

A painting of a stone building, possibly a house or a small church, nestled in a dense forest. The building has a gabled roof and a large arched doorway. The scene is dimly lit, with sunlight filtering through the trees, creating a sense of mystery and tranquility. The colors are muted, with earthy tones and deep greens.

HEAVEN
IS A HOUSE
LIKE THIS
A EULOGY FOR NATURE

M A H N O O R R A Z A

“Soul and soil are not separate. Neither are wind and spirit, nor water and tears. We are eroding and evolving, at once, like the red rock landscape before me. Our grief is our love. Our love will be our undoing as we quietly disengage from the collective madness of the patriarchal mind that says aggression is the way forward.”

– Terry Tempest Williams, *Erosion: Essays of Undoing*

The days are becoming shorter, or so I've heard. To me, they still seem to stretch out endlessly, with there still being sunlight to spare even hours after I wake up from a post-work nap and saunter downstairs for dinner. Summer feels life-affirming. There's a stickiness in the air that feels like home. But, in this quaint yellow-walled cottage in the Adirondack Mountains near my workplace for the summer, I couldn't be farther from home. The air feels heavier, but my heart feels lighter. Maybe it's the sunny days doing their magic; the gentle warmth is a reminder that there is still so much life, and so much to live for. Or maybe it's the single, hyphenated word that has been echoing in my head, rising above the clamor of countless others—*grief*, *girlhood*, *growing pains*—always vying for attention. *Life-affirming*. It bounces around and illuminates every corner it hits, like a pinball machine. *Life-affirming*.

Fellow mourners, we gather here today to pre-emptively bid farewell to Nature. And like many funerals, this one is a celebration of life. Summer and grief have more in common than you would think. Summer feels life-affirming, and so can grief. This comes as as much of a shock to me as it may to you, and I acknowledge that it sounds paradoxical, considering that grief has always been the final frontier in the eternal tussle between life and death. However, it turns out that witnessing artists come together to interpret local oral stories about climate can shift how you perceive the cycles of life and death. It was here, at this artist retreat in the Adirondacks, that I talked to writer and photographer Andrea Gluckman about Nature, climate denial, and—you guessed it—grief.



Our conversation was a revelation to me. We spoke about what happens when you lose the liminality of seasons, as just one example of what is at stake because of climate change. The changing seasons have been our guiding constellations for centuries. They've inspired poets and priests and children's play. They are what we organize our festivals and foods and weddings and school years and travel plans around. The expectation for the upcoming winter is our heritage; the anticipation for spring is embedded in our DNA. The seasons make up for our disappointing lack of tree rings by guiding our perception of time and age, which means being deprived of them would render our world rhythmless and patternless.

When faced with the possibility of losing so many ways of experiencing our senses, of course there is the temptation to resist. Climate change is terrifying, and the urge to push back against the mere thought of losing your home is as natural as leaves changing color in the fall. That resistance might take many forms, ranging from ecoanxiety and climate action, to indifference or even outright denial.

Andrea called climate denial “a desperate theology,” which perfectly captures the frantic and obstinate need to turn a blind eye to climate catastrophe. When you deny change, you leave open the possibility of a return to normalcy. It becomes a means of self-preservation—a different, if misguided, way to create hope and affirm life in the face of unimaginable grief, which is, of course, just another form of love. And like any form of grief left repressed

and unaddressed, Andrea noted that climate denial would inevitably rear its ugly head in painful and unexpected ways if we are not prepared. Because here's the rub: although alluring in its attempt to shield one from the climate crisis, denial carries the burden of eventually exacerbating the very grief it aims to escape.

In her strange and wonderful book *Pure Colour*, Sheila Heti proposes a different way to go about processing climate grief and making room for hope. The book envisions Earth on the brink of destruction, and it likens our world to a first attempt at creation, which the Creator is about to destroy and replace with a flawless second draft. In the midst of this impending calamity, grief is abundant and seasons have become postmodern. When faced with the weight of uncertainty and loss, instead of retreating into denial, humanity seeks an outlet through art. They channel their rage, joy, and pain into their own first drafts. They turn to love each other imperfectly, and make imperfect art. They fight to find beauty and meaning in a world that the Creator has deemed too flawed to endure, and this act of creation becomes an act of healing and defiance against a reality that seems determined to crumble. The book has more to say about climate and the importance of listening to Nature, but this particular form of resistance—the affirmation of life in the face of seemingly certain death—speaks to the difference between despair and distress.

That, to me, is life-affirming: to be acutely aware of what feels inevitable and distressing, but to reject despair and hopelessness. To carve out possibility and wonder within our grief instead of beyond

it. That is why the retreat felt like an intervention to me in best way possible. Celebrating and mourning Nature with people of all ages, disciplines, and walks of life forced me to confront sorrow and joy head-on, often at the same time.

Artist Joan Epstein baking Challah for us all was the perfect example of the inextricability of these emotions. Joan spent an entire morning in the kitchen, kneading and braiding dough. She brought out the golden-brown, freshly-baked bread for dinner, a culinary and artistic symbol for nourishment and community. The act of breaking bread together—sharing food and stories, and discussing life, loss, and our relationship with Nature—felt truly profound and mirrored the love, care, and reciprocity that the natural world seeks from us.

The act of baking Challah for the residents at the retreat was a labor of love and a testament to the value of dedicating energy to create something meaningful, unifying, and nourishing. At the same time, it also made me reflect on death. With the Challah before us, Joan spoke about the Jewish tradition of placing objects representing the deceased on a table at their funeral service. “I think about what I’d want on my table,” she said. I thought about it too, and I’m not sure yet. But, to be fair, the death that is now constantly on my mind is not my own nor that of anyone I know. After all, our collective lifespans make up an infinitesimal fraction of the single flap of a hummingbird’s wings. No, it is the death of Nature that I wonder about. If Nature could speak—which I’d argue she can—what would she put on her table?





“writer’s retreat”

by Yusra Amjad

to unlearn capitalism
means to return to the small,
dreamy things whose company
i kept as a child

would you believe me if i said i always wanted a small house?

to be a poet is to want
what you want
and not a penny more

retreat
is the opposite of writing

would you believe me if i told you i never wanted to be famous?
would you believe me if i told you the poems mean nothing without the
people?

One night at the retreat, I had a dream where I had died and gone to heaven, and it looked exactly like the cottage we were at. I woke up and stared at the log ceiling beams and thought, *heaven is a house like this*. I went swimming in a lake for what felt like the first time ever. The sun was the most perfect it had ever been and will ever be. I could have laughed with joy. The breeze smelled like grass and, inexplicably, snow. I reminded myself to trust the water. When we waded onto land again, my friend Julia said she wanted to take a screenshot of the humidity and temperature to know when she'd feel like this again.

Sometimes I would walk through the retreat and catch snippets of conversations. I walked in on Julia and Ellie telling someone about how they liked celebrating the little things, like getting a friend an ice cream cake because they went to class. One artist told another that not knowing how to work with a medium just meant they had less to unlearn. I learned how to Irish dance in a barn. I watched artists paint with leaves and produce music out of birdsong. We walked around the forest with mics and headphones to listen to the trees rustle and the water lap against the rocks. One night, when I was supposed to be cleaning up dinner, I sprinted to a canoe to go beaver-watching. We stumbled through the woods blindfolded so we could listen to Nature better. I worked with my hands, peeling carrots but also creating gelli plate prints. Julia and I watched the stars by the lake and slowly took in one sight, touch, smell, taste, and sound. I heard Julia whisper, "We just formed a new memory."

This summer, I've started to hum to myself—I never used to do that before. It's one of those things I always read about but never experienced for myself. Similarly, I couldn't fathom how anyone could enjoy the summer heat until I experienced the North Country sun. "The world feels like it wants you in it, in the summer," said Julia. Again, I could have laughed with joy, but I didn't. Instead, I felt a cocktail of guilt and grief. Summer has never been joyful in Pakistan and is becoming increasingly intolerable. It is the opposite of the world wanting you in it—it rages against you. With the recent unrelenting floods, I wonder if rain will also take on an equally malevolent persona in the public consciousness. Already, looking forward to a rainy day back home feels like an immensely tone-deaf privilege. To enjoy the rain means you sit atop a mountain of privilege, on elevated ground untouched by the water and the havoc it wreaks on millions of people's lives, and allowing myself to enjoy the summer in the States feels just as tone-deaf. But nobody should have to feel like they aren't allowed to enjoy the seasons. Nobody should have to be scared of Nature or feel guilty for loving her. Rain should be joyful, and so should the sun overhead. The world *should* feel like it wants you in it, in every season.

Julia, ever full of pithy wisdom, also noted that our little mountain retreat was the closest we might ever get to experiencing Earth as it was before humans showed up. As we stood on the dock overlooking the lake, I wondered—a little dramatically, I'll admit—if this was the last time I would ever be so close to a landscape as

pristine as this. More realistically, I also know that wilderness and the bewilderment it brings will not be accessible for the generation after mine if I succumb to despair now. Heaven is not confined to a retreat cottage; it resides in the joy and community found within, and the clear blue water and emerald woods surrounding it.

While there is so much more to say—as there always is—about the individual’s role in the climate movement, I’m also thinking about another intergenerational and interdisciplinary experience I had recently: a discussion circle at the John Brown Farm about racial justice and historical figures’ complicated legacies. During the discussion, one participant shared what a woman from the Mohawk nation had told her: that we don’t know whether we have any power in the grand scheme of things, but that doesn’t absolve us of personal responsibility. This sense of personal responsibility and the joy in healing a world you love can, and should, be reason enough for us to reject passivity. Emily N. Johnston, in her excellent essay “Loving in a Vanishing World,” writes, “Feelings need not be destiny.” She notes, “We can feel fear and grief and anger—we can even feel avoidant sometimes—and still attend to the world’s very real and immediate needs,” simply because doing something, anything, is the only way to lighten that grief in yourself and others.



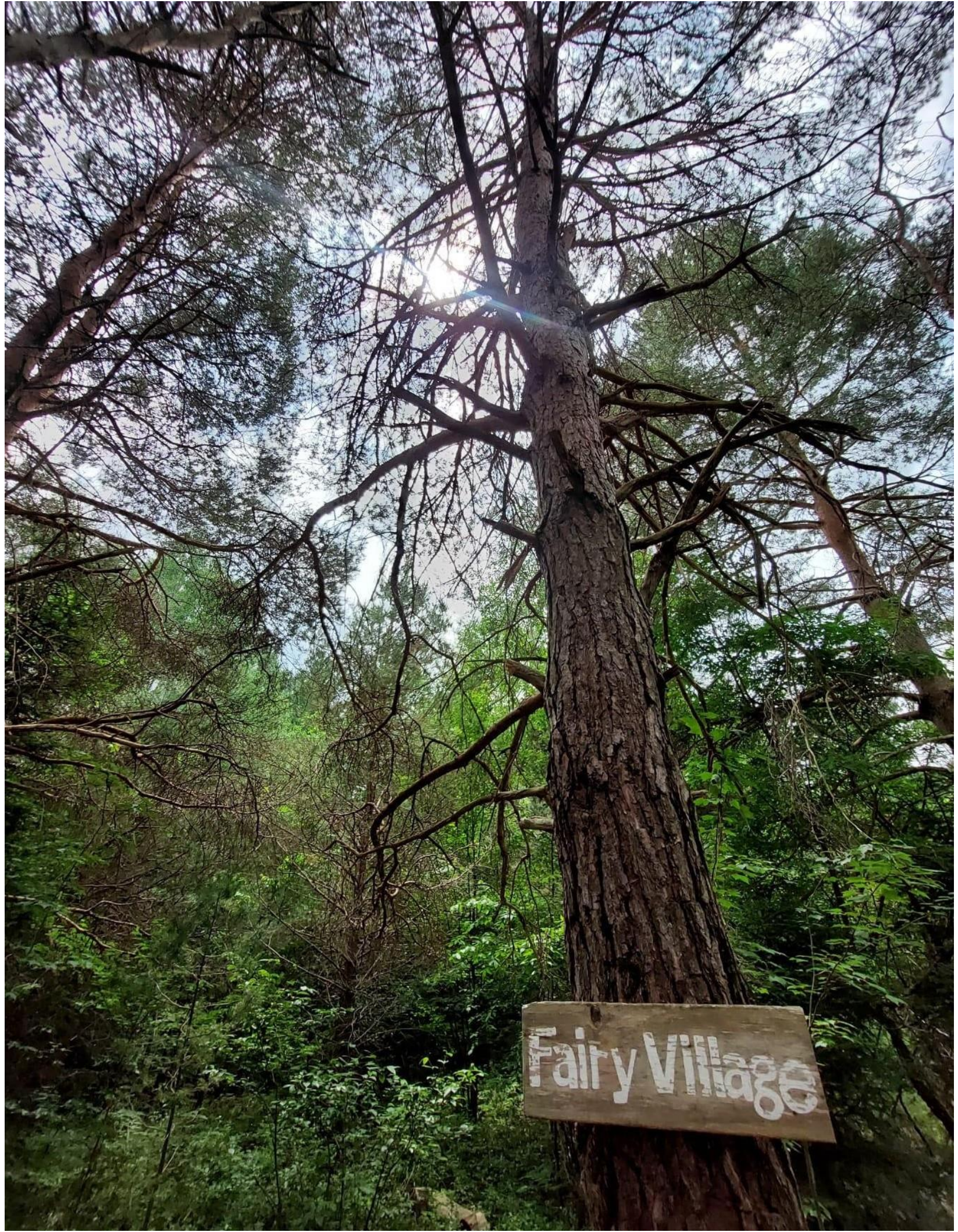
“The Trees”

by Philip Larkin

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too,
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh



Fairy Village

For me, imagination has emerged as the only way to counter the climate grief that is always, always edging closer. As a child, I carried a dark, dirty, shameful secret: I was convinced that I was dull and uncreative. Why did I, a voracious reader, aspiring writer, and only child, not have an imaginary bosom friend like Anne Shirley or the psychedelic imagination of a Roald Dahl protagonist? Wasn't that the whole point of being a child? Was there something wrong with me?

Looking back, I realize I was in a constant state of play, but I wonder if I only felt like I had an inadequate imagination because childlike wonder was my default state of being. The standards set by the Dahls and Blytons of the world were perhaps a surface-level, self-conscious attempt to recreate childlike whimsy. I suspect as much because my imagination has recently resurfaced like dormant seeds sprouting after seasons of sleep, as if fighting to stay alive. At age nine, I sat staring at my shoes and pledged to never forget what it was like to be a child. I told myself I never wanted to forget, even though I wasn't sure yet what exactly I was trying to remember.

It wasn't until this summer, when I watched children's imaginations run free at various installations at the Wild Center in Tupper Lake, that I remembered just what I was trying to hold onto. Their effortless wonder taught me to experience joy in the natural world again. At one point, finally alone in Forest Music—an immersive installation in the woods where hidden speakers play music that accompanies the sounds of the natural world—I put down my copy of *The Hidden Life of Trees* to dance. I'm not a

dancer and am notoriously inelegant, but I have never felt closer to Nature. It was one of the greatest joys of my short human life.

What I'm trying to say is: grief is love, and loving something can be life-affirming. Joy can be life-affirming. The love and joy experienced in Nature—the one thing sustaining all life—is worth grieving and worth saving. And: perhaps sustainability is also about learning to experience joy with courage, compassion, and care, and preserving this capacity to feel hope and bewilderment in the natural world for those to come.

It is 9 PM. The sun is setting, but Nature teems with life yet, and so, it is imperative that I go watch the sunset on the lake while I still can.



“Tagore said, trees are the earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven. But people—oh, my word, people! People could be the heaven that the Earth is trying to speak to.”

– Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

“Teach the children. We don’t matter so much, but the children do. ... Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit. Stand them in the stream, head them upstream, rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in, its sticks and leaves and then the silent, beautiful blossoms. Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

– Mary Oliver, *Upstream*