

LENS

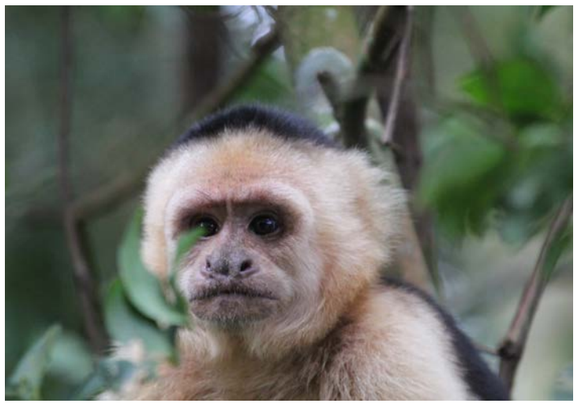
The Journal of Environmental Narratives

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AI and the environment | How we look at birds and birds look at us | What we make of waste
Connecting with nature through trees, landscapes, parks, poetry, and a bespoke app
Plus art, photography, and much more

VOLUME 1 | FALL 2026

LENS

The Journal of Environmental Narratives at the University of California, Los Angeles
Volume 1 | Fall 2026



Photograph by Annie Phillips.



Photograph by Merrin Casl.

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Photograph by Merrin Casl.



Photograph by Merrin Casl.



Photograph by Merrin Casl.

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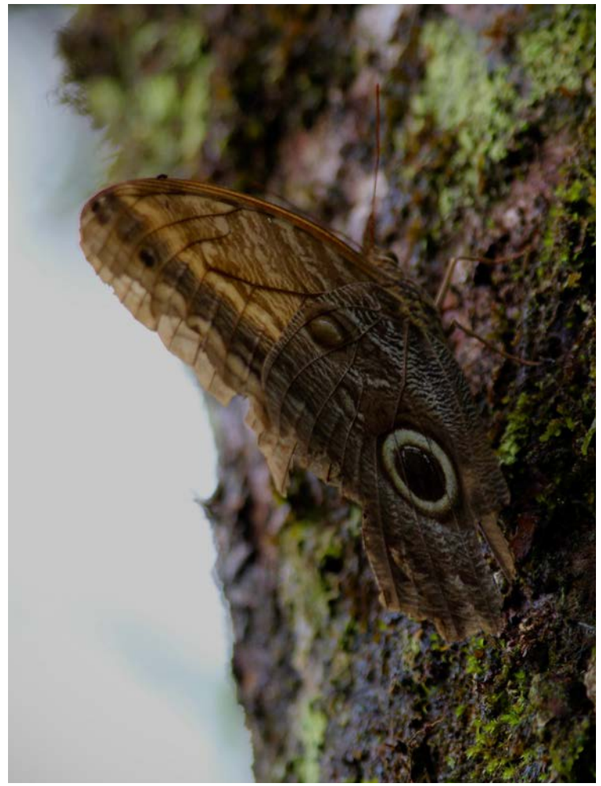
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Photograph by Julia Awad.



Photograph by Annie Phillips.

Masthead

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Photograph by Taizo Nakayama.

Mission Statement
LENS: The Journal of Environmental Narratives is a creative academic journal produced by UCLA undergraduate students. We feature works from students about the environmental humanities, narratives, and communications.

We welcome comments, letters, and submissions for our future issue. Write to us at:
uclalensjournal@gmail.com.



Photograph by Grace Miller.

LABORATORY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Contributors

Abigail Rui-En Hsu is a third-year Cognitive Science and Economics major and an emerging writer. While writing has always been deeply personal to her, this piece marks her debut publication for an unfamiliar audience. Through her work, she explores themes of biocentrism and animism, driven by a deep love for the natural world.

Alyssa Wong is a fourth-year English and biology double major and writer, originally from Hong Kong. Her environmental interests include climate fiction, ecofascism, containerization, and maritime transport.

Angelica Osorio is a recent graduate who majored in American Literature and Culture and minored in Education Studies. She is interested in expanding environmental education, beginning with the use of art in her future classrooms. Angelica hopes to continue writing poetry that inspires others to reconnect with their desires, origins, and our Mother Earth.

Ava Philson graduated in 2026 with degrees in Environmental Science and French and Francophone Studies. She is a researcher interested in the perception of nature and more-than-human-life as separate from humanity and the human world.

Caitlyn Chang is a second-year student at UCLA pursuing degrees in Gender Studies and Public Affairs. She is a writer and researcher whose work examines environmental justice through feminist, decolonial, and interdisciplinary frameworks. Her particular interests include settler colonialism, political ecology, and the relationship between environmental narratives, power, and social inequality.

Isabella Bonner is a second-year at UCLA majoring in Microbiology, Immunology, and Molecular Genetics. She has been an artist all of her life and enjoys creating in the mixed-media medium. Outside of her creative pursuits, she is interested in staying informed on advancements in environmental justice.

Joy Sugihara is a class of 2026 UCLA Biology graduate interested in the illustrative world and AI, and its resulting impact on the environment. Her interests surround the questionable technological future for both man and nature alike.

Kiara Velez is a third-year writer and student at UCLA who thrives on random midnight inspiration and music blaring at max volume. Majoring in English with a minor in Pilipino studies, Kiara works to observe and absorb the whispers of the natural world, especially if those whispers spell disaster. She is also interested in how a given environment influences the relationship between the individual and the other.

Kylie Bach is a 2026 graduate at UCLA studying Cognitive Science with minors in Digital Humanities and Information and Media Literacy. She is interested in the intersection between the media, technology, and the environment.

Louise Goldman is a third-year Environmental Science major with a concentration in Conservation Biology and a minor in Literature in the Environment. As a writer and researcher, she finds herself captivated by the environmental humanities, urban ecology, and advocacy, and especially enjoys finding inspiration outside in nature.

Marianna Rebollar-Reyes is a third-year Education and Social Transformation student at UCLA. As a student researcher and writer, she is passionate about exploring how ecomedia literacy, land-based education, and Indigenous pedagogies can deepen environmental learning, strengthen relationships between communities and the natural world, and inspire more just and sustainable futures.

Muaathah Abdullah is a writer and 2025 graduate of UCLA, where she studied Education and Social Transformation. Her work centers on environmental justice, examining how underserved communities face disproportionate exposure to pollution, industrial sites, and urban heat islands. She is passionate about education, equity, and the public health impacts on these communities.

Priya Grewal is a recent UCLA graduate who majored in Education and Social Transformation. She is a writer whose work focuses on utilizing non-Eurocentric stories and methods to aid the environment.

Samantha Castro graduated Summa Cum Laude from UCLA in 2026 with a major in Education and Social Transformation from the School of Education and Information Sciences.

Victoria Tong is a researcher and writer who graduated from UCLA in June 2026 with a degree in Biochemistry and a minor in Literature & the Environment. She is passionate about basic needs security for all, the multiscalar relationship between humans and their waste, and urban ecologies.



Photograph by Grace Miller.



Photograph by Julia Awad.



Photograph by Merrin Casl.

A Note from the Editor

Dear readers,

Whether you are holding the crisp paper edges of our journal in your hands or scrolling through its pixelated pages online, I would like to offer you a warm welcome to the inaugural issue of *LENS: The Journal of Environmental Narratives*.

Around eight months ago, UCLA professors Jon Christensen and Ursula K. Heise approached me with the concept of creating a multidisciplinary undergraduate journal about environmental narratives, which would operate under the auspices of the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies (LENS). It would be the first of its kind at our university.

Suffice it to say, their idea garnered my immediate support and enthusiasm.

The prospect of providing undergraduates across North and South campus with an academic venue in which to display their ecocentric works was thrilling; the actualization of 65 pages teeming with ecosystems of human and other-than-human assemblages, Indigenous stewardships and labors, and varied cultural resonances to wastes and oceans has proved to be even more so.

Now, I do not want to tell you any more about what is bundled within our journal. Instead, I'd like to try and show you through exercises aimed at provoking your environmental imaginaries. I invite you to get comfortable, settle in wherever you are, and follow along for a few minutes.

Imagine you are outside in the natural environment. The grass might be lush-green and the pine trees might engulf you with their sharp, sweet scent. A lake might glisten nearby, its blue hue capturing your gaze. You might feel in awe, out of your body, away from daily troubles, and disconnected from life—totally unplugged from everything and everyone.

Now, let's imagine something different. Picture yourself in an environment that you frequent often. This might be sitting around the lounge tables in your backyard, walking through a misty and early-morning Westwood, visiting your favorite restaurant in a nearby city, dropping by your grandparent's house, or going to the grocery store.

As students, you might also think of lecture halls as a typical environment. And, since this is a journal of and for UCLA undergraduates, please indulge me as we delve into that particular example together.

If you look outside of the window of a classroom, you might see a variety of plants, trees, grasses, and shrubs. This is what most of us think of when prompted to envision and identify *the environment*. Yet, what *environments* linger inside of the classroom? To name a few: your fellow peers, the paper in your notebooks, your bookbags, the laptop you take notes on, service dogs, and the coffee you drink from your thermos. These all represent a multitude of environments, too—environments worth our critical and creative curiosity. For instance, who harvested those coffee beans? Who built and transported the parts of your computer? Where did your classmate get their sweatshirt from and how was it manufactured? What interconnected networks near and far have produced this encounter, and what do they express in regards to environment-making?

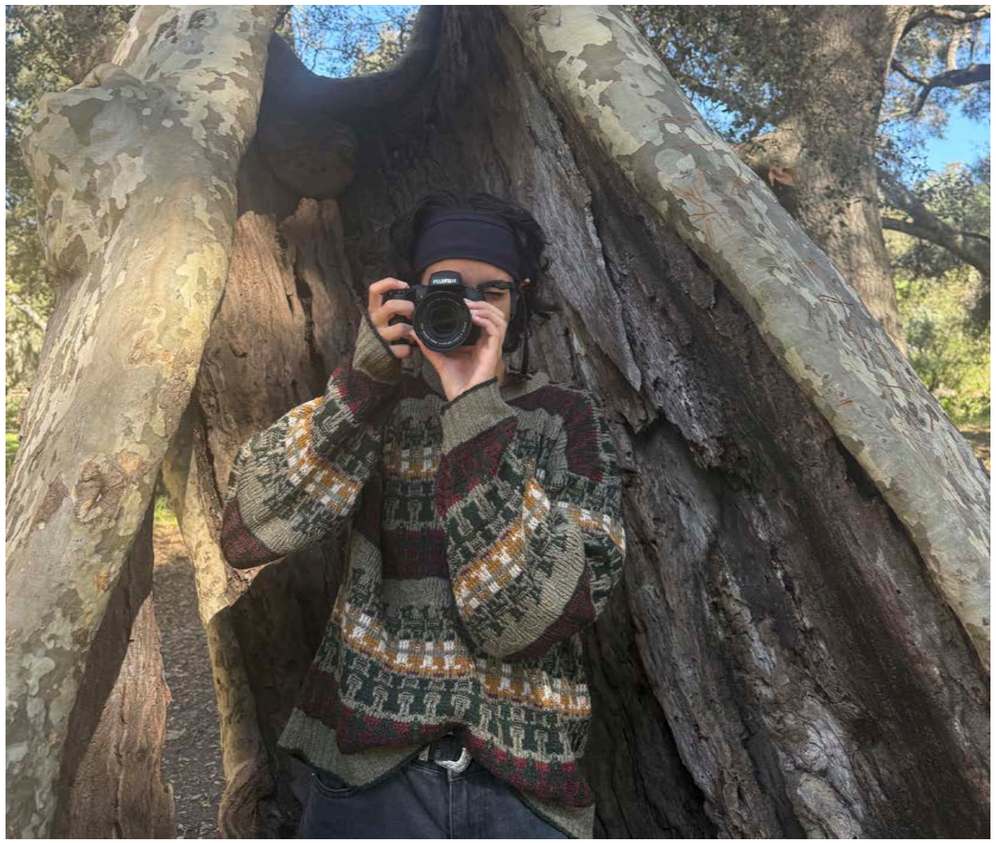
Through these activities, we begin to realize that there is no "environment" as such. Nor is there any environment that exists separate from other life forms. For this reason, questions of "*the* environment," as I prompted you to consider, sometimes flatten the materi-

al complexities and diversities we encounter in environments everyday into a singular, predetermined space. Likewise, categories of "*the* animal," "*the* climate refugee," "global warming," and "nature" act as objectified caricatures of lives and matter far more specific, multiple, and messy. We might instead say, for instance, *global warmings* and *natures*.

Please, then, join us in thinking not of the environment, but of many environments. Through our first issue, we hope to offer a concrete recognition and appreciation of them. I am filled with gratitude and humility to present you with our featured pieces. They offer vignettes into subjective, interconnective, material, and affective histories and experiences across human and other-than-human environments.

Special thanks to our advisors, Jon Christensen and Ursula K. Heise, for guiding this publication with such care, knowledge, and effort. I would also like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of art director and editor Kayleen Kim, as well as that of our other editors, Louise Goldman and Grace Miller. This journal would not be complete without them.

Happy reading,
Julia Awad
Editor-in-Chief



Julia Awad. Photograph by Liana Awad.

The *LENS* Calendar 2026-27

The Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. To mark the occasion LENS is pleased to announce a series of monthly events focused on environmental storytelling. We hope you'll join us for these diverse and exciting conversations with scholars, writers, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and artists.

Save the Date: LENS 10th Anniversary Events

October 29: Michael Kimmelman, architecture critic, The New York Times, "How to Tell the Story of a City."

November 9: Alejandro Camacho professor of law, UCLA, Anthony Rendon speaker emeritus, California Assembly, and Marta Segura is director of the UCLA Center for Healthy Climate Solutions — on the midterm elections and environmental policy and politics in a contested era.

December 1: Kathleen Yap, UCLA IoES alumna and deputy director, National Parks Board, Singapore, "From the City in the Garden to the Garden in the City."

January 26: Chandran Sankaran, founder and CEO, Gigafact, on narrative strategies against misinformation in an age of AI.

February, TBD: Juan Devis, president of Film Independent, and special guests — on environmental narratives in film and television.

March, TBD: Virginia Blanco and Katherine Bahena-Benítez, Teatro La Lengua, and a table reading of a new play, "Historias de Descolonización: Cambio Climático," in Spanish, Nahuatl and English.

April 22: Becky Lakin and Jason Ashlock, founders, The Tomorrow Company, on how to tell powerful stories for sustainability.

May, TBD: Filmmakers Bora Rex and Erin Cooney, on giving up auteurship, with their film installations "Aprovaca" and "Aire Libre."

More details to come. We look forward to seeing you there!

To get on the LENS mailing list, visit our website at ioes.ucla.edu/lens.

Many of our 10th anniversary guests will also be featured on the LENS podcast, "Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet," which you can find here — ioes.ucla.edu/lens/podcasts — or wherever you get your podcasts.

And for faculty and graduate students, next summer, **July 18 through 25**, LENS will be hosting the Summer Institute in Environmental Humanities, a week of workshops and faculty talks at UCLA, in collaboration with Colby College. Watch for details about applying.



Photograph by Muaathah Abdullah.

My Park: A Home Away from Home

Muaathah Abdullah

As a little girl, the park was my playground, my escape. Growing up in inner-city Los Angeles in a small apartment with no yard to run free, the park became our backyard, our adventure, and our sanctuary. It was where my working parents brought my siblings and me to enjoy the open air and endless possibilities. Climbing trees, learning cartwheels, and running freely, we were filled with youthful joy.

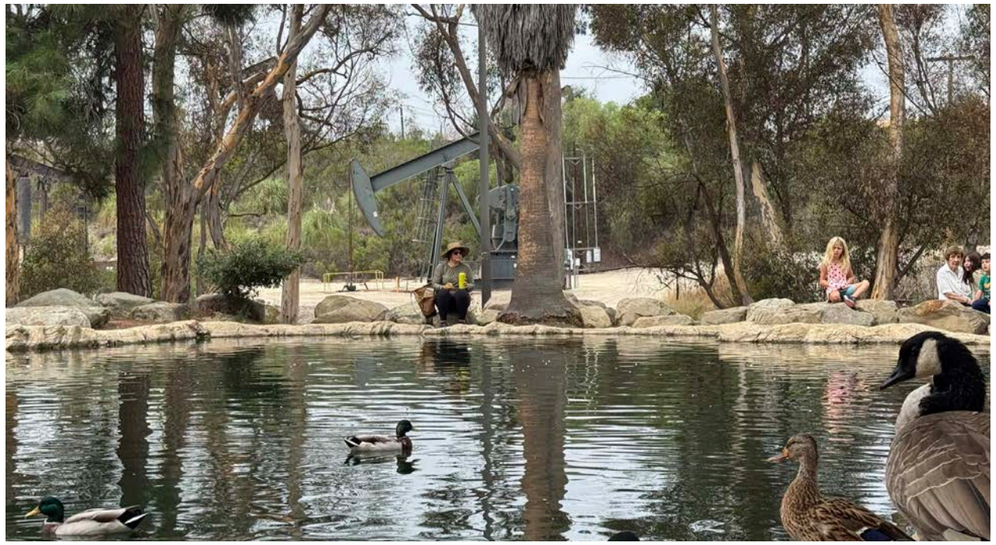
My dad loved to fish, treating it almost like an art, casting his line into the water with quiet patience. My mom would sit beneath the shade of a tall tree, immersed in the pages of her favorite books for hours. My siblings and I became explorers—jumping, swinging, skating, hiking, and discovering every hidden corner of our little oasis. We searched for bright flowers and lizards camouflaged among the bushes. I can still hear the birds chirping, their melodies blending with the rustling of leaves as the wind whispers through the trees. It was peace. It was freedom. It was home.

Yet beyond the park's gates, towering metal structures loomed in the distance. As a child, I would press my face against the fence, staring at the strange machines with their slow, mechanical movements.

"What are those?" I would ask my mom.

She would sigh before explaining that they were oil rigs, machines pulling something from deep within the earth. I did not fully understand then, but I knew they did not belong beside the park, hidden in plain sight and quietly ominous.

As we grew older, life became busier. We could no longer



An Inglewood Oil Field pumpjack next door to Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area. Photography by Jon Christensen.

visit the park every day, but it remained our retreat for weekends and special occasions—a place for family picnics and laughter-filled card games spread across a blanket. We celebrated Eid there in the early morning, when dew still clung to the grass and mist lingered in the air, surrounded by community on joyful occasions. The comfort of simply being together never faded.

Life is not as simple as it once was. Over time, the park became a place to clear my mind, breathe deeply, and escape the four walls of a home that was not always serene. It became somewhere I could step away from the noise around me and within me, letting the open sky and warm sunlight bring a sense of calm. The park reminds me of all that I am grateful for.

Yet among the memories woven into this place, I eventually learned that the machines I had always wondered about—the ones standing just beyond our playground—were part of the Inglewood Oil Field, the largest urban oil field in the United States. Stretching across Baldwin Hills and Culver City, the 1,000-acre site sits dangerously close to homes, schools, and parks like mine. I came to understand that it was not merely an eyesore but a source of harm. Chemicals released from oil production have been linked to cancer, heart disease, birth defects, and respiratory illnesses, disproportionately affecting surrounding communities. In 2021, an oil spill leaked more than 1,600 gallons of oil near the Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area—a place meant for children to play, not contamination.

When my dad passed away last summer, we returned to that same park—our park. But this time, it felt different. The laughter felt softer, and the air a little heavier. It is a place that holds so many memories, where joy and grief intertwine. Sitting beneath the same trees that had watched me grow, I felt both the weight of time and the warmth of love.

The park remains my refuge, my reminder of family, childhood, and the simple beauty of being together in nature—among plants, animals, and moments of reconnection. But now, I also understand its fragility: how something so precious can be threatened, how the same air I once breathed freely may not always have been clean.

The park is still home. But now, I see it fully—the beauty, the memories, and the quiet battles it carries.



Photograph by Muaathah Abdullah.



Photograph by Julia Gu from *Bruin Life*.

The Divine Right of Waste?

And Food Recovery as a Practice of Care

Victoria Tong

At 8 p.m. on Thursdays, my night is just getting started. I change into an all-black outfit and queue up 2000s pop-girl hits on my Spotify, but I am not heading to frat row—instead, I am getting ready for food recovery with Bruin Dine.

Three nights each week, my team and I arrive at the UCLA dining halls after their dinner service ends, pick up trays of leftover food still hot to the touch, and transport them to the Student Activities Center (SAC) to serve to students and other community members for free. Last quarter, we recovered 5,700 pounds of food from the dining halls and distributed over 3,000 meals—the most in my four years with this organization. Our unofficial tagline is "food should be free," and each night, we do our best to realize that as fully as we can and for as many people as possible.

A lot of what I have been reading lately has given me the language to describe why my work with Bruin Dine feels more necessary than ever. Food waste alone accounts for 8 to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, meaning that every tray of dining hall food that ends up in a landfill is also a climate issue (United Nations). And yet, UCLA continues to throw away hundreds of pounds of food night after night, because reducing waste is not a priority for institutions whose incentives are aligned for



Food waste. Photograph by OpenIDUser2 from *WikiMedia Commons*.

unbridled growth. This is the logic that philosopher and cultural theorist Mark Fisher had in mind when he popularized the idea that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. (Fredric Jameson, the Marxist critical theorist, originally espoused this claim).

Such dominant capitalist narratives position us as bystanders to an environmental catastrophe already in motion, too large for any individual to meaningfully address. After all, when just 100 corporations are responsible for 71 percent of greenhouse gas emissions (CDP Worldwide), what can one person's choices really amount to?

I understand the temptation to accept this framing. However, it absolves us of our responsibility to others. Building upon feminist scholar Donna Haraway's arguments in her book, *Staying With the Trouble*, we do not choose the circumstances we inherit, but we have the agency to respond to them—and not as isolated actors, but as members of a collective entangled within larger systems.

In fact, climate change is a collective action problem: individuals pursue their own self-interested motivations, but in aggregate, their actions produce harmful outcomes that no individual actually intended (Hormio). And just as collective action problems are created by many actors, they cannot be solved unilaterally—they require coordination across many stakeholders and a shared commitment to bear certain costs. Yet, individual actions are still not meaningless within this structure. They manifest as a form of moral integrity, a dissolution of the boundary between the personal and political that makes the statement: I am embodying the future I want to exist right now, rather than waiting around for change to happen (Hourdequin). This is what Haraway, in *Staying With the Trouble*, would call "worlding"—the active, material practice of making a different world possible within the conditions of this one.

That said, I want to be careful. Individual behavior change must coexist with, and not substitute for, collective action. It is problematic to



Photograph by Julia Gu from *Bruin Life*.

hold all people to the same standard of personal responsibility when low-income communities and communities of color bear the greatest environmental burdens despite having contributed the least to them (Bullard and Wright). The obligation to act is real, but it must be understood structurally, not just on the personal level. Micro and macro scales of action and accountability must be kept in constant relation with and reference to one another.

UCLA has the resources to eliminate food waste and ensure all of its students are fed. Consider the napkin math: approximately 14,000 students live on the Hill, and the most popular meal plan, the 14P, costs each student around $6,500 per year. If every student took the 14P, that would add up to $91 million. The university has simply chosen not to prioritize these pressing issues. For me, holding this value comes with an obligation to do something in the meantime. This is not about letting the broader system off the hook—Bruin Dine works closely with the Undergraduate Students Association Council (USAC) and other student organizations like Swipe Out Hunger to advocate for student basic needs at the institutional level—but we cannot simply let the status quo persist while waiting for the system to be fixed.

By holding events every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night, no matter the weather or how hectic the quarter gets, something greater than just the acts of recovering and serving food has emerged from our consistency. We have volunteers who sign up week after week. We have reliable diners who come by knowing they can count on us for a hot, nutritious meal. The basement conference rooms in SAC are cramped and always slightly too warm, but for a couple of hours each week, they become a gathering space for a real community.

In my view, this is what care looks like. It is not just a passive feeling, but an ongoing practice—and my work with Bruin Dine is how I enact my belief that food is a right, not a privilege, and that the people around me are worth showing up for. The systems that produce the climate crisis and allow food waste to coexist with food insecurity on the same campus did not emerge by accident, and recognizing that comes with a responsibility to intervene. By building trust within our communities, meeting people where they are, and showing up above all, we can already make a different world possible in small but tangible ways. And while it may still be difficult to imagine the end of capitalism, I turn to Ursula K. Le Guin: "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings."

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Drawing and photograph by Marianna Rebollar.

Humwichawa at Dusk

Marianna Rebollar

I grew up where the mountains appear purple
as the sun slips away quietly,
before anyone admits the day is ending.

Their silhouettes stay
long after the sun begins to leave.

The sun is never just yellow.
It is multicolored,
bleeding into everything,
uncompromising.

Desert light does not disappear.
It lingers.
Stains the air.

And there you stand,
Humwichawa.

Not the name given later
by hands passing through,
but the name that belonged first.

You open outward
crooked and unashamed,
embracing the wind that has known you all your life.

When I was young,
I thought you were strange,
twisted against the mountains.

Now I think you're honest.
Growing in the direction that feels true to you.

Into your silence,
I feel the land sitting with me,
the colorful mountains, the sunsets,
and the sun pressing against my skin.
When I paint the sky in every color,
it is because that is how I know it.
Not simple,
but layered,
radiant.

The desert taught me that;
beauty bends. Color survives.
It remains.



Gingko biloba. Photograph by Jean-Pol Grandmont from *WikiMedia Commons*.

An Excerpt from “Rooted”

Abigail Rui-En Hsu

Prologue

It is said that in the great plains, by an emerald cliff edging over the southern ocean, there lies a tree. The scars of nature impress upon its thick furrowed bark, guarding its heartwood core that bears a silent count of time. Swaying gently with the wind, those passing by cannot help but still themselves, enchanted. What is most peculiar are its leaves. Each piece spreads out like an oriental fan, yet bears a shallow cleft at its center—as if angels had begun to split it into two but relented. Along this hesitation, dichotomous paths emerge, and the veins part, each toward its chosen edge.

I first met the tree by chance, and it enthralled me with its appearance, but even more so its spirit. In the Fall, its leaves adorn a vibrant yellow sheath, resplendent under the sun. I stood looking at it longer than I had intended to, yet unable to explain why. There was something so profoundly lonely about it, with the surrounding air thick and unmoving. I felt its weight settle in my chest, tightening my heart with sympathy. Decades turn into centuries, yet it remains a forced witness to fleeting life and inevitable death. Despite my hesitancy to reduce its sentience and circumstance to human emotion and experiences, I cannot help but do so—it seems to have loved and lost just like we do, and the poverty of my human experiences dilutes the words I have to describe its sentiments. I can only offer you my best translation. As I penned down my conversations with it, clarity came. The tree's musings unveiled a shroud that I, habituated to civilization, had long forgotten I was wearing, like a ladybug that had settled on my shoulder, initially unbeknownst to my senses; only after my realization did I wonder how long it had already settled on me.

My personal notes of my encounter with this tree remained in my possessions for a great many years, a quiet trove of stories, a secret to my wisdom. It all started from that fateful day I spoke to the tree, asking it to share about its life with me. The tree began, slowly, as if summoning an old memory, “When I think of my former years as a young sapling…”.

I

When I think of my former years as a young sapling, when waking and sleeping thoughts were simply about how to reach further up to the clearing in the clouds, all I recollect are prominent patches of memorable daylight. Strangely, those memories seemed disjointed, with gaps like holes in the fabric of recollections, unlike my later days when days connected. In some ways, time seemed to pause then. My rationalism tells me that I existed then, just as I do now, but it is puzzling how those early days lacked constant salience; special days glowed so intensely that perhaps everything else dulled relatively. Wherever have those intense feelings gone?

Don’t get me wrong, I still experience emotions you call by the same name now, as I did then. But rarely do I get surprised by the extremity in which those same feelings were experienced.

*

Daybreak stirs the Earth from its usual slumber, shining brilliant, pure light upon the unassuming land as it soaks up the warmth from the rays. High above, great birds of prey soar in the azure, infinite sky. Each flap of their wings lifts them further, leaving powerful gusts behind. Where do they journey with their synchronized flight? What sights have they witnessed, while I stay still under this singular ether? I wonder. A sudden, unexpected weight on my branches startles me. It is the plain myna, resting after a morning flight. I support its feet, just as how the land supports mine.

“Pleasant day, ain’t it,” he croaks. I sway in response.

“Every day is pleasant, I suppose.”

“Any day with worms is a good day. In the sun, I can see those tiny squirmy things



Common Myna. Photograph by Tisha Mukherjee from *Wikimedia Commons*.

better. In the rain, they come out of their hiding holes, and I can find them. Yes, yes…every day must be a good day," he muses, nodding his small black-feathered head.

"But a bad day for the worms," I add, silently. The myna didn't seem to hear, for he had already begun a cheery tune about his glorious pursuit of fresh, fat worms (the type that squelch when he takes a hearty bite, so he said). I feel the worms under the soil tremble in fear, but I stay silent and do not tell the myna of their presence. Let nature take its course; their day will come.

And so I stand there, as I always do, admiring the environment that provides for me. I ponder my statements earlier, as one often does on days that feel endlessly long. Was every waking moment truly pleasant? Surely, that couldn't be true! For sadness and despair I often understand as well. When my leaves shrivel after droughts, or droop after floods, can I still truthfully make the same claims as I do now, when the weather has been so kind? How circumstantial are my feelings, then? If I can say, on a good day like this, that every day is good, would I then say, on a terrible day, that I live in daily misery?

I gaze into the wide, expansive fields that hug me, as the midday sun illuminates the colors of life, as what with life is set in motion along the lands, from the haphazard flight of the butterflies in the fields dotted with poppies, to the monotonous buzz of the worker bees by my ears, down to the gruelling crawl of the ants up my spine. Like an oath, this beautiful scene remains etched in my mind—an answer that bad days will always end, for an exquisite day like this one must exist.

It was in this blind faith that I decided to live my days, endlessly waiting for another pleasant day, and willing it to come.

II

Few remember the tempest of the fifties, but I can recall it with every sense of my being, from the quiver of my leaves down to the coursing of sap through my trunk. It was startlingly gray for a mid-afternoon, and only got darker as the clouds got thicker and thicker, banding together to rebel against the sun, holding its glow hostage. I felt the wind picking up, ever so subtly at first—blades of grass contorting, forming slight arches—and then raging, without warning, great gusts sending leaves up into the air, defying gravity… hefty trees swaying worryingly fast, like an old stiff man breaking into energetic dance. The crows frantically called out to their young, flying haphazardly to the nearest trees, begging them to lend their strength; to protect their families against the savagery of nature. Some flew to me, and because I had been chosen, I felt the duty to defend. I dug my roots firmly into the earth, clinging onto this prayer with all my might: I will remain standing until the worst has passed.

Distant gongs always sound before any attack from the enemy—so too did I smell the blood of the rain before they came charging down. The soldiers of the heavens, usually so cordial, came in full armory this time. What evils have we committed that demanded this punishment thus? I stared at the small wooden cottages past the river. How heavy I felt, knowing that they would be gone after this rampage! Feeble humans, thinking that borrowing some

of nature would suffice in shielding them from it at its purest! Don't they know that the strength of nature lies in its Life? That is, when it is living, and hence can heal and grow. Stealing it away and killing its soul merely loses that power it possesses! A tree is not strong because it is made out of wood. No, it is strong because it chooses to hold steady to the ground, and stand straight up to the sun, which grants it Life.

The rumble of the thunder drew my gaze to the sky—the forever sheet of space we call the part above us. How terrifying that the same bright, baby blue friend can change so very dramatically to this somber, dull mass! And how helpless I am in the face of it all! At the same time, as I worried about whether I had the strength to defend against the impending torrent, I could not help but be pained by this scene around me, because I knew that separated behind this disguise, this armor of lightning, lay my dearest friend, still bright and baby blue. He was probably fearful too, alone behind the darkness, conjuring up a storm under his name, but one he could not stop. If only I could reach behind those thick thunderclouds, grab him by my branches, and hoist him back to fair grounds! Upsetting as it may be, my form limited my actions; I stayed where I have always been. At least I had the crows to protect.

The rain battered down relentlessly, coloring my trunk a deep shade of umber and picking away at my leaves without mercy. I felt each prick of detachment, and uttered goodbyes to those green sheets that served me so well. Soon they would form a graveyard beneath me, and I would have to watch their lives seep away as they brown and dry out over the following week. I cannot caress my loved ones, or give them the burial they need, but I watch every death with respect, until they return back to the soil.

*

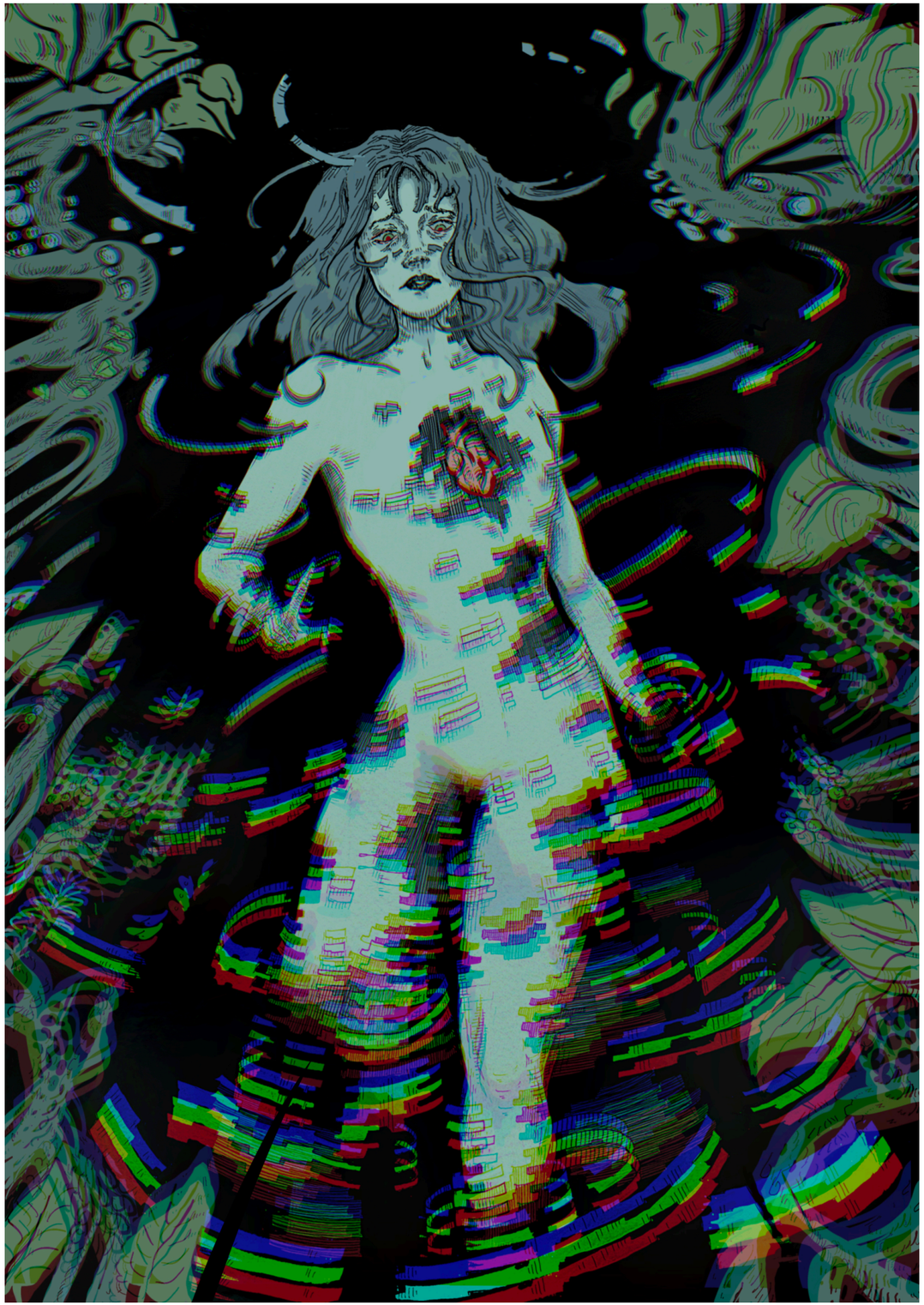
"Do you remember every single leaf you've shed?" someone asked me many decades later. They compared it to their human hair, and diminished the pain of my grievances. Leaves are different; they nourish my buds, they feed me, they let me breathe. "They are your placenta, your mouth, and your lungs," I replied calmly, "If those were ripped out, would you feel the pain, too?" Pain among humans is subjective enough, much less pain between species. I do not want to compare, because there simply isn't any basis to do so. All I want is empathy for my kind—my kind who have given so much and yet continue to be exploited, and treated below all life.

*

Now, back to the tempest. With each passing second of onslaught, I shook more furiously. I gripped the soil with conviction—I will remain standing until the worst has passed!—as the talons of the crows pinched my body. Soaked in rain and robbed of their power of flight, I, their shelter, was their only salvation. Gallantly, I bore the brunt of the attack, letting the wind push and pull at me at its capricious whims, letting the deluge of rain inundate me…I let it happen. All the elements worship the common god of Nature, and like most human gods, Nature too guides life in the way it deems fit. People think gods punish and forgive, but they forget that these divine beings are above even that; their actions are not simply reactive to yours. (You think you have that much power to shift the weight of their choices?!) Rather, they do what they must to sustain balance. It was in this understanding that I could remain unwavering in my acceptance of troubling times—they are necessary, I remind myself, as necessary as the joyous ones. Hanging onto this thread of my faith, I stilled.



Photograph by Bob Harvey from *WikiMedia Commons*.



Art by Joy Suguihara.

She Feels it All

Joy Suguihara

My intention behind this work was to reimagine Mother Nature in a deteriorated form, as opposed to something steady or eternal, as a representation of AI's impact on the environment. To make that deterioration feel more immediate and intimate, I portrayed her as a human-like figure, and I decided that her body, from bottom to top, would physically fall apart like damaged code. That visual distortion directly reflects how I perceive rapid technological advancement and artificial intelligence upsetting natural processes in ways that seem unstable and beyond our control. Additionally, I intended the exposed heart to symbolize a minor semblance of hope, conveying the idea that nature is delicate, but still alive. It implies that the environment is constantly under strain, reinforced by the glitching that extends throughout her body to highlight how environmental deterioration affects all systems simultaneously. However, she still attempts to persist. I portrayed AI as an unseen force that overlays and tampers with the natural environment around her rather than as a physical machine, as is the reality. AI's reliance on massive data centers, energy use, and resource extraction adds to environmental stress and carbon emissions. This tension is reflected in the media itself, as I initially used traditional pen and ink techniques for my outline and sketch, contributing to its organic character, and, in contrast, used computer techniques for the digitized color and fragmentation. In general, this work serves as a caution: I suggest that the future of the environment is directly tied to how responsibly we develop and use technology, rather than something that exists separate from it.

Reflections on a Series of Campus Bird Surveys

Ava Philson

The following entries were written during a series of bird surveys I conducted across sixteen sites on UCLA's campus between November 2025 and February 2026. These surveys were part of a larger research project mapping bird species diversity across campus that combined quantitative data collection with qualitative field reflection. These entries below are the qualitative component of that project, written the morning of each survey, serving as a record of what I noticed beyond what the data could capture.

11/30/2025: This morning was overcast, the kind of gray that diffuses light evenly rather than blocking it, with a slight chill in the air. During my short walk to Dickson Court South, I was made well aware of the birds' presence. They continued in the trees above and around me, their calls uninterrupted as I walked beneath them. I had entered their space, and they had not stopped for me. There was something in that indifference that felt welcoming. I walked amongst the bounty of figs strewn across the pathway, their bright and rosy interiors smashed brown by crowds of feet crossing through every day. This morning, I felt immense gratitude for campus, the grand trees we have, and the peace that feels so elusive when I am rushing to class. Being here on a Sunday morning, a time I am typically anywhere but campus physically and mentally, gifted me a perspective shift I rarely get during the week.

Walking to Dickson Court North, I was surprised by the difference in the birds over a short distance. Dickson Court North and South are separated by not much more than a road, and yet, crossing it felt like entering a different acoustic space entirely, the calls fewer and more dispersed than where I had just left. I sat on a low concrete border as I waited for a bird call to register on my phone, one that I did not recognize. Continuing to Bunche Hall, I heard a raucous burst of chirps from one short, unassuming tree whose canopy I saw was home to about 18 Bushtits. The Bunche Hall courtyard was teeming with birds beyond the Bushtits. A few were hunting for food on the ground, dark gray and deliberate in their movements, a different species I was still trying to identify. I tried crouching for a while, until eventually I stood up on the low concrete border edging the garden bed, hoping none of the birds noticed me hovering at a distance. As I looked behind me, I was glad there were few people on campus, given my climbing around. I then made my way to the Murphy Sculpture Garden, and was



69. Western Robin, *Turdus migratorius propinquus* (W)

Thus far, the Robins visit the campus only in winter (October to March) and have never been recorded in great numbers. Should we develop large areas of lawn in the coming years, I see no reason why we should not attract a few of them as nesting birds. Just exactly *that* has occurred on the Berkeley campus during the past fifty years. Also, they are beginning to nest about certain golf links in Pasadena.

70. Alaska Hermit Thrush, *Hylocichla guttata* (W)

"Hermit" is a good name for him, he slips in and out of the thicket so quietly, and even his delicious "whisper song," which he gives in March from the thick shrubbery under my office window, can be heard only from a few feet away. By October 10 I begin to listen for him.

71. Russet-backed Thrush, *Hylocichla ustulata* (S)

This thrush comes in from the south about a month after the Hermit Thrush has left for the north. He sings in the willows of Stone Canyon just north of the campus limits, but not until May 13, 1944, was he actually seen on the campus.

72. Western Bluebird, *Sialia mexicana occidentalis* (W)

Like his cousin, the Robin, the Bluebird is a winter visitor—a situation that the eastern visitor finds surprising. But then, he must expect California to be different—else why did he come? Bluebirds are rare with us. They may fly high overhead in passing to the more open areas near the beach.

73. Western Gnatcatcher, *Polioptila caerulea amoenissima* (R)

Along the sagey slopes of the Arroyo or of Faculty Ridge these quiet midgets are to be found at any season. They look like thumbnail sketches of the mockingbird but are as shy as the mocker *isn't*.

74. Ruby-crowned Kinglet, *Corthylio calendula ceneraceus* (W)

Early October may bring the first Ruby-crown, and a few weeks later they are everywhere about the campus that a small insect might be found. In mid-March they begin their piping little song which means that the urge to migrate will soon take them away to the northward.

Illustrations from *Birds of the Campus: University of California, Los Angeles*. Text by Loye Miller, illustrations by Robert C. Stebbins. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1947.

quickly stopped by the sound of two squirrels chasing each other on a tree branch, bickering and chittering. Always pleased to look at squirrels, I stood as one of them stopped, completely splayed out perpendicular to the ground, the other having run away up the tree. For the first time ever, I watched a squirrel stretch. It was such a funny sight, given that it was holding onto the bark by its feet, curving its arms up off the tree. Seeing that, I could imagine the same feeling in my arms. What a strange thing to be able to do, to relate to a squirrel. He saw me and started waddling over, eventually stopping a few feet away from me on his hind legs, with his arms curled up to his chest as if he was begging me for food. When he realized I was not going to give him anything, he walked to another tree close to me and sat there splayed out again, looking over at me every so often. All the while, a Song Sparrow was scratching the ground with its feet, looking for insects to eat. I could not tell what bird it was at first. My camera was not sharp enough for iNaturalist (a citizen science data app) to capture it clearly, and I later confirmed it as a Song Sparrow through the call I had recorded on Merlin Bird ID (an app that identifies bird calls).

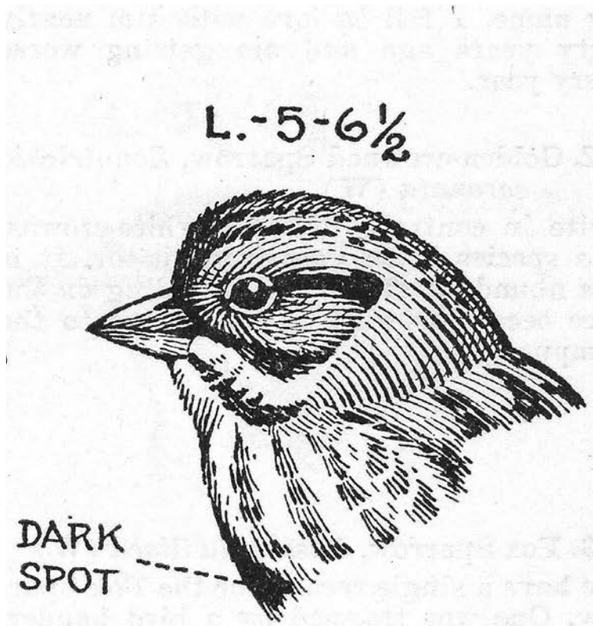
Sitting there on the low concrete border, I felt as if I were a fellow being with this squirrel and sparrow, each of us adjusting to the other, each of us aware. I heard another squirrel duo tussle, and walked over to get a better look, but those squirrels were dancing up in the treetop. I craned my neck, bent low, but still could not see them well. At that moment, I was moving only with the goal of noticing in mind. Hunting is not the right word for it, but just as the birds searched for bugs, and the squirrels watched me, I was also looking for something right there in that glen. Presence, maybe, or at least the possibility of it. The calls had not stopped when I first walked over, and they did not stop now. I had not been invited exactly, but I had not been turned away either.

1/18/2026: While walking around the cluster of trees right in front of Bunche Hall, I saw a squirrel drinking from a sprinkler. It was really amusing because it looked like it was drinking from its very own squirrel-sized water fountain. I value these sorts of amusing sights as much-welcomed interruptions of the sustained concentration that dominates my time in the field. For most of my time at this site, I sat on the low concrete garden border near the vending machines, watching birds appear on Merlin and looking up to find them settling briefly on branches above me.

However, I happened to see one bird jumping around the foliage silently, and got up to follow and identify it. It kept weaving in and out through the understory of this small grove, searching for food on the ground while unknowingly evading my view. This continued, and I moved to stand on the low concrete garden border for a better view, until I noticed a family walking from the Murphy Sculpture Garden. Whether they registered what I was doing at all, I cannot say. But the fact that I assumed my behavior required justification, and that adjusting my movements for the sake of following a bird read in my own mind as something that needed explanation, says more than any glance from a stranger could. We so rarely move for animals that when we do, it is perceived as strange, even to ourselves.

I pondered how little humans move out of the way for animals, at least in this urbanized setting. Even beyond the city, it is animals who move for us. We expect them to. Birds spring into flight for cars barreling towards them. Move or die is the message sent by roadkill on a highway. In a less morbid context, we stand our ground without thought when a squirrel is a few feet ahead on a sidewalk; a butterfly on a bush we brush past on a hike barely registers. This may not even be because of human entitlement alone, but also due to how our cities are designed, which at a larger scale has life-or-death consequences. Cougars and bears on the margins of hilly communities lose their habitat as development encroaches, and are a public danger when they refuse to. What does it mean to invert this and move for animals—to allow them into the flux of our lives and the everyday movements we make? I found myself lingering with that question on this particular morning more than I expected to. My assumption that what I was doing appeared weird to the family, or at least out of the ordinary, made me pause. I could not know what they really thought, or if they thought anything at all. What I do know is that the assumption came quickly and without much examination: the idea that moving deliberately for an animal, in a space designed entirely for human use, is something that requires explanation. I am not sure what to make of that yet, but it seems worth sitting with. The simple act of following a bird through a grove, adjusting my path and my body without being asked to, was not something I had done before. I am not sure it would have occurred to me to notice that if the bird had not made it necessary.

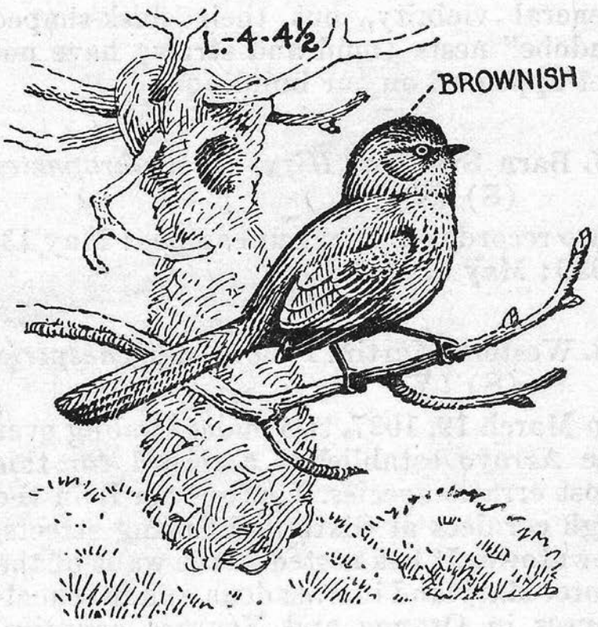
2/11/2026: Before I saw any birds this morning near Moore Hall, I heard them. The Yellow-rumped Warblers came into view only after I had already been standing still for a moment, pecking and flitting through the grass in front of Franz Hall. A few of them chased and bumped each other, trying to establish their place in the frenzy. Whether their interactions were playful or not, to me they seemed to be, and reminded me of students sprawled out on the grass of Janss Steps on a slow afternoon, some tossing a ball and others lying in the grass, each absorbed in their own world while collectively filling a space. Arriving at the set of staircases between



115. Song Sparrow, *Melospiza melodia cooperi* (R)

Twenty-six varieties of song sparrows are recognized by the expert within the United States and ten of them are resident within this state. But wherever you meet him, he's the same cheerful little streaky brown bird that sings at the first light of dawn in summer or winter in a city garden or the weed patch by a desert water hole. *And* he's just as happy at noon. I wish Mrs. Browning had known about the American song sparrow. She could have done him justice. I can't. Get acquainted with him yourself.

NOTE: Many of these campus dates have been contributed by my colleagues, Drs. Sarah R. Atsatt, R. B. Cowles, and R. C. Stebbins.

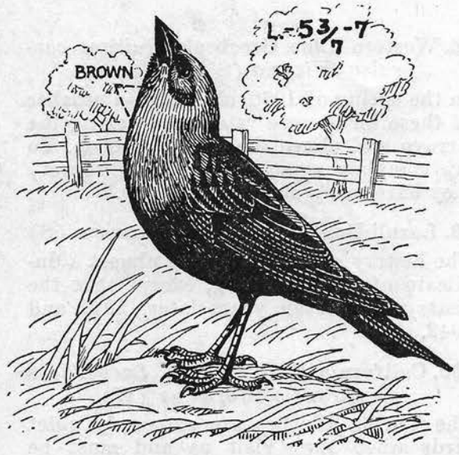


63. Coast Bush-tit, *Psaltriparus minimus* (R)

Present when we arrived, these busy midgets have moved into the new trees about the buildings almost as fast as we have planted them. Their stocking-shaped nests have been built within a few feet of our doorsteps. Always in motion and always vocal in a "microscopic" way, they are easily located if you come anywhere near them.

Royce Hall and the Fowler Museum, I set up a recording on Merlin and waited for calls and songs to register. When nothing popped up a minute or two later, I was quick to think there was something I had done wrong, whether I had chosen the wrong position, moved too quickly through the site, or simply not given the space enough time to settle around me. I walked down the stairs slowly, and sure enough, the calls of a Song Sparrow, Great-tailed Grackle, and several others appeared during my stroll towards the Fowler Museum. This is a reaction I have noticed in myself several times during these surveys, where I expect immediately to register calls, and when that does not happen in seconds, I assume that there is something I must fix. In fact, noticing the birds, even on my app, apparently, takes a moment of real attentiveness. I must stand there and listen, turning my mind away from what I expect to happen. This morning near the Fowler, it took a full two minutes of stillness before anything appeared. I can only speak to what I noticed during these mornings, and noticing is always shaped by who is doing the looking. But what I found, repeatedly, was that the birds did not operate on my timeline. They were neither early nor late. They were simply in the moment they were in. Learning to meet them there, even briefly, felt like its own kind of radical multispecies practice.

95



94. Brewer's Blackbird, *Euphagus cyanocephalus* (R)

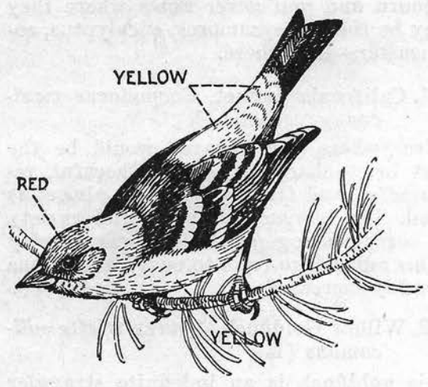
The Blackbirds are such businesslike workmen. They go about their lawn workers' patrol so cheerfully and move aside for hurrying humans with only a mild-mannered "chuck" or two—then come right back, or else take it up again a few feet away. I'm sure the Blackbirds will always be with us—and right welcome, too.

95. Dwarf Cowbird, *Molothrus ater obscurus* (S)

In late April or early May these erratic birds generally appear about the Esplanade. Mixed groups of males and females wander here and there. Occasionally they drop down onto the lawn with their larger cousins, the Blackbirds, but the brown heads of the males and the smaller size will distinguish them at once.

L.-6⅓-7

96



96. Western Tanager, *Piranga ludoviciana* (T)

These brilliant birds cross the campus in early May, as a rule (May 8, May 3, May 17), and may be reported from the sycamores, oaks, or the Botany Garden pines.

97



97. Black-headed Grosbeak, *Hedymeles melanocephala* (S)

The Grosbeaks cross the campus on their way into the hills. About the first week of July they begin drifting back. Miss Dorothy Groner reports a nest on Faculty Ridge, May 17, 1944. I see no reason why they should not some day be a common nesting bird within our limits.

Moving Away from Stillness

Kylie Bach

Growing up in San Diego, I would drive myself in the late afternoon to the coast, hoping not to miss the orange-pink-purple gradient that filled the sky. The horizon softens, the air cools down, and the light slowly shifts—just enough where you can actually watch it change. The ocean has always felt peaceful to me because of its steadiness. Watching the waves wash in and out grounds me. It makes me feel as if everything will be okay. Watching a sunset requires patience and presence. You can't rush it. You just stand in it.

Over time, I've noticed that my sense of immersion has shifted. I still feel deeply absorbed, but now it happens more often inside screens. School, work, deadlines, messages—it seems as though everything in my life exists within digital environments. I'm constantly engaged. I move from tab to tab and notification to notification, but I don't feel centered.

When I feel overwhelmed, I find myself reaching for my phone. It feels productive, or at the very least, is a great distraction. It fills the silence quickly. Silence is where I notice nature the most. It's one of the only times nothing is asking anything from me, and there is space.

Sometimes, taking the time to go outside feels like a waste of time. Like I should be doing something more measurable. But the natural world doesn't operate with this sense of urgency—it relies on cycles, repetition, and patience. This pace is one that almost feels unnatural to me now.

I wanted to create something that I could move through—something that exists in the digital world, but still feels thoughtful. Using Figma allowed me to build intentionally. Each screen holds one thought at a time, and the pacing is simple yet deliberate. The experience is meant to feel quiet.

When I started working on this project, I noticed how my relationship with nature exists as a memory. The ocean feels the same when I return to it; what has changed is my attention. Instead of focusing on what is immediately in front of me, I have been more preoccupied, more rushed.

Maybe nothing is lost at all. Maybe I've just allowed urgency to replace stillness. Perhaps returning to nature doesn't require a dramatic shift. Maybe it can be something as small as not wearing earbuds while walking through campus. It can be as simple as giving myself space to notice what is already there.

The natural world hasn't moved away. Rather, I moved away from it.



the ocean

it feels peaceful
like everything
will be okay.

San Diego, CA
7:42pm
Sunset

when do i notice
nature?

usually in moments of
silence

when nothing is asking
anything from me

i forget it

when i’m busy
When i’m preoccupied
with whatever is right in
front of me

school

sometimes it makes
being outside

feel like a waste of time

when i’m overwhelmed

i reach for my phone

i tell myself I should go
on walks more

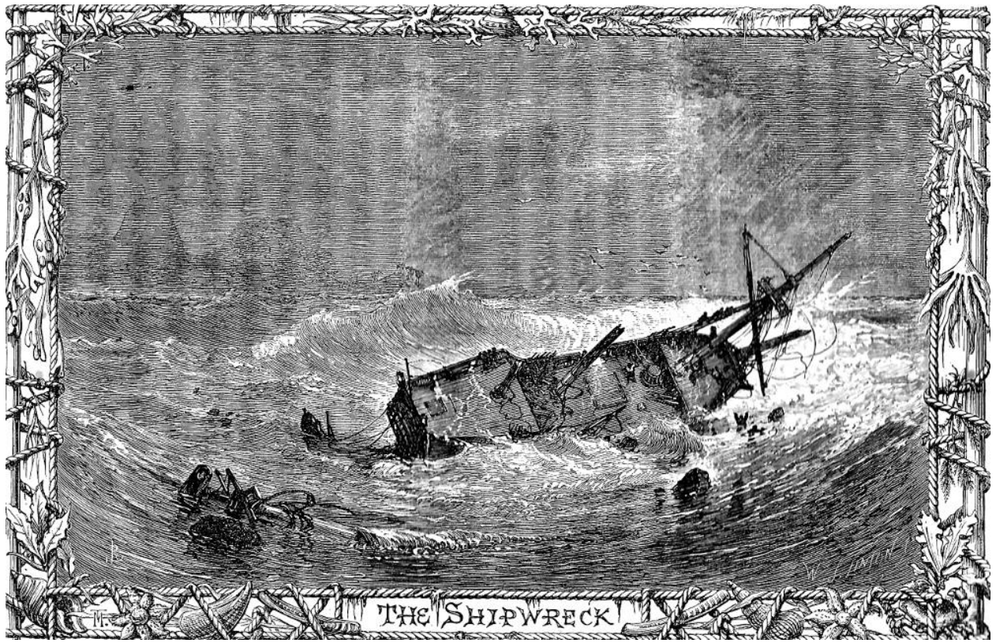
or find better ways to deal
with anxiety

maybe nothing changed

maybe I just stopped
noticing

step outside

**Use this QR Code
to access the app**



The Crew Take to the Boat. Drawing by Philip V. Allingham from Victorianweb.org.

One Man's Trash Is Another Man's Treasure

Alyssa Wong

Maritime spaces are marked by waste in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Ming-Yi Wu's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011). The titular character of Defoe's novel spends twenty-eight years as a castaway, beginning his journey by salvaging his shipwreck's debris. The ensemble cast of *The Man with the Compound Eyes*—including Atile'i, a teen from the fictional island Wayo Wayo, and Alice, a professor—face sea changes when the Trash Vortex, an enormous island of pollution, crashes ashore in Taiwan. While Defoe's text echoes eighteenth century dismissals of waste informed by a burgeoning capitalist economy, Wu's work reflects more contemporary environmental outlooks that prioritize repurposing waste and tending to the natural world. Considering Defoe's background as an English merchant and Wu's as a Taiwanese scholar, their characters' relations to the environment are as cultural and geographic as they are economic. Whether it be through the characters' antithetical uses of waste or their psychological resonances with the sea, each novel's distinct approach to oceanic spaces and waste reveals the historical, economic, and cultural factors that shape human connections with the environment.

Beginning with *Robinson Crusoe*, the paradox of extractive capitalism is exhibited when Crusoe's actions lead to infinite growth despite finite resources. Equipped with mere "diligence," he recovers a near-infinite number of items from the exhaustible shipwreck. This is emphasized by the extended use of asyndetic listing to describe even "several things of less value," including "three or four compasses, some mathematical instruments, dials, perspective glasses, charts, and books of navigation." Such items are in addition to the food, liquor, cutlery, clothes, carpentry materials, ammunition, and arms that Crusoe obtains. In all, he returns to the ship *a dozen* times to scavenge waste. With this material glut, Crusoe cuts the figure not of a survivalist recovering "some necessary things," but of a capitalist "with all [his] wealth about [him]." In other words, he refigures waste into a sort of accumulative excess, whereupon his capitalist impulses reign supreme.

On the other hand, self-sustaining economic thought is present in *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, where Atile'i's upcycling of the Trash Vortex's industrialized waste more closely reflects a circular economy based on regeneration. When he finds plastic bags, he recalls "bags like this on Wayo Wayo," remembering how islanders "used them to hold water." He also "pick[s] up lots of sodden, ripped […] clothing," noting "one seemed to be able to wear them once they were dry." Repurposing items produced to be disposable, like single-use plastics and fast fashion, acts as a criticism of industrial pollution by proving that items discarded as waste can be kept in continuous use. The Vortex—a literal consequence of "extract[ing] so much from the environment"—becomes an idealized, closed-loop circular economy, a trash island where waste itself is technically being eliminated. The importance of a sustainable economy to the Pacific island nations to which Wayo Wayo fictionally belongs is highlighted by Fijian anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa, who notes renewable economics preserves an ocean essential for "the stability of the global environment." If *Robinson Crusoe*'s fantasy is extractive capitalism, *The Man with the Compound Eyes*' fantasy is a regenerative economy. Likewise, Wu's work blends Indigenous management of nature with a viable economic system that does not deplete the story world, but instead replenishes it.

Accordingly, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* represents an Indigenous knowledge system that not only respects the environment, but also imbues it with an other-than-human life of its own. Indeed, the characters in Wu's novel frequently display curiosity and wonder toward aspects of the natural world that might be considered "waste." For instance, when Alice's friend Hafay, an Indigenous Pangcah woman, recalls her childhood memories of the weed-like silvergrass, she also recalls its association with her mother and birth village, linking "the view of the silverflowers" with "what home looked like." "View" can be taken as polysemic, referring to both the physical landscape of Hafay's "home," but also nature's own visual capacities—the silverflowers' "view" of *their* "home." Uniting the two aspects of the word "view" dismantles an anthropocentric understanding of perception, which evinces Wu's position that the natural world has its own awareness, or even knowledge, of and about itself. When Detlef—a German tunnel-boring machine consultant—enters a mountain that should only be "waste" to drill through, he finds himself overcome by its beauty: "water trickling through the fissures [...] like little unexplored alternate universes." The notion of "unexplored alternate universes" again elicits the



Marine pollution. Photograph by Christian Yakubu from *Wikimedia Commons*.

idea of seeking out nature's mysterious capacities with the desire to learn, thus triumphing a myopic definition of the environment as waste. Notably, this sentiment of environmental care is strongly cross-national, shared by two vastly different characters. Indeed, literary critic Shiuhhuah Serena Chou argues that Wu's text revolves around a "cross-culture alliance," that of Atile'i and Alice. Through these two characters, we can see the benefits of an open attitude to diverse knowledge exchanges. Such benefits surpass the intrinsic merit in fluid and flexible exchange by providing tangible help as well. When Alice collects "wild food plants" based on Hafay's Pangcah knowledge, she improves her gathering once Atile'i realizes certain "wild ferns" are edible, hence giving consumptive use to a plant considered waste under another knowledge system.

Crusoe, in contrast, remains deeply incurious about island life outside of its utility to him. Animals and plants that Crusoe cannot use (or does not know how to use) are consigned to waste. When Crusoe encounters a baby goat, he hopes at first to "tame" it; failing to do so, he instead "eat[s]" it. For Crusoe, animals fall into one of three categories: "good meat," "domestics," or else waste. He refers to his cats' kittens first as "the increase of his family," but once "pestered" by them, he "kill[s] them like vermin." The abrupt shift from the intimacy of "family" to the apathy of "vermin" illustrates the ease with which Crusoe views the kittens as waste once they are no longer serviceable as "domestics." He is similarly uninterested in Indigenous knowledge of island flora, knowledge that is to him waste. In one instance, Crusoe finds a tree that "in the Brazils they call the iron-tree." Despite its "exceeding hardness," Crusoe forces the Indigenous tree to fit an English shape, creating a shovel "exactly shaped like ours in England." Although aware that the shovel "would not last [him] long," any Brazilian woodworking knowledge is waste to Crusoe, such that any English alternative (however nonfunctional) suffices. Indeed, where economic philosopher Karl Marx characterizes Crusoe as a "true-born Briton" for his meticulous productivity, Crusoe's belief in English ways as superior surely also mark him as such a "Briton," mirroring wider early eighteenth-century English industrial and colonial attitudes. Crusoe's survivalism is not innocent, but instead takes on the character of the nascent empire. As such, there are no consequences to Crusoe's lack of and disinterest in Indigenous knowledge. In fact, he manages to cultivate "perfect green barley, of the same kind as [...] our English barley"—an outcome that exalts English knowledge as the only knowledge necessary, no matter the geographic setting.

But incurious though he may be, Crusoe is no unfeeling character. When Crusoe finds money on his shipwreck, he understates it as "not worth to [him]," but keeps it across twenty-eight years, even taking it with him when he finally leaves the island. Though his possession of the money over decades may be economically motivated, it also represents Crusoe's desire to rejoin humanity. His refusal to view the money as waste thus stands in for his lasting hopes of ending his isolation, wherein he is "singled out and separated [...] to be miserable." The shipwreck whose waste provides Crusoe with profit also incites in him a "renewing of [his] grief" over being "entirely destitute of all comfort and company." Without any "company," Crusoe goes as far as likening himself to the waste of a corpse, declaring "to have seen one of my own species would have seemed to me a raising me from death to life." Such a moment of companionship does eventually arrive when Crusoe meets Friday, an Indigenous island inhabitant, later in the novel. However, Nicole Pepperell, a professor who studies critical social theory, argues their relationship is more of "a master–slave relation." While Friday's "indefinite servitude," as Pepperell calls it, is certainly problematic, Crusoe still displays affection for Friday, particularly on the occasions when he tolerates the loss of product or profit for him. For instance, when Friday reunites with his father, Crusoe gifts him "a cake of bread" that was "carried on purpose" as well as rum and raisins. More significantly, Crusoe retains Friday in Europe even while hiring a new servant. While Pepperell cites this as further "commitment" to "a master–slave relation," the money Crusoe wastes in this may hint at a crude emotional bond, especially while his traveling companions "conten[t]" themselves with one servant between two, to save the charge."

In *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, grief is also conveyed through the imagery of waste. Alice, who is grieving her deceased husband and son, begins the novel having "decided to kill herself." Not only has Alice come to view her own life as a "waste," but the emptiness and waste of the Sea House, a home with intimate ties to her family, becomes symbolic of her depression. Even before the Sea House is visited on the page, Alice uses similes to invoke its wreckage, comparing the future to "an empty space like a basement" and words to "stones being tossed into an empty house." The repetition of "empty" implies both absence (i.e., Alice's literal loss of kin) as well as a lack of purpose (i.e., Alice's consequent despair). When seeing the Sea House itself, Hafay wonders if it is "still habitable." Such a query links the waste of the Sea House to Alice's emotional state, as the house is both unlivable and Alice herself no longer wants to live. In other words, just as the Sea House is not "habitable," neither is Alice's devastated body. Only after meeting Atile'i does Alice begin to process her grief, including with a dive to the now-submerged Sea House. While plunging into the sea, she sees "myriad plastic objects floating in various poses, like the unknown organisms of an alien world." With mundane "plastic objects" turned "unknown" and "alien," the transformation of the familiar into the strange reflects the emotional strangeness of Alice's return to a drowned home. However, this peculiarity does not ensnare Alice in continual grief. Instead, it removes her from the waste of the Sea House, as the life implied by personifying plastic as "alien" and "organisms"

mirrors Alice's acceptance of her loss and renewed desire to live.

Like Alice, Atile'i begins the novel with his life as "waste," being a sacrificial second son on Wayo Wayo. Accordingly, he too employs waste in the processing of his grief, such as when he prays for his corpse to "turn into coral and drift homeward for [his lover] Rasula to find." This desire to become waste to return home is eventually paralleled by Atile'i's decision to sail home in a boat he makes out of waste. But Atile'i's decision to return home proves to be in vain when the Trash Vortex obliterates Wayo Wayo. In response, the sperm whale spirits of its second sons render themselves waste, beaching themselves on Taiwan's shores in their grief with "grim eyes, cracked skin and crushed ribs." However, their deaths are not necessarily purely "waste." Atile'i stated earlier in the novel the Sea Sage of Wayo Wayo's belief that "every beached whale would leave behind valuable wisdom concerning the future and fate of the island." Although Wayo Wayo has been "consigned to oblivion," the whales' deaths are thus implied to impart lasting knowledge to a wider world that will endure past its current climate crisis. This is seen in the temporal phrases Wu uses when describing the scientists who come to study the dying whales, speaking of how the scientists will behave "till the end of their days," and of how they will "reminisc[e] in later days."

As Wang et al. write, Wayo Wayo echoes real "locales like Bikini Island, the desolate 'trash towns' on China's eastern coast [...], chemical enterprises in Japan and Taiwan, and even the Maldives." *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is deeply concerned with the real-world need to halt environmental destruction, with Wu's treatment of waste functioning as a plea for empathy, connection, and action. *In Robinson Crusoe*, on the other hand, waste is simply a byproduct of the profit gained by exploiting environmental resources, mirroring real-world colonial and capitalist ventures. This distinction is what ultimately makes Defoe and Wu's configurations of waste so dissimilar, from how Crusoe's extractive capitalism creates the conditions that make *The Man with the Compound Eyes*' circular economy compelling, to their contrasting attitudes of a narrow versus expansive attention toward natural and cultural environments. However, both novels are ultimately similar in their use of waste to convey grief and loneliness in forms as different and as universal as Alice's mourning of her husband and her son, Atile'i's separation from home, and Robinson Crusoe's own lengthy isolation.

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Mother and baby sperm whale. Photograph by Gabriel Barathieu from *Wikimedia Commons*.

Looking Backwards

Louise Goldman

When they started building the L.A. River,
They had their water and drank it too.
Starlets and moguls sailed boats and sipped champagne on Owens Lake.
Flanked by mountains for 100 square miles,
she was invincible, breathtaking—
so blue you couldn't even imagine.

Seventy-three years and seven trillion gallons later,
Southern California's greatest lake was sucked dry,
as if by the mosquitoes breeding in its now-stagnant waters.
Swallowed by a city for a river
that barely trickles through a concrete gulch.
What good is a yacht club on a salt flat?

When they sent men to the moon,
they weren't trying to see the Earth they left behind.
But there, through the rocket's window,
she lay in all her glory—
so blue you couldn't even imagine.

A near-extinct, near-perfect butterfly,
tattered wings pinned against dusty black velvet—
a trophy of conquest, or
proof that actions have consequences.

So:

Weigh anchor, business major;
Heaven knows you're starbound.
But what will you see
when you turn around?



Los Angeles River. Photograph by Downtowngal from *Wikimedia Commons*.



Apollo 8: Earthrise, 2020, from NASA.



Diya. Photograph by Kritzolina from *Wikimedia Commons*.

Echoes of Home

Priya Grewal

When I was little, my grandmother would wake before sunrise every day. In the light golden hues of early morning, she would make her way into our backyard with a small clay pot of water. I would sleepily follow after her, the grass cool and wet beneath my bare feet.

She would turn her face toward the rising sun and whisper a soft prayer, offering the water to it. "For Surya," she would say excitedly, "we give thanks before we begin." The Sun Salute filled me with a vibrancy and energy I could not quite put into words. It gave me the strength and courage to move forward with my day, igniting me with the power of the sun itself.

Although I did not fully comprehend the significance of these moments at the time, I loved the way the world felt at that hour—slow, beautiful, and fully present. The vibrant colors blending into the sky, the fog settling into the foliage, the trees whispering a forbidden song, and the hum of birds calming my spirit reminded me of the real reason to live.

Behind our home stood a tall neem tree. Its branches stretched long and wide, patient and protective. My grandmother referred to this neem tree as our silent guardian. She told me stories of villages in Punjab where such trees were planted when a child was born, growing with the little ones. "The tree remembers your life," she would say. "It breathes alongside you; never fret—it will be here, just for you, always." A blanket of reassurance and tranquility entered my soul.

One summer afternoon, when the heat felt particularly unbearable, I sat beneath this neem tree feeling restless and anxious about who I was. At school, I tried to smooth out the parts of me that felt too different: the smell of cardamom in my lunch, my name foreign and unfamiliar to many, and the oil my mother would apply in my hair, a tradition passed down through generations.

But under this tree, I did not feel different. I felt seen, heard, valued, and appreciated.

The wind moved through its leaves with an unwavering, steady whisper. I leaned my back against its rough bark, picturing its strong roots spreading deep within the earth—roots that did not apologize for where they came from. The same soil that nourished my neem tree had also nourished my grandfather's fields in India. A different piece of land, the same sun. The sky stretched above, holding stories as old as time.

That very evening, my grandmother brought out a small diya and placed it at the base of the tree. The tiny flame sat in a small clay pot and flickered bravely in the dark. "Light," she whispered to me, "is never wasted. It remains and stays for as long as we are allotted."

As I watched the flame dance and move, I came to a powerful realization: my heritage was not separate from the natural world around me. Time and time again, I had been made to feel small and ashamed of my culture. From the way I dressed and the language I spoke to the food I ate, I was made to feel that I had to hide it. However, the turmeric in our kitchen came from the very earth I tread. The cotton of my kurta began as a plant. The prayers I softly spoke every morning and night were older than borders, older than cities, carried by the same passion and verve as my ancestors before me. I can feel them around me wherever I go, their ghostlike whispers carried by the wind.

My neem tree never asked me to choose between two worlds. It simply stood there, rooted and reaching out to me whenever I needed—and even when I did not.

That night, as the evening air rushed in and the crickets began calling out, I felt a kind of peace I had not felt in a long time. Like my neem tree, I could learn to feel a sense of belonging in more than one place. I could carry stories across oceans without forgetting my roots. I could aid others who had felt just as lost as I had, especially those who are not yet able to find their voices.

In the quiet rustle of leaves above me, it felt as though the earth itself was agreeing with me. The night no longer felt burdened with heaviness or uncertainty, but full of stories, memories, and a quiet strength that was always present, silently waiting for me to notice. I closed my eyes and allowed the sounds to settle into my spirit—the chirping crickets, the soft crackle of the diya beside me, and the distant hum of life vibrating around me.

Belonging was not something that could be granted by others, nor taken away from me. It was something I carried within me, rooted as deeply as my neem tree. The parts of me I once tried to hide were not burdens, but bridges connecting me to my ancestors.

In the days that followed, I no longer rushed past the small moments, but instead felt a strong desire to remain present within them. The scent of spices in my home felt richer, more grounding. The sound of my name, which I had once winced at, I now carried with quiet pride. Each morning, when the sun rose, I whispered a silent thanks alongside my grandmother, appreciating not just the day ahead, but also the path behind me that shaped who I was.

And even now, whenever I feel uncertain or out of place, I return to the memory of my neem tree—the flame dancing, the steady presence of something that never questioned who I was or doubted me in the slightest. In doing so, I remind myself that I am allowed to take up space, to grow, and to belong exactly as I am.



neem tree, *Azadirachta indica*. Photograph by PJeganathan from *Wikimedia Commons*.

My Creature

Kiara Velez

Gentle hands lift me cautiously, easing me upwards and placing my small weight on the balance beam of adjoined palms. My black beads follow the hands of the being I know they belong to: my creature with short black hair on its head. My taloned toes are spread for balance while my creature walks on talon-less red and black stubs. Such an odd appearance, my creature. I have grown used to it, though. After all, they are hardly different from the other creatures that used to live in this nest. But the other creatures did not scrub the ash from my feathers or save me from my broken home. They did not care for me as my creature does.

My creature places one stub after another, moving from my nest (the best of the row because I am the best weaver) through perfectly identical and rectangular rocks, and pushes through the wall of the nest into the passageway beyond.

I dart my eyes back and forth between my creature and the passageway. I have not been this far from my nest in a long time, and it makes me uneasy. My creature tilts its head down to me and pulls its lips upwards, baring their teeth. I know now that this is not a sign of aggression, but rather my creature's way of communicating, so I chirp in response. A few moments later, my creature's lips steadily fall back to a tight line. They look sad and I do not know why.

My creature eases me onto one of their palms as we walk down a long passageway. I try to settle in as much as I can, my toes scratching the surface of their skin. Two more creatures stand at the end of this corridor, one on either side of an opening where orange sunlight pours through. I know this light and I am glad to see it, chirping more and jumping around my creature's palm with excitement. At least I understand why we are here now.

Or, at least, I thought I did. My creature makes a noise and the other two respond, turning to grab what looks like a skull with vines connecting the jaw and nose to a grid-textured circle attached to the front. I watch as the other creatures place the vined skull upon my creature's head like a laurel and new face all at once. The skull hisses and I flinch.

It does not seem like a malicious act, but I worry what they *are doing to my creature.* The creatures that guard the door step back, and at some cue unknown to me, my creature flails a hand towards them. I have learned that this is often a greeting, or in this case, a farewell. Yeah, good riddance, I chirp as we move from the passage and into the light. Though I am still confused as to what is on my creature's face, I am glad to be away from the others.

I blink as we are bathed in orange, squinting at the smog-smothered sky, and I chirp with joy. For years, my creature always protected me with their barriers in the nest. It was challenging to learn where they were at first—I bumped into more than I can count despite the markers on them– but then I got used to them.

Now, I soak in unfiltered light—*natural* light. *I have never felt the sun so strongly before!* My feathers are already warm. I breathe in, expecting something cool and refreshing, only to be shocked with the opposite. The air out here is hot and dirty with a heaviness that suffocates. I can practically feel the particles sticking to my feathers.

My creature's breath comes loud and slow through the skull. We walk for some time, passing creatures like mine but still none that I recognize. Then we stop. I look down and see



Dark-eyed Junco. Photograph by Paul Danese from *Wikimedia Commons*.



Red-tailed Hawk on power pole. Photograph by Frank Schulenburg from *Wikimedia Commons*.

that we stand atop a hill. The stone descends in identical chunks ahead with beautiful brown grass and trees on either side. *I have never had so much space or grass before!* Fascinated by this novel landscape, I try to gaze out, but my view is inhibited by the murky sky. *What an odd place.*

My creature moves to one of the nearby rocks and places me down. My talons connect with the surface, and I nearly jump out of my feathers. *This rock is so different from the rock in the nest.* I flutter from one side to another, testing the surface and marveling at its imperfect cracks and crevices. I look back to my creature, eager to glimpse the teeth that I am sure are bared, but what I see stops me immediately.

My creature's talons have reached up, pulling down the vined skull from their face. Their true face is revealed once again, but I see no teeth. They move so that their face rests on the rock, eye-to-eye with me. Their large white wings wrap the air around me like a pristine cage.

I tilt my head to one side and hop towards their face. I have never seen them act this way. They move their maw and I listen intently to the sounds, trying desperately to interpret their meaning. Their talons move and I stay still, allowing them to entrap my body.

Using a tool I have not seen before, they cut the colorful bracelets from my legs! The very same ones they gave to me as a welcome present! My bracelets—all gone! Then my creature stands, pulling their white wings away from me. Once again, they place the skull to their head as the face I have come to adore vanishes from my sight. A wing and talons raise up and flail at me slowly.

No. I hop forward and chirp quietly. *Why are they saying goodbye?* My creature lowers their wings and wraps both around their body. *Wait wait wait*. One hop, two, and I am flapping my wings, lifting off into flight. I struggle after my creature, who continues to move away from the rock, the hillside, me.

It has been so long since I have flown outside the nest and a gust of wind pounces on me, flinging me aside and off course. *Where are you going? Why are you leaving me?* Flying through valleys, I chase after my creature. After such a fight I am exhausted, wings heavy as though I had been drenched in water. I emerge from around the mountain and catch my creature walking through the passageway to the nest—*our nest*! I chase after them, flap flap flap, please please *please*.

My head collides with a barrier and I tumble downwards, watching as the passage walls close around my creature. They did not look back.

Their image becomes blurrier, hazier, and my world goes black.

*

It has been three suns since my creature left. I have spent that time fluttering around, learning how to fight the wind, learning how to prey upon insects, learning how to be alone.

I miss the cool comfort of the nest. I miss my companions, when they were there. I miss finding food quickly, and finding a lot. And most of all, I miss my creature, bared teeth and weird tools and all.

Landing in a patch of brush, I survey my immediate surroundings, looking for a sign of motion or berries or something else—*anything*. Then a branch above me jolts and it is not because of the wind. "Haven't seen one of you in a long time," a voice said. I freeze. I look up and find another winged fellow perched on the branch! Larger than me, with big yellow eyes, it tilts its head and stares at me.

"I haven't seen anyone that looks like you before!"

My new friend chuckles and I abandon my hunt for food for now, opting instead to hop up onto the branch too. They are beautiful up close, big brown and white feathers with a curved beak. Powerful. My new friend speaks in a high-pitched screech. "Where did you come from, little one?"

"A nest in a far away mountain."

"All by yourself?"

"No…" I hesitate, pained. "I lived there with my creature."

"Do you mean a human? The ones that walk outside with big masks on?"

"Masks? Do you mean the vined skulls? If so, then yes, that sounds like my creature."

"Wow." My friend ruffled his feathers, pulling his wings closer to his body. "I think I'd hate that. I remember my own encounter with a human. It left me with a reminder." My friend lifted his leg to reveal two bracelets, one silver and one red.

"You have bracelets too!"

"Too?" He looked at my legs where my bracelets had once been.

"Oh, right." I tried to laugh off my sorrow. "My crea- my human took them off when I was kicked out of the nest."

"Oh, is that so? They probably just lost funding."

"Funding?"

"Yeah. Humans, the ones that put what you call bracelets on us, they're a special kind of human called scientists. They study other animals like us. The bracelets are to identify us. They probably couldn't keep studying you anymore. Let you go so you'd be *better off*."

I stare at the brush I was just in, trying to process. "So, my human did not want to let me go?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

I frowned. He smiled. "It'll be alright, kid. Anyway, we better get outta here soon." He lifts a wing to the sky—the sky that I had failed

to notice was now black with smoke. “There’s a fire coming this way.”

A memory of blazing heat and violent color flickers across my vision. The crash of falling branches and rrrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiip of roots in which I kept my nest. The soot-smothered wind suffocating me. Then gentle talons and the face of my human, teeth bared and terrifying, lifting me from the ashes.

I shake my head and the memory fades. “I have to go warn my human,” I say, spreading my wings to take off.

“It doesn’t need you. You should worry about yourself.”

My eyes are a cold gush of air as I look at my friend. “I have to go. Thank you for all of your help.”

My friend shakes his head with equal parts pity and disappointment. I take off. It is a struggle, but I bounce and hop and glide to get back to my nest. Occasionally, I interrupt my flow and turn back, faced with ominous red on the horizon inching closer. Nearly there, I rest on a ledge, struggling to catch my breath and watching humans scuttle about beneath me like the insects I catch, travelling from inside the mountains to moving metal machines. The machines roar and I recoil in fear.

The crowd ties my stomach in knots, but my desire to find my human is overwhelming: I flap and am off once again. Turning the corner into a familiar valley, I spy the mountain that looks like where our nest is. Many humans are pouring out of the barrier, and there is a long row of roaring machines with humans perched inside. I scan for my human, slow and steady.

After some time, my mind begins to unravel. *How close is the fire?* The memory flickers over my vision again and the search for my human turns frantic. I hop about each machine in a panic. *I just want to go back to our nest*.

Thowehrtd. I hear a noise. *Thowehrtd*. There it is again! Riddled with nerves, I speed up my movements between the machines. I reach my fifth one, look about, and see my human! They pull the mask off of their face and flail their talons at me. Without the mask, they cough, but keep their teeth bared, happy to see me.

A warm, fuzzy feeling blooms in my breast. *They recognize me! Even without my bracelets!* They try to move towards me but are blocked by the crowd.

If my human cannot come to me… I take off. Flying over, I nearly crash into my human, barely slowing enough to perch on their shoulder instead of tumbling into it. The smoke grows thicker by the second, and humans peer in the direction of the flames not yet in sight, but soon to be visible. Yet, all my worldly worries have vanished. As long as I am with my human, everything will be alright. Finally safe, I relax, moving into a crouch on my human’s shoulder. And then they brush me off.

Harsh contact sweeps me aside, and I fall off my human. World spinning, my feathers unfurl to catch myself before I hit the ground. *What*?

I glide over to a mountain outcropping, looking back at the crowd and struggling to understand. I see my human pushing towards someone, but it is not me. No, I was not who they were trying to approach. It was another human sitting on the machine, slightly further away from where I was. They call to each other, caring and considerate. My human climbs onto the roaring machine, embraces the other human, and never once looks back at me.

I wait, hoping that I am wrong. Hoping that they will turn to find me. The crowd dissipates as most humans have found their loved ones and secured their belongings. One of the last to go, the machine my human is on roars off into the distance, moving farther and farther away. Leaving me behind.

Leaving me alone.

I tilt my head up and see that the sky is even blacker than before. The valleys and mountains I had flown through and explored were now bathed in crimson-orange light.



Sunrise during the Palisades Fire in Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Jessica Christian from *Unsplashed*.

mountains I had flown through and explored were now bathed in crimson-orange light.

I should have listened to my friend. I take their advice now, slipping away before the last of the machines turn around the corner, not waiting to see my human pass out of sight. I guess they were never *my* human at all.

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Quechua women weaving, Ollantaytambo, Peru. Photography by Thayne Tuason from *Wikimedia Commons*.

The Ecological Labor of Sustainability

Caitlyn Chang

High in the Andean mountains of Peru, a young woman cups a handful of wool. With three passes of her fingertips, she determines the sheep's grazing altitude, shearing season, and whether the fibers are strong enough to withstand a warp. She separates the locks by crimp structure and micron thickness with precision, guided by an expertise in local sheep breeds, a knowledge refined over generations (Merotto; Canestrelli).

This work is often dismissed in Western markets, either as an outdated practice disconnected from modern technology or nostalgic craft (Parker; Tello). In fact, from wool graders in Peru and herders in Mongolia to flax workers in Japan and fiber processors in Appalachia, women perform environmental labor that remains largely discounted. Yet, such work cannot be forgotten as inconsequential craft—it must be recognized as specialized ecological labor grounded in cultural knowledge and executed through touch. If we aim to reach a sustainable and just future, the labor of these women must be reframed as valid, embodied, and skilled. In doing so, the gendered and geographic inequities that have long permeated issues of the environment will be uncovered.

Female textile work is technically demanding ecological labor (Johnson et al.). Through years of intergenerational apprenticeship that teach highly specialized sensory and technical skills, women cultivate the ability to assess fiber quality through touch alone, making real-time decisions about sorting and processing based on environmental conditions, animal health, and intended textile use (FM-admin; Barnard et al; Merotto). Their work also supports biodiversity by maintaining locally adapted sheep breeds, camelid herds, and plant fibers suited to specific climates (Amos-Landgraf). Such practices reflect the precise ecological engineering that constitutes these women's labor: selecting and processing materials in ways that respond to temperature, soil, and seasonal variation while minimizing waste and environmental strain (Rocheleau; de la Bellacasa; Barnard et al.).

Unlike petrochemical textiles, which depend on fossil fuel extraction and rapid disposal, this sort of labor operates within a circular carbon cycle. Specifically, natural fibers store and release carbon through biological processes in lieu of introducing synthetic pollutants. The expertise required to produce sustainably closely aligns with the ecological goals of many contemporary industries, and yet, this gendered and Indigenous knowledge remains undervalued. This is not incidental, but instead constructed through specific social and institutional conditions—namely, Western, capitalist, and white-dominated systems.

The invisibility of these women's work uncovers the deep-seated biases present in how the Western world evaluates feminized and non-industrial labor. Outside scholars, markets, and cultural institutions routinely categorize women's textile labor as "tradition" or "craft" rather than as technology or science (Parker; Haraway). Such dismissive classifications render their labor static and trivial, obscuring the creative, perceptive, and flexible elements involved in fiber grading, animal breeding, and everyday environmental decision-making. This is, in part, due to the fact that this labor is situated within the underpaid domestic sphere, where textile production has historically been deemed an extension of women's obligatory household responsibilities rather than a form of valid ecological labor (Federici; Johnson et al.).

Capitalist systems further entrench this exclusion. Because textile knowledge is collectively held, orally transmitted, and embedded in practice rather than patented, it falls outside dominant frameworks of individual innovation and quantifiable economic value (Amos-Landgraf). This reflects a longstanding colonial practice that elevates industrial, extractive technologies as "modern" while devaluing Indigenous, rural, and women-led systems as obsolete (Whyte; Shiva). The marginalization of this labor is therefore not accidental but produced through intersecting systems of gender, capitalism, and colonial knowledge hierarchies.

These problematic and uneven dynamics have urgent consequences. As the textile industry markets itself as "sustainable," it often prioritizes technological solutions like biofabricated fibers or synthetics while overlooking already existing low-carbon systems. When "ethical" or "regenerative" materials are developed without the input and participation of communities that have long practiced these methods, sustainability is merely postured—it is a saleable aesthetic rather than a material reality (Shiva; Federici). In fact, materials like wool, hemp, or flax may still be produced through extractive supply chains, which only exacerbates environmental harm under a greener label while the communities that preserve regenerative systems face ongoing marginalization.

The issue is not only environmental but knowledge-based: sustainability depends not only on ecological outcomes but also on whose stories, information, strategies, and in-

sights are regarded as worth paying attention to. When leading climate frameworks ignore the gendered, racialized, and colonial histories that shape labor and knowledge valuation, they risk replacing functional ecological systems with less effective substitutes while continuing to exclude those most equipped to guide sustainable futures (Whyte).

Addressing this imbalance requires a fundamental reframing. The gendered labor of wool graders, herders, flax workers, and fiber processors must be recognized not as negligible artisanal heritage, but as the very expression of the specialized ecological knowledge needed today. This shift carries meaning beyond the ethical and into the material: inclusion in climate policy, access to sustainability funding, and direct economic support for the communities that hold and execute this knowledge. It also requires recognizing these women as legitimate contemporary experts whose knowledge and practices offer viable alternatives to petrochemical dependency.

Sustainable futures will not be built through technological innovation alone, but through supporting the people who have long practiced ecological resilience. Climate justice is unfinished until those who have sustained the world's ecological systems are recognized not as cultural artifacts, but as indispensable architects of its future.

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Peruvian woman spinning wool. Photograph by Guy Delsaut from *Wikimedia Commons*.



Art by Isabella Bonner.

Environmental Justice In Musical Theater Lyrics

Isabella Bonner

My project explores environmental justice through the lens of musical theatre and mixed media by drawing on the Broadway works of *Hair, Hadestown,* and *Urinetown*. Each of these musicals critiques social and political systems in ways that I felt parallelled environmental injustice, and I used them as narrative bases to build my visual piece. Across all three productions, I selected lyrics that I felt evoked passion against environmental degradation, scarcity, or systemic inequality. These lyrics are clippings quoted from the original works, not my own writing, and act as textual anchors to further express my original artwork. Materially, I expressed these themes by using repurposed materials like cardboard, wrapping from online packages, and collage paper, alongside acrylic paint and colored pencil.



Photograph by Michael Walk from *Unsplash*.

We Were Never Separate

Samantha Castro

They told us the Earth was a thing,
a resource,
a warehouse,
a planet that we live on.

They drew maps
and called lands empty.
Named rivers property.
Measured forests in profit margins.
Taught us that growth meant taking,
and taking meant winning.

But the ground remembers differently.

It remembers when we called it Mother.
Pachamama.

When water was an ancestor.
When mountains were teachers.
When gratitude came before harvest.
When reciprocity was law.

We were never separate;
Only convinced that we were.
Now the atmosphere holds the heat
of four hundred thousand Hiroshima bombs.
Glaciers are melting
as water levels continue to rise.

And still, the story of exploitation
tries to sell us more.

Some call this crisis inevitable.
But history whispers otherwise.

The richest one percent burn the most fuel,
while the poorest breathe the smoke.

Sacrifice zones bloom
where lives are seen as disposable.
But we know better now.

Or are we doing the same thing?

Hope is not a mood.
It is a muscle.

It is the hand that links with another hand at a rally,
in a classroom,
in a courtroom, speaking for a river
that cannot speak for itself.

What if the forest had rights?
What if the lake could testify?
What if clean air were not a privilege,
but a promise?

We can ask:
Who benefits?
Who pays?
Who decides what is exploitable?

We can unlearn the myth of scarcity.
We can imagine abundance.

Solar panels, blooming.
Buses driven electrically through city streets.
Homes not surrounded by pollution.
Jobs that repair, instead of extract.

Imagination is practice
for what could be.

The Earth does not need domination.
It needs a relationship.
Balance.
Care.
Reciprocity.

We are not above it.
We are of it.

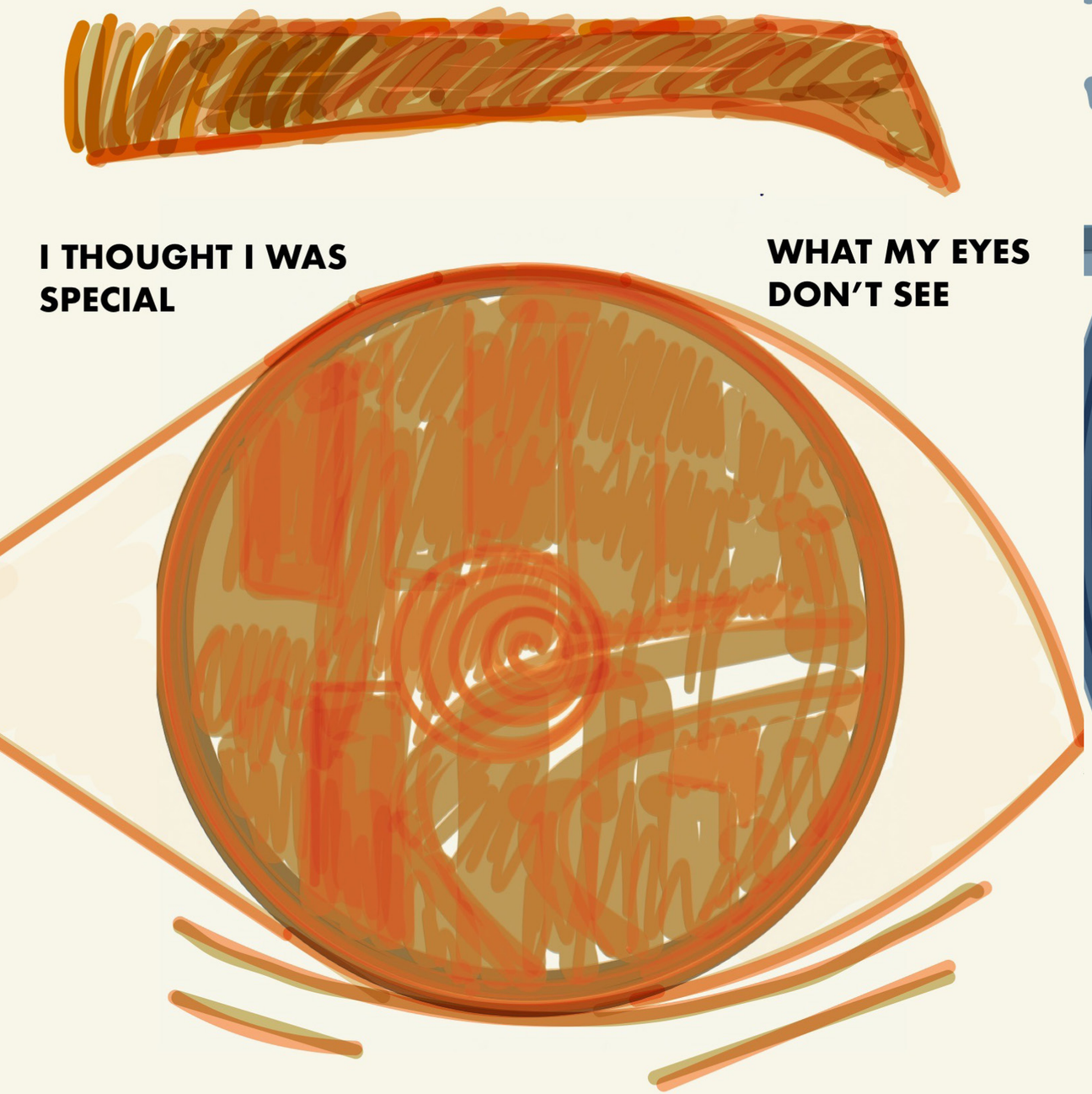
We were never separate.

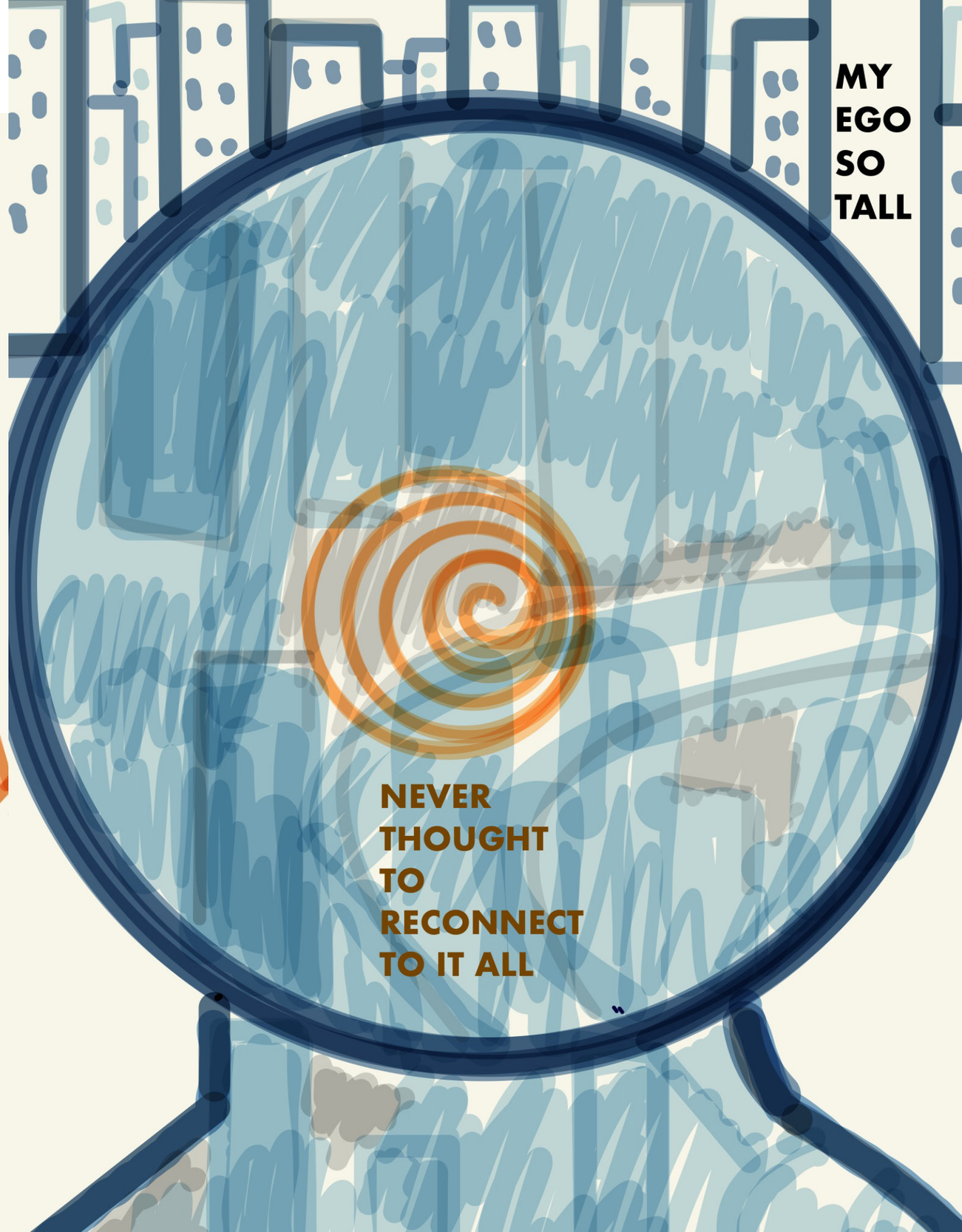


Beech tree forest. Photograph by AVTG from *Adobe Stocks*.

Ecog

Angelica Osorio





HOW DID I FALL SO FAST

NEVER STRAY SO FAR

COULD I HAVE KEPT ON TRUDGING

OUR TROUBLES HAVE REACHED A NEW BAR

NATURE CAN WAIT

NATURE CAN'T WAIT

SO SHOULD I
WITH MY
LOVING
GROWING
BREATHING
LIMBS
REPLENISH
WHAT I'VE
TAKEN IN
WATCH OVER
AND PROTECT
MY
MOTHER'S
KIN
SPEAK FOR
HER
HUMMING
LANDS AND
SONIC
WATERS

SHE REMEMBERS
MORE THAN ME

SHE HAS ALWAYS
BEEN THERE



LENS: The Journal of Environmental Narratives is a creative academic journal produced by UCLA undergraduate students. We feature works from students about the environmental humanities, narratives, and communications.

We are guided by the mission of *LENS: The Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies* (LENS) is an incubator for new research, teaching, and creative collaborations in storytelling, communications, and media that contribute to sustainability and environmental justice. Environmental changes are perceived, understood, and experienced in divergent ways depending on different languages, social structures, cultural practices, knowledge systems, and historical memories. Our research often involves collaborating on media productions, exhibitions, communication campaigns, and convenings that enable scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students to investigate narrative strategies for engaging with the environment across differences and disciplines.