HOLD THE WORLD
LIKE A CHILD WHO HAS
FALLEN ASLEEP
ON YOUR CHEST
AND BELIEVE,
AGAINST THE ODDS,
THAT WE CAN STILL
LEARN HOW
TO HOLD ON TO
WHAT MATTERS.

— NOW YOU SEE THEM, LISA BRODSKY

CHANGING SKIES

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

CREATIVE NONFICTION

2026

THE PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC

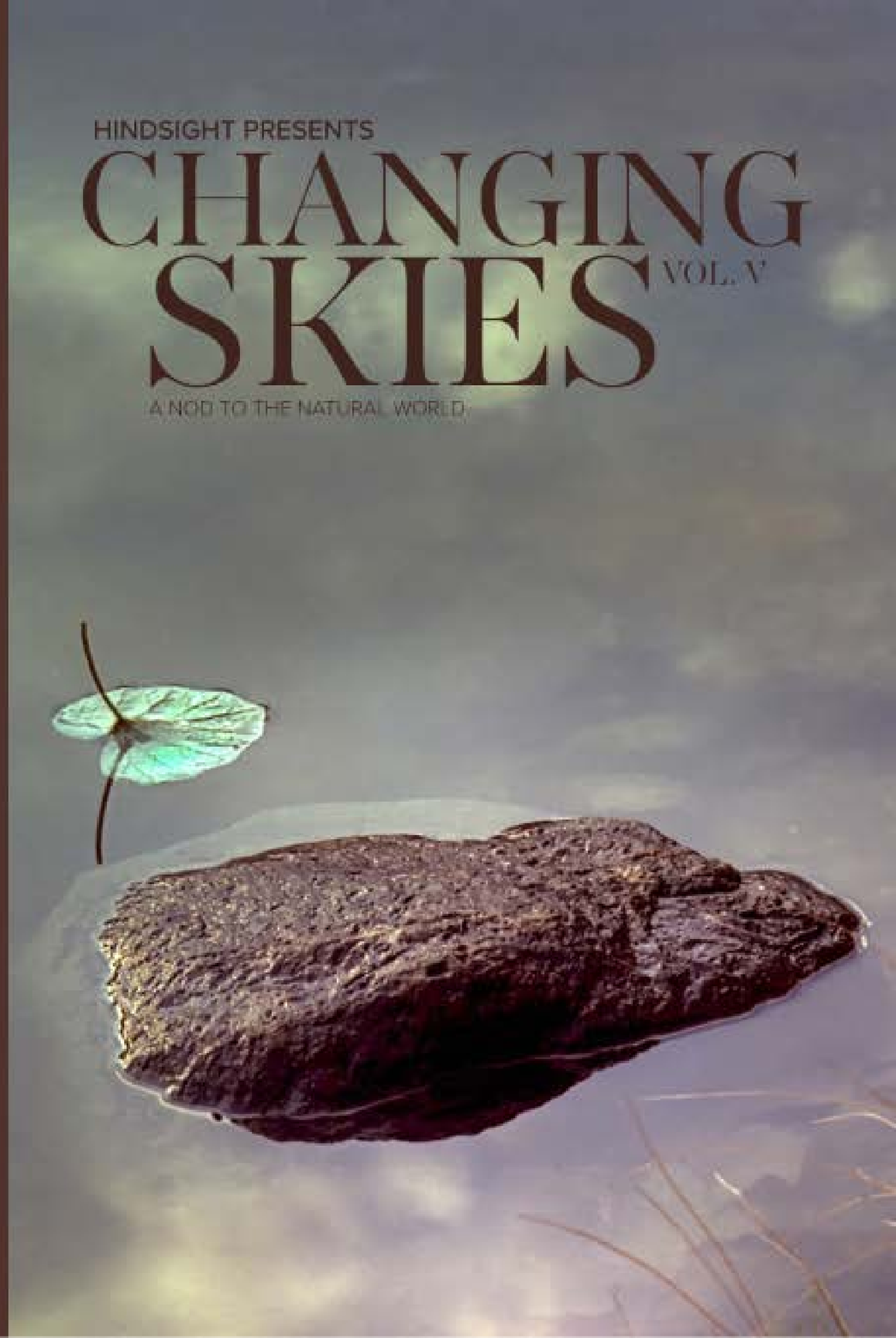
CREATIVE NONFICTION

HINDSIGHT PRESENTS

CHANGING SKIES

VOL. V

A NOD TO THE NATURAL WORLD



HINDSIGHT PRESENTS

CHANGING SKIES

creative nonfiction

2026
VOLUME FIVE

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Cover Art by Willy Conley

FROM THE EDITORS

CHANGING SKIES publishes creative nonfiction with a focus on environmental writing. As humans, we have complicated relations with the natural world and often forget, even walking through a city, we still live within nature. This fifth edition of CHANGING SKIES features authors mining for facets of life otherwise undiscovered. We reflect here on the simpler, more mundane aspects of environment.

HINDSIGHT CREATIVE NONFICTION, our parent journal, succeeded our first title in 2013: JOURNAL 2020. Both of those titles regularly included what we then called sustainability writing, sometimes with contests. In 2021, Scott King's Mission Zero initiative sought to help University of Colorado Boulder students fight climate change, with donations for everything from environmental engineering projects to business startups. Beyond offering more sustainability contests open only to CU undergraduates, we gratefully worked with Mission Zero funding to create our new title, CHANGING SKIES. Now both our themed and general creative nonfiction publishes to readers around the world and features international writers, alongside students at CU Boulder.

Our contributors take a sharp eye to the human condition and find themselves intertwined with the earth in ways that move beyond the obvious. The pieces in this issue look for connection to urban landscapes, expanding our view of what nature can be in the 21st century, and develop intimate relationships with often-overlooked parts of our changing world. CHANGING SKIES grasps at these complicated affinities to inspire the reader through the natural upheaval of our landscape that seems so constant.

We would like to thank all of our contributors, writers, and artists. You are the ones who bring this journal to life. And to our readers, we would not have CHANGING SKIES without you. Please enjoy.

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CONTENTS

NOW YOU SEE THEM 3
LISA BRODSKY

CHANGING SKIES WRITING CONTEST THIRD PLACE WINNER
WILD IRIS 13
LUKE SWANSON

DEEP JOY 18
SOPHIE KVARATSKHELIA

ROCKY MOUNTAIN LOW 21
JAKE O'DONNELL

CHANGING SKIES WRITING CONTEST SECOND PLACE WINNER
SUBWAY COYOTES 28
CHARLEY HYDER

THE TROUBLE WITH INVISIBILITY 35
RHONDA WATERHOUSE

FRAYING TENDONS 45
KARA LEFEVRE

ON ME DIT 48
TRINA GAYNON

CHANGING SKIES WRITING CONTEST FIRST PLACE WINNER
RUN LIKE THE BISON 50
CHRISTA FINLAY

THE LITTLE ASSHOLE PRINCE 59
JOEY DAMIANO

WRITING

OCTOBER IN YOSEMITE 67
MICHAEL THEROUX

BIOSPHERES 70
ANNE BABSON

MORE THAN ONE KIND OF EDEN 72
MARA ADAMITZ SCRUPE

BRUSH 87
MARTHA MITCHELL

BIRDS, DEATH, &c 91
COLLIN VAN SON

LAND AND LABOR 99
TULASI ACHARYA

OWL DREAMS 105
SEAN STINY

CONTRIBUTORS 108

ARTWORK

MICHAEL C. ROBERTS
v
ix
12
114

RICHARD HANUS
2

PENG QI
18-19

KATHRYN CASTANOLI
20
66-67
72-73

DAN SWAIM
28-29

CLARISSA CERVANTES
34

KATLIN RISEN
44

ALPHIE BLAND
49

ALLISON NOWELS
51

DONALD GUADAGNI
58

PAXTON SANDOVAL
70

MICHAEL ROGNER
86-87

JERI LEWIS EDWARDS
90

LUKE SWANSON
98

SEAN STINY
104

WILLY CONLEY
108-109



art by MICHAEL C. ROBERTS



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NOW YOU SEE THEM

LISA BRODSKY

Bedtime in our house was often a chore.[1] After a particularly long day at work, I found myself lacking the enthusiasm to read the same stories we have read about six hundred times each. As a mom of four boys, I had developed the art of making things up over the years, and I asked, "Have I told you the story of Sheema and Teemu?" I had no idea where those names came from, but they seemed to grab their attention, and Ryan and Dylan climbed into bed right away and looked at me with anticipation. The story I crafted quickly was about two naughty male polar bear cubs, who, of course, did not always listen to their mother.

I spun them a tale modeled after the incident earlier in the week when I found them sledding down the massive hill on a snow pile left by the snowplow driver in our side yard, next to the road. It looked like he must have taken every flake from the cul-de-sac and piled it onto my yard. The hill was probably close to fifteen feet high. That morning, I had dressed the kids up in snowpants, boots, hats, and mittens and told them to stay out of the street. I checked on them from time to time through the window and watched amusedly as they built a snow fort. The next time I looked outside, they were sledding down the hill directly into the cul-de-sac. Mama Bear freaked out. In their defense, they claimed it technically was the circle, not the street that runs in front of our house.

Sheema and Teemu were just as naughty as they sledded down the snow mountain on their bellies, like baby polar bears love to do. Even though their Mama Bear told them to stay close by, Sheema and Teemu wandered off far away to find a bigger hill and ended up sledding into the cold water, nearly

1. *bedtime: where imagination meets parental exhaustion*

getting hit by a boat. Mama Bear had to rescue them and told them all about the dangers of getting too close to the water, explaining how icebergs could break off and they could float away.

In our house, Ryan was the fearless one, filled with the kind of confidence that can only live inside a child who has never met gravity.[2] He was forever declaring, "watch this," moments before a bad idea bloomed. Dylan, meanwhile, was the giggler, the echo, the co-conspirator. If trouble had a shadow, it was him, trailing closely behind with mittened hands and wide eyes, happily willing to follow his big brother into whatever "brilliant" idea he had just invented. If Ryan was the spark, Dylan was the delighted puff of smoke that followed, convinced that loyalty counted as safety gear.

Ryan barreled forward like curiosity strapped to caffeine, and Dylan giggled in his wake behind him, half nervous, half delighted, fully committed. If Ryan found a slope, Dylan found courage. If Ryan found fun, Dylan found loyalty.

confidence is enviable in toddlers and terrifying in sons with limbs

By the time they returned to Mama Bear, soaked and shivering, Sheema wore a triumphant grin as if nearly colliding with a boat were an achievement. Teemu clung to Mama Bear's fur, teeth chattering, trying very hard to look brave but secretly relieved the adventure was over.

From that point forward, they slid safely. Mostly.[3]

And then, because every story in our house held a little truth wrapped in fur, I tucked in the real lesson.

Polar bears are the biggest bears in the world, I told them. Giant marshmallows with claws, rulers of ice and ocean who keep the Arctic in balance the way a mother keeps a family in orbit, always quietly holding things in place. They slide on their bellies just for joy and help the ocean stay healthy without ever asking to be noticed.

"There are only about twenty-six thousand left in the whole world," I said softly.

Ryan's little brow wrinkled. Mine did too.

---

2. *confidence is enviable in toddlers and terrifying in sons with limbs*
3. *mothers never fully relax; we just pause between alarms*

The room felt warm and safe. Maybe too safe. I looked at my sons and my heart tugged for the bears, for every mother on ice or in a bedroom trying to protect her young from things she cannot wrestle or chase away.[4]

We never missed seeing polar bears at the zoo. Their paws pressed to the glass, my boys' small hands lifted to meet them, as if understanding that kingdoms deserve witnesses. Once, one of the polar bears had twins, and of course, my kids called them Sheema and Teemu every time we visited. Ryan would roar softly at them as if issuing a brotherly challenge, while Dylan waved like he expected the bears to wave back. One time, he even bowed, which made a nearby grandma snort-laugh so hard she dropped her purse.[5]

Requests for Sheema and Teemu's stories became regular. And the boys gave me plenty of material to work with.

That same winter was particularly snowy, and the snowbanks were excessively high. High enough that a couple of the boys were able to climb onto the roof of the house. To this day, I am still unsure how they managed to get up there after the last incident, when the neighbor called me and said, "Your kids are on the roof, should I wake up the babysitter?"

"Please do," I responded, chuckling while thinking she was kidding. I held my breath for a few moments, anticipating something else, probably not so awful. But I was horrified to learn that it was not a joke.

The sitter had put out a lounge chair in the front yard while watching the two older boys play. Like a cat, she curled up in the warm sun and fell asleep. The boys took the opportunity to climb the tree next to the house, traverse a large branch, and pull themselves onto the roof of our two-story home. The neighbor just happened to look outside and saw my two oldest boys, around eight and ten years old at the time, walking around on the roof of our house. Luckily, she realized that something just did not

4. *we do not tell children how often worry rocks us to sleep; or how often it keeps us staring at the ceiling*

5. There is something holy about a child believing every creature deserves ceremony.

seem right. After our call, she walked over and woke up the babysitter to let her know.

By the time I reached home, from only two and a quarter miles away, the children were already off the roof and took great pride and pleasure in showing me how they made it up there. I stood quietly, just nodding and shuddering, thinking about how badly this could have ended.

The tree was cut down the next day. It turns out that where there is a will and two determined boys, there is always another way onto the roof.

Back on the roof again, while the two oldest boys were debating who would jump first into the tall snow pile they had built, Dylan pushed Ryan off to see if he would survive. They were like penguins, I told them later. Not really true, scientists have since said, but metaphors are a mother's currency.

Penguins walk like tiny butlers and fuss like old men. They nap standing up. They fall in love like storybook characters and hand their eggs to the fathers, who cradle them against the freezing dark. Wind that can reach seventy-six degrees below, I told them. Imagine loving something enough to hold it through that.[6]

Dylan, my sentimental one, gasped like he had just learned the secret recipe for love. Meanwhile, Ryan whispered, "I bet I could do that." Dylan immediately agreed, already imagining a heroic penguin-dad adventure with hot cocoa breaks. Sean, ever the comic relief, flapped his arms and squawked loudly enough to attract stares, convinced he too was penguin material. And baby Zach, still in a stroller then, bundled like a burrito, stared at the penguins with big solemn eyes, as if evaluating the structural integrity of their waddling.

Ryan mimicked waddling once at the zoo, insisting he could do it faster than the penguins, while Dylan tried to bow to every single one like he was greeting royalty. Sean attempted a belly slide across a patch of concrete, and baby Zach clapped once, a tiny judge awarding a single polite point. A nearby couple asked if we practiced "formal penguin etiquette" at home. In a way, yes.

"If the ice keeps melting, most emperor penguin families may be gone by the time you are grown," I whispered: a truth too sharp to give loudly.

6. *love makes children invincible until the world disagrees*

They slept unbothered. I lay awake. Their innocence rested on my chest the way a penguin father rests his egg, precious and unbearably breakable.[7]

It is hard to imagine a world without penguins. Their cuteness and charm could melt the most frozen of hearts. During our many trips to the zoo, we always made sure to stop by the penguins and watch them waddle around. Now they are marching towards extinction.

The monkey of our family is Sean, third in the birth order. Like me as a child, he was always fascinated by watching the monkeys at the zoo. Then he would come home and copy their behavior. This, however, led to an unfortunate incident where he jumped around saying, "Ee ee ee I'm a monkey," pooped in his hand, and threw the result at his older brother.[8] Maybe funny if he were six years old, but not so much at sixteen. His love for monkeys was never-ending.[9]

I grew up hearing stories of Curious George, a monkey that a man in a yellow hat found in Africa. He was likely a chimpanzee, although he had no tail. We made regular trips to the local library to read about all the trouble Curious George got into. *Curious George Rides a Bike. Curious George Goes to the Hospital. Curious George Gets a Job*. He tries to be good but keeps getting into trouble, even going to jail. Looking back, it was a bit odd for a children's book.

My favorite toy as a child was a puppet named Gaylord. He was a soft brown monkey with a lighter face that looked just like Curious George. I have no idea why I named him Gaylord, but he went everywhere with me. When I was about three or four, my brother and I were fighting over him, and he "accidentally" disappeared out of the window of a moving car on one of our car trips. The panic and chaos that followed led my father to turn the car around and drive back down the road about a mile to search for the little brown monkey on the side of the highway. I remember feeling like a big giant spoon had just scooped out my heart. Thankfully, after a half hour of searching, with my father serenaded by the painful wails of two distraught

7. *innocence sleeps harder than worry ever will*

8. To this day, Sean denies that it was him and blames his brother Zach, hoping I will forget who it was. However, it is now written in this story and memorialized for all time.

9. Recently, Sean, now twenty-nine, sent me a photo of a monkey's butt from Japan. Not a temple. Not Mount Fuji. A butt. Legacy secured, I guess.

children, he was found. Gaylord had returned to the safety of my little hands. I dried my tears on his soft little brown body as I hugged and kissed him.

At some point in childhood, after paging through a worn National Geographic and watching a PBS documentary where Jane Goodall[10] sat quietly in the forest with chimpanzees, patient, gentle, and brave in the way only someone who listens can be brave, I decided Gaylord must have been a western chimpanzee, the kind found in forests in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, and Senegal. I imagined jungles stitched with green light and figs and laughter, a place where small brown creatures were understood and protected simply because someone cared enough to pay attention.

Sean, our resident family primate, sat up a little straighter at this part, chest puffing in pride as if Jane Goodall herself might walk into his bedroom and hand him a clipboard. He even once saluted a chimp at the zoo and whispered, "I am one of you," which earned us a few curious stares and one enthusiastic thumbs-up from another mom who clearly had a monkey kid too.

Then the quiet truth slipped in: almost eighty percent of western chimps disappeared in just one generation.[11] Only around thirty-five to fifty-five thousand left.

A sorrow rose in me, old as childhood itself; the ache of losing something that cannot be remade.

There is an understanding that some things vanish not with drama but with quiet thinning, like fabric rubbed thin by too many nights of holding.

But then I wondered if Gaylord was a lemur instead. Big golden eyes. Nocturnal spirits whose name in Latin means 'spirits of the night' or 'ghosts.' I would tell the children that, in Madagascar, folks say lemurs are basically adorable little ghosts: awake all night, yelling into the darkness, and blinking those spooky glow-in-the-dark eyes that would absolutely make you sleep with your door open if you met one in person.

In the lemur world, the mothers rule. They take the best branches and shoo the boys away when they get too loud or too needy. They even go so far as to kick them out of bed, forcing the male to find a different place to sleep. Outside of breeding season, rejected and evicted males form sad little bachelor cliques. Honestly, a system with promise.

---

10. As a child, I aspired to be Jane Goodall when I grew up. I poured over any and every magazine and story about her and her monkeys.

11. *almost eighty percent gone in one human breath—how can a world lose so much and keep spinning*



Ryan wrinkled his nose at that. Dylan laughed. Sean said, "Not me," which is precisely what boys who would definitely be shooed away always say.[12] On one zoo trip, Ryan attempted to imitate a lemur call and startled a toddler nearby; Dylan just nodded solemnly and said, "That seems fair," as if he, too, questioned the male species' qualifications sometimes.

Yet even magic fades.

True to their Latin name, lemurs linger between presence and memory. Nearly every species at risk. Seventeen already gone**.** Forests disappear, their trees emptying like a childhood room after college move-in day[13], and ghosts have nowhere left to perch.

I felt the old heartbreak of losing Gaylord again, but it was sharper.

This time it was not a toy.

It was whole worlds softening to nothing.

It is quite disconcerting to learn that our closest living relatives are being wiped from the face of the earth. As I think about these disappearing primates, it feels like a big giant spoon is once again scooping out my heart.

I am not sure what happened to Gaylord. After many washes, he began to disintegrate. It may have been that my mother got tired of sewing tears on his little body or restuffing his head. I looked for him when I was fifteen to use him to feed my baby sister her breakfast, but he was missing. No one could tell me exactly what happened to him. He, like his primate relatives, just slowly disappeared and faded completely out of our lives. I had to use the giant panda puppet, which was also on the at-risk list for a while but has recently been declared no longer endangered due to global efforts to save them.

Another animal that does not stand a ghost of a chance is the snow leopard. They move through the peaks like myths with fur, earning the name "ghost of the mountains." So shy they might as well evaporate, their white coats let them vanish into snow as easily as teenagers vanish when chores appear.

Snow leopards move like secrets. They do not roar; they chuff, which is suspiciously like the sound my youngest makes when asked if there are dirty dishes under his bed. Sometimes I felt like we understood each other, the leopards and I. Creatures of quiet doorways and soft exits. Children slipping into their own lives. Mothers learning the shape of absence.

My youngest son, Zach, is as elusive as the snow leopard. When he lived at home, you barely saw him but often heard him—the soft click of a door, the shuffle of socks down a

12. Every boy believes he is the exception, until gravity or a girl proves otherwise. And today, all three live in female-dominated households, just like their father—just like the lemur, they learned early that the ladies run the tree.

13. *childhoods and forests both thin quietly*

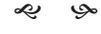
hallway, the faint hum of a refrigerator opening and closing at midnight. He lived in solitude in his room, emerging only to eat, shower, or disappear again into whatever world teenage boys inhabit when they are half-grown and half-gone. At dawn, he would slip out to work, and at night, he would return in the dark, hood up, steps quiet, making himself invisible by instinct, not rebellion.

If you caught him unexpectedly, a rare sighting indeed, and asked a simple question like "How was your day?" he would exhale a puff that translated to, "I love you, and also, please pretend you never saw me."[14] Once at the zoo when he was older, he stared at the snow leopard for so long that I think they bonded over mutual social exhaustion. A preschooler yelled, "Move, kitty!" and Zach sighed, "Relatable," then vanished like mist on purpose.

Like Zach, they appear at dawn and dusk, solitary but aware, careful but entire, choosing presence only on their own terms.

There are only about four to six thousand snow leopards left in the wild. That is barely a small town's worth of big cats. Their mountains are shrinking, people hunt them, and the climate is shifting under their paws. They were once considered endangered, and now they are designated "vulnerable," which is really just a nicer way of saying they are still not safe. Not even close. And I feel sad about that, sad in the way a mother feels when she knows something precious is slipping and she cannot scoop the world up fast enough to save it.[15]

sad in the way a mother feels when she knows something precious is slipping and she cannot scoop the world up fast enough to save it



One by one, my children have moved on and built their own nests.[16] In some cases, they found mates to share their new territory. They still make short but rare appearances every now and then, particularly in times of food and resource scarcity.

14. *introverts love deeply; they just prefer you not notice*
15. *vulnerability is not safety–ask any mother or snow leopard*
16. *they fly; we stand waving, pretending our hands don't shake*

They are slowly fading from my life like extinct animals. I can't help but think that, perhaps, I am the one becoming extinct from their lives?[17]

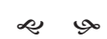


While environmental advocates focused on saving pandas, much of the planet's other wildlife continued to decline. Today, the world is confronting an unprecedented and rapidly worsening biodiversity crisis, with over one million species at risk of extinction.

Skies are stiller. Forests are quieter. Oceans are emptier.

I listen sometimes to the silence that follows childhood. It sounds like the silence that follows wildness. And yet somewhere, beneath all of it, a mother-instinct hums:

gather what you can,
love what you can,
hold the world like a child who has fallen asleep on your chest,
and believe, against the odds,
that we can still learn how to hold on to what matters.



Now you see them.

Soon you won't.

17. *mothers fade too*



art by MICHAEL C. ROBERTS

WILD IRIS

LUKE SWANSON

Iris

At first, I had not noticed her presence. It was a windy day, and all the trees and bushes were calling my attention. The movement of the creek shadowed any delicate noises, though one could still hear the birds singing for glory. In the winter, you slowly forget the instinctual beauty of their song. Just like now, there is a moment every spring where the solemn, enduring silence of the cold breaks all at once; all the overlooked noises that surrounded you in the fall now feel absolute. A time in your life you'd swear to remember for eternity. It happens the next year, and the next, and the next, and each time you promise this will be the feeling that stays with you for the rest of life. I have realized I am not eternal in this sense. This picture I have of wild Iris still lives in my memory, being the first spring moment: one that strips the static chill from your bones. She's the only person I have ever known to be eternal.

I pushed my index finger into a colorful old bruise and writhed in pain, surprised at how much it hurt. Just as I did, an older woman wearing a long dangly turquoise necklace, sagging just as much as her droopy chin, leaned over to give me a twenty-dollar bill.

"You should really get that cleaned up," she said with clear concern.

"I know the shelter down the street has people who can help you."

Haha! I do remember this feeling of self-perception, the way you can seem a certain way to others.

"Thank you very much, Ma'am, bless your kindness!" I replied.

I had never 'blessed' anyone before; it just seemed like the right thing to say at that moment. Sometimes it feels like you must make old people happy. It did paint a reassured smile on her face. I had accepted the twenty-dollar bill and stored it in my breast pocket. I do not know what she had intended or hoped I would do with the money, but the thought of an espresso and some real city food immediately came to my mind and would not leave.

At a Cafe

What I saw behind those doors was nothing but terror. I was now seated at my own table, and I felt all the eyes bound by these cafe walls taking gnawing glances at me. A forgotten, but deeply familiar feeling started to manifest itself; I could feel it developing in the marrow of my bones. I have already told you about the eyes, but the faces looked offendedly towards me. It was akin to the way the barista behind the counter stuttered at taking my order and could not meet my gaze. The way her hands fumbled anxiously at the cash register, this fear, this desire for self-preservation that was somehow at stake from my being.

All this seemed to be manifested in the faces of the other customers. Anxiety, anxiety was in the room, and it started to make its way to me. I could not decide where to lay my gaze and felt it safer to look at different objects in the room, and to switch between them rapidly, so as not to suggest my attention was in any one particular place. The others had it easy. They all had their own personal screen to lay their eyes on, and nobody thought this was strange. Obviously, they are probably working, important tasks; their attention is completely justified. Heart beating faster and faster, so fast, I can hear it now. I hope nobody else can hear it. And the breathing, the breathing. Slow it down, don't let anybody hear it. They will think something is wrong. Is this what crazy people look like, me? Am I now the one my mother told me not to look in the eyes?

After frantically looking, I noticed a woman sitting at a table all the way across the cafe with a white silky cloth wrapped around her head; I had not noticed her before. She too had a computer, with a glowing apple imprinted on the back. The apple had a bite taken out of it. It looked just like everyone else's. The cloth she wore was loosely wrapped around her black hair; one of the ends came around the side of her face to obstruct her nose and mouth. All that could be seen was her eyes, which initially drew attention away from my own frantic heartbeat. Pretty eyes covered with a layer of melting glass,

trickling off lashes. Two streams running down rosy cheeks, absorbed by the cloth she had on, maybe for protection. A blue ring circled the infinite black hole in the middle, all contained by the milky white portion. All attention directed toward the light emanating from that computer screen. It might have been because the cloth became so soaked with tears, so wet that it was no longer comfortable or concealing. (After all, the flow was so heavy that it could certainly be heard if the chatter of words in the room was not so loud). It might also have been because she no longer wished to hide. Her right hand lifted from the table and trembled a bit as she reached around her head, fiddling a bit before unraveling the cloth. Her full face came into view, and as if she had been aware of my prolonged gaze the whole time, our eyes met.

It was as if her tears infected my eyes. She seemed to calm a bit, and the crying muscles relaxed. Now I felt my eyes glass over a bit, and a tear fell onto the cafe floor. The rope that kept the leaving ship tied to the dock was now severed.

Stars

I have been taught the different constellations and how to find the north star, all of this, more times that I believe is usual. I remember very few names, and it's likely because of this. All alone, swallowed up by the looming night. We had never talked about it before it happened. I remember very few names, and it's likely because of this. For a reason still unbeknownst to me, while lying out under the stars I was overcome by a feeling that you and I were seeing the same exact star. The same one! I knew this more than I could ever know. Nobody told you to do this, to copy me like that. So bizarre! These feelings surprise even my own feelings. I had claimed that singular point in the night with my eyes, but somehow, you knew and also belonged there.

A restaurant

Dada! Screamed the child, running over to the makeshift bar where the man was standing. The kid's face soon found a place to hide from it all in the back of the man's kneecaps, and for a second this was the safest place in the world. I could see the drop of the heart, the change of expression once the man spoke, the realization that these cozy kneecaps were indeed not his father's. The kid jumped back with a shock of embarrassment; now everyone in the restaurant was looking. The middle-aged women occupying the room let out a collective "awww," which was individually enunciated upon noticing

the mistake. And it was the kind of sound that repulsed whoever it was in reaction too, but delighted all others, especially the women. I, sitting at a slight distance, could see the men's faces let out little smirks, revealing one canine tooth each, stray mustache hairs looming in front. The child had, by now, found his mother's kneecaps to hide behind, as she whispered some soothing words so smoothly into his ear. And as the kid wiggled his head from side to side, wet tear stains came into view on the back of his mother's grey jeans.

And the room now appeared a bit brighter; I too found the corners of my mouth uncontrollably rising. Drew pivoted her chin towards me, and her short blonde bangs seemed to point directly to her eyes. A hum of words came from her mouth, which must have been relatively insignificant compared to this face. All eternal, all forever, until I die.

City noise

The blaring horn of the angry Ford F-250 masked the sound of its own engine turning over. The truck passed by. Now I could hear sounds coming across the street from a lady who seemed to be yelling at one of those policemen who drove around a tiny, three-wheeled, box-like car. Beneath this, there was the sound of gas hissing out of a pipe behind the building I was slowly strolling by.

Beneath all the overt noises, there seemed to be infinite amounts of quieter, more consistent ones.

Never would the city be quiet. Never could it let itself rest in peace even just for a moment, it would always, and forever, need something. How is a man supposed to sleep when his belly aches with pain and hunger? How is a woman to dream when her baby boy cries for comfort all through the night and into the day?

Coming back

The large 'H' frame my bag was mounted on had been digging into my side for many months now. There was a dark purple bruise in this place on my side that lightened, gradually fading to skin color about two inches away from where the aluminum had been burrowing. In the mountains it had not been an issue, a minor pain that had blended in with the rest of the discomfort, which further seemed to blend in with life. Staring into the eye of this bruise made me remember Iris by the river, the memory seeming almost impossible

in my mind now. However, it was still there, and would regularly come back to comfort me in times of...

...times like now.

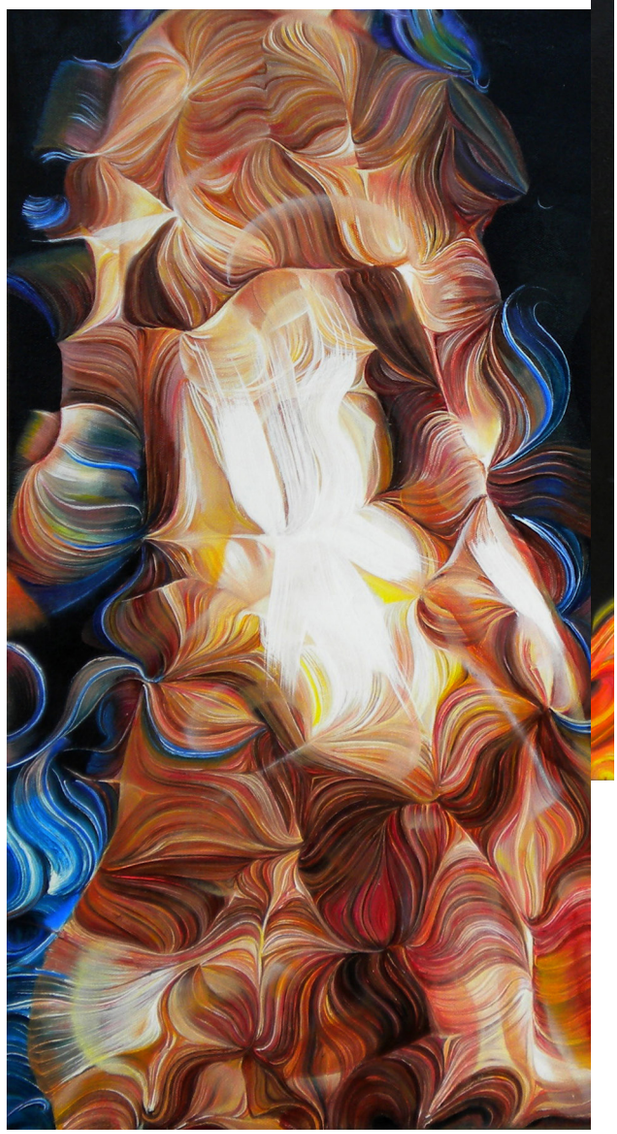
The memory in my mind was more like a picture.

The first thing I noticed in the reflected glass was how scraggly this beard of mine has gotten. Having not seen my face in some long amount of time, I wondered if this reflection would have come as a surprise, but even nature has hidden this discovery from me. Maybe it would be easier this way. This much could be too much if revealed all at once.

The song of birds twinkled in the city like those stars I always find myself running away to.

DEEP JOY

SOPHIE KVARATSKHELIA



What's the matter with deserving?
We compress vertebrae, bowing to screens
Glowing beacons of worship, numbing button clicks,
Guiding us to the drinking well
Where palm oil slips
Down throats
Coagulating at the collar
A smooth, sweet cork filtering our speech
Breath comes in sips
And now, we can only sing:
"Yes, I deserve this."

Our ancient fingers hold maps
Leading to true place and purpose,
Trails spiraling
Towards treasures across the surface
Of skin where prisms dance
In microscopic oceans
But nature's designs are told
To grip petroleum ripped from raped Earth
To be of service
And as hands cramp, we can only write:
"Yes, I deserve this."

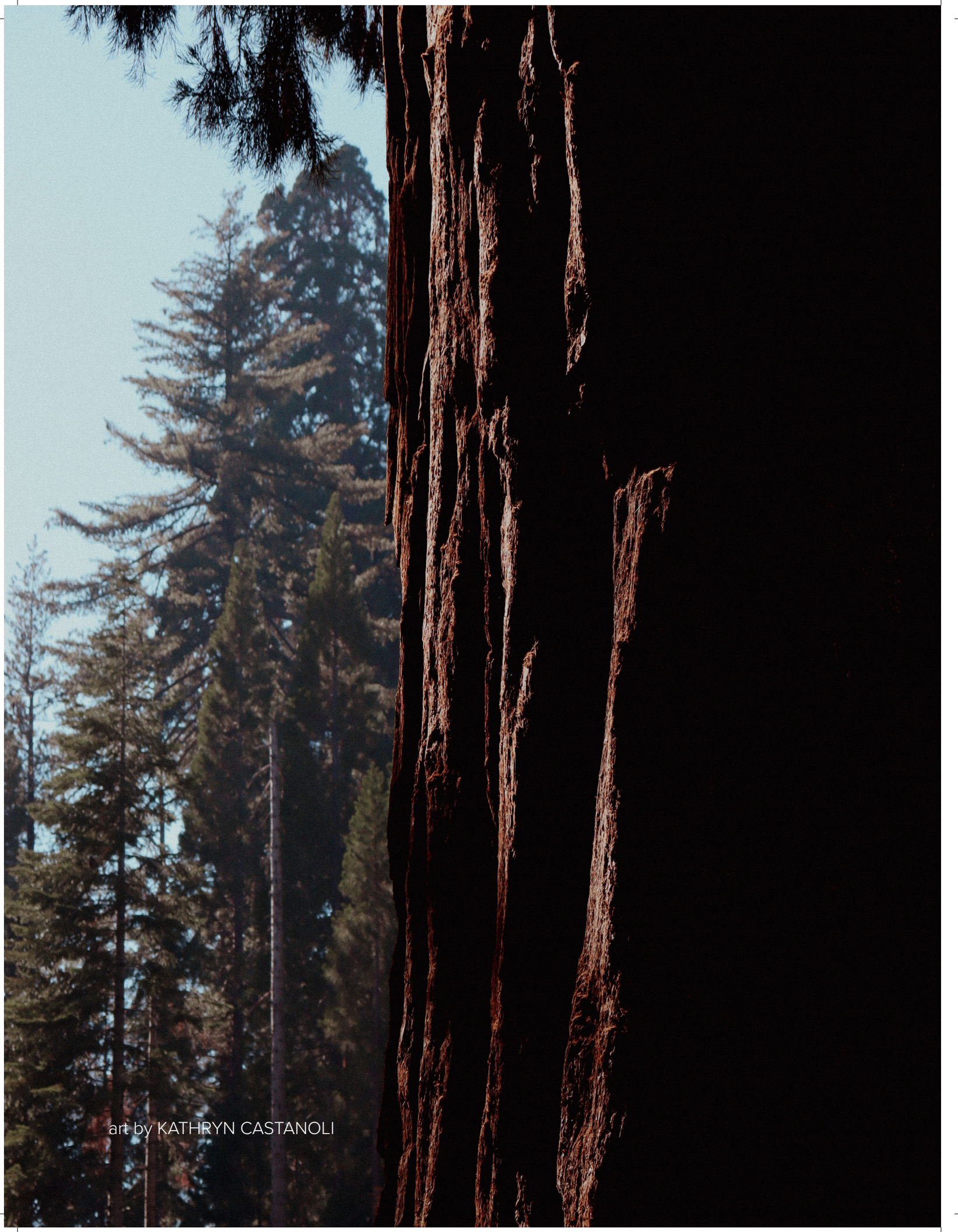


art by PENG QI

Our eyes leak and sigh, crying out
Against the harshness outside
The smoke is too thick, there's not enough sky
To dance with our kin
And create the divine
Diversity found in a meaningful life
So we turn, away and away
To wipe our own faces dry and say:
"It is what it is. I deserve this."

How could you hope to ask for more?
To demand for a life unfettered?
What distorted creature would you become
If you only settled for deep joy?
Kicking and howling:
"I DESERVE SO MUCH BETTER!"

Surely, a mutation would occur
An unravelling of every fabric pretense of
Normalcy, humility
And a ripening, in their place, of
A human being
Returning home to a mother who speaks sternly:
"Feel the grass between your toes
Be held in Earth's bliss. Let your ancient fingers trace a new path.
You deserve this.
You deserve this."



art by KATHRYN CASTANOLI

ROCKY MOUNTAIN LOW

JAKE O'DONNELL

The Static

"Great Falls, Montana ... 19 degrees."

Static.

"Missoula, Montana ... 23 degrees."

Static.

"Bozeman, Montana ... 16 degrees."

Static.

All I can hear from the cheap walkie-talkie sitting on the passenger seat next to me. All I can discern from the thoughts rushing through my head while hunched over the steering wheel. Just static.

"Bozeman, Montana ... 20 mph gusts ... heavy snowfall expected to continue throughout the night."

Static.

How dumb am I to be out in this weather? How stupid was it to jet off on a dirt road by myself? How idiotic is it to be stranded 15 miles in the wilderness? How moronic am I to be stuck in a snow drift with no way to call for help?

"A winter storm warning remains in effect for Gallatin County."

Static.

How am I going to survive? To anyone else it might've been a bum rap. Just an ill-advised field trip gone south. Shit happens, so you wake up in the morning, put on a hoodie, and hike to the nearest road, no biggie. Not for me. I'm freezing cold and sopping wet, sitting silently with the heat cranked in my pickup. I had just spent hours trying to shovel myself out of the snow I was hopelessly stuck in. Outside the wind is howling and the last light had just faded. Inside the car, other than radio static, is silent.

"Expected accumulation of 26 to 32 inches."

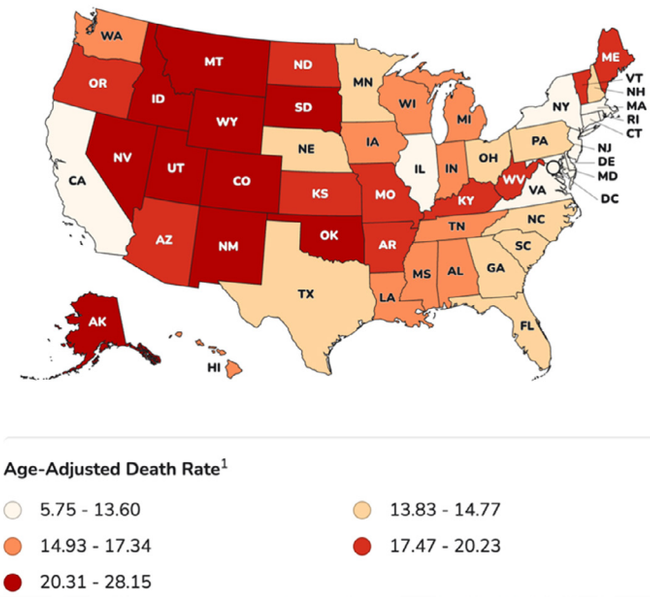
Static.

But my mind wasn't. I had spent years holding off dark thoughts and hurtful voices. All it took was a stressful situation. After a fight against the darkness, I was proud to have won for years. One ill-advised field trip. Nothing useful could be found in the thoughts swirling around my head. I was a failure and an idiot. I was alone in the middle of nowhere. How did I end up on this mountain? How am I going to survive? It wasn't hypothermia or exposure I was scared of, it was myself. It wasn't my first mental spiral, but it definitely felt like the worst. These mountains had slowly been killing me my entire life, but now they were trying to finish me off.

"Stay indoors and avoid unnecessary travel if possible."

"Repeating."

The Paradise Paradox



CDC- 2023 Suicide Rates by State
- Measured by number of deaths per 100,000 total population (5)[1]

One dark, red, streak. If you know your geography, then you'll notice it goes straight across the Rocky Mountains. But this infographic isn't death

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Suicide Rates by State," Suicide Prevention, March 2025.

by avalanches or falling from heights. Yet somehow, these deaths are still closely related to the mountains they take place in. Besides the sparsely populated, adjacent states of South Dakota and Oklahoma, all the most suicidal states in U.S are mountainous.

This is the 'paradise paradox'—the name given to the observed phenomenon that despite the idyllic nature of mountain towns, they often experience higher rates of suicide and depression.[2] There are many proposed causes for this: isolation, transient populations, cost of living, hypoxia, less sunlight, longer winters, etc. In academia, these are seen as competing theories, but all I see are the little chips a mountain town takes out of your soul. Isolation means people in mountain towns have smaller communities to rely on.[3] Transient populations mean residents' systems of support are constantly changing. A sky-high cost of living results in stress and poor work-life balance.[4] And geographic factors are straining residents' bodies, draining their ability to combat these issues.[5]

Steamboat is the most gorgeous place on earth. A legendary ski hill towering over a charming town nestled deep in the Rockies. The culture is a perfect collision between ranchers and skiers. My mother's family left because they were torn apart in isolation. Vail is objectively beautiful. The richest of the rich flock to its streets because there isn't a more beautiful place to reside. After living there for two years, my parents describe it in two words: windy and lonely. Evergreen was the perfect town to grow up in. The embodiment of idyllic mountain life on Colorado's western slope. The views were the best in the world, and I woke up every morning blessed to be there, yet every day I felt the life was being sucked out of me. I left because it felt like a remote outpost where everyone hated each other, my high school had abysmal mental health figures, and all my friends were addicted to drugs.

The Aspen

My grandmother was a career artist. A good one, too. She once painted her family tree, decades before I was a part of it. My grandfather, mother, uncle, and her lived in Steamboat at the time, a place famous for its aspen forests. The tree she used was an aspen. But perhaps unintentionally, this was much more fitting than she knew. Aspen trees are familiar with disease, maybe more than any other tree. Picture one—you can't imagine it without the black spots, can you? There are many causes of these: elk scarring,

2. Liliana Tenney, "Mental Health in the Mountains," *ColoradoSPH,* April 2020.

3. PRC, *2022 Community Engagement & Behavioral Health Survey Report*, PRC, April 2022.

4. Maddie Vincent, "Longevity Project: Mental Health Connected to Culture, Altitude of Mountain Communities," *The Aspen Times*, September 24, 2019.

5. Kristen DelMastro, et al. "Incidence of Major Depressive Episode Correlates with Elevation of Substate Region of Residence," *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 129, no. 1-3 (2011): 376-9.

black canker, sooty bark canker, trunk rot, etc.[6] They're gorgeous trees despite this, but the disease is ever-present. My family tree is diseased in a similar manner, rotting from the inside out with mental health issues.

And that tree, just like any of the hundreds of millions of aspens in Steamboat, is deeply rooted in Colorado. My mother's family has been in Colorado for five generations, arriving almost before it became a state. The gorgeous aspen tree, oozing disease throughout? It has a Colorado flag on nearly every branch.

The story of my great-great-grandfather moving here mirrors that of many who shifted places looking for a better life. Packing up what little he had into a single trunk before taking a grand trip on a locomotive to a place he had only heard stories about. When he saw Colorado's towering western slope, he must've thought he hit the jackpot. Every morning, when I woke up in the little mountain town I called home, I thought I had hit the jackpot too. You only see the aspen tree for its beauty. You can't see the affliction buried underneath.

The Static

Static. Not what I'm hearing. Not the thoughts in my head. Static is how I feel. Depression can manifest itself in infinitely fun ways, some intense, some mundane. I've described it as a black void or a gray cloud looming. Sometimes the only way I can characterize it is 'blah.' But static is all I'm feeling right now; static is the only word that comes to mind.

And maybe it's a little itchy too. After all, the hospital scrubs I'm wearing aren't made for maximum comfort. But I suppose after a week I got used to them. I had also gotten used to the feeling of walking around with no shoes, having every aspect of my life scheduled, seeing new faces every day and faces I had gotten to know disappearing. But I hadn't gotten used to how I felt. Static isn't quite nothing, it's a difficult emotion to get used to.

I am where I need to be, a place where I can rest. A place where I can recover after a drastic and incomprehensible mistake. But it doesn't feel like my mind is recovering, the TV is stuck between channels. But goddamn, that view of the mountains out my window is pretty.

The Elevation

In Pitkin County, CO - 10% of adult residents were diagnosed with depression between 2013 and 2015. In 2017, the suicide rate was 18.6 per 100,000.[7] The national average at the time was about 13 per 100,000.[8]

6. Colorado State Forest Service, "Common Insects & Diseases of Aspen," last modified 2026.

7. Vincent, "Longevity Project."

8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Suicide Rates by State."

In Summit County, CO - 46% of adult residents reported many poor mental health days. The national average was 28%.[9]

In Eagle County, CO - 12.7% of all households have a child in the home who has been diagnosed with a mental or emotional issue.[10] In the rest of the U.S it's approximately 6%.[11]

In Routt County, CO - it's estimated that 22.5% of adult residents have received a depression diagnosis.[12] The national average, in contrast, is 8.3%.[13]

Numbers, numbers, numbers. But those numbers really show that Colorado's mental problems are greatly exacerbated in mountain communities. From Vail, to Breckenridge, to Aspen, to Steamboat; if there's a ski hill towering over the town, it seems the residents below are miserable. It's a cruel twist of fate that the most beautiful places on earth are the ones that dig into your soul.

This was almost certainly an unknown phenomenon, or at least one too taboo to discuss, in the time of my great, great, grandparents. But today it's known internally throughout these communities and externally throughout the mental health world as an issue of note. Luckily, this attention means the battle against it is ongoing. Summit County is developing SMART (Systemwide Mental Assessment Response Team) to counter their challenges.[14] It's supposed to be a "co-response unit pairing law enforcement officers with mental health clinicians to respond more effectively to mental health calls." Routt County has also started a program called REPS (Reaching Everyone Preventing Suicide). REPS is a non-profit that serves Routt and Moffat Counties. It provides five free, confidential therapy sessions by partnering with over 60 licensed providers.[15]

But the response to this pressing issue is not a unified one. These programs are being undertaken in places with people notorious for their fierce spirit

9. Andrew Maciejewski, "Culture High: Vacation Atmosphere Fuels Elevated Substance Use in Ski Towns, Public Health Reports Show," *Summit Daily News*, February 29, 2024.
10. PRC, "2022 Community Engagement."
11. U.S. Census Bureau, "Selected Social Characteristics in the United States: 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates," *U.S. Department of Commerce*, 2022.
12. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "PLACES: Local Data for Better Health, County Data 2024 release," last modified 2026.
13. National Institute of Mental Health, "Major Depression: What Is Major Depression?" National Institutes of Health, last modified 2023.
14. Tricia Stortz, "How a Colorado County Reimagined Mental Health Crisis Response," *The Colorado Springs Gazette*, August 20, 2025.
15. Yampa Valley Reps, "Youth & Adult Counseling," Yampa Valley Reps.

of independence and pride in their self-reliance. Some say the bleak mental reality helps keep the towns from being overrun, that it weeds out the weak who don't deserve to live in their slice of heaven. But valuing life and ensuring that people can thrive in the mountains is not weakness. It is a more overt kind of strength that builds healthier communities where self-reliance and community support are not mutually exclusive.

There are those outside these communities who show little empathy, claiming it is an issue of the ultra-rich and that they don't deserve help. They ignore the fact that the rich aren't the ones who face this issue. They come to their mansions for a couple of weeks out of the year, before being whisked away on a private jet. The rich never deal with the realities of mountain town life. The ones living around their hollow dwellings do.

The fight against mental illness in the Rockies has been started, but it faces tremendous opposition both socially and scientifically. It will likely continue indefinitely.

The Corruption

Me - [redacted]
Sister - [redacted]
Mother - [redacted]
Uncle - [redacted]
Cousin - [redacted]
Grandmother - [redacted]
Grandfather - [redacted]
Great aunt - [redacted]
Great grandmother - [redacted]
Great great-uncle - [redacted]
Great great-grandfather - [redacted]

*(Diagnosis and assumed diagnosis redacted for confidentiality)

5 generations, 145 years, 7 Colorado mountain communities, 16 diagnoses and likely-diagnoses of depression and depression-adjacent mental illnesses. In the painting of a family tree, the members were put on branches like any other, but all up and down the trunk are large black scars. And that's only the members of my family I know of and have strong reason to believe a mental disorder affected them during their lives.

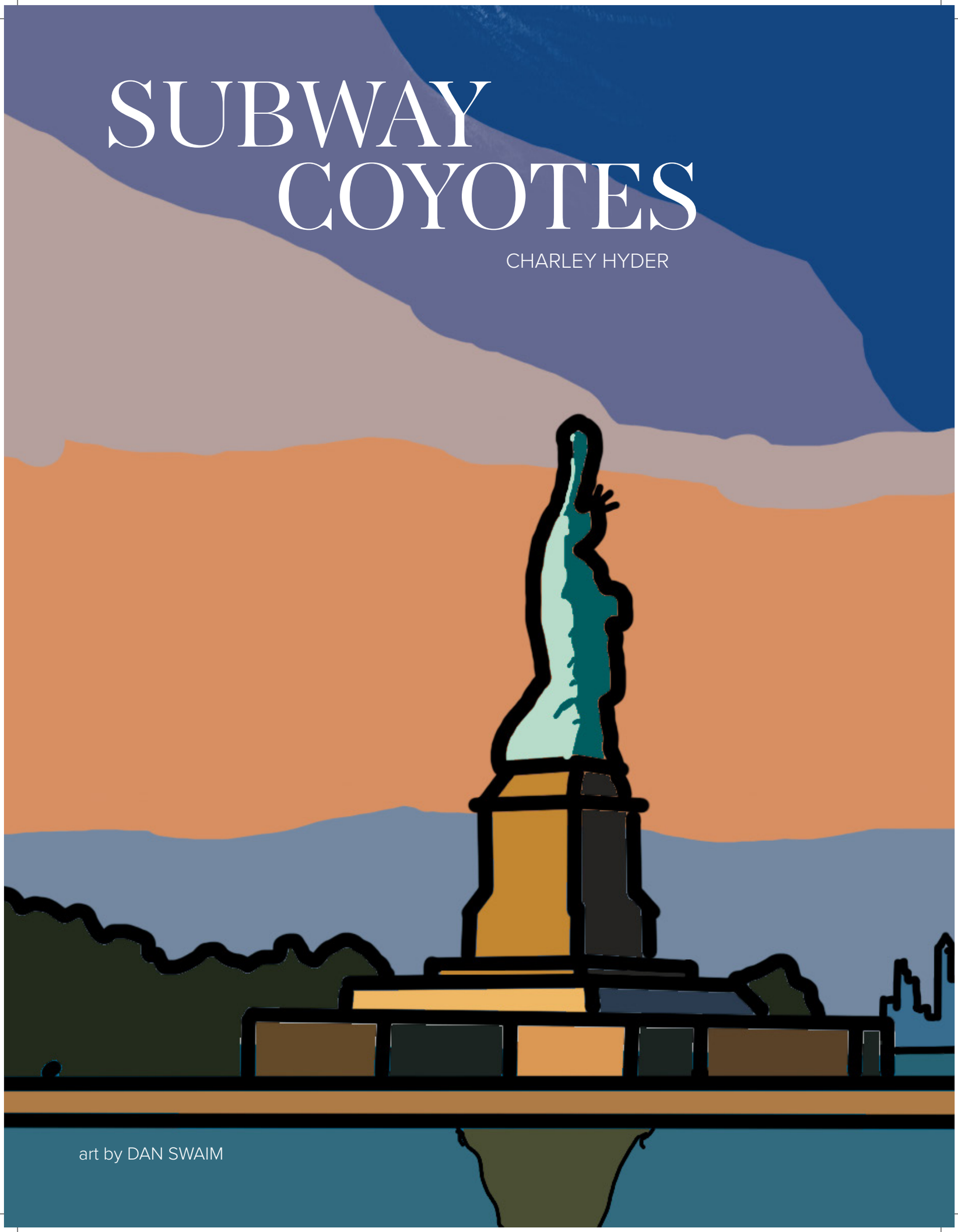
My mother's entire family split apart and left their cozy mountain community the second she and my uncle finished school. All four went their own separate ways, each

with their own psychological afflictions. My great-aunt was a well-regarded lady, with an unmatched outdoorsy spirit. But she was often described as if a cloud loomed over her head. She wandered away from her idyllic mountain town where she suffered a suspicious, almost intentional-looking fall while rock climbing. I was told that my great uncle was rough, tumble, and handy. He was always working on a project, and his favorite thing to do was build survival shelters isolated deep in the woods. When he disappeared, my family decided he must've built himself a shelter he loved more than living around people.

Most individuals with mental illness can trace it through an extensive family lineage. The exact significance of the role of genetics in mental disorders is a difficult thing to pin down, but it's a widely accepted fact that they play a significant role. A family tree like this is not a unique phenomenon, but the correlations are astounding. A state with a pattern of mental health issues, towns with an ongoing battle against mental illness, and a family that has resided in both for generations and seems to perfectly exhibit the issues of the region. The Rocky Mountains are the most beautiful place on earth. But the paradise paradox looms larger than the shadows that these magnificent peaks cast. My family has been sick for a long time. And there's good reason to believe that the place we live has had a hand in it. In continued defiance of that, the roots of this aspen tree are going to stay firmly planted in the highlands of Colorado. But I'm going to see what I can do about the weird buzz coming from one of the branches. It almost sounds like ... static.

SUBWAY COYOTES

CHARLEY HYDER



art by DAN SWAIM



My gaze fixes on both all of it and none of it. The twinkling lights of Manhattan's skyline dance and flicker through the glass pane of my apartment window and right into my retinas. They don't stop there. They wander their way through the eyes and down into the power center of my soul.

Is this really what I want?

Light

There exists in all great cities a pervading madness, like an illness, coming to silently possess its humanity. A madness which wraps its slender fingers around my throat. I have deemed it a bare necessity, in order to basically live, that I must retreat into the woods, or some barren beach, to stare into the cleansing oven of a campfire. It is here, in this campfire and under these blistering, beautiful stars, I am awarded a special kind of freedom: the freedom of being a mammal, of being of this Earth and of being, simply put, a human being.

Gone are the terrible worries that cripple and quietly doom the mind—like the exhaust of the machine—how many suicides could have been prevented by a simple prescription of a week under the stars? It is these silent horrors of civilization, worries of finances, of bosses and fierce competition in the marketplace of a world we live in that ultimately kill us. Jealousy and existential dread are certainly enhanced within concrete walls and under blue light. This car or that house, this shirt and those shoes—when does it end? Oh, my ears are too big and my nose too crooked; the Gods of Instagram shall deem me unfit for reproduction and, as such, continued membership to the human kind.

My drink has perspired out onto its own glassy skin. My hands are wet, I think, but is this *wet*? I came to this city to find purpose. But... I now wonder... is it my job to find purpose, or has it always been there? My grip tightens around the glass. I gaze into a setting sun over the granite palace that is humanity's machine. My phone buzzes and taps on the shoulder of my attention, its blue light emitting a frenzy of false hope from my desk.

Not right now.

Water

I find, under the stars and beneath the salty waves, a touch of freedom and a dose of reality that I forget about in the cities. My lungs reach a deeper level of breath, my retinas become more sensitive to the light and to this beautiful symphony of color and emotion and light that we exist within. I feel, finally, like a living, breathing person. Gone are my thoughts of necessity for the material world—what joy!

I walk, I don't run. But in the city I sprint. I drink water, and I can taste it. If pure had a taste, that might be it—water from a trickling stream. I feel a bit guilty for a moment, as if I have stolen something. How could this beauty be so free? There is no piper demanding his gold coin for your pleasure. He has been taken away, yes, dissolved by Nature's divine hand, as but another figment of the human imagination.

Civilization is a wonder. There is no doubting that. We are living in the exhaust fumes of some strange pipedream come reality... Some capitalist's dirty little daydream. And, if I am honest, I am easily seduced by her tricks—to participate in such a world which makes me a peg on a cog of the squealing machine. Was this our design? My fated destiny?

There exists in all great cities a pervading madness... A madness which wraps its slender fingers around my throat

My lips purse. I gaze out onto the contrast of flickering city lights and natural beams of light roaring out of a setting sun. I watch its final dip below the horizon. Sirens are the bird calls of this jungle, horns the roar of a distant lion. The subway's screech a coyote's yip. Here, I pay to experience this. My spine stiffens. My grip tightens. I am just another species of another genus of another living, breathing life form here on earth. And sometimes, if I am lucky, I remember that.

Beast

If you re-rolled humanity a hundred thousand times over, with a trillion different faces and stories and names, and took the average of all of them, would you get the same world? Are

we the average, or are we some deviation which strayed so far off course that we forgot our own name? Was shoving Jolly Ranchers into our face and slurping down liquefied, carbonated sugar really part of the plan here? We stare at glass for hours a day, being propelled by photoshopped images and advertisements for blow-up sex dolls. We are hairless monkeys with thermonuclear weapons pointed at one another over ideological differences. If you saw that scene at a zoo, might you think it a bit odd?

Was this really part of the plan?

If so, I have some questions for the executives upstairs in the Universe.

But maybe there is no plan. And maybe we are the lucky ones. Maybe we have held on to our humanity just long enough to still be able to enjoy a sunset, to love the rain's gift of clear and clean water, to run your fingers in the dirt and laugh at just how beautifully insane this whole thing is.

Maybe we are the lucky ones.

A coyote trotted past camp close enough that I could see the burrs matted into its coat. Usually they stay obscured in their cloak of night. Their presence is bigger that way.

It looked at me the way you look at a parked grey Toyota– briefly, without interest. Scanning for an odd bumper sticker. Then it went on its way. I have thought about that look for a year now. That small beast perhaps didn't consider his purpose, but he was on it. I am wondering if I could say the same.

My phone again beacons my attention. I know so well the subtleties of the different vibrations it has. This thought upsets me. I could not help myself. I exclaim, either to myself or to the walls of this apartment,

"Now go outside, you neurotic shit!"

I pace.

"Put this, this goddamn phone down and touch some grass. Find some, at least."

Who am I trying to convince anyway?

Neurosis, in my experience (of which I have a lot) thrives under the stinging blue light of an iPhone. But this world carries many shades of blue.

And almost as if on the pure instinct of a running cheetah, I dart down the three floors of my walk-up apartment. West. West. I may have missed the sunset, but I may still see dusk melt to dark. The final bruise of light fades to black. I may still hear the sea crash– even if it is against concrete walls. And maybe that's okay. Maybe it's not all so rational.

A lightness creeps into my soul with each step: a relief from all my daily troubles and worries. Perhaps they are not real coyotes, or perhaps the water is not so crisp, the lights not purely of natural resonance. Perhaps, yes, I did pay for this experience of urban life. But it's something. My stride picks up; I feel my spine grow taller with each step toward that fallen sun.

A smile creaks over my face. My pace slows. I remember to walk.



art by CLARISSA CERVANTES

THE TROUBLE WITH INVISIBILITY

RHONDA WATERHOUSE

Christmas music blared as we entered Paddles Rental shop, thirteen months in The After. T-shirts and mugs with pictures of manatees lined the shelves. As I shuffled up to the counter, my brain slowed. The woman said something to me, and I peered behind me, signaling my daughter Cassidy to reply. I could hear the woman; I just couldn't make sense of what she was saying.

The trip to Crystal River, Florida with my twenty-year-old daughter Cassidy wasn't exactly smooth. We'd driven an hour and a half from our Airbnb because I'd confused Crystal River with Crystal Springs and booked our stay too far away. I couldn't tell if the confusion came from my recent brain injury, but I seemed to make a lot of mistakes like this now. Since the car accident a year before, my brain was like a river with a shifting current—I couldn't always tell which way it was moving. Cassidy learned to paddle beside me to help me navigate the invisible tides of memory loss, processing issues, and impulsiveness.

Long before I saw the first manatee, I'd been thinking about what it meant to survive damage. Manatees carried their scars openly—white streaks from propellers, healed but never hidden. My own injuries were invisible, buried in the folds of my brain after the car accident rewired the way I move through the world.

A 2020 study looked at photos and documentation of 2,935 manatee carcasses over a ten-year span. Ninety-six percent of the adults had water-craft related scars. One in four had been hit ten or more times during their life. Five of the bodies showed scarring from forty or more strikes.[1] These were manatees who survived traumatic injuries again and again and kept truckin' on.

Prior to the trip, we decided to rent a tandem kayak instead of swimming—it was cheaper than renting two wet suits; plus, the flight, rental car, and Airbnb had already stretched our

1. Brandon L. Bassett et al., "Quantifying sublethal Florida manatee-watercraft interactions by examining scars on manatee carcasses," *Endangered Species Research* 43, 2020.

budget. Cassidy's eyes cast down when she forced a smile. "I'll be happy just to see manatees." She has longed to swim with marine mammals since she was little. She loved them so much that she minored in marine biology at NC State and she worked at UNC Wilmington's Marine Science Camp last summer, even though she didn't really like kids.

My brain vibrated. "You should swim. It will cost a little more to rent the wet suit and snorkel gear, but we came all this way." I pictured myself sitting on the kayak, taking photos of her with the gentle giants.

But just as the woman rang it up, I said, "You know what? I should swim, too." Maybe brain injury impulsiveness wasn't such a bad thing.

Cassidy suggested paddleboards instead of a kayak because they would be easier to get on and off. The woman fitted us by sight for wet suits. Cassidy's thin 6' frame was a little harder to fit than my 5'6" one, but the woman knew what she was doing. When I put on the top of the wetsuit and Cassidy zipped it up, I gasped from shooting pain in my shoulder, one of the remaining injuries from the pick-up plowing through a red light into my (once) adorable sea-glass green Prius. The woman suggested we leave the tops off until we got down to the water, and I tried to allay my fear of being in pain the whole time. I bought a neon pink wet bag for my keys, sunglasses, and cell phone after we watched two required videos from the state of Florida and learned how not to be assholes to manatees. Even though I was driving, Cassidy made a point of remembering the directions the woman gave us to the launch site, which was good since I forgot them before the bell chimed when we left the tiny shop.

We hid our shoes in a bush near the dock at Kings Bay Park, and Cassidy tugged up the top of my wetsuit. She pulled up hard to make more room for my shoulder, relieving much of the pressure.

The man who trailered our paddleboards to the dock loaded them onto the ramp and said, "Kneel with your backs to the water and push off."

My stomach lurched at the idea of going backward into an unfamiliar river, but I climbed on and shoved off before I could change my mind. When we first started paddling, I struggled to go forward because the river's current was yanking my board to the right. Cassidy said, "Paddle more on the right side and keep your paddle close." Each time I paddled, the front turned sideways instead of propelling me forward.

I stood up for a while to give my shoulder and knees a break. My legs were shaky at first, but I remembered my surfing instructor's direction to be gooey on the board. As soon as I relaxed, the shaking stopped.

The paddle through Kings Bay and up Crystal River to Three Sisters Springs was farther and more difficult than I thought it would be, but once we passed under a bridge and into the narrow canal where the water was calm and the current was with us, the going was easier. Houses lined each side of the canal like a street. Spoonbills, pelicans, and cormorants

perched on docks and in yards as we paddled passed. We were afraid they'd close the springs, but the impending thunderstorms held off.

A few manatees swam by, just under the surface, on our way down the canal—flat gray oviform in the dark water. Even though they are enormous, manatees are surprisingly difficult to see and often look like rocks when they are still. Manatees don't need to come to the surface often to breathe and when they do, their tiny dark noses are barely visible. This near invisibility is what leads to many boat strikes and deaths of manatees.

In a 2004 study of sixty-eight dead manatees in Florida, almost half were caused directly by trauma. Four of those were from head trauma and the other twenty-eight had either thoracic or abdominal trauma or both.[2] I wondered about all of the ones who survived their TBI and continued on. Perhaps they were more susceptible to other issues later, like more head injuries and health problems, just as humans are.

Six of the animals in the 2004 study likely died from brevetoxicosis,[3] an illness caused by consuming a neurotoxin in *Karenia brevis*, a marine alga that is responsible for what's called "red tide blooms." The published data doesn't state how many of the manatees, especially the twelve that died of Cold Stress Syndrome (CSS), had prior head injuries, and it only looked at those that died, not the survivors.

A 2019 study on manatees with CSS showed that they had very low calcium levels.[4] This also happened in some humans with hypothermia. One of the consequences of low calcium in humans is that when they are hypothermic and then rewarmed, neurons die and the brain can be injured. This may relate to the reason some manatees with higher levels of calcium were able to survive CSS.

When I spoke with Alison Loftis, an Assistant Stranding Coordinator at the Marine Mammal Stranding Program at UNC Wilmington, she told me, "Watercraft strikes are an overwhelming threat to these animals, but in Florida, there are boating speed regulations in manatee habitats for no wake and minimum wake zones." These simple rules are saving lives.

I thought back to my phone call with Wayne Hartley, a park ranger at Florida's Blue Springs State Park, who has spent decades watching the same

2. Gregory D. Bossart et al., "Pathologic Findings in Florida Manatees (Trichechus manatus latirostris)," *Aquatic Mammals* 30, no. 3 2004: 434-440.

3. Bossart et al., "Pathological Findings in Florida Manatees," 2004.

4. Molly Martony et al., "Clinicopathological prognostic indicators of survival and pathological findings in cold-stressed Florida manatees *Trichechus manatus latirostris*," *Diseases of Aquatic Organisms* 132, 2019: 85-97.

manatee return each winter. He said that when he started in 1980, he could identify any manatee after just three years by the pattern of scars from boat strikes. Now, he said, it can take eight years before they have enough scarring to tell them apart—a quiet, hopeful sign that the protections are working.

Cassidy and I navigated around pontoon tour boats and tied up our paddle boards. I clumsily slid off the board into the cool water. Cassidy focused in on my trembling hands. She tilted her head with sympathy in her eyes. We both remembered my panic attack on a summer day in California sixteen months earlier, just three months before the accident. I didn't feel the fear from the panic attack anymore, only the memory of what it did to my body.

In Monterey, my arms stuck out to the side as I attempted to lift my feet high enough to prevent my fins from catching in the sand and landing me on my face. The wetsuit suffused with fifty-degree Monterey Bay water, icicles to my ninety-eight-degree skin. I pulled the mask over my face and wedged the snorkel into my mouth, telling my brain that it was okay to breathe only through my mouth after decades of yoga training to the contrary. I plunged my face into the water. The neoprene squeezed my neck like a noose multiplying the impediment of the clumsy rental fins on my feet. My heart beating hard against my ribs, I forced myself to move toward deeper water, away from the sandy shore. The moment I reached the black seaweeded bottom, I was in trouble. Surely sharks swam beneath me in the darkness. My lungs burned like they were filling with water.

My breathing grew quick and shallow. The world shrunk. The lid of a coffin was closing over me. My jaw clenched. Every muscle tightened. My body begged to get out of the water.

I don't remember making my way to the shore or climbing the sandy hill back to the surf shack. I couldn't catch my breath. Hot tears streaked the salt on my cheeks. Momentarily, I registered that the man helping me was young enough to be my son, but I was too far gone to care. He didn't say, "Calm down, Ma'am." He reminded me to breathe. He offered me a paddleboard to lay on and allowed me to keep the mask and wetsuit. He didn't charge me extra. He said, "This happens to lots of people when they go snorkeling the first time." I tried to believe him.

Cassidy, then nineteen, who planned the whole trip to Monterey Bay, snorkeled like a pro. The YouTube videos she watched in preparation for the trip taught her how to dive to the bottom without getting water in her breathing tube. She came to the surface to tell me when to dunk my face in the water to see orange starfish and purple sea urchins. Once when Cassidy was diving, a baby seal made eye contact with me and I swear it waved before it dove under again.

Yet my momentary security as I rested on the paddleboard was tempered by my embarrassment, and I was sure Cassidy was disappointed that I wasn't joining her in the water. Later, when Cassidy relayed that she and my mother had predicted I wouldn't be able to snorkel, I added shame and anger to my emotional packing list. Perhaps, if I'd known what I would survive a few months later, I would have been braver and proved them both wrong.

❧ ❧

But this time in Florida was different. There were no fins on my feet and no sharks in the slightly brackish spring water. I'd been swimming laps in the university pool and working hard at physical therapy to loosen and strengthen my frozen shoulder. At fifty-one, I enjoyed taking surfing lessons since I had lost some of my normal fear of dying as a result of the crash. Weirdly, almost dying made me less afraid to die. Or perhaps my injured brain just wasn't as capable of feeling fear. At any rate, I was a much better swimmer and much less anxious than I was in The Before.

And yet, Cassidy noticed my shaking hands and assumed a panic attack was on the horizon. She used her camp-counselor-voice to tell me step by step what to do and how to breathe. Even though it was excitement and not anxiety that she saw, her calm voice guided me back to steady breathing, the same way she'd learned to do when my brain misfired at home. Maybe we'd both been learning how to keep each other afloat.

Once I settled into the mask and snorkel, it was easy. Even the dark bottom of the canal didn't frighten me. Two pool noodles kept me buoyant above the manatees who preferred the bottom of the river where the grasses grew. We swam over to the swimmer-only zone and watched the manatees enter the springs area that was blocked from boats by four underwater metal pillars. I floated light and fluid as I watched the manatees make their way through, although in the videos I watched later, my limbs were splayed like a gawky giraffe. I touched a hand to my heart and met Cassidy's glowing eyes, happy we had joined these gentle creatures in the water and that I was lucky enough to be here with her.

All the manatees had scarring from boat strikes, except for the young calf that swam past with its mother. I may have coveted the manatees' scars a little—their visible healing. Their scars mapped a history of harm and healing, visible proof of what they'd endured. Mine were hidden inside my skull—the

world saw me whole, but I was still learning to navigate with my own damaged sonar. Watching them glide so effortlessly despite their wounds reminded me that survival can look slow, even clumsy, and still be beautiful.

I shook these thoughts away when tiny striped fish picked at the largest manatee. She flicked her tail to shoo them off, the fastest movement I saw from any of them. Some of the manatees had barnacles growing on their skin because they moved so slowly and spent so much time lying still on the bottom.

Finally, the manatees cleared the path, and Cassidy and I entered the springs. The bottom was almost white, making the gray forms much easier to see. We saw at least ten manatees gliding through the deeper pool in the center. I giggled with the realization that I loved snorkeling when the water wasn't freezing and the bottom wasn't black. Light and free of pain, I wanted to snorkel more and do it often. My shoulder flowed without effort. My thoughts were steady, and my brain was clear and fully present. I borrowed the manatees' weightlessness, their languid movements, their peace.

After several minutes, they stopped allowing tour groups into the swimming area. A volunteer hollered, "The springs will be closing in five minutes. One of the calves is sick. The vet is on his way. You can continue to swim around the springs and take pictures while we get set up." Because they stopped allowing tour groups in, we had the springs mostly to ourselves while they prepared to help the calf.

I couldn't help but think about all the manatees that had been lost since 2020 in a catastrophic die-off of manatees in Florida. This unusual mortality event was caused by pollution that affected water clarity and allowed algae to grow large enough to block seagrasses from the sun that are essential to manatees' survival.[5] Even though their closest land relative is elephants, manatees truly are the cows of the sea. They are herbivores whose main diet is sea grass. This algae event is called "red tide" since the algae can cause the water to change color, and it can be dangerous to both animals and humans. Between 2020 and 2023, over 1,900 manatees died due to starvation, most of them (1,346) were found along the Atlantic Coast of Florida.[6] For the last few years, volunteers have hand-fed the manatees romaine lettuce to keep them alive.

5. WLRN Public Media, "Manatee winter feeding program is halted after seagrass conditions improve," *WLRN NPR News*, December 6, 2023, 10:20 a.m. EST.

6. Treasure Coast Newspapers Editorial Board, "Here are three steps we can take to reduce the number of manatee deaths in Florida," *The Invading Sea: Florida and the Climate Crisis*, April 1, 2023.

The month we visited the wild manatees, Florida announced they were slowing the handfeeding program since some seagrasses seem to be recovering through replanting initiatives and spontaneous re-growth. Later I learned that in the month Cassidy and I visited Citrus County, where Crystal Springs is located, they reported three calf rescues and two calf deaths.[7] I'm hopeful that little one survived since neither death occurred near the date of our visit.

Inside the springs, the huge, elephant-colored creatures moved deliberately slow and radiated calmness. When one finally made eye contact with me, I waved like a child. She didn't wave back, but since I had already absorbed some of their placidity, I didn't mind.

I intended to swim in a large circle around the edge of the spring. I intended to notice the trees and plants that surrounded the springs. Mostly, I floated in the center of the pool, mesmerized by these enormous creatures who clearly didn't notice or care that I was there—a relief, after the accident, to not be the center of attention for once.

Climate change means manatees will continue to move north toward where we live on the North Carolina coast as waters warm. Scientists are concerned. Since manatees haven't typically roamed this far north, there are no laws to protect them. Florida has no-wake-zones to help protect manatees from boat strikes, but so far North Carolina has no such protections. From 1991-2012, North Carolina averaged 6 manatee sightings per year. From 2018-2023, the average was 36 manatees. This 83% increase in manatee sightings could spell trouble for manatees if nothing is done to protect them.

Late last fall, the stranding program monitored a manatee that seemed to be hanging around too long into November. Luckily, the manatee headed back to Florida on its own and no intervention was needed, but this won't always be the case. Unlike whales, manatees have very little blubber, so they are not adapted for cold weather. Manatees can die from cold stress syndrome if exposed to water below sixty-eight degrees for too long. Climate change doesn't just mean hotter weather; it also means unpredictable freezes. In 2010, 279 manatees died when a cold snap hit Florida.[8] Florida's governor

7. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, *2023 Preliminary Manatee Red Tide Mortality Table.*

8. Staff Writer, "Record Number of Florida Manatee Deaths in 2010," *The Ledger*, January 6, 2011, 3:20 a.m. EST.

has pledged millions to aid in the recovery of Florida's waterways because manatees and other marine mammals attract tourists like my daughter and I who bring money to Florida. Unfortunately, not every endangered animal or habitat has such direct economic impact.



As we mounted our paddleboards to head back, joyful tears pooled in my eyes. All the tension had left my body. I didn't want to speak for fear of breaking the manatees' spell.

When the canal met the wider river, the water became choppy. The storm was approaching quickly. A little over-excited about getting better at paddling, I accidentally left Cassidy too far behind. When I glanced back, my heart hurt seeing the panic on her face. I couldn't hear her yelling for me through the wind, but I could see her tears. I did my best to stay still in the quickly shifting current until she could catch up with me, my chest thumping with the knowledge that my daughter needed me, and I hadn't realized it soon enough.

"I'm sorry," I said as soon as she could hear me.

"You just left me." Tears leaked down her cheeks.

"I know. I'm sorry." I wished I could hug her, but we needed to get back to the dock before the lightning came.

We reached the boat ramp, ready to leave the water behind for now. When our breathing finally slowed and Cassidy's anxiety faded, the sparkle in her eyes and wide grin said everything about what this experience meant to her. The quiet awe lingered with me for hours afterward, calming my nerves and reminding me how deeply connected I felt to Cassidy, to the manatees, and to the world around us.

Eighty-two degrees in mid-December made for perfect snorkeling-with-manatee weather. Cassidy took a photo of me wearing shorts and a tank top in the middle of Crystal Street under the Historic Oak Canopy, the southern live oaks arching across the street. On the long drive back to our Airbnb, we stopped at Weeki Wachi because I had watched a documentary about their mermaids. Unfortunately, since that is a plan-ahead kind of place, their only show was over, but Cassidy bought a tiny glass manatee to take home.



Years later, I still daydream about floating among the manatees—the slow rhythm of their swimming, the way they move as if time has softened for them. Their bodies bear the evidence of past collisions, yet they keep rising to the surface, unhurried and with a sense of ease. I understand a little of their pain from sudden impacts, but I also hold their healing. I carry my own injuries in the way I pause before I speak, the way I reach for a word, the way I rely on Cassidy to remember directions. Like the manatees, I keep surfacing.

When I think back on that day, what stays with me isn't just the calm of the springs, but the quiet rhythm Cassidy and I found together: her watching for signs of panic, me learning to let her lead. In the tide of time, our roles may have shifted, but we've learned to share our vulnerabilities, both buoyed by something larger, both held by the same current that carried those gray giants.

As the planet warms and the manatees drift farther north, I wonder what protections any of us can count on—parent, child, or animal. Maybe healing, for all of us, means learning to move carefully through a world that can wound without meaning to, learning to rest when we need to, learning to keep breathing in a vulnerable world.



art by KATLIN RISEN

FRAYING TENDONS

KARA LEFEVRE

"... what I did now know with a doubt what that I was not alone, that I had never been alone, that the people who came before me were still here, and would always be here. And there, in the warm breeze, in the rustling trees, in the vast and endless sky, the ghosts of my grandparents gathered around me like stars."

– Jennifer McGaha[1]

Amid the strains across my body—the familiar muscle ache pinging just above my Achilles, neck and shoulder complaining from the load on my back, cold wet skin—one area stood out as rock solid. My feet. Comfy and dry, strong and steady. The new boots I'd started breaking in a few months back, to replace a trusty 20-year-old pair whose soles had begun to separate, were coming in clutch, as my sons might say. Italian light-weight beauties with rigid ankle support for the uneven trails yet supple enough to mold to my feet. Chosen purposefully to protect that persnickety ankle.

I'd splurged for Gore-Tex, grateful for the waterproofing that was holding up to the steady downpour and muddy puddles. Step after step I plodded in the sweep position at the back of the line, enjoying the opportunities to stop, look, listen. The students ahead of me forged on quickly, no doubt eager to keep a pace that brought us back to camp quicker. Yet I moved slowly, awestruck at the ethereal scene surrounding us.

We were in the temperate rainforest northeast of Vancouver, British Columbia. Golden Ears Provincial Park, which I later learned was originally named "Golden Eyrie" for the nests of majestic eagles, fitting since our trip was part of an ornithology field course. Thick carpets of golden moss weighted everything. Layers upon layers of epiphytes—plants growing on top of other plants—claimed every available surface. The still lushness hung heavy, punctuated by occasional phrenetic song of the Pacific Wren. I was in no hurry.

1. Jennifer McGaha, *Flat Broke with Two Goats*, Naperville, IL, Sourcebooks, 2018, 458.

A small break in the fine rain coincided with the appearance of a gravelly beach. We took the opportunity to doff packs and stretch out arms to the sun, to refuel with a quick snack. People spread along the river, scanning the misty forest horizon for bird life. I watched with a full heart as students delighted at the sight of a Steller's Jay, flaunting his jaunty peaked cap atop the fir spires. I scanned the water in search of activity, perhaps dippers diving for aquatic insects. None of those, yet the reward of a familiar tail bobbing, a Spotted Sandpiper patrolling the shoreline.

The sun dissolved back behind clouds as the rain resumed. We quickly redonned packs and continued along the trail, heading toward the waterfall that was our morning destination. One foot in front of the other, walking stick keeping rhythm, careful to avoid slipping while paying close attention to strain on the left tendon.

I must note, it wasn't my trusty boots that eventually failed. The volume of water absorbed by my clothes, despite my waterproof top layer, eventually reached saturation point. Water had begun to leak down my body, under my clothes, past my lower back and straight down my calves. *Into* the tops of the boots. They were not so much breached by water as invaded from the inside. Soaked completely, through every lay. I carried on.

Our journey to the falls ended up being a quick stop at a lower viewing point instead of climbing to the top. Everyone seemed to silently agree that we had seen enough water, and it was time to power back to camp.

Problem being, there was no power left in this body. I resolved to continue at my careful tortoise pace—slow and steady wins the race, yet there's no race here— knowing that albeit drenched and tired I could surely make it back safely. At a bend in the river, I stopped to take in the mist rolling over the boisterous riffles. The sandy banks evoked perfect habitat for Kingfisher nesting burrows, I thought. Moments later my pause was rewarded with the chattering of one flying across the water in search of a meal.

I kept a hopeful eye out for Harlequin Ducks, easily imagining them in this spot yet unsure if they occurred here. The rain continued still and so did the surprising visits of other creatures braving the elements. Joined by my patient colleague who waited for me, we heard, long before we saw it, a Black-headed Grosbeak's uplifting melody.

Finally squishing back into camp, we laughed at the criss-crossing spiderweb our students had concocted with ropes for a makeshift clothesline beneath the only covered space. A weak woodstove wouldn't be able to dry

clothes in the steady dampness but it was enough to raise spirits. The only other thought I could muster was, please don't let us wake up to the sound of rain again tomorrow.

At this juncture in my teaching career there is a puzzling juxtaposition of powers. Life experience gives me the perspective to support deeper learning, mentoring student growth in ways that weren't possible at an earlier age. I see things newly through their eyes, meshed with my own learning over decades. This enables me to adapt to unpredictable opportunities on the landscape, and in the community.

While those mental and emotional powers are at a fierce peak, my body is sometimes pushing its limits when we're learning outside. Months after the trip I asked my friend's husband to peek at my persistent Achilles problem. An orthopaedic surgeon specializing in the foot and ankle, he explained the trickiness of tendons as we age, when collagen fibres in our connective tissue become less elastic. It's a simple equation that led to injury sometime over recent years: the tendon's capacity to heal is being outpaced by its capacity for injury. He reassured me this condition is not seen in inactive people: it's the activity and strong muscles that pushed the tendon past capacity, he told me. Its thickening will likely stay: he said that's a good thing, that the fibres are regrowing amid scar tissue, and that the chance of reinjury is much lower compared to with a healthy tendon. And the inflammation is a good signal, showing the flow of elements needed for rejuvenation of damaged tissue.

So, there it is: maybe not such a disjunct level of power after all. Pushing the limits strengthens them. And can the mental heal the physical? Landscapes that we're studying and aching to protect are fraying tendons of the Earth. Slashes on bark, striations on rock, gouges in the soil=scars that tell stories. Perhaps this learning from the land is the inflammation necessary for healing.

ON ME DIT

TRINA GAYNON

Tous les preságes sont d'accord
—Victor Segalen

I am told: In dry years
wind replaces water.

Texts of whole civilizations
dissolve into dust.

Mouths of the speakers
fill with dust.

Ears of the listeners
fill with dust.

We argue with omens.
We argue with the evidence.

Despair must be held at bay.

I begin to take Death personally.

He asks annoying questions, *Are you ready?*
Not waiting for an answer, he snatches up

a soul in my circle of fellowship.
with each grab, he comes closer.



All of the prophesies of *Lamentations*
can be blown away with a puff of breath.

All the studies of climate change likewise.

I begin to take Death personally.

He asks, *Do you know what you have done?*
Our mouths and ears are filled with dust.

The earthly sphere takes back her own
and remembers how to weep.



art by ALFIE BLAND

CHANGING SKIES

WRITING CONTEST
FIRST PLACE WINNER



“Run Like The Bison”
by Christa Finlay

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 through powerful writing.

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

“Run Like the Bison,” by Christa Finlay, is our first-place pick for the CHANGING SKIES Writing Contest. This piece considers athleticism in the human and the animal, and provides an intimate look into the mind of somebody pushing physical limits. Investigating the past and present reality of the American West, “Run Like the Bison” explores the free-flowing thought that comes from exertion through nature.

Fall 2026 Editorial Staff

RUN LIKE THE BISON

CHRISTA FINLAY



art by ALLISON NOWELS

Miles 1-7

1. Looking out along the great plains of North America, the bison roam the land. Undisturbed, unaware of Manifest Destiny's arrival. If you listen closely, you can hear the pounding of their hooves against the earth below them.
2. The pounding of our feet as we run along the trail sounds like a herd of bison.
3. In the early 1800s, millions of bison roamed around North America. Now…not so many. Where did they all go?[1]
4. Despite them being Wyoming's state animal and even America's national mammal, humans brought them to the brink of extinction. It all happened during westward expansion, when European settlers colonized the West and decided to use their newly engineered rifles to hunt these majestic creatures. They called this time "the Great Slaughter".[2]
5. 42 Miles, 11,000 ft of elevation gain, 0 chance of seeing a bison on this run.
6. Why run 42 miles? Why not just 26.2 miles, the familiar marathon?
7. 42 miles is the distance of the entire Teton Crest Trail. A beautiful trail that flows through the heart of Grand Teton National Park. Pristine land, untouched by humans, where the bison used to roam.

Miles 8-12

8. Grand Teton National Park is located just 30 minutes outside the affluent Jackson Hole. Celebrities and millionaires flock the streets with their custom-made Kemosabe cowboy hats and boots after flying in on their private jets.
9. If you have ever visited Jackson Hole, you would know that guns and cowboys are some of its specialties. Little do people know that the original cowboys of the West were Indigenous

1. "American Bison," *National Geographic*, March 9, 2026.
2. U.S. National Park Service, "People and Bison," Bison, March 4, 2024.

Mesoamericans. I mean, Buffalo Bill's rise to fame had to be inspired by someone. But even today, not many people know the true history of cowboys. The real cowboys are forgotten deep in the ground.[3]

10. The ground that I am running on. The ground the bison ran on.
11. The ironic part about Jackson is that if you talk to any so-called "local," you will experience a boatload of attitude. Whether you're a transplant or just a tourist visiting, they want you out. Quite contradictory for a town built on the colonization of the West and the removal of native people.
12. I wonder if Buffalo Bill ever saw a bison.

Miles 13-15

13. 13 miles in, and I am committed to finishing this run. I was born to do this, or at least that is what I have been told based on our evolutionary understanding of humans. Thanks, Darwin.[4]
14. For starters, we stand on two legs. Requiring us to use much less energy than the four-legged bison. Our legs allow strides to become longer, enabling us to go greater distances. Our Achilles tendons and arched feet are also unique adaptations that make us stand out from other members of the animal kingdom.[5] Does being different from others make us better? From the eyes of a scientist, we are just part of the evolutionary lineage, connected to all other organisms. From the eyes of God, we transcend nature and are therefore superior to it.
15. While I may never reach speeds of 40 mph like a bison, my human endurance will always win. Maybe this is why the bison were killed…they could not outrun the humans.[6]

3. Phil Livingston, "The History of the Vaquero," *American Cowboy*, June 10, 2022.

4. Robert R. Sands and Linda R. Sands, "Running Deep: Speculations on the Evolution of Running and Spirituality in the Genus *Homo*," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 3, no. 4, (2010): 552–77.

5. *ibid.*

6. "American Bison."

Miles 16-20

16. Just under halfway, we stop at Lake Solitude. An accurate name for the lake, as its seclusion leaves the water unbroken, reflecting a perfect picture of the mountains and trees before us. As we regroup, we take off our shoes and socks and soak our swollen feet in the frigid glacier water, breaking the mirror. Numbing the pain of our soles.
17. My group and I are a herd...just like the bison. We work together as a team to make sure that no one is left behind. We evolved to be social creatures out of necessity, as being able to rely on one's herd was vital for survival pre-industrialization. Nowadays, we don't need a herd. People drive to work in their cars by themselves, walk to class with their AirPods in, and waving while passing one another is unthinkable. How did we all become so isolated?
18. No matter how introverted I think I am, I crave human connection...we all do. Today, my herd would keep me moving forward. I would finish this run because of my herd.
19. While cooling down in the lake, one of the herd members grabs her water bottle from her running vest and scoops up the freezing water from the lake's edge. She screws on the cap with a water filter attached and starts to squeeze the filtered water into each of our water bottles and camelbacks. Within seconds, lake water becomes delicious, clean hydration.
20. 2.1 billion people don't have access to clean drinking water.[7]

Miles 21-28

21. 21 miles in, and we enter Death Canyon Shelf. A geological formation that is part of the trail, creating a narrow plateau.

7. "1 in 4 People Globally Still Lack Access to Safe Drinking Water," World Health Organization, August 26, 2025.

22. Death Canyon Shelf is named after U.S. Geological Survey worker Thomas Bannon, who vanished in the canyon and was never seen again. I find it interesting that Bannon was the inspiration for this name, and not the millions of slaughtered Bison.[8]
23. Or the tens of thousands of Indigenous people who were murdered in the West. Where is their recognition?
24. I am running through a so-called national park…a battleground.
25. The land where Indigenous people were slaughtered. Murdered in their own homes. The land that was theirs was then stolen to become something of purity and mysticism.[9]
26. An area created to preserve nature and separate us humans from it. Is this separation the reason why we are destroying our planet? How was it that we used to live among nature in a way of coexistence? We would take care of the land, and in return, the land would take care of us. Unfortunately, this symbiotic relationship is now dead.
27. On the trail, I look around and see no trash littering the ground. When I am in a city, I am surrounded by waste. I question if maybe it is good to have us removed from these areas of nature, I mean, we are the ones polluting the planet. But as I run through this graveyard, I am reminded that humans could…can exist in peace with nature. It's not that humans are the villain; it's just that our relationship to nature has become so dysfunctional.
28. We used to be a part of this land, a part of nature, and perhaps we still are. Perhaps we all still have that maternal yearn for Mother Nature, and that is why part of me wanted to run today.

Miles 29-32

29. Stop and listen….
30. Silence…other than the thudding of my feet and the breeze through the air. Occasionally, I will hear the gentle bristling of trees and the charismatic singing of the birds.
31. This is what being in nature sounds like.
32. Over in a bustling city, the air is filled with constant noise. The honking of vehicles and congestion of the area make it impossible to hear your

8. Buckrail Staff, "Spooky Season: The Ghosts of Death Canyon," *Buckrail*, October 31, 2022.

9. David Treuer, "Return the National Parks to the Tribes," *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2021.

own thoughts. It is a privilege to escape into the silence, a privilege to live in Jackson Hole, a privilege to run through this battleground.

Miles 33-38

33. At this point in the run, I am trying to consume as many calories as possible without being sick.
34. I've already eaten a whole bag of granola, a couple of peanut butter sandwiches, a few apples, and endless amounts of gels and candy.
35. While burning this many calories, I remind myself that I cannot stop fueling...which is much harder than it sounds. However, feeding myself is probably easier than starving.
36. Over 800 million people worldwide face food insecurity. Luckily, I am not one of those people.[10]
37. Bison were one of the main food sources for Indigenous groups in the West. Europeans saw this as an opportunity to control them, which is why they decided to kill all the bison.
38. I wonder how much a bison has to eat. They are very large and therefore must have high caloric needs, but they sustain themselves on grass. I can't imagine that grass is calorically dense. That is probably why they are always eating in photos I have seen of them. I feel like a bison constantly trying to keep up with my caloric needs.

Mile 39

39. When I feel like quitting, I think of Kathrine Switzer. Who, in 1967, became the first woman to complete 26.2 miles at the Boston Marathon. Her presence in the running community was not welcomed, and people thought women should not participate in this race. Men

10. "World Hunger Facts," Global Care.

attacked her during the run, attempting to rip off her bib and push her off the course. She kept running, though.[11]

Miles 40-42

40. The end is near, and I cannot help but think that this sucks, yet at the same time, I am so lucky and grateful to run. Some people run from their country, run from wars, run from conflict and persecution, run from oppression, run from hate...I am just running because I can.
41. I am running today for the 2.1 billion people who don't have clean water, the 800 million hungry people, for the Indigenous people who died in this park, for Kathrine Switzer, for the people who had to leave Jackson because it was too expensive, for the original cowboys of the West.
42. I run for the bison, who could not escape their hunter.

11. Kathrine Switzer, The Real Story, "The Real Story of Kathrine Switzer's 1967 Boston Marathon."



art by DONALD GUADAGNI

THE LITTLE ASSHOLE PRINCE

JOEY DAMIANO

In the early 1980s, me and Mom used to fly from Los Angeles International Airport to Hong Kong to see my Chinese grandparents. I remember one such visit. I think I was ten. Over there, people's eyes often lingered on me like I was some kind of freak that they could not quite figure out. They didn't get it. My face bore Mom's Asian features, the wider and higher cheekbones, blended with Dad's Italian American nose and ears. Auburn hair with natural sun-tinted highlights. Olive skin which tanned to a pleasant light brown at the beach. No telltale East Asian monolids. Back home, able to pass as white if people did not look closely.

I mimicked the way my white classmates spoke while erasing from my own accent any signs of Mom's noisy Cantonese musicality. When I spoke, I sounded like characters from Hollywood movies and TV shows set in present day, generically American. To the white denizens of a speck of a Mojave Desert town where we lived, even if I *was* a bit ambiguous, my presence seemed to be less offensive than that of a full-blooded ethnic person whose first language was not English.

I was a hybrid. In my mind, special.

My grandparents' faces lit up when they saw me at the airport. They tried to speak to me in Cantonese. I nodded and grinned, noted their missing teeth, their faces creased by hardships. That mole bulging from Grandpa's chin, irregularly sized hairs tufting out of it like a mini-Don King growing on his face.

It made sense that I was the center of attention. I was Mom's golden child, a healthy and precocious boy. The status symbol which gave her worth, elevated her rank in her family, throughout China. I smirked at my

grandparents who squeezed my cheeks, continued to babble at me in their alien language.

I was a little prince who thought his subjects were silly. My grandparents dressed like they were still villagers in Guangdong Province before they fled Mao's Cultural Revolution and widespread famine. Always the same dark gray or black pants, white tank top undershirts with pit stains (Grandpa), drab, formless tunics worn by provincials (Grandma). They smelled like moth balls and garlic. For some reason, Grandpa kept sucking his teeth.

Their food was gross. Once, I witnessed Grandma kill a live chicken right there in their apartment. At the only, narrow table, which was near the front door, where I sometimes sat to eat at my McDonald's as roaches tickled my feet. I watched Grandma's thick, peasant's hands as she gripped the struggling chicken's throat and suddenly, with a quick flick of her wrists, broke the bird's neck. The creature went from an alarmed bok! bok-bok! to squaaaaahh...then its body went limp, deflated, and fell silent. Grandma picked up a butcher knife, lifted it above her head, and swung down sharply until the blade hit the wooden cutting board with a THOK. The head popped off. Blood pumped from the neck hole. Spurt, spurt. Dribble, dribble. Drip.

Why was I seeing this? Our food should have been killed elsewhere. I was not supposed to think about dying animals as I chewed on a fried drumstick. Here I was, a comfortably middle class suburban American, visiting this backwater to check on the natives. These people sat here in high-rise tenements, recently washed underpants and bras hanging drip dry on row upon row of clotheslines which were suspended from each concrete balcony. No elevators conveyed us up to the sixth floor, which meant we got to work our core several times a day. Sweat-drenched wifebeaters, faces shining with perspiration, three or five people to a tiny space. A pedestal fan with its greasy blades lazily swinging its neck as it blew hot air across one side of the room and then it click-click-clicked back to blow air into my impatient, dewy face. I spoke

into the fan which changed my voice, made it sound robotic, menacing: *Luke, I am your father*.

The fan futilely looked back and forth as if it warily took all of this in: there I was melting in this sweltering heat, seated on a barely padded bench connected to the wall, swatting away flies the size of cranberries, while everyone else in here with me in this small room sat elbow to elbow shouting at each other.

Why were they yelling? We were right next to each other. Was this a conversation or a fight? It did not matter, because *The Smurfs* was televised in Cantonese. I could not understand what Papa Smurf and Smurfette were even talking about.

Luckily, everyone worked overtime to make sure I was entertained and fed. I knew I was cute and handsome, because I heard my grandparents say it in Cantonese: cute (*dak ji*) and handsome (*leng zai*). They lavished me with attention, offered me fast food, McDonald's meals, Kentucky Fried Chicken, ice-cold Coca Cola. Daily I was handed a roll of these British, fruit-flavored gummy candies which tasted delicious, but they always seemed stale because you needed a pit bull's jaws to grind through them. I gnashed the unyielding piece of cherry flavored rubber between my teeth and after a few chews gulped it down whole. I *did* like some of the local food, like lo mai gai, sticky rice wrapped in a lotus leaf and filled with minced chicken or pork. Otherwise, just give me that Pizza Hut.

My grandparents bought me other things they couldn't afford, like Chogokin, die-cast Japanese robot toys from popular anime TV series, these products also assembled in Hong Kong. At Mom's prompting, I said thank you in English, then corrected myself by saying *doh jeh*. I accepted everything they gave me, the attention, the food, the gifts, as if I were entitled to it. Of course I was supposed to receive these things. I was Joey, Mom's beloved "Joe-Joe," as she used to call me even into her 70s.

In a tiny flat within a decaying public housing building, Grandpa had to sleep on a bamboo mat placed on the hard tile floor instead of his bed because me and Mom used it

during our stay. Perhaps as payment, Grandpa persisted with the daily Cantonese lessons. I repeated words and phrases with little enthusiasm. As I uttered the requested expressions, I used an American accent. After a few minutes, I refused to speak. I looked off, over Chinese Grandpa's shoulder as if there was something more interesting going on outside their window, six stories up, out there in this teeming, overcrowded part of Kowloon. Grandpa chuckled, muttered something I didn't understand, and finally left me alone.

My grandparents' "kitchen" consisted of an ancient, propane-fueled stove and food prep counter setup placed outside and next to the front door of the apartment. While Grandpa used this battered old spatula to toss around sizzling bok choy and noodles in his wok, the wiry old man a conductor of shooting flames and searing ginger, other residents turned sideways and squeezed past him on the narrow balcony catwalk to get to their units. Every household had this outdoor stove arrangement.

The building's bathrooms were communal, used by hundreds of other tenants, and they were disgusting. Cigarette smoke, piss, and shit stank. I avoided touching the walls and fixtures. Stall doors dissolved off hinges, stall partitions rusted through from exposure to ocean air. Through perforated gaps of deteriorating metal, you could watch the person next to you grimace with a cig hanging from their pursed lips as they excreted. While squatting and taking a dump, you did not want to accidentally lose a sandal in the long, crumbling, concrete canal of slow-moving water mixed with floating logs of various shapes, cigarette butts, swirling green galaxies of phlegm and urine-logged toilet tissue. A rat bobbed along like it was scuba diving. It looked dead. A fetid river of waste lazily sliding by under your hovering, puckering anus.

During the trip, I must have eaten something tainted. In the coming days, I felt as if little screws were digging into my intestinal walls, twisting, and poking at me somewhere up my asshole. When I finally went to the bathroom, I found dozens of little worms wriggling angrily inside my shit. Luckily, Hong

a beggar, skin blackened by double decker bus emissions, long hair piled high atop his head

Kong had doctors who practiced western medicine, one of whom treated me. I was not about to drink one of those stinky potions Grandma and Mom cooked up on the stove, a bubbling witches' brew of what looked to be dirt and dried detritus.

Later bowel movements confirmed the worms, inert and embedded throughout my stool, were in fact dead.

The taxis spewed black exhaust as they jerked us around the city. A taxi dumped us out on a busy district where jewelry stores lined the streets. Mom's eyes widened as she perused treasures: diamond rings and glowing gold necklaces, jade bracelets gleaming a vibrant green under blinding display case lighting. They were her favorite things to browse. She grew up wondering whether she would ever afford nice jewelry, before Dad, a U.S. Marine on R&R away from the frontline, rescued her from her hostess bar job in Wan Chai during the end of the Vietnam War.

My mom and I walked from shop to shop, the heat outside oppressive like a warm wet towel over your face, followed by the shops' blast of arctic wind as you entered. I needed incentives to stay patient during these outings, so she promised to get me a Cadbury Fruit and Nut bar and maybe another Chogokin if I was a *gwai jai* (a good boy).

In between jewelry shops, we passed a beggar, skin blackened by double decker bus emissions, long hair piled high atop his head, the hair's upwardly swirling structure held in place by a mortar of caked grime. Mom averted her eyes, her face scrunched up from disgust. He was seated on the sidewalk cross-legged; one leg poorly wrapped in a once white bandage now turned beige. Poking out of the tattered, loosely hanging cloth speckled with dried blood was exposed bone. Was the man's foot completely gone? Did I really see this? How was he still alive? I looked away but now, decades later, the image still stuck. I was not supposed to see this, what the fuck.

Back in America, we lived in a house with 3-bedrooms, 2-bathrooms. A big backyard. Desiccated dirt and tumbleweeds,

but still. Ample space for a household of three. Our swamp cooler kept the interior a nice 72 degrees Fahrenheit during 110-degree summers. I had my own bedroom and a TV in the living room where I could watch *Robotech* and *Scooby Doo* undisturbed. I had Atari videogames to numb my brain from the feelings associated with being disconnected from Dad, who eventually left the Marines but worked long hours at a high security naval weapons testing base near our town. Also, back home, I tried not to think about Mom, who stood there in the kitchen at 11am sucking down mug after mug of wine, poured from the jug which she hid under the sink, maybe because she was bored, maybe for other reasons which I couldn't comprehend. But I hated her when she was like that, angry and teetering around the house muttering, looking for fights.

Why? Because I was a fucking child

In America, I was not asked to go on errands to purchase packs of cigarettes for Mom. Why? Because I was a fucking *child*. I didn't come from some *Blade Runner* dystopia, where British administrators peered down from their colonial style mansions atop Victoria Peak, surveyed their kingdom, watched as their subjects, Chinese Hong Kongers, scrambled around the city to keep it humming, to continue producing cheap toys and clothes and electronics in the city's factories.

I came from America. I did not need to navigate tight, trash-strewn streets occupied by sullen people pressing one nostril closed and then shooting snot onto the pavement as I walked by. In America, I went to a bright, sterile supermarket where the meat and poultry were sealed into nice, clean plastic packages where they sat in refrigerated displays, the use by dates clearly marked. In our American town, when walking to the store, I didn't have to wander past open air wet markets, the smells of which took your breath away, reeked like the insides of slaughtered pigs, chickens, cows and other, unidentifiable carcasses, the stink of their intermingled blood and viscera hanging in the air and which attracted clouds of flies. I didn't have to see live animals caked in their own filth mewling pitifully inside cramped wireframe cages, creatures

who were an hour away from being decapitated, bled out, then plucked, skinned, gutted, quartered, hung from meat hooks, or wrapped in butcher paper and bagged in plastic for waiting customers. I heard the defeated murmurs of the animals' voices. No, no, this was wrong. This was not my world.

Like a disinterested dignitary visiting his subjects, I accepted my grandparents' vassals' gifts and fawning adoration. But I was glad we were leaving so I could get back to the order of our quiet house, the white kids outside biking freely up and down our wide open roads, carefree and unencumbered by the chokehold of overpopulation, safe from taxis careening up and down clogged streets, these lurching cars controlled by glowering Chinese men who, based on the way they drove, seemed intent on hitting something, anything, to change the course of their day.

At the airport departure gate, after Mom tearfully hugged her parents, I hugged each of her family members who saw us off, an uncle, an aunt, a cute girl cousin who I crushed on, Mom told me to say *no noi ei* (I love you). I said it but deliberately mangled it. Everyone chuckled. Grandpa sucked his teeth.

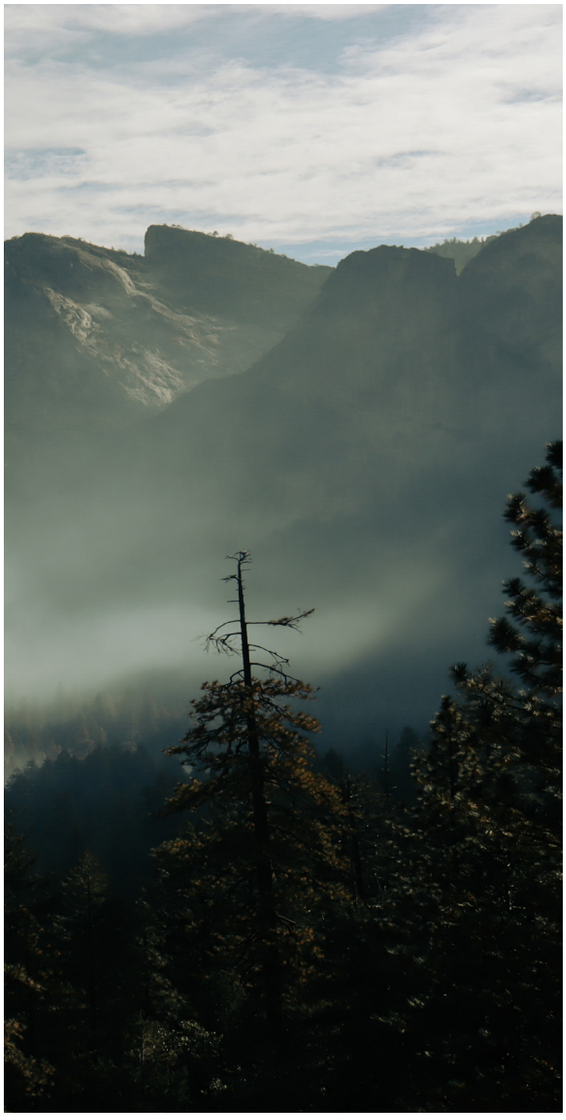
We flew back to America where I promptly forgot my family and their impressive but polluted megalopolis. The Chogokin my grandparents bought me; the head fell off and one of its projectile fists was lost behind the fridge or maybe it got sucked up in Mom's vacuum. ꕥ



art by KATHRYN CASTANOLI

OCTOBER IN YOSEMITE

MICHAEL THEROUX



There's a bridge arching above the Merced, in the heart of Yosemite. Glass water reflects great rock walls and this afternoon, October's dove-gray skies. The bridge trembles constantly from the thrumming of tourist feet. Leaning against the railing, I jot the thoughts this magic place stirs.

A baby calls "mama!" to a young woman on the sandy riverbank below. On her haunches, she waits by the river as her husband herds her children toward her. She feeds bits of torn bread to a mallard with a drooping, broken wing. Her clipped and guttural German accent is clear and understandable; she is telling her children about this poor duck, admonishing their gentleness, urging a quiet and careful approach to the wounded creature. The baby, delighted, timidly takes the crumbs and extends tiny hands; the fowl waddles forward and accepts the alms. As the parents turn to walk toward Yosemite's concessions, the little girl, unobserved, snatches a handful of pebbles from the bank and flings them at the retreating bird.

I reach for my pen to enter this observation, and in drawing it from my shirt pocket, inadvertently, and to my great chagrin, catch a gum wrapper in the clip of the ballpoint. It flutters away from my futile grasp like a robotic butterfly, to land and float downstream on the river's skin.

Young trout peck and fret at the blue and white scrap riding among the golden leaves of aspen and alder. The detritus

makes its silent way toward some further trap, to catch among the willow wands or between logs jammed against boulders. At the bottom of the deep pool, well below the nervous movements of the young fry, a fine group of huge rainbows wait patiently.

The broken mallard swims in, samples the flotsam, rejects the bit. The children have temporarily been forgotten by their young German parents and return to play on the bridge above the deepest pool. All are oblivious to the clutch of large fish, and to I, observing anxiously.

Squawking at each other and flapping their elbows, the kids mimic a brilliant blue and gray Steller's jay in the alder.

Two teenagers approach and pass on the bridge in animated discussion:

"Here's the thing, okay, I do not relate—you can't make me feel what a fish feels ... I mean, I can't put myself in the mind of those animals, and ..."

"No, it's not like that! You just gotta look at them—LOOK! They are beautiful, and ..."

"Aw, come on—I just don't see food that way ..."

Yosemite Falls traces a thin, misty line in the afternoon's golden haze, hiding in El Capitan's shadow. The Steller's jay is now in a rapid-fire conversation with the squawking children. The sun settles into the valley's western notch. A film crew waits, poised for the 'right light' to touch just so on their array of very natural-looking teepees, rising like conical mushrooms sprung from the broad straw-colored meadow off the river's flank. Well done—their staves are worn, the tent-tops sport smoked canvas, and the entire venue seemed to be of a quieter, wilder world. The constant din of traffic will be background static for the soundman to edit.

Yosemite—sweet, cool bowl of granite, growing these giant pines that seen from above are only fine moss below the monuments. The hordes meander through this soul's retreat, searching perhaps only for that one quintessential picture to complement their 'I Saw El Capitan' bumper sticker. Few leave without having been caught by the sheer wonder surrounding them.

There is such healing here, in the light. An unavoidable humbleness descends on all who come to gaze upward in amazement, their childhood awe emerging from their elder shells.

It is the valley's due: that pause that comes two weeks later to soften life's irritants. A calming thought, perhaps when baggage is sent to Dallas instead of LAX, when the 747's seating has been re-arranged at the last moment, separating family members.

Mid-flight, and on the way to the toilet cubicle, the young German mother remembers the way October light reflected off the Merced's golden surface. With a start, she also remembers that her momentarily forgotten babies were left to play over that deep pool with its huge trout and the raucous squawks of the mimicking jay.

Long-lasting change comes from this magic place, but comes in its own sweet time.



art by PAXTON SANDOVAL

BIOSPHERES

ANNE BABSON

I.
The lily preens ungilded. She floats it,
Anchors it on the surface. Her fish hide
Under it. She allows no algae to
Mask their motion. The pond she hand-poured
Complete with indigenous cellular
Organisms—volvox and amoebae—
Is clear like her thoughts.
She designed this forked path for promenades
In the cool of the day without serpents.

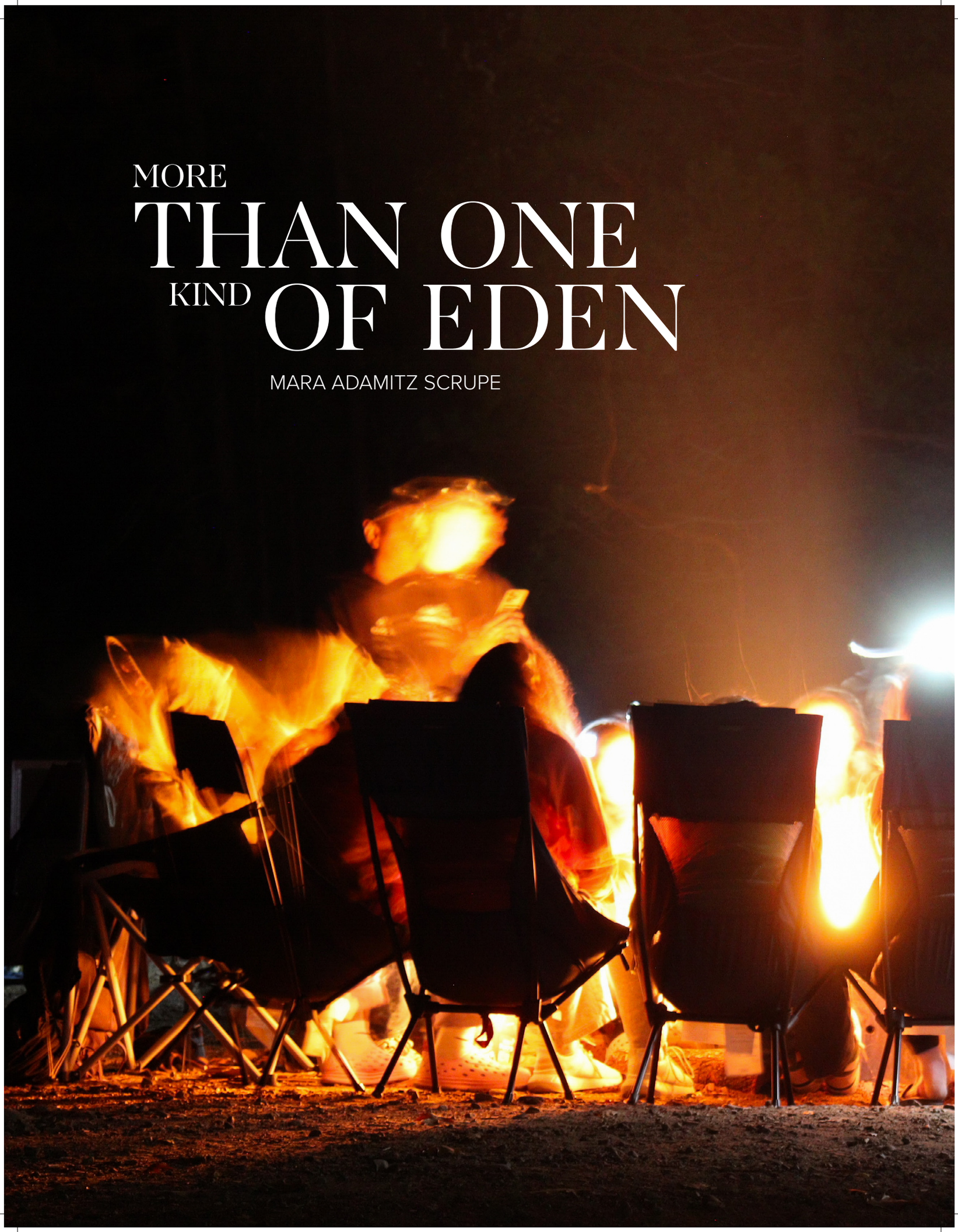
II.
I come here with oils every morning.
Yes, the pond looks different every day.
I paint canvases the size of palace
Walls. I want the eye to see what the soul
Perceives—this is home, our home
That transcends the light of our
Organized dwellings. Once inhabitants,
We were marooned in this century,
In this civilization. We have lost
The gentle croaking of the yellow frog.

III.
From a place like this one, the yearning came
To crawl, doctor–like when a baby
Gets curious—the fish wanted to chase
The dragonfly. The root wanted to chase
Crawfish at the bottom. I can chart
The yearning from the moment the xylem
Drew the water into the lotus leaf.
Mapped out in my notebooks,
These effects can be reproduced in
My laboratory, but I need funding.

IV.
Come. Walk with me, beloved, in the cool
Along the banks I have dug.
Hardened obsidian, take my hand.
This moment I have longed for,
Not the laying of eggs in the sandy
Stratum. No, beloved.
This conversation is what made me
Explode the void into
Heady millennia of lava and
Plate shifts, made me orchestrate the low tides
And the moon phases, that you and I might
One day flip through the blueprints together.
Each day, this bursts fresh. I have yearned for this.

MORE THAN ONE KIND OF EDEN

MARA ADAMITZ SCRUPE





art by KATHRYN CASTANOLI

Planted catty-corner across the road, a single sodium vapor lamp beams jaundiced yellow through two mullioned front room windows. Loosely vented into a rawboned brick chimney, a black cast iron Franklin stove sits a bit off-kilter in the center of the room. Loaded up with wet wood collected down by the river, it's pumping out more smoke than heat. I'm lying on my back in a thin, foam-stuffed flannel sleeping bag plunked down on the bare wood floor where we've sacked out for the night. I can't close my eyes. I'm worn out, even after a straight-through twenty-some-hour drive in a half-ton pickup truck hauling a twelve-foot trailer, but my body feels like it's wired to the road. Electricity's out in the house, but that light keeps blazing in from out there, in the middle of nowhere.

A Change of Residence

Our new home, in a ramshackle village alongside the river, once served as a general store with living quarters above, a blacksmithing business out back. Built around 1840, hunkered into the base of a slate embankment a couple of hundred yards up from the James River, we bought the place during our honeymoon trip to Virginia, on a complicated but undeniable urge that seems unreasonable now only in retrospect. We'll live in that house for four years, modernize with a propane furnace set in the middle of the front room, and eventually sell it, all the while looking throughout the five-county surrounding area for something else; we're not sure what. Our only non-negotiables are land, at least ten acres—there's got to be acreage—and water: a stream, a river, whatever. We'll wind up two miles away, in an eighteenth-century mess of a house perched on a lofty precipice overlooking the same river we thought we were leaving. But now we're committing, settling in permanently. Though we don't really know it, not yet.

Childhood and a Farmhouse

The emerging suburb where our little family relocates in the late 1950s consists of a half square mile of two-and three-bedroom ramblers plopped down on former farm fields sandwiched between the Mississippi to the east and the Minnesota River to the west. Almost every summer day, my sisters and I ride our bikes along the six blocks of white, freshly cured concrete suburban sidewalks to nearby Mound Springs Park. Racing the park's trails, winding around and through until we reach the hills edging the river bluffs; digging there from time to time, we come across bits of animal bones and other little treasures—a tiny bead, a chipped quartz arrowhead. We know that the circular ridges we climb up and over were made by 'Indians'. But we don't think we're messing around on sacred ground. We don't think that there's anything wrong with making this our regular playground. Anyway, it's magical: pebbled trails rambling through mysteries of thickly wooded, wet and sloughy kettles and moraines, clear sun-sparked creeks meandering between high hillocks, afford us

enchanting and otherworldly relief from our parents' rules and warnings, as well as a welcome interregnum circumscribed by the fractious breakdown of their marriage.

Among the earliest Europeans to arrive hereabouts and stay, French missionaries set up at Fort Snelling in the Minnesota Territory in the 1820s, aiming to convert Indigenous people to Christianity. Roughly a century later, a few miles south of the Fort, our story-and-a-half stucco-faced farmhouse was constructed atop a rare, elevated spit of land, on the seemingly empty, boundless plains that had first attracted homesteaders in the 1850s. Mom and Dad showed up in 1956 with two toddlers in tow—my older sister and me—and a baby on the way. The nearest town center—called Oxboro and later renamed Bloomington—was little more than a wide spot in the road when we arrived, with a shoe shop, a hardware store, a movie house, and a small grocery. But even then, it was already in the process of transforming from boondocks to a classic post-war boom town. As we settled into our new life in the early 1960s, the town would incorporate and become a city. Thereupon new streets and highways materialized, alongside shopping malls, restaurants, and office parks. Housing subdivisions with spacious, fenced yards sprang up everywhere, representing real progress for mostly working-class families leaving crowded urban centers.

My father came up in the Corcoran neighborhood of South Minneapolis, an immigrant enclave populated by an ever-shifting admixture of races, ethnicities, and religions. Back then, most kids from that rough-and-tumble district knew and used epithets like *dago*, *chief*, *yid*, *hun*, *paddy*, and *russki*. Dad, a proud Polish Catholic, and an unflinching *polack* with a lot of fighters in him, probably gave as good as he got. Born in 1930, Mom's childhood was spent in north-central Minnesota's Cass County, a landscape of grasslands edged by forest, periodically punctuated with the many lakes for which the place is famous. She grew up on a dairy farm without electricity, indoor plumbing, or central heat, and after graduating high school in 1946, moved to the Twin Cities for a two-year secretarial training program. The American economy was then in a post-World War II recession that would last another year; nevertheless, Mom was hired right out of school for the first of many office jobs that would span her forty-plus years in the full-time pink-collar

workforce. The fastest typist I've ever seen, she also took dictation and shorthand at a pace; in fact, everything she did, she did fast. Among my earliest memories, we're driving to one of the babysitters who look after the three of us during the day while my mother works. Mom parks, jumps out, slings open the rear passenger door of our compact, white Dodge Dart, and whisks us out of the car with a *quick, quick, girls*.

Once Mom left the farm, she never pined for the woodlands, lakes, and lush prairies of her youth, insisting she couldn't wait to get away from all that work, the endless haying, milking, and clearing rocks from the fields for planting. Dad was never very comfortable living out in the country and away from urban amenities; he was forever looking for a place to meet his buddies, have a beer or two, and shoot the breeze. I've always wondered what made a city boy like him, and Mom, who eagerly sloughed off her rural upbringing, decide to leave the sweet, modern, center-city bungalow they'd bought in Minneapolis a few years after they married, for our old, solitary farmhouse in the middle of a former cornfield. Best I can figure, they both hoped that a fresh start in a quiet haven away from city temptations would help with Dad's drinking and bolster their efforts to save their fledgling but already foundering marriage.

Mounds and Other Histories

Long before we moved to the farmhouse where my two sisters and I would grow up, long before evangelists turned up at Fort Snelling, long before the Fort itself, and centuries before the arrival of any European settlers, the Dakota were the first people known to inhabit the area. Countless generations harvested wild rice and maple sugar and cultivated gardens along the wooded banks of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers.[1] Coldwater Spring, situated at the confluence of these two mighty waterways, is a sacred site fundamental to Dakota cosmology and the center of its spiritual world. It is also the spot where U.S. Army troops camped during the 1820-25 construction of Fort Snelling.

In an essay entitled *The Death of a Mound, Politics and Human Remains in Minnesota*, Bruce White describes a 2004 controversy involving an archaeological dig taking place not far from Coldwater Spring and Historic Fort Snelling, just above the mouth of the Minnesota River, at the proposed, future location of the Mall of America in Bloomington. White's article

1. Dakota Wicohan, "History on The Dakota of Minnesota," Dakota Wicohan, 2020.

explores the discovery of human bones—or what might even be a mass grave associated with the 1862-63 internment and subsequent deaths of at least 130 Dakota people—unearthed during excavations for the new Mega-Mall. White goes on to note that the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community, a non-federally recognized Native group, vocally expressed their opposition to this and other planned construction projects on sacred grounds, in particular at that place where the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers converge.[2]

The site of the Bloomington dig comprised three tumuli rising along towering cliffs overlooking the Minnesota River. But according to a state archaeologist working there, only one—referred to as Mound 2—remained intact prior to the dig. Minnesota State Statute 307.08 Subd. 8 states that *if burial grounds are authenticated on private lands, efforts may be made by the state to purchase and protect them instead of removing them to another location.*[3] Mendota tribal leader Michael Scott opined that extracting bones from the site did not make it any less sacred, since flesh and other body parts break down, becoming inextricably embedded in the land.[4] Nevertheless, remains were steadily removed from that location and carried away—admittedly with some of the soil in which they were originally inhumed—for interment across the road from their original burial. Notwithstanding this officially sanctioned reburial, an anonymous letter in circulation at that time, possibly written by another archaeologist on the team, asserts that *this is probably the most important burial site along the Minnesota River, perhaps in all of Minnesota.* White quotes another archaeologist who worked on the mound in the 1990s who stated for the record that it *is a place of incredible cultural value. It has been a cemetery and sacred place for 1,500 years or more.*[5]

Several years before the Mega-Mall controversy, an analogous dispute erupted over a plan to extend a major roadway through adjacent Native lands. On February 26, 1999, Dakota spiritual leader and Episcopal minister Rev. Gary Cavender delivered a speech at a press conference on the construction of Highway 55 through Coldwater Spring at Historic Fort Snelling. The following is excerpted from that text:[6]

We are coming here to talk about sacred land, and especially the sacredness of that place. In our creation story of where we first began as people on this earth, that place was sacred long before anybody from Europe arrived and saw the place. Because of the topography of the land and because of the coming together of two great rivers (Minnesota and Mississippi), it is called "Md ote" or the throat of the waters, and they named a town after it–Mendota–although it is pronounced altogether differently.

2. Bruce White, "The Death of a Mound," Minnesota History, 2022.
3. Minnesota Legislature, "2025 Minnesota Statutes," Minnesota Legislature, 2022.
4. "The Death of a Mound."
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*

In our Creation myth, we the Dakota, the Seven Fires of the Dakota, came from the belt of Orion–the seven planets of the belt of Orion, the seven stars–and arrived at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, and so in some respects it is our Eden, and the land around there is sacred as well. There is that sacred spring that is in negotiation; that sacred spring is the dwelling place of Unktehi, the God of the Waters, and in that spring, there is an underground river that goes into the big river, and that is his passageway to get out into the world. To block the sacred passageway would be courting drought and things of that nature that have to do with water, because after all, this is the God of the water ... We came there as human beings, and so that is our Eden, and the irony of it all is that in 1862-1863 that was almost the end of us as people, because that was the Ft. Snelling concentration camp. It may have been a full circle for us–the beginning and the ending, which is sacred in and of itself, but the land is sacred ... There are bodies there; there is a sacred cemetery there. Maybe all of it is gone, but it is still sacred.

We hold our lands sacred, but these lands are more sacred because of the history, because of the myth, and what we are pleading for is some understanding ... Use this sacred place as a neutral ground to start a journey of understanding each other and leave it alone. Our people's beginning spirits are there, and our people's ending spirits are there. All of the Gods are there. The Wakan Tanka is there. The Wakan Tanka is everywhere, and so for us it's only a little patch of land we're asking for. The economy isn't going to collapse. There is an alternative way to solve the problem, but for us it is a great, great sacrifice, and we've sacrificed so much for so long. All we're asking for is a little understanding and perhaps respecting what we hold sacred!

More Than One Kind of Eden

The promontory where I stand overlooking the James River has long held special meaning for the people who've known it, passed through it, and settled here. From beyond this remarkable vantage point—stalwart waterway below, cerulean-tinged mountains to the west—weather of one sort or another daily pushes downriver; apparitional mists roll up and out over the shoreline's first and second banks—floods are recurrent in this part of the Virginia Blue Ridge piedmont—braising the tops of ancestral oak, locust, hickory, sycamore, and walnut trees. A few of the last remaining, naturally occurring, hearty survivors of Dutch Elm Disease still stand, despite the infestation that, a half century ago, decimated a majority of North America's oldest specimens. In aggregate, in their immensity, diversity, and fortitude, these forests provide a buffer against winter's bitter north wind but, with the

recent changes in local weather patterns, have themselves become its victims. Just last year, the weight of heavy ice and wet snow coupled with near-cyclone blasts—sometimes reaching thirty or forty miles an hour—felled more than a hundred trees on our land. Many of them were saplings, though not a few were lost that had stood sentinel here for a century and more.

These past three decades on the farm, we've planted, nurtured, babied, and admired scores of river birch, maple, and ash, their imparipinnate leaves—spinach green on the upside and flaxen underneath—offering kaleidoscopic shade during the hottest days of our upland southern summers. In drought years, we drove the pickup down to the river, hooked up a twelve-volt water pump to the truck's battery, and filled the mammoth plastic holding tank we'd borrowed from a neighbor, regularly watering thirty of the youngest maples. All of those seedlings made it through the driest seasons, but in more recent years, the Emerald Borer took out every last one of our ashes. All that's left of them is a mountain of firewood stacked against the pole barn.

Coyotes need this land, as do black bears, badgers, fox, and deer. Though we keep eight acres around the house clear, creating a barrier against venomous snakes—water moccasins, eastern rattlesnakes, copperheads—that generally prefer shaggier, higher grasses, and the natural cover they provide. Our mown clean boundary likewise discourages deer that, barring hindrance, eat my vegetables and flowers down to nubs—the apex predator, the Eastern Cougar, that once kept ungulate populations in check, having been hunted to extinction more than a century ago. We leave our remaining forty acres for wild animals who long ago figured they're safe here. Coyotes, though circumspect and human-shy, often show up at night—their yodeling howls echoing down the bluff—making fine, bold vocalists. Sometimes I'm awakened just before daybreak, in the purplish flush of river valley brume, to their raucous songs. Our small orchard stands a couple of hundred yards west of the house. Despite these animals' natural caution and legendary intelligence, the pear trees, and the luscious fruit they abundantly produce, can bring our wild canine neighbors out from the woods, even in daytime. There remains a countywide bounty on coyotes, and I sometimes think that, in creating a tiny haven for undomesticated animals, we've tamed them down just enough to lure them to their eventual ends at the hands of some nearby, frustrated farmer or gardener. And I often wonder at how we punish coyotes for surviving, and to some extent flourishing, amidst the very conditions we've created.

Gazing out across this valley is a scene unchanged for centuries: an antebellum mansion seated on the hillside upslope from the north bank of the river, thousands of acres of still-cultivated fields bordering the water below. But before ownership, titles, transfers, bills of lading, legal documents, and tax records, Monacans were, for thousands of years, the only human inhabitants of these verdant forests, streams, and upland meadows. English colonists, upon first encountering the exuberantly green landscapes of Piedmont Virginia, thought they'd found Eden. Historian Archibald Shepperson writes: *Here we have it, simply and concisely set forth—the conception that most Virginians held of their state for the past three centuries and a half: earth's only paradise:*

And cheerfully at sea,
Success you will entice,
To get the pearl and gold,
And ours to hold,
VIRGINIA,
Earth's only Paradise[7]

an antebellum mansion seated on the hillside upslope from the north bank of the river

Barrows

The earthen burial mounds of Monacan people—like those of their distant Siouan cousins, the Dakota—are endemic to this region, and have proved irresistibly intriguing for generations of newcomers to its lands. In his 'Notes on the State of Virginia', Thomas Jefferson discusses *Barrows, of which many are to be found all over this country. These are of different sizes, some of them constructed of earth, and some of loose stones. That these are repositories of the dead has been obvious to all ... There being one of these in my neighborhood ... I determined to open and examine it thoroughly. It was situated on the low grounds of the Rivanna ... It was of spheroidal form, of*

7. Shepperson, Archibald Bolling, "Earth's Only Paradise," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 33, no. 4, 1957, 595–603.

about 40 feet diameter at the base, and had been of about twelve feet altitude ...

Jefferson goes on to describe excavating the barrow, and what he finds in that process: *I first came to collections of human bones, at different depths from six inches to three feet below the surface ... The bones of which the greater number remained were skulls, jawbones, teeth, the bones of arms, thighs, legs, feet, and hands. There were some teeth which were judged to be smaller than those of an adult; a skull, which, on a slight view, appeared to be that of an infant, but it fell to pieces on being taken out, to prevent satisfactory examination; a rib, and a fragment of the under-jaw of a person about half grown; another rib of an infant; and part of the jaw of a child, which had not yet cut its teeth ... I conjectured that in this barrow might have been a thousand skeletons ... they are of considerable notoriety among the Indians: for a party passing, about thirty years ago, through the part of the country where this barrow is, went through the woods directly to it, without any instructions or enquiry, and having staid about it some time, with expressions which were construed to be those of sorrow, they returned to the high road, which they had left about half a dozen miles to pay this visit, and pursued their journey.*[8]

Because of his methodical investigation and documentation of the barrow near his Monticello home, Thomas Jefferson has often been referred to as 'the father of American archaeology'.

Another Site Another Story

Located about a twenty-minute drive due east of our place, Point of Fork is the earliest English name for the meeting place of two great rivers of central Virginia, the Rivanna and the James. A strategic arsenal was established here during the American Revolutionary War, and a village grew up that, according to locals, was later put forward as a possible capital of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Rechristened Columbia at the turn of the nineteenth century, the flourishing town—a critical shipping point for Virginia's tobacco trade—established its own bateau freight line linking plantations downriver at Richmond to growing cities to the west: Lynchburg via the James, and Charlottesville via the Rivanna.[9]

Perhaps because Monacans were reticent in their dealings with the earliest newcomers, almost nothing of their history was ever set down on paper by the English, and until recently Columbia was not widely recognized as the site

8. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on The State of Virginia, Query XI," Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., New York, NY, 1984, 223-6.

9. Bergman Justin, "Columbia: Will Fluvanna's historic burg be saved?," *The Hook*, December 18, 2002.

of an ancient Monacan town called Rassawek. Theirs is an oral culture in which memories are verbally handed down through scores of generations. Hence, an astonishing written void exists concerning Monacan society, origin stories, places, and ways of worship, even material culture and artifacts, all of which in aggregate form the very foundations and meaning of life itself for Monacan people. It follows that, if only what is written down is legitimized as history, then the oral history of the Monacan people—because it was never officially documented in writing—is therefore lost, or to some extent considered (perhaps to this day) irrelevant by the dominant culture. Nonetheless, the adventurer John Smith, during his early seventeenth-century travels, recognized the significance of Rassawek, recording a description of it as an extensive palisaded settlement situated at the mouth of the Rivanna River.[10] And according to Indigenous accounts, for hundreds of years tens of thousands of Native people lived in settled villages of permanent pole and thatch houses fanning out north and west from their capital at Rassawek.[11]

In 2003, the James River Water Authority (JRWA) was established to build a pumping station carrying water some twenty-one miles north from Columbia to Zion Crossroads, a designated development zone that lacked sufficient water resources of its own.[12] The JRWA eventually purchased property at Columbia/ Point of Fork/ Rassawek in 2016, pursued the US Army Corps of Engineers' project permit requiring mitigation of impacts on historic sites,[13] and contacted representatives of the Monacan Nation offering to conduct archeological studies and facilitate reburial if any graves were discovered, and to donate funds to the Monacan Ancestral Museum.[14] However, once the tribe learned that the JRWA had identified several alternative locations, it flatly opposed the proposed plan, noting with some asperity that Native occupation of Rassawek dated to about two hundred generations before John Smith's exploits in Virginia. What's more, the authority's offer to excavate burials and transfer artifacts to a museum did not necessarily ensure they would go to the Monacan Nation.

In the end, the Corps of Engineers required the JRWA to obtain a more comprehensive public interest review of the project, enlisting the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to investigate and issue a new report on Rassawek's ancient history. In 2020, the National

10. Uncle Philip, *The Adventures of Captain John Smith*, New York, D. Appleton & company, 1842, Image.

11. Scott Fralin, et al, "The Land Speaks: The Monacan Nation and Politics of Memory," University Libraries Virginia Tech, December 12, 2022.

12. Fluvanna, "James River Water Authority," Fluvanna, December 17, 2022.

13. "Section 106 is a review process that is an integral component of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966. The review process requires federal agencies to identify and assess the effects that federal undertakings will have on significant historic resources. Federal undertakings can be projects or activities which are funded, permitted, licensed, or approved by any federal agency, and can take place either on or off federally owned or controlled property," December 17, 2022.

14. Virginia Places, "Rassawek," Virginia Places, December 17, 2022.

Trust for Historic Preservation identified Rassawek among that year's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places.[15] And in March 2022, the Corps of Engineers determined that the James River water pumping station must be relocated from the initially proposed site.

Full Circle

When we first arrived in central Virginia, Zion Crossroads consisted of a couple of small, independent gas stations, a Burger King, and an unbranded motel serving the junction of Interstate 64, a major east-west artery traversing the state, and Route 15, a two-lane highway. At these two roadways' intersection stood a single stop sign. Driving almost forty miles to and from Richmond's big-box outlets, supermarkets, and restaurants, we quickly registered our local lack of urban conveniences and said so to a new neighbor. Uncharacteristically vehement—Virginians are generally polite to a fault—he sharply challenged why we'd come to this out-of-the-way spot in the first place, if what we really want is access to all the amenities a city has to offer. Today, Zion Crossroads boasts a multi-lane highway complete with cloverleaf and four stoplights, almost every imaginable fast-food outlet, a Walmart and a Lowe's, a winery and golf club, several upscale motels, an urgent care medical center, a walk-in clinic, and a couple of fairly high-end housing subdivisions, with more planned in the near future. Once the new water pipeline is fully up and running, the development potential of Zion Crossroads is almost limitless.

Gardening and Other Earth Works

Unlike the rich, black loam of my prairie childhood, the soil of the Upland South is hued deep red by iron oxide combined with minerals like quartz, feldspar, oxidized titanium, and other earthy metals. The moist denseness of plains humus forms ball-like in the fist, crumbling into a creamy, clotted jumble, while our ruddy, heavy Virginia soil is stiff and unyielding, holding water that only gradually drains away when broken up with a garden spade. In my initial cultivation efforts, I wondered how such stuff could produce the ubiquity of native trees and shrubs found here in such amazingly gorgeous profusion. Because red clay tends to be acidic and low in calcium, I learned to add lime to raise pH levels in my garden beds, and to dig in

15. National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Discover America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places for 2020," National Trust for Historic Preservation, December 18, 2022.

other amendments—organic materials like composted leaves and tree bark—to produce the non-native flowers we favor in Virginia: azaleas, rhododendrons, and the English and China roses I absolutely adore.

Shovel in hand, cutting into the soil, scooping up hard clumps and dropping them into the wheelbarrow I hauled out from the implement side of the barn; in a roundabout way, the story of the trench I'm digging by hand into our bluff overlooking the James River begins with gardening, but proceeds from ghosts. Perhaps because our boundless prospect high above the James suggests both emancipation and isolation, I feel the presence of the many animals and people who've come before me on this land. Monacans knew this place, and no doubt traversed it, crossing their homelands that stretch from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the James River fall line at Richmond. The earliest documented owner of this land was born during the American War of Independence and served as a colonel in the War of 1812. Coerced scores of people, whose names I'll probably never know despite extensive research efforts, worked it to fruition. A Baptist preacher and his wife once occupied my house; they owned two enslaved people, both of whom are enumerated—unnamed—on the official census records. A brother and sister, the children of the minister and his wife and the grandchildren of the colonel, lived on this place until their deaths, well into the twentieth century.

Some years after settling in here, in commemoration of my predecessors on this land, and in recognition of our shared experiences—dependencies, affinities, cruelties and joys—I decide to send a missive across the water, a quarter mile distant, to people passing over the James River Bridge. I'll spend months excavating a long, narrow gully. I'll install a system for draining rainwater, design a solar power station for illuminated signage. I'll throw out my back, count calluses on my hands, discover chipped arrowheads large enough to take down an eight-point buck. I'll dig and dig, and finally—I'm still not entirely sure why—I'll give up. I'll never finish that seventy-five-foot-long earthwork dug into the bluff. It will never radiate a simple poem: *I'm here. Where are you?*

Contiguities

I take comfort in circularity, in the concatenation of events: the way my mother left the rural countryside forever, and somehow, without conscious intention or aim, I was drawn back to it. The way, as a kid, I dug in dirt for bits of treasure and found relics of those who'd come before me, and again,

I take comfort in circularity, in the concatenation of events

much later, in an unfulfilled longing to deliver a message of affirmation, I spent months excavating a trench for an art project that, in the end, overwhelmed me. The way some of us dig in hard to honor and protect the origins, histories, and well-being of our people and places, while others quarry and extricate, moving forward, always looking to the future. Considering the wayward design of fortune, of nature and culture side-by-side, of profit and loss, of beauty and ugliness, faith and despair, mercy and grace, I'm left with the hope that perhaps, if we're very lucky, the best sort of progress might lead us to touch along some contiguous border—river to stream, mountain to valley, human to animal, bone on bone—groping forward toward some kind of communion, connecting us and to this earthly Eden, in some profoundly effulgent way that I, for one, will likely never fully grasp or achieve, but can only wonder at, long for, and open myself up to.

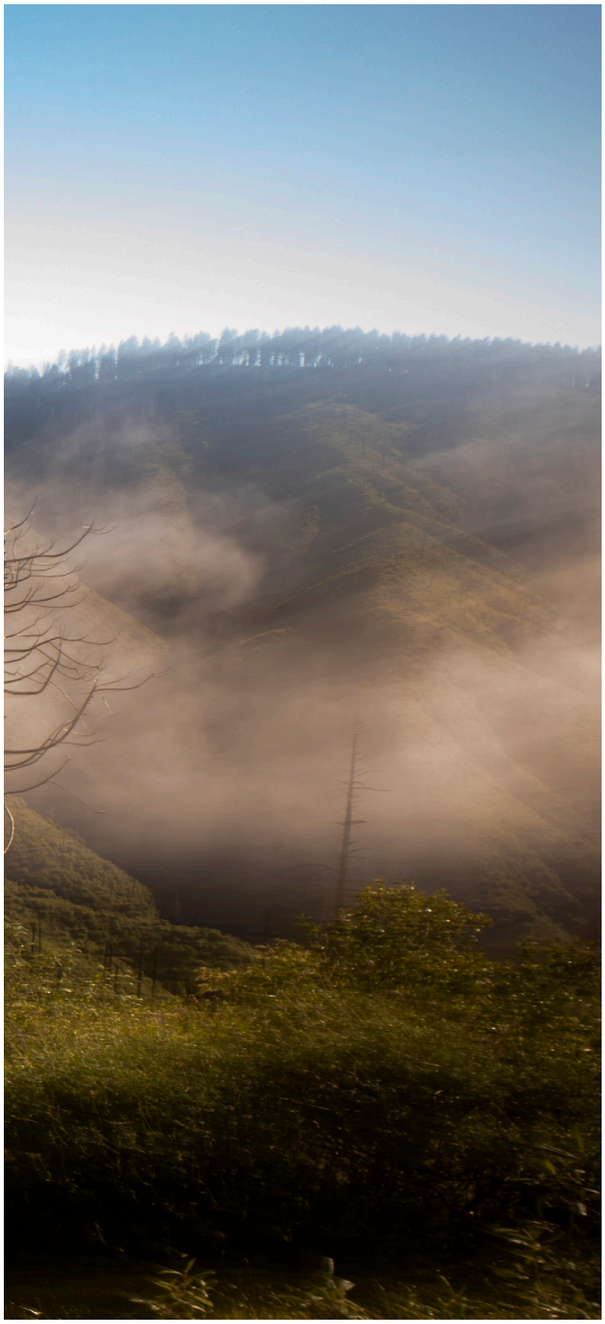
I take comfort in contiguities; land with water, valley with piedmont, the way currents kiss the shoreline at the put-in spot where we launch our canoe, floating downriver to Columbia. On fast days, after heavy rains that come more and more often these days, even digging in hard with the oars, we've paddled from sunup to sundown to make that trip. Majestic bald eagles nest in the tallest oaks rising a hundred feet from banks alongside the river; they've chosen the best view of the water from the greatest heights for safe predation—to feed their young—regularly shifting from one well-constructed aerie to another, returning year after year. Watching them soar over the rapids, then dive for prey at breakneck speed, fills me with a sense of ecstatic freedom, alongside grief in the knowledge that an encounter with such unrestrained, instinctive exquisiteness is, now more than ever, a fleeting thing, just a moment, a breath, in this earthly continuum.



art by MICHAEL ROGNER

BRUSH

MARTHA MITCHELL



I'm working alone in a dry Jeffrey pine woods overlooking Humbug Creek, trying to follow a brush-infested skid trail planned for reconstruction as a timber haul road. But I keep straying onto a fine network of deer trails. Cloven-hoof prints are everywhere, pocking the loose ground of the ridgetop. Interwoven among the prints are tracks of just-born fawns so tiny I could cover them with a quarter. I feel as if a hundred deer are watching me from the thickets, and they probably are.

A soft bleat comes from somewhere in the tangle of brush—a fawn's cry for its mother, who has left it camouflaged in the dappled shade of this close-grown hillside. Scentless and spotted, it's safe from cougars, but perhaps has heard the crackle of dry branches as I pushed through the brush and has merely been signaling to its mother.

I skitter down the prow of the ridge through a tight tangle of white thorn and chokecherry onto a trail of broken branches. A stench hits me—an odor like a dirty barn. There, in a depression of crushed limbs and sticks I walk into a place where a black bear has bedded on this south-facing slope, guarded by stickery brush. I crouch, and with the back of my hand feel the warmth of its freshly vacated bed.

Still searching the skid, I stumble onto an abandoned narrow-gauge logging railroad grade. It contours into the draw of upper Humbug Creek. There, among chinquapin

and scraggly blackjack poles, high, virgin-cut Douglas fir stumps rear above the brush. They're scarred with springboard notches carved into the massive trunks well above a man's height footholds where sawyers stood to pull the misery whips, bringing down the giants. Once, this was not a glaring brushy hillside but a cool, shaded slope of big timber standing in deep, moist duff.

High stumps of fire-scarred old-growth fir tell a story of fire and logging that cleared this place, baring the ground to bald sunlight and opening it up for brush to move in. I stop to rummage in my vest for a sandwich. In the quietness that ensues, the chittering of chipmunks, birds, and squirrels resumes in this knotted wilderness. When the nights cool and days grow shorter, these critters will compete for a cornucopia of fruits among the maze of seed-and-berry-bearing shrubs. Deer, bear, foxes, and coyotes will join them to harvest autumn's crop of plump manzanita, silk tassel berries, and the bitter fruits of chokecherry and antelope bush.

Reforestation foresters don't like how native and non-native shrubs quickly move in to colonize logged-over sites. That they compete with newly planted conifer seedlings for light, moisture, and nutrients. So, the herbicide 2-4-D is applied after nursery-grown seedlings are planted to keep the brush down and help the baby plantation get a start

But as I take my lunch in this opening of a former conifer canopy, it's plain that brush plays a heroic role in this dynamic landscape: sequestering nutrients from wildlife scat and from the copious decomposing leaves of deciduous shrubs. Thus, a brushfield stabilizes and cools soils and shelters them from erosion. It provides refuge, browse, and seasonal habitats for a range of wildlife, and colonizes disturbed sites, bristling with life and potential.

I muse about this as I slither among pants-snatching manzanita, still in search of the skid trail. In sixty years or so, this place of giant, fire-scarred stumps in a field of brush haven't even begun to regain their former state. I catch a long view across the Northern Sierran landscape of forest ecosystems altered by industrial-scale logging. Range by range, the conifer stands are younger and denser. Certainly, crowded young plantations are at risk of becoming tinderboxes of close-grown trees. Ironically, fire suppression has now become a major constituent of forest management, and research tells us western wildfires are getting larger.

The hope of forest management was that after logging, close-planted seedlings would restore forests. But the resulting density and increasing drought make it difficult for every seedling to get enough sunlight, water,

and nutrition. It will take centuries for natural competition and succession to result in multi-species, multi-age forests that are wind-firm, well-spaced, and capable of surviving frost crack, shattering wind, disease, competition, drought, and wildfire.

I finally wander onto the ancient skid trail. On a clear, south-facing pitch, I stop and hunker down to watch two beetles manage to roll a deer dropping down the steep skid trail. One clambers to the top of the pellet and overbalances it just enough for the beetle on the downhill side—which is standing on its head—to catch it with the mighty strength of its hind legs. The pair does this over and over, like a Jack 'n Jill duo coordinating their felling and limbing operation. I ponder ecosystem change as I consider the beetles' perfect duet: harvesting deer scat in the bald sunlight of a ridge once shaded by a climax forest. As I hike back to my rig, I pass a meager spring where the moist ground around it is imprinted with the fresh skid of a fast-moving bear.



art by JERI LEWIS EDWARDS

BIRDS, DEATH, &c

COLLIN VAN SON

At the top of a 90-foot spruce at the southern end of Cheesman Park sits a red-tailed hawk nest. I first noticed the nest three years ago, during my first winter in Denver, when an adult red-tail in the midst of home renovation flew over my head with a massive dead branch.

A few weeks earlier, back in Pennsylvania for Christmas, my sister had gifted me a field guide to the birds of North America, and I'd raided my dad's junk drawer for a pair of old binoculars. I soon discovered that everything smaller than a robin looked the same to me. My nascent hobby might have fizzled out right there were it not for Cheesman's resident red-tails. Because of their dependable presence, it's now by reflex that I unhook my binoculars on the way out the door.

This year, for the third in a row, spring brought two new hatchlings. For weeks they remained indistinguishable, just two balls of flesh-eating lint. Even after they'd grown large enough to tell them apart, I resisted the temptation to assign them names. Not wanting to impose a false sense of familiarity (like that coworker who insists on giving everyone a nickname), I referred to them simply as "the bigger one" and "the smaller one." With these unsentimental descriptions, I told myself I was taking a stand against the impulse to domesticate.

For the sake of convenience, "the bigger one" and "the smaller one" were eventually shortened to "big one" and "little one." Later I got into the habit of dropping the *one*.

After that, it was only a matter of time before I started using capitals: Big and Little. Naming, I have come to suspect, is not always a choice.[1]

It was shortly after Big and Little's hatching that I started bringing a pocket-sized notebook on my visits to the nest. At the time I was reading a biography of Meriwether Lewis, and the reproductions of his journal pages—with their sketches of trout, vultures, canoes, all surrounded by neat cursive script—convinced me that field notetaking is an undervalued art form, one located at the intersection of natural history and poetry.[2]

So it was with an image of myself as a kind of field poet that I sat down on the bench with the best view of the nest and touched my pen to paper.[3] Before I even reached the end of the first line, I concluded the whole thing was a disaster. My opening observation—*overcast & breezy*—failed to make a meaningful contribution to poetry *or* meteorology. Worse than what I had written, however, was *how* I had written it: compared to the flowing work of Lewis's quill, my printed letters were an embarrassment. I'd come to observe the mysteries of non-human life, and here were the same crude letters I left on grocery lists and dental forms. My handwriting was an insult to the hawks.

It was because of Big and Little, then, that I began writing in cursive for the first time since elementary school. I was surprised at how quickly it came

1. I could have assigned the hawks numbers, I suppose, but I doubt that would have stemmed the tide of human affection. As I write this, the world has only just lost the beloved Grizzly 399, who was killed this week while crossing a road south of Jackson, Wyoming. She was 28 years old, the same age I am now, and the emotion I felt upon hearing of her death was in no way dampened by her lack of what in humans we would call a proper name. National Park Service, "Grizzly Bear 399 Fatally Struck by Vehicle in Snake River Canyon," October 23, 2024.

2. I also enjoyed Lewis's liberal use of *&c*, his preferred abbreviation for *et cetera*. The letter-punctuation combination feels playfully incongruous in a 200-year-old journal, like a chapter of the King James Bible ending with *tl;dr*. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson and the Opening of the American West*, Simon and Schuster, 1996.

3. The bench in question was one I spent more time standing on than sitting on; before the hawks were old enough to explore the branches that overhang the nest, I needed the extra step up in order to glimpse the tops of their heads. Later, in a 24-hour period between two of my visits, the bench was removed by unknown forces and replaced by another, unnervingly similar bench. As far as I can tell, the only differences are that the new bench is a slightly different shade of green and has no middle arm rest. The new bench, like the old, has a small brass plaque that dedicates it to a recently deceased member of the neighborhood. Beneath their name, the plaque reads, "A Friend to All," which is more or less how I feel when I'm visiting the hawks.

back to me; over the following weeks, as the hawks traded their dandelion down for sleek flight feathers, my penmanship matured alongside them. By mid-July, they no longer hesitated to hurl their bodies into the wind, and I no longer paused at every capital *I*, debating whether the loop goes to the right or to the left. That my return to cursive was an exercise in vanity does not escape me, but having seen the fastidiousness with which the hawks preened and oiled their new feathers, it occurs to me there are worse things than vanity.

Statistically speaking, I knew I was all but guaranteed to miss the hawks' first flights. Even so, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment the day I first spotted Big outside the nest tree. Binoculars at the ready, I took a seat in the grass and resolved to stay there until I saw Big fly. By the time I finally gave up, I was an hour late to pick up my parents, who had just arrived in Denver for the very first time.

Over the course of my parents' visit I took them to see the hawks several times. My mom was hooked by the drama of their early flights, when it always seemed uncertain whether they'd ever make it back to the top of the spruce.[4] My dad impressed me with the amount of bird knowledge that had apparently spent decades lying dormant in his brain. But as I listened to him describe the key features of a cormorant ("long neck, stubby butt"), part of me wondered how long it would be before we arrived at one of his many stories of bird-related violence.

4. A few days after they returned home, my mom texted me a photo she had taken of an owl, its head rotated 180 degrees to stare right back at the camera. I told her it was a barred owl, and she surprised me by asking whether those were the owls the U.S. government was preparing to kill by the hundreds of thousands. I told her yes, that it was my understanding that barred owls were crowding out other, less hardy owl species, and that a culling of the barred owl population appeared to be the agreed-upon response. So as not to bum her out too much, I asked where she'd seen the owl; she told me she passed it while driving and admitted she'd slammed on the brakes without first checking whether there were any cars behind her. This kind of automotive recklessness is one I inherited in full. Ninety-nine percent of the time I am an unhurried (some would say infuriatingly slow) driver, but I have a tendency to swerve like a maniac any time I spot an interesting bird. When my girlfriend is in the passenger seat, I suspect there are many birds she chooses not to bring to my attention out of fear for our safety. Matthew Brown, "U.S. Officials Plan to Kill Hundreds of Thousands of Barred Owls to Save Another Species from Extinction," *PBS News*, July 3, 2024.

As far as I can tell, my dad's childhood in Santa Barbara played out against a backdrop of routine animal death.[5] The earliest example that I can recall involved a neighborhood cat that was terrorized by a territorial mockingbird: every time the cat tried to cross its owner's backyard, the bird would swoop down and peck the cat in the ear. The mockingbird struck so regularly and with such accuracy that over time it created a big bloody hole in the center of the cat's ear. After carrying on for a while with this open wound, the cat eventually succumbed to an infection. Within the canon of my dad's bird stories, this one is unique in that the bird is not the one who dies.[6]

A more representative story is that of the pigeons. One summer, my dad scaled the inside of the local drive-in movie screen and collected half a dozen baby pigeons from the nests their parents had built inside the trusswork. He brought the birds home and deposited them in the outdoor pen where his eldest brother kept homing pigeons. Before long, the movie theater pigeons and their well-bred counterparts had coalesced into a single flock; released into the open, my dad's pigeons would follow my uncle's all the way home, reentering their enclosure via a one-way door. It was, to all observers, an impressive display of bird-to-bird and brother-to-brother cooperation.

One Sunday morning, however, my grandfather decided that the pigeon coop would be put to better use as a playhouse for my dad's youngest brother. Accepting that their time as pigeon tamers had come to an end, my dad and his older brother drove the flock across town and released them once and for all—only to have the birds beat them home. Again and again they tried to set them free, but no matter how far they drove, the pigeons returned every time. As Opa grew increasingly frustrated by the playhouse

5. In this he is not alone. I have long since lost count of the number of pets whose deaths my sisters and I oversaw. Some met their ends via natural causes, although "natural" feels a little dishonest when applied to a North African lizard that died atop an imitation rock in a Pennsylvania suburb. Others included a hamster whose wheel squeaked so horribly that we took to lubricating the axle with butter, which the hamster happily ate and ate until it died from what I can only assume was coronary heart disease.

6. I confess that my sympathy for the cat in this story is rather low. According to researchers from the Smithsonian Institute and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, domesticated cats kill as many as 4 billion birds per year, so I see little harm in the tables being turned every so often—especially since I, like my dad, am allergic to cats. Scott R. Loss et al., "The Impact of Free-Ranging Domestic Cats on Wildlife of the United States," *Nature Communications* 4, no. 1, 2013.

construction delays, my dad and his brother felt their options narrowing. After one more failed attempt to ditch the flock, they entered the pen and killed every pigeon with a shovel.[7]

And then there was the falconry attempt. At some point before or after the pigeons, my dad's older brother acquired a sparrowhawk that he imagined he would train to hunt small game. My uncle, however, did a half-ass job (my dad's words) of training the bird, and one day it disappeared into the neighborhood. It was spotted some days later in the top of a tree, the leather jesses my uncle had tied around its ankles hopelessly entangled in a branch. The hawk had hung there, upside down, until exhaustion or exposure at last set it free.



On their second day in Denver, I took my parents for a nature drive at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, which for decades was run by the U.S. Army as a chemical weapons production site. In addition to VX, mustard, and sarin gas, the complex was used to mix the propellent for intercontinental ballistic missiles, and the Shell Oil Company leased part of the property for the manufacture of pesticides. Unsurprisingly, the Arsenal was eventually declared a Superfund site.[8] Today it is a wildlife refuge home to bison, eagles, and prairie dogs that my mom said reminded her of her first-grade students back home.

For the length of the Arsenal's one-way nature drive, you are required to stay inside your vehicle to avoid being gored by bison. Approaching a bridge that spanned a shallow creek bed, we found ourselves driving through a roiling cloud of cliff swallows. There were no cars behind us, so I parked in the middle of the bridge and turned off the engine. With the windows down and the sunroof open, it felt like we'd entered the eye of the world's most gentle tornado.

My dad kept referring to them as "mud swallows," and while the underside of the bridge was no doubt studded with their mud-pack nests, I told him they were cliff swallows. No, he replied, these were definitely the mud swallows he'd known in his childhood.

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7. By the time I came to know him, Opa was a man fiercely devoted to his birds. His kitchen window looked onto an array of bird feeders, and during my family's Sunday visits, he made sure that any uneaten crusts were thrown into the yard, not the trash. His affection for birds, however, grew in proportion with his hatred for squirrels. His favorite coffee mug was stamped with the silhouette of a squirrel. "WANTED," it read, "FOR THE MISAPPROPRIATION OF BIRD SEED." In the garage he kept a large metal cage that he used for catching squirrels. Whenever he managed to capture one, he'd carry the cage to the garden and drop it, with the squirrel still inside, into the rain barrel he used to water his tulips. As Opa understood it, devotion—to the birds of his old age, to his youngest son so in need of a playhouse—was a thing that sometimes called for death.

8. Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, "Rocky Mountain Arsenal," Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, January 25, 2026.

I had never once heard of a "mud swallow," so it was with the special arrogance of the amateur naturalist that I opened my field guide and invited him to compare for himself. He squinted at the entry for cliff swallow, compared its contents to the birds outside, then shut the book and handed it back.

"Well," he said, as if to himself. "We always called 'em mud swallows when *we* shot 'em down."

My mom and I said nothing, and the silence in the car seemed to draw the swallows closer. A swarm this dense, you could hardly throw a rock without bringing down a bird. With one of the Sheridan air rifles of my dad's youth, you wouldn't even have to aim: just pump the handle eight times, close your eyes, and send a swallow down into the mud.

I could have asked him why, but I already knew. It was the same reason I used to throw rocks at hornet nests and swat down cicadas with my tennis racquet. Because they were there.

Finally, thankfully, a white splash of swallow poop landed on my arm. My parents still laughing, I restarted the car, and we drove on.



My low point came in late July. I hadn't seen the red-tails in days, not since a thunderstorm lashed the city with limb-snapping winds. Big and Little had survived storms before, but I couldn't shake a feeling of foreboding—a feeling that only deepened when the wildfire smoke rolled in. Walking through Cheesman that evening, the sky itself seemed burned, wrapped in a gauzy haze and lit from behind by a dim, throbbing sun.[9]

A tree company truck sat parked nearby, its trailer piled with freshly sawn branches. The driver was cleaning the sidewalk with a leaf blower, and something about the sawdust he kicked up, the way it nestled in the larger

9. Cheesman is my favorite—and, according to a sign by the never-filled-in lily pond, the most haunted—of Denver's parks. Originally called the Prospect Hill Cemetery, the hilltop steadily deteriorated into "a potter's field for criminals, paupers, and smallpox victims." In the late 1800s, with property values on the rise, the city decided to turn the Old Bone Yard into a park, and it hired an undertaker to relocate the human remains from some 5,000 unclaimed and unmarked graves. The undertaker, who was paid by the grave, divvied up remains across multiple coffins in order to inflate his earnings. In the resulting chaos, over 2,000 bodies were left behind; to this day, human bones remain a common finding during park renovations. Sign in Cheesman Park. Denver, Colorado, n.d.

cloud of wildlife smoke, made me deeply sad. It occurred to me I didn't even know the name of the forest whose remains I'd been breathing all day.

And then I heard a hawk. Perched in an evergreen half a block away, a juvenile red-tail was letting loose scream after scream. Big or Little, I could no longer be sure—they both seemed so big now. At first, it wasn't clear what all the screaming was about, but finally I realized there were two birds on the branch: the red-tail, and the starling that lay limp in its talons. Whoever this was, they knew how to hunt for themselves.

A minute ago, the sun dimmed by distant fires, I had felt the weight of death pressing down from above. So too, it turned out, had the starling. For a moment, standing beneath the evergreen, I caught a glimpse of life as a never-ending relay, death the baton that passes between us. Predator and prey converge at the handoff and reveal themselves as teammates, running different legs of the same grand race. The insight drifted off as smoothly as it'd come, and I found myself returned to the same ground, the same choked sky. But I no longer feared what would happen to Big and Little when they left the park for good. I had passed some kind of invisible threshold, as had the red-tail. As had the starling.

Even in the hawks' absence, I rarely pass my time at Cheesman alone—the sight of me standing on a bench and scanning the sky usually draws at least one person who wants to know what I'm looking for. Many have stories of their own, like the man who woke to what he thought was a home invasion but turned out to be a hawk loudly dismembering a squirrel on the roof. Others will take out their phones to show me photos they've taken nearby: a Cooper's hawk perched on their porch, a red-tail with a woodpecker pinned to the ground.

One man told me that his son had, just that week, found a baby kestrel stranded in the center of a hockey rink. Its mother had continued bringing food for several days, but now the young bird was gone without a trace—probably dead, the man concluded. An old woman recounted the time, years ago, when the hawks of Cheesman carried off a small dog. Noise like you wouldn't believe, she said.

In this way I keep watch on the nest, and people bring me their assorted tales of death. To which I respond in the only way I know—with my head tilted back, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever may have cast such a promising shadow.



art by LUKE SWANSON

LAND AND LABOR

TULASI ACHARYA

1984

The flood of Mawa River swept away our land, causing our family to migrate from Urlabari, Morang to Gauradaha, Jhapa, Nepal where our relatives lived. Amrita Sharma, my mother's aunt, *fupu didi*, lent us some land to cultivate and eke out our livelihoods from the soil. The land was so barren that crops would hardly grow. The soil was sandy, and whatever we planted would quickly die due to the lack of water. The only thing that seemed to thrive in this rocky, sandy soil was a scratchy crabgrass and weeds for grazing cattle. The land had never before been cultivated. It was virgin earth. The weeds would destroy our crops unless completely uprooted.

There was no house on the land. No neighbors lived nearby. At night, the jackals howled, and owls hooted like ghosts calling back and forth. If something happened, no one would ever hear my parents' cries for help. Any shouts or screams would be muffled by the vast and expansive silence.

My father walked a mile or two to ask for help from the neighboring farms, explaining that we were new to the land and mentioning my mother's condition. Each family provided my father with a bamboo rod and a bundle of hay so my father could make a thatched straw house to protect us from rain and sun. All the neighbors came to help my father build the house, and they completed it within a week's time. While it was under construction, the neighbors allowed us to sleep in their barns.

Three weeks after our move to this barren land, my mother started crying in pain one evening. Her labor had begun. The nearest transportation was at least a mile away. Even then, there were no roads for vehicles other than the bullock carts that were slower than the minute hand of a watch. The hospital

was ten miles away, and the paths ran through thick woods. We had to make a stretcher and carry the patient.

"Be patient. All will be well," my father reassured my mother. "I will call the neighbors. They can help us."

"I am dying, my husband. I am dying. Just let me die," my mother said. Beads of sweat on her face flickered in the light of a homemade oil lamp made from a glass bottle of kerosene and jute wick that peeped through the lead. Her eyes rolled back as if she really was going to die. I started crying.

My father calmed me. "Be happy. Your mother is giving birth to your sister." He said this with confidence, even though he didn't know whether it was going to be a baby girl or boy. He went to the hearth to boil some thyme seeds which he believed would give some energy to my mother. Her condition seemed to worsen. Leaving me to look after her, my father ran out of the house and quickly reached out to the villagers for help. Our neighbors gathered within minutes, made a stretcher of jute sacks and bamboo, and placed my mother on it. Four people held it in the front and back and rushed her away. I was left under the villagers' care.

They managed to get my mother to a nearby village and then the rental jeep took her to the hospital. Eventually she was taken to the larger hospital in Biratnagar where she had given birth to me.

Our first year on the new land, my parents were hardly able to grow any crops because of the barren soil. But the soil was good for a particular type of grass that cattle liked. That same grass became an indirect source of food for us, too. Whoever came to our land to graze their cattle brought rice, vegetables, milk, or meat, enough for us to survive.

My parents worked hard on the farm while I looked after my sister Brinda, who was now a year old. She had started babbling words like *baba* and *ama* to my delight.

My parents first began rearing chickens. They sold these and bought some goats, and they sold some of the goats when they were desperate for money. They helped our neighbors plant rice and plow their fields in return for the help they had received. My parents collected cow dung and used it to fertilize the barren soil. By harvest time, our land finally began to yield crops: rice, maize, barley, millet, and buckwheat. It was our first harvest after a year of

I am dying,
my husband.
I am dying.
Just let me die

cultivation, but it was still not enough for our family to survive on, and it would be another year before we would have a full harvest. If any of us were to become sick, my parents would not have the money to pay for our care. They had already borrowed a lot of money from the neighbors when my mother was hospitalized delivering Brinda. Still, my parents were pleased with the results of their first year of hard work.

"Doesn't it feel great, my husband, that we have produced these crops on our own farm?" my mother asked while we ate lunch. "I know it's not yet enough for to survive on, but still …"

"Of course," my father said, dipping a lump of *oo*, or wheat flour dumpling, into a cup of soup and popping it into his mouth. Brinda sat in my mother's lap and I by my father's side, watching our parents' joy. Flies hummed and zoomed around, and one of them fell into my father's soup and started swimming. He removed the fly with two fingers and flicked it away, swearing, "*Tyaskaa bajeko*, how many flies do we have in this house?" The soup dripped off his finger, but he licked it off immediately and gulped from the cup before another fly might swim into it again. Brinda began sucking at my mother's breast under her shawl while the flies buzzed around her.

"Maybe we should give some portion of what we produced to *Didi*," my mother said, waving the flies away. "She gave us the land to cultivate, and we did promise this to her."

"I know, but it is not even enough for us," my father said. "Can't we do that next year, when we grow more?"

"Not a lot, but perhaps something this year," my mother said. My father remained quiet. He gulped the last morsel of *dhindo* in his bowl and left the room, leaving my mother to her work.

We never had enough food to sate our appetites, nor did we have enough clothes to protect us from the rain, heat, and cold. My parents begged for help from our kin, asking them to lend some money or clothing. I had Brinda to play with, but I was more of a caregiver than a playmate. There were no other kids my age to play with. It was a challenging time for all of us.

My mother went to see Amrita Sharma and asked for her help once more.

"I walked almost six miles to get there," my mother later told me. She arrived exhausted, perspiring under the scorching sun.

"How is it going?" Amrita Sharma asked. "What did you grow this year? How much did you yield?"

"The land was really barren, *Didi*" my mother sighed. "I am here to tell you that we could not make enough to bring you what we produced. It would be nice if you could lend us some money. We had to borrow a lot of money when I was hospitalized during Brinda's delivery. I will pay you back. We are working hard."

"You are coming to see me with your hands empty. I do not have anything to give you now. Whatever I had, I gave you," she scolded sternly and turned away in anger. She paused then and turned back around with a sigh. "I heard you have a lot of grass on the farm. Take our cow and let her graze in your field. Right now she is a heifer; when she delivers a calf and starts giving milk, use it to feed your children. That's all I can do for now."

"Thank you, *Didi.*" My mother nodded, wiping her tears of joy, and she left with the cow.

"When you come to see me next time, bring me something. Do not come with your hands empty," Amrita Sharma shouted from the doorway of her comfortable home. She wasn't struggling to survive like my mother was. She couldn't understand the pain my mother was going through. She was rich and had plenty of food stored in her house, my mother told me later on.

That same year, my mother became pregnant for a third time.

1985

I was five, and Brinda was one. My father always woke up at three in the morning and left to work on the farm, either to till the soil or to plant seeds. By the time we woke up, he would already have finished half his work for the day. At first, he carried out his tasks in the dark, by moonlight. Eventually, he started carrying a flashlight with him. My mother made a cup of black tea for my father and nursed Brinda. She took care of the cattle at home with Brinda tied onto her back with a shawl. I followed along, trying to help her with the chores. My father continued working in the fields.

We have a saying: Grow more by eating less. When it rained during the monsoon, the farmers plowed the fields and planted the rice. Usually men plowed with bullocks, tilled the soil, and brought the saplings to the terraces, while the women planted the rice, rain or shine, with no pause for food, tying a shawl around their waists to support their backs as they stooped over. The tightness of their encased waists also kept their hunger at bay as they worked dawn to dusk. Our family did the same.

No sooner was the monsoon over than my mother started experiencing her labor pains. My father was tilling the last piece of land to plant rice, and I ran to call him. He left the oxen in the field, rushed to the house, and held my mother close. He sent me to call for the neighbors, and I left quickly. Since it was monsoon season, I could see people working on a farm not far away. When I came back home with some neighboring aunties, my mother had already delivered my youngest sister Binita. It was her first home birth as she never made it to the hospital. The neighboring aunties helped my mother for a day or two, and my father took care of her afterward. After two weeks, the cow also delivered a calf, and a sense of boundless joy enveloped our home now that everyone would have milk.

But no sooner did my great aunt learn that the cow had delivered than her workers came and took the calf away. Her promise didn't last.

"Anyway, we've never had milk in this house besides mine," my mother joked good-naturedly. She surely already knew the hard heart of Amrita Sharma.

"She said that she would let us have the milk for our kids, but she took the calf away?" my father seethed.

"What can we do? That's what she said. Obviously, she is not a person of her word," my mother said weakly.

"Forget about it. It was never ours. We were never meant to eat anything for free," my father retorted. His teeth glinted in joy.



art by SEAN STINY

OWL DREAMS

SEAN STINY

I've seen an automobile dismembered by an elk. Metal hindquarters flayed open like Dinty Moore.

Elk hindquarters stashed in an ice chest next to the interstate. The Sheriff's supper.

I've seen a grizzly sniffing for tubers, lumbering through an open tundra.

A moose skull freed from its bones, underneath a frightened spruce.

A man close-up in a marsh, shoot a mallard through the head.

Lately I've been having dreams. Crazy dreams I can't explain.

A three-toed woodpecker drops bark at my feet, high in the swaying fir. Pock-pock-pock, pock-pock. Jackhammering for beetles, guzzling them with a grin.

Pock-pock-pock, gulp.

A fir squirrel shoos me from its acorn cache with a scream and a cartwheel. It can sense my amusement.

A feral feline looks through me with her tameless yellow eyes. She can see my heart.

A Douglas Fir grows from my heart. Straight and thick. A horned owl takes purchase on its bough. Do I know you?

A sensitive boy summons the wherewithal, a monsoon behind his eyes.

I yearn for these gadabout dreams not to cease.

Crazy dreams I can't explain. And I can't begin to tell you how that feels.

A fox lay dead at my feet. Skull crushed by a goddamn truck. Burning diesel, burning dinosaur bones. I kept his tail. A talisman.

One year later, a deer met this fate. A doe, her fawns lost now to the hills and valleys. Her tail lay in the ditch. A truck's headlight lay in pieces. Her life snatched. At least she dealt a blow to the bastard truck. I kept her tail. A talisman.

I'm getting good at skinning tails.

I've looked to the sky for streaks of tinsel, only to see singing stars. A cirque of snow crowning a noble lake, a dipper tempting a dive.

I've stabbed myself ten thousand times, performed an act the body refuses, kept my flesh afloat.

Strange and wondrous things I've seen. Crazy dreams that go on for hours. Been going on for years.

One hundred and seventeen billion human lives have lived on this earth. Trillions of non-human ones. Drawing breath, absorbing energy. More dreams than stars in the Milky Way.

I sit cross-legged against a tree. A sapling. The bluebirds above me flock. The humans outside me flee. I can't abide their understanding of this world. A whole life can be lived in the lee of this sapling.

Sideways memories and spellbound thoughts. Not vagaries nor distortions. Intuitions of a sound mind, slipping from sepia to technicolor.

My father and brother lost at sea.

My wife with her back turned.

A child I never had reaches for my hand.

Ashes spread in a brook, along a trail, underfoot.

My own life, who here will bear witness.

I expect some great revelation will descend upon me. Yet, none has.

I'll scribble these words. Maybe a few more. Clamber a bit further. Take a few more steps.

Her life snatched. At least she dealt a blow to the bastard truck.

Mine, whose deeds will live only in the memories of those few who ascertained them.

Crazy dreams that go on for hours. Been going on for years and years.

I've touched love at its core.

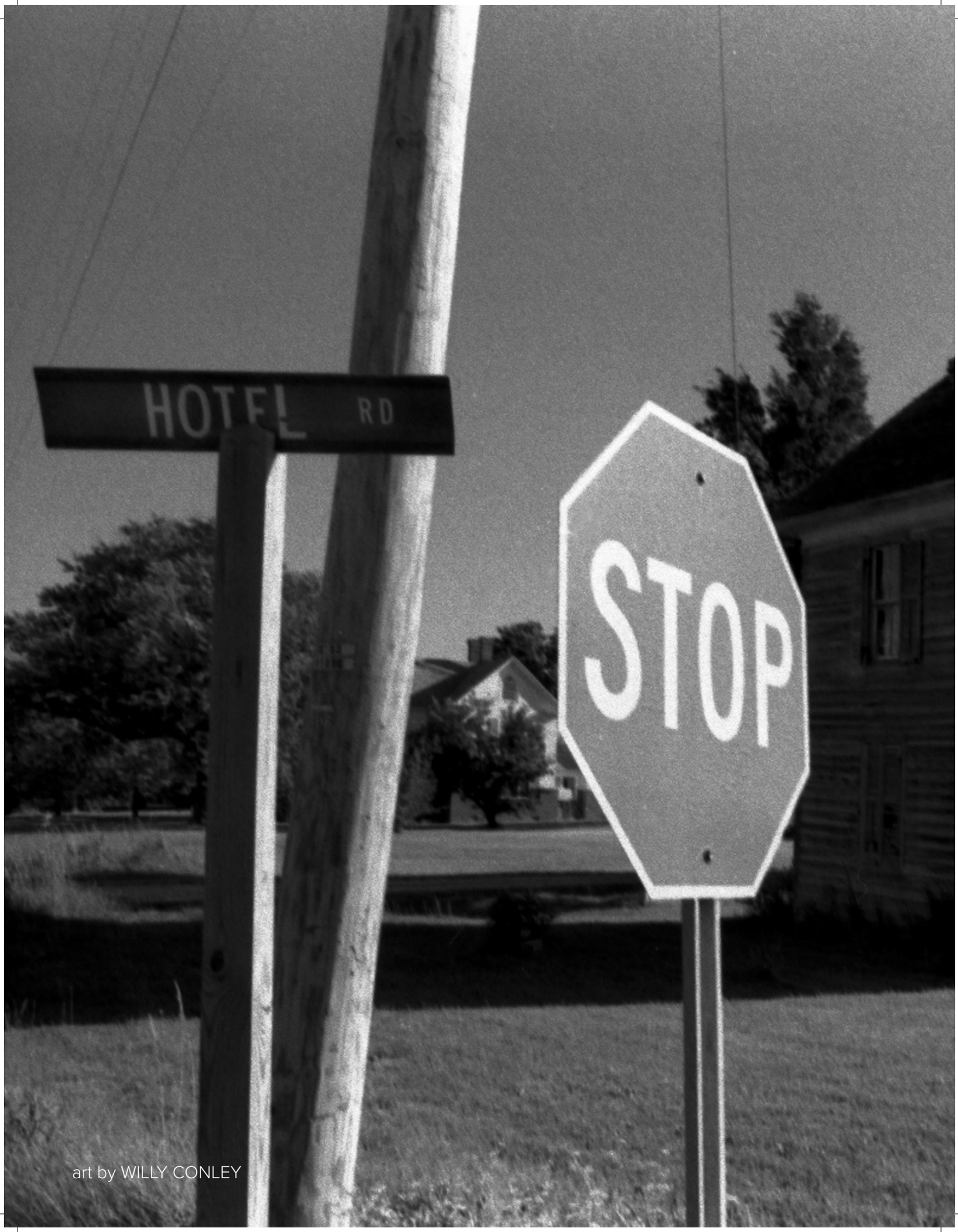
Years and years and years.

The horned owl trades back my stare. My call draws him close. Do I know you, stranger? Black pupils embed in yellow eyes. Gliding silently, back and forth over my head. Burps up a pellet of good faith. Tires of my pitiful hoo-hoos. Dive bombs from a rotted telephone pole, urges me to move on. And so, I do. Yes, I do indeed know you. Do you know me?

Crazy dreams I can't explain.

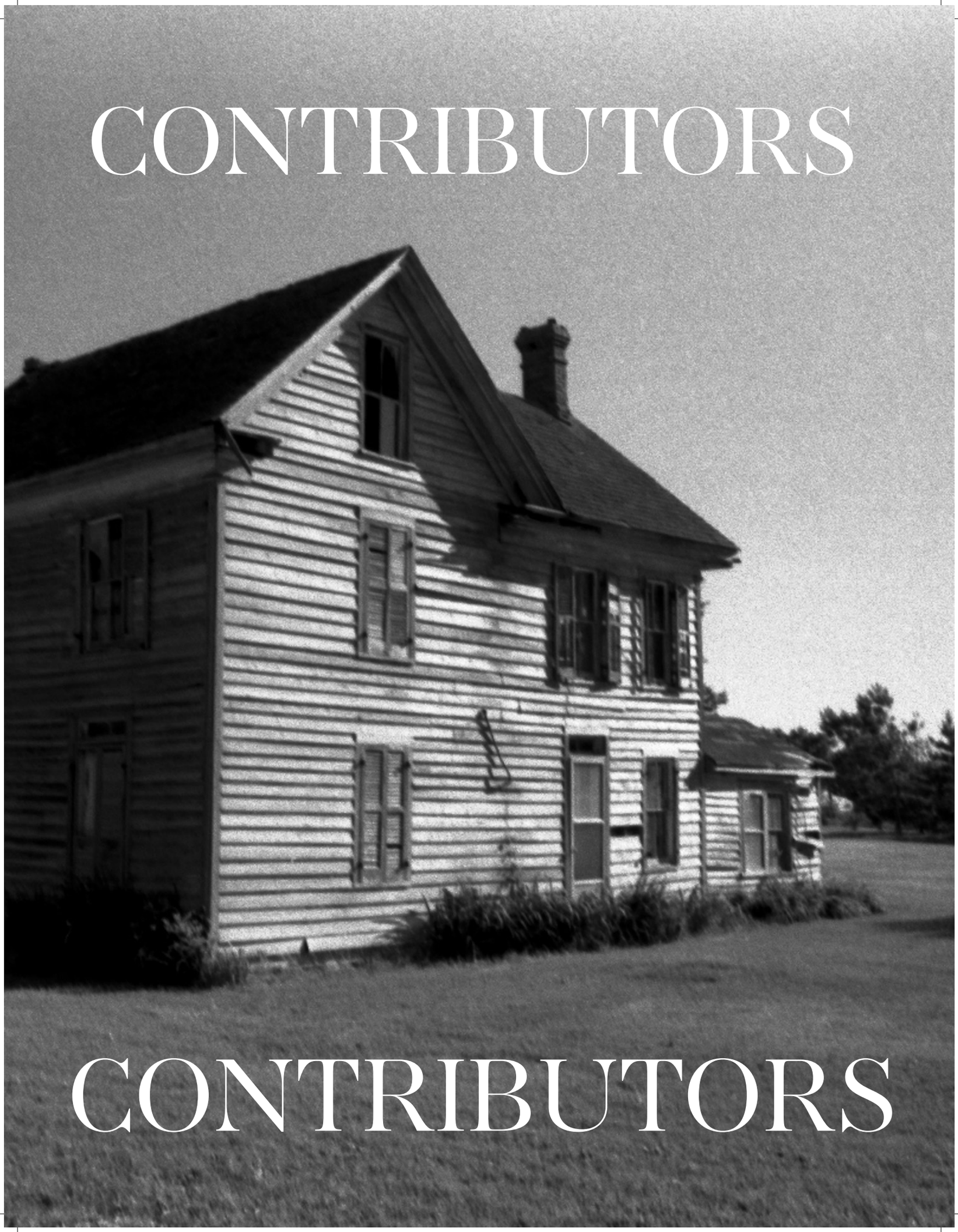
Knit together by our mother and her great mystery.

And I can't begin to tell you how that feels.



art by WILLY CONLEY

CONTRIBUTORS



CONTRIBUTORS

WRITERS

Originally from Nepal, TULASI ACHARYA embarked on his American journey in 2008, earning a Master's in Professional Writing from Kennesaw State University. His academic path also includes a Master's in Women's Studies and a Ph.D. in Public Administration from Florida Atlantic University, and an MFA at Georgia College. At South Georgia State College, he teaches English. With over a dozen published books across multiple genres, including his acclaimed debut English novel *Running from the Dreamland*, his literary footprint extends globally. He recently published a Himalayan memoir, *Like Water on Leaves of Taro*.

ANNE BABSON is the author of four poetry collections—*The White Trash Pantheon* (Vox Press, 2014), *Polite Occasions* (Unsolicited Press, 2017), *Messiah* (Saint Julian Press, 2019) and *The Bunker Book* (Unsolicited Press, 2022). Her play about gun culture in the South, *Reenactment*, was published in Review Americana. The opera *Lotus Lives*, for which she wrote the lyrics, has been performed in multiple cities in North America. She lives and writes in New Orleans.

LISA BRODSKY is a writer whose work explores memory, mysticism, and the architecture of belief. She holds a Master of Public Health and is completing her MFA in Creative Writing at Hamline University. Her writing has appeared in *Otherwise Engaged*, *Pictura Journal*, *Memoirist*, and others. She lives in Minnesota, where she works at the intersection of narrative and community well-being and serves as a reader for Trio House Press.

JOEY DAMIANO is a writer, clinical social worker and former U.S. Marine. His writing is forthcoming in *Bluestem* and has appeared in *Chiron Review*, *Audrey Magazine*, *Enjambed* and other places. He often writes about intergenerational trauma and biracial/Asian American experiences. Born in Sasebo, Japan, he spent his youth in Okinawa, Virginia, and various Southern Californian communities. Joey holds master's degrees in creative writing, literature, and social work.

After forty years in California, TRINA GAYNON moved to Oregon. She graduated from the University of San Francisco's Masters Program in Creative Writing and volunteered with literacy programs in libraries and WriteGirl in Los Angeles. She currently leads a poetry reading group and writing salon at Senior Studies Institute in Portland. Poems recently appeared in *Poetry East* and *Presence*. More can be found in *The Grace of Oregon Rain*, *Fire and Rain: Ecopoetry of California*, other anthologies and journals. Published volumes include *An Alphabet of Romance* from Finishing Line and *Quince, Rose, Grace of God* from Fernwood Press.

"Subway Coyotes" is written by CHARLEY HYDER, a 29-year-old undergraduate, who has returned after taking time away from school to work in both New York City and in wilderness therapy in Utah. This is a piece written on the precipice of that change, from the place of self discovery.

SOPHIE KVARATSKHELIA is an undergraduate student at the University of Colorado Boulder studying Molecular Biology, Environmental Studies, and Spanish. They are passionate about connection with human and non-human beings through dance, visual art, comedy, and poetry.

KARA LEFEVRE is a science educator who studies consequences of human activity for biodiversity. She also writes creative nonfiction to explore themes of landscapes and belonging. Kara is Associate Dean of Science at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia, and Adjunct faculty at Florida Gulf Coast University.

MARTHA (MARTY) MITCHELL's work in the logging industry caused her to develop a career centering on water resource protection. She's a consulting physical geographer whose nature writing has appeared in several small presses, including Heimat and *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, as well as a variety of professional and government publications. She lives in the Pacific Northwest and favors long-distance walking in mountain terrain.

JAKE O'DONNELL is a fourth year psychology student at the CU Boulder and a research assistant for the Positive Emotion and Psychopathology lab. He intends to go into clinical research after he graduates. Jake is interested in the underlying cognitive mechanisms behind mood disorders such as depression, bipolar, and anxiety. These mechanisms include rumination, learned helplessness, cognitive inflexibility, and impaired prospection. He's a proud Colorado native and an avid outdoor enthusiast. He immerses himself in the mountains while skiing, camping, and mountain biking.

MARA ADAMITZ SCRUPE is an environmental installation artist, a writer, and documentary filmmaker. She is the recipient of visual arts grants and fellowships, and she has won or been shortlisted for diverse international writing prizes. Her creative work often evokes palpable experiences of land, landscapes, and the people, plants, and animals that inhabit them.

COLLIN VAN SON is a playwright, poet, and essayist from Denver. His work has appeared in *The Colorado Sun*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The Normal School*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and elsewhere.

SEAN STINY grew up in Northern California. A writer, woodworker, and owl box maker, he lives in Petaluma, California. He writes about the landscapes of the West and our place in them. His writing has appeared in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Grit Magazine*, *Bend Magazine*, *True Northwest*, *Kelp Journal*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Cal Fly Fisher*, *Whitefish Review*, and *Outside Magazine*.

LUKE SWANSON is currently a junior at CU Boulder, studying English literature with an emphasis on creative writing. His motivation to pursue the creative capabilities of writing are, in part, fueled by a newfound interest in painting. Luke's current writing style mimics the loose nature of painting, allowing the intuition to dictate structure. This issue also features his artwork.

MICHAEL THEROUX began focusing on publishing his literary works in his seventh decade, following an MS in Biology, careers as a field botanist, an environmental health specialist, a green energy developer, a resource recovery website editor, and a writer for all the requisite technical environmental and regulatory articles. He has had 84 poems and short stories published in the last three years, and recently had his first chapbook accepted for publication. Some of his stories and poems may be found in *Cerasus*, *City Key*, *Wild Word*, *Ariel Chart*, *CafeLit*, *Midsummer Dreamhouse*, and *The Gilded Weathervane*.

Being raised on a Pennsylvania farm near Lake Erie, RHONDA WATERHOUSE developed a deep connection to land and water. She holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction with an environmental focus from University of North Carolina Wilmington, where she now teaches. Rhonda is also a freelance environmental journalist in the Wilmington, NC coastal region. Her work has appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *American Submariner*, *Coastal Review*, *Chautauqua*, *storySouth*, and elsewhere. A former Brauer Fellow and Weymouth Writer-In-Residence, she was a semifinalist for North Carolina Literary Review's 2024 and 2026 Alex Albright CNF Prizes, and took second place in the 2026 Rose Post Contest. She is currently working on a memoir exploring brain injury and the healing power of trees.

ARTISTS

ALFIE BLAND is a British sailor who takes film photography to capture moments when traveling.

KATHRYN CASTANOLI is from the suburbs of Chicago. She's always had a camera in her hand. While living in Los Angeles all she could think about was leaving the city to see nature; she chased that thought to Boulder, Colorado.

CLARISSA CERVANTES is a photographer-researcher. Her gallery includes images from all over the world.

WILLY CONLEY is a photographer-writer with work in Photographic Memories, Plays of Our Own, The World of White Water, Listening Through the Bone, The Deaf Heart, No Walls of Stone, Visual-Gestural Communication, and Deaf World. He is a retired professor of theatre arts at Gallaudet University in D.C.

Naturalist, a self-taught visual artist, and poet JERI LEWIS EDWARDS resides along the Central Coast of California. Her poetry and visual art have been published in several literary journals. Her poetry collection, This Place of Wanting Nothing is published by Finishing Line Press.

DONALD GUADAGNI is an international educator, author, and writer currently teaching and conducting research in Beijing, China. In addition to international photography and artwork, he publishes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in many genres.

RICHARD HANUS had four kids but now just three. Zen and Love.

ALLISON NOWELS is an artist and photographer from Los Angeles, California. She found her interest in photography from her father, a professional location scout, and her interest in drawing from her aunt, an adult coloring books illustrator.

KATLIN RISEN is a CU Boulder alum and Duke graduate student studying history. While her academic interests lie in gender in the space race, her creative endeavors focus on crochet, 3D media, and photography.

MICHAEL C. ROBERTS is a mostly retired pediatric psychologist after an academic career. He has returned to his avocation of photography. Although he often relies on digital photography, his passion is a retro-analogue format of film. His photographs have appeared on journal covers and in

literary publications. His book of film photographs is available on Amazon: Imaging the World with Plastic Cameras: Diana and Holga.

MICHAEL ROGNER is a restoration ecologist and artist living in Northern California.

An award-winning visual artist and art educator, PENG QI has worked in these fields for over 20 years, distinguishing himself through his unique ability to generate virtual and photoelectric color effects that do not exist in the natural world.

PAXTON SANDOVAL is a fourth-year biochemistry student at CU Boulder, studying colorectal cancer at the Cleveland Clinic, and acute myeloid leukemia at CU Anschutz; she hopes to earn a Ph.D. in Cancer Biology. Her creative passion for photography captures the people and scenes she loves.

DAN SWAIM studies Aerospace Engineering at CU Boulder. When he's not busy with schoolwork he spends time with his two children and dogs, reads and writes science fiction, and enjoys the beautiful nature surrounding him in Colorado.

art by MICHAEL C. ROBERTS



SUBMISSIONS

CHANGING SKIES and our sister journal HINDSIGHT read submissions year-round. We accept work through Submittable, and practice blind review on first reads. Accepted work may be published in print, online, or both. We seek only previously unpublished creative nonfiction in any of its genres. We do not accept work generated, even partially, by Large Language Models or Generative AI, and we fact-check. We retain First North American Serial Rights until first publication date, after which all rights revert to our contributors. We only disallow work from current and recent staff, and from teaching faculty at our home institution, the University of Colorado Boulder. Atists, send us your work to accompany writing in HINDSIGHT and CHANGING SKIES in print, online, and for marketing materials. We accept only previously unpublished work including but not limited to photography and other digitized art, and video and music for online publication. We also retain FNASR until publication, and we also consider all art for future publication and marketing, unless otherwise requested.

JOIN OUR STAFF

Current CU Boulder undergraduates can join staff by taking Journal Publishing (WRTG 3095), or signing up for a one, two, or three-credit Internship (either upper or lower division) with a Faculty Advisor in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric. We seek anyone wanting to learn the Editorial, Art Direction, Digital Production, Podcasting and Video Production, or the Business and Marketing aspects of a print and online journal of creative nonfiction—no previous experience required. A position on the HINDSIGHT staff fosters professional skills while students learn about the exciting genres of creative nonfiction. As a member of staff working on a premier print and online journal of only creative nonfiction, students learn with other students, gaining an unparalleled experience on campus. We exist to serve and further a community of creative nonfiction writers (and artists) across campus, and globally.

Program for Writing & Rhetoric

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publish creative nonfiction
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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.