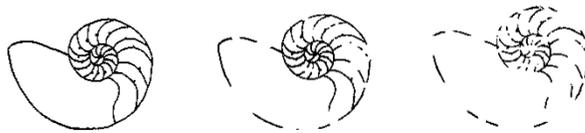


Imagination Fractal¹

Ocean eyes are watching me
through blue crystal frames. I
watch the crisp, cool waves pull
taught on the sand. You, a friend,
hold the crab pinched between
thumb and forefinger and wonder
if it's alive. As we silently
imagine its feet dancing again on
the sand, a wave surprises us,
soaking your tennis shoes. The
saltwater has healing properties
but today we found it can't save a
life.

The shell fills with seawater and
sinks to the dusty sea floor.

When your waterlogged shell touches the sandy
bottom of the ocean, tell me if you, the crab, find
a wandering chambered nautilus dressed in a c-
shaped shell with orange stripes spread out along
its length. You will know it when you see it- if
you bisect its shell, you will find pockets
spinning precisely from large to small in a
mesmerizing spiral. But you might find its shell
crumbled to pieces instead. This ocean grows
acidic from human pollution, shells slowly losing
their strength, reversing nature's construction:
another human sacrifice; the perfect product of a
society consumed by consumption. No matter
what you find, send your answer to me in an echo
across the sea. I will be searching for your reply.



I wait for your echo along a Florida river,
straining for your small voice on a haunted
breeze.

¹ A fractal is a pattern, originally found in nature that changes scale over time while maintaining the same general shape

This river is lined with rich brown cypress trees and lonesome palms, their roots digging into the earth, holding onto scraps of land. I walk down to the water and dip my hand into the muddy water. The river whispers the long-lost secrets of ancient peoples, telling their stories in the gentle rise and fall of the water on the bank. I see the people that came long before us in the scattered sand, in the bleached white shell pieces and in the long, webbed fingers of cypress branches. I imagine them moving about, pulling oysters from the mud and making smokey fires with downed pine needles. They didn't know that, thousands of years later, they would be just words blowing like smoke through the mind.

The smoke from my mind exits through my car, my shower,
my food and enters the water.

I take the white foam, that concoction of cleaners and cosmetics laying on top of this water as a sign that you are dying. You, that bald cypress tree on the bank, are sucking in that poison through your clinging roots. Maybe this is the last spring you will see. I watch as you unfurl your new, and maybe your last green leaves, like living feathers being spread for the first time. Your leaves have a gentle pattern, the repeating green leaves, exactly opposite of one another on the branch, getting smaller as they reach the end. These oil slicks in your chemical bathwater are fracturing your feathery patterns and turning them brown. Soon we will see underneath those leaves to a skeleton of mathematical precision. Then finding you useless, the birds will flee from your branches into the wind.



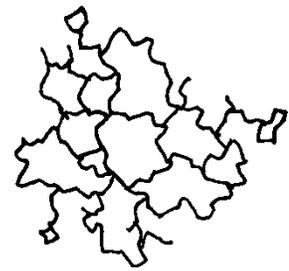
These birds let the wind carry them backwards towards me in time and space.

Many years and many miles before, in the throes of my childhood, I find myself clinging to the outdoors like a beetle clings to the bark of a tree during a summer storm. I string up large blue tarps with brown rope, creating a blue plastic castle in an expansive backyard next to our red brick house. I invite you, my sister, onto the soft grassy carpet with a plywood table fit for a king. I set out, gently gathering flowers from bushes and trees. You find natural odds and ends- a bright red leaf, a collection of dark wood chips, the stray dandelion. We take our haul back to the blue castle of tarps and I set to work making flower and leaf soup while you work over the grill built of sticks, grilling wood chip steaks to serve over a bed of oak leaf purée on a pretty rock platter. Afterwards, we keep those nature concoctions in plastic containers, hoping, I guess, that a woodland

fairy will find in them a delicious meal. We don't realize that when you leave that mix of leaves and flowers in a container too long without opening it starts to rot.

Today I ask the flower, would you rather perish by a child's imagination or by the maddening hand of the summer sun?

This ground is dying, cracking in too many spots, a web of fractures between patches of burnt grass. The rain refuses to come. All we have is endless sun, so dry and hot I can see the plants in our backyard crying out with thirst. They wilt and droop, stems bending over, too weak to stand up straight. Even the birds grow quieter as the summer drags on. It looks like the dirt is fighting—dividing unevenly and pulling away from its neighbor, leaving behind a pattern of canyons too wide for even the biggest ant to cross. The hottest summer on record- it's no surprise. They say the world is getting warmer and here we are getting drier. They say that water wars are in the future but from my angle this dirt is already fighting.

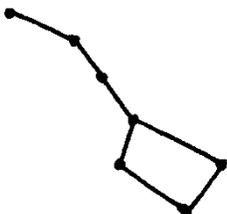


The child's whisper always seems to fight the flat roar of the parent.

Another day, much earlier, but in that same house, our young eyes wander excitedly across a sagging tent sheet. At the end of this day we should be tired, but you, a friend, and I are up long past bedtime; fatigue seems to have missed us this night. After a day spent wandering backyard ecosystems, we are sprawled out on the carpeted game room floor under the cloak of night planning our escape. Our hushed whispers are the serrated outline of a plan meant to take us into outer space. We imagine what it would be like to travel through complete blackness, to see Mars, to see the sun, to run our fingers through the Milky Way. Then parental voices interrupt our ideas about what a star will feel like between our fingertips, telling us it's time for bed. Our childish brains translate this to *just whisper quieter*. And so we do, crafting a royal blue shiny spaceship using only the mixture of my thoughts and yours coming together in midair.

The stars seem to hang suspended in midair, held hostage by the lighted fog of the city.

Under the glare of my porchlight most of the stars have been rendered invisible. You, my dad, point upwards, trying, and then failing, to find the big dipper. We shield our eyes from the streetlamp, the passing headlight of a truck, the blinking light of the airplane. We try to find a few more shimmering stars. If we could see the universe laid out before our eyes, we would find patterns in those stars, we would find the organized chaos of the universe. We could watch the Milky Way track across the sky in a band of colorful shimmering dust. But these patterns have been cloaked in the dusky cloak of a world glowing too brightly.



Yesterday a man on the grassy trail with a fishing rod says that he has been out here all day and still hasn't caught anything.

This seems to be the challenge of growing older.

I want to tell him that I too, have trouble catching fish these days. That the hook of the line that I throw into my imagination has dulled over the years and I am left with nothing but a soft piece of metal.

There is a pattern with imagination as we age- it gets smaller and smaller as we grow older like the steady climb into the middle of the nautilus shell, the leaves on the bald cypress tree, the growing fissures in the earth, the patterns of distant stars. It's hard to pinpoint the cause of this fading imagination. Maybe its decline happens by a similar mechanism as water pollution, climate change, and light pollution- the life slowly draining and draining out until you realize that you have nothing left- no water to drink, no air to breathe; no creativity to create new things. Maybe this loss is the sad product of time and we are powerless to stop imagination's decline. But I refuse to believe that adults can't have nature soup on the dinner table and starships in their closet.

Today I find myself at the beach with toes in the sand, inhaling the salt spiced air of the ocean. Wandering down to the shoreline, I watch as waves lap at the sand like gentle breaths of wind caressing the tanned face of the earth. I think about the crab I once found with a friend and I remembered the falling, plummeting moment we both realized it was dead. I guess we placed it gently back into the ocean as a sort of tribute to the life it once had. We watched the waves carry the dead crab slowly out to sea, the tide tugging at its legs, its body, gently deconstructing its skeleton and sinking its shell down to the sandy bottom. Today, standing here with the wind whistling by and toes dug gently into the sand, I realized that the death of childhood imagination might be as inevitable as a dying crab pulled apart by the sea. But the fragments remain, sunk to the watery bottom of the mind's ocean, just waiting to be found.