

## Girl, Optimistic: An Environmental Ethic

My legs dangled from the sides of the paddleboard and I leaned forward, resting my arms on my thighs as I peered into the darkening water. The sun, on its way towards the horizon, had become shrouded by a particularly thick cloud and in the waning dusk, I imagined a creature would finally feel comfortable enough to emerge from the depths of Blue Mesa and bite my toes.

It was almost enough to pull my legs out of the water and back onto the safety of the paddleboard, but the cloud began to burn off and I became distracted by the slow, dying display of sunlight spreading across the mountaintops. Nestled between two mesas, the sun scoffed at the attempt to cloak it and erupted in brilliant shades of orange. Its reflection danced in the murky water, shifting and bobbing on the crests of haphazard waves. I thought then that it didn't matter if a monster came and swallowed me whole – I could hardly remember seeing anything so wonderful in my entire life.

That was my twenty-first day in Gunnison, Colorado.

I grew up in Maryland; I spent my first five years of life in Odenton and the next fourteen in Laurel. I knew open farmlands, lush and humid forests, muggy ponds, slow and sprawling rivers, and rolling hills. My backyard was an ecosystem: bordered by towering trees, the little hill behind my house hosted a slew of insects, flitting birds, and ambling deer. Anthills snaked through the grass, and I was barefoot and forgetful, so I'd often come tearing back inside with ants crawling up and down my legs. Fireflies twinkled in the waning light and bats swooped by in their clumsy nighttime dance to gobble them up.

The creek down the hill was my wilderness. I would wrap hot dogs in fishing line and trick crayfish into thinking they'd found an easy meal. I waded up to my thighs in the deepest

pools until I found a snake intertwined with the submerged roots. I turned over rocks and carried turtles up to my backyard so that I could lie down in the grass and watch them navigate with their stubby legs. A fallen tree, with its mountain of upturned roots, was a throne in my wild kingdom.

But at age nineteen, and after my umpteenth visit to the mountains, I was thrust deep in my refusal to see the magnificence, or worth, or importance of where I grew up. I thought the crags and torrid creeks and big sky country was where I belonged, so I stuffed my bags into the back of my Scion hatchback and took off.

Colorado was not the first place where I realized I had an affinity for the outdoors. It never even occurred to me in my youth that nature and I were different. It never crossed my mind that as a human, there was somehow supposed to be a distinction between the environment and myself – as if I didn't belong, as if I could be anything but an extension of nature itself.

It took until a visit to Yellowstone National Park when I was sixteen to realize how indifferent nature was to the comings and goings of humans and how as a species, we alienated ourselves from this precise, ingenious, interconnected system. People paraded through the park in cars and observed the outside world from behind the muted, distant safety of glass windows. Those cars would come to a screeching halt at the sign of an animal – sometimes a herd of bison crossing the road, sometimes a lone coyote snaking through the long grass – but what caught my attention was when I pulled over to watch a black bear hunt, catch, and devour a marmot.

The marmot scurried under the cover of a pile of logs, but the bear had already noticed it – it dug a paw into the tangle of wood, revealing a hole large enough for its snout. The marmot was shrieking and writhing as the bear plucked it from its hiding place, but the terrible clamor

was abruptly cut off when the bear sent its teeth into the marmot's belly. The bear pulled a string of innards loose and finally I looked away, feeling both appalled and fortunate to have witnessed such a rite of survival.

It was a display of raw nature, a closed-loop circuit into which we did not fit and it got me thinking – where do humans belong in our imperfect world? We put ourselves on a pedestal at the same time we started taking a sledgehammer to its foundation. We made ourselves kings and then set fire to the kingdom.