE DAY THE SKY TURNED ORANGE

JOANNE FURIO

I wanted to apologize for everything: that I didn't get solar for my now home, though we did have it in our last house and it was affordable because we used a third-party company but now have a gas furnace and stove because we have been lazy but also because we needed money to replace them, and yet that feels so selfish with the West burning and the freeway culture that was once called progress now punishes us for our reliance on oil and gas, reminding me that we no longer have an electric car, trading it in because now we have only one vehicle (that's a plus) and my husband didn't think we'd have enough range with an electric to visit our sons, besides the Honda salesman was giving us a good deal since we were repeat customers, and they didn't have an all-electric anyway, but now I'm questioning not only car but plane travel because my nephew, a left-wing mayor of a small New York village where he installed solar panels over a parking lot, told me that, yes, he would love to visit one day but cannot reconcile the effects of a cross-country flight on the ozone layer and that made me feel guilty about all those trips to Europe I made in my 20s and 30s that felt so right and now feel so wrong, just like veganism, which used to feel so radical, so out there, the subject of jokes, but now feels like the only way to offset the factory farming of animals and to encourage small farms as an antidote to the monoculture of agribusiness, which writers like Wendell Berry had predicted back in the '70s, and when I come to think of it, all those previously way-out philosophies espoused by forward-thinkers in earth shoes have come to fruition, even if so many of their ideas have been hijacked by vegetarian chain restaurants and corporate health-food stores that sell organic vegetables in clamshell containers, yet who am I to talk because no matter how many silicone lids and compostable poop bags I buy, I still buy Dr. Bronner's soap, a hippie favorite, in a plastic bottle, which goes to show, even the most virtuous intentions can take you on that road to hell, like when I finally obeyed my dentist and bought those tiny brushes to clean in between my teeth until I saw on TV that such single-use plastics are ending up on Midway Island, where the bellies of seabirds contain plastic bags and pulverized bits of cut-up credit cards, which means that I'm going to have to do an all-out plastic purge one day, all of which makes me wonder what we did before plastic bags, airplanes, cars and central heating and then I cry—I literally disintegrate into non-recyclable tears—when I tell my father how guilty I feel about the world we are leaving my children and how it's too late now for excuses. ♡



HOW FJÖRDS MADE CLIMATE CHANGE BORING

KALLE FOX

Call it unconventional, call it insulting, call it cliché that it occurred during a study abroad program, but when I read the title of the program, “Iceland and Greenland: Climate Change in the Arctic,” the first three words sold me over the last five. I was but a woefully apathetic anthropology major with Iceland on my travel bucket list after watching *Secret Life of Walter Mitty* some years ago.

In our first week of lectures—conveyed in the form of PowerPoint slides and multilingual educators of varying expertise, all taking place in a sleek University classroom—we learned that we’re on an island saturated with glaciers, waterfalls, a volcanic center, scattered geothermal fields, and even a tropical lake fed by spring water; that unlike in other places settled by European descendants, the earth itself kills more people than people themselves, and, through the evolution of risk management and land planning and snow surveying over the last fifty years, that Icelanders care enough about their fellow man to act accordingly.

As fascinating as it all was in the moment for someone not used to the landscape nor the culture of adapt and mitigate, the bombardment of information failed to take hold of my frontal lobe and root itself in my memories for years to come. All my humanities background knew was to write down three months’ worth of presentation slides and hope it would be useful for later.

What imprinted itself instead was the thirty-ish minute round trip walk to and from the university center in Ísafjörður, the capital of the Westfjörds. For three weeks, five days a week, I lived with a host family in one of many uniquely designed houses. Situated cautiously along the lower slope of the flat-topped cliffs, was an entire neighborhood. Bright colored exteriors popping against the cliff’s winter cloak and spring brownness. And for these three weeks, five days a week, I’d step outside my temporary residence and be immediately greeted by a council of towering, stoic, unavoidable walls of earth. As I penguin-walked down the slope and traversed the spit of land that held the downtown center, my view was made up of at least 60% elevated earth depending on if I was looking where I walked or not. It’s a backdrop I’ve never experienced as someone who spent 19 years in the tropics, where the tallest anything in my line of sight was an overhead native oak or landscaped palm tree, or a downtown Miami skyscraper.



art by IRINA NOVIKOVA



In retrospect, I find it counterintuitive to try and teach someone the impacts of climate change in a classroom setting while there's a mountain looming outside the window. Frankly, it's quite rude. When you hear of American students dropped in a Kentucky-sized country in the middle of the Atlantic, do you think refined graphs and numbers will slam a person's senses harder than stepping out of a tiny plane and suddenly being surrounded by the flat-topped glaciated cliffs of the Westfjörds?



What compels me to listen to the earth's council of geologic elders over the decades of anthropocentric assessments of them is the fact that they do not say a word about it. They are merely there, silent as they are indefinitely omnipresent. The organically raised castles of each continent could not care less about whether our species will survive the climate crisis. Why would they? They didn't make their own mess to clean up.

Still, unbothered by our presence as they might appear, these giant formations know when to show their annoyance with humanity. One snowy day in early March, a pod of us reckless trammellers trudged on all fours up the snow-covered side up one of these cliffs opposite the inlet of Atlantic water, stupidly determined to reach the top. But just as we were getting somewhat close, a giant crack in the snow appeared to our left, extending horizontally in our direction, crackling as menacing a warning as any movie that features an incoming avalanche.

Nope. We swallowed our pride and turned back.

At the height we had reached before common sense brought us back down, we could see the town and their neighborhoods scattered down below across the flatlands. From there, you could better understand the kind of power these giants wield, if provoked, and why avalanche walls were built right above the sloping neighborhoods of the Westfjörds. A lesson learned—not during the weekday in a university center, but outside on a Saturday, with our hands and feet on the sides of a millions-year-old body that could kill us if it wanted to.

The ominous indifference of these beings is both envy-inducing and inspiring. Which is not something I can say about the equally ancient, equally omnipresent, objectively uglier human beings whose indifference to their own power will be the death of their brethren.



The hours of indoor lectures were, thankfully, punctuated with group tours to the most noteworthy geologic features. There were a few stops at waterfalls—Goðafoss in the north, Gullfoss and Seljalandsfoss in the southwest—and the force in which gallons of water plummeted down could contradict my previous sentiment that Iceland's power is in its silence. While the mountains and cliffs are quiet and still, the hydrology of the country is explosive and, uncharacteristically for the culture of Iceland, always in a hurry. We made it to Vik, a black sand beach known for its relentless sneaker waves that will snag an unsuspecting human and drag them to an unknown fate. While we

had a tour guide with us as we navigated through Thingvellir National Park, I could not tell you a single fact espoused about the place, because really, the murmurings of Iceland's features were more compelling than the words of their human translator.



Forgive me for being an American in Greenland

Riddle me this, fellow environmentalists, which might incite a heavier dose of climate dread in your soul. Would you rather read published papers—filled with academic jargon tinged with elitism—about the increasing rate at which glaciers are shrinking, and how humanity is screwed if global temperatures increase by a certain degrees Celsius at the end of the century, or spend an hour watching a glacier rhythmically drip its way to death as you spike and stab your way across its body? I was fortunate—maybe unfortunate—enough to experience both in the span of a few days, so I have my thoughts.

A day after my group received a lecture on shrinking glaciers and the inevitability of an environmentally doomed future, we ventured out to the Sólheimajökull glacier in the southeast region. The day was overcast, giving an air of dreariness and exhaustion before we even got off the bus. Before us stood another great hunk of rock and ice, another elder of this island, involuntarily resigned to its fate as a tourist destination.

As we walked with spikes on our boots and poles in hand, the light blue sheet revealed itself underneath the snow, curving every which way as we invaded its crevices. Water slowly dripped off tips of the sheet, birthing tiny tributaries of the former glacier that coursed along its own body. I never imagined being horrified by the simple conversion of a solid to a liquid.

I witnessed climate change firsthand in the form of those drips, and instead of inciting a visceral rage at all the things that induced such a cruel, slow-burning death of this glacier, and the planet, it did exactly what every long-time environmental activist warns against as a deterrent for collective action: it bummed me out. How could anyone marvel in the moment when the drip-dripping existed as a reminder of its own inevitable doom? Should I consider myself lucky to have received lectures from both a human AND a glacier? At the very least, you have to appreciate their sustainable approach to death—creating their graveyard through their own blood.

After that, I found guided tours to be less enjoyable. Splitting focus between people and nature made for a lesser appreciation of what either had to say.





Don't get me started on trying to instill climate statistics while living briefly in Greenland. Ten days was all we had in that gloriously obscure fever dream of a place on earth. Forgive me for internalizing the threat of thinning sea ice on the livelihoods of indigenous hunters. Forgive me for being an American in Greenland, of all places. How is an American exchange student supposed to absorb and apply all the accumulated knowledge on climate change that far up in the Arctic, when they eventually must return to their homeland of an incomparably different set of geographic features and social systems?

At the very least, ten days was enough to witness the Arctic in its most unyielding. In the backdrop of Greenlandic language classes and presentations on topics that I wouldn't recall unless I fetched the five-year-old notebook with three months of lectures I've all but forgotten, our roaming ecosystem of lower-latitude, nonnative species were nearly blown off our feet by April blizzards with negative-degree wind chill as we muscled our inexperienced limbs from the downtown of Nuuk to our hostel alongside the coast.

In knowing there are 55,000 people on that mostly uninhabited continent, who made an entire built environment in a place both unbearable for equator-leaning visitors, yet vulnerable to the impacts of equator-leaning global industries, ten days in Greenland taught us ever-so-briefly what collective resiliency looks like, even though I would never experience it there.



Three months in the Arctic did what they needed to. After an unceremonious acquisition of my Bachelor's, I moved out west to pursue an environmental career in Montana. As it turns out, simply being keen on surrounding oneself in America's rockiest regions doesn't really qualify you for paid positions in stewardship, and so I rooted myself in the mountain valley town of Missoula and returned to academia as an Environmental Studies graduate student. The courses have climate change as a backdrop to each topic, instead of beating you over the head with how we're all doomed and capitalism is to blame. They offer insights into what isn't yet doomed: the capacity for local community-building to mitigate region-specific climate impacts; the collaboration between public and private entities for large-scale ecological restoration; and how much hope there is in grassroots organizing over demanding federal policy shifts from a distance.

The elevated entities that surround the former glacial valley town are even bigger than the ones I first encountered in the Westfjörds, but neither flat-topped nor as tightly compacted, like the ones forever guarding—or threatening—Ísafjörður. Instead, they present themselves as softly rolling grassland foothills, or fierce and jagged mountains further in the distance. Even though I've lived here long enough to grow fondly apathetic to my surroundings, they still manage to transmit a small source of inspiration when I take a moment to acknowledge their presence. Admittedly, it's easier to listen to the Earth's dominating silence when you're an unemployed, uninspired undergraduate than

when you're older, intentionally working to make use of your own existence to fight an existential threat. Even when you know deep in your own core that you're not terribly passionate about it.

Sue me for preferring the sensations of cold air pressing against my face on a sunny day, momentarily blinded by the reflection of snow draping the surrounding ice cliffs of Ísafjörður, over the subtle strain of my back and neck as I interchange between looking up at a projector screen and absent-mindedly scribbling notes that I'd never use when I returned to the States. Sue me for acknowledging my cosmic insignificance when I stare up at these million-year-old citizens of Gaia, and not when I read article after article about how the planet's health won't be salvaged unless we collectively undo 200-plus years of global systematic exploitation. Sue me for choosing the numbness in my toes as I traverse between these cliffs in my first hike across five feet of snow over the accumulated numbness from phone updates of increasingly severe wildfires, earthquakes, mass shootings and institutional damage control.

That sense of insignificance? That numbness? In the context of human-engineered numbers that project themselves on symmetrical screens in fluorescent-lit buildings, such feelings risk inaction and nihilism. None of us need that this late in the graph-tracked road to the apocalypse. Outside, in face of chaotically, asymmetrically produced landscapes—that either loom over you in silent dominance, or mind to themselves in the distance—by God is it as soothing as it is empowering to the fragile human soul. My heart goes out to the scientists once more, for they've likely dedicated more of their lives indoors trying to work out the numbers to present to people who'd rather be frolicking outside.



One October weekend, a cold front slammed the mountain valley town with five inches of snow, followed by a twenty-degree drop in temperature the next day. I was smoking a cigarette on my front porch, staring out at the final product: the hills, peaks, and the evergreen forests. They were shrouded in white, while at my eye level, remnants of autumn still lingered. The setting sun cast a familiar shade of pink on the snow-covered hills and mountains—a shade I'd seen for the first time some years ago cast upon an equally white-capped chunk of earth. A feeling—also familiar—simmered up and spread outward from my chest. A feeling I never would have gotten reading a scientific article that took years of grant writing and research, and peer reWviewing to reach my eyes, wired and exhausted by the blue light of my laptop. A feeling that incites both a love for this earth, and a will to act in a way that honors that love.

I smiled, ashed my cigarette, and went back inside to do what I could. ♡





EVERGREEN

JACKIE HERBACH

art by DANIEL WORKMAN

I headed out for my walk, wanting to escape the Sun's most penetrating rays, and also to check on him. There he was, sitting in his pot at the edge of the yard, with sharp branches and evergreen needles, staring at me. It looked like pieces of him were beginning to wither and dry up, maybe had started to surrender.



I first met him about a month ago on a ninety-seven-degree day. He had a swagger and stood proud as the sun glared at him. He wasn't afraid, and this annoyed her. There was an old dusty pick-up truck with a fading logo parked on the street: The Good Gardener Landscaping Company. He had arrived with his siblings. Some looked like him, but no two were the same. All his siblings had been planted, yet when it was his turn, the "good gardeners" decided it was quitting time.

The landscapers piled into the pick-up truck drinking what was left in their water bottles and wiped their faces with towels already sweat soaked from the day's work. I wanted to run after the truck and tell them to take him along, but before I knew it, the pickup had spun around the corner, and I too was dreaming of cold water and a shower. I looked at him, all alone.

"They'll be back tomorrow, and you can be with the rest of your family. I'll come back to check on you too. You'll be okay overnight." He didn't say anything to me. Some of his needles were turning brown. I knew what it was like to feel left behind. My hands that I had worked with for most of my life had developed arthritis. I could no longer do what I used to do so well.

The next day it was even hotter, so I waited until later in the day to take my walk. I had a patio container of tomatoes, basil, thyme, and rosemary growing on my deck. Like a proud mother, I hovered over them each day and watered them after the sun set. They were well taken care of.

It was about seven in the evening when I approached his block. I walked quickly to the yard where I saw him the day before, yet to be placed in the ground with his siblings.

"Didn't the good gardeners come back?"

He stared blankly at me. Not knowing what else to do, I continued my walk. It was Friday, and he would have to spend the weekend alone in the yard separated from his loved ones. The forecast predicted rain and this gave me some relief. At least he would be watered, and maybe a few of his brown needles would return to their royal emerald green.

It didn't rain that weekend, and it did not rain for four more weeks. It seemed that it would never rain again. Each day my tomatoes and herbs received my water and coddling. On the days I passed him, I noticed that his needles became browner and his indignance towards the sun no longer existed. He was now afraid. He watched his siblings grow and drink each day from the sprinklers, and he was happy for them. He longed for the sprinklers to reach him, but they could not. The good gardeners never returned, and I decided to take matters into my own hands.

I began to strategize a plot to rescue him. I would drive once it became dark, place him in my car, and plant him somewhere safe. I knew how dark the streets were at night, no one would see me. But, as each day ended and nightfall came, I made more excuses: I'll do it tomorrow, it was too hot today. He is heavy, and needed a big shovel. I probably could not lift or plant him on my own.

A month went by, and I had done nothing to rescue him. Whenever I walked by, he would look at me quizzingly. Guilt formed as I realized that I was no better than the landscapers. Despite my good intentions and feelings for him, I had done nothing to improve his situation. I reached out my hand and touched his injured needles.

"I am so sorry for leaving you here alone. I know you wanted to be planted with your family, and I failed you. We all failed you. Can you forgive me?"

I noticed he had a tag on him. His name was Cypress.

"Cypress? Is that your name?" I said excitedly. He looked at me and it seemed as if he smiled. We looked at each other for a long time. In him, I saw myself. Older, dryer, and thirsty, but an entity showing resilience, wisdom, and experience. There was something bigger than the two of us.

The sun reappeared from behind a dark cloud, and we both turned towards the warmth. She had compassion for us this time. 🌿

*"Didn't the
good gardeners
come back?"*





art by TIMOTHY SAUNDERS

MAN, MEAT, AND STONE

JHILAM CHATTARAJ

In the contemporary imagination, Hyderabad often shrinks to a city of real estate boom and biryani. However, to me, a teacher, poet and seeker of cultural experiences, Hyderabad pulses with a different life. It is a city etched by the lost footsteps of patthar, and the rich aroma of patthar ka gosht, ‘meat on stone’; a regal delicacy. I draw a parallel between the fading fragrance of the traditional kebab, patthar ka gosht and the depleting rocks of the city—both symbols of loss amid urban social growth. I offer a pause to young citizens who feast on instagrammable delicacies; and a nostalgic trip to millennials occasionally enjoying luxurious delights like the patthar ka gosht.

Against the towering shadows of chic apartments, I hold up to light the vanishing layers of Hyderabad’s identity; trace food born of royal desires and geological generosity, peering through the lens of anthropogenic crisis to explore the complex interplay between food, heritage and environment. I reflect on what is lost when progress prioritizes consumption over conservation.

Patthar ka gosht, is a kebab. Tender lamb is marinated overnight in a gentle blend of spices and slowly cooks on a hot, porous, granite slab, laid over glowing coals. It echoes the city’s intimate bond with the rocks—a living testament to the stone songs of ancient eco-sentinels. I hope to enable readers to nurture a more nuanced comprehension of urban change, ecological responsibility, and cultural memory—essential for imagining futures that honour the past rather than erase it. If the rocks disappear, what becomes of the meat? What remains of the conversation between nature and culture in Hyderabad’s ever-changing heart?

It might seem contradictory that while I lament the loss of the rocks, I am also drawn to explore the roots of a regal fare made with goat meat—the life of a creature claimed by the feudal control of man and his appetite. Yet the nucleus of my work does not rest on the clichéd representation of man-versus-nature conflicts. Rather, it seeks to comprehend how the very name of the kebab resonates with the influence of rocks, woven into the city’s fabric. Just as the stones have dwindled under the rush of urban consumption, patthar ka gosht has almost faded from Hyderabad’s gastronomic landscape, echoing a deeper loss that transcends simple binaries.

There are several popular accounts on the origin of patthar ka gosht. It is believed that once when the 6th Asaf Jahi, ‘Sir Mir Mahboob Ali Khan Siddiqi Bayafandi’—also famously known as ‘Tees Maar Khan’, one who killed 30 Tigers—went on a tiger hunting spree, he demanded to have kebabs.¹ The royal chef forgot to pack the skewers and used the slab of stone being carried on the Elephant’s back for the comfort of the ruler.² The meat (gosht) cooked on stone on an open fire was liked so much by the King (also known as the Nizam) that he decided to have it again on his return to Hyderabad. This time, the kebabs were prepared on improved stone, and it led to the creation of patthar ka gosht.



About a century later, popular eateries and street vendors revived the kebab for the delight of common people. The kebab is soft, juicy and bears the smoky fragrance of a chef’s patience. The rocky-breasted bed of meat must swallow the heat. At any cost, the stone must not crack.

Patthar ka gosht is believed to have become a rare culinary heirloom.³ A few home chefs, traditional eateries like Chicha’s, Bade Miyan Kababs, and some high-end restaurants prepare the kebab on stone and serve it with the soft zeal of a rumali roti. On a rain-soaked evening in 2024, the monsoon’s rhythm set the stage for my memorable interview with Mr. Qutub Alam Khan, one of the Founders and Managers at Chicha’s and also the nephew of Nawab Mehboob Alam Khan, the forerunner of Deccan cuisine. Mr. Alam felt that while Biryani would survive the tsunamis of food trends, patthar ka gosht may not. Interestingly, Mr. Alam presented a new theory regarding the genesis of patthar ka gosht. He proposed that the kebab’s origins might have been rather commonplace and utilitarian. People used to travel for several days in the past. They lacked the utensils needed to prepare the scheduled supper. Usually, a pit was excavated, lit, and a stone slab was heated; only salt was used to flavour the meat. The tale seems to reinforce the primal and visceral connection between man and stone.

According to Mr. Alam, patthar ka gosht will always be the “hero” of Hyderabadi cuisine. Mr. Alam, who is passionate about preserving and providing only Hyderbadi food, takes great care to make patthar ka gosht the old-fashioned way—it is time-bound and limited. Presently, he uses a locally sourced, treated granite of a certain culture—a slab four to five inches thick to prepare the kebab. Each year, the stone is replaced. His chefs are required to possess technical knowledge and expertise to cut

What else is Hyderabad losing?

the lamb pieces. Mr. Alam perceives the preparation of kebabs as sheer craftsmanship.

The art and artistry of food define the life of Hyderabad-based writer and journalist, Sucharita Swati. One day, while we conversed about the unprecedented growth of fancy cafes, we also spoke about the vintage cuisines of Hyderabad. ‘Sucharita-di,’ as I often address her like an elder sister, felt that very few places offered patthar ka gosht in the traditional sense. Low-budget, street vendors cook ‘the melt-in-the-mouth’ kebab on a gas stove. Conventional kebab connoisseurs would consider it as a ‘cardinal sin’.

I arrived in Hyderabad in 2010, at a time when the political struggle for Telangana’s statehood was reaching a fever pitch, with protests and rallies drawing thousands demanding a separate state. Once it was achieved, in 2014, the scapes of the city began to shift. The sprawling, open span morphed into a hive, and I, a bee buzzing through its hollows, remembering the early days. The giant boulders that once held the city’s ecology and the stones that my father and I watched pass by from the windows of mini-cabs were gone. Instead of the drama of rockscapes, we now witness a fungus of urban luxury. Recent studies document this transformation. Driven by tech-led migration, the population density in Hyderabad has surpassed even Delhi.⁴ Experts point out that this growth not only pressures city resources but also spurs infrastructure development and urban expansion to meet the new demands. The Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority’s master plans and infrastructure projects have expanded urban boundaries aggressively, converting vast tracts of natural rock formations into residential zones. Peripheral localities like Gachibowli, Kukatpally, and Kondapur have seen their housing markets explode, with high-rise apartments and villas catering to the city’s tech workforce and upwardly mobile populations.⁵

The relentless march of construction—villas, gated communities, luxury apartments have not only displaced the rocks but also the cultural imprints they carry. Can the city’s zest survive such a voracious appetite for development? And in losing its rocks, what else is Hyderabad losing?

Hyderabad’s expansion has destroyed natural rock outcrops and water bodies, worsened flooding and disrupted groundwater recharge

1 Sidharth Bhan Gupta, “The Curious Case of Patthar Ka Gosht,” Slurrrp, July 27, 2022.

2 Sabyasachi Roy Chaudhuri, “Patthar Ka Gosht: The Delicacy from the Nizami Era,” The New Indian Express, September 23, 2017.

3 Mir Quadir Ali, “Patthar ka gosht: A vanishing delicacy,” Deccan Chronicle, July 10, 2014.

4 “Is Hyderabad Prepared to Handle the Pressure of Its Increasing Population?” Economic Times, February 18, 2025.

5 Sobia Khan, “Hyderabad’s Peripheral Real Estate Markets Poised for Transformative Growth Amid Infrastructure Growth,” Economic Times, March 11, 2025.



essential to the city's ecosystem.⁶ These urban changes in Hyderabad's granite terrain speed up rock-water interactions, impacting groundwater quality and safety.⁷

Professor Raza Mir, writes that the Hyderabad he grew up would appear provincial to an outsider. In 2025, the idyll of 1990s remains transformed into 'Cyberabad,' with international corporations setting up offices and their managers living in plush high-rises where domestic staff are screened twice by security Apps. The erstwhile village of Shaikhpur and Kokapet have transformed into 'gilded enclaves' while drains of Yakutpura, old city, remain 'open'.⁸ Raza Mir acknowledges the complexities of this transition, highlighting the tension between the city's relentless push for growth and its residents' nostalgic attachment to the past. He concludes by citing a poignant couplet by poet Josh Malihavadi:

*Waqt ka farman apna rukh badal sakta nahin
Maut tal sakti hai ab farman tal sakta nahin*

The decree of time may change its course to catch its breath
But the verdict of that time is even more unyielding than death (p.xviii)

I have always been fascinated by the relationship between the rocks and the city; nurturing, exotic, and symbiotic. While writing of Hyderabad's rocks, it's impossible to overlook the film 'Other Kohinoors' by Uma Magal and Mahnoor Yar Khan.⁹ The evocative documentary studies beyond mere geology, weaving the story of these ancient stones into the very fabric of the city's identity. It analyses suffixes such as 'gutta' and 'guda'; Telugu words for hills and hillocks attached to popular vicinities such as Punjagutta and Narayanaguda. The film rightly evokes the concept of 'solastalgia.' Nostalgia for home is replaced with a feeling of

*Volcanic
memories
have swirled
into odd-
shaped dolls*

6 Ramachandraiah Chigurupati, "Urban Growth, Loss of Water Bodies and Flooding in Indian Cities," in *Water and Urban Development Paradigms: Towards an Integration of Engineering, Design and Management Approaches*, eds. J. Feyen, K. Shannon, and M. Neville, 1st ed. (CRC Press, 2008), 121-125

7 Majed Jemali et al., "Assessment of Groundwater Quality in a Structurally Deformed Granitic Terrain in Hyderabad, India," *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 131 (2007): 117-27

8 Daneesh Majid, Foreword, *The Hyderabadis* (HarperCollins, 2025).

9 Mahnoor Yar Khan and Uma Magal, *Other Kohinoors* (2022).

distress and helplessness on witnessing the environmental shifts due to urbanization or climate change.¹⁰

The rocks are the city's original 'kohinoors'. They shelter local myths and legends; they are also the canvas for man's art; in Kalamkari paintings we see rocks being worshipped as the divine. Granite splendour once held the watery eyes of the landscape—massive lakes, peacock-stunned boughs, pink flamingos owned the bluest sky—symbols of a fecund empire. Cradled by onion weathering, volcanic memories have swirled into odd-shaped dolls, mushrooms, an elephant's ear, a slow tortoise and sometimes a gravity-defying bird-beak.

These rocks are almost 2.5 billion years old. They are believed to be older than the Himalayas and have surfaced from the aching soil even before the dinosaurs (Society to Save Rocks).¹¹ Though the rocks appear bald and barren, their fissures hold water and have sheltered almost 175 species of herbs, shrubs, and medicinal plants.¹² At the Khajaguda Rocks, one may find trees like night flowering jasmine, the Indian screw tree (*Helicteres isora*), the Indian ash trees, East Indian satinwood, Indian Laburnum, Ficus, Ziziphus, Neem, Indian Ash, Pala Indigo, Sitaphal (custard apple), Haldu, Governor's Plum, and Sea Lemon.

Hyderabad's citizens have watched capitalist desire destroy its rocks. However, the same citizens come together and critique the forces that wean them from their natural environment. Hyderabadis have actively opposed illegal encroachments threatening the Khajaguda rocks and lake, which are ecologically and culturally significant. Activists and local residents have organized protests and campaigns to raise awareness about the destruction caused by real estate developments and dumping of debris.¹³ Their efforts pressured authorities like the Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority (HMDA) to take action, including demolishing illegal structures and enforcing protective measures around the site. Despite ongoing challenges, these citizen-led movements highlight the community's commitment to preserving Khajaguda's natural heritage against unchecked urbanisation.¹⁴

Can we ever stop the breaking? The constant wounds to history and memory? We may create what we need; like state-of-the-art buildings, transport, medical facilities; but we can't afford to demolish nature for our luxuries anymore. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but

10 The Age of Solastalgia, *The Conversation*, April 2012.

11 Society to Save Rocks, Hyderabad.

12 Yunus Lasania, "Hyderabad's Khajaguda Rocks and Its Ecology Yield to Posh Urban Spaces," *Questions of Cities*, July 1, 2022.

13 Balakrishna Ganeshan, "Hyderabad's Khajaguda Rocks Face Encroachment, Activists Cry Foul," *The News Minute*, February 22, 2022.

14 Aditya Singh, "At Hyderabad's Khajaguda Hills, Citizens Fight to Save Crucial Urban Commons," *Citizen Matters*, April 4, 2022.



not every man’s greed.”¹⁵ This truth gains relevance when considering the work of Hyderabad-based environmentalist Frauke Quader. Her relentless efforts to conserve the ancient granite formations confront the very challenge Gandhi spoke of: resisting the temptation to exploit natural resources for short-term gain at the expense of long-term ecological and cultural well-being. Her advocacy highlights how the rocks are not just relics of the past, but vital parts of the city’s identity. Understanding Frauke and the rocks show the urgent need for mindful preservation in the face of urban expansion.¹⁶

Over the years, certain cafes, homes, hotels and IT offices in the city have integrated the rocks within their concrete embrace. However, such structures are only a small oasis in the desert of modern architecture.

The Society to Save Rocks (SSR) has listed about 23 heritage rock sites in Hyderabad; some of the popular ones include ‘Bear Nose’ behind Cyber Towers, Hitech City, ‘Cliff Rock,’ Road Number 46, Jubilee Hills, Rocks at Moula Ali Hills, ‘Mushroom Rock,’ University of Hyderabad, and ‘Hamburger Rock,’ Gachibowli (Society to Save the Rocks). The rocks, their folds, and furrows take us back to an exclusive geological time and engineering.

The splendour of Hyderabad’s rocks captivated the heart of poet, Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. The poet was a familiar and much-loved personality in the Nizam’s dominion. Mehdi Nawaz Jung, the secretary to Nizam’s Executive Council, invited Tagore in 1933 to meet the intellectuals of Hyderabad. Tagore stayed at Nawaz Jung’s ‘Kohistan’, a beautiful residence integrating the rocks of Banjara Hills.¹⁷ Tagore was smitten by the smooth rockscapes and the wilderness of the hills. He did what poets do—composed an ode:

From the distance thou didst appear
Barricaded in rocky aloofness.
Timidly I crossed the rugged path
To find here all of a sudden
An open invitation in the sky
And a friend’s embrace in the air.
In an unknown land the voice that
Seemed ever known
Revealed to me a shelter of loving intimacy

15 Neha Walia, “Remembering Mahatma, His Philosophy on Environment,” The Tribune, October 3, 2019.

16 Uttara Varma, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Hyderabad Boulders Lose Out on Infra Needs,” Times of India, May 26, 2019.

17 Mohammad Ayub Khan, “Rabindranath Tagore’s Visit to Hyderabad: When Poetry Triumphed over Politics,” The News Minute, September 25, 2021.



Writer, Günter Grass, visited Hyderabad in 1986. He was so attracted by the pre-historic rock formations that he chose to examine them over the city’s traditional tourist attractions. Grass spent hours lying on the rocks, making sketches. Later, in an interview on national television in India on 28th December 1986, he told Professor Isaac Sequeira that he was “appalled at the indiscriminate quarrying of the beautiful rocks around Golconda.”¹⁸

Hyderabad based painters and artists have held numerous exhibitions and placed art installations across the city to raise awareness about the rocks. Yet a deep, piercing gaze into the city’s horizon would not reveal rocks but gigantic pylons with colossal cranes perched on top like famished vultures.

Poet, editor, translator Sudeep Sen documented the residual rockscapes of Hyderabad and the suburbs for his upcoming book *Rock*, Pippa Raan, UK, the final addition to his eco-trilogy, *Anthropocene* (2021) and *Red* (2025). Sen an ardent fan of Hyderabad’s patthar ka gosht, responds through poems and photographs to the significance of the city’s rocks in the larger context of the deccan plateau.¹⁹

In times when man can overcome grief but not hunger, something as small yet vital as patthar ka gosht invites us to rethink our relationship with the city’s spectacular rocks. It calls for a gentle awakening to the layers of memory, culture, and ecology that make Hyderabad more than just a backdrop for modern ambition. Each time the meat sizzles on the hot stone, we must remember to preserve its stillness, beauty, and benevolence. ♪

18 Narendra Luther, *Marvels of Nature: Rockscapes of Telangana*, 3rd ed. (Save the Rocks Society, 2020), 30.

19 Sudeep Sen, “Poetry and Music.” Interview by Jhilam Chattaraj. *Mekong Review* 34, no.3 (Feb. 2024).





art by ABHIDIP BHATTACHARYYA

THE LITTLE MONARCH

SIMON UNGLAUB

Still crawling around in the professor's garden in mid-October, the segmented little freak could no longer escape the coming winter. Its refuge is now a small Tupperware container, with a handful of leaves to munch upon, and the holes poked so perfectly round like it had been completed with a hole puncher. My professor warns that its death will likely arrive by the end of the day, but I ignore this. I want to raise it. I want to try.



I grew up with big dogs—animals much stronger than me—with all their necessities conveniently bought by my mother. The plants I now grow require little care: an apple tree that can sit outside all winter, a snake plant that could live on a space station, a freakish basil plant that really shouldn't have lasted this long. I have no idea how to take care of something so fragile.

After trekking the mile-and-a-half walk home and trudging up three flights of stairs to my apartment, I notice the container: it is nearly empty. Its precious milkweed supply is entirely run through, disintegrated in the stomach of the supposedly doomed insect. And so begins my journey across Boulder for a milkweed plant, guided by the North Star that is iNaturalist, a network for recording such biodiverse encounters. I'm a bit concerned about the time given for my incomplete assignments for the night, but fortunately the app tells me there's a bush just around the corner. A light drizzle patters on my head, but my goal is just a few steps away. Unfortunately, I'm met with a wall. Not an emotional or metaphorical wall, but a literal one. It's on private property. I continue on, looking for milkweed I won't have to hop a fence for.

Disappointed as I may be, at least I used the weather app this morning. There was one day in Boulder when I left my umbrella at home due to the low chance of rain



and had to walk two miles through hail. It will remain one day, and one alone. The umbrella was already packed the moment I saw a single percent threatening me, so at least I'm able to continue my quest without any backtracking.

I reach a park and the icy rain cools my mood. Rather than being peeved about all this work for a stupid worm, I'm instead humbled by how delicate its life is. Would it have been able to survive in weather like this?

I search for a while, continuing to compare images online to what is in front of me. The leaves look a bit spikey—is it even milkweed? Is all milkweed edible to Monarchs? I take the leaves off some adjacent plants as backup. Who knows how picky the little bugger is? I'm sure I look like an absolute psycho to anyone passing by, tearing leaves out of a city park bush. But shame has never stopped a parent before.

In its now-empty container, the specimen can be seen far more clearly. Striped like an old Russian imperial flag, prideful even on the verge of death, it flaunts a dangerous display of colors. Almost burying the poor thing in an endless supply of leaves, I feel quite content with my journey's bounty. The caterpillar doesn't seem nearly as enthused by the change in scenery. I'm sure it will eat its way into redecorating the container in no time. What surprises me the most over the next few days isn't how much constant attention I give to it, nor how many times it enjoys its own body weight in food. It's how much I suddenly seem to care. The task of acquiring the leaves could be seen as homework, a basic assignment to keep the specimen healthy for my class' lab submission. But this somehow goes beyond that. I am not receiving a grade or extra credit for these efforts. Why do I care?

It's a bit embarrassing to describe it this way, but I don't know how else to describe it as anything other than parental instinct. I cannot stress enough how frequently I checked on this caterpillar to make sure it was staying alive and healthy. I don't understand how real parents do it, with such bigger, needier, and uglier children.

Similar to sleep-deprived parents relearning the joys of silence as the roaring cries of their baby finally calm down and the beast finally sleeps, a wave of relief washes over me as the caterpillar finally takes shelter in its chrysalis. Peace at last.

A few days later, the caterpillar's color looked off. Like losing a child in a grocery store, my mind immediately fears the worst. The dark, almost brown tint worried me. Isn't it supposed to be green? Is it dead in there? I search online to see if my fears align with reality, that it's sick or bruised or dying or dead. But this problem is too niche, even for Google to answer, and there aren't any butterfly veterinarians around to answer my question. I immediately resign myself to its death. I wrap myself in regret like a blanket on a cold night, making a cocoon of what-ifs and coulda-done-betters. The leaves arrived too late, that hour of hunger leaving it deprived of precious nutrients needed for the transformation. It needed more oxygen in the container, leaving it too weak to break free from its old body. I finally lay these thoughts to rest as I go to bed, ready to toss its container once I've woken up in the morning.

I feel like an idiot the next day when I see a beautiful, healthy butterfly slightly cramped in the Tupperware. White dots adorn the edges of its mosaic wings. The dark veins run thick across a golden hue, signifying a female. The once ugly duckling now displays her heritage in all its majesty. Hailing from the noble Nymphalidae family, I name her Aura, from the Greek *Aurae*, a nymph of the breezes. She clings to my fingers, light as a breeze.

My joy is briefly set aside as I realize her wings might be permanently bent awry from the stuffy plastic home. Desperately freeing the fresh monarch from the plastic clutches of the box, she fluttered and dried her wings, ending on my hand. Perhaps I spoiled her too much. Regardless, all the regret and worry leading up to this moment seems silly. I'm too distracted by her beauty to regret anything, so joyous I don't even remember what I was so worried about.

It was fun to play our one-sided hide-and-seek whenever I got home. Only for a moment was it concerning to find where she had snuck into but felt equally as silly as soon as I found her safe and sound. Every time I looked at her, I felt pride in her beautiful wings. Those few weeks flew by for me, but it was an entire lifetime for the little monarch. I'm glad I gave her the opportunity to sprout her wings, and I hope she was—at the very least—content with those measly leaves I fetched for her majesty's palate. 🦋





art by MICHAEL ROBERTS

SISYPHUS AND THE PIPING PLOVER

SHELLI ROTTSCHAER

In *On The Trail With AHD*, “Sea Oats on the Armored Shore,” Alison Hawthorne Deming writes of her summer-home on the Bay of Fundy in Grand Manan, Nova Scotia. “A new raw wound in the earth, spruce trees leaning on their way to the big fall.” To counter this imbalance, “a guy who works with rocks has been armoring the shores against the winter storms that tear away” at the coast.¹

My question—is this “guy” a modern-day Sisyphus?

In Greek Mythology, Sisyphus’s tenacity is what ultimately led to his destiny. He outwitted the divine and paid for it eternally. Sisyphus may have cheated death but he was forever punished in the underworld to roll an immense boulder uphill—only for it to repeatedly tumble downward every time he neared the top.² In contemporary times, this makes us question laborious and futile tasks that seem never-ending. The myth reminds us that our ill-conceived deeds and careless acts will render punishment. A cause and effect.

Should we take on a role like the “guy” armoring the shore? Are his current labors a punishment for our past crimes against Mother Nature? How does this modern-Nova Scotian-Sisyphus relate to the effects and results of climate change? Are our efforts, to slow the erosion or reverse the pebbled beach’s drift, merely another example of Sisyphean labor?

Or is the point entirely different? To make ourselves feel better by at least trying to make amends? Does it lift our temporal psyche, knowing we tried—even if the effort is futile?

Perhaps, these observations are comparable to Lake Michigan’s National Scenic Shoreline of Sleeping Bear Dunes or Lake Superior’s Grand Sable Dunes within

¹ Alison Hawthorne Deming, “Sea Oats on the Armored Shore,” *On The Trail With AHD*, Substack, 8 July 2025.

² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Trans. Justin O’Brien, Vintage, 1955.



Pictured Rocks National Seashore. Either dunes are massive, and these fragile places are like sand in an hourglass. Grain by grain, they cascade into the shallows of the freshwater seas. This erosion affects what lies below, by extending sandbars further out into the depths. It also affects that which is above, when the deciduous forests topple, landslide down the dunes, and dam the shoreline. These alterations of geology affect the geography, in turn, the cultures and lifeways of the communities that surround them.

Which communities one might ask? In answer, the communities of both our human and other-than-human relatives.

This is true in the case of the Piping Plover—a small, sand-colored shorebird that annually migrates to this region to breed, nest, lay eggs, and fledge its young. These beaches are the plovers’ sacred ground. Once disturbed, their lifeways are upended, and fewer hatchlings survive. Their piping—the plaintive, bell-like whistles by which they communicate—peters out, because their numbers are dwindling.³

Since 1986, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has listed the Great Lakes Piping Plover population as endangered.⁴ Conservation efforts have yielded slow population growth by designating more wilderness areas as Piping Plover sanctuaries. This includes the area surrounding Wilderness State Park in Emmet County, due southwest of the Mackinac Bridge along Lake Michigan. As well as Whitefish Point near the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum in the town of Paradise, on Lake Superior’s southern shore of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.⁵

What is key to the Piping Plover’s survival is protecting their breeding habitat along Lake Michigan and Lake Superior’s sandy, pebbled beaches. Along these shorelines, the plover forages for food at water’s edge, eating insects, marine worms, and small crustaceans that burrow in beach wrack and seagrass debris.

These areas are altered by dune erosion as well as harmed by pollution within the wrack zones. It is estimated that 53% or higher of shorebirds ingest micro-plastics, which wreak havoc on their internal organs. Also, the birds become entangled in the micro-plastic flotsam-debris, tethering them to the ground, and making them vulnerable to predators. It is imperative to take on these Sisyphean tasks: to clean up our waters and shore up the dunes to protect a species that is both beautiful, and a symbol of ecological well-being. If the Piping Plover disappears from these shorelines, its absence will indicate the overall deterioration of the Great Lakes bio-habitat.

Piping Plovers are an indicator species, meaning their presence signals that a bioregion is healthy. If the region maintains sustainably clean waters the fauna-food-chain will be strong enough for the longevity of other species, human-relatives included.

This is how it affects the human community. Without the presence of indicator species like the Piping Plover, the health of our overall biological network will deteriorate. Species higher up on the food chain will be affected. This upheaval has and will continue to affect lifeways of those who traditionally live on this land: the Odawa and Ojibwe. Traditional ecological knowledge will be lost. Land health will be compromised.

³ L Graham. “A record year for Great Lakes piping plovers.” Michigan Public Radio, 11 July 2025.

⁴ “Piping Plover,” US Fish and Wildlife Services.

⁵ “Wilderness State Park,” *Pure Michigan*, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, 2025.

Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* used his storied-metaphor to reflect upon the human condition within our absurd modernity.⁶ Camus noted humanity’s conflict between our desire to find meaning in life as compared to the indifference of the universe that perhaps offered none. In Camus’s interpretation, Sisyphus’s eternal labor represents humans’ quest for meaning in a world that refuses to provide it.

I would counter this idea with my analogy of the Piping Plover. The absence of this small, sand-colored shorebird will cause other crucial presences to go missing. Absent, its piping whistle will create vacancies in other types of communication. Without effective communication, a further grain-by-grain cascade will cause a landslide of ineffectiveness. It will weigh down those who survive, like micro-plastics lodged in the gut, to anchor us in our own drowning. Or, in Sisyphus’s case, to roll downhill and start over, again and again.

In my opinion, meaning is found in the “guy” upon the Bay of Fundy’s efforts. His hopeful attempts to armor the shore prevents beach-drift into the ocean one grain at a time. Our efforts of restoring freshwater beaches from micro-plastic pollution will not only benefit indicator species like the Piping Plover, but ultimately our human-relative communities as well. ♻️

⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Trans. Justin O’Brien, Vintage, 1955.





IN THE MOUNTAINS

TINA CARTWRIGHT

I don't remember anything about the hike. I remember the male teacher watching from the bank of the stream as the girls squealed and plunged their heads into its glacial flow. We are surrounded by mountains and culverts and shivering silver water—such a promise, such a dare. It's 1990, and the spiral perm, pinging like tight chisel shavings, is the hairstyle of choice for the rich, popular girls. Water creeps over white centre parts, trickles icy fingers down young, innocent backs. The male teacher who watches is the PE teacher, the one who wears his budgie smugglers to swimming sports at the girls' school, standing in front of the grandstand and blocking the race with his snug little package.

I am a child then, fourteen, from a tiny, tiny place full of churches and disappointment. I have wild dreams that play through my head. I have wild eyes too, always watching.

Here comes the harried Social Studies teacher with her red, circulation-free hands and baby-fluff hair.

"What were you thinking?" she mutters out the side of her mouth to the PE teacher. Night is creeping down the mountain sides like a search party. The polar air seeps into our eyes, bones, up our noses, and into our ears.

At the school camp, there is no electricity, not one outlet. How are we supposed to dry our hair? Most of the teachers are in their cabin building a fire and laying out mugs for hot toddies and cards. They will bet on the cards, stakes high, lunch duty for the rest of the month, or a change of homeroom for Tammie Halkett, who is a right pain in the you know where.

The teachers can't wait to get rid of us, sent to bed in our tents, the canvas already stiff with cold.

"Girls! Dry your hair, completely, properly, before bed. Here, huddle close to the fire. No one is to go to bed with wet hair. We don't want anyone to get hypothermia." The Social Studies teacher herds the girls, circling. She guides us close to the fire. She comes up close behind the PE teacher. "You might as well go in," she says.

I do not dunk my hair in the icy stream. I do not care about washing my hair or what the popular girls do. There is something foolish, a betrayal against who you

art by JOONHEE MYUNG

are, if you do what everyone else does, no questions asked. If I rooted out the origins of this, I'd find it's a consequence of something I learned as a small child, which is that adults lie. They do it all the time. So, if you can't trust them, you can only trust yourself. I learned this at five years old when an adult promised that if I entered a colouring competition, then I would win. I did and then I didn't. Back then, my mother said it may not be a lie, that perhaps she forgot, but I feel that it is, and from then on, I notice more and more lies told by adults, which surprises me since I had supposed that by the time you were an adult and could do what you wanted, there would be no need to lie. From that moment on, I decided I would make up my own mind about everything.

In the middle of the clearing, we huddle around the fire. The flames are blue spectres in the black night. Their light outlines our hands and backs in blue, but all the faces are dark. The popular girls are in a tight circle around the fire, blocking the warmth from everybody else. In the dark, I sense my friend Tahlia beside me. She mutters about the cold. Her lips are shivering. Her hair is dripping, and she is a fool, but the teachers are worse.

They are freezing, rubbing their pen-callused hands together for warmth. They send us all to bed, with the warning that there is to be no 'night activity,' there is to be no trips to the boys' camp, and lights out is all. The girls look at their friends, giving them the side-eye in the dark. We have no idea that the boys' camp is close by.

The tent is an icebox. We wear all our clothes, including beanies, inside the sleeping bags, but only those with wealthy parents have proper sleeping bags, adequate for cold conditions. There are four of us in our tent. None of us will sleep.

At first, the tent is too cold to sleep, so we tell stories. Pockets of chatter from other tents drift around us. There is movement. The night is restless and bleak. After a long time, I notice that Tahlia has not spoken for a while. We have been talking and laughing all this time, so surely she is not asleep.

"Tahlia?" I step into the cold. No answer. I wait. Her silence is weighty and wrong. I reach out and touch her hand. I am shocked at how cold it is. Her skin is more than cold, it is frozen, as if her flesh were frozen right the way through. I remember her wet hair, her shivering lips. Even when I shake her gently, she does not rouse.

"Guys. Feel her hand, she's absolutely freezing." Her arms and her cheeks, too, are glazed with cold. Our tentmate, Anna, is Head Girl. She's just completed her first aid training. She feels for a pulse. I hold my hand above Tahlia's mouth; she does not breathe.

*The flames
are blue
spectres
in the
black night*

"Nina, run for the teachers," I say. We've got to get her warm. I rub Tahlia's freezing hands, cast my breath over them. We pull the beanie over her curls. At the base of her neck, her damp hair is like grass stiff with frost. Her limbs are heavy and cold. She is a leaden doll in our arms.

The first teacher to arrive is Andrea Bell, who runs marathons, teaches jazzercise, and wears striped leg warmers. Soon after comes Mr. Dour, who says 'how droll' all the time. We don't know what that means, and we do not care. In his class, we are busy making magnesium into shocking flares of white while he paces and stares out the window. The teachers are too slow to realize how serious this is. Then, Andrea is on her knees, holding her face close to Tahlia. How long has she been like this?

The night becomes a whirlwind.

I crouch in the corner, holding the lamp high. It casts a blue sheen over the two teachers while they perform CPR. Nina is sent again, running through the dark, for Mr. Cross, who they decide will be the best to carry Tahlia down over the rocks to the teachers' cabin. My lips are shivering.

"Is she alive?" I whisper. No one answers.

"Is she alive?" I ask louder.

Andrea Bell glances up, her palms resting on Tahlia's chest. She does not answer, only looks at me. My hands shake and my teeth begin to chatter. My lantern light sways.

"Get her out of here," Mrs. Bell commands, turning back to someone at the tent flap. A hand takes my lantern, and I am cast out into the night. I still do not know if Tahlia is alive.

I need comfort. It is dark. I can't find anyone. I stand in the middle surrounded by the dark shapes of tents, not knowing who is within. I look for Nina, but she's gone. Everyone has disappeared. No one comes to find me. I stumble, beginning to cry. Is she alive? What if she died right there and not one of us noticed? What if I did not touch her hand?

I stagger through the night. I dare not go back to the tent. I do not know what I will find in there. I call out, and some of the popular girls answer. They are Tahlia's friends but not mine. I ask after Nina and they laugh, at both of us, saying she has gone to the boy's camp that I am out after boys. How could Nina think of such a thing at a time like this?

Later, back in our tent, there were three of us left. Nina did not go to the boys; she was with the teachers, sipping hot chocolate. I am furious with the teachers again. Do they not think? They know there are four to a tent. Why did they not look for the others or ensure our safety? This is my experience in school. If you do not fit with everyone else, if you do not care for hairstyles, or boys, or sports, they do not notice you, or rather, they do not know what to do with you. Nina tells us how Mrs. Bell saved Tahlia. She zipped Tahlia into a sleeping bag in front of the fire, she



stripped Tahlia and herself, and warmed her skin on skin. That’s what you have to do with hypothermia, Nina assures us.

At first, Tahlia wasn’t moving, and all the teachers were silent. Then, Tahlia started to mumble and tremble. They made her sit up and drink a hot chocolate, Nina says. She cries when she says her body quaked, then demonstrates, shivering, mouth agape, as if her body cast a demon out of her mouth. She’s alright now. Nina lets her head sag. Mrs. Bell has got her. She could have died, is stuck on loop in my mind. I cry. She could’ve died. If I didn’t touch her hand. If Nina didn’t run over the rocks fast enough. If, if, if.

We sing through the night.

In the morning, we find out that a helicopter came at first light to transport Tahlia away.

I never saw her again.

None of us do.

Her parents take her out of school. They move towns. I cry to my mother that I never got to see her, to say goodbye. Why? I want to know. My mum has her hands in the sink, suds and bubbles, popping rainbows in the sunlight.

“I guess she wasn’t safe,” she says. 🌀



CHANGING SKIES

PROSE CONTEST
THIRD PLACE WINNER



“A New Normal”
by Heather Corl

Following acceptance into CHANGING SKIES, strong contenders were voted on by HINDSIGHT editorial team. These three winners were chosen for their articulation of our evolving reality.

Thank you to the Program for Writing & Rhetoric for funding this contest.

Fall 2025 Editorial Staff



A NEW NORMAL

HEATHER CORL

The sun stings your eyes, but you can't bring yourself to lower your face from the kiss of warmth seeping through the honeyed leaves. It kept the nip of October air at arm's length. Some days are still how you remember them growing up. What fall is "supposed" to feel like, instead of sticky ninety-degree odes to the summer that linger longer and longer each year. You can't tell if it's just Colorado being the way it is or the global warming that still seems to be up for debate. A conversation that's a bit more like screaming at a man standing behind a brick wall. You've never understood how arguments of plain things can carry on like they do, but you're late for class.

The dripping on glass is music. You can smell the damp asphalt through the cracked window as whispered promises pull your attention from the droning of the latest state of emergency. Half of the world is on fire, and the other underwater at any given time nowadays, and you were the edge of a coin flip away from one or the other. As you walk to your car, fumbling with your keys, your socks are wet, and you can feel your toes chill as you watch the murky rainbow gloss the road. Normal is subjective and shifting. You imagine what it might be like to have a say in what normal is next.

Trying to choke down the last of a latte you don't like but cost you an hour's wage, and you need the caffeine, you hear about the trees they promised they wouldn't cut. You've learned promises expire if you wait long enough. Or even if you don't. Pull one brick and the whole house falls. "The last virgin forest," someone says, and you wonder how long it stood alone.

The girl walking in front of you doesn't stop as she tosses her Red Bull can in the bin marked "landfill only," and you find yourself wondering if it even matters. You heard somewhere that even if every individual in the world recycled, it wouldn't outweigh the damage done by corporations. It won't stop you from trying, but the mixing of helpless flavors is bitter in your mouth.

Even on her sickbed, you notice how beautiful the world is. How the dew glints in morning light. How the clouds cradle the sun in the blue sky. Your awe brings you brief anger. You're late for work. ♡





art by DANIEL WORKMAN

WINTER'S WEIGHT

TAYLOR LOHMAN

As the days of fall begin to fade with the first snow, nature starts to slow down. Thriving bears retreat into their dens, and the squirrels into their nests. The trees shed their leaves, conserving energy for the long, dark path of hibernation that awaits them.¹ Everything slows to a stop as once-flourishing mountains are covered in sheets of white flakes. Hibernation, a process of preparing for the change in seasons, is natural for most mammals. But not for me. As soon as the last of the color drains from the trees, seasonal depression creeps in like an early frost, leaving me scrambling for resources to fuel my last bit of energy before the torpid days of winter start to close in.

The weight of my first winter emerged in 2021. My friend Jillian got into a car accident and lost her life. I struggled to understand if what had happened was real. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that I would never get a chance to laugh with her again. She was the kindest, most selfless person I have ever known. The grief was difficult to deal with, as it was the first significant death in my life.

I experienced my first panic attack the night that I found out. My lungs felt as if they were being vacuum sealed as I exhaled, and every inhale I would attempt would be shortened and sharp, as if I had bags of sand weighted heavily on my chest. Every memory I have of her was flashing through my head like a cheesy movie montage. I closed my eyes, let my tears fall down my cheeks, and melted into the floor. Days and weeks after that felt slow, as if I was just moving through the days like a slug. Experiencing my first deep loss during the isolated months of winter made simply existing even more overwhelming; I was forced to confront my grief, navigate emotional darkness, and juggle my mental struggles through the solitude of winter.

There were months where all I remember are the baby steps it took to get through the day. It felt as if my body was on autopilot while my brain was tapped out. Weeks dragged by, but the next year eventually came around. I was optimistic about navigating the hardships of mental health. I allowed myself to heal from Jillian's death. However, it was now the year that I would pack all my bags and move away to college. The weight of winter became heavy. Many things caused me to slip into lethargy.

¹ McKenzie Mak, "What Is Hibernation?" World Animal Protection US, May 5, 2023.



The daylight hours seemed to only linger for a couple of hours, and the serotonin I was so dearly holding onto was slipping away with it.² I was struggling with my social anxiety while meeting new people. My long-term boyfriend and I entered a long-distance relationship. I struggled to start college courses, but I was self-isolating every chance I could get. I felt like I was dragging myself everywhere I needed to be. The only place that felt safe was my bedroom. It was a den of comfort, allowing for emotions and anxiety to be relieved. Going to my classes, going grocery shopping, and attempting to keep myself fit and healthy all carried a certain heaviness. All the feelings I had felt the past winter arose yet again. I never felt like myself. I was juggling losses left and right while trying to piece myself back together. It seemed like a never-ending loop of despair. The darkness always seemed to find its way back to me.

Piled under layers of soil, leaves, and blankets of snow, I was surprised to find that I was comfortable, the most dangerous aspect of winter. I allowed myself to detach from life, barely talking to people who brought me joy, plastering a smile on my face like a laugh track on sitcoms. There were brief moments where I found myself truly happy, spending time with my friends and family, but after it was over, I would grieve the fleeting moments of happiness. I returned to my den, and my happiness never seemed to last for very long.

My family found out that winter that my childhood golden retriever, who had shared 18 years with us, had a tumor on his liver. Watching him eat his last chocolate, his favorite food that he had sneakily stolen many times before, and listening to his last puffs of air, shattered me. My family and I shed many tears that February night, but, ironically, it was that night that I caught a glimpse of sunshine peeking through the trees. I was so caught up in the loss of my dear friend, my dog, and myself that I hadn't realized how much I treasured the time I spent with my family. I was laughing with them, sharing stories about how my dog would drag my toddler brother by his face in the snow when they went on walks, and how he once jumped on the counter and ate all 18 of our peanut butter chocolate cookies. I always thought grief would only bring a storm, but the loss of my dog reminded me of all the times when winter felt warm.

As I was traveling home, I was excited to have discovered a small beam of hope, hope that I could make it out from under all that consumed me. My family reignited a desire in me by sparking small beams of happiness and reassurance. When the snow melts, there is a feeling of discomfort, but somehow it is better than some might realize. The melting layers of snow are still cold, but you can feel the blanket turn warm when the sun shines upon it. The snow starts to glisten, uncovering a new beauty that was hidden for so long. It allows for nature to be rediscovered in a new way and slowly brings all the critters and greenery back to life. A rebirth is celebrated in the warming air, bringing me to recognize that the people who loved me and the

*I was
self-isolating
every chance
I could get*

first big step to recovering were found through their support. I learned to rely on my friends and family, and I started going to therapy. They held my hand through all the tasks that I once felt apathetic to doing by myself. I found comfort in my routine, and simple tasks didn't seem too daunting anymore. I found people who made me laugh and kept me out of my den. Most importantly, I found waves of joy in the life I was living. Little by little, the light started to shine longer; the coldness still stung, and the frost remained, but I realized that winter is beautiful; you just have to learn to adapt.

A heavy snow can feel like the most gut-wrenching grief and loss; but the blur between seasons can be a different kind of grief. Feeling like slipping back into a place you tried so hard to get out of is soul-crushing. It feels like walking into a deep, dark abyss, like a bear retreating into its den for the winter. I realized I had burrowed deep into my grief, convinced that solitude was the safest place to be. But unlike bears, waking in the spring ready to reenter the warmth, it came to my attention that if I stayed in isolation too long, I might not find my way back to the sunny spring I had longed for. Healing meant learning how to step outside again, even when the cold still lingered. I struggle every year to keep myself from self-isolating, but I have had so much joy come from my experience in healing. I keep in mind all of the good things that hard times have brought for me, and all of the things that I have chosen to let go of.

I thought that conserving my energy, bottling up my emotions, and shutting out the world would force me to focus on my self-healing. But healing isn't about avoidance. I had to learn how to adapt to winter without letting the cold define me.

Winter will never disappear, so I had to search for what keeps me warm. My family and friends helped me to accept that healing wasn't about fixing what was broken or replacing what was missing. I now know that I am capable of journeying through treacherous snowstorms; there is always light that can be found with the rebirth of spring, no matter how far the journey is to find it. ❧

² "Seasonal Affective Disorder." National Institute of Mental Health, 2023.



CITY SOD VS. PRAIRIE GRASS

KAY SMITH



art by DANIEL WORKMAN

The fragile city sod yellows at the softest step, as if it has taken all the abuse it can from humans. It struggles, consistently dry and brittle with sharp blades. Nowhere for animals or bugs to hide, lacking in contribution to the ecosystem.

In the city, nature is restrained, encased, and contained in concrete with neatly edged borders. Maybe the city sod shares the same potential as prairie grass, but human intervention keeps it at bay. The city tries to keep up the illusion that nature thrives here. They try to beautify the landscape with artificially lab-created plants to distract from tall steel and road noise. Mother Nature cries out, and then leaves us with the smell of sewage, begging us to see this isn't real nature, but the rain doesn't lie.

The true wild vibrance of home rings out in my mind in stark contrast every time it rains. Have you ever stood barefoot in the Flint Hills on a dewy morning after a spring rain? Have you smelled the fresh earthy air and felt the energy of the sky and earth flow through you? I long to step outside after an early summer storm and smell the grass. To see the drops of water glistening on the tips of the blades. To feel the soft earth under bare feet with the grass tickling my toes. This is the grass that survives and thrives, feeding the life around it. The cattle graze, and their weight harms nothing.

The farmers burn the fields in early summer as the Natives taught them, fighting fires and directing them through the pastures by batting the flames with old potato sacks. They look on the ashen fields, their shades of black and brown striking, but do not see devastation. This is the beginning of renewal. The roots of the grasses reaching depths of almost fifteen feet will quickly return with a green so saturated that it makes the sky seem more blue. The grass coats the hills as if the goddess painted them by hand. Even in the winter when the hills are covered in a blanket of snow, rabbit and fox tracks remind us that nature persists. I miss feeling in tune with it, like I belonged in the ecosystem. I was once a part of it. I was a part of the ever-changing, ever-growing resilient nature of the land. I welcomed the change of the seasons and the beauty it brought.

In the city, the change in seasons is nothing in comparison to the industrial landscape. The spring storms last through the early summer, dropping the frail limbs of ornamental trees onto houses, cars, and power lines. The pollen fills the air, irritating my sinuses. A few leaves fall but are soon swept away. When the snow comes, dirty slush builds on the roads and ice coats the sidewalks. In the city, nature is a burden. The light pollutes the sky and even the stars won't shine on this place. ♪



POST
NATURALISM

CADE YOSHIOKA

art by JACK GERALD

i. Contaminated

Air, clean & cool like the
first bite of honey-crisp
blue skies, unsullied
by smoke or smog

Or water; fresh snowmelt
mountain springs. We swam
lakes & creeks to bask
in our youthful squeals

let cold water fill
our mouths & nostrils,
kick back to the
surface, sputtering

or how fruit juices ran down
our cheeks & chins. We
made love to fruits with
salivated mouths

Black
is water, air, & fruit;
decades after
our inaction

fruits sit in neat rows
on dusty shelves
Organic is an expired,
dead word

replaced with pesticides

ii. Commodified

We touch fibers of
a succulent plant
to discover moss-green
plastic under fingertips

we're in Target, after all.
what else did we expect

It gets us thinking, though.

When did we last lay
in lemongrasses

Feel prickly pine needles
on our palms

In the seasonal section
plastic pines line aisle F45,
primed for a PVC holiday

Smell a rose bush

Pluck petals off dandelions
found along sidewalks

there's a bundle of artificial
sunflowers; \$3.99 or \$7.98 for two

for fabric replicas, each yellow petal
still appears to be wilting

"Made with love" reads the price tag



iii. Homogenized

Once, fields of plants
stretched to the sky,
arms of wheat & corn
swaying in a breeze

we ran through cornstalks,
heels over our heads
kicking up dirt & dust

corn with butter & salt
kernels stuck in our gums
that we picked at with
writhing tongues

Dark clouds swirled in later years;
swarms of locusts & beetles

it wasn't long before fields were
stripped brown, barren, bitter.

sweet corn tastes like styrofoam
strawberries miss their sugariness

asphalt paved over fields
for grocery store parking lots
we'll lay down on the tar
& melt like ice

we'll dream of cornstalks

iv. Mediated

Rainforests, thrum with life
lush & beautiful

a waterfall crashes white
water upon rock heads rubbed
smooth by friction & time

The television screen
flickers for a moment;
we sit, on edge.

David Attenborough continues, languidly narrating as images
of a rainforest flit across our screen

A green frog croaks loudly,
perched on a giant taro leaf

His song is distorted & crackles
in television speakers

with baited breaths,
we quake to hear his voice

sometimes, our quivered
throats warble the frog's melody

I just wish the world was twice as big and half of it was still unexplored





art by JORDAN ECKES

A SPOT OF WINDOW SHOPPING

PAVLE RADONIĆ

It's raining! It's pouring! Pelting down around lunchtime, just when a chap's tummy was a-roaring. But never fear! The 250m dash to the bus-stop from Block 2 at the back of the Haig—involving one little circuit out front of Block 9—provided excellent cover. Dry as a bone almost; piece of cake. Actually, rather like window-shopping in nature. A kind of nature, well-ordered and contained. Neat as a pin. Theme-park site of regularly razored hedges, fringe garden-beds, the little candy-colored plastic playground. The Malay gardening crew behind their umbrellas had grown as of late. A week ago, it came as a great surprise when the figure, usually snoozing hard against the wall in the corner behind her shield, turned into a tall, long-haired, almost ravishing beauty. Golly! Ripe for a rescuing prince. Her mother possibly joined their detail now, and two or even three others bunched together. Further along Indian lads were spread-eagled on their cardboard, their yellow Wellies upright beside them. Then, more Malays & Bangla for variation. Window-shopping the Third World, should you be interested; a zoo safari of cheap serfs. As usual, more than one group was taking their lunch on the brown grease-proof papers spread between their legs. (These people were in fact the reason for the spotless, litter-free grounds, the pasted-on perfection of gardens. Once or twice the poles and seats of the playground had been witnessed receiving a buffing.) Not an out-and-out monsoonal drenching this one, but not bad. Especially given the price of admission. ♡

Geylang Serai, Singapore 2011-25





art by JACK GERALD

PAUSING IN WONDER

MARTHA S. MITCHELL

The Sandy River dashes down Mt. Hood's sheer slopes, losing almost 12,000 vertical feet in a 56-mile run to the Columbia River's floodplain just east of Portland, Oregon.¹ In its last few miles, the Sandy carves a steep, deep gorge graced with conifers of staggering size—a wonderland of ancient woodlands living on into the twenty-first century. It's a sweltering August day, and I've gone to walk in this undisturbed forest along the wild and scenic Sandy to find respite and renewal.

The woods are cool. A slight breeze plays with the leaves of deciduous maples, cottonwood and the understory shrubs; causes the boughs of conifers to sway. Despite the bright day, sunlight barely lights the dusky forest floor, a place crowded with sword fern, oxalis, and huckleberry. In the distance, the Sandy whispers and chuckles through lazy pools and riffles, where soon salmon will return to spawn.

But something is amiss with the western red cedars here.² Clusters of leafless cedars stand dead and dying, oddly sparse and skeletal. Others appear sick: their tops have browned out, or their usually full, green and glossy sprays have become lean and orange. I'm confused, because this forest flourishes on a terrace of moist sand. It was laid down several centuries ago when a gaseous explosion on volcanic Mt. Hood caused rapid melting of headwater glaciers, sending a lahar—a concentrated fluid mixture of water, boulders, cobbles, gravel and sand—coursing down the mountain. When this admixture reached the canyon, it overtopped the river's banks and laid extensive terraces well above the Sandy's high-water mark.³ Even children know that sand is a wonderful aquifer. Remember digging down to moist soil only a few inches below the dry sandy surface? The interstices between every bit of this ground-up rock material hold water like a sponge.

¹ "Sandy River." *National Wild and Scenic Rivers*.

² "Western Red Cedar Dieback Project," *Tree Health Classification Field Guide*, June 2022

³ Martha Mitchell, "Morphology and Dynamics of the Sandy River at the Boat Ramp in Oxbow Regional Park, Final Report." ClearWater West, Inc. Portland, Oregon. December 2000.



The other conifers on the terrace are doing fine. So, it doesn't seem as if lack of water is causing mortality in the cedars. Conifers of great age and girth cling to the thin soils on the precipitous, rocky canyon walls above the terrace. It appears they, too, have enough water.

In the time since the lahar, the river has cut a slot through the terrace deposits. It has begun to exhume mature forests that were buried by that dramatic event. Ancient dead trees poke out of the sandy banks at the river's edge, telling a story I easily missed when I first came to this place. The fragile banks continue to slough with each season's high water, yet it hardly seems that downcutting would have drained the extensive sand terrace where a woodland flourishes.

Intrigued, I went home to query the situation online. Satellite photos show wasting and dead cedars throughout their range: from the northwestern Rocky Mountains in the US to the western cordillera of northern California, Oregon, Washington and southern British Columbia. The images are thickly dotted with the orange of dead cedars, like an angry rash among the green living trees.⁴

This is heartbreaking. Who has not paused in wonder at the beauty of a western red cedar's gorgeous, compact stance? It's a lovely tree; conical in shape, densely covered with down-sweeping branches thickly covered in fronds of glossy green, scale-like leaves. What lies within those clasping branches?

The ancient Greeks believed their gods directed spirit nymphs, the dryads, to take care of trees. The huntress Artemis, goddess of the moon, bade two forest nymphs to watch over the cypress, a conifer related to the western red cedar in the family Cupressaceae.⁵ The nymphs safeguarded this long-lived tree. One lived nearby in the forest, protecting cypress groves. The other was born and lived within the cypress itself and perished when it died. Ancient Grecian and Italian works of art depict the guardian nymphs as chaste and beautiful young women. No wonder the ancients associated the cypress with purity, longevity, and eternal life.

When I step into the old-growth forests along the Sandy River, I feel something of the presence of the nymphs. The air seems to sparkle and is imbued with a lightness, perhaps the pure, oxygen-rich exhalations of the living ancients. All worldly cares vanish, and for the long moments of my walk, my mind floats in a kind of celebration.

*What lies
within those
clasping
branches?*

4 "Western Red Cedar Dieback," Goodrich, Betsy (USFS R6), Fischer, Melissa (WADNR), Buher, Christine Buh (ODF), January 14, 2025

5 "Dryads, Nymphs of the Trees," Greenberg Mike, June 22, 2020.

Here is perfection, a companionable co-existence of myriad living and earthly elements sustained by sun and water. Birds are making their proclamations, the tracks of woodland creatures embroider the forest; even mushrooms, the fruiting bodies of fungi, signal that even underground all is well.

Western red cedar is the longest-lived among the conifer species in the region. Some are estimated to attain more than a millennium.⁶ The eldest cedars exhibit buttressed, massively fluted bases. Being often hollow at their cores, their precise ages can't be determined by counting the growth rings in the pencil-thin core samples obtained with an increment borer. The largest known (now deceased), on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, measured 121.8 feet in girth, a giant.⁷ It was even wider at its base, because tree circumference measurements are taken at breast height.

Here in the lush Pacific Northwest, the Pacific Ocean produces a mild and moist climate that nurtures dense coniferous woodlands in the Coast and Cascade ranges. During early Anglo exploration of the Far West, people took note of the extent, variety, and massive size of conifers flourishing in the West. Indeed, the seemingly endless supply of timber fueled settlement and nascent industries and at the continent's western edge. A wealth of firs, hemlocks, spruces, pines, yews, larches, and cedars beckoned logging magnates who had depleted the virgin stands of eastern woodlands. The newcomers found cedar invaluable as lumber for wet environments, decking, siding, shingles, furniture, carving, and myriad household uses. The need for ships' masts, mine shoring, lumber, charcoal and all manner of building supplies inspired the western reach of railroads (think also: railroad ties!) and the construction of sawmills.

But to the many tribes and Indigenous nations of people who had thrived in the Pacific Northwest for millennia, cedar enabled a bountiful culture. The abundant landscape they called home not only provided wealth from land-based ecosystems but from the ocean, estuaries, and rivers. The long, painstakingly carved cedar canoes made possible discovery, harvest, trade, and war along coastal and inland waterways. This wealth of resources empowered the Tlingit, Haida, and the myriad tribes of the Pacific Northwest to develop rich cultures. The people derived a great deal from cedars, the four species known today as Alaska yellow cedar, western red cedar, Port Orford cedar and incense cedar. The people wove intricate baskets from cedar roots, pounded its bark into articles of soft clothing, constructed plank longhouses of bark and straight-grained cedar boards, carved bowls and vessels of all kinds, fashioned oars, masks, and sophisticated works of art. Cedar fronds and sprays figured in rituals, dance, and medicine. Elk and deer browsed the cedars' lush foliage and protein-rich

6 "Western Redcedar (*Thuja plicata*)," Washington Department of Natural Resources.

7 Gene Woodwick, "The demise of the record-breaking Quinault Big Cedar," *The Daily World*, August 23, 2016.



cones, and in turn became valuable sources of protein for the people who hunted them. The Pacific Northwest was a veritable Eden in which all human needs were met, cultures flourished, and none of nature's bounty was diminished.⁸

Foresters and dendrologists are carrying out all manner of research to determine why the western red cedar is wasting: Is it a soil fungus, an insect, a disease? The University of Washington has initiated a citizen scientist program so that outdoor enthusiasts like me can aid in collecting data so these questions can be answered.⁹

Western red cedar prefers moist, but not wet soil conditions, although this species has been known to thrive in dryer sites and less-than-optimum soils.¹⁰ When I was working in the woods, I noticed cedar often occurs near the toes of slopes where downward-seeping groundwater provides optimal moist, but not wet conditions. Where my husband and I golf in the lowlands along the Clackamas River—another stream originating in the Cascade Range—cedars formerly thrived in the hyporheic zone there. This is the often-wide zone adjacent to channels that remains moist from groundwater, surface water, and seepage from the river. In an undisturbed landscape in the Pacific Northwest, streamside forests often thrive in such zones. At the golf course, sawn cedar stumps are plentiful here, some of great size. But fresh stumps, sawdust and piles of sawn cedar limbs indicate that others are being felled and removed, perhaps due to this curious wasting.

My forester friend tells me that a conifer of great age takes as long to die as to attain that age. Indeed, before its ultimate demise, the grand cedar on the Olympic Peninsula looked more dead than alive. It's many-branched top leaders were buckskin bare (barkless), yet a few limbs waved green fronds. It's a mind-bending proposition to envisage an ancient cedar living and dying in a single spot for well over a millennium. What weathers has it known, what changes have occurred in the biosphere around it, how many billions of cones has it released into the world?

Thus far, findings of research on the cedar's wasting have been inconclusive. The current thought is that climate change is a huge factor—not so much drought, but the heat associated with it.¹¹ Climatologists have observed that western Oregon has been in a drought condition for the past 20 years.¹² In the 2010s here in Portland, residents experienced 169 days of 90-degree F and higher temperatures. A few summers ago, we had heat in excess of 110 degrees for upward of a week. But we remember the rainy summers of long ago, when we had to cancel a July backpacking trip around Mt. Hood with the kids because of a drenching rain-

*This is like
an air lock in
a gas vehicle's
fuel system*

storm. One year, the weatherman announced the surest rain-free day of summer to hold an outdoor wedding would be August 17.

The shallow root systems of western red cedars are susceptible to heat.¹³ This makes them vulnerable to ground fires that consume shrubs and groundcover. Increasing drought and heat certainly increase the odds of cedar mortality due to such fires, but there is another threat. Like the leaves of all conifers, cedar leaves have tiny stomates (pore-like structures) that allow the escape of oxygen, a byproduct of photosynthesis. There is some thought that in our warming climate, plant moisture escapes during oxygen release. Capillary action draws fluids and nutrients upward from the roots in the xylem, a tissue in the living part of the tree just beneath the bark. If too much moisture is lost due to heat and evapotranspiration, the vital "pull" of capillary action can be broken. This is like an air lock in a gas vehicle's fuel system.

These days I notice declining cedars everywhere: on freeway verges, backroads, backyards, the slopes of Mt. Tabor Park just up the hill from my house, and on hikes in the Cascades and Coast Ranges. I suffer an unconsolable ache knowing this lovely tree is likely to become extinct in our lifetime, the lifetimes of our great grandchildren, or in the coming century. To see the western red cedar declining over its entire range is to know a grief unlike any other. One cannot look away or forget what one has seen. Yet, the tree that has enriched peoples' lifeways for thousands of years is slipping away in our warming world that can no longer sustain it. And the grief has already begun. ♡

8 "From Cradles to Coffins: Western Red Cedar, A Tree of Life," *Evergreen*.

9 "Native Use of the Western Red Cedar," *Lake Wilderness Arboretum*, 2016.

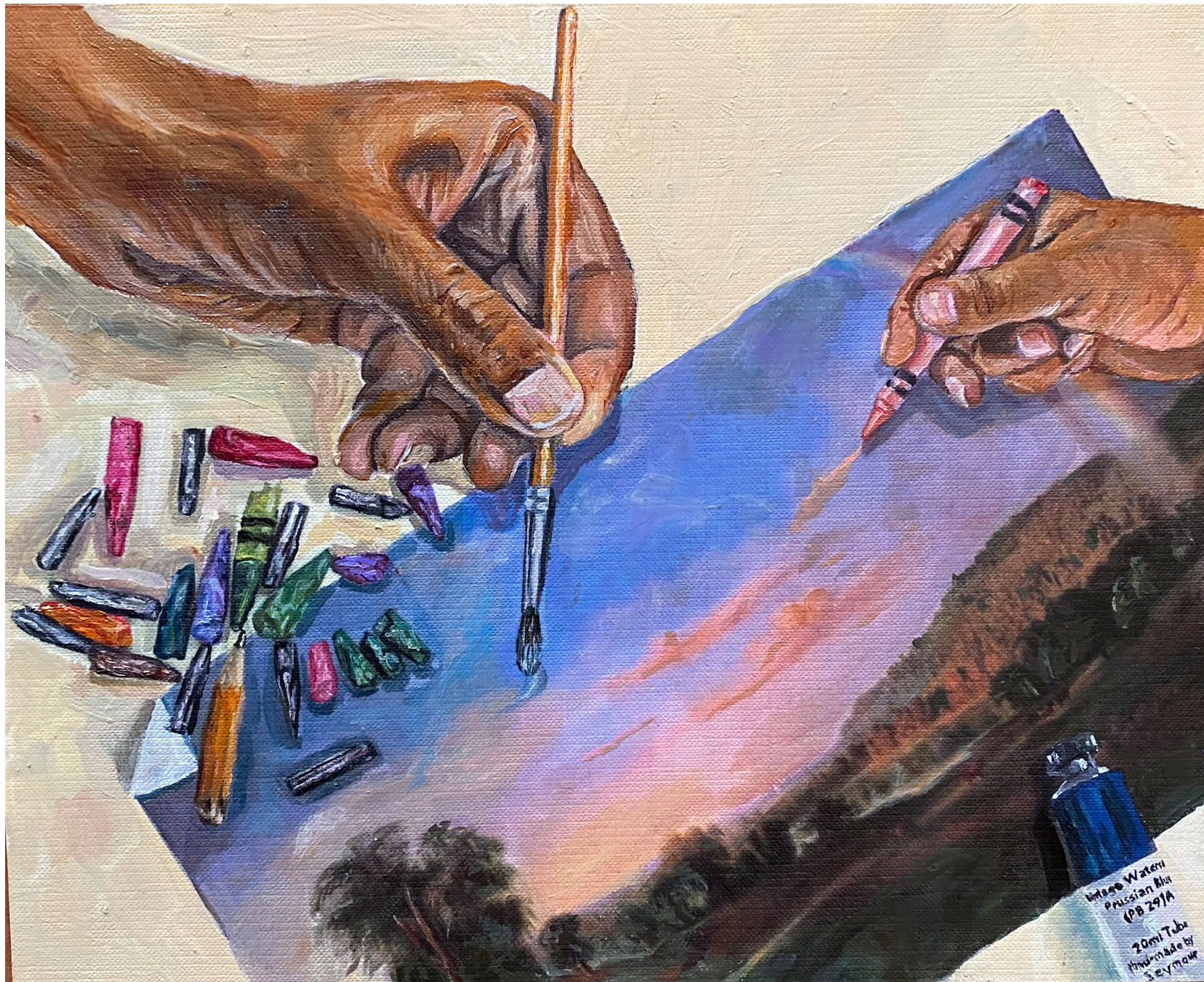
10 "Plant Guide: Western Red Cedar," United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service

11 Gaither, Angela, "The Impact of Heat: A Western Redcedar (*Thuja Plicata*) Case Study," (2022)

12 "Oregon Drought," Oregon Water Resources Department.

13 "Western Red Cedar," United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.





art by AMURI MORRIS

VERSATILITY IN THE SAVANNAH

SA'ID SABO

The sun hung low, projecting a warm, brilliant tone over the rambling savannah. This was my country, where generations of my family had resided and flourished. However, the once-unsurprising rhythms of life had been upset by a new, persistent power: environmental change.

I'm Sa'id, a pleased individual from the Nkosi clan in West Africa. My family and I had consistently depended on the land for our livelihoods. My dad, Nana, showed me the insider facts of our precursors—how to peruse the sky, anticipate the downpours, and grow crops that supported us. Yet, as I became older, I started to observe changes that my dad and his dad before him had never seen.

The blustery season, which used to be a lifesaver for our harvests, had become sporadic and capricious. In a few years, the downpours showed up later than expected, leaving our fields dried and crops shrivelled. In different years, they came too soon, causing floods that washed away our homes and yields. The sensitive harmony between nature and our lives had been disturbed, and our family was in good company in this battle.

One night, as my family gathered around the fire, my grandma, Ama, started to share her recollections of when our property was unique. She discussed rich woodlands that overflowed with untamed life, waterways that streamed consistently, and familiar, anticipated seasons. Her eyes shimmered with wistfulness, and I couldn't resist the opportunity to contemplate whether such a world could be seen once more.



As I became older, I comprehended environmental change both as a theoretical idea and as an unforgiving reality. The searing heatwaves during the dry season became more insufferable, making it harder to track down water for our steers



and ourselves. The recurrence of illness flare-ups among our animals expanded, compromising our fundamental source of food.

Our little town had forever been versatile, yet environmental change tried this purpose more than ever. We needed to adjust to new difficulties, tracking down imaginative ways of gathering water, safeguard our harvests from erratic climate, and teach the youth about the evolving environment. Our people's group pioneers asked us to establish dry spell safe harvests and investigate elective kinds of revenue sources.

Despite these endeavors, life became progressively troublesome. My more youthful sister, Nia, longed to become a medical caretaker; however, our family battled to pay for her schooling. My more established sibling, Kwame, who had once been the pride of the town as a gifted rancher, started to address whether he could continue accommodating our loved ones. The heaviness of obligation weighed heavily on my shoulders, watching my family struggle in our savannah.

In any case, it wasn't simply our town that was languishing. Across the mainland, environmental change was unleashing destruction. The Waterfront people were confronting rising ocean levels, dislodging families from their homes. In East Africa, delayed dry-spells and food deficiencies were driving individuals from their familial grounds. The impacts of environmental change knew no boundaries, impacting every one of us, from the savannahs of West Africa to the deserts of the Sahara.

At some point, a gathering of researchers and activists came to our town, wanting to report the effect of environmental change on nearby networks. They carried with them accounts of liquefying ice covers, increasing worldwide temperatures, and halting the out of control fires. Their words portrayed a world in emergency, a world that required critical action to battle environmental change.

I listened eagerly as they made sense of how industrialization and the consuming of non-renewable energy sources were emitting substances into our air, disrupting the ozone layer, and upsetting atmospheric conditions. They talked about the requirement for states and people all over the planet to lessen their carbon impression, progress to sustainable power sources, and safeguard our valuable natural assets.

Their message impacted me, and I understood that while our town could make changes to adjust to the evolving environment, it was the obligation of the whole world to address the underlying drivers of environmental change. I realized I needed to follow through with something, not only for my family and town, but also for the fate of our planet.

*We needed to
adjust to new
difficulties*

I joined a nearby ecological gathering, and together, we left determined to bring issues to light about environmental change and promote supportable practices. We coordinated tree-establishing efforts to battle deforestation and disintegration, showed our kindred residents economical farming methods, and campaigned nearby organizers to put resources into sustainable power sources.

It was a little step, yet it was a step towards a more maintainable future. Our endeavors started to prove to be fruitful as our town gradually adjusted to the evolving environment. I imparted the wisdom my dad had given to me of perusing the sky and anticipating downpours to the more youthful generations. Nia kept on chasing after her fantasy about becoming a medical caretaker. She comprehended that environmental change was an ecological issue as well as a danger to general well-being too. She joined a group of medical care laborers who made trips to distant towns, giving medical consideration to those impacted by environment-related illnesses. Kwame tracked down trust in maintainable agribusiness. He turned into a forerunner of local projects to develop crops that could endure the difficulties of environmental change. He tried new strategies for achieving this and shared his insight with adjoining towns, making plans towards strengthening cultivation practices.

Throughout the long term, our town finally started to see the rewards of so much hard work. Crops developed more plentifully, and the danger of a dry spell turned out to be less desperate. Rationing our water and safeguarding our current circumstance paid off. As a family, we had faced the hardship of environmental change; however, we realized that the battle was not even close to finished.

We kept working with the researchers and activists who had visited our town, upholding worldwide efforts on environmental change. We imparted our story to the world, trusting that our encounters would motivate others to make a move to diminish their carbon impression. Our little town in West Africa had turned into an image of strength and assurance despite a shifting environment.

As the years passed, I frequently ended up looking at the sunset over the savannah, thinking about the changes my family and town had endured. We had dealt with the unforgiving, real factors of environmental change directly and had arisen more grounded and joined together. Our association with the land and each other had developed, and we had discovered that our activities, regardless of how little, could have an effect.

Environmental change would continuously be a part of our lives. However, as of now, we were not uninvolved casualties. We had become fighters, not entirely settled to safeguard the land that had supported us for ages. My African family and I realize that our story was only one of many, a demonstration of the strength of networks all over the planet that were confronting similar difficulties.

I realized that our endeavors wouldn't be to no end. Yet again, with sincerity, information, and the common need to safeguard our planet, we could construct a more sustainable world for people in the future, where the sun would gleam on a flourishing savannah, and the land would be a wellspring of life and an expectation for all to uphold. ♡



STICK SHIFTING THROUGH HELL AND KANSAS

JOHN RENFROW

I've never owned a car that had air conditioning. In the swampy Ohio Valley I grew up in, this is basically a social death sentence. You show up everywhere sticky and smelly, your shirt stuck to your back and face as red as summer tomatoes.

God forbid you're due for a formal event that requires Sunday clothes, or you have to dress up for work. The trend is not only waning, but never really caught on for most Kentuckians. I wasn't so lucky.

"What happened to you?" they'd say at the office.

"Oh, nothing. I just drove here."

This led to the idea that I could never live in a humid place again. Now, in the Rocky Mountains, where shade actually brings the temperature down, the 500-some odd dollars it costs to fix the damn thing feels even more ridiculous.

Ideally, just skip the highway and tail cars down mountain roads decorated with generously shady trees, the air sweeping through fully open windows a sweet kiss of relief in a still too hot summer. But city driving is the same anywhere you go, and that's where I live. Amen, it's not humid.

This new reality of mine was well-earned, driving through what must be Hell in Kansas to get here. Not that Kansas itself is so bad. I'd passed through it before and thought people complaining about it en route to Denver needed to get over themselves.

"There's beauty in everything," I thought. The plains were new territory, an endless sky blending the horizon in a harmony of clouds painted orange and violet by the setting sun.

Then I did the drive a second time. They might have had a point.



An undeniable deal on a new ride found me back in Kentucky, which is farther than I'd like to go for a car, but I was wheel-less in the West. The city stretches on for miles, the country around it infinitely further, and used cars run high here. Not ideal. It was a green 1998 Honda CR-V, perfect for the mountains, with a hatchback for hauling, and tires that didn't cost the price of another car. Older, yes, but hell, it only had 150-something thousand miles on it.

No air, of course. That would have been too convenient for a 16ish-hour trek back to Denver. But it was April, so I figured the worst of the summer was still ahead of me. It was a manual, which I'd always avoided, but hey, the deal was *simply too good* (Tim Robinson voice).

With necessity being the best teacher, and with no patience to wait for hotter days, I took the old stick shift on the road before dawn. Getting to fifth gear, once I could get there, made the highway part, well, smooth as driving any car. It was the clunky up-and-down shifting between few and far between rest stops that humbled me. But I decided the old machine, nearly as old as I was, would be tamed; it's only muscle memory after all.

Eight hours in, the Green Bean was chugging along just fine. The last suburbs outside Kansas City were well in the rearview, and soon it was all road and sky, with the sun settling into the middle of the picture above between titanous thick white clouds.

Unfortunately, it was starting to cook in the cockpit when the afternoon temperatures arrived.

Music blasting, I tried to cut the whipping winds through my cracked windows. Hours of mind-numbing white noise with your music get old, but by two in the afternoon, it was 105 degrees (insulting for April). So you adapt.

One window, the passenger side, was growing more reluctant with my switch-flipping and slowed to a crawl in either direction. Not great. This conveniently coincided with the approaching countryside, on both sides of I-70, completely on fire.

Flat fields that were tannish brown the whole day were suddenly lit with flames and billowing smoke in all directions. An accident? No, the entire fields were burnt black. Controlled crop-burning? Maybe. But at 100+ degrees? A swirl of charcoal smoke and dust danced in the air, mingling with the heated wind. Between two fires, it was an unwinnable situation: breathe in this toxic shit or microwave myself with my windows up under an unforgiving sun.

Worse, glowing brake lights indicated I'd be in this hellscape for longer than I'd like, which, without A/C, was any time at all. Slowing to a near-stop, and I opted for half the windows up; the front ones, so smoke wasn't hitting me right in the kisser.

But, being the dumbass that I am, I rolled up the passenger side, which, stubborn and now comfortable, never went down again. Shit. This clunky old car had everything, but somehow Honda demanded that it have automatic windows. I punched

the radio off cursing at myself, Kansas, and God for placing me in this eclipse of events. Me, a damn fool for cheaping out, for not buying a different car with air, and for never having a car with it. Kansas, for being over triple digits in April and bleeping on fire, and God for allowing it to happen. I was having trouble "finding beauty" in this.

What turned into stop-and-go traffic forced me to get more comfortable with my new lower-gear friends. It took less than a day to learn manual, which is no fun on slow and crowded roads. Many stick drivers—a dying breed—wax about their vehicles and how they truly feel connected with them, as if moving the clutch an inch here or there makes them full-blown mechanics. While I'm happy to have learned this skill, I wouldn't mind doing it less. In this situation, an automatic (with air, please) would have been manna¹ from heaven. But we trudged along, car and self, in an overheating competition as the miles crept up. You could say I was warming up to the stick shift. You could say that, I wouldn't.

I almost pulled over as the temperature gauge on the dash inched toward H, which I knew stood for Hell. Finally, an exit sign screamed Hallelujah.

By the time I pulled into the first place off the ramp, a Wendy's, the engine was smoking and I was sweltering. I found a shady spot under a tree and popped the hood. Thank god the field flames weren't contagious, because the only thing I saw was smoke and oil. Time for an hour break, at least, and some coolant for us both. For me, that meant housing the best damn Frosty of all time.



The Green Bean made it to Denver just fine. We cooled off, waited for dark, and tried again. The window was stuck up, but that was manageable. I later found out the radiator hose, coolant hose, whatever it was (I'm a stick-shift driver, not a mechanic), wasn't carrying the antifreeze to the engine. That meant that the only time the car cooled off was when the passing air kept it cool, assuming it wasn't 100 degrees. But when you're driving through fires and hotter-than-hot sun rays, there's no keeping anything cool. I replaced the hose, and now she's cooler than a cucumber.

I didn't get the air fixed. But the passenger window motor is in the mail. I still don't blame Kansas, but more so the warming world and its unforgiving acceleration. But man, if there's a place that tests American optimism, it's Kansas. *Ad astra per aspera*, the slogan of the Sunflower State,² is how I remember it, though. "To the stars through difficulties" is the English translation, and it fits like a glove. Where else to look in Kansas, but up at that endless sky, where plush clouds shapeshift and travel across the state like we do. As night takes over, the stars—more than you've ever counted—bloom in the infinite night, unimpeded by city lights, stretching out into the universe. All this, served on a plate to Kansans and the state's wayward travelers. ✨

1 "Manna." Merriam-Webster Dictionary, September 28, 2025.

2 State Symbols USA, "Ad Astra per Aspera," *State Symbols USA*, April 13, 2017.





art by LINDSEY MORRISON GRANT

THE EARTH ON WHICH WE RESIDE

NATALIE JONES

Among the trees and the bees and eight billion people, eight billion eyes that can see, eight billion hands that grasp, hands that hold, hands that care, hands that kill, and eight billion hearts that feel, hearts that will break and ache and spill open, revealing themselves to the world. Eight billion feet pounding on the ground that is the grass that is the dirt that is the crust of the Earth, lying upon on the mantle, fused to our flaming core, spinning into an endless night forever falling through space as the Coriolis strains to hold us up, our weight woefully weighing us down, so as though one might think, how do we not fall?

But who pays mind to the workings of the world when to live on this rock is conflicting. To live on a rock seems such a simple thing, but to live on this rock is far more complex than anyone could ever comprehend. So, it may be requisite to go about your day quietly suppressing the ever-growing knot of paralyzing dread that is slowly sinking into your stomach and not think twice about the dizzying burdens of the world, forever spinning into oblivion. We often think only of ourselves for on this Earth we reside. However, there is another truth.

Among this Earth in which we inhabit, only a crumb of the clump of a septillion of cells belongs to us, only the smallest sliver of life is carved for us, yet we take it all, how avarice we are in claiming this rock to be ours and ours alone, for we are the greatest to ever rule on this rock. Yet upon this rock, we are perpetually pivoting deeper into a dark ignorance. We forget about the lives we cannot see, the hearts we cannot touch, the feet we cannot hear treading ever so lightly in the shadows below us. These lives that, in turn, keep us living for we could not survive without them, yet still we flaunt, we taunt, tainting the dirt beneath our feet until it is nothing but dirt indeed, striped of all that once made it whole, stripped of everything that made it alive, all so we can say it was I who made that footprint, it was I who suffocated the cells between my brazen boot and the unforgiving Earth striking over and over and over and over. If I remove my boots and walk freely with my bare skin against the bare Earth, will I even make a sound? For who would know of my existence, if I do not prove I am worthy again and again. We are only ever trying to prove ourselves in this impossible world.



Would the Earth not grow greener if everyone surrendered their boots? Let everyone tread blissfully over the greenest of grass, let the naked arches of our feet rest supported by the soil below, a billowing blanket of jade underneath our eight billion feet, the energy of the Earth flowing through us then seeping back into the entangled eddies of endless roots, steadying our mother Earth in her orbit, offering the smallest of a condolence for the suffering we have put her through.

They say the grass is always greener, yet we are the ones turning it all to dust, watching it crumble and dry into a splintered and broken land that has succumbed to drought, forgetting we are the cause. Forgetting we, too, are responsible for the upkeep of the Earth, for the preservation of the populations, including that of our own. For this is our role on Earth.

On this rudimentary rock on which we live, we all breathe the same air that slowly corrodes and erodes us from the inside out, until we are nothing more than the mere dirt we left behind. So, let us not forget to hear the hum of the harmony that hugs our world. Let us care for the creatures who crawl beneath the crushing soles of our boots, for they will survive longer than we ever will, burrowing into the Earth we have left behind, finding safety underneath the stripped land, long after we concede to the catastrophes we have created, choking on our own pungent pollution that wrings the oxygen from our lungs until the Earth claims us once again.

Orbiting into obscurity, with a narrowed and inevitably doomed ending such as this, we now have a choice. Will we surrender our brash and broken boots and let the Earth grow verdantly versatile once again, or will we simply succumb to our ignorance?

For this is the Earth on which we reside. ♪

CHANGING SKIES

PROSE CONTEST
SECOND PLACE WINNER



“Ring of Fire”
by Nat Sojka

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Thank you to the Program for Writing & Rhetoric for funding this contest.

Fall 2025 Editorial Staff



RING OF FIRE

NAT SOJKA



art by JACK GERALD

I first discovered the Earth was dying when I was nine years old. I came home from school one day to discover that our yard was being torn up by strange men that I didn't know. They were jamming their steel shovels into the ground, creating haphazard piles of dirt and chunks of grass around them.

"What's happening?" I asked my dad. Were they installing a pool? Did they discover precious minerals underneath beneath our feet? Were we making an underground bunker to survive the zombie apocalypse? All of these options seemed more plausible in my nine year old brain than my dad's sullen response. "We're in a drought, honey. We can't water our lawn anymore, so we're replacing it with decomposed granite."

Even though this seemed like a dramatic change to me at the time, the drought hadn't started that day. In the past year I had watched our luscious green lawn fade into a weed infested dull yellow rectangle. I noticed new signs being put up at the local athletic club to limit showering to five minutes or less. I listened to my teachers as they told us not to climb trees because many of their branches were dead and could break off at any moment. It turns out, my Southern Californian town was suffering from an extreme drought. Our main water source was a small lake, which at its lowest point was only at twenty eight percent capacity. I used to be able to see the lake in the faraway hillson my way to school every day, but the magical oasis in the distance turned into a small sliver of blue, and eventually it was out of sight completely.

The drought in my hometown was shortly followed by raging wildfires two years later. My parents were awoken by our neighbor pounding on our door in the middle of the night. "You've got to get out of here, there's a fire!" she shouted. My dad ran into my room and shook me awake. "You have ten minutes. Pack a week's worth of clothes and everything that is important to you. You might not see the rest of your stuff ever again." The urgency in my dad's voice scared me, and I frantically started throwing everything in sight into my suitcase. However, I was so worried about finding things in my room that were important to me that I forgot about the week's worth of clothes. I somehow only packed three single socks and forgot underwear completely, but I shoved every stuffed animal I owned into the trunk of our car. As my parents and I drove, we saw the sun slowly peak out over the horizon. The sunrise was beautiful—a deep red beacon of light accompanied by dusty orange clouds. But this beauty was distorted by fear. I clenched my teeth nervously as the sun began to illuminate my beautiful little town, now clouded by smoke.

*"We're in a
drought,
honey."*

*I grabbed a
plate and
headed over
to the grill*

My sixth grade class missed two months of school as the fires raged on. My parents and I were lucky enough to be able to stay with our cousins in Northern California, but some of my friends couldn't leave town in time. The wildfire had completely encircled our town, trapping everyone inside. Those who were trapped were forced to watch the flames creep closer and closer to their homes. One night during our evacuation my family and I went out to dinner at a steakhouse. A bell jingled as we pushed open the door and we were welcomed by the smell of grilled meat and the sounds of clinking dishes and friendly chatter. A speaker overhead blasted old timey music, and as we sat down in a booth, "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash came on. I felt like the catchy tune was taunting me. Eventually, after months of staying with the cousins, constantly checking the news for updates, we were given the all clear to return home.

The only thing scarier than evacuating from a fire is coming back home afterwards. As we drove through town, the putrid stench of smoke was so strong it was almost suffocating- even through my mask. Snowflakes of ash fluttered down from the sky forming swirly black shapes on our car windshield. The gorgeous hills surrounding our town once covered in mustard flowers, oak trees and wildlife of all sorts were now black barren wastelands. When we got to our street I held my breath in anticipation. I let out a sigh of relief when I saw our little blue house, now tainted gray with ash.

Others weren't so lucky. One of our family friends recently invited my parents and I to a party at her house that took her a painstaking five years to fully rebuild after it was burned down. I stepped into her yard. The air was filled with the clink of glasses, the laughter of friends, and the smell of tri-tip which was sizzling on the grill. Somehow our friend found an old jukebox and hooked it up to her patio outside. "Steak's ready!" our friend hollered to the crowd with a smile. I grabbed a plate and headed over to the grill, listening to Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" blast from the jukebox. ♪





art by IAN HALL

CHICKEN LITTLE²⁰¹⁶

GREGORY BELL

I meet him at a party thrown apparently
in my honor, but hey I'm happy to be
the excuse for canapes & wine

and a welcome bit of chinwag

So as guests filter in I am pleased to be
presented with the chance to meet new people
and the challenge to remember their names

And then I'm introduced to a climate scientist

who I am told will be on his way on the morrow
to a gathering of the Geophysical Union
in San Francisco.

That's when I confess

I am a climate alarmist

which is when he excuses himself
but I accompany him to the bar
and recommend a cabernet as I reach

to recharge my glass and pour one for him

I also confide I read the entire IPCC
report published y2K as a fundraiser
for Greenpeace



and he puts on a show of being engaged

but I see I'm losing him
so I cut to the bone of contention
telling him science & climate community

are losing the PR battle

and I think I know how to fix it

That's when I notice the beads of sweat
breaking out on his brow and his effort to flap
his sportcoat for more air and I quip

A bit of local warming, eh?

He gives a half-hearted chuckle but I buttonhole
him insisting I'll be brief *Here's the thing*
that's driving the deception: the fossil fools
fund their think tanks not only to deceive but to
tear apart your languaging! 'Global Warming? Here's
a snowball, Mr President, here's your

Global Warming! And the brainwashed doubters
chortle and applaud that bit of sophistry.
And as he nods and turns to leave

I buttonhole him again

'Climate Change, huh? Well of course the climate
changes alla time evruhbody knows that!'
And he nods and sweats and looks away

but I grab his shoulder: *Look, we know*
the difference between weather changes
and climate breakdown

I have a solution and I give it to you free of charge
no conditions no preconditions no claim
of ownership Use It Propagate It Call It

Climate Crisis

By now he's nodding agreement, but he's developed a tic
almost as if manacled invisibly forbidden to discuss the matter

with this mere wild-eyed *hoi polloi*

He leans to leave but I make my last desperate
appeal: *OK, I know you're under pressure*
to not sound like Chicken Little,

but you know and I know and your colleagues know
we're approaching total collapse and we have to
call it the Emergency the Crisis the Code Fucking Red it is

because the sky really is falling!

And that's when he wormed away

back to the party





art by JORDAN ECKES

MICROPLASTICS IN OCEANIC FISH POPULATIONS

WYLIE CORNISH

A bottle shatters against the rocks, brittle plastic splintering into the waves, breaking down against the immense power of the ocean. The currents push and pull, rubbing the fragments against the abrasive sand. After hours of torment, the tide recedes, carrying the particles out to sea. Here, these microplastics will begin their new life under roaring tides.

The deep blue waters of the North Pacific rise and fall under the beaming sun. A black cod trawls its native waters, scouting for something to eat. He aims at bright flashes of light and color, clear signs of bait fish.

His powerful body is quick to react, darting towards the flash. As he draws in, his jaw unhinges and snaps shut around the glimmering entity. The attack is successful.

As the fish swallows, the plastic slides smoothly down the digestive tract, settling into its stomach. Endocrine-disturbing chemicals (EDC) seep into the stomach lining, spreading through a vast system of capillaries. His heart pumps, the toxins circulating through his veins, rapidly infecting systems in his body.

As months pass, small growths begin to form on his fins. His sickly body fights to swim against the strong ocean current. He no longer craves to mate, his being consumed by floods of excess hormones. Deformed, senile, and sterile.

99% of all fish brought to market contain micro-plastics. This is the shocking reality of how widespread the effects of plastic pollution have become.¹ Forty percent of the surface of our ocean is swirling in microplastics² making it inevitable that fish and other marine life will consume these remnants.

These microplastics, less than 5mm in size, have created an ecological crisis in our oceans. Certain manufacturing processes leave plastics riddled with “forever” chemicals, never leaving the body, easily absorbed by fish, and the catalyst for a plethora of issues. Tissue damage, uncontrolled cell growth, hormone disruption, and infertility all carry on to future descendants of the species. Fish found to have ingested microplastics during the gestational phase had offspring with dwindling

¹ Summer D Traylor et al., “From the ocean to our kitchen table: anthropogenic particles in the edible tissue of U.S. West Coast seafood species,” *Frontiers in Toxicology*, vol 6, 23 December 2024.

² Tammara Davidon, “How Much Plastic is in the Ocean in 2024?” *CleanHub*, 5 Nov 2024.



sizes, depleted heart rates, premature death, and developmental imbalances.³ All of these effects poison the bloodline, spreading through generations of offspring. As these toxins kill and alter our fish’s reproductive cycles, we run the risk of losing whole populations of fish. This puts further stress on our ecosystems, harming more species along the way.

These effects impact you and me as well. Three billion people around the world rely on fish as a main source of food.⁴ It has become unavoidable not to consume the contaminated meat. As we ingest the tainted fish, chemicals seep into our bloodstream. While our larger size means that we need a sizable dosage of these chemicals to do major damage, the increasing levels of microplastics in these fish are accelerating these threats into real-world consequences.

The mismanagement of industrial waste is an extremely difficult problem to solve as it requires intense political intervention and lobbying to fix. Conversely, reducing the amount of consumer plastics in our oceans can be much easier to fix with an emphasis on public initiative.

More than half⁵ of all recyclable items are thrown away after a single use. From this alone, we can see that there are simple solutions to the consumer-side of this problem.

Many people choose⁶ not to recycle, simply because it is less convenient. An increase in accessibility would encourage people to change these habits and increase the amount recycled. Changing plastic bags and containers to compostable or recyclable materials can be extremely effective. Cutting down on single use bags can help reduce the amount of plastics turning up in our oceans, floating aimlessly around until mistaken for fish food.

While reducing ocean plastics may feel overwhelming, there are many people around the world taking action. Organized beach cleanups are yielding visible results. Fewer strips and fragments of artificially colored plastic scatter the sand. New technologies have begun removing plastics from the surface of our oceans and an increase in single use plastic bag bans have reduced the demand for them. People implementing conscious recycling in their own lives has shown great promise for fighting this crisis and reducing the amount of microplastics introduced into the environment.

The increase of microplastics in our oceanic fish populations is not just an environmental issue. It is a direct threat to our health. Continuing to ignore it only endangers the health of our loved ones, our planet, and ourselves. Next time you have the option to recycle, take it, don’t trade the health of our planet for convenience. ♻️

3 Jia Yi et al., “The Invisible Threat: Assessing the reproductive and transgenerational impacts of micro- and nanoplastics on fish,” *Environment International*, 2024.

4 “WWF Seafood Sustainability Overview,” World Wildlife Fund.

5 Leslie Kaufman, “Americans Throw 76% of Recyclables into the Trash,” *Bloomberg*, 10 Jan 2024.

6 Johnny Wood, “This is what stops people from recycling more, finds a global survey,” *World Economic Forum*, 18 Nov 2021.



CHANGING SKIES

PROSE CONTEST
FIRST PLACE WINNER



“Considering Clouds, and Other Works of His Fingers” by Cora Goodwin

Following acceptance into CHANGING SKIES, strong contenders were voted on by HINDSIGHT editorial team. These three winners were chosen for their articulation of our evolving reality.

Thank you to the Program for Writing & Rhetoric for funding this contest.

“Considering Clouds and Other Works of His Fingers,” by Cora Goodwin, is our first-place pick for the CHANGING SKIES Prose Contest. This piece explores nature in all its moving parts, from clouds forming in the sky to spiders spindling their webs. Connecting these phenomena speaks to the human experience, closing the distance that we often feel between ourselves and the natural world. Goodwin inspires hope by examining the sheer beauty surrounding us.

Fall 2025 Editorial Staff





art by ALLISON MURPHY

CONSIDERING CLOUDS AND OTHER WORKS OF HIS FINGERS

CORA GOODWIN

It was March, and I was knee-deep in academia.

The steady processional of the school year had settled into deep ruts and rhythms, and I found myself consumed by my coursework, by my education, by my goals.

In the rush of school, I'd forgotten what it meant to look at the sky. There wasn't much time for clouds when there was organic chemistry to learn, general chemistry to teach, and biology to consume. There wasn't even time to consider the loss.

The week before tender April began, school loosened its tight grip for one glorious week. Two of my best friends and I piled a tent, some books, a cooler of vegetables and rotisserie chicken, and three pairs of hiking boots into the back of an old Nissan Rouge. We headed west, just like countless Americans before us. We headed to California. Not in pursuit of glory or gold, but of seeing the salt flats and the ocean. Redwoods or bust.

We drove by many landscapes over the course of six days— the rocky canyons and towering boulders of Utah, the roaring ocean of biting Northern California, the frosty mountains and short bushes of Great Basin National Park.

We weren't in pursuit of much more than the thrill of being 19 and on a vast road in the middle of nowhere. We reveled in our adventure, lying in the middle of the loneliest road in America, doing cartwheels and running and jumping across the thick yellow lines. We picnicked and we hiked, licked peanut butter off of our fingers and napped on the cold shores of Clam Beach.

In my escape from Boulder's confines, we saw a side of America entirely foreign to us, and I began to reclaim something lost long ago.

Something about the unbelievably great expanse of the Earth, slowly creeping in. Something about life being more than a letter, than a series of exams.



We awoke on a dark, black Sunday morning, determined to see stars and the quiet emergence of sweet sunlight. Clouds coated the horizon, too thick to allow the soft light of gas giants millions of miles away to reach our eyes. But we had each other, and we had the rays of sun as the clouds turned scarlet.

It seemed only fitting that in the spirit of adventure, after witnessing something so lovely, we should seek out a church. A 20-second google search had us driving the hour and a half to the middle of a ranching country, smack dab in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing but a few scattered houses dappled across the vast plains, distant pinpricks from our position on the dusty road.

The church itself was quaint. Twelve members, old wooden pews, and the deep rhythms of people who know each other intimately. We were impossible to miss—three young women, fresh off the old highway. Who were we, where were we from, where were we going? What was college in Colorado like? Would we like to join for Sunday supper after church?

We learned what it was like to ranch, to live and eat and breathe your rugged terrain. We heard life stories from a woman a decade ahead of us and from someone in their seventies. We listened to old Pastor Jack tell us about God and listened to the hymns accompanied by the strumming of a weathered guitar.

There was a guestbook on the table in the entrance, and it struck me. This small church, with twelve attendees and a four hour voyage to the closest city, had a guestbook. How strange, that even in the middle of nowhere, people can hope and expect strangers, and even stranger still, that strangers will come.

We were amazed. We had been asked questions because the people had wanted to know us, welcome us, make us feel loved. We were invited to lunch at one of their houses, prayed for during the sermon. Whatever we had expected, it wasn't the kindness that had been lavished upon us.

"There are people here," my friend Sarah finally said, the shock clear in her voice.

She, just like I, had forgotten the world was bigger than the University of Colorado Boulder. She had forgotten that people continue to exist and live and breathe and love outside the confines of our college experience. Whether we ever thought of it or not, people eat and they drink and they die across the world, just as human and full of complexity as any one of us.

There are people there, at Diamond Valley Baptist Church. There are lives there, beyond the invisible curtains of Boulder. Every corner of the Earth, full of beauty, in all its people and all its rugged coastlines.

The world is a vast, vast place, if only you take the time to explore it.



Eventually, we arrived at what felt like the crux of our trip, the Redwoods. On the advice of a young park ranger, we headed to a four mile trail in the hopes we'd see flowers, even in the chill of early spring.

There didn't seem to be a single other soul that entire afternoon. In all the miles we wandered, the only signs of life were the brilliant hues of green and our own soft footsteps. The forest itself

was silent. No wind, no birds, no voices. It was all around us, constantly, that lack of sound. And yet somehow the complete quiet was not ominous or lonely or anticipatory. It held no animosity, no hidden agenda. It simply was. There wasn't anything the forest needed to say, to tell its three young visitors. Its existence was enough.

In every direction we were surrounded by the color of life. Among the branches of every wonderful tree, explosions of the hue. Along the path, a hundred leafy ferns the color of polished agate. Green clovers bigger than I've ever seen, moss along every russet trail, and clustered among the roots, sprigs of small saplings a couple hundred years away from the sky.

Nothing but blue atmosphere, brilliant swaths of soft leafy greens, the deep auburn of tree trunks, and the calm silence.

There was only an ancient forest and three young women.

We craned our necks to try to see the waving tree tops, wrapped our small mortal arms around trunks to try to understand their diameter. We, of course, couldn't cover a fifth of those great trees with our little bodies. The trees towered over us, steady, soaring, and incomprehensible.

The familiar scenery of Colorado, of rolling foothills and short pine trees, the place I'd spent my whole life, was nowhere to be seen in the gaps between ancient trees. Here was I, surrounded not by mountains but by an entirely different kind of giant. How vast the Earth is, to be made of so many different kinds of landscapes. I had been so silly to act like Boulder was all there was. A thing I had always known, and yet somehow I had completely forgotten. There is a stark difference between knowing a thing and seeing it with your own eyes, standing on it with your own feet.

It is easy to pretend to understand something when you remain in one place. You cannot realize how small your view is until you come face to face with a Redwood, with a human being in rural Nevada.

Our wanderings continued, joyful and listless, before we stumbled upon something we had probably already passed a hundred times. A small black spider, intricately spinning itself a web. Perfectly spaced, wonderfully geometric, still and silent and innate. It stole our breath away. It was almost divine and holy, this little organism somehow creating silk from carbon and carefully tethering it to the small branches. How? we murmured to one another. Our exuberant laughter was lowered to whispering now, not one of us daring to break the consecrated stillness. Where does the silk come from? How does it know to space its web so perfectly?

It was a small creature, methodically skittering across its webs before expelling more from its shiny abdomen. Its web was so thin that a blurring of the eyes had it disappearing entirely, a faint breeze making it indiscernible. The spider kept building, oblivious, knowing only that there were branches to connect and flies to catch.

Slowly, quietly, watching that spider delicately maneuver in symmetrical perfection, taking the time to pause and consider and believe, something stirred in my calloused heart.

Questions, of a multitude unrivaled since early grade school, gently emerged in my head. From the quiet depths of enchantment, old friends lost long ago to the formality of schooling began to reemerge. Wonder. Curiosity. Poking their heads out of the sand they'd harshly been buried in during high school.



And still we watched and murmured quiet woah's.

There is something about nature, about its intricacies and deep beauty, that points to something greater, something divine.

We had gone to a church in Nevada to meet God, but here He was, in the middle of a forest, in a small spider and its gossamer web.

There is infinite complexity in an organism as small as a spider. A startling cascade of proteins, of DNA unraveling and being transcribed, of cells moving and multiplying, carrying oxygen and killing foreign microbes. Chemical reactions converting sugar into energy and water, every molecule composed of atoms and electrons and quarks, every neuron that fires and muscle fiber that tightens obeying the laws of physics. All of it contained in something so often overlooked and ignored.

If only you stop to think, and look, and wonder.

What truths could be learned from the spider, what secrets discerned from its web?

Curiosity is an odd thing. It is a thing we attribute to children, that we deem simultaneously endearing and annoying. Children constantly ask why, wonder how, question the reasoning of a thing. Adults, of course, are supposed to know. To be wiser and older and more well-read.

But how silly, when there are spiders beneath our noses and the pull of gravity upon our feet. When there is the inexplicable movement of tectonic plates, mating dances of birds, the ability of one cell to become two then four and eventually an entire being. Everything is so complicated, so curious, begging to be looked at.

Mother Nature stands at our doorstep, waiting for us. I think she holds deep truths about the nature of the universe and our place in it, if only we bother to ask her.



We found ourselves on the shore as crashing waves pummeled the cold, gray sand.

"Wow!" Sarah shouted. She was jumping up and down, as if she had never seen water before, as if the ocean had only been a fictitious imagining until this moment.

No matter that she had seen it tens of times before. No matter that there are hundreds of beaches more beautiful than that dull one. There is something about earnest curiosity that changes a person.

"Wow! Wow!" She cried again. "How does it do that? That's all water! Look! It just keeps coming!"

"It's just hydrogens and oxygens bonded together," I said. "Can you believe that, two atoms making up all of this?"

"Think about how many molecules there must be to fill the whole ocean," Karina added.

"Wow!" Sarah repeated.

The waves continued to crash into land, pulled by the moon, commanded by forces I cannot pretend to understand.

The beach itself was littered in dead clams and pebbles, hundreds and hundreds of pebbles. From afar, they were the same cold gray as the nondescript sand and the chilly sky. While Sarah

and Karina slept, I wandered along the beach, picking up stones as I went. They were round and seemed smooth. Particles of sand and dust clung to them, and I could feel the small granules as I rolled them between my fingers. They were dull, almost colorless.

But the moment they touched the sea, they turned green and purple and honey-brown. It was a game now; I picked up more and more, holding them in the cold water, watching them transform from drab stones to rich, complete, beautiful works of art.

They say rocks become more colorful in rippling water because their small cracks get filled by water and smoothed out, so that there is a cessation in the initial scattering of light and a shift to consistent reflection. There is suddenly a unified direction of light rays, and the true colors of the pebble, no longer muted by the pocked imperfections coating its surface, emerge.

The rock's blemishes are covered and filled by living water, and the rock turns marvelously back to its intended color as it is made whole.

It's a beautiful thing to witness.

It turns out that the stones I held, despite my perception of their smoothness, were anything but. They too held cracks and crevices and pits and holes, impurities that caused light to scatter in all directions. It didn't matter that I hadn't noticed it at first. Some cracks aren't as apparent as others.

But the water rushes to the shore, covering the rocks all the same, and I saw the ones embedded in the sand turn golden amber and dark olive, just like the ones in my palm. A multitude of rocks, made of a hundred hues, all washed clean by the ocean.

Stones and spiders and strangers in churches.

There are many lessons to be learned the moment you take the time to stop and look. At a tree stump, a grasshopper, a new person. It's all so complicated, the interconnected nature of things, the biology and physics underpinning our reality. There is so much beauty waiting to be explored in the people we meet and the organisms we encounter.

I learned this looking at Lake Tahoe, tasting the tangy crystals of the Bonneville Salt Flats, and staring at an arachnid.

The world is full of profound, resounding beauty that echoes in all its small corners and facets, in gargantuan canyons and the tips of bird wings.

Maybe it's all here for a reason. Maybe we aren't meant to be consumed by careers and educational choices, by the march of progress or tantalizing lure of success. Maybe the greatest lessons that can be learned are found out there, among the unfamiliar, the new, the things that wait for our attention.

Maybe there's something more to all of this. ✨



CONTRIBUTORS



art by JACK GERALD

GREGORY BELL authored *Looking for Will: My Bardic Quest with Shakespeare* and two award-winning plays. Honors include the 2019 Kowit Poetry Prize & 2023 Helen Schaible International Sonnet Prize. He facilitates Green Poets Workshop at Beyond Baroque, Venice, CA, is recently published in *Scientific American*, *Gaia Lit*, 'In the Black /In the Red' Anthology, *Helicon Nine*, and *Changing Skies*. He also has a poem on the moon with NASA's Lunar Codex Project.

TINA CARTWRIGHT (she/her) is a neurodivergent writer and language teacher living on Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung lands. Her manuscripts were longlisted for the Michael Gifkins Prize for an Unpublished Manuscript in 2023 and 2024. In 2025 she was a finalist for the Tasmanian Writers' Prize, longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and Highly Commended in the Boroondara Literary Awards. She is appearing at the 2025 Emerging Writers Festival.

JHILAM CHATTARAJ is an academic, critic, and poet. Her books include *Sudeep Sen: Reading, Writing, Teaching* (2026), *Noise Cancellation* (2021), *When Lovers Leave and Poetry Stays* (2018) and *Corporate Fiction* (2018). Her works have appeared in journals like *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Colorado Review*, *One Art*, *Mekong Review*, and *World Literature Today* among others. She was nominated for the Nina Riggs Poetry Award, 2023. Presently, she teaches in RBVRR Women's College, Hyderabad.

HEATHER CORL is a visual artist and author passionate about character-driven storytelling through writing and expressive illustration. Corl explores the intersections between people and the environment, emphasizing small moments reflecting larger truths. Inspired by the natural beauty and chaos of everyday life, she seeks to capture the feeling of being alive in a constantly redefining world.

WYLIE CORNISH is a Mechanical Engineering student at CU Boulder who recently discovered a passion for writing through his Writing on Science and Society class. Born in Colorado, he is a dedicated nature enthusiast who cares deeply about the environment. In the future, he hopes to apply his engineering skills towards sustainability.

Born and raised in Salem, Oregon, MICAELA EDELSON is a writer, traveler, and environmentalist working to make meaning in a chaotic world. She has lived in Pennsylvania, Colorado, England, Germany, and now Iowa. Her work has been published in a variety of journals and magazines, including *The Washington Post*, *Edge Effects*, and *The Brussels Review*. She is a candidate for an MFA in Creative Writing and the Environment from Iowa State University.

KALLE FOX is a writer and land steward. Influenced by her academics in Anthropology and Environmental Studies along with her stewardship career in Montana, her writing connects her surrounding landscapes with universal elements of the human experience. Her work has been featured in *Sage Magazine* (Yale School of the Environment's literary journal), *Deep Wild Backcountry Journal*, and *The Travel*. She is looking for new adventures and inspirations.

JOANNE FURIO is a writer of creative nonfiction, an award-winning journalist, and a former Bridge-and-Tunnel girl who has been transplanted to Berkeley, California. Her personal essays, author interviews, and reviews have appeared in publications such as *Believer*, *Panoply*, *Craft Literary*, *Juked*, *Cumberland River Review*, and *Open: Journal of Arts and Letters*. At *Berkeleyside*, an online news platform, she writes about books and culture. She received an MFA from Saint Mary's College of California in 2016.

CORA GOODWIN is a senior at CU Boulder studying Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology and Neuroscience. When she isn't memorizing a list of transcription factors for class, she can be found staring at a sunset or baking cookies. Cora loves to consume stories and consider the intricacies of Earth. She loves traveling, floor time, a good hymn, and adores nothing more than spending time with those she loves.

JACKIE HERBACH has been writing since she was a child. She is from NYC and is working on a memoir about growing up in Manhattan. Herbach has been published in *Oddball Magazine*, *Nifty Lit*, *Tangled Locks Journal*, *Accidental Magazine*, and Wild Sound Writing Festival. She currently lives in Pennsylvania. Jackie is also an actor and has performed in theatre and film productions.

COURTNEY HITSON teaches English at the College of the Florida Keys. During 2024, she received three Pushcart nominations for her poetry. Outside of writing, she enjoys scuba-diving, freestyle unicycling, and philosophy. Courtney and her husband Tom (also a poet), reside in Key West, Florida.

TAYLOR LOHMAN is a senior at CU Boulder, studying Integrative Physiology, with a minor in Sociology and a certificate in Public Health. She is focusing on pursuing a career in medicine while furthering her knowledge of human connections. She loves reading, hiking, and traveling the world. Much of her inspiration comes from nature and the connections that it has with people and their behaviors.

While working for the US Forest Service locating roads for timber sales, MARTHA (MARTY) MITCHELL developed an interest in erosion, which eventually led to her career as a consulting physical geographer focused on water resource protection. She is a poet, long-distance walker, and musician living in the Pacific Northwest. Excerpted essays from her book-in-progress, *The Lost Sierra*, have appeared in *Heimat*, *Meadowlark*, *The Guilded Weathervane* (Farm Girl Press), *Haymaker*, and *Prairie Fire*.

An Australian writer of Montenegrin origin, PAVLE RADONIĆ spent ten years living in SE Asia, from where a disproportionate number of his publications derive. Recent work has appeared in *Sagebrush Review*, *QU Literary Magazine*, *Hobart*, and *New World Writing* (*Post Road Magazine* forthcoming).

JOHN RENFROW is a journalist and creative writer living with his fiancé in Denver. His works have been featured in the *Golden Transcript*, the *Canyon Courier*, the *Westminster Window*, the *Northglenn*



Thornton Sentinel and more. He’s likely working what he hopes to be his debut novel or hooked to a TV screen watching sports with his cats.

WRITER SHELLI ROTTSCHAFER lives in El Prado, New Mexico, and Louisville, Colorado, with her partner, Photographer Daniel Combs, and their Pyrenees-Border Collie. Shelli completed her doctorate in Spanish from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque (2005) and her MFA in Creative Writing from Western Colorado University, Gunnison (2025). Her published prose is in *Crab Creek Review*, *Campfire Stories: Santa Fe & Taos, New Mexico Wild*, and *Voices Elevated: Elk River’s 10th Anniversary Anthology*.

SA’ID SABO is an electrical engineer by training but does not restrict himself to the field. He is involved in public speaking, writing, business, project management, and traveling. He obtained his master’s and bachelor’s in Electrical and Electronic Engineering from University of Benin and Bayero University Kano. He joined the services of the Nigerian Navy in April 2011 and has served onboard various naval ships and shores. These include Naval Shipyard Limited, NNS NWAMBA and NNS THUNDER, among others.

NATALIE SHAHINIAN-JONES, author of “The Earth on Which We Reside,” is an undergrad at CU Boulder studying English Literature and Environmental Science. This is her first journal publication. Through her work, she hopes to raise awareness about important topics such as climate change. In her free time, Natalie tutors at the CU Writing Center and enjoys reading.

KAY SMITH grew up in the Flint Hills of the Kansas Prairie and now lives in the Kansas City, Missouri area. She lives with her husband in Platte City, Missouri. She is currently studying creative writing online at Columbia College of Missouri and hopes to continue on to a masters in Library Studies. Writing has been an important part of how she processes the world and her place.

NAT SOJKA is a sophomore at CU Boulder. Originally from Ojai, California, Sojka now studies Spanish and Ethnic Studies along with an Art minor. Sojka loves hiking, spinning fire poi, drawing, reading, and playing the drums. Sojka has always loved writing, but he is new to creative nonfiction, and this will be his first publication.

SIMON UNGLAUB is a senior majoring in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at CU Boulder. Despite plans to go into Public Health as a career, he keeps his passion for writing as a hobby and has trudged through writing a novel since high school.

CADE YOSHIOKA is an emerging poet from Castle Rock, Colorado and is currently an MFA student in poetry at Queens College in New York. His work often centers on Queer and bi-racial identity, themes that are heavily influenced by Japanese folklore. His other notable publications can be found in *Hindsight*, *Beyond Queer Words*, and *The Panacea Review*.

Undergraduate students at
the University of Colorado Boulder
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from around the world in two annual volumes,
HINDSIGHT and CHANGING SKIES: A NOD TO THE
NATURAL WORLD



Our parent title suggests reflection and looking back, while
our logo and colophon—a “hind,” or female red deer— center this
publication in the environment.
Both our titles publish creative nonfiction grounded in
memory, movement, and the stories we carry.



SUBMISSIONS

We read year round through Submittable, charging no fee, and review both simultaneous and multiple submissions. Accepted work may appear in print and online, or as online-only exclusives. We give all writing a first read by blind review from at least three staff. Once writing receives high enough scoring to be included in our long list, we then choose writing to achieve a mix of roughly 60% to 70% from international contributors, with a reserve of about 30% to 40% of work by students of the University of Boulder Colorado (never active staff or teachers, and only after initial blind review).

While we cannot offer payment outside of our competitions, we send print copies to all published contributors. We also distribute print copies annually at AWP conferences, and locally from our home at the University of Colorado Boulder. We publish both our print titles annually: HINDSIGHT Creative Nonfiction each Spring, and our themed journal, Changing Skies: Writing Through the Climate Crisis, each Fall. All of our issues are available for free online.

Although we keep our Submittable open year round, we read for each journal up to a month or two before printing that title; our response time can therefore take up to ten months (if for a title not next in line to our printers), though we try to respond more quickly. Queries will only be read via Submittable, and we ask for at least three months before your query—unless you publish all or part of a submission elsewhere, in which case we want to hear from you immediately.

Art submissions are not quickly rejected in most cases; we may hope to use your work in any future issue or online (and if so, also in marketing materials) unless you opt out of this or withdraw your submission. We're happy to keep art in line for consideration, but if eventually you prefer to withdraw a submission, please contact us via Submittable for this.

For all submissions, please send only unpublished work (including nothing published by yourself in any way, including on social media), and please withdraw anything accepted elsewhere immediately. We obtain First North American Serial Rights, and we do not consider anything—writing or art—generated by AI. For the best idea of what we publish, read this issue and those that preceded it (on our website—back to 2013) for more great creative nonfiction and art.



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art by THOMAS MORGAN

