

PLANTING SEEDS: ESSAYS ON NATURE AND NURTURING

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## ABSTRACT

### PLANTING SEEDS: ESSAYS ON NATURE AND NURTURING

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This thesis explores the relationship between plants and people. Specifically, I was interested in how plants provide healing services to humans and their experiences, both formative and traumatic. This thesis takes the approach of creative nonfiction, in the form of personal essays. I incorporated many of the nonfiction books I read for my comprehensive exam to give focus to each chapter and each essay from a literary perspective. Each section relies on research and literary analysis, but ultimately each section revolves around my personal narrative essays. Additionally, the entire project is housed under the main arch of *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, with this text introducing the ideas for each section. Methodology relies on research and readings conducted during comprehensive exams, as well as additional readings about nature healing. Narrative essays allow me to explore the more scientific and literary discussion through a personal lens, connecting my life, as well as the lives of others, to plants at a human level. I explore the healing aspect of plants using section headings titled “Ground Level,” “Below Ground,” and “Above Ground.” “Ground Level” represents the formative experiences I have had in nature and how those experiences tie me to my human world. In this section, people who have guided me along this journey become central, as well as experiences when I felt my connection to the earth was most remarkable. “Ground Level” is the bridge between the two other sections,

demonstrating not only how I got from below to above “ground,” but also how those connections still exist within me, how those experiences continue to inform who I am and my path forward. “Below Ground” represents the stories that are hidden. These are the things that I keep buried, that I don’t share often with others, that have created such a basement to my being that they hold the whole version of myself up. The essays in this section represent the trauma that has informed my life and that I work hard daily to move past. “Above Ground” is where I consider myself now. In “Above Ground,” I answer back to the formative and traumatic experiences that have shaped me and write essays from a place of healing – healing that has come through observations and interactions with the natural world.

## Introduction

### **Personal Connection**

Reading Richard Powers' 2017 novel, *The Overstory*, marked a transformative experience in my life as a writer. As an English MA student pursuing a concentration in Literature, I felt I was well-versed in literary genres and understood the general narrative structure of a novel. But Powers' genre-bending, masterful approach to narrative changed something within me. I realized that writing didn't have to follow a set formula. Writing could happen from the heart. Writing could expose an entirely new ideal about plants as characters, one that I hadn't seen explored in a similar way before. After reading the first chapters of *The Overstory*, I was hooked. To see trees given a central plot role, characterization, and a generational arc gave me a sense of the impossible becoming possible. Powers offers a voice for the voiceless with his portrayal of trees and of the natural world on a grander scale. Few authors have attempted to do what he does with *The Overstory*: creating a narrative around nonhuman beings, allowing these beings to center the text and the stories of the human characters.

My goal with this thesis is to build upon similar connections between the earth and its human inhabitants, namely those that have been present in my life, in a way like what Richard Powers has done with *The Overstory*. This thesis runs deep with personal connections and narratives, relating my time in, and observing, nature to my own past experiences. In time, as Powers' characters also come to realize, I too understand the winding path my life has taken as it interweaves with the narratives of the natural world. Plants specifically, have always been a presence in the underlying story of my life, and with deep reflection on formative moments, I can see how they have supported me and helped me to grow into my own human nature as well. If it

weren't for plants, I don't know how my story would have grown, and if it weren't for *The Overstory*, my thesis too may have taken a divergent path.

### **Character Connection**

One of the most striking features of *The Overstory* is how the narrative blends the life histories of two beings, the human with the nonhuman, within each of the opening chapters. Part of the section called "Roots," this opening produces the background and formative experiences of *The Overstory*'s nine central characters. But more than simply character bios, these first eight chapters also establish the connections between the human characters and the trees that have made them who they are. Each character has an intimate and powerful connection with one or more trees. In this way, trees serve as central figures within the story. Without the presence of these trees, the reader would have even less information about the main characters, and their stories would not be nearly as developed. Through their connection with the trees, sometimes spiritual, sometimes traumatic, always life changing, we come to know the characters' sense of self and place within the human and naturalistic worlds.

The connection to their "sentinel tree" defines each character's story, not only in terms of the decisions they make, but also in terms of the innate nature of the places they find themselves inhabiting. The characters embody different ideals based on how their relationship with their tree develops. For the first character, Nick Hoel, trees are a central feature in the story of his family, as he continues the multi-generational photographic and artistic documentation of the ill-fated American Chestnut tree that resides on the Hoel property. But the same Chestnut tree is also a harbinger of fate for Nick. As he returns home from a snowy artistic outing, the tree beckons from the road, the largest entity for miles, a lone survivor amongst its kind. Nick soon learns he too has become the lone survivor of his family, the rest perishing in a tragic carbon monoxide

accident. The two, tree and Hoel, become one momentarily, impacted by their isolation but with a sense of determination remaining, propelling them to find ways to survive no matter the odds. Art becomes Nick's way of dealing with his solitude, his way to explore his trauma, and his way to honor his connection to the land and its other lone inhabitant – the solitary Chestnut.

Mimi Ma, the book's second introduced character and the daughter of a Chinese immigrant/refugee, has a similar relationship with her tree, the life-giving Mulberry. The Mulberry tree remains central to Mimi's life; her father, Winston, plants it to create a connection between his new American home and identity and the life he left behind in China, where he can no longer visit. For Winston Ma, the Mulberry is "older than the separation of yin and yang, the Tree of Renewal, the tree at the universe's center, the hollow tree housing the sacred Tao" (30). Trees were central to Winston's, and therefore Mimi's, homeland stories as well. The rings and scrolls passed down through the family for generations, the heirloom treasures Winston takes to America to avoid seizure by the Chinese government, contain the three trees of life, with Winston's father telling him, "You live between three trees" (26). In fact, we all do, as Nalini Nadkarni's *Between the Earth and Sky* also reveals. Nearly every human culture that has walked this planet has looked to trees as the passage between this world and what lies beyond. Each religion and culture may have a different tree that marks the path, but the ubiquity of trees in this role cannot be ignored through cultural and religious history. For Winston and Mimi, the Lote tree represents the "tree at the boundary of heaven that none may pass"; the Fusang marks the place where the "elixir of life" is kept; and the third tree, a twisted Pine, the tree that Mimi inherits on her ring when it is passed down to her, represents what is "all around you: Now. And like the Now itself, it will follow wherever you go" (26). Mimi too experiences trauma related to her tree when her father commits suicide under his beloved Mulberry, leaving parts of his brain

scattered on the ground for his daughters to clean up, and a cryptic note his only communication in which he states, “I can’t stop getting lost in my thoughts, my ancient forests” (41).

Neelay Mehta is one of the characters for whom his tree represents the most concrete form of trauma in his life. It is Neelay’s flight to his tree because of a misunderstanding with his teacher that causes him to become paralyzed after a near-fatal fall. And yet, Neelay finds a way to not only accept his new situation in life, but to thrive in it. Neelay becomes tree-like in his disability, rooted permanently to his wheelchair, taking in little sustenance, and instead focusing his energies on growing a universe. While in the early stages of his paralysis, Neelay comes across a tree in his university’s gardens and through time spent in the tree’s presence, has an out-of-body experience like another character, Olivia, as he recognizes how alien trees truly are when compared to humans and our world. The tree creates a connection between Neelay and the greater universe and cosmos, as he communicates with something he cannot name:

He has the overwhelming feeling of being watched. A silent chorus sings, ‘Turn and look. Turn around and see!’...One hyper-jump, and he has landed in an intergalactic arboretum. On all sides, furious green speculations wave at him. Creatures built for otherworldly climates...All these signaling, sentient beings knock him back in his seat. (109-110)

Neelay experiences something like the nature-awakening many of us who have spent time in the outdoors may also have felt. He can see the trees for their own innate being rather than as just a part of the “natural world.” Instead, Neelay recognizes that these trees represent something greater on the planet, something able to communicate to other beings about the need for change, the need for seeing things through fresh eyes. After his experience in the garden, Neelay does see with fresh eyes, and it is during this time that he creates his nature-simulation game, *Mastery*,

which readers are told changes the world by allowing humans to think about greater connections as they world-build from the perspective of nature. This game, and its inception, does not reveal Neelay's genius, but rather the genius of the trees, beings that can plan and accomplish goals, as the Redwoods Neelay encounters, "work a plan that will take thousands of years to realize – the plan that now uses him, although he thinks it's his" (111).

As other characters like Adam, Olivia, Ray, and Dorothy are introduced, the reader sees that while trees play a role in their upbringing, they are not as central to their worldviews as they may be to other characters. However, even these characters' connections to the trees cannot be denied. Adam's family plants trees for each child as they are born, with Adam as the Maple, and his sister, Leigh, an Elm that Adam watches wither and die before her tragic disappearance. Leigh is never found, but Adam, in an allude to Nadkarni's text, finds a book that gives him hope, a passage from which becomes a mantra as he mourns his sister's passing: "A tree is a passage between earth and sky" (55). This connection creates in him a willingness to listen to nature, to allow it to show him a path forward through time. Olivia's connection to trees is the most unclear, narratively, until she experiences near-death. It is only after dying briefly, that Olivia establishes a linkage to the natural world. For her, this linkage comes in the form of beings of light who communicate with her, showing her a path toward her future and the future of the earth. Olivia experiences the most direct form of divine natural intervention through her ability to communicate with the world beyond the human realm. It is this connection that drives the remainder of *The Overstory's* plots. Without Olivia's visions, the characters would be unlikely to find their ways towards one another. For Ray and Dorothy, trees do not become central until further in their journey, but even as a young couple, they find solace in the ability to grow, nurture, and watch nature take its course, as they plant something new in their garden with

each marriage anniversary/. The planting is a tradition started to remind them that “not everything we plant will take. Not every plant will thrive. But together we can watch the ones that do fill up our garden” (71). These three, short, less-connected chapters, reveal the greater connection more explicitly seen in other characters in more subtle ways – we are all connected – nature, humans, the cosmos, and as such each of our stories intertwines with the others. Without one another, we would not be whole. We are all made of stardust, humans and trees alike.

Douglas Pavlicek, *The Overstory*'s war-traumatized veteran and major eco-warrior, is the character I related to the most as both a reader and a writer. I empathized with Douglas' time in Vietnam, as my stepfather, also a Douglas and Vietnam veteran, ended up passing from complications due to Agent Orange. I have written about him and his experiences previously. But I also found myself drawn to Douglas' time spent planting trees in the West. The following is a blending of two excerpts – the non-italicized is Douglas' experience in the woods during a pivotal scene on pages 86-87 of *The Overstory* where he comes across a clear-cut for the first time, interwoven with the italicized excerpts of my own nonfiction poem “In This Ghost Forest,” written during a road trip out West with my dog in 2009. Through the blended structure, our experiences become hauntingly similar, relating our own shock upon encountering the destructive path of the extractive timber industry:

“He’s trancing out on the miles-long walls of Englemann Spruce and subalpine fir. He pulls off onto the shoulder to relieve himself. Out here on these ridges he could pee on the highway’s center line and humanity would be none the wiser...He steps off the road and into the woods.”

*It's been days since we left home  
This dog and I  
in search of another  
but still the car prods  
by night now only  
our westbound desert escape  
the pallid moon guides our way*

*and now trees have reemerged  
they line the road so copiously dense  
that I'm sure they can barely breathe*

*She needs to stretch  
we pull to the side of the road  
and emerge to follow  
enmeshed hints of a trail  
her leash on, we walk  
my camera out  
capturing dark shadows  
falling in the moonlight*

“And there, flag at half mast, eyes towards the wilderness...Douglas Pavlicek sees slabs of light through the trunks where there should be shadow all the way to the forest's heart.”

*We pass under a stately giant  
reaching towards its sleeping god  
my hand runs along its rough trunk  
then to my nose as I breathe in  
the piney, petroleum-scented  
resin left behind  
a secret souvenir  
that will last for days*

“He zips and investigates. Walks deeper into the undergrowth, only deeper in turns out to be farther out. The shortest of hikes, and he pops up again into... you can't even call it a clearing. Call it the moon.

A stumpy desolation spreads in front of him. The ground bleeds reddish slag mixed with sawdust and slash. Every direction for as far as he can see resembles a gigantic, plucked fowl. It's like alien death rays have hit, and the world is asking permission to end.”

*And as my eyes lift upward  
I stop  
we are only a few feet  
off the road into the forest  
but it has vanished  
the forest  
and in its wake remain  
only stumps  
marooned in the ground  
edges raw and frayed  
sap gathering where capillaries  
once extended it skyward*

*limbs litter the surface  
reaching out for their  
disappeared bodies  
swaths of tire tracks  
tear deep through the  
sumptuous mat of living earth*

*It won't be rich like this much longer*

“Only one thing in his experience comes even close: the patches of jungle that he, Dow, and Monsanto helped to clear. But this clearing is much more efficient.”

*And I weep  
I weep for what we have done to this place  
I weep for its creatures  
I weep for the 900-year-old  
ancient that's outlasted  
fires and droughts  
plagues and civilizations  
only to be taken down for a cheap door  
corner clearance at a big box store  
grain that shows too much whorl*

“He stumbles through the curtain of concealing trees, crosses the road, and peers through the woods on the other side. More moonscape stretches down the mountainside. He starts up the truck and drives.”

*Sensing my pain  
she nuzzles into me  
her whiskers tickle my hand  
she knows what I need  
more than I do myself  
and I wonder  
I wonder how creatures as noble  
as her own have come to adopt  
my kind  
my destructive, single-minded kind  
how a being who knows  
such innocent love  
can want anything to do  
with us*

“The route looks like forest, mile after emerald mile. But Duggie sees through the illusion now. He's driving through the thinnest artery of pretend life, a scrim hiding a bomb crater as big as a sovereign state. The forest is pure prop, a clever piece of artistry.”

*But she senses that too  
and doesn't shy away  
from my tears  
or my sometimes-awkward sobs  
so, we sit together  
in this dirt  
in this ghost forest  
under this moon  
as I weep  
until the first rays of mourning  
reach out to touch their  
greatest creation  
only to come up empty  
and longing*

It was at this point in *The Overstory's* opening section, "Roots," that I found myself fully drawn into the tale. I had never read a book before that mimicked my own experience with such startling accuracy. Douglas holds his own trauma, too, having almost died, but instead being saved when falling from the sky by a sacred Banyan tree. Additionally, after attempting to kill himself, he instead vanishes into the wilds rather than end his life. There is something so human and deep about his experiences in the story. And when Douglas finds the clear-cut and dying forest, rather than giving up, he fights. He plants millions of trees, he becomes an environmental activist, he forms relationships with other like-minded beings that will last his lifetime. Douglas has had an awakening in the dead forest, in a way I can relate to as well. His eyes have become open not just to trees' worth on this planet, but to human-kind's destructive power. When one finally comes to this same realization, there are only two ways to go – succumb or fight. Douglas realizes that "trees fall with spectacular crashes. But planting is silent and growth is invisible" (89). We oversee our own stories, and whether we succumb or fight, the world will go on. No one may acknowledge our struggle, just as they may never acknowledge the trees' struggle, but that does not make it any less worthwhile.

Finally, there is Dr. Patricia Westerford. She is so clearly modeled on real-life tree scientist and forest communication pioneer Dr. Suzanne Simard that it is hard to distinguish the two even as their stories diverge. Just like many other characters, both Patricia's drive and early childhood trauma come from the trees. Her father is central to her later life and world view, and while he teaches her how to be a plant scientist, he is also killed by the trees he helped cultivate. As she becomes older, Patricia's time spent in the 1970s world of forestry science is dominated by the patriarchy. She is not taken seriously or allowed to explore her own, more maternal ways of studying the natural world. Instead, she is mocked and ostracized, attempting and later succeeding in killing herself due to this professional shunning. But even in the face of these odds, Patricia, like Simard, discovers something life-altering about the trees, remarking, "Older creatures – bigger slower, older more durable – call the shots, make the weather, feed creation, and create the very air" (114). They communicate with each other through underground networks. They help one another survive as well. There is a community in a forest, more than we even now understand, and the forest keeps itself whole as outside forces, including humans, try to breach it: "Nothing is more isolated or more social than a tree" (115). In the end, this chapter becomes the compass chapter of "Roots," allowing the reader to see where this narrative is heading. The reader can sense the below-the-surface connections that the story is building, not just between the characters and their trees, but between the characters and one another, between the storylines that begin to interweave, like the filamentous connecting fibers of mycelium under the ground level of a forest, and in the case of *The Overstory*, in the canopies of the trees and the stories of their human counterparts. Connections and relationships become the main theme of the text, as they become the main theme in our real lives as well. And just as Patricia reads in a book that inspires her studies, so too does *The Overstory* spread the same message of the forest, of

nature, and of its power on the human psyche: “We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men...In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks. The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness” (124).

### **Structural Connection**

I felt compelled to dive deep into Powers’ character development in “Roots,” as it is the section that most inspired my approach to this thesis. I have tried to emulate, in a way, the development of my own life, formative events that have seen me grow in my own journey on this earth. Through the nine essays in this thesis, I hope to create connections between my personal narratives and some of the commentary on the natural world, human connection, and trauma that is abundant in *The Overstory*. I initially headed my thesis chapters similarly to Powers’ section headings, i.e., Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds, but I found my text taking a slightly different shape. Instead, my section headings relate a bit more to the ideas in Nadkarni’s *Between the Earth and Sky*, demonstrating connections of my own established by the trees – an underground, a layer of connectedness at earth-level, and what happens above the surface.

My section “Ground Level” represents the formative experiences I have had in nature and how those experiences tie me to my human world. In this section, people who have guided me along this journey become central, as well as experiences where I felt my connection to the earth was most remarkable. This section is meant to speak to Suzanne Simard’s ideas from *Finding the Mother Tree* where mycelium build bridges between the trees across which they communicate and through which they exist. In this way, “Ground Level” is also the bridge between the two other sections of this thesis, demonstrating not only how I got from below to above “ground,” but also how those connections still exist within me, how those experiences continue to inform who I am and my path forward. The section “Below Ground” represents the stories that are hidden.

These are the things that I keep buried, that I don't share often with others, that have created such a basement to my being that they hold up this whole version of myself. This section brings up ideas present from other authors in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* as well, and while I am not claiming to understand the trauma that Indigenous women have been through, I can relate to their trauma from the level of my gendered girlhood and womanhood. The essays in this section represent the trauma that has informed my life and that I work hard daily to move past. "Below Ground" also contains hints of a way out of trauma's wreckage, as I have my first experiences with an emerging mental clarity, finding new ways to relate to the natural world. The full poem, "In This Ghost Forest" from which the excerpts in this introduction come from, was also originally included in this section but has been removed for length from this version. Finally, "Above Ground" is where I consider myself now. I too look at the world through the eyes of Nadkarni's connections to the greater beyond, where nature can reveal a higher purpose to me through my observation of it. In "Above Ground" I answer back to the formative and traumatic experiences that have shaped me and write essays from a place of healing – healing that has come through my interactions with the natural world. Becoming a mother has been the ultimate healing experience for me as it allows me to see the intimate connections between our human world and the natural one. Nothing in my life has been as instinctual as motherhood. Nothing in my life has allowed me to grow and nurture as much as motherhood. And it is through this lens, that I have started to heal myself. To see that my time on this planet has had a purpose. To see that all the things that led up to this point have established my being and my own sense of nature.

I hope that each personal essay in my thesis creates a similar connection to its subject matter as do the initial nine characters in *The Overstory*. Each essay is meant to convey a specific theme related to the natural world, as each of Powers' characters does as well. "North American

Wildlife” is my answer to Nick Hoel. This essay marks my journey of growing up on generational property and the experience of having my Nana guide my introduction to the natural world. “Cut” is my piece for Douglas Pavlicek. In this essay I explore my emotional reactions to the Westcoast’s extractive timber industry and how it changed my view of humans’ place in the natural world after I too moved out West. In “Immigrants/Emigrants” I think about displacement, in a way Neelay Mehta’s and Mimi Ma’s fathers likely felt as well. Here, I speak on a variety of immigrants/emigrants and how my own emigration story plays into my vision of place and home. “Coral Reefs,” and also in a way “How to Eat Mushrooms,” can be most closely linked with Olivia Vandergraff’s story in that the narrative is hazy in my mind still. I try to make sense of memories of which I don’t truly have a firm grasp, but that I also feel have been speaking to me across years. In “Fanning the Flames” I recount my own experience learning botany and dealing with a patriarchal scientific system in the same way Powers’ Patricia Westerford does. In this essay, I blend the scientific with the personal in the same way Suzanne Simard, Powers’ inspiration for Westerford, does in her *Finding the Mother Tree*. Through this narrative I can explore my feelings about multiple systems at once and how they may be interrelated to one another even if there are markedly different on the surface. “Guerilla” speaks to Mimi Ma and the foundation her father built for her. Through my own connection with my father and the land, I explore how gardening has allowed the two of us to get, and remain, closer as I became an adult. In “Planting Seeds” I explore the way that gardening the land has impacted my psyche and mental well-being in a similar way to the way Ray and Dorothy use their plants. My garden has created a space to heal, a space to breathe, and a space to observe the natural world. Through these observations, I have learned things about growing and letting go. Finally, “For Him,” is related to Adam Appich’s story in that I too relate motherhood experience, as well as my son’s

childhood, to the natural world through the seasonality of place. But “For Him” most closely relates to Robin Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* where time slows in nature long enough to see how closely related we are as humans. Through motherhood (and parenthood), our journey on earth becomes somewhat clearer. The desire to nurture our progeny, our seeds, overtakes our desire to be independent people. Instead, connections and relationships become the focus and, in this way, as in this piece, my relationship with the earth becomes more clearly established. We are one, humans and the natural world, existing in this tiny pocket between the earth and the sky.

GROUND LEVEL

*We watch the sprouts.*

*Moved by their generation,*

*Our generation has too,*

*Put its feet*

*Back into the soil.*

*We grow.*

## “More than a Collection of Trees”

“And everything in the universe is connected – between the forests and prairies, the land and the water, the sky and the soil, the spirits and the living, the people and the creatures” (283).

- *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard

“No individual exists apart from the world. This fact is echoed in food webs, ecosystems, and global ecology. Plants, animals, fungi, microbes, bacteria, and humans are all linked. No action we take will be without an effect on another being” (240).

- *Between the Earth and Sky*, Nalini Nadkarni

Connections flow throughout the natural world. In an average day, we as individuals are connected to thousands of objects, things, and beings. We form connections with one another, with our animal companions, with the food we eat, and the beds we sleep in. We form connections with the air we breathe and the water we drink. Without these connections, we simply could not exist. Our lives are built on connections.

In *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard reflects on 30 years of scientific work analyzing the associations between plants, mainly Fir and Beech trees. Her work with these trees mirrors the work in her personal and professional lives as well. Connections are created and broken along the way, but her work eventually establishes an entirely new ethos around the *purpose* of a forest, how it operates, and why. Traditionally, by Western scientific standards, trees were thought to be in competition with one another, but Simard reveals that the trees within a forest act cooperatively, with each entity doing its part to create a connection with all others within the space. Simard establishes the networks between newly sprouted seedlings and saplings and the large, mature trees she refers to as “Mother Trees.” These Mother Trees link the forest together in a community, sending nutrients to not only their offspring, but also towards other surrounding juvenile or injured trees. The trees, it seems, know that when one of them

thrives, they all thrive, and so, underground, they form connections to one another's root systems through mycorrhizal fungi that link them into a single entity working together to maintain their structure, diversity, health, and kinship.

Simard's goal as a forester has always been to understand why native forests are more productive and healthier than the monoculture ones planted after a clear-cut. Through her research, she discovers that these connected forests, with Mother Trees intact to serve the community's needs, have "almost twice the productivity...the opposite of the usual foresters' expectations" (281). She found that in areas where the Mother Trees had been cut, the planted seedlings were sickly and dying because "there was a maddening disconnect between the roots and the soil" (18). It is the connection between the young and the old, between the needy and the nurturing that allows a forest to maintain its structure. Without these connections, a forest becomes like a ghost town, where remnants of what we know as trees remain but have lost their individual spirits. In this way, Simard's book is not about "how we can save the trees...[but] about how the trees might save us" (6). For Simard, we must look to the beings around us, namely trees, to experience and contemplate our own place on this earth.

In *Between the Earth and Sky*, Nalini Nadkarni addresses these larger connections between trees and humanity, between trees and the biosphere, and between trees and the cosmos. Also a scientist by trade, Nadkarni explores the relationship between trees and the greater world beyond the bounds of a forest. Her book is structured according to a new interpretation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where Nadkarni adds her own additional layers, contending that trees can satisfy all of humans' basic needs, including spirituality and mindfulness. She builds on Simard's and others' work in the early chapters showing the linkages between trees and our

physical needs, but it is her work in later chapters, linking trees with humans' metaphysical needs that adds further to the conversation on the importance of connections.

*Between the Earth and Sky* establishes the long-held relations between trees and how humans view time, where according to Nadkarni, "Nothing more effectively indicates seasonal transitions than the tender green of the emerging buds of spring, the rich, deep greens of summer, the multicolored leaves of autumn, or the delicate filagree of snow on tiny twigs after a winter storm" (163). Because of their connection to time, trees are then able to give humans a sense of belonging in the greater timescales of the universe.

It is through this connection between the past and the present that trees bridge the spiritual realm for humans as well, with "trees constituting for us a connection between Earth and the heavens that is both physical and spiritual. In important ways, they allow us to expand our sensibility beyond the mundane" (Nadkarni 215). For Nadkarni, tree-based spirituality, with its established connection to the universe allows us to answer the larger questions of life such as, "Who am I? Where did I come from? To what forces am I connected? Will it matter that I lived?" (216).

Nadkarni recounts the various religions and cultures that have lived across our globe in time and space and demonstrates that trees are at the basis of not only many, but most, of the spiritual practices that have cycled through our species over time. She finds a connection in many of the creation stories, from current religions around the world, to Native American origin stories, to long-gone cultures where trees take center stage, "providing a metaphor for explaining our origins" (218). There is a common connection among these beliefs with the universe represented as a tree that extends to the cosmos; "Its branches hold up the heavens, its trunk

stands in the earthly realm, and its roots descend into the underworld” creating what Nadkarni calls the “*axis mundi*” or “axis of the universe” (218).

It is through these earthly, spiritual, and chrono-connections that Simard’s and Nadkarni’s stories align. They both speak tales of caution, urging us to see our past, to open our eyes to the connections that are happening around us, and to experience the connectedness of the universe and all its beings. We are not alone or isolated in our time on this planet, each author contends. We are part of a whole. We are part of something greater. And it is through the trees and their connections to the physical and metaphysical world that we can begin to understand our own connections to these realms as well.

North American Wildlife:  
A Guide to a Southern Childhood

There was a book at my Nana's house that I could never keep out of my hands. With each visit, its pages grew thinner and more frayed from my thumbing. Dogeared corners turned down to mark my progress. The book, published in 1982, two years before I was born, was a copy of Reader's Digest *North American Wildlife: An Illustrated Guide to 2,000 Plants and Animals*. This book, treasured on each visit to Nana's house, fueled my need to know more. It stands out above all other things, as the key factor that opened my eyes to the natural world.

Hidden away in a corner somewhere, leaned against a yellowing pillow, I dove into another world on visits. At first, it was the world of animals. The front half of the book contained information on every conceivable animal my young brain could imagine. The cover displays a Raccoon, *Procyon lotor*, which always drew me to page 58 where I learned that racoons did just as well in human communities as they did in forests. From there, the birds and their bright colors always called to me. Nana loved birding and the book didn't disappoint. There were birds I'd never heard of or considered, birds I couldn't fathom, and others I imagined flying next to me as I rode my bike through the neighborhood. Males and females of each species were distinguished, mostly by plumage.

"Why do the boys get all the colors?" I asked one visit.

"That's only birds, honey. You can be as bright as you want to be," Nana told me.

The book became mine by default, even though Nana insisted on keeping it at her house. I made her swear that one day I could have it. I engraved the back cover, "Stephanie Mills was here," in the sloppy pencil inscription of a possessive eight-year-old. Nana acquiesced; I think

she enjoyed the connection it brought us. Together, we could sift through the pages for hours discussing the details of each animal. As much as the animals in the book inspired my early youth, as I got older, I found myself more and more drawn to the back half of the book. It had once seemed boring to me, but I had memorized the animals in such detail, that looking through their extensive section at the front of the book no longer held the same wonder. One day, I turned to the plant section out of desperation. I noticed for the first time the wildflowers. Pages of brightly colored faces greeted me, drawing me into their world.

I realized something else as well. Animals were elusive. They were things I would likely never see in the wild, even in a zoo. But the plants? The plants were there. Always. Accessible. I could be with them, I could find them, I could see them. So, after a few seasons of obsessively combing the pages of the animal section, the plant section became my new favorite. At each rest stop on road trips to Georgia, I would wander off to identify as many plants as I could in the time it would take my father to convince my brother to get back in the car. When we visited somewhere new, I would take clippings, pressing them between pages of the book until they had dried, preserving a version of our trip for the future.

My small world opened just a bit to the world of plants. I began relating to them, understanding their meaning, their timing, their patience. I started understanding myself too. Without this book, perhaps I would have never noticed the pervasive presence of plants. But now I can't unsee them. Plants have guided me, helped me, shown me the way through this world. If I stop to listen, it is always the plants that offer their wisdom, their comfort, their strength.

It is always the plants.

## **Southern Magnolia, *Magnolia grandiflora***

*Magnolia-like fossils more than 70 million years old indicate the ancient lineage of these beautiful trees. In fact, one major classification system for plants is based on the premise that magnolias were the ancestors of all other flowering plants. According to this theory, they were the first plants to bear seeds in a protective ovary, or fruit.*

Nana was the matriarch of my dad's side of the family. She was a steady force in my life for as long as I can remember. I really didn't know my maternal grandmother well. She and my own mother were always in some type of battle. I wasn't close to my step-grandparents either, there was an intimacy that was lacking, as I had met them later in life.

Nana was a character. A Southern lady from Ocala, Florida, raised by some homesteading South-Westerners. She grew up with her mind on independence. Married, divorced twice, and single for the largest portion of her life, Nana got a degree in mathematics before many women did and loved to travel alone. Every summer, my family took a road trip from Florida to Georgia where Nana had a second house. The Cabin, we called it. These summers on the lakes of Georgia were formative to my love of nature, my peace in the wilderness, and my passion for the outdoors. At the Cabin, my brother and I were given free rein to run wild. We could go anywhere we wished, no phones, no check-ins. Come home for lunch and dinner and don't go towards the big road were the only rules. Today, we'd be called free-range kids, a radical concept in 2022, but in the 1990s, it was still just a regular childhood.

As we headed north from our home in Tampa, our family met Nana in Ocala, all loaded into her minivan, and made the long day's journey to central Georgia. Her cat, Biggie, always came along for the ride, purring in my lap as we crossed the state line. Nana had two different houses in Georgia through the years. One was on Lake Oconee, a deeply red clay-bottomed lake that would dye anything it touched a murky brown. We made sure to always wear our worst

bathing suits when we swam because by the end of our stay, they'd be ruined. Later she moved to rural Macon, Georgia on a much larger property, also set against the shore of a lake, more vast and clearer than the previous. The clay settled mostly to the bottom, rather than disperse throughout the waters, so our bathing suits stayed their rightful colors.

The second property in Macon was in a dense forested space. There were neighbors in the distance, but they were hard to see between the trees. Nana had cleared some land at the front of her acreage to get a bit of sunlight to the porch. The roughly half-mile path to the lake was also bare. In front of the house stood two magnificent Magnolia trees a previous owner must have planted years prior. A clear contender as my favorite childhood smell, tied only with the orange blossoms of my Florida youth, I loved watching the stunning, large white Magnolia blossoms pop open each summer, revealing an inner cone, ancient in appearance, harboring mountains of yellow pollen I could never keep off my clothes. After pollination, the soft, inner Magnolia cone turns into a larger, darker one resembling a pinecone. Once opened, its insides harbor bright red seeds, sticky with pulp. I loved to play with the seeds and would always steal some for the trip back home, usually lost to my pockets and found in the next wash cycle.

After she died, Nana's children sold the Cabin and the land. Her grandchildren were distraught. How could our parents sell off a piece of our childhoods like that? We all mourned the loss of that special place. That loss hurt because we would miss the freedom bestowed on us at the Cabin. But mostly, it severed our last connection to the woman who was in us all. Where could we go now to cherish her memory if the Cabin was no longer an option?

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**Common Cattail, *Typha latifolia***

*One need never starve where cattails grow. In fall and winter, the starchy rhizomes can be peeled and cooked like potatoes or dried and pounded into flour. In spring and early summer, the young shoots can be eaten raw or cooked. The fluffy white fruits have been used to stuff pillows.*

A small, shaded creek ran besides Nana's house and fed the larger lake. Willows overhung its shallow waters, casting it into a darkness that most fish refused, but which catfish loved. The shores were inhabited by dense thickets of cattails. I loved to run my hand over the tops of them, wrapping my fingers around the thick blooms, resembling corn dogs more than flowers. My brother and I pulled the blooms up by their narrow stalks and hit each other with the ends like swords. Towards the end of our summer stay some years, the cattail flowers would burst open revealing fluffy white seeds that dispersed to the wind. The seed puffs would get caught everywhere, hanging from the willows, swaying from the edge of lawn chairs, caught in blades of grass.

Nana cleared a small patch out of the cattails for fishing. She rigged up bamboo poles with lines and sinkers. We left a bucket of fish heads tied to a post in the water. The bamboo poles were baited with rolled bread balls and left secured overnight. I don't remember a single time in all my years at the Cabin, that upon morning inspection, every tethered pole was not occupied by a solitary catfish. On fishing days, we would eat catfish all day long – fried catfish with eggs for breakfast, seared catfish sandwiches at lunch, and a dinner of grilled catfish with sweet potatoes and squash casserole.

Even as a kid I struggled with the idea of fishing. My father was the fish cleaner, it was his job to kill the fish dangling from the bamboo poles, clean their scales and guts, and ready the fillets to eat. Because I was the oldest, he always enlisted me to help. He hit each fish over the head with a mallet then with a quick slice from a small hatchet took the heads clean off. I was

supposed to help clear scales after he was done, but I could never keep my eyes off the heads. The mouths still gaped open with each breath. Bright eyes stared out, full of life. The severed bodies quaked for a while, flicking their tails, pulsating up and down. The sight left me shaken. My dad threw the heads toward the creek, but most missed and ended up in the cattail bank.

After he was gone, I snuck back down to the cattails. Spreading the three-foot-high reeds, I searched for any heads still breathing. Most had gone still by that point, but I could always find at least one that still gasped for air. I sat by the banks of the creek, watching the catfish head until the last breath left its mouth. Someone needed to be there with it, I thought.

Coming back to the lake as a teenager, the ritual continued, dad sliced heads off the fish, and we ate the fillets throughout the day. But I stopped watching the heads. I stopped sitting with them in silent vigil by the cattails. Instead, they were left alone to open and close their mouths, waiting for the last breath to come. With me no longer there to watch over them, the crabs and bugs moved in quicker, covering the still breathing catfish heads, taking them apart before they were done living, already cycling them into the next phase of energy along the creek shores.

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### **Longleaf Pine, *Pinus palustris***

*Foresters classify the pines into two groups according to the characteristics of the heartwood, the central portion of the trunk. Although the heartwood is not visible on a living tree, other differences between the two groups can be more readily observed.*

pinus are everywhere in the South, throughout the chunk of Georgia and the long peninsula of Florida that occupy the lower right corner of a map. In Florida, much of the native pine forests are gone, cleared away for subdivisions and strip malls. Single stands may remain,

buried behind a Walmart parking lot, on someone's hunting acreage, occupying a storm drain off a highway ramp, or in a few remaining patches set aside as state parks.

On the drive from Florida to Georgia every year, the pines occupied my view. It took roughly 12 hours to arrive at the destination, with rest stop and picnic breaks. I always brought books and puzzles, enough for my brother and me since he always somehow forgot to pack anything to occupy his time. Head down, nose in a book, I read as my father, not one to take risks of any kind, drove the exact speed limit once Nana was ready to doze off for a nap. But every few minutes my head turned up, and out the window my glance shot.

The highways are a pine refuge, still mostly lined with the trees throughout Florida until the Georgia line, where the trees give way to orange clay fields full of cotton or tobacco. I loved to watch the pines sway with the currents from the highway traffic. Sometimes, in the rain they bent at unnatural angles. I was sure I'd see one snap, but they never did. They have grown accustomed to the quick-hitting, powerful storms of the Southeast. The pines moved at such a blur at times, I could barely make out individual trunks. Instead, the mass appeared to move as one. Buried between them, billboards advertising the next stop's attractions, a deal at the next exit's McDonalds, or every Floridian's personal favorite, the "We Bare All" signs that occupy a hundred-mile stretch before Ocala, leading to what I can only assume must be a lovely truck stop strip club. My brother and I liked to be the first to spot these signs, spread at about 10-mile increments, claiming each billboard as my father sat up front annoyed but ignoring our crassness.

When we arrived at Nana's cabin in Georgia, road weary with cramped adolescent legs, the pines were the first thing to greet us. Nana's pines seemed taller and more majestic than the highway pines that occupied the drive. They towered over us with such a graceful majesty, their tops could not be seen looking directly up through their branches. Some were so big I couldn't

wrap my arms fully around their bases. Vines strung between the crowns and birds called out from the upper branches. The pines shadowed us from the Georgia summer sun until we made our way to the dock to jump into the lake waters. A worn path ran from the Cabin to the dock, carved through time with the feet of grandchildren and children. Nana watched from the back porch with her sweating glass of sweet tea. I don't remember her coming down to the dock much and I never remember her swimming with us. But she always found a way to be with us still as we explored the outdoors.

One peaceful day as I swam in the lake with my father and brother, we saw the nearby neighbor's house had cars coming up the driveway for hours. A big party or reunion must have been taking place. I barely made out the music and laughter floating from the house across the water. A man emerged from the house with a long gun in his hand. I watched as he drove a golfcart toward a towering pine near our dock. He got out, aimed the gun towards the treetop, and fired. Suddenly a small shape came sailing down from the trees. It spiraled as it picked up speed, flying the full length of the tall tree. The fuzzy thing hit the ground with a thud I can still hear. The man leaned over and grabbed it by its tail. I recognized it was a squirrel as he threw it in the seat of the golfcart and drove back towards the house.

My eyes welled. I let out a painful sob. My dad rushed over in the water and embraced me as the lake lapped around our waists. I had never seen an animal, other than a catfish, intentionally killed before. The quickness and finality of its death hit me raw and hard. My father tried to comfort me by saying he was sure the neighbors would eat it at the party, but that only made my cries louder and more furious. The entire trip that summer had been ruined for me in a moment. It felt a little like my childhood had been escalated, an innocent part of my soul had been lost as I watched the death spiral of that squirrel. That day I felt like a pine, but I didn't

know which kind anymore. My heartwood had grown just a little harder. A protective barrier began to be erected around that soft place inside of me that had existed prior to that moment.

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**Saw-Palmetto, *Serenoa repens***

*Saw-palmettos commonly grow in dense thickets beneath pines, their stems creeping along the ground. Rarely does the stem become tall and the plant tree-like.*

Between the pines at the Cabin, close to the edge of their range, were clusters of saw palmettos. Kids growing up in the Southeast are told at a young age to stay away from these stunted palm trees as this is where rattlesnakes prefer to call home. Florida saw palmettos can take up acres and acres, bunched together in such thick patches that there is no movement through them at all. It is easy enough to steer clear of their dangers in the open fields of Florida. At Nana's cabin, the palmettos were few and far between, occupying tiny slivers of sunlight that made it to the ground in between the thick pine trees. Only one or two palmettos could take over any sunlit patch; there just wasn't enough solar energy for them to thrive in larger sets. Because of this, they didn't feel so dangerous in my child's mind. I walked by them with ease, ignoring any possible threat. I never encountered a rattlesnake. Maybe they were scared away by the constant noise of my cousins and me. Or maybe they were frightened by the dogs.

Every summer at the lake, I befriended a random dog. In rural Georgia, dogs run as free as children, crossing over property boundaries and lone country roads, roaming for miles. We always had canine visitors at the Cabin. I wondered how they knew to come to us from wherever they originated. The only yearly repeat visitor, and the only dog Nana knew the owners, of was Duke, a classic golden retriever of the copper variety. When I go to my dad's house now to thumb through old childhood pictures, sometimes it seems there are more pictures of Duke and

me than of me with any cousins. He was a constant in my summers for a few years, until one summer upon arriving from Tampa, I called out Duke's name and Nana told me he had been hit by a car and died. As sad as I was, it didn't last long, because a pair of dogs joined us that summer soon after, somehow altered to Duke's absence. One was a shaggy black and white mutt, and his companion was a tiny Pomeranian looking thing, although it was hard to tell exactly as his hair was matted with sticky seeds, burrs, fleas, and ticks. These dogs weren't nearly as cared for as Duke had been, but they were just as loving. Another year, I took to a Pitbull mix Nana warned me to stay away from but who turned out to be an angel, staying with me one day when I tumbled down a hill spraining my ankle. With no one around to hear my cries for help, the dog sat beside me, nosing my palm to stay calm until my dad finally found me. I got a temporary cast and even though we tried once to put a Ziplock bag around it, I found I couldn't enjoy the lake that summer. Instead, I sat next to Nana on the porch with the Pitbull that even she soon warmed up to, sneaking in pats between sips of tea.

Old pictures of me with the dogs show another thing too. I was growing from a chubby little girl into a gangly adolescent. In these pictures that mark the passage of time along the lake, I am almost always in a bathing suit, my hair wet and glistening against the Georgia sun. The pines grew taller around me. The Magnolias got thicker in the base. Life became more complicated. The Cabin was where I pondered my first heartbreak and my first fight with a friend. The Cabin was the backdrop to the summer when my grandfather passed and the summer after my mom got remarried. Sometimes it felt like the only constant in my life was the Cabin and the trees. And maybe the dogs.

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**Kudzu, *Pueraria lobata***

*Fast-growing kudzu was imported from Japan in 1911 to control erosion and restore nitrogen-depleted soil. In the warm, wet climate of the Southeast, the Kudzu ran rampant, overgrowing forests, fields, and buildings at the rate of 100 feet a year or more. Today the kudzu invasion is a serious problem throughout the region.*

On the way back to Florida one summer, well into my teenage years, I glanced out the car window to meditate on the pine trees and was surprised I couldn't find them. Their basic shape was still there, but the individuals were gone. I couldn't make out trunks or crowns. Instead, they appeared as one mass that ran for hundreds of yards. The individuals were buried, and kudzu was to blame. The fast-growing invasive vine that anyone from the Southeast can identify and commiserate over had finally made its way to the highway section where some of my favorite pine trees lived. Kudzu can overtake an entire stand of trees in one season. It is incredibly difficult to stop once it gains a hold. In some patches, the D.O.T. had decided the only way to eradicate it was to cut down the trees that it entangled. In the place of my pines or even my kudzu-covered forests, were now bare patches of soil, stumps and tangled limbs littered the ground. Stringy kudzu vines jutted up from the mess, probably still alive enough to take root and continue their pursuit regardless of the loss of their forest host.

At a certain point when I was a teenager we stopped going to the Cabin. I don't remember exactly when or why, I stayed busy with school and friends and jobs. But one summer, sitting bored in my room waiting for some boy to call, I suddenly remembered Georgia and the lake and wondered why we weren't there now. Nana was getting older, and I knew travel was harder on her. The last few yearly trips, my dad had driven the whole stretch with Nana in the passenger seat. My time spent with her started to get shorter too. We still visited her house in Ocala a few times a year, but the visits started to feel more forced and less natural.

In Georgia, she was just a part of my life. There with a lemonade when I would come in from swimming, ready to talk about school or home or whatever was on my heart. In Georgia, she washed my clothes, cleaning the murky lake water from my bathing suits. Or found the note I had written to myself in a pair of jean shorts and made sure to save it from the washing machine, and instead asked me about the book or band that I had jotted down to try to remember later. When my period hit, Nana saved feminine hygiene products under the Cabin sink, so I had what I needed. But since Georgia, the visits to Nana's home in Ocala felt more formal. We were there for a set amount of time. Conversations took place in the living room. I barely explored the house. I hardly had time to tell her about what was really on my mind. I never had time to relax before our visit was over and we had to head home to beat traffic. At a time when I probably needed her most, it seemed Nana and I had succumbed to the distance between us.

One day, I got a letter in the mail. It was rare to get anything addressed to me, especially something handwritten. My dad handed me the envelope, "I think Nana might have sent this to you." Inside was a \$10 bill and a letter. I cast the money aside to read the note. Nana said she missed talking to me and wanted to know if I wanted to be her pen pal so that we could still talk in one way or another. And so started our long-distance correspondence. We wrote each other frequently and at length. She always asked questions in her letters, "How is school? Any boyfriends? How's softball? Where are you thinking of going to college?" My responses to her were filled with hope. I didn't want to burden her with the truth. Instead, I focused on things that were going well, "I got a job. I made shortstop. I got an A in P.E."

Nana always sent money in the letters. Deep down I was thankful, but I also hoped that she didn't send money to make sure I wrote back – I would write back no matter what. Sometimes, I had so much to say I'd send another letter before I even had her response from the

last one. I saved every letter she sent, and they grew in a box under my bed until it overflowed. Like the kudzu that had taken over the highway, the letters spilled out onto the floor until I had to get a second and then a third box to contain them all. Even when I left Florida for the Pacific Northwest after high school, the letters continued. When I crammed my small car full of only the things that mattered for that drive, Nana's letter boxes had space on the floor of the backseat.

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**Spanish Moss, *Tillandsia usneoides***

*Despite their evil reputation, they are not parasitic. They attach themselves to trees for support but take no direct nourishment from their hosts. They live on nutrients leached from leaves and dead bark by the rain.*

Spanish moss, the grey dripping entity that hangs from trees in the deep South is as ubiquitous as the pop-up roadside stands selling oranges, boiled peanuts, crawfish, and pescado that dot the backroads. Spanish moss is in fact, neither Spanish nor a moss. It originates from Central and South America and is in the flowering plant family. Another common warning Florida children often hear is not to put Spanish moss on your body because the "red bugs" will bite you. A true Florida child will tell you though, that so long as the moss you gather is from the tree and not the ground, you will be fine using it for old-timey wigs or Santa Claus beards. The red bugs, or chiggers, only gather in the moss once it falls to the ground.

There's a point somewhere in Texas where the Spanish moss disappears from the trees. On the way out West, I hardly noticed its absence as my brother and I made the week-long drive from Florida to Oregon, taking the long southern route and shooting up through California because my worn-down 1997 Chevy Cavalier couldn't handle the Rocky Mountains along the shorter northern route. At 19 I moved out West, leaving behind the trees of my youth for a whole

new ecosystem in the Pacific Northwest – one that would come to grow my love of nature and the outdoors, even though the seed had been planted long ago in the pine forests of the Southeast. When I moved back home to Florida a decade later, I nearly cried in Mississippi when I suddenly noticed the moss had started to gather on the trees again.

Once in Oregon, I realized there were three things I missed more than the rest. Lightning storms are almost non-existent in Southern Oregon where I moved. Lightning may strike occasionally, but the Florida version of these storms were missing, with their dense dark clouds that move in ferociously, dropping rain by the ocean-full in fat globules, sparking the ground every second with lightning so bright it can blind a person who looks directly at it. Spanish moss was nowhere to be found either. I didn't realize what an impact that plant had on my psyche until it was nowhere to be seen. The trees covered with the long, thin filaments somehow felt comforting back home, like a thick quilt wrapped around me. The trees in Oregon seemed bare compared to the moss-covered oaks back home, except for the lichens running up the trunks in the most densely packed Western forests. And I missed Nana. I felt like I would never see her again at the time and wondered how long it would be before I made the journey back to Florida.

Unlike the thunderstorms and moss, Nana was still there in her own way though. Her letters continued and got me through some of the darkest periods in my young adult life. The sun is strong in Oregon, like in Florida, but only for half the year. For the other half, it vanishes, driven by seasonal axial tilt. Thick winter clouds blanket the sky. Months can go by without the sun peeking through. And that can take a toll on a Floridian's state of mind. I shared these thoughts with Nana in my letters, which no longer masked the bad, but instead sought advice. Nana answered back as best she could. The piles of letters grew larger, and the boxes numbered more. I had never felt closer to her even though we were so far apart.

On my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Nana bought me a new laptop to celebrate my move from the local community college to the small liberal arts university in town. She was ecstatic to learn that I had chosen to be an environmental science major and concentrate in botany. I told her I couldn't help myself; the plants called to me. She told me she understood. When I phoned to thank her, Nana gave me some bad news. She had been diagnosed with lung cancer. She told me not to worry and that everything would be fine, but my mind went to a dark place. Our letters became infrequent, but our calls increased. She could only talk for short periods because she would get out of breath so quickly, but she always assured me everything was fine. And for a while it was.

Just before my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, my dad phoned. "You need to call Nana," he said, "I'm not sure how much longer she has."

When I called, my aunt picked up the phone. Nana had chosen to leave the hospital. She wanted to die at home, "to be surrounded by family, not machines," my aunt told me. "Don't talk to her for too long, she's weak. And she can't understand much, but she wanted to make sure you called," she said handing the phone to Nana.

I tried to keep it brief. And I tried not to let her hear the pain in my voice. I didn't cry. At least not on the phone. I told her I loved her and that she had inspired so much about my path in life. She only mumbled back, her voice nearly gone, but I know I heard her say "I love you." Within a few minutes, my aunt took the phone back and said Nana needed to rest. The next day, my dad called to tell me Nana had passed. "I'm glad you got to tell her you loved her, Steph. I know it meant a lot to her."

I flew back for the funeral which was at a stuffy church in Ocala. The reception, however, was held at nearby Silver Springs State Park, a peaceful, frequent gathering spot when we visited Nana. The family ate at a picnic table along the river, pine trees towered overhead, the

breeze softly whistled through their needles. On the edge of the river's banks, large, old oaks stood, Spanish moss dripped from their limbs. Spanish moss doesn't grow on young trees. It flourishes on mature trees are in their final stage of life. The moss becomes thick on the dying trees, preferring their quickly shedding cells to nourish its growth. When the trees finally topple over, the moss and tree decompose together, their energy and life force leaking back into the soil to nurture future generations.

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**Salal**, *Gaultheria shallon*

*The fruit is a source of food for many animals. A staple food of NW coastal First Nations. Can be eaten fresh, cooked, and dried. Attracts birds, butterflies, and hummingbirds.*

After Nana passed, I wasn't distraught. It was her time, and she had made peace with that fact. And because she handled death with such grace and understanding, I was able to as well. But I did miss her. I missed the letters, and I missed the calls. A few weeks after her passing a package arrived in the mail. When I opened it, there was a book wrapped in tissue paper. On top, a note in Nana's handwriting, "Make sure Steph gets this." I slowly unwrapped the paper, knowing what was inside, but still delighted to see the dark green letters of *North American Wildlife*.

Shortly after the package came, I took my dog on a weeklong camping trip along the Oregon coast. It was my first great foray into the Oregon wilderness. We camped at bluffs overlooking the ocean, hidden at sites buried beneath different kinds of pine trees than those of my home state. I took the book with me. It occupied my backpack as I journeyed along coastal trails, across rocky outcrops, and through dense old-growth forests with tree trunks wider than anything my Southeastern mind could have ever imagined. I pulled the book out often trying to

learn the names of new trees and plants, orienting myself to my new home by way of the flora that inhabited the space as well. I felt that if I could know the plants of a place, then I could know the place itself.

At one stop in a particularly dark patch of forest, I noticed some deep purple berries growing from a large bush. Inside, I could hear the chatter of birds as they ate up the berries from within, making sure to stay out of sight of my dog and her perked up ears. I watched as a butterfly silently glided in front of me, coming to a rest at the top of one of the bush's leaf clusters. I searched my book for the plant and found easily, and with satisfaction, that it was called Salal. The book offered a brief introduction to the plant's importance, but it wasn't until a later research field trip for a botany class that I learned of how truly vital it could be.

Salal was, and still is, a primary food source for Pacific Indigenous cultures. Salal isn't prized for its taste, and in fact, other berries are eaten fresh over Salal frequently. But what it lacks in taste it makes up for in nutrients. Salal is dried and stored either as whole berries or as a dried flour, providing more nutrients and antioxidants than even a powerhouse like blueberries can. Because it can be dried, it can be stored for long journeys or times of hardship when other food sources were scarce. Salal is a survival food, one that when times are good and food is abundant can be ignored for the better tasting berries, but when times are hard, becomes a life source that can keep people alive until the sun shines again.

Salal made me think of Nana. She was always there for me in whatever way I would allow her. When I didn't need her, she still availed herself to me in smaller doses as a comforting presence. But when I needed help or advice, I would call to her, no one else would do, because no one else was as understanding or knew as much as she did. No one else allowed me to be who I was without judgement and still offered me outreach in times of need. Nana was my survival

tool, just like Salal. I know that she led me to that patch in the woods, with my book open, so that I too could make the connection. So I could sit with her at least one last time.

## Cut

I cried the first time I saw a log truck in Oregon. Coming from suburban Florida, I had rarely seen an open-bed truck piled high with the carcasses of our ancient life source. But in Oregon, they were everywhere. Rolling down the dirt roads and highways, the trucks were stacked high with cut trees, some so large I couldn't span their diameter with both arms spread. What I noticed most was the lost essence of the tree. *Can they even be called trees still?*

Traveling down the highway in the back of the truck, studying the trees reveals the bark stripped to a relatively smooth, sterile surface. Lichens and mosses are gone. Limbs are completely removed, leaving a perfectly round skeleton behind. They are barely recognizable. The cut edge of the log faces the road. In larger specimens, I can count age rings driving behind the trucks at 60 mph. At this point the trees are still alive. Mutilated beyond belief. Unable to sustain themselves. But by pure definition, the cells remain alive for some time after the tree has been cut off from its root system.

Moving to Oregon from Florida was an act of sheer will. I was 19 and in a relationship I can only now, looking back, describe as dangerous. My live-in boyfriend had threatened me and been physically violent with me previously. On our last night together, he had gotten a DUI. To pick him up from the county jail, I had to log into a computer system to see when I could retrieve him. Once in the system, I saw he had multiple domestic violence charges of which I was unaware. When I later picked him up and confronted him about these charges back at home, he threw me against a wall, put his hands around my neck, and told me to "drop it." I didn't speak that night. I didn't sleep that night. It wasn't the first time a man had put his unwanted hands on me. I knew silence was key to survival.

In the morning, I called my brother and asked for his help to move to Oregon. Our mom had moved there recently on a whim, and I felt like I needed to get some distance from my boyfriend to remain safe. I got the feeling he wouldn't take kindly to being cut out of my life. My brother and I packed up everything we could fit into my tiny Cavalier, I wrote my roommate a note with my last month's rent, stopped by my dad's house to say goodbye, and took off. It took us almost a week of driving to get to our destination. When the car finally pulled up to my mom's house in Ashland, Oregon, nestled among the gently sloping edge of the Cascades, surrounded by crisp mountain air filled with the scent of Douglas Firs, I felt like I could take my first full breath in days. The air that filled my lungs smelled wonderful. This was the fresh start I needed, to cut the negative from my life so I could focus on myself again.

When the US Forest Service (USFS) was created under the Organic Administration Act of 1887, its stated goals were to maintain water supplies and "to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens of the United States." Most citizens today have an incorrect understanding of this federal office. Asking the average person what the USFS does, they'd likely respond with protect the forests or run National Parks, even though that is an entirely separate, and similarly flawed, system. People don't realize that the USFS was created, and still generally operates, on a for-profit-basis. It was not established to preserve forests for their intrinsic value, but rather to harvest them for top dollar and ensure that the harvestable timber remains "sustainable." Instead, priority is given to furnishing "a continuous supply of timber for the use of the citizens of the United States." This is not a department that is interested in ecology or sustainability. Their interest remains monetary. The management of the forests under their control is tied tightly to economic gains.

Out West, I felt free. I was an enigma, an unknown entity. I could make myself over to be whoever or whatever I chose to be. No one here knew me. I took a job at a local vegan restaurant and enrolled in college to study environmental science. I started making over my life, healing the wounds from years-old cuts I still harbored deep within me. I got deep into philosophy and ethics. My brother, still living with me, started calling me an “eco-nut.” I went through our trash finding bits of recyclable or compostable materials he had discarded, lecturing him on their proper placement. I refused to allow him to cook meat in our shared apartment. I began trying out a freegan lifestyle, only eating what I could forage, scavenge, or grow. I stopped showering except on Sundays and refused to flush the toilet for anything other than a #2. I created so many rules for myself to ensure that I was living an authentically “environmental” lifestyle, that I started to feel trapped.

If you’ve ever seen a *Final Destination* movie, you know better than to follow a log truck. The odds are likely that a unique chain of catastrophic events will lead to a lost log flying through your windshield and impaling you against your seat’s headrest. When I found myself behind a log truck out West though, I moved away quickly for a different reason. Looking closely at the raw, cut edge of each log, I could see sap flowing out, congealing at the edge of the rough hack.

The sap is the true life force within the tree. It travels between two types of specialized cells in the wood called xylem and phloem. Xylem cells are hollow like straws and use gravity in a unique process to pull nutrients and water from the soil up towards the leaves of a tree. Surprisingly these cells are already dead. Generally, much of the bulk of a tree is made of dead cells. They are made, die, and replaced on a yearly cycle. This process also creates the tree’s rings which allow us to age it. Each year the cycle repeats, laying a ring to document its growth

conditions. In years of stress, the rings are tiny, barely distinguishable. In times of plenty, the rings are thick and easy to count.

Phloem does the opposite of xylem, carrying the sugars created in the leaves during photosynthesis down to the roots. This process is arguably one of nature's greatest feats, turning raw sunlight into storable energy. The roots store this energy for next year's needs. Trees always preserve something for the future. This is the mentality of a living thing that cannot move. They must always be prepared for what may come next, holding onto anything they don't need, just in case. These sugars make up the the sap that I see flowing from the cuts on the trees as the trucks carry them down the road. The blood of the tree, if you will, leaking out, staining the highways with its sticky richness.

And this is what makes me cry.

What I soon realized was the "rules" I had created for my new self were purely coping mechanisms. Because of the trauma I endured before leaving Florida, I felt out of control. The new system of boundaries I gave myself allowed me to feel in control. To a degree. When I broke one of my own rules, like the time I accidentally ate bread made with butter, I spiraled. To feel in charge of my life, I needed these boundaries to exist. Without them, I started to feel like a failure. Especially as a woman. I had always thought of myself as strong and independent, but twice in as many years, a man had overpowered me. And this made me feel like I had lost control of my own personhood. I knew I had to get my life back, to make it my own again. I was a survivor.

If a person were to drive through any given USFS land across the country, what they would find in many places are clear-cuts. In the world of forestry, clear-cuts are about the least sustainable way to harvest lumber. They destroy not only the forest, but the entire surrounding

ecosystem. Trucks come in and tear the land apart, leaving behind a razed area resembling the surface of a barren planet. All living things are displaced during this process. Nothing can remain behind. The animals that can flee, do, running for remaining patches of forest that are still intact. The understory plants are lost in the process, not even used for their economic value, run over instead by the treads of the giant machines which tear and cut trees from the earth. Centuries of growth can be destroyed in a day. Possibly hours.

Sometimes, to start fresh, you must assess your losses. I had to own up to all that had been taken from me against my will. I had to acknowledge that I was not the same person, but that it was OK to be different. My life had been razed. I was back at ground level. What I soon realized is that when you're at the bottom, the only way forward is to grow.

I started to ease up on my rules. I let myself eat cheese if I wanted to. I stopped watching the news when the environmental destruction made me too sad. I flushed the toilets and showered again. And I started growing things. One plant from the grocery store turned into one hundred, made up of clippings gifted from friends and neighbors and cuttings swiped on walks. I filled my home with greenery, and my heart started to fill with hope. What I had left behind of myself was gone, buried. Instead, something new was emerging, rising from the dirt in its place.

For the Forest Service to say they practice sustainable techniques with ecosystem health in mind, we must all buy into the lie that this is the most ecologically stable way to harvest trees. It simply is not. Much research has been done into more sustainable harvesting strategies. Sustainable forestry practices consider the underlying ecosystems and the long-term forest health. These techniques may selectively remove trees, leaving the main forest structure intact. Machines may not be used at all, with harvesting relying instead on manpower. But this in turn drives up costs. People don't want to buy expensive lumber. They want cheap paper and two-by-

fours. Sustainable foresters may still “clear-cut,” but it is much smaller in scale and environmentally sensitive in a way that creates space and movement for animals and understory plants. Generally, these clear-cuts take place in a circular form, like a pizza, with only one slice of the pie removed each year. The pie may contain ten to twenty slices, allowing a long time between each yearly cut and keeping the forest generally intact for the other ecosystem elements within it.

Sustainable forestry also considers its workers, which traditional forestry simply does not. Logging tops the list of the U.S.’s most dangerous jobs almost every year. Logging is nearly twice as deadly as the next deadliest profession. In countries outside the US this loss of life can be far greater. In many of these countries, logging is done by enslaved human or animal labor, often illegally. Conflicts may result in the murder of forest protectors or those who inhabit the land that illegal loggers covet, as has been happening in the Amazon rainforest for years now. Entire groups of Indigenous people are being massacred in the name of cheap wood and land clearing in this region.

The vegan restaurant I had been working at closed down. I took another job at a brewery that practiced near-closed system sustainability, a feat in the foodservice industry. All the power was generated by solar panels or bought as green energy. The food and beer inputs were grown on the brewery’s farm. Table scraps from the restaurant went back to the farm in the form of pig feed or compost. They bought all their staff members bicycles and gave us financial incentives for each mile we biked to work instead of drove. Rather than living in some dream world, this place was practicing sustainable techniques and making them work. It gave me a new sense of hope.

At this restaurant I found new friends too. It was these relationships that secured me, built me up and made me believe my life could feel good again. When I had been rigid in my ways, I felt alone. I was constantly pushing people and things away because they didn't fit my world view. But now that I was living more authentically, my life began to fill with connections. New relationships formed and I had space to take in my surroundings. I started using my free time to walk and hike with my dog instead of holed up in my apartment smoking weed and getting angry about the state of the world. I explored the top of the mountain I lived under. I wandered down to the creeks and lakes that encircled the town. I camped under the stars. I put my hands in the dirt and started planting vegetables. In this way, I started to heal myself. To mend my own cuts. My past stopped defining me and instead I allowed the future a possibility. It felt like I had been reborn, gifted another chance to try again.

Activists and regular citizens alike are appalled at seeing clear-cuts in healthy forest systems. What hasn't been nearly as contentious however, is the practice of postfire logging employed by the USFS. This technique is applauded by many of the same people who abhor the traditional clear-cuts, even though it is arguably as destructive. The practice is seen as of value because after a fire, the idea goes, the felled trees are wasted if they are not immediately harvested for their wood. The same idea is behind the harvesting of trees killed out west by the Pine Bark Beetle.

This idea is categorically untrue, however. Fallen trees and debris after a forest fire provide essential nutrients, groundcover, animal shelter, and growing substrate for a forest in recovery. The wood from a fallen tree provides a structure for the returning forest to build on. Animals make homes within it, and these may be important for seed spreading or ground tilling. Mushrooms and fungi may colonize the log, adding vegetal depth to an area that may have lost a

lot of structure from burning. Over time, the log will break down, adding nutrients back to the soil. Studies have consistently proven that fallen logs are vital to ecosystem recovery post-fire. And yet, the narrative continues that if these trees aren't harvested, the value of the wood will be lost forever. If only humans considered the value to the ecosystem the way we do our bottom lines.

Another argument made for removal of fallen trees after a fire is that it reduces fire load for future potential fires. However, an area that has experienced a recent fire is extremely unlikely to experience another in the immediate future. The load has already been burned. What does accelerate the likelihood of fire is fire suppression which allows understory growth to overburden the forest, creating a backlog of biomass ready to burn. Sustainable timber harvesting would right this situation. Selectively harvesting from a forest area clears space where larger trees can fill in the gap. These larger trees are not only much more fire resistant than the groundcover that takes over in a crowded forest, but they create shade on the ground, increasing the soil's water capacity, making large-scale devastating fires less likely in the future.

I stayed in Oregon for a decade nurturing my relationships with people and connection to the land. Without this time out West, I don't know where my life would be now. I doubt I'd be as grounded or as happy. When I was called to teach, I moved back to Florida to stay with my parents while I went back to school. On the drive home, my head felt clear and my heart full. I didn't dread crossing the state boundary again. Instead, I welcomed it. And my positive approach bred positive outcomes. I finished a degree, met my husband, got my first house, and conceived my son. When we left for the Blue Ridge Mountains to raise our son, I no longer felt like I was fleeing. Instead, I felt like I was following the path to my next home. Once I moved to North Carolina the log trucks were back in view, but they no longer made me cry.

## Immigrants/Emigrants

There's a reservoir just outside Ashland, Oregon off Old Highway 99 called Emigrant Lake. If you were to stay on the road, you'd head up into the mountains that make the watershed for the Rogue Valley, the large dip of earth that houses the beautiful town of Ashland, as well as the various creeks and rivers that feed the dry region's water needs. When I moved to Ashland in 2005, Emigrant Lake was one of the first places I explored. Exiled from Florida, attempting to escape a past that had caught up to me, something about the name drew me to its trapped waters. I was an *immigrant*, but here was an *emigrant*.

The difference in the names is more nuisance than anything really. Both groups have left a homeland. *Emigrants* are in the act of leaving, while *immigrants* have arrived. I felt the dichotomy between the two terms as I explored the county park that surrounded the lake. It felt lovely and peaceful to me, a serene-ness that I was unaccustomed to experiencing on the streets of Tampa. But that peace hid a secret in 2005. Today, in 2022, that secret has been exposed.

Emigrant Lake was created in 1924 when the valley that used to be there was dammed to create flood control and a reservoir for the growing city of Ashland. The project displaced many homesteaders and covered over the old Klamath Junction Road leading further into the mountains and the watershed, an area of extreme water rights contention today. Businesses and homes were bought out by the government to make way for the giant manmade lake.

It's strange what your eyes can't see even if it's right in front of you. To my 19-year-old mind, the lake was a natural escape from the confines of suburban living. A place that nature had created just as it intended, full of endemic plants and animals that had been living on its shores

for millennia. But that's not really the case at all. After learning a bit about the history of the region other things became more apparent.

For one, there's a road that runs right through the lake. This is the aforementioned Klamath Junction, a road which served as an intersection between the mountains. An accompanying store and gas station were bulldozed to create the reservoir. My dog, Kayla, used to dig up chunks of rock from the lakebed. I studied them marveling at the diversity of the layering and the sediments that made them up, wondering what long ago mountain they originated from. I soon realized it was no rock, but concrete chunks broken off old Klamath Junction Road, eroded by the gently lapping waves. You can walk on the road some ways down the steep lake slopes until it disappears straight into the water. Squint out past the sun glinting from the tepid water and you can see the road emerge on the other side.

Things are buried here too. Dig deep enough, trash from another century resurfaces. Tin cans, tire rims, old glass bottles. Dig deeper still, graves of past immigrants, or emigrants, may be found. The marked graveyard was moved out of the flood zone before the project was completed, but there are centuries of human activity on this land. Before the immigrant settlers that were displaced by the dam project, another group of Indigenous emigrants was pushed out by westward expansion.

One of the things I loved most about moving out West was the lure of gold. I've always been somewhat of a rockhound. I used to dig in the backyard looking for treasures. I get it from my dad. He has boxes full of gems, fossils, and arrowheads, scavenged as Ocala, Florida was razed to clear way for strip malls and suburbs in the 60's. When I moved to Oregon, he sent me a gold pan in the mail. My brother and I liked to go to some of the nearby creek beds to pan and

sift the sediments hoping to strike it rich. We never did, but we found a lot of interesting rocks, some even more exciting than old, eroded concrete from a long-submerged road.

Early white settlers got a little luckier than we did though, finding gold all over the state. Jacksonville, Oregon, just up a winding mountain road from Ashland, was one of the hot spots. When the immigrants arrived here, Native people had been on the land for hundreds of years. Three different Indigenous cultures inhabited the valley and surrounding mountains – the Shasta, Takelma, and Athabaskans. All were eventually forced to resettle, to emigrate, away from their homelands, where the gold and fertile grounds were, into reservations across Oregon.

Emigrants were everywhere it seemed. The more I learned about the history of the region, the less joy I started to find in my time at Emigrant Lake. Everywhere I looked I could see remnants of the past, washed over by what was surely thought to be progress when the dam was built. Across 1920s America dams were in vogue and stayed that way for a long time. They provided endless sources of energy, water, recreation, flood, and erosion control, went the thinking. But what we didn't realize we were doing with these dams was stopping up the flow of natural systems. Water which had poured from mountains for thousands or even millions of years, flowing to the sea, became plugged and stagnant. Animals had trouble finding the waterways of their collective memories, some dying out completely, others left to the brink of extinction. The once rich land became more barren, but the march was slow. When timeframes move at an earthly pace, humans can't see what is happening right before their eyes. And so, the destruction continues along until it is too late. Emigrants are created.

When I lived in Ashland, people I encountered at the lake would often tell me this was the lowest they had ever seen it. Yet the water must flow. We need it for crops and irrigation, toilets and showers, lush green lawns and city parks. So, the draining continues. Each year that

passes, the locals say the same, “This year is the worst.” But the next year their boats stop floating, their fishing lines come up empty, the water trickles into their fields even slower. “Even worse than last year,” they say. This year, my brother tells me the lakebed went completely dry. “Not even a drop here,” he says in a text with an accompanying picture of a barren wasteland that resembles a desert more than the lush lake park I once knew. “You can even walk across that old road.”

The people and animals that are displaced are more obvious than other beings. The plants are slower to show their wear, slower to succumb to the lack of water. They have spent millions of years learning how to adapt without moving. But as water left the streams and creeks in the watershed, the plants began changing and dying. Large trees went first, succumbing to disease and pests, unable to engage the strength to fight. When they died, more understory plants moved in. Their fast-growing bodies trying to outpace the drought. In years of plenty, they grew enormous, taking over the forest floor. When droughts hit, they died back, leaving behind their skeletal remains waiting for a spark to take them. Emigrants that never quite made it out.

Southern Oregon is known for rogue lightning strikes. There aren't too many thunderstorms, something I truly missed coming from Florida. But you are warned as a newcomer to be alert when hiking mountains. The weather may be clear and sunny, but a sudden lightning strike may hit, igniting the land around you. And that is what has been happening. The dry brush that has built up over centuries of dying forests and biomass accumulation sits in wait. It only takes one strike, one careless cigarette thrown from the window, one campfire burning a little too brightly to spark it up. Whole swaths of forest burn. Whole ecosystems change. What took thousands of years to build, takes only a year to destroy.

Are they emigrants or immigrants, the trees? Is there anywhere left for them to go?

BELOW GROUND

*I have watched you for a thousand years*

*Stumbling, tumbling, and falling*

*Picking yourselves up and dusting off*

*You were never satisfied in the dirt*

*Now you come at me*

*Chainsaw in hand and rather than beg*

*I stand my ground*

*I know I will live on*

*Under the soil, in the air, within the flow of a stream*

*My seed was planted long ago*

## “Fragmented Bodies of Memory”

In the essay collection *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, edited by Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton, several of the text’s female authors relate not only their pasts, but also their families’ and cultures’ pasts, to the essays they write. The editors spotlight how time, particularly familial, generational time, is portrayed in the many essays of the book. Using basketry as the narrative structure for the text, the editors demonstrate that for baskets to take shape, many generations must work the land, continuously shaping the materials to the form best fitted to the basket’s end use. In the same way many generations have molded the stories of trauma and survival that come out of *Shapes*.

Sasha LaPointe’s “Fairy Tales, Trauma, Writing into Dissociation,” is a clear example of her family’s past dictating her present. In her essay, LaPointe’s great-grandmother and aunt’s writing on trauma echoes back to her during dissociative sequences as she recalls her own sexual abuse and survival. For LaPointe, her authorial interests as “an abuse survivor, as a woman writing about trauma, as a girl who grew up listening to her tribe’s legends and lessons, are the narratives that are using fairy tales, fables, and mythology to address trauma” (68). Sasha LaPointe’s narrative in the style of a fable gives a steady example of time as a non-linear concept. By tying her own trauma and resulting dissociation, in the form of “a metaphor for what occurs in many survivors during the experience of trauma” (68), to similar experiences her great-grandmother and aunt had, LaPointe addresses her own form of bodily colonization through sexual assault, in the way her family members also have, by “making sense of it in words . . . through the story . . . absorbing a language around trauma that allows . . . access [to] those fragile moments that sometimes seem too frightening to explore” (72-73). LaPointe plays with the

reader's sense of time, using generational timescales that allow for the processing of the trauma resulting from abuse, ultimately, creating a connection between the storyteller and reader which allows a new association to form through art.

For LaPointe, dissociation takes the form of little boats she imagined on the walls at the age of ten, manifested during her first time at the hands of her abuser: "The boats came from some place in my mind and surfaced as a distraction, a meditation of sorts...For a long time the boats were all I could remember from that night" (69). As a child, not having the words or mental capacity to wrap her mind around the abuse as it took place, her brain instead focused on the boats to take the place of words. As an adult, LaPointe recalls the boats as a way to further her ability to recount the story. She says of the boats, "There are moments in my memoir where I am unable to put into words the details of my abuse. The boats lend themselves to me for the dissociation they represent...it is safer and more effective for me to use the boats" (69). In this way, LaPointe is still able to be true to her experience, to recount the story of her abuse, but at the same time find a way to protect herself against its true weight. The boats can stand in where needed to reveal what she is unable or unwilling to fully share with her audience. This metaphor creates an authentic experience, nonetheless, through which the reader understands the substitution of the boats and can experience LaPointe's trauma from a place of safety as well.

In the same essay collection, Toni Jensen's "Women in the Fracklands: On Water, Land, Bodies, and Standing Rock" seamlessly blends the author's own experiences with traumatic encounters with men to those of Native women who have gone missing or been sex trafficked in the area. Jensen weaves her own story with the missing women's as she researches the missing and exploited and participates in a tracking website trying to identify possible locations of the vanished women. On one research trip where a group of men seemingly target Jensen for

abduction, she seeks safety at a nearby hotel waiting for them to leave, only to realize it is the site where many of the Native trafficked women have been kept, remarking “you’ve learned to wait. Because it is very, very difficult to sleep in a hotel room once you learn a woman’s gone missing from it” (202).

Jensen also recounts her relationship with her father, who created an initial sense of trauma in her from a young age, but who also taught her how to be safe on her own should strange men approach. It is through her father’s teachings that she escapes the potential abductors in the story’s beginning, but it is also her father’s actions that have contributed to Jensen’s early mistrust of men. She weaves the storyline of her own father with that of the Indigenous protestors at Standing Rock who attempted to fight back against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The two stories blend as Jensen recounts her connection to water while amidst the protestors:

Because you can see this future upriver or down. Because everywhere is upriver or down.  
Because your first memory of water is of your father working to drown your mother.  
Because you are four or five and need to use the bathroom...It seems crucial for you not to wet your pants. It seems crucial to hold the pieces of yourself together. If you make a mess on the carpet, if your father doesn’t kill your mother, then she will have to clean the carpet. (205)

At the end of her piece, Jensen finds herself at the Standing Rock protests, where women take on the role of water protectors. At night, as she participates in a pow-wow with the other women, she reaches a level of catharsis that unites the stories. The women of the pow-wow create a community informed by their pasts, by their traumas, and by their protective associations where they “move their arms in motions that do more than mimic water, that conjure it. Their voices

calm and strong, and they move through the gathering quiet, like something that will hold”  
(Jensen 209). It is through these associations that arise from trauma, that abuse survivors may  
begin to put words to their acts, allowing a type of healing to form in the details of the writing.

## Coral Reefs

I am six.

My mom and my dad have just finalized their divorce. We live with my mom's new boyfriend, Jay.

I am sick. Vomiting.

My mom leaves the house with my younger brother to go pick up medicine for me. I just threw up the last of what we had on hand.

I watch on the screen as jellyfish float in the waves, propelled only by the currents running through the coral reefs, created by the warm shallow waters that meet with the deep cold waters at the reef's edge. Bright fish dart through the equally colorful corals. It is a time when nature documentaries about coral reefs still show the beauty and the magic of the reef, not the decaying bleached corals with their grey fish and piles of garbage littering the floor that the producers can no longer leave out of the films today.

A turtle passes by. Her back is covered in a thick leather shell and on top of it, barnacles have attached. A mobile home. The barnacles will travel thousands of miles in their lifetimes. Generations of their kin will remain on the shell, building on top of their grandmothers' and mothers' backs, eventually releasing their own spawn into the world. Some will stay put upon the shell and others will float on to find new homes. To find new lives. The turtle barely knows an entire ecosystem exists on her back. Yet she carries it with ease, gracefully flying above the corals.

My head is in Jay's lap. He is stroking me. Telling me everything is going to be okay. I am so sick I can't think straight. I am delirious. But something doesn't feel right. Something

hasn't felt right about this moment my entire life. Why can't I remember my body? Why is the only image I can conjure one of anemones attached to the rocky coral outcroppings with their thick, tongue-like feet? A plethora of pink-tipped arms waving in the sea, grabbing onto whatever particles happen to float by. A bright orange clownfish darting from polyp to polyp, unfazed by the poison released by its touch.

My mom has always loved coral reefs. As an artist, working in mostly large-form hyper-realistic acrylic paintings, her fixation on coral reefs would become obvious to me later in childhood, our walls filled with colorful images of turtles, trigger fish, and crabs.

While we live with Jay, she doesn't paint.

Jay whispers something to me. I can't quite hear it. But I know I'm not supposed to tell my mom.

Now a shark. A lot of sharks. Black tipped, schooling in the deeper drop off at night. The music changes. It becomes menacing. Something is happening, but my brain can't remember. Instead, the sharks swarm. The narrator tells us "Anything that moves will be devoured." An octopus darts from its hideout. The sharks swim fast towards it, sand flying up to block my view. When the dust clears, the octopus has hidden in another hole. Safe for now.

A parrotfish nearby is not so lucky. "Parrotfish sleep in a cocoon-like sac made of mucus they spit out," the narrator says. It makes me sick to watch because it looks like vomit, and I've seen enough of that tonight. But the sac fills with water and the parrotfish floats inside. The current from the sharks lunging after the octopus pushes the parrotfish's sac just a little out of its hiding spot. But it's enough. Unaware and safe in its cocoon, the parrotfish sleeps. The sharks pounce. The sand flies up again. Tails whip. Something is happening. When the sand settles again, this time tiny glittering flakes of parrotfish scales sink with it to the ocean bottom,

catching the light of the underwater camera crew. How do they stay safe with all the sharks, I wonder?

The memory of this night, of this coral reef documentary, of laying in Jay's lap, sits in my brain. At nearly 40, I can remember it in full detail still. The individual animals' stories on the screen. The smell of the grape medicine that I had just thrown up still fresh on my lips. I remember staring up at the potted spider plants in the second story window, looking at their trellising babies hanging low from the mother plant, reaching out, trying to touch soil. I remember the large potted palm tree that sat by the window of the front door, the only part of the house that got enough sun for it to survive. I loved to run my fingers along its silky fronds when I went in or out.

I remember the walls painted a sickly color of pink. A color the new owners undoubtedly repainted as soon as they got the keys when Jay sold the house after we moved out. After my mom left him, packing our bags in the night and heading to my grandfather's house. I remember the stain on the carpet by the TV, where my brother had spilled a bowl of soup but didn't tell anyone so the gloppy liquid embedded itself into the carpet and when my mom finally did find it a few days later, no amount of scrubbing could remove what had been done.

What I don't remember in the moment is myself. Or more accurately, my body. I don't remember Jay's body either. Except his hand. Held firmly to my shoulder. Sometimes stroking, mostly resting. My head in his lap because laying down made the vomiting just a bit better. I don't remember how I felt, how I physically felt in the moment. It was almost as if my body no longer existed. It was almost as if I was floating in that sea with all the brightly colored creatures.

A storm moves in. A large hurricane, shown from above at first, the ominous eye wall circles with dark clouds. The camera zooms down under the water now. Fish hide in whatever

crevices they can find. Larger animals have left for calmer waters. The turtles and sharks are gone. The waves churn and roil against the corals. Large chunks of reef break off under the crushing weight of the water. The narrator tells the audience that the chunks that break off won't all be lost. Some will go on to establish new reefs. Others will open patches in the structure where new corals can grow, reaching for the underwater light.

I can't feel my body. The narrator's words echo.

Some pieces will survive.

Some pieces will survive.

## Fanning the Flames

Our world is on fire. Burning. This is nothing new. Heat and flames created life, and in many ways, sustain it still. But there's nothing natural about the large-scale fires that ravage our globe today. Rather, they are a direct result of colonization, exploitation, and the unnatural management of the ecological landscape. These fires are speaking to us, but we can no longer hear them. Most of us have lost the ability to communicate with the earth.

For decades now, forest fires across the globe have been increasing in size. 2020 marked the most severe global fire season on record. Historically, fires have always been a part of the ecosystem. Today, they're almost never naturally occurring. Instead, the large-scale fires ravaging our landscape can be caused by all sorts of man-made activities, from power lines to camping to driving to smoking to purposeful arson even.

Sometimes, someone just wants to watch it all burn.

\*\*\*

*“Testing, 1-2, 1-2. Begin recording. The date is February 18, 2003. This is detective XXXX of Monroe County, Florida. I am here with Stephanie Mills to record her statement. Miss, you know your mom doesn't have to be here, right? You're 18.”*

*“I know, detective. But she's not my mom. She's just my stepmom.”*

*“Well either way, you can do this alone. There might be some things you don't want her to hear.”*

*“I don't want to be alone. She can stay.”*

\*\*\*

In the United States, and across the globe in fire-prone regions, these fires had been managed for thousands of years by Indigenous cultures who maintained a close connection to the land. Upon arriving in America, white, European settlers exploited these Native people, as well as the native land.

Rather than working with Indigenous cultures to learn about the land they had lived on successfully for thousands of years, the colonizers forced the people from their land, just as they would also force fire from the land in the coming centuries. Native knowledge of the land was suppressed in the name of progress.

But what the settlers didn't realize was that the vast prairies and open forests of the West, with their minimal understory and towering ancient trees, were not unmanaged, virgin landscapes. Rather, they had been carefully curated by their previous stewards through millennia of meticulous care. By burning land and brush in a controlled and methodical manner, Native Americans created the landscape of the West. They cleared out the brush, which today, has re-accumulated to fuel the largest fires on record. They encouraged plant growth through a regenerative process that worked with the landscape, rather than against it.

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*“Before we start, I need to take your clothes for evidence. You brought those right?”*

*“I did. I put them in a paper bag like you asked.”*

\*\*\*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, controlled burning by Indigenous people was outlawed across the Western states, replaced with the U.S. government's version of fire suppression. Rather than working with the natural element of fire, allowing it to burn low and slow in a natural pattern, ridding the landscape of the woody build-up as it moves, fire suppression put out all fires with

impunity. This created a backlog of unburned materials left in wait. Now, when fire moves through these areas with so much biomass accumulation, it creates massive, uncontrollable fires that wipe out everything in their paths.

Suppression has always been a tool of the oppressor.

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*“Have you been to the hospital? Have they done a kit?”*

*“No. They won’t find anything. He’s not an idiot.”*

\*\*\*

From 2005-2012, I lived in Ashland, Oregon during and after college. I moved from Florida after a traumatic experience; I needed a fresh start. Out West, fires were a regular part of our lives. Just like margaritas, hikes, and days spent lakeside, fire season was a normal part of each summer. The smoke would fill the air in quantities ranging from “I can still ride my bike to work” to “I need to wear a bandana over my mouth and nose even in my closed-up house.” I never saw them up close, but heard of fires past, and knew somewhere, just over the rolling hills, they burned. The fires never represented a real threat in my life, just a nuisance.

\*\*\*

*“Ok, well we’re going to start at the beginning. Were you drinking?”*

*“Are you serious? I’m 18!”*

*“I know that miss, but I still have to ask.”*

*“How is that important? How is anything I did important?”*

*“It’s just standard questions ma’am.”*

*“No. I wasn’t drinking. And no, before you ask, I wasn’t on drugs either. I was sleeping.”*

\*\*\*

On September 8, 2020, the fires became real for me. Sitting in a graduate class in Western North Carolina, my new home state, I got a text from my brother who still called Oregon home. A fire had just started behind his house in Ashland. He and his wife were being evacuated. He'd let me know when they were safe, he said. "Oh, it'll be fine. You live by the greenway. They would never let that burn," I texted back.

Hours went by before I heard from him again. They had been evacuated three times. Every shelter they sought was evacuated as the fire swept along the highway, across miles, and through three towns. It burned everything in its path. Once he was finally safe with extended family four towns over, my brother and I stayed up all night together, talking on the phone, each monitoring various police scanner livestreams from different YouTube accounts.

I was thousands of miles away, but a fire had never felt so close before.

\*\*\*

*"Had the two of you ever had a relationship of this nature before?"*

*"Again, why does this matter?"*

*"Again, miss, it's just procedure. We ask this to everyone."*

*"No. We hadn't. I was dating his friend, but we broke up a month ago. I only knew Brandon casually through my ex."*

\*\*\*

When all was said and done, the Alameda Fire, as it was called, destroyed nearly 3,000 homes and businesses, killed three people, and nearly leveled the neighboring towns of Phoenix and Talent, Oregon as it swept through with lightning speed, traveling on the 40 mph winds that carried it nine miles along the most populated road in Jackson County. My brother's house, at ground zero on Alameda Drive was spared. Even though the fire originated only feet from his

home, the fast winds tore it north so quickly it didn't have a chance to spread south to his home. Police investigators interviewing him about any suspicious activity he might have seen, later told him they suspected multiple arsonists. A charred body was found in the BMX park just behind my brother's home.

\*\*\*

*"What was the nature of your stay at Brandon's house?"*

*"My mom kicked me out of my house. He offered. I accepted. I was sick of sleeping in my car in the Publix parking lot."*

*"And where did you sleep at his house? Did you have your own room?"*

*"No, it's a three-bedroom trailer with six people already living there. I slept in a Lazy Boy in his room."*

*"Where was the Lazy Boy in relation to the bed?"*

*"It was beside the bed. Touching. The room is tiny."*

\*\*\*

Many of the friends I made in my decade out West were not spared though. My friends, sisters Misty and Crystal, along with their entire extended family, all lived in the same mobile home park that burned to the ground. Other friends lost houses and businesses they had built from the ground up. The Latinx migrant community, so heavily relied on for the region's agriculture, lost more than most, as the fire tore mainly through lower income areas. Housing across the state dried up and many people were forced to leave the homes and towns they had known their entire lives. Suppression had struck again, displacing entire communities of people along the way, just as it always seems to do.

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*“Can you tell us in your own words what happened?”*

*“What does that mean, ‘in your own words?’ Who else is going to tell you this story?”*

*“We’ll be interviewing Brandon as well.”*

*“Well, he isn’t going to tell you anything. He’ll deny the whole thing.”*

*“That’s part of our investigation miss. We must get the other party’s side.”*

*“Maybe I made a mistake coming here. There is no other side. I’m telling you facts.”*

*“Ok miss, calm down. Would you like a water? Or a soda? I’ve got Sprite.*

*“Don’t tell me to calm down. Yeah, give me a Sprite.”*

\*\*\*

Misty had lost everything in a fire only years before. This one through fault of her own, a candle left burning when she went to sleep. Still devastating, nonetheless. After the Alameda fire she received a small FEMA payout but had no fire insurance on her home - it’s prohibitively expensive out West. She started a GoFundMe to build her life back from square one. Again. Some friends donated an RV, and she took off. The fire allowed her to live a lifestyle she had only dreamed of, roaming the country in an RV and living off the land. A nomad amongst the interstate veins traversing the continent. Forced to adapt to a total loss. She got a dog, shaved her head, and began anew.

Misty and I met at Southern Oregon University in Ashland, a small liberal arts college of about 3,000 with two specializations; theatre arts (Ashland is world-renowned for its Shakespeare Festival each summer) and environmental studies. Seated in the foothills of the Cascade mountains, the surrounding ecology is ripe for study due to its unique influence from the surrounding landscapes – coastal mountain ranges on one side and dry, desert steppes on the

other. Misty and I studied the landscape together as environmental science majors. We were different years in the program though, and only ever took one class together: Fire Ecology.

The first half of Fire Ecology taught us about the history of fire on the Western landscape. We learned about Native American's historic land management techniques. We learned about the fire suppression strategies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century enacted by the U.S. Forest Service, and the destruction they had caused. We learned about Smokey the Bear, a propaganda tool used to sell the unnatural approach to forest management to an entire generation. I hated the first half of the class and thought about withdrawing. It felt really depressing to hear how badly my ancestors had fucked up this land and its people.

\*\*\*

*“Let’s start again from the beginning. What happened?”*

*“I was asleep. And when I woke up, he was getting off me. I wasn’t wearing my pants or underwear anymore. I think they were on the floor.”*

*“But what happened in between?”*

*“I don’t remember.”*

*“Miss, how are we supposed to investigate if we don’t have a story?”*

*“I don’t know, isn’t that your job to figure out? I was asleep.”*

\*\*\*

In the second half of Fire Ecology, my mind was changed. I engaged with the class in a new way as we learned about the other side of fire. The side of fire humans forget about because of the timescales involved. The side of fire not sensational enough to make the evening news - fire’s regenerative qualities. You see, the landscape needs fire. Especially in the West. Many

plants are dependent on fire for reproduction. Without going through the flames, their species will die. Without fire, their legacy will be wiped clean.

Plants have developed multiple approaches to handling fire. Because they cannot run away, they have adapted to live with the fire. Some, like the giant Sequoia or hearty aloe, weather the blaze with thick insulated leaves and bark and may even have substances in their tissue that act as fire retardant. They know that they can't escape, so they accept what is happening to them and try to make it through to the other side.

Other plants, like the Eucalyptus trees of Australia, hide out. They allow the fire to take the part of them you can see, but they keep a secret part of themselves hidden away underground, somewhere the fire can't touch. After the threat is gone, they resprout from that hidden part, creating a new life over the top of the old one. The fire can only take so much from them.

Many trees in fire prone areas, such as the Ponderosa Pine, have a unique strategy of outgrowing the flames. They push all their vital tissues and materials towards the crown, keeping their important parts out of the reach of the heat, growing as tall as they can. They sacrifice the lower halves of their bodies to protect the delicate parts they keep held above the threat.

Plants that outlast the flames are interesting for sure. But for me, it's the plants that *use* the fire that fueled my curiosity. These are the plants that welcome the flames knowing they will come out the other side anew. These are the plants that account for hardship in their reproductive strategy. These are the plants who seemingly know that there will come a day when it will all burn, and not only will they be ready for it, but they will come out stronger because of it.

\*\*\*

*"What else can you tell us?"*

*"I was having a dream. In my dream I was screaming."*

*“Are you sure that was a dream?”*

*“No. I’m not sure of anything.”*

*“This is going to be difficult. Did you ever say no? Did you ever tell him to stop?”*

*“I was asleep – “*

*“But surely, miss you knew what was happening. Did you tell him to stop?”*

*“Are you serious? You’re going to tell me what happened? You think I’m lying?”*

*“It’s not that. It just seems unlikely you stayed asleep the whole time.”*

*“Yeah, I told him to stop. I screamed NO. I screamed STOP! But he couldn’t hear me because I was dreaming.”*

\*\*\*

Some plants, like the Grass Tree of Australia, go through what is called “prolific flowering” after a fire. They use the extra nutrients in the fertile, scorched soil to send out masses of flowers that would be too resource intensive to produce under normal conditions. The burned earth literally nourishes the next generation. And so, they await the flames.

Others, like the Fire Lily, cannot flower without fire. They are dependent on the heat of fire to awaken in their genes the urge to procreate. They waste no time either. As soon as a fire passes through, the plant hidden underground waiting begins to produce flowers, a usually lengthy process. In the case of the Fire Lily, a plant can go from zero to many flowers in just over a week. The fire rouses the plants spirit, and so they too anticipate the burn.

\*\*\*

*“What about afterwards, what did you do?”*

*“I pretended I was still asleep.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Because he’s 6’3” and like 300 pounds and I had just watched him beat the living shit out of a kid at school for looking at him the wrong way a couple days before. I’m pretty sure that kid wound up in the hospital. What do you think he would’ve done to me?”*

\*\*\*

One fire adaptation stuck out to me, though, above all the rest – the fire-adapted seed. In this case, a plant will produce cones or fruits that can only open to release their seeds when activated by the heat of fire. Lodgepole Pine’s cones can sit in wait for years and years, buried under the soil or attached to the tree, biding their time for the opportunity to grow. Future generations are left hanging dormant from the parent tree until the flames give them their freedom to spring forth.

\*\*\*

*“Stephanie? This is Detective XXXXX calling from the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office. We’ve got some good news and some bad news.”*

*“Great. What’s the bad news?”*

*“Why don’t I start with the good news?”*

*“No. I want the bad news first.”*

*“OK. Well, the prosecutor has decided that there is not enough evidence to proceed. Brandon told us your relations were consensual. It’s a case of he said, she said now. Unfortunately, that’s just not enough to go off. We are closing the case.”*

*“Fuck you, Detective XXXXX. Like seriously, FUUUUUCKKKK YOOUUUUU!”*

\*\*\*

These are plants that evolved with the flame. They do not fight the fire; there is no use. Instead, they work with it to achieve a common goal. Fire adapted seeds have another advantage

too. After the fire comes through, it clears the way, literally, as all other competing plants are burned to the ground. The fire-activated seeds are the first to re-emerge, soaking in the unblocked sun and nutrient-rich soil with little to no competition. By learning to live with the fire, these plants have turned what for others may be catastrophic into a chance at new life. We humans can learn a lot from plants about handling our own damage. To live, to be reborn, we must apply a variety of adaptations to our lives to outlast the heat of trauma's flame.

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*"I'm sorry I hung up on you Detective. What's the good news?"*

*"Well, the good news is you can come back to pick your clothes up. Hopefully, you'll be able to put this behind you and move on."*

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As humanity's eyes seem to be reawakening to the power of plants, the fire is being allowed to return to the landscape as well. On the Westcoast now, partnerships are underway working with the displaced Native people as we try to heal our land. We are listening to the wisdom that has been won through thousands of years of collective ecological living. Managed fires have returned to burn the debris that has built up after so many years of suppression. And oppression. We need to deal with the past if we are ever going to witness a future rebirth. And just like the plants, we need to maintain our link to all the adaptations and approaches that can help us find our way through the flames.

That Fire Ecology class in Ashland set my life in a new direction. Afterwards, I changed my concentration to botany where I began studying plants in detail. I bought seeds and seedlings, fruit trees and house plants, and filled my life with a sedentary support system. When I eventually moved from Oregon back to Florida for grad school, I packed all I could in my four-

door sedan, made room for my dog and cat, and cleared a spot for my plants on the backseat. We had all been through so much together. If I was being uprooted from a life I had known back to a place where my trauma still lived in some form, my plants had to come with me too.

Today, my love of plants is quite well-known by any person in my life, especially my husband. My garden has taken over our backyard. And our front yard. And our side yard. Two mini greenhouses eat up the square footage on our screened porch. I use them to plant the next season's seeds before the cold has fully left the air. The seedlings must be tended carefully if they are to provide nourishment for us later. Our bedroom overflows with leafy tendrils, hanging down above the bed, reaching low to tickle our dreams. The dining room table and available counter space have an ever-shifting array of "rescue" plants that I am healing or seedlings on their last leg that I just can't let go. We are each other's caretakers.

In the same way they have for our scorched earth, plants have found a way to heal me too. There is no greater calming space for me than deep in my garden rows, dirty fingernails and muddy boots, stroking a tomato leaf so that my hand can harbor its smell for a few brief moments. I talk to the plants because they are my support. And because they listen. And they talk back in their own way. Each year, I know that the peony puts on a special show because she knows her flowers bring me such joy. The artichoke over does itself because I let some buds stay on to flower rather than eating their rich meat. The strawberries put out their best when my son picks with me because they too want to show him the power that plants can have over our souls, if only we choose to listen to them. And through this slow regrowth, I have followed the plants on my way through the flames.

## How to Eat Mushrooms

*“The psychedelic effects of some plants and fungi have been known and deliberately exploited by humans for thousands of years. Fungi, particularly mushrooms, are the principal source of naturally occurring psychedelics. The mushroom extract, psilocybin has historically been used as a psychedelic agent for religious and spiritual ceremonies, as well as a therapeutic option for neuropsychiatric conditions” (Lowe et al).*

### Directions:

1. You must be 24.
2. Go back to step one.

I know you ignored that step, but it’s crucial. This is the exact right age to try mushrooms for the first time. You need to be old enough that you have lived some. You need to have felt joy and heartache and have an understanding of things beyond the realm of your control or even just an understanding that, indeed, there are things beyond your control even if you can’t explain it beyond that. You cannot yet have begun to turn jaded. If you have ever had the thought that nothing matters, then you must not proceed. Unfortunately, the window has passed for you. You must maintain an air of stubbornness, but also of hope, of endless opportunity. You must be 24.

3. Find something fun to do, but that doesn’t require a lot of physical energy.

A concert under the stars can be ideal. Jam bands are best because they combine the perfect mix of laid-back tunes and low energy vibes. If the year is 2009 and you happen to be in Southern Oregon, I’d recommend G-Love and the Special Sauce with guest Ben Harper. The song “Milk and Cereal” will hit just right. Trust me here.

4. Get a good group.

You don't have to know everyone, but make sure the leader is trustworthy. She should be someone experienced in eating mushrooms. Someone who knows how to control quantities for newbies. She should be someone who exudes a type of loving energy you always wished you could too. Someone who brings a smile to your face just because there is one on hers. Let her lead. Step back, even though it's hard for you. You are not in charge tonight. You are going with the flow. Allow the lack of control to wash over you.

5. Eat just enough but not too much.

Again, your leader will be crucial here. She knows what that means even if you do not. Allow her to give you the exact right amount. It's going to taste bad but there are strategies here. You can just muscle them down your throat in one quick swallow, that's probably what the experienced connoisseur would suggest. You could steep them in hot water with honey, then drink the brew and eat the remnants left at the bottom of the cup. Someone who drinks Yerba Mate would be an ideal candidate for this style. They are already used to things that taste like grass and dirt. You could put it on a cracker with cheese and pretend you are having an appetizer. You won't even be able to taste the mushrooms, the fancy sharp cheddar bought for the picnic-style concert will overpower any other flavors. This method is ideal for someone who has never tasted mushrooms before.

6. Wait.

There will be a period of time before the experience begins when you just have to wait in the moment. Use this time to connect to your friends. Use this time to meet the new people in the group so that you can call back to this connection when the mushrooms

do kick in. You want to create a link to each person you are with, however small. I wouldn't suggest drinking during this time, but if you do, wine or beer is preferred, stay away from the hard stuff. Complete any physical activities as well, such as finding the one bathroom at the concert venue, arranging blankets into a comfortable position, or tracking down another friend who just texted that she's at the same show.

7. Let the feeling wash over.

Eventually, you will realize that the mushrooms have started working. This may come on gradually or all at once. It's important to announce it though. Make sure your leader knows you are feeling it. Ask for any last-minute advice. You may be told something like, stay put for a bit and see what happens. This is good advice. You won't know it yet, but your whole body may melt away, leaving just a floating, autonomous brain, and walking will become something like a distant memory to you, legs having vanished and all.

8. Lay back and watch the stars.

They will become the most beautiful thing that you could have ever imagined. It doesn't matter how many times you have seen them in your life, they will never have looked like they do tonight. They never will again. Let the universe speak to you through them. Let it open your heart to the mysteries it holds. Mysteries you had never considered until this exact moment. Make sure a good friend, completely sober, lies there with you. Allow her to hold your hand when you start crying about how beautiful this world is. Allow her to quake with you as you laugh harder than you ever have, everything becoming clear at once and the joy in all of it washing over your body. The heaviness you have held for years, lifted in this moment, up towards the stars. Your body disintegrating,

leaving a lightness behind that you have never known. Allow your friend to hug you when you suddenly remember the terrible things happening too. The rising seas, the dying polar bears, the old-growth trees cut down, the bugs smashed on your windshield, the animals in factory farms, the bird you hit with your car at 16, your childhood cat buried under the rosebush in your father's front yard. Her embrace will pull you out of this dark space before it takes over. It's vital you do not allow yourself to sit in this darkness for too long. Return to the light. Let the lightness come back over you. In the background, your ears will pick up the band again. The music will carry your soul back into the positive space. Don't sit in the negative for too long, I can't emphasize this enough.

9. Try to find a way home.

If your DD took mushrooms too, you are now stuck at a concert venue in the mountains over an hour from your house. All you will be able to do at this point is laugh so it won't really matter. To pass time, you will grab onto those connections you made before the mushrooms kicked in. You will tell each person with you that you love them. At least three times. Mean it. They will do the same for you. Hug people, also stranded, that you meet. Embrace them for so long it will feel like your bodies have now become one. The passion that you will feel is greater than you have ever felt. There has never been such a golden love surrounding you. Sit on the ground feeling the grass under your hand as if it's the first time ever. Take your shoes off because the earth feels better on your bare feet. Don't plan on ever seeing those shoes again. Play with your friend's hair. Tell her it is silk spun from the finest material. Tell her she is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen. Mean it. Allow her to look into your eyes in a way no one ever has.

Allow her to see your soul. It's OK after all. You've been hiding it all this time and now you can't remember why. Pull it out from within. Allow everyone to see it. Wait for two hours as a good person you don't know drives over the mountains in the middle of the night to come get you and your friends. Laugh the whole way home. Tell this driver that you love her with all your heart. Mean it.

10. Get dropped off at home.

You still have a long journey left. It's only been a few hours since you ate the mushrooms, and they will be with you most of the night. So, get comfortable. Have your roommate, who also happens to be your brother, walk you to bed. Tell him you need a nest and when he questions the meaning of that request, repeat *A NEST* until he bunches up all the blankets and pillows on your bed and you crawl into the luxurious center. Allow him to bring you water because he has never seen someone on mushrooms and doesn't know what you need but he cares enough to try. The water will feel good on your throat. It hurts from laughing. Get ready.

11. Meet God.

This God can look different for every person. Maybe your God is a person or an entity, maybe it's an energetic life force, maybe it's a plant or an animal or you, maybe it's the entire universe. The form God takes is beside the point, the end result will be the same. You will be given information about life and its meaning that you did not possess before this moment. In some cases, maybe God comes to you as a 1980s giant golden light fixture above your hand-me-down king size bed. Maybe it talks to you in the most calming and reassuring voice. Maybe it tells you everything you have ever needed to know about how to make it through this life. Maybe it tells you that everything you fear

and everything that scares you has a reason, and those reasons reveal themselves to be absolutely perfect. Maybe it tells you that no matter what happens to the earth, life will continue in some form or another and that we are just living in a blip of time and a sliver in the geological history of the galaxy. Maybe it eases the anxieties that have become so heavy for you that you have sought professional help and pills for them just recently. Maybe it takes all your depression, bundles it up, and shoots it into space with the stars you communed with earlier in the evening. No matter what, you will think to yourself you should write down all the lessons you are learning because they feel so important and powerful you don't want to risk losing them again. But maybe your body still won't cooperate fully, so instead, you lay slumped in your nest, speaking to the ceiling all night. Maybe your brother comes in a few hours into the conversation and asks if you're OK and who you are talking to and leaves just a bit concerned when you point to the gold light fixture and say God.

## 12. Wake up.

At some point in the early morning hours, you will finally fall asleep. The dreams may contain more visions and lessons learned. But when you wake up in the late afternoon, the night will be a blur. You will reach for the notebook you just know you must have recorded everything in and find it is not there and there is no written account. Instead, you will be left with only fleeting memories of enlightenment. The feeling that for just a few hours, everything became clear. The worry and heartache and pain and questions were lifted for that time, and you felt whole. You were one with the universe and everything made sense. And even if you can't remember exactly what was said, you do remember that you are just a speck of energy floating in this great chasm. That your

energy meets and combines with other beings' energy daily and hourly and that if you take a moment to listen, you might even be able to hear them. So now when you take your dog for walks around the lake or through the woods, you keep your headphones out and music off. Instead, you simply listen. And you do hear things. The wind blows through the trees and whispers to you. The birds chatter overhead and you almost understand. The squirrel darting across the road stops briefly to chirp at you and for a moment, you get it. And there is this brief understanding that you can't explain because you didn't take notes, but it has helped. It has created a turning point in your life where you are no longer stuck inside yourself, but you now recognize that you are a part of something greater. You are a part of everything. And this helps you feel less alone at the time. And this helps you feel less alone still. You will hold onto this feeling for the rest of your life, catching brief glimpses of it as you watch a field of daisies sway in the breeze or your son running through an orange sunlit pasture to catch butterflies at dusk. And you will never eat mushrooms again because this first time was so all-consuming that you fear you will lose everything you have learned if you try to repeat it. Instead, you will hold onto this one experience, replaying it in your head for eternity, knowing that deep down, you know the secret. And just knowing you know is enough.

ABOVE GROUND

*We throw our seeds to the ground*

*Hoping the earth takes hold*

*Where our human minds could not*

*We wait*

*Winter to spring to summer*

*We watch*

*Until suddenly the green springs forth*

*Then the reds, yellows, purples, and pinks*

*The grays disappear behind the sea of color*

*Our seedlings emerge*

## “A Mother’s Work”

When motherhood was bestowed upon me, my life changed. I no longer inhabited a space of self-preservation. Instead, my life became about my genes, my progeny, my seed. The instinct to keep my offspring alive took over during my son’s infancy. When he became a baby, I tried hard to make sure the world welcomed him lovingly. Now that he is a toddler, I am a teacher. I show him how to live on this planet, to be one with nature, and to let it guide his actions. Within me, an instinct arose that I did not know was there. The connection between motherhood, nay parenthood, and the natural world is intimate and guttural. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes of this union between one realm and the other with an eye to the relationships that help join the two.

*Braiding Sweetgrass* begins with the story of “Skywoman Falling,” recounting the Great Lakes peoples’ “Original Instructions,” which teach that we are all star people, connected through a “constellation of teachings” (Kimmerer 7). “Skywoman Falling” is a teaching tale, passing down Indigenous knowledge of how to live on the land peacefully and sustainably. In “Skywoman Falling” Kimmerer argues that it is “not just the land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to the land” (9). She starts *Braiding Sweetgrass* with this story because it offers an example of a woman who teaches her kin by example. Through plants, nurturing, and growth Skywoman heals Turtle Island. With plants, Kimmerer states, Skywoman “was leaving us teachers. The plants can tell us her story; we need to learn to listen” (10). “Skywoman” urges us to look at our place in the great system of life, to acknowledge our part, and to listen to those who have come before us, for they have wisdom to share, whether they be plant or animal. Skywoman is the first mother in many Great Lakes Indigenous cultures, and

Kimmerer uses her teachings to pass down knowledge through the rest of her essays to her readers.

In her essay, “A Mother’s Work,” Kimmerer reminds us that it is through the act of caring for another that humans build their relationship with nature, solidifying the links between the two worlds. In her case these relationships form with both her daughters as they age and move away from home as well as the eutrophicated pond she rehabilitates during these years. By caring for another, human or other, Kimmerer comes to realize that she is caring for an entire community as “Everybody lives downstream” (97). All actions are interconnected. The act of mothering creates the ties that bind, as “A good mother...[knows] her work doesn’t end until she creates a home where all of life’s beings can flourish. There are grandchildren to nurture, and frog children, nestlings, goslings, seedlings, and spores” (97). A mother holds her knowledge deep, dispensing of it to future generations when the time becomes right.

A mother’s work remains a constant theme throughout Kimmerer’s text, with each essay building upon the next, joining the fabric of motherhood and teaching to the world she observes and interacts with around her. The second section of the book, “Tending Sweetgrass” houses stories that establish the importance of recognizing the ties to the natural world that are created by parenthood. “Maple Sugar Moon” shows us how patience with the earth and ourselves allows us to create tradition with our children, but also to thank the Earth Mother for her provisions, perfectly timed for our needs and her own, and that everything is cyclical, circling back on itself in a flawless feedback loop. Kimmerer states of the maple trees from which she harvests sap, “And so the roots, which fed the buds, are now fed in return by the leaves all summer long... The syrup we pour over pancakes on winter morning is summer sunshine flowing in golden streams to pool on our plates” (69).

The idea of succession, of one thing feeding another, comes up again in her story “Witch Hazel” in which Kimmerer and her daughters must deal with the oncoming death of their adopted grandmother, a woman who harbors the knowledge of plants and spends time revealing their secrets to the family before her passing. It is in this same way that knowledge of the natural world has been passed for time immemorial, one generation teaching the next to continue the growth. And it is in this same way that the natural world too communicates its understanding to its offspring. It is only by stopping to listen to these stories, from our mothers, from our earth, that we can hear all that the natural world offers to us. Their wisdom guides us through the hardships that will come. As Kimmerer states of her relationship with her adoptive grandmother Hazel, she is a woman with her “feet planted deep in the earth” (75). Both women, taking cues from the natural world around them, create connections where none were before, “[learning] well from the plants they both loved – they made a balm for loneliness together, a strengthening tea for the pain of longing” (81), a bond formed between mother and child, between teacher and student, between speaker and listener. It is this bond that we hold onto during our brief time on the earth. It is this bond, that should the time come, guides our choices as mothers, and parents, as we harvest the knowledge we will pass on to our offspring.

## Guerilla

My path to becoming a guerilla wasn't sudden. I didn't even know the term existed at the time. What I did know was that I was drawn to plants. I filled my bedroom windows with cuttings and cast offs given to me by friends who proclaimed they killed everything. In my hands though they flourished, overtaking my bedroom. I moved them into my brother's room where his window quickly became full. Outside, I planted in whatever I could find, old pots, pans, Tupperware, and other container-like castoffs. Soon the front of my apartment was nearly hidden from view, as the plants overflowed into the courtyard. I needed to find space to branch out, literally.

My tangle with green guerilla warfare began at my tiny apartment complex in Ashland, Oregon. When I moved in, I thought the place was cute enough. Little garden apartments faced each other across a small courtyard I shared with my twelve neighbors. Trees dotted the concrete, providing shade and moving shadows that I tracked across my bedroom ceiling as the sun shifted across the sky. But the concrete was marred with ugly patches. Chunks missing with raw soil dug out told me of a past where flowers had once been rooted. In the parking lot, a large 12 by 12-foot section was missing from the concrete pad. Nestled in a back corner next to the community garbage cans, it had become a de facto dumping ground for anything deemed too big or awkward to place in the trash. An old tire, a metal bedframe, parts of a recliner straight from the 80s, large scraps of plastic and metal, and tons of kitchen waste filled the soil.

One day, while walking my garbage to the dumpster, my eyes set on the large soil patch in the corner of the parking lot. What if I converted it into a space to plant? It was clear no one was using it or cared about it in the least. I decided to give it a try and see what happened. My way has always been to ask for forgiveness rather than permission, so later that day I set out

clearing the garbage. I spent about two weeks removing waste until I finally hit clean, bare soil. A few times, neighbors walking to their car thanked me for cleaning out that eye sore. It seemed everyone was just as sick of it as I was.

I tried to enlist my brother's help for the project, but he was intent on sleeping instead of gardening. Between my two part time jobs, almost all my money went to bills, so I had to be creative about ways to spruce up the patch. Ashland is a treasure trove of goodies on the days before the garbage trucks come rolling down the street. People put out all kinds of things on the curbs in the hopes someone will take them and breathe new life into them. It was in this way that I was able to collect scrap material for a makeshift fence, trellises, and some pots. At work, I asked coworkers to donate any unused seeds they had lying around. I went to the local nursery and scavenged the clearance plant section that contained the dying remnants of vegetable starts no one had purchased. They were cheap, some as low as 25 cents, and when the owner found out what I was doing, he let me have many of the worst castoffs for free.

Every day I wasn't working, I was out in my garden, converting the raw, neglected soil patch into my personal oasis. In the heat of a southern Oregon summer, it wasn't long before the garden had turned from tiny sad plants, drooping from transplant shock into a foreign earth, into large blossoming things, reaching out to the world and its bugs with their sticky flowers, urging an embrace. When the parking lot patch overgrew its small footprint, I also adopted other concrete cutouts around the apartment complex. Two small spaces on either side of a fence became my sunflower gardens. The bare patch of ground under the mimosa tree outside my window housed my herb garden. I left signs to tell the neighbors what each thing was.

Something else happened too. I went from not knowing a single neighbor to having hours-long conversations with them. The garden was drawing people to the area. They stood

outside the makeshift fence and told me about their own love of plants. They told me how their own mothers had taught them to plant seeds, or their grandfathers had grown corn, or how they used to have a pot of herbs in their window until the daily grind of life caused them to miss one watering too many. They told me how much they loved to see the garden grow and that watching my plants had brought them such joy as they took their garbage out each week. Some neighbors came with gloves and asked if they could help pull weeds. Other times, I came out to work the ground only to see someone had already staked that tall tomato or pruned that spindly pepper. It was becoming a community garden, truly. One neighbor even took to donating large boxes of food to my brother and I after he found out we were eating what was growing, thinking that we must be bad off if we couldn't go to the store.

Without us knowing it, the apartment complex was sold by the single landlord who had always treated us with care and compassion, even after the time my dog almost burned my unit down, to a corporation who ran most of the apartments in town. One day, while out harvesting some squash, the new company's representative was offering a tour to potential tenants. As he walked towards the parking lot, I overheard him. "Here is where your parking spot would be. And over here," he said gesturing my way, "is our community garden." I stood up and smiled at the couple and then went back to my plants.

It was only after telling my garden story to a co-worker that I was told that what I was doing had a name. "Guerilla Gardening," termed in 1970s New York by a group calling themselves the Green Guerillas, began a somewhat radical, but not necessarily novel, approach to confronting urban decay. The idea grew around converting unusable and wasted, generally urban, spaces into something either aesthetically pleasing, utilitarian, or both, through the transformational powers of plants. In New York, the Green Guerillas transformed a forgotten

space piled with garbage into a community garden, still managed today as Bowery Houston Farm and Garden, named for the street intersections where the overthrow took place.

Even though it was a term I had never heard, it made perfect sense. I had taken over a patch of land that stood neglected and abused and transformed it into an ecologically welcoming space. A place where beings of all kinds, plants, insects, and humans could find a brief piece of community to latch onto in the concrete desert of an urban space. I started to research the movement and realized it was happening all over the world. Wherever a bare batch of land stood unused, a guerilla gardener could move in and create a habitat from nothing.

Guerilla gardeners don't even have to take over an area. There are many strategies that can be applied for infusing just a tiny piece of the natural world into an urban environment. Seed bombs are much more innocuous than their name would imply. They are simply balls of clay with flower seeds mixed in. While the clay is wet, the seeds are rolled inside, sometimes with plant food as well. When the balls dry, they are hurled over fences and into bare patches of soil, left to disintegrate into the earth with the next rain. The clay and plant food nourishes the seeds even in the most desolate of grounds, giving the seedlings just enough nutrients to sprout forth and fill an empty, gray lot with a splotch of color. When the right plants are chosen, usually those native to an area, their own seeds will drop to the ground and establish themselves over time, colonizing the patch, until soon the whole empty lot may become a field of colorful orange poppies or butterfly attracting wildflowers. Life will begin coming back into an area that had long been abandoned. Insects and birds move in. In time rodents, snakes, and small mammals like rabbits may too. The land becomes usable again. And beautiful too.

Guerilla gardening in its truest sense can take on other forms as well. Across time and space in my father's neighborhood back in my hometown of Tampa, an older Vietnamese couple

have become master guerilla gardeners. They own the local Chevron station, which years ago, was just that – a Chevron station. Today, however, it more resembles a farmer’s market than a gas fill-up. Outside, baskets of fresh fruit and vegetables greet customers. Inside, fresh boiled peanuts, a southern favorite, colorful flower bouquets, farm fresh chicken eggs, and more heaping piles of ripe produce can be found. They do not get this food from any supplier; rather, it is all grown in their tiny backyard, managed as a permaculture food forest, with many vertical layers of edible food grown in their small plot of land.

My father was the neighborhood mailman, retired now, on a route he fought years to get through seniority. He wanted to be able to stop at his own house for lunch, and finally after 25 years with the post office, he won the bid for the route. Through his deliveries, he talked to all kinds of people and business owners in the area. He grew to know the Vietnamese couple, whose names, if I ever did know them, escape me now. They told him of how they had almost lost the business, but by integrating their expertise in the garden, had found a way to make their gas station stand apart, while also bringing in additional income. Their home had become their farm, even with the limited space they had, and they had used it to supply fresh, local food to the neighborhood. Whereas Publix’s lettuce might come from California, and their Papayas, when they had them, might originate in Mexico, at the Chevron station a person can buy just-harvested food directly from their own neighborhood.

That gas-station-turned-farm-stand had again created a community where none had existed before using the power of plants. Though Temple Terrace, Florida, the sprawling suburban neighborhood where my father lives, was once one of the largest orange producers in Florida, it is now nearly impossible to find local produce in the area. Even the “farmers market” that pops up in nearby West Tampa on the weekends is not local. All the stands get their food

from the same warehouse supplier that brings cast offs from the larger grocery store chains. There is nothing local or fresh about the food at that market. Instead, people in the neighborhood must find ways to create small spaces of food by cultivating plants in any area they are able. And this small step again, brings back native fauna to the region. Areas once starved of nectar for butterflies and other pollinators by the fields of manicured grass now use garden plants to invite them in again.

In 2012, when I had to move back home with my dad at the age of 28, depressed, lonely, and lost, it was the garden that brought me back to life too. The Northwest had been good to me, don't get me wrong, but that was in the tiny town of Ashland with a community that embraces its members. In 2011, I decided to try my hand at the big city and moved with nothing but a truck of my things, along with my dog and cat, to Seattle. The city chewed me up and spit me out. I could never find my footing and was dealt one blow after another. When my lease was up at the end of my first year, I drove cross country, staying at friends' houses along the way, back to Florida and back to my father's house. I enrolled in a master's program to become a teacher and waited for the year to end so I could have Florida residency again before starting. In my mind, teaching was what would bring me back from this place of darkness. It was my way of making something of the hardships I had endured.

What brought me back though were the plants. And my dad. In the time between my absence and my new arrival, my father had converted his own yard into a garden of sorts. He had planted nearly 20 different citrus trees in his quarter acre backyard. They were so dense, standing outside made me feel like I was in a jungle, the sun blotted out by thick leaves, frogs and birds singing in the background, the humidity so overwhelming it enveloped my whole being. Out front, he had carved garden beds instead of flower beds along the edges of his property line. In

these he planted collards, eggplants, and cabbage, more than he could ever use. He had instead taken to donating most of his bounty to people at work who eagerly accepted the garden treats as well as the box-full of citrus and starfruits he brought in weekly.

Needing to be outside, I asked him for a small patch. There was a dusty sand pit in the back that was the only unused space in the yard that still saw the sun. He said I could do what I wanted with it. I set to work, my guerilla gardening skills coming in handy, as I converted the unusable sandy soil to my best attempt at a Florida backyard garden. I amended the soil adding leaves, pine needles, compost, and any other organic matter I could get my hands on. I made rows and planted seeds. I made sure to include flowers around the edge to entice the bugs. Within months, my work had surprisingly paid off; even in the harsh geology of Florida, I could make something grow. And that gave me confidence in myself. The patches of okra, green beans, mustard greens, tomatoes, and peppers shot up and with them my sense of self too. Somehow, my dad knew that I could turn that desolate and bare patch into something productive and serene.

Even though my father bought the house he lives in now after I moved out, I felt as if I had come home. After that first-year-back garden, my life started to turn around. I began running, took a job, met a man, reconnected with long lost friends, and engaged with the city of my upbringing again. I felt like I was the bare lot. The desolate, wasted place, lost to the elements, that someone had begun to tend, bringing back the natural beauty that had been lost. Slowly, I was rehabilitated, the color coming back, the life returning where it had been temporarily lost. After I moved out on my own again, my garden patch returned to soil; my dad never tended it again. But if I wander back to see it on a spring day's visit now, the remnants remain. The wildflowers I put around its perimeter went to seed that first year and have

naturalized since. Each year a few straggly plants make their way through the sandy surface, opening their bright blooms to the sun, drawing the butterflies and bees to them. And every time I see these survivors, I am reminded of myself, making it out of my own depths to reach for the sun once more.

## Planting Seeds

The sun beats down on my back as I bend over, aggravating my farmer's tan even worse. A bead of sweat escapes my hairline and slithers down my cheek to the corner of my mouth. I gently tap it with the tip of my tongue to taste the salt and dirt. My hands gather a clump of grass that has snuck into this bed. *Crab grass is a beast!* I yank it, both hands engaged, my quads straining as I pull with my whole body. Side to side I sway trying to pick up enough momentum with all of me to pull this measly cluster from the soil. I can feel it budging now, so I really lean in. Twisting as I pull, I know I've worked an edge. Suddenly, *plunk*, the clod pulls from the dirt, releasing its roots and sending me ass-first hard onto the ground. *Ouch*. Lettuce crunches under my rear. *Damn, I was going to eat that for lunch.*

I'm a conundrum of a gardener, both terrific and terrible at the same time. My garden yields loads of fresh produce all summer long. Mountains of juicy red watermelon and berries. Pound upon pound of greens and green beans. I can pull strawberries from April until August. The early ones are larger, but the latter are sweeter. My favorite are the gourds. All types: Flat White Boer, Connecticut Field, Striped Green Cushaw, White Scallop, Jack-Be-Little, and Long Island Cheese are among my personal favorites. I'm drawn to their tendrils and arms always reaching out for more. They never get enough and will overtake any space. Tomatoes can become smothered in the same bed, but sweet potato vines just play along, using the gourds for more surface area, reaching up and over them for the light. Years of experimentation and observation have led to this conclusion, I have never read it in a gardening book. I never mark my seeds when I plant them. Most things I know by heart anyways based on the size and shape and color of the seedlings that sprout up. Cabbage and broccoli look alike at first, but after a few

weeks, cabbage becomes squat, while broccoli keeps reaching. Tomatoes and peppers pop out identical cotyledons, or first leaves, but after a week, when true leaves start forming, tomatoes take on intricate serrated patterns while pepper leaves grow large and rounder. Gourds though remain a mystery. Even after they start their fruiting bulk, it is hard to tell what is what. A green striped gourd may suddenly reveal itself to be pale orange on the next day's inspection. A baby squash that starts out long and straight can one day change to plump and round. Watching them change and grow is the highlight. I almost never use them all, preferring to gift them. It is the process I need.

I'm terrible though too, at least by most gardening standards, because I let nature do its thing. It's hard for me to even pull the crab grass unless it starts directly interfering with one of my planted babies. I don't pull anything once it flowers, even the weeds. The mysteries of last year are one of my favorite things. I prefer to let the pollinators have their way. I let the seeds scatter; next year I won't have to plant as many. I have a ten by six cilantro patch that started from three measly plants three years ago. I haven't planted any since. I have green onions that have lived as long. Rather than pull from the roots to eat, I just cut what I need from the tops and leave the rest. "Weeds" snake their way in and out of my haphazardly planted crops. There are no rows here. I don't even group by type. It's not how nature intended. Things are scattered to ensure prosperity. When the bugs come for one section of the garden, I let them have their way. There's another section of the same thing that they know nothing about. I don't till, I layer, as nature also intended. The decomposing organic matter feeds the next generation. Everything relies on this cycle.

I watched across our pasture as the neighbors brought in the backhoe. My son was ecstatic to see it, being a heavy machinery enthusiast and all. My husband and I, not so much. The last time the neighbors brought in a backhoe, they nearly tore our fence out and the goats almost escaped. This time, they steered the backhoe to the large willow tree that I watch from my bedroom window each spring. It is the first tree in the neighborhood to bring color after the winter's long browns and grays. The tips of the willow suddenly spike with hot, fluorescent greens one morning each spring. It is my sign that the long wait is over.

As the backhoe edged closer to the tree, I watched as two men emerged from a truck I hadn't realized was following. One came out with an ax, the other a chainsaw. Curiosity quickly turned to horror as I watched them start to prepare the tree to take down. One man angle-cut into the thick, likely over 50-year-old trunk with the ax while the other gassed up the chainsaw. I had to turn away. Within minutes, I heard the crash as the old tree, always a part of my life at the homestead, fell to the ground. It took the men just six hours and three truck loads to have it fully chopped and removed from the property, a wide stump the only thing remaining in its place. Over the next three days, they cut down two more stately willows on the neighbor's property. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't figure out what had propelled the neighbors to suddenly declare war on the most beautiful trees in our neighborhood, removing their entire kind from our small cul-de-sac over the course of one long weekend.

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All winter I wait for the greens to come. For the reds and purples too. People think of spring as a time of verdant colors, but the first tree in our yard to start changing is the maple. The tips of its branches turn a vibrant red, signaling that the small, winged seeds the tree will launch across our lawn, sparking a war my husband fights each year, will soon emerge. The first flower

to come out is the violet, with its dusty purple and white blooms. The bees have barely been seen, and yet the violets begin their approach. They take over my garden beds, the lawn, the small patch in the front of our house where we grow daffodil and tulip bulbs. I never pull the violets because of their beauty. Even though they grow so vigorously that each year I worry this will be the one that they finally overtake my garden. They never do. By the heat of summer, they have died back, their thick tubers left underground to breathe life into the dulls of winter again next year.

The peonies begin to pop up. Their ancient looking maroon stalks emerge from the ground suddenly. One day, the earth is bare, the next, stubby dark ruby stems have pushed through the soil, reaching for the light. The peonies are my absolute favorite. They get one chance each year to bloom. Some years the sun doesn't hit their bed right and I only get to see four or five flowers. Other years, the angle is more direct, each plant fills with buds, and I get a few weeks of successive bursts of their subdued pinks, energetic reds, and bubbly fuchsias. I cut a few too, for inside. Mostly because if the wind hits them just right, they disintegrate into a thousand petals on the ground. I hate watching all the peonies' work be ended in seconds by a blast of cool air coming up the hill. Instead, they sit on my counter for a couple days, my gaze trending toward them each time I enter the room, unable to resist the soft, sweet fragrance they send into the air to get me to look their way.

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The hardest thing for me to accomplish in the garden in any year is letting a plant go. There is a certain point in each garden-plant's life that it has matured past its peak. Certainly, it may release a few more tomatoes, peppers, or flowers, but they are stunted and dull and don't highlight a dish the way the early ones do. Most gardeners pull these plants to make way for the

next round, an act called succession planting that yields the most abundance from the smallest space. But these are my babies. It is so hard for me to give up on them, to tear the root system they've spent an entire season building from the ground as they send out their last attempt at reproduction. And having eaten all their previous fruits, who am I to say that a plant cannot attempt to create its next generation because I want to put some lettuces into the cooling ground. So, I leave almost all the stragglers. My garden becomes an overwhelming mess of twigs and sticks and long spindly arms reaching out with one tiny fruit holding on. My husband hates it, but the garden is my space. He dares not enter it and uproot anything. He knows better.

Some plants, we gardeners never allow to even reach their peak. Most herbs are the tiny plant starts, still tender when we add them to our soups and pastas. Cilantro is barely a seedling before we give up on it. When it bolts, most gardeners chop it down because it becomes bitter and past the stage of eating. I leave it though. And basil, dill, and fennel too. I have learned that letting these herbs reach maturity gives both my garden and me the greatest benefit. Not only are the tiny flowers that develop on the bolting herbs so delicate and beautiful, but they feed the next generation of pollinators, creating a memory in the insects that tend my garden for free so that they return each year allowing the strawberries, tomatoes, raspberries, and squash to feed my family another year.

The pollinators love mature herbs more than just about anything in the garden. The cilantro, growing nearly four feet high, no longer resembles the grocery store variety in the slightest. Instead, it reaches skyward, a heavenly, earthy scent calling in all manner of bugs. It seems to be a favorite of fireflies, or lightning bugs, depending on what part of the country you live. They feast on the flower nectar all day and then delight my family, especially my son, all night with their glow. The difference between our property and the neighbors' each night in the

summer is the difference between watching the stars from New York City or from Death Valley. Our pastures explode with millions of lightning bugs because we do not mow, we do not chop, we do not fertilize, or throw pesticides. Instead, we allow nature to take its course, to nourish its own as it is meant to do. The neighbors with their manicured lawns, devoid of willow trees, fertilized to a level of green that no longer seems natural may get a few stragglers, but it is our pastures that truly glow.

When the day begins again and I check on the fennel, I find the caterpillar larvae of Eastern Black Swallowtails, one of the most ubiquitous butterflies in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina. They munch happily on the fennel fronds, never disturbing the tasty, prized root underground. When the caterpillars are done, the plant rebounds. The chewed leaves spur new growth and instead of a tall, straight form, the plants now become bushy and thick, increasing their biomass by three times, drawing in the next round of butterflies who pass by looking for a spot to lay their eggs.

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When we go into a land thinking we know what it needs or how to tend it, we ruin everything about that place that makes it special. The key with nature, with gardening, with parenthood, with personhood, is observation. It takes years of watching to understand all that makes a system tick. It takes years of stillness to see how the smallest thing, like a dandelion, for example, can have the biggest impact. Dandelions are one of the earliest food sources for emerging bees and other pollinators. By spraying and pulling these plants, we limit the ability of the insects we rely on for our food system to make it. Instead, we must watch as the bees circle from blossom to blossom, picking up the yellow dust from their centers to take back home to nourish their own fuzzy young.

My son is beginning to understand. We leave the flowers in the ground. We smell them and touch them and look closely at them. But we don't pull them. We leave the berries on the bush until they have hit just the right color of red. It has taken him two years to be able to tell the difference between a raspberry at its peak and one that is two days from that point. But he knows now. He has observed. He has watched. And he has tested.

There is no perfect way to be a gardener. No perfect way to be a parent or a neighbor or a human. Instead, we must allow our instinct to take over. If we truly watch the world around us, it will guide us there. There is nothing in nature that happens by accident. It is all part of a greater design. We must allow ourselves the same grace. We must acknowledge that our lives have led us to this point, that we exist to fulfill a purpose. Nothing we have been through has been miscalculated. But we must sit with these experiences, we must observe their impact, we must wait to find out what they reveal. And the second we finally get it, finally see it, our time will be close to over. We must work hard to pass on our knowledge to the next generation, sending out last-ditch shoots to our kin to make sure that our entire season of growth has not been in vain, but instead can hold, in our seeds, the wisdom of our experience, allowing our next generation just a slight advantage over our own beginnings. We must plant the seeds of our futures.

## For Him

The sun beats down on your face as you watch him. As he watches. Everything. Nothing escapes his vision. The birds in the trees, the grass in the breeze. The buzzards overhead, the bugs in the garden bed.

“Mama, those birds are fighting. Do you see?”

“Mama, what is this bug? I don’t know this bug.”

“Mama, where have the leaves gone? Is it summer yet?”

“Mama, you see the clouds? The dark clouds mean it will rain soon.”

He observes with an eye that has yet to be tainted. You lost your eye a long time ago. You observe from a place marred by your past. You observe with an eye on the future only. He watches from the present. You learn from him how to be in one place again. How to watch one thing again.

In the winter, he bundles up. He’s old enough to put on his own hat and gloves. You still need to help with his socks and shoes. But not always. You miss it, his need for you, though you also cherish the moment to yourself as he shows off his independence.

“Mama, when it’s cold out, the bugs hide.”

“Mama, it will snow soon, I can tell from the sky.”

“Mama, the water is frozen for the chickens.”

“Mama, when is it time to dig for potatoes again?”

As the skies fill with gray clouds, rolling in with another low in the 20s, you tell him maybe tomorrow it will snow. His eyes fill with delight. “I will have to get my snowsuit ready, Mama.”

Stuck indoors and bored, he digs through the cabinets in the kitchen, finding things lost to you. An old popsicle tray emerges. You haven't made popsicles in years. But a newness comes to everything you own through his eyes.

“Mama, what is this for?”

“Mama, I want a blue popsicle.”

“Mama, will it be cold to eat?”

“Mama, can we make popsicles, please?”

You tell him in summer you can make popsicles so he can eat them outside. And even though it's months away, you spend the night researching recipes, reminding yourself of how to do it. You were years younger the last time you tried. The sweet juices dripping down your own chin, the bright summer sun reflecting from the droplets. The past is coming back. For him, though, it is still the future. There is a sparkle that you can bring to him, of things he does not know yet. And that creates a spark back inside of you too, one that had been lost. One that stayed buried in the soil as the last popsicle droplet left your chin years ago.

When spring comes, he marvels at the ground. New things bloom around him, and sometimes, it is the first time he has seen them. Sometimes, they are as new to him as they are to the year, to the sun, to the soil.

“Mama, that flower is pink, but the other ones are yellow.”

“Mama, do you see that the goats are shedding?”

“Mama, the sun is warmer today.”

“Mama, I see some baby leaves on the trees.”

Spring is your favorite, too. But secretly. You always tell people your favorite is Fall. But Spring offers hope. Hope that Fall cannot compete with. It is a time to start fresh. You have a

chance to start new. Everything from the past is buried and, in its place, rises something unseen. The leaves open and the flowers bloom and your heart grows just a little less cold.

By the time summer hits though you have forgotten. Instead, you are lost in the grind of farm chores in the heat. Your pants stick to your legs in an uncomfortable way, clinging so tight they no longer move when you do. There is so much to do, the stress builds again. The garden won't stop growing, so you must keep moving to preserve it all. The animals need water and food and their hooves trimmed. He needs to explore. So, you take him to the woods. More for yourself than for him. The woods are cooler, and the sweat leaves your forehead just long enough to enjoy the season again, even if only momentarily. Sometimes a cool creek can be found, hand dipped in its water, placed on your neck to await the beads of relief that run down your back.

For him, the summer brings wonder. Everything is out, nothing hides away. There is much to see.

“Mama, the tomatoes are red today. Yesterday, they were green.”

“Mama, I hear an owl. He goes *who who*.”

“Mama, are there more raspberries today? Can I eat them?”

“Mama, the chickens are laying more eggs. Can I help you get them?”

His favorite are the fireflies. He doesn't see them much. The sun stays out too late in the summer and his bedtime is too early. But sometimes, he peeks out the window as they glow.

“Mama, is that snow outside?”

“Mama, why do they glow?”

“Mama, I can catch them, watch.”

“Mama, can I keep one?”

And it brings you back. Way back. To a time when your mind was as clear, as unencumbered. When you kept lightning bugs in jars by your bed. When you stayed up all night waiting for them to glow again, getting sad when they refused to light up in your room. So, you snuck outside with the mason jar in hand, tiptoeing past your sleeping dad's room. In the night, you carefully opened the lid and gently dumped the contents on the ground. You watched as the bugs emerged timidly, then lifted into the air, suddenly glowing again. They couldn't be contained and still glow. And even as a child, you realized you were the same.

And so is he. He blossoms when you are outside. Indoors he paces like a tiger in a cage. He needs to run, to feel the sun. And when he's outside, you can see him grow. If time could just freeze for a moment maybe he'd stop, but instead you watch as the inches put on before your eyes. His feet in the soil, he plants himself. His head in the sun, he reaches tall. And all the while he grows. He thrives in the summer heat. Like watermelon. Or okra. And when Fall hits again, he's nearly a foot taller and no longer a baby. He's a boy and it has happened so fast you almost missed it. The sunflowers bloom, the corn becomes milky, the lettuce has long gone to seed.

"Mama, I'm going to carve a face in this pumpkin."

"Mama, the chickens are losing their feathers again."

"Mama, look the goats are starting to get fuzzy again."

"Mama, the leaves are coming off the tree. I like orange the most."

And again, you tell yourself this is your favorite time of year. But you feel the depression begin to creep in with the nights as you both grow colder. You need the sun just as much as him. Just as much as the garden. Just as much as the trees. You don't tell him, but red leaves are your favorite. You tell him you like orange too. And you watch, with joy and sadness as the last of the leaves hit the ground. The litter blows in the yard as the winds move in. You move in too. Your

time outdoors is ending for another year. It takes a toll on your soul to be indoors so long. The cold doesn't suit you. You're from the sun. But it's easier with him. For him, you still go out, bundled up tight. The cold doesn't seem to bother him. Instead, he just finds new things to marvel at. For him, there are always new things to watch. For him, there are always new things to observe.

“Mama, this stick is my sword to fight coyotes.”

“Mama, next year, the strawberries will be even bigger.”

“Mama, I can't wait to make a snow angel.”

“Mama, I love you.”

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