
Art as Transformation:
Outside of Human Hands

FINDING YOUR WAY WITH PHILOSOPHY

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This little magazine is part of the Art as Transformation project, organized by community philosophy non-profit Merlin CCC. Inspired, designed, and coordinated by Jess Holmes as part of their Merlin Student Scholar Fellowship work, the magazine houses reflections on art and nature by people from the Helena and Missoula communities. Commentary, context, and organizing content offered throughout reflect Jess' ever-evolving relationship and conversations with nature and art, through the lens of philosophy, literature, and environmental, feminist and colonial studies.

Merlin CCC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based out of Helena, MT. With programs for people of all ages and backgrounds, their mission involves enriching lives and strengthening communities through philosophy. To learn more and help support their work in the community, visit merlinccc.org.



About the Cover Artist

Catie Deck is a tilemaker and mixed-media artist based in St. Louis, Missouri. She studied art and expressive arts therapy at Webster University and has since worked in community art and education spaces. Her work explores intuitive making, hidden realms, found and natural objects, and the connections between self, nature, and the sacred. The front and back cover reflects on the natural galleries we move through every day and the small compositions waiting to be noticed within them. Using cyanotype, the work allows creation to happen outside of human hands. Rather than controlling the final image, the process becomes a collaboration with light, time, natural materials, and the environment itself, honoring nature not just as subject matter, but as an active participant in making. More of Catie's work can be found on Instagram: @catiedeck



A Letter to the Reader

Whether you believe art exists in the natural world or not, thank you for taking the time to engage with this little magazine. The pages here are a combined effort of myself, an environmental philosophy graduate student who believes deeply in the vulnerable practice of transformation, and other community artists who have graciously shared their own reflections. The purpose of this little magazine is to explore how art exists outside of human hands and how impactful it can be on the human experience. Natural art may look like bees dancing to communicate with one another, the sound of rain on a still lake, or the shadowed reflection of tree leaves on a forest floor. Ahead, artists have delved into how natural art has encouraged or influenced individual transformation.

The sections you'll find are reflective of values that feed into *eudaimonia,* a Greek word that is best understood as human flourishing: happiness & pleasure, meaning & purpose, and justice & beauty. At the beginning of each section, there's a brief introduction written by me to help guide reflection while reading the artists' works. You'll also notice a leaning on Ancient Greek philosophers throughout. This, by no means, implies my own beliefs are in direct alignment with their's, but I wanted us to remain close to *eudaimonia.*

It is my hope that this little magazine will be a place of mutual engagement. To respect the art that follows is to share in the vulnerability required to create it. Human flourishing extends beyond the individual; it allows for the cultivation of an effective, authentic, and loving community. I encourage you to not only sit with the works ahead but to follow the thread of thought they inspire and maybe even create some art of your own. Transformation is obtainable for all.

With peace,
jess holmes
editor and author

What is *eudaimonia?*

In Aristotle's foundational text, "Nicomachean Ethics," he provides a moral framework to which each individual can obtain what he believed was the highest good: eudaimonia. This word translates into roughly into human flourishing, and Aristotle built his moral theory around it.

He developed, what's now known as, virtue ethics. In short, if you are to become a virtuous person, then you must maintain the character traits of a virtuous person.

Eudaimonia is the embodiment of virue and is the ultimate goal for all humans; it's representative of a life well lived. It extends beyond momentary happiness caused by pleasureable actions to genuine human excellence.

But can the natural world help us achieve this excellence?

> “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”
> - Aristotle

> "Happiness depends on ourselves."
> - Aristotle

Happiness & Pleasure

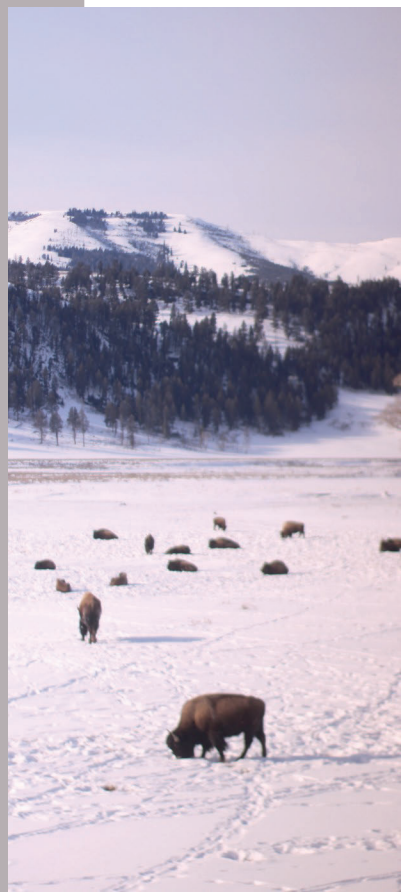
Happiness and pleasure immediately draws attention to the question whether pleasure leads to happiness, and even further, does happiness lead to a fulfilling life. The idea of happiness holds weight, but it begs crucial questions of whose happiness is worth more. Do we live in accordance with promoting individual happiness, or are we obligated to assist in the happiness of others?

Pleasure may lead to happiness, but do all types of pleasure hold the same weight? Does having a good drink feel the same as helping a friend who is grieving? When do we sacrifice our own pleasure for the wellbeing of others? Seeking pleasure often means the avoidance of pain. This type of hedonism may appeal in simplicity, but it seems to disregard our innate human desire for connection. If our focus is solely ourselves, then we become blind to others' experiences.

It is my belief that the natural world reminds us of that connection. Some might seek solitude in nature, but in reality, all ecosystems are beaming with relationships. The colors, the sounds, and the feel of soft earth, in lieu of concrete, may do wonders for our nervous systems, but the pigeons competing with the squirrels for bits of food forgotten by humans on the sidewalk are just as connected. It's there, whether we chose to see it or not.

When we look to other species for happiness, it seems necessary that we consider their happiness as well. Doesn't their wellbeing deserve our respect? We know it to be fact that creatures with a central nervous system can feel pain, meaning they can feel pleasure too. Philosophers have classically claimed human capacity greater because of our ability to reason, but I think it crucial to consider what is done with that reason.

If we have this blessing of deep thought, then should we not expand our willingness to learn in order to help others feel good? Considering others in our actions may seem overwhelming, but with reason encoded in our being, should we not spread love when we can? What could possibly bring a greater pleasure?



"The secret of happiness, you see, is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less."
-Socrates



Ode to the Slug that Left a Trail on my Window Screen

As though a monk equipped with iridescent
slime instead of black ink, tired of the circle
he'd painted all his last and half of this life,
(the kind that fades and disappears into
itself) drew a great, skeptical course, crossing
out of frame and in again — his stroke's
hard beginning nowhere in sight; the end,
breaking into thin strands, lifts away.

I'm reminded
of a painting I know: a snowy road
at its orange hour, the sky like a reflection
of sky on glass; and up the gentle slope
of a country bridge, the blue tracks of a sled, which I
have to assume continue on the other side.

Poem by Sam Burbank, a teacher and poet from Portland, Oregon. He studied Spanish and English Literature at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, where he was the runner-up for the Dan Hemingway Prize. His writing has appeared in Frogpond, The Oregon Capital Chronicle, and Gear Junkie. He is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Montana.

lost to the landscape

the tattered pillow holds her high enough
to watch the fields leap in pleasing patterns
grey, then green, then blue

tickled by loose threads
she still hurts for the land
fenced into formations,
forbidden flourishing.

she hurts more for the animals
dead on the side of the grey
road to a better home,
without fences.

the green is interrupted
with speckled angels,
splotches on the horizon,
who do not belong.

a welcome sight, regardless.

no longer can she be silent,
a request from the front seat;
the cows are too important,
too sweet.

her hands begin to shake,
uncontrollable squeaks squeeze out
of the lips who've been instructed
to only speak when spoken to
but the cows

represent hope for her
but dissonance for the front.

they loved them once, too
didn't they?



"For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones.
-Aristotle

Poem by Jess Holmes

Catching the Bull Trout

She walked behind him most of the day, until he would stick out his gentle hand, and she would stumble up over the rocks and grasp it, her smile warm in her cheeks, and they would walk together. He would remind her that he loved her, whether with his words or by kissing that hand he held.

Occasionally she felt like an ornament, or a tool. There to carry his other rod, with the other flies that seemed to be working in these pockets he guided them into, watched them sink, run down, again, and again. He knew what he was doing, and it always impressed her. Only a few runs of the flies down from the top of the deep water to the bottom would tell him what he needed to know. The sun sparkled on the water, blinding him from the yellow foam grasshopper for pockets of moments, relying on his keep of as little and as much slack on the line as possible to tell if a fish had snagged itself on the dropped fly below.

Weird, he would say, then tsk his tongue on his teeth, shake his head. *This is the perfect day for hoppers.*

Even when he caught a fish, and she took the net from his back and held it in the water. While he brought the fish to her hand holding its tool, he would wet his hands, poise the rod he was holding between his knees, lift up the fish, take out the hook—which he never ever left barbed—say something like *a nice rainbow*, and let it go, sighing afterward that he wasn't catching the fish the right way.

They're just not taking dries.

The other rod almost always had a dry fly on it, which he would try as she fished a new pocket of the river.

Too much wrist! he would yell, halfway in the water a few yards upstream, effortlessly sending his own fly to the surface of the water just under a tree on the other bank.

You're arcing it!

Don't try to throw it. Let the rod do the work.

Sometimes she felt that the more she tried to relax, let the rod do its work, the worse her casts would get. Each time she got stuck or tangled, though, he was there to wade in or walk back and undo it, correct once more, and have her go again. She would blink back tears of frustration at the ends of long days on rivers, in too-big boots and waders that leaked at her thighs, her ankles sore from twisting on the wet rocks.

On this day, though, the end was the best part.

They had tried every pool for a mile or so downstream from the car. A few fish were brought up, though not in the right ways, he insisted. At an especially promising, slow, deep pit in a bend of the river, an enormous bull trout had chased after a juvenile he'd hooked on his line. The fish, ancient in look and size, had been so keen on his suddenly thrashing prey that he'd swum nearly up to their sore ankles where they stood in the water.

The hook in the mouth of the juvenile bull trout was quickly removed, and the fish let go. The angler was speechless, his companion's mouth agape. They eyed the furtively still water where both fish had retreated.

They walked downstream. He got her a small fish, guiding her casts. Her nervousness quelled when he praised her improvement. He couldn't stop thinking about the grandfather fish still waiting in that pool.

Further downstream, that time of day came in afternoon's depth when he walked up to her, out of the water, where she was waiting with the other rod in a field of wildflowers.

Let's go home.

She followed him through bushes, at least nine feet behind, the length of the rod she followed him with, held low so the farmers who drew from the river wouldn't spook. They waded as much as they could, but some parts were too deep and too fast to keep off the wooded bank.

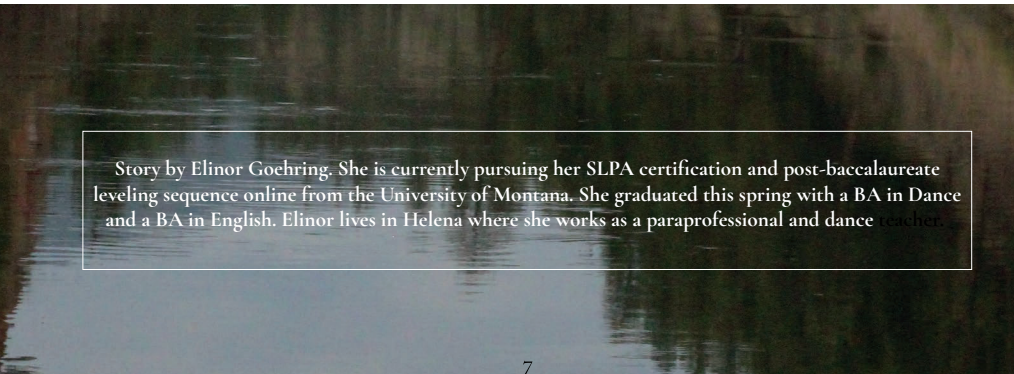
I'm just going to try this one more time.

She watched him. He was focused, quiet, his eyes on the water.

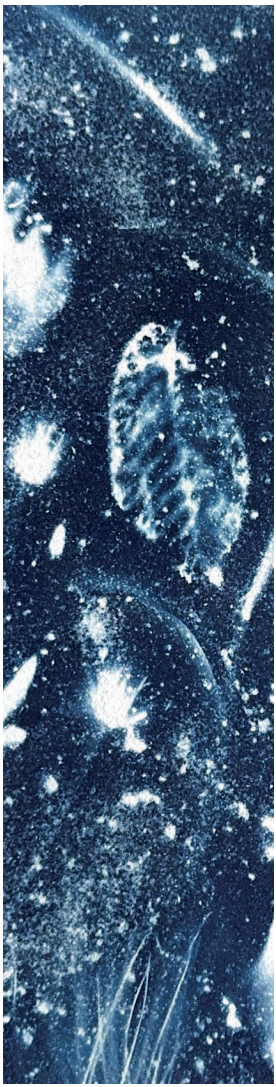
He cast his line, the flies the same as before. He waited for the bottom fly to sink, for a small fish to snap it up. When it did, the bull trout was ready. It came along and swallowed the little fish whole, catching his own mouth on the small sharp hook.

The fly fisherman drew him in, slowly stripping line. It looped in the water by her legs. He let him run when he wanted to, letting line spool out, keeping the tip of his rod up to the sky. The soft line became an arrow, darting through the water. The girl poised with the net once again, her heart beating, eager to help. The sun beamed down, so close they could scoop it up. Everything seemed to stretch in one long quivering line from the fish in the water through themselves, their rods, their nets and line, up to the sun, and to everything past.

When she netted the fish, he traded net for rod, slid a hand wetted with water from the river underneath its long body. Felt its years in its weight. The hook had dislodged as soon as they'd got him in the net and snagged its side instead. His boots sunk deeper into the muck and the rocks as he crouched in the cold water. He took out the hook, took a good look at the creature, and let him go. She watched him. He let his breath out in a half whistle. He stood, drew his woman towards him, touched the back of her neck with a wet hand. The rods they still held marked an X where they stood on an endless map of time.



Story by Elinor Goehring. She is currently pursuing her SLPA certification and post-baccalaureate leveling sequence online from the University of Montana. She graduated this spring with a BA in Dance and a BA in English. Elinor lives in Helena where she works as a paraprofessional and dance teacher.



turquoise rushing,
within millenia of connected disorder

I see the movement

this morning holds ambivalence
a subtle smallness,
constructed by
cool, damp divine

I feel the magnitude

the fish are here,
the trees, the brush, the roses
a single collective force

I play in the motion

from your world to mine,
your power pours into my desire
for entitle freedom

I remark calmly

obligated to let you go,
gasping,
life dangling between us

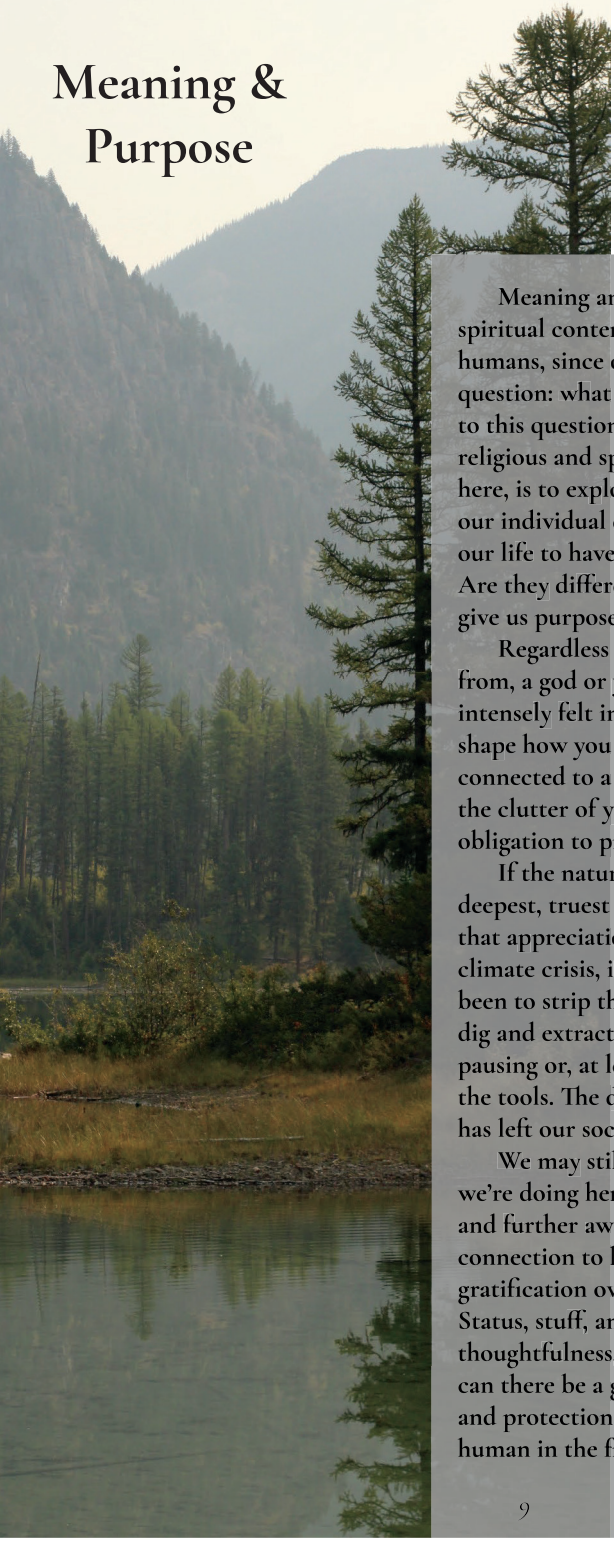
I yield

on the sheen of river stones
you disappear into the malaise,
leaving my soul alone,
guilty and yearning.

I trust in the moment.

Poem by Patrick Benson, a geographer interested in the connections we thread between people and place. He spent years working seasonally for the U.S. Forest Service in Montana, earned a M.S. in Geography and is currently in Guatemala with the Peace Corps. Always curious, he's more at home learning a new landscape than settling into a familiar one. He's come to suspect a place truly shows itself once you've left.

Meaning & Purpose



"The unexamined life is not worth living."
-Socrates

Meaning and purpose steer us towards a more spiritual contemplation. It's been a quest of humans, since our earliest days, to ask the question: what am I doing here? The larger answer to this question falls to the varying sects of religious and spiritual thought. The intention, here, is to explore how the natural world relates to our individual contemplation of these matters. For our life to have meaning, must we find a purpose? Are they different for all of us? Does our morality give us purpose?

Regardless of where your morality comes from, a god or yourself or the universe, it's often intensely felt in natural spaces. Does that feeling shape how you interact with the world? Are you connected to a sense of self that's often blocked in the clutter of your day to day? If so, do we have an obligation to protect that what gives us this peace?

If the natural world acts as a conduit to our deepest, truest selves, then what role do we play in that appreciation? Being in the midst of the climate crisis, it's as if our purpose as a species has been to strip the planet of all that serves us. We dig and extract and destroy and rip down without pausing or, at least, reap the benefits of those with the tools. The disconnection caused by this reality has left our society hurting, without meaning.

We may still grapple with the question of what we're doing here, but the answer becomes further and further away as we actively destroy our connection to life. We've learned to value instant gratification over our genuine place in the world. Status, stuff, and selfishness have replaced thoughtfulness, togetherness, and tranquility. How can there be a greater purpose than to give thanks and protection to the planet who allows us to be human in the first place?

Cookie Tinned Creek Soul: Religious Art as Loved Ones in Nature

Soon after William's dad moved him to California, eventually joined by four half siblings one after the other, chubby cheeked moldable arrows for God's quiver. Once a year Will came back to the ranch, only spending the night with the good christian relatives, not the hellbound ones. Still I'd walk with him down the same road bordering the creek where his mothers ashes fell from a hand too small for grief. We talked of unholy things, Greek gods and Harry Potter, grand fantastical tales ruled by magic not miracles. Typical devil worshiper talk held while sitting crisscrossed under the lightning struck snag, among the blooming knapweed, buttercups, daisy and lupin. Springs and midsummers in the Bitterroot when he came, showed off all the hidden, little treasures sunning themselves. We moved out among them, challenging the air with our gossip and superstitions, sticking to one another as weevils on the knapweed.

I taught him the unmanly art of daisy chains and how to pluck knapweed root weevils off the finger without crushing them. In an act of biblical rebellion we decided to store a secret from the prying eyes of the familial righteous. A map starting at the base of the field snag, down past the headgate, along the deer path through fallen trees and knee tall grass, right at the deer bone pile, over one ditch and two marshes to the rusting coil of barbed wire near the creek bank. A wax sealed cookie tin holding treasure instead of sewing, we hid small and broken things, knick knacks of every color and shape. A jade bear from Thailand, a golden one off an old necklace, an engraved jewelry box found in an Oregon cave and a Californian shell. A plastic dolphin from a mermaid Barbie set, a few pennies, a carousel coin, a heart shaped rock, and a piece of pyrite. Glorious tchotchkes valued for where they had come from, what strange mysteries they held before money taught us real meaning.

The creek water rises and buries the cookie tin deeper into the undergrowth and once a year we retrace our steps in the heat of August to find the rusted trove and add to it. After, we wade barefoot on the slick algae rocks of slow-flow late summer waters and talk of equally hidden things. The boys he likes, the solitude of burying who you are to fit the conformity of those preaching God's love. How unconditional love becomes conditional within the "spare not the rod" judging biblical eye. Theology and queerness rolls off into the creek noise and washes down stream as our feet fight to stay grounded in snowmelt, icy and freeing in the heat and pressure of our brief escape. What was said silently and what outloud? I can't remember now. Sometimes walking up a branch of the creek to sit waist deep in man made pools I'd hear whispers of our souls conversing across the water as we grabbed at each other's heels trying to pull the other under. Digging blind for skipping rocks, tripping each other and dropping water skippers along necklines, we were linked by blood and land and liberated by age with time to spend. Horseflies and Deerflies snack on us and we smack them and one another, trying to feed them to the Cutthroats and Brook Trout and Rainbows weaving ankles and snags in deeper waters.

Torn between the simplicity of the water and the eventual return we face, drenched head to toe as limbs of cottonwoods and pine and Crested Shieldferns trace their scrawny fingers across our bare calves, we fortify a peace within ourselves. Tenuous and tied where our feet bridge the gap of lapping water and warm coarse sand, there lies an emotion only expressible in the shared love of a place, silence coursing from one soul to another in the rush of clear reflected sky parting white on slick mossy boulders. "I tried my hand at the Bible/Tried my hand at prayer/But now nothing but the water/Is gonna bring my soul to bear". Most Christians claim water washes away your sin, that you are born again pure and forgiven. But poised shoulder to shoulder, soaked as wet rats on the bank of Big Creek we listened for God in the pulsing movements of life all around us.

And heard no rebuke, no untouchable virtue to be mimicked, only the beat of flycatchers eating stoneflies top the gaps of shallow log-stilled water. No praising, chanting, raised hands and muttered phrases, just the mindful quiet of observation in the timeless wake of mountain runoff. Perhaps there is a God which needs no prayer, dwelling in the water and keeping the secrets of those who willingly listen and learn to bear their souls in reverence. Perhaps there is a God who keeps the rusted trinkets and polished memories in distant water waiting always for the communion of bare feet in rough-hewn sands.

Story by Lilly Wages, a Creative Writing and English Literature dual majoring super senior. She's dabbled in climate change studies classes and is going for a five-year undergrad or broke. A seventh-generation Montanan who grew up wild in the rural fields and streams of the disappearing Bitterroot Valley, Lilly believes in secret, earthy places cultivating the words.



Waning Seconds

Tonight,
I have fallen for the last time.
Cushioned and covered in soft earth,
Engulfed in finely-tined grass,
The weight of age finally drawing me down.
My vision drifts upward, into a clear black-blue sky.
Focusing on constellations with poor eyes,
Trying to make sense of their blurry shine,
Before the white veil of moonlight is eternally drawn.
Before vultures pick me down to morsels,
And the jackals tear my limbs away for their sons,
I will be covered in vegetation;
Just as I was when I was born.
For as much as I feel that I am alone,
I know that when the sun crests over the quiet savanna,
My herd will find me.
And just as I'd done for my mother,
And she'd done for hers,
They will delicately run their trunks over my body,
Caressing my jaw,
My tusks,
And my teeth,
My most defining features,
In a final goodbye.

But now they are sleeping under a blooming acacia,
Unaware that I stumbled away from its safe branches,
To fall to my knees,
Slump down on my side,
Hoping to see what I could
Of the falling moon,
And rising sun,
For the last time.

Poem by James Edwards, an Environmental Philosophy graduate student at the University of Montana and a case writer for the APPE Intercollegiate National & Regional Ethics Bowl. He is deeply passionate about the study of environmental ethics, animal consciousness, and education. In his free time, he enjoys writing, illustrating, sewing, gardening, reading, and humane insect pinning.

Nature's Art: 'To experience things in a cosmic way'

I. “Nature lacks Art”

“Nature lacks Art.” One might take this position based on an understanding of Art which involves human manipulation or employment of some media for a communicative, expressive act, and an understanding of Nature as “phenomena that lack any traces of human design.” (Budd, 1998) (From this point of view, a garden would be *less natural* than untouched wilderness; arguably, all the Earth has been impacted by humanity, but some aspects of it have comparatively less of that impact, and we employ the term Nature to refer to those less-human-impacted parts of our world.) Human intention and influence are decisive in Art being Art, and the distance from human influence is decisive in Nature being Nature.

Of course, even if Nature lacks Art, Nature can nonetheless be Beautiful; Aesthetics applies to Nature. The beauty I may find in a falling leaf is a consequence of my aesthetic perception. In principle, “anything at all…can become the object of aesthetic attention,” (Stolnitz, 1969) but this act of our attention remains distinct from Art.

II. Nature's Art

This judgment on the boundaries of Art and Nature is challenged by Pierre Hadot in *The Veil of Isis*. Influenced by the thought of Roger Caillois in “Generalized Esthetics,” Hadot writes, “nature is art and art is nature, human art being only a special case of the art of nature” (2006). Hadot understands Caillois to be saying that “nature and nature alone is the creator of beauty and art” (2006). So, human art “merely obeys the organic laws of nature” (Hadot, 2006). For Caillois, human design is just one way forms can come into being (1962). Caillois does not *directly* say that sea shells and other natural forms are a sort of art. But he does say that certain artists strive “to be more and more like nature, or perhaps to outdo it in its own domain” (1962). Hadot makes a similar remark in *What is Ancient Philosophy?*: "Artists merely imitate the art of nature, and human art, in a sense, is merely a particular case of the fundamental, original art of nature” (2002). Humans are natural beings—a part of Nature—and human Art is only one kind of Art. Nature’s Art is multiform.

III. Nature's Art: Context for a Claim

It might be important to clarify that the just-mentioned ideas Hadot puts forward about Nature’s Art are not the central argument or focus of his book, but those ideas play an interesting role in that inquiry. *The Veil of Isis* is an extended commentary on the fragment of Heraclitus “*phusis kruptesthai philei*" (Hadot, 2006). The subtitle of Hadot’s book is ‘an essay on the history of the idea of nature,’ and it traces misinterpretations or misunderstandings of the quote over time. Hadot argues that the historical misinterpretations of Heraclitus’ short aphorism proceed from differing orientations toward the concept of Nature. In other words, Hadot, through tracing the ways those in different times have interpreted this quote from Heraclitus, traces how *conceptions* of Nature impact how people *relate* to Nature.

First among the ways we might relate to Nature, there is “the world of daily perception, regulated by habits and also by the orientation of our interests.” In this way of relating to Nature, “[we] look only at what is useful for us” (Hadot, 2006). Then, there’s the Promethean Attitude toward Nature—which “would use the methods of science and technology”—and involves a “quest for the secrets of Nature” (Hadot, 2006). This contrasts with the Orphic Attitude toward Nature—which involves aesthetic perception; “[art as] a mode of understanding nature” is “an affective experience of anguish or wonder in the face of the ineffable” (Hadot, 2006). Part VI of *The Veil of Isis* is dedicated to examining the Orphic Attitude, and Hadot articulates the ideas from Roger Caillois in that section, but he returns again to the idea that “nature is art and art is nature” in the book’s conclusion (Hadot, 2006). It seems earlier to be an aside, but takes on new emphasis by its mention in the final lines of the book, where he says that this is “an idea that, I believe, enables us better to understand both what art can be and what nature can be…[An] experience that consists in becoming intensely aware of the fact that we are a part of nature, and that in this sense we ourselves are this infinite, ineffable nature that completely surrounds us” (Hadot, 2006).

So, Hadot's ideas on Nature's Art occur within the context of his articulation of the aesthetic attitude toward Nature (as perhaps the culmination of it), within his broader essay on the history of the idea of Nature. Even though Hadot does not 'take sides' when he distinguishes the utilitarian, the Promethean and the Orphic attitudes, he does explicitly express the judgment that "it is good for human beings always to remember that they themselves are natural beings," and suggests that idea can have particular potency (2006). It's an idea that reflects *an experience* of being at one with Nature.

IV. To Experience Things in a Cosmic Way

Hadot ends *The Veil of Isis* by describing the experience of "becoming intensely aware of the fact that we are a part of nature" via a quote from one of Nietzsche's unpublished fragments: "To go beyond myself and yourself. To experience things in a cosmic way" (2006). What it means to 'feel cosmically' may be murky, but it seems as though particular conceptions of Art and Nature align with a sort of mystic insight.

Conceptions of Nature impact how people relate to Nature. By breaking the confines of our current concepts, we can form a new relationship. The destabilization of presuppositions opens up possibilities. One possibility is that the novel conception lacks any commitment to action—it's an empty locution. Another possibility is that we reflectively reaffirm our initial judgments. A third is that we change our lives for the better.

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Essay by Mitchell Conway, a Community Philosopher at Merlin CCC and an Academic Coach at Prisma.

Justice & Beauty

"Living well and beautifully and justly are all one thing."
-Socrates

In today's world, justice and beauty both can feel far away. Many philosophers have romanticized the law as a representation of justice, but for those of us paying attention, we know that's far from truth. As our world has expanded and intertwined, the pains of that growth have spilled out into an unfathomable amount on injustice. Many of the ancients also believed that individuals living justly was a necessary step towards eudaimonia. To live well, one must treat others fairly.

The convoluted way in which our society has developed has made such a simple concept challenging, especially when you extend that thought to nonhuman others and natural environments. It's also necessary to consider: are we even able to treat ourselves fairly? If the chaos of our day to day doesn't allow for even that, how can we extend just treatment to others?

When looking at beauty, how have the values imparted on us by our consumerist society impacted what we believe to be beautiful? Is beauty truly subjective, or can beauty exist beyond someone perceiving it as so? Is something beautiful only because of the pleasing form it takes, or because of an emotion it stirs? Can there be beauty without justice? If we are unable to treat ourselves fairly, how are we to experience beauty?

The beauty of the natural world is often used as a media tool to shine light on planetary injustices. But is it just to rely on the natural beauty we're actively destroying? If we're to seek justice for the natural world, is it our responsibility to restore damaged ecosystems, or is it best we halt all human interference?

Justice and beauty share a similar ambiguity. They exist so regularly in our daily lives that they can often be overlooked, but in reflecting on them both, separately and together, justice and beauty can reveal much about where our values lie, or where they should.

Orbit

I want to be the thing I once killed.
Web weaving, piecing
my life together by moment.
I want to build my home without thinking
it will end my life.

There was once a spider on my back that
I left a room of men to look at,
knowing it would not survive their need,
their fear or their protective
performance.

Away, then, I exhaled slow and
asked her to reveal herself.
It was my hand, my fear,
my truth that did not survive outside
the view of its opposer.

Am I no longer instinct?
I have never known what that means.
If survival is cruel or if it has ever breathed
the same air as mercy.

I want to be the thing I once killed.
Orb weaver, orbiting
Earth, which doesn't lay beneath me
punishing itself, only
withstanding its own creation.



Poem by Rowan Heil who recently obtained her Creative Writing BFA from the University of Montana, and is currently leaning into the untethered nature of early post-grad. Her work often explores the dissonance in her relationship with herself and the land in the age of information.

Within the Same Afternoon

I was hiking up Mount Helena on the 1906 trail, one I had done numerous times before. It was also my birthday. As I walked and began nearing the summit, I noticed a downed dead tree full of intersecting branches.

I kept looking at it, though I didn't know why.

It was like this unassuming tree was showing me my grief. I stopped and wandered around the tree with tears in my eyes, wondering why I was so attracted to it. Its thin branches looked almost like a tangled nervous system trying to unravel itself.

I hesitated, then rapidly took a few photographs.

I felt uneasy and confused, but also as if something had come forward in me.

There are things people don't like looking at, in nature or in themselves. Once, I would have walked past this tree looking for something stronger…the mountains, the flowers, something that seemed worth photographing.

But I kept looking.

Eventually I reached the summit. The sunlight was bright and the wind moved across the top of the mountain and through my hair. Below me was the valley. I took photographs of myself with a wide smile and an arm stretched out with the distant mountains and sky behind me.

My body felt strong.

The tangled tree and the smiling version of me could both exist within that same afternoon.

On my way back down, my dad called. I told him I had just hiked to the summit. He asked how high it was, or how long the hike had been. I told him.

"Oh, that's not that bad," he said.

The thrilled, excitable feeling I had been carrying seemed to shrink a little.

For a long time, and sometimes still, I believed I should be only one thing.

Good. Pleasant. Liked. Easy.

When I first began photography, I was drawn to grand vistas, spectacular sunsets and the obvious wow moments. It was thrilling to make an image that looked beautiful and acceptable. I knew what I was supposed to point the camera toward.

Slowly, though, photography (or nature, or some inner part of myself) began showing me something else.

I started noticing shadows. Strange patterns in water. An odd interruption in the grand landscape. Twisted and gnarled branches. Decayed forms. Things most people might call darker or strange.

At one point, I made a photograph where I pushed the creek water so dark it became almost black. I remember being apprehensive to share it. I worried that other people might think the darkness meant something bad about me.

But I thought the photograph had become even more beautiful. It was almost as if I could feel the water's essence.

Until then, I had never thought of myself as dark. I thought of myself in bright colors, pretty things, and smiles. I kept this photo to myself but continued experimenting, especially with black and white. I began sharing riskier, not immediately "likable" photos.

Looking back now, some of those photographs seem almost mild to me. At the time, crossing that small boundary felt huge.

I began to wonder why these inconspicuous things were asking for my attention.

Learning to photograph what I once overlooked allowed me to see certain aspects of myself I had buried deep. Anger. Sorrow. Parts of myself I had decided were ugly, excessive, or simply "not me."

A storm does not apologize for intruding on a clear afternoon. A dead tree does not make itself less tangled. Shadows move across the path whether anyone admires them or not.

Maybe this is part of what photography has changed in me. Not just what I consider beautiful, but what I consider worthy of attention.

I used to think the strongest photograph might be the most impressive, obvious or attractive one: the mountain, the sunset, the expansive view.

Strongest for whom?

Sometimes the photograph I cannot stop thinking about is the one most people would have walked past. The branches that evoke unease. The dark water. The shadow that disappears almost as quickly as I notice it.

The unsettling and the beautiful can both take up space within the same frame.

I am still figuring out what that means for me. Maybe contradiction is not something I need to figure out.

I still go outside with my camera, not always knowing what I will find. More and more, I am interested in the things that don't immediately ask to be looked at.

The things people overlook are the things asking to be seen.



Story by Andrea Renae Marquez, a photographer based in Montana. She has been seriously photographing for about two years, during which her practice has shifted from scenic, more mainstream imagery toward work that feels increasingly internal and psychologically charged. Her work can be found on Instagram: @drea.renae.

Reflexiones sobre arte en la naturaleza

Tengo en mis manos la fotografía de una planicie, una inmensa franja recta y horizontal limitada en el horizonte por lejanísimas sierras recortadas contra un cielo todavía grisáceo.

En medio, ocupando un espacio mínimo, se ve una piedra.

Una vez más, me pregunto por qué estaba ahí.

¿Puede una piedra ser una obra de arte? No hay artista, no hay intención ni proyecto. Probablemente nadie decidió colocarla allí ni eligió su forma, su textura o el lugar que ocupa en la planicie. No existe para ser contemplada, no me debe belleza ni sentido, y sin embargo está en mi fotografía. Aparece entonces la sospecha de que quizá el arte no esté necesariamente en la cosa.

Si el discurso se agota en la mirada y decimos que basta con contemplar la piedra para que ya haya arte, entonces no hemos cuestionado ninguna frontera, la naturaleza sigue siendo naturaleza y el arte sigue siendo una producción humana. Estaríamos llamando «arte» a una experiencia estética que en realidad no hemos creado, pero la piedra no se convertiría en obra, simplemente habríamos proyectado sobre ella una categoría humana.

Sentado sobre ella enciendo el hornillo para preparar la cena. Miro a mi alrededor y me percato de que la piedra y yo somos los únicos que habitamos este páramo.

¿Podríamos pensar en una forma de creación que no dependiera de un creador, una transformación que no necesitara de una voluntad que la dirigiese hacia un resultado? La naturaleza transforma constantemente la materia, la erosiona, la sedimenta, la fractura, la mezcla, la desplaza, la acumula; produce formas sin proponérselo. No hay intención, no hay proyecto, pero hay proceso. Esa ausencia de finalidad me obliga a revisar a qué llamo creación.

La piedra me ha atrapado, pero hay algo en su presencia que se resiste a quedar reducido a una explicación. Es una piedra entre muchas, pero precisamente por eso su existencia concreta adquiere una singularidad absoluta: ahora es «esa» piedra en «ese» lugar, con «esa» forma y sometida durante quién sabe cuánto tiempo a unas condiciones que desconozco. La pregunta por su origen abrió el misterio, y ahora comienza a construirse una relación, las preguntas que la piedra suscita modifican mi manera de mirarla, su presencia me ha obligado a detenerme y permanecer disponible ante algo que no termino de comprender. Lo que sucede no está enteramente en la piedra ni enteramente en mí, sucede entre ambos.

Dentro del saco acerco mi mano a la piedra. Está caliente porque pasa todo el día al sol. Como si fuera una mesilla de noche, antes de dormirme, dejo sobre ella mis gafas y la linterna.

Si entendemos la creación únicamente como la producción deliberada de algo por parte de un sujeto, la naturaleza queda necesariamente fuera de ella. Pero hay otra manera de entender el proceso de transformación: surge porque dos realidades entran en contacto de un modo que las transforma, un proceso de encuentro afectivo que produce preguntas y fija la atención.

Miguel Ángel interviene sobre la materia: talla, elimina, descubre una forma posible en el bloque. Cuando Ansel Adams fotografía El Capitan no modifica la montaña, pero su proceso —la espera, el encuadre, el negativo, el positivado— modifica las condiciones bajo las cuales esa montaña aparece. Richard Long desplaza y ordena piedras en relación con el propio territorio; sus círculos dependen de la relación entre piedras, lugar, recorrido y acción, y su intervención puede desaparecer después.

En ninguno de estos casos la naturaleza crea la obra, pero tampoco es solo lo que el artista utiliza: es aquello con lo que entra en relación para que la creación pueda acontecer.

Cuando despierto y me pongo las gafas, sin querer rozo la superficie de la piedra. Ahora está fría.

Volvamos a la piedra. Hasta este momento no hemos hecho nada artístico con ella, no la hemos tallado ni desplazado; tampoco hemos esperado a que una determinada luz la transforme en imagen. Solo la hemos encontrado y, sin embargo, algo ha sucedido.

Dejo mi taza de café sobre ella, me alejo unos metros y fotografío el campamento, el saco extendido y la piedra contra el horizonte inmenso del amanecer.

La piedra estaba allí antes de que yo llegara —su existencia no dependía de mi mirada— y seguirá allí cuando yo me haya marchado, pero ahora la he aislado del paisaje, la he convertido en el centro de una pregunta y, finalmente, en una imagen. Su materia no ha cambiado; ha cambiado aquello que la piedra es dentro de ese vínculo.

Existe una diferencia fundamental entre encontrar algo y crear algo. Encontrar supone que aquello ya estaba ahí. Crear implica que, a partir de ese encuentro, producimos deliberadamente una forma que antes no existía. La piedra no ha sido creada por mí pero, para mí, ya existe de otro modo. Esa transformación aparece en el espacio que se abre entre ambos y provoca una forma de atracción difícil de reducir a una decisión consciente
.
¿Qué diferencia una transformación de otra? La intención. El artista no parte de la nada, parte de algo que ya existe y que, en mayor o menor medida, se resiste a ser reducido. Crear consiste en dejarse afectar por esa resistencia y trabajar a partir de ella.

Camino preguntándome si la piedra sería una señal puesta por alguien que ahora marca donde he dormido.

Al abandonar el lugar, queda el rectángulo de mi esterilla marcado en el suelo. Puede que desaparezca al final del día, quizá mañana, quién sabe. La piedra, sin embargo, seguirá ahí otros cientos, o miles, de años.

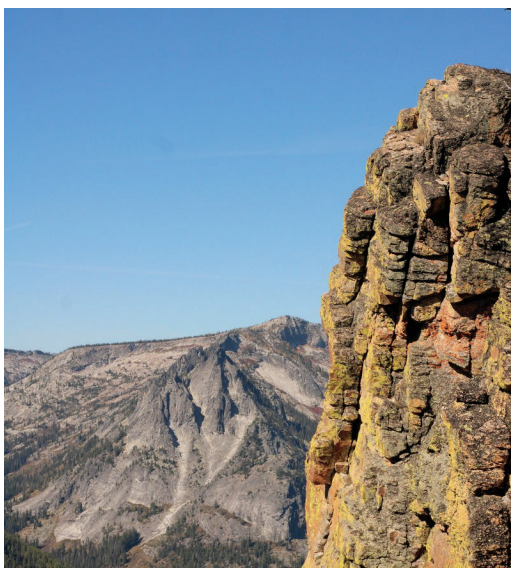
Entonces me giro y tomo otra fotografía a media altura con ese fondo que ya degrada a rosa donde el cielo toca el suelo. En medio del mundo, ella explica el tamaño de este paisaje.

La contemplación no es creación. Puedo experimentar algo profundamente estético contemplando una salida de sol, y la naturaleza no se ha convertido por ello en arte. Pero si, a partir de esa relación, decido someterla a cualquier operación destinada a convertir esa relación en forma, estaré en el territorio de la creación artística.

A media jornada, no sé por qué, vuelve a mi memoria la piedra, y busco en mi teléfono la fotografía que tomé mientras desayunaba...

¿Quién ha acompañado a quién esta noche?

Essay by Ignacio Luque, an artist and traveler with a degree in fine arats and, soon to be, philosophy. He worked as a photojournalist for five years, a teacher for ten, and a graphic designer for fifteen. In 2007, he began a journey in which he remained immersed in developing artistic work in photography, film, and literature. For the past nineteen years, Ignacio has lived on the road, where he works, studies, and seraches for answers to the questions life asks him.



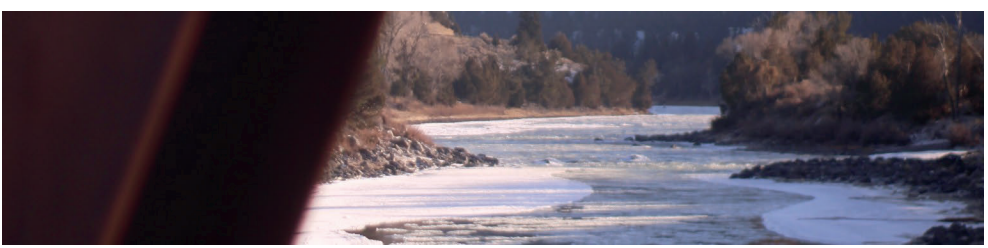
Out of the House

Looking at a worn black and white photograph taken one Wisconsin winter, a cascade of memories come back from a long ago. Trudging outside in the dark, cold and snow in winter, watching out for spiders, bugs and flies in the summer. Trips to that tiny, cramped, single holed stinky place that was our family outhouse. Except for the diapered babies, each member of our family dreaded the need to visit the privy behind the farmhouse. With each complaint my Dad reminded us of the solution soon to come. The rustic homestead had been purchased in 1952 with the promise of a community water line extension. When that long awaited day came, my father became a manual laborer in the summer evenings after his normal workday had finished, digging holes for the pipes and tank that would replace the shack out back with an indoor comfort. While he worked, he told us about the engineering details of the system that we anxiously awaited.

Little did that young child know how the transition from outdoor to indoor plumbing would affect much of her life's work, that she would have a career founded on taking care of all forms of waste; studying, identifying, collecting, regulating storing, sorting, digging up, burying, reusing, recycling and hopefully, eliminating waste.

I remember the ceremonial first flush of the toilet, and my first bath in hot running water. It gives me a feeling of gratitude for something that is too easy to take for granted. A reminder both of our privilege and the great problems we face in dealing with the waste products of what we call civilization. Organisms in nature recycle all materials. Why then is this so hard for us to do? We need to remember that humans are part of nature and must find a way to live sustainably. Gratitude for our many conveniences would be a good start.

The day the outhouse was deconstructed, the old grey boards of the much used, little loved, privy were given another, more noble life as an ice pond frame for winter skating. Skates on, I remember trudging out in the winter cold and overcast sky, this time for fresh air and fun. But that's a story for another day.



Story by Marie Zanowick Bourgeois, a creative civil engineer with 34 years of experience working for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. She was associate faculty at Arizona State University and the Biomimicry Group 3.8 where she devloped and presented online M.S. level classes for biomimicry students and conducted field studies in biomimicry. Marie combines her educational background with her regulatory expereince and facilitation skills to produce innovative solutions to a wide rangeg of challenges. She uses biomimicry as the method of choice in solving environmental challengs.

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And to all who submitted, accepted and not, to this little magazine.

And to all who actively try to make this world a better place.

If you are interested in engaging in further reflections of a similar nature, email hello to jess.holmes@umconnect.umt.edu with "art in nature" as subject line for future projects.

All photos in this little magazine were taken by Jess Holmes throughout the state of Montana, excluding the photo on page 5, which was taken in Ditmer, MO at an animal sanctuary Jess worked.

This little magazine was printed on recycled paper.

