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Green Rhetoric

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Verging on adulthood:

Nature's imprint on a child

Sixteen years old is a transitional age. It hits that sweet spot where you're entering a period of seemingly unimpeded independence; it is finally legal for you to drive a car, but not quite legal for you to take on the roads with your friends, you're moving up in the class ranks and bridging on the superior side of the highschool hierarchy as an upperclassman, but you report to your family for your curfew. For me, when I turned sixteen the reaches of my claustrophobic world began to expand and take on a new shape. The possibilities of what the weekend could hold after the five day long schoolweek of monotonous routine were sweeping and tempting. By Friday at 2:30, just fifteen minutes away from the end of the school day, I was vibrating with the sense of possibility and the change from normalcy.

When I finally earned my provisional drivers license the sun had just begun to conquer what seemed like an eternal season of Portland, Oregon rain; gray skies were breaking with streaks of a warm and cherished glow that was longed for in a city littered with a vitamin D deficient population. In Portland the only socially-respectable car that you could drive was a Prius or some form of fuel-efficient alternative; the silent spaceship that my all-female family affectionately named Ruth for the esteemed Justice Ginsburg, was my ticket into a weekend of pioneering the untred. Ruth was an instrument of freedom. I would pick up my friends in style,

but not in legality. The car would be packed with sixteen-year-olds as anxious as myself for the adventures that the short and unrestrained weekend would hold and we would head east, seeking our favorite spot, where the great states of Oregon and Washington kiss on the Columbia River.



One particular day we packed Ruth full of seven of my friends; no part of this fell within the law. The sun was hot on that day in mid-May and we pursued one of my favorite hikes along the Columbia River Gorge, Oneonta Gorge. Unlike the sea of Portland traffic today that shaves years off of the average Oregonian's life, my rule back then was that no drive within Portland and the surrounding areas takes more than 20 minutes. The drive serves as the semblance of peace as you hang tight to the tightrope that is I-84, balancing along the border between Oregon and Washington. We bumbled along and pulled off the paved road, setting out to our adventure for the day.



Oneanta Gorge is a very short hike, ranging no more than 2 miles long, but to make it to the end posits several challenges. We started our way up, only making it a half a mile in before we were up to our wastes in freezing water, camelbacks and nalgens hoisted above our heads. The water was electric in its temperature, sending a shock through your spine even on a day as hot as that Saturday. Riley served as the navigator of our little group. He charged ahead, flashing in and out of sight, acting as though he was a kid diving for plastic rings; even on our independent trip to the gorge, free of parental authority, Riley

brought us all back to childhood. With false confidence he led our group and somehow we steered from the well-groomed trail. About a half a mile off the traditional and intended path we reached a tunnel decorated in colorful graffiti. The walls of the tunnel ahead were cloaked with paint, grasping at every spectrum of color within our universe, persuading us to step inside. We hadn't yet cleared the freezing water, which loomed around our ankles, biting us with its bitter cold temperature. Our logic was unclear and the leadership sorely lacking, but we sountered forward, holding tight to the walls of the tunnel that danced with illustrations, reaching for the small beam of sun at the end. My feet squished in the mud as we neared closer to the end; the

tunnel dimmed and our visibility lessened. When we reached the end the bright sunshine inspired me to wince, as the blue of the rich water of the Columbia River melted with the striking light of the hot May sun; we had made it to our unintended destination and it felt as though we had reached the end of the world. Here, we spent our afternoon, soaking in the rich rays of sunshine, embracing our escape from the city, the juvenile nature of highschool and feeling the freedom that accompanies the transitions of being sixteen.



This memory fits in among the dozens of glimpses into my childhood that was shaped among the foliage, freezing water and wildness of the Columbia River Gorge. I reflect on this area as a safe space for me, fostering adventures, serving as an accomplice to an escape from routine throughout my Pacific Northwestern upbringing. The Columbia River Gorge underscored a shift in my life, highlighting a transition and break from youth as I drove east, windows down, controlling the wheel, with a full car of friends tucked in the back; we were shaking off the remains of childhood with a confident and false sense of maturity. My memories have the fortune of being untouched, illuminating the period, place and experience that provides their context.



Nature is similar in its inherent and unmarked beauty at its very roots; the trail that we walked along early on our hike along Oneonta Gorge, the river that splits the mirroring lands along our drive, the moldic current that makes the rocks that lay below smooth with its touch.

Nature isn't as fortunate as my memories, affected by the

unforgiving influence of time and modernity. On September 2nd, 2017, what came to be known as the Eagle Creek Fire consumed 50,000 acres of the Columbia River Gorge. The fires were destructive, burning for around three months, leaving some areas still closed to the public today. Several days after the fires had erupted from the canyons of Eagle Creek, reports have demonstrated that the fires were the results of illegally set off fireworks.

Nature, like childhood, is impressionable. While I drove up with my friends to Oneonta Gorge on that hot May day, embracing the feeling that we had finally joined the ranks of adults, the reality was that we were in the most childlike place of them all, the great and impressionable outdoors. We were explorers, playing games, seeking expedition, marking uncharted lands; we were in my childhood backyard, unaware of the impact that it had on us and in turn the imprint that we making on it. Today I reflect on the simple days; the days of sheepish sunshine and

unconventional trails that spread before us as if we would never reach their limits. The landscape is scarred now and some areas will never be what they were when I was sixteen, but to know what it once was, granting influence to my childhood as I bridged on adulthood, will influence how I reflect on the impressionability of nature today.

Works Cited

Cowley, Jared. "One Year Later: An Eagle Creek Fire Timeline." *KGW*, 2 Sept. 2018, www.kgw.com/article/weather/wildfires/one-year-later-an-eagle-creek-fire-timeline/283-590297
[111](#).

Self-Evaluation

1. What's the word count for your memoir?
 - a. 1,211
2. Why did you choose this nature experience(s) over others? What helped you make your final choice?
 - a. I've always found the idea of the innocence of nature to be an interesting concept. I wanted to pair this with themes that surrounding growing up and moving on from childhood, a similarly innocent concept. The hikes that I went on in the gorge serve as snapshots that are reflective of my childhood, however it is something that I cannot go back to in the same way because of negative human impact that harmed the landscape. This topic was important to me because it spoke to themes that align with the roots of nature and also emphasised a call to action.
3. What do you want your reader to take away from your memoir? Why?
 - a. I want my readers to reflect on the simplicity that we can find in nature, but to also recognize the elements that we take for granted. This should prompt environmental respect and activism.

4. Of the nature memoirs we read in class, which two or three were most useful for you and why?
 - a. “The Big Grass” was a source that had similar themes and a writing style that I wanted to employ in my work. The author focused on a small untouched bit of nature, grass, that represented the most innocent and enlightening elements that often go unnoticed through the correct and authentic lens. The second piece was Kingston’s “A City Person Encountering Nature.” I loved the appeal to the escape that Kingston alluded to throughout her work and wanted to demonstrate similar concepts within my writing.
5. What was challenging about writing the memoir? Enjoyable?
 - a. Normally I am a very structured writer; I am religious about creating outlines, and holding to a set format. A nature memoir rings closer to creative writing than what I have done historically and so this craft pushed me outside my comfort zone. My first draft I sat down and wrote almost conversationally, without stopping to review. I liked this style because once I was done I was able to reflect on the entire piece, pulling out themes that rang most clear. This “word-vomit” (to put it delicately) eventually helped me hone my craft and allowed for a solid foundation. Ultimately this was a different stylistic approach than what I am used to.
6. Describe the peer feedback you received. What was the most helpful feedback you received, and why?

- a. My peers were very helpful in their review of my content. The most helpful advice was their guidance about the format of my paper. They told me to focus more on my larger themes and shorten my intro paragraph which wasn't contributing as much to the main arguments.
7. What did you focus on when you revised?
- a. When I revised I focused on the middle sections, adding details and underscoring themes that I presented towards the end of my work. I also shortened my introductory paragraph which had become too long and took away from the major themes in the paper.