

Growing Up on a Dying Planet

Not too far from my parents' house, there's a little forest nestled deep into the folds of the surrounding hills. During the many years that I spent living in the area, meditative walks through the forest were almost a daily routine. Being alone in the peaceful, lush, green woods made me feel safe and at ease. Throughout my emotional teenage years, it always represented a quiet space I could go to in order to escape from the tension of my parents' fighting or to cope with the incessant stream of anxious thoughts in my head. Being in nature gave me the reassurance that I could be at ease physically and mentally, and nobody would bother me. I took this safe space for granted until the day I almost lost it in September of 2021 to a wildfire. The forest was a home to me and realizing how fragile and vulnerable it was made me more appreciative of it. It also made me begin to emotionally understand the gravity of climate change and encouraged me to be more critical of the public figures who deny the existence of climate change.

In the summer of 2021 I had just graduated, and was preparing to move to Santa Cruz to start my first year of college. Excited to fully enjoy my newfound independence and freedom, I had been making all the necessary preparations for my move months in advance. I was constantly Zooming with my future roommates, dragging my mom along on endless trips to the temporary "College" aisles in Target, and packing my childhood bedroom into storage bins. During the whole month of August, my room was filled with labeled duffle bags and storage boxes. I had stripped my walls of the colorful poster collages that once decorated them, leaving them bare, white, and speckled with tiny push-pin holes. At the time of the fire, I was making my last trip to Target, having forgotten to buy some hangers for my clothes. Driving down the main road, I came upon a huge line of parked cars surrounded by a gathering of people. I stopped my own car in one of the dirt pull outs, and directed my gaze where everyone was looking and

pointing. Billows of smoke were rising from the dry, brown hills and bright orange flames were licking up their sides. “Fuck.”

My thoughts stalled as I tried to find the words to explain to myself what was happening. I was too flustered to think logically and drove home as fast as I could to tell my mom. “Is it bad?” she asked me. “I don’t know, but it’s moving fast.” “Are the firefighters there yet?” “No.” “Well, unless they tell us to evacuate, we’re staying here.” I walked back to my empty room and sat down on my mattress. Screw hangers. I looked around the space. What do I bring if we leave? The watercolor painting my mom made for me when I was small, a carved wooden box from an old friend, my grandfather’s old Minolta, the guitar I swore I would learn to play, the stack of letters I had been saving for years and my old baptism medal all stared at me from the corners of my open dressers and drawers, begging for a spot in my bag. “I’ve got all the birth certificates and passports just in case,” my mom called as she crossed the house with a file full of important papers.

While I contemplated my possessions, I was flooded with memories from my childhood and teen years and mentally retraced the hike I had taken countless times. To reach the cool, shady core of the forest, I’d cross a few dead fields, walk through a dusty horse stable, usually empty save for one light brown mare, and follow a narrow trail for an hour. It went up little hills, through shallow pools of murky water and between old ferns as it branched into invisible coyote paths. Little birds would be nesting, foraging and chasing prey in the grasses and brush bustling full of life below me. Above my head, the trees seemed to bend over, curious to spot a visitor. They would extend their long branches across the path, snagging my hair and pulling on my clothes, sometimes scratching off a little skin by accident. Sometimes the wind would pick up and their dark, moss covered bodies would sway, squeaking under their weight in long laughs

and sighs. Even though the waterfall had dried up, the forest was always damp and shady. On bright days, sunlight would pierce the foliage, shining on the specks of dust and pollen floating through the air, illuminating the wildflowers, making the moss glow a deep green. The trees didn't care about me or my life, and I could temporarily let go as well.

In her article "A Map of Lost Things", Jamila Osman describes a similar experience with Eagle Creek, a place she would go to to reflect about home, belonging and the ability to return to a space one closely identifies with. Envyng the Chinook salmon in the creek that could find their way back to the estuaries of their births, she would "sit on the wet earth and hold [her] knees against [her] chest as [she] [watched] the salmon spawn" (Osman), immersed in reflection. She "returned to this same creek many times as an adult, and [she] still [felt] the same sense of jealousy [she] felt at nine years old." (Osman) As the child of Somali immigrants, Osman longed for a place to be able to return to where she felt she belonged, like the salmon. She notes the constant rejection she experiences in both the United States and Somalia, perpetually being asked "Where are you from?" (Osman) or being labeled as "the American Girl" (Osman). To Osman, Eagle Creek represented a neutral place in which she could be alone with her thoughts, and consider feelings and emotions that were difficult to process in everyday life. Despite our different reasons, nature represents a dependable space to both her and I where we can find the solitude necessary to reflect and escape.

In the same way Osman would cradle herself near Eagle Creek, I used to climb up trees and lay down on the thicker branches, looking up at the soft foliage before closing my eyes and letting the sounds of conflict and lesson-giving turn into gentle rustles, chirps, and creaks. Being there gave me the space and peace I needed to check in with myself and think about the challenging things in my life, and the emotions that surrounded them. When the hills burst into

flames, for the first time, I felt afraid to lose that space and all of its peaceful inhabitants. Back on my mattress, I watched as local newspapers flooded my phone with notifications about the fire. Apparently, it started when someone mowing their lawn struck a rock, which created a spark and made the dry grass erupt into a blaze. The authorities' only response to what turned into a 44 acre fire was that mowing "should be done on cool foggy mornings." I was angry. Respectfully, who the fuck was going to listen to that rule? For years during the ongoing drought, the entire valley had been slowly turning into a pile of arid kindling. Nobody had told us to mow on "cool, foggy mornings" then. I wasn't mad at the firefighters, nor the person who lit the fire, but at the inauthentic care that the people in power expressed for climate change, the main root of the wildfires devastating California.

In our country, politicians advertise themselves as ecological saints only to turn around and rape the Earth with fracking drills¹. They pose as they dig little holes to plant perfectly pruned trees during inauguration ceremonies, and then enable corporations to bulldoze the Amazon in the name of industry and profit². They make promises of action and change, only to find loopholes and make misleading statements in their efforts to avoid accountability. This attitude is typical of right-wing politics, which tends to keep environmental protection low on its priority list, second to economy and industry. President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2020 is a clear example of this mindset. According to a press statement by Secretary of State Micheal Pompeo, President Trump's withdrawal was a response to "the unfair economic burden imposed on American workers, businesses, and taxpayers by U.S. pledges made under the Agreement"³. Regardless of its validity, this decision simply reveals the President's clear prioritization of what *he perceives* as a profit-friendly energy agenda over a

¹ [The Literal Gaslighting that Helps America Avoid the Climate Crisis](#), The New Yorker

² [How American's love of beef is helping destroy the Amazon rainforest](#), Washington Post

³ [On the US Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement](#), United States Department of State

“binding agreement [that] brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects.”⁴ Furthermore, it introduces a trend of climate-denialism within American politics that is becoming an essential part of the right-wing’s identity.

In an article published by the *New York Times*, reporters Michael M. Grynbaum and Tiffany Hsu examine opinions held by right-wing leaders and personalities who express “skepticism of the notion that climate change is a factor in the fires devastating the West Coast” (Grynbaum, Hsu, *NYT*). A general theme developed in the conservative media they considered was the argument that 9,900 forest fires⁵ that happened in California in 2020 were all simply due to the lack of forest management. As put by right-wing radio-host Mark Levin, “it sure as hell would help if these forests in these timber areas were free to be properly managed, but they’re not”(Grynbaum, Hsu, *NYT*). This climate change denying opinion was echoed by then-president Donald Trump, who confidently asserted “It’ll start getting cooler. You just watch,”(Grynbaum, Hsu, *NYT*) during a meeting with California officials regarding wildfires. When presented with science backed opposition, the president simply responded, “Well, I don’t think science knows, actually”(Grynbaum, Hsu, *NYT*). While some politicians remain on this initial level of absurdity, some bring their controversial views to new levels, creating incoherent links between climate disasters and false conspiracies. On live national television, Fox News host Tucker Carlson sarcastically mocked environmental initiatives, stating that “In the hands of Democratic politicians, climate change is like systemic racism in the sky. [...] You can’t see it, but rest assured, it’s everywhere, and it’s deadly. And like systemic racism, it is your fault”(Grynbaum, Hsu, *NYT*). Ah yes, the witty technique of creating a conspiracy by linking two controversial

⁴ [The Paris Agreement](#), United Nations - Climate Change

⁵ [California’s 2020 Wildfire Summary](#), by Kat Kerlin, UC Davis

issues in order to divert your audience from the initial problem and fuel hatred! Through the multiple layers of ignorance within this opinion, not only does Mr. Carlson deny a global emergency, but he does so in a way that mudslings other serious societal problems (systemic racism) and evokes conspiracy, encouraging viewers to be distrustful of science. While critical thinking is often a positive alternative to blind following, doubting scientific facts surrounding ecological disasters is a dangerous road to go down as it divides people, releases denialists from their responsibility, and allows for the continuation of our planet's death.

Hearing such things from political leaders was always disgusting to me, but ever since my close encounter with a dangerous wildfire, it has become nearly intolerable. One human error combined with the context of the climate emergency nearly took an important natural space away from me. And yet, my experience was nothing but a microcosm for the magnitude of global warming and the harm it does to people, plants and animals. Around the world, ecosystems are being destroyed, animal and plant species are going extinct, human rights are being violated and basic needs are becoming scarce. Those who do not directly suffer the devastating impacts of climate change will read about it in the news or on social media and desperately try to help by protesting or participating in trendy activism such as buying metal straws, recycling clothing or ditching plastic. And yet we still see nature dying faster, the poles getting warmer, and environmental deadlines get closer. I hope that someday we will not feel that our efforts were in vain because we will live in societies that prioritize the well-being of humans and nature alike. I hope that someday *all* our leaders take notice of the rising oceans, raging wildfires, melting poles and devastating droughts and realize that my generation's children are worth more than political glory. Most of all, I hope that someday our temporary, fragile human lives will be accorded more respect and value than the Dollar.

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