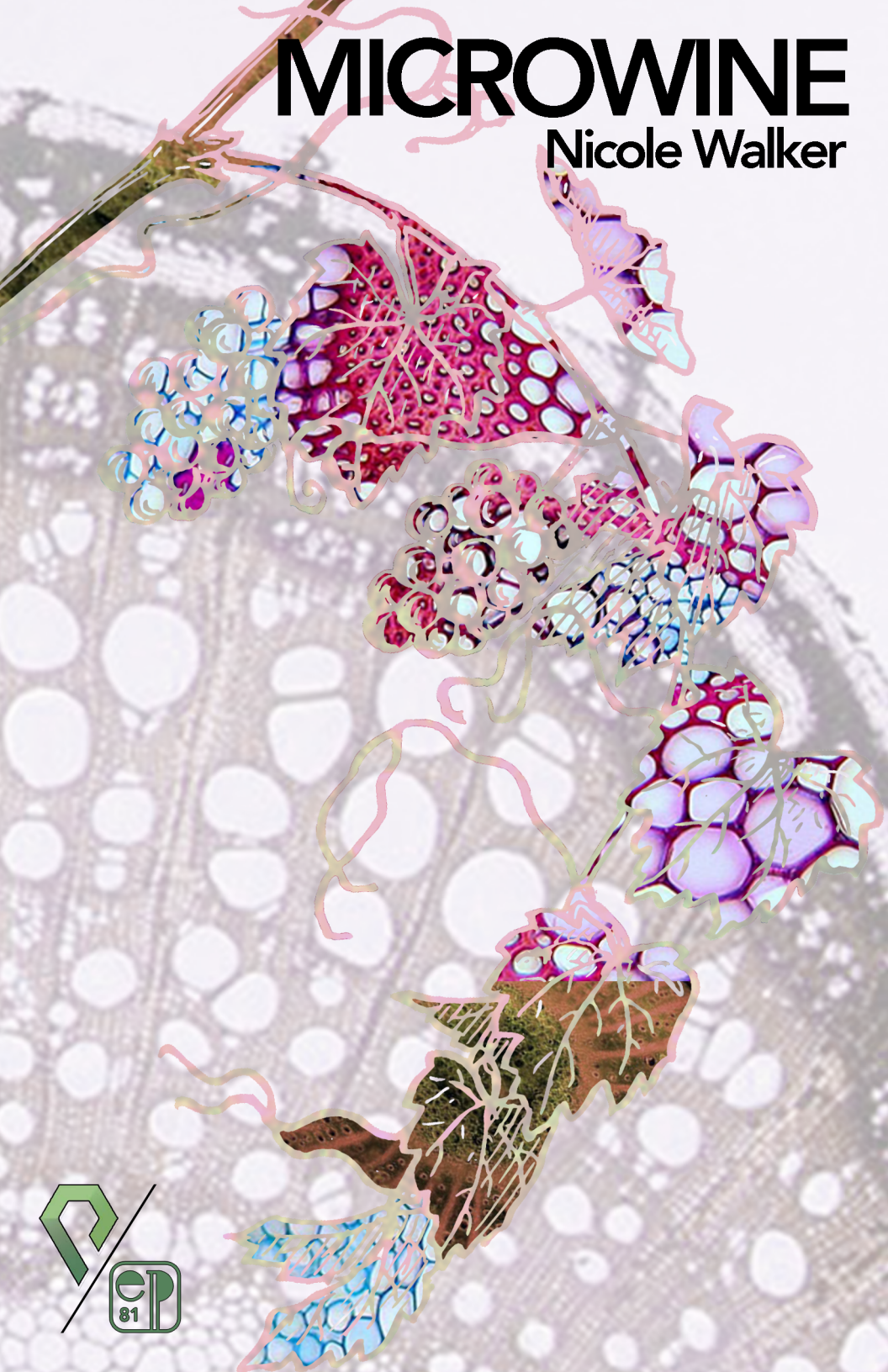
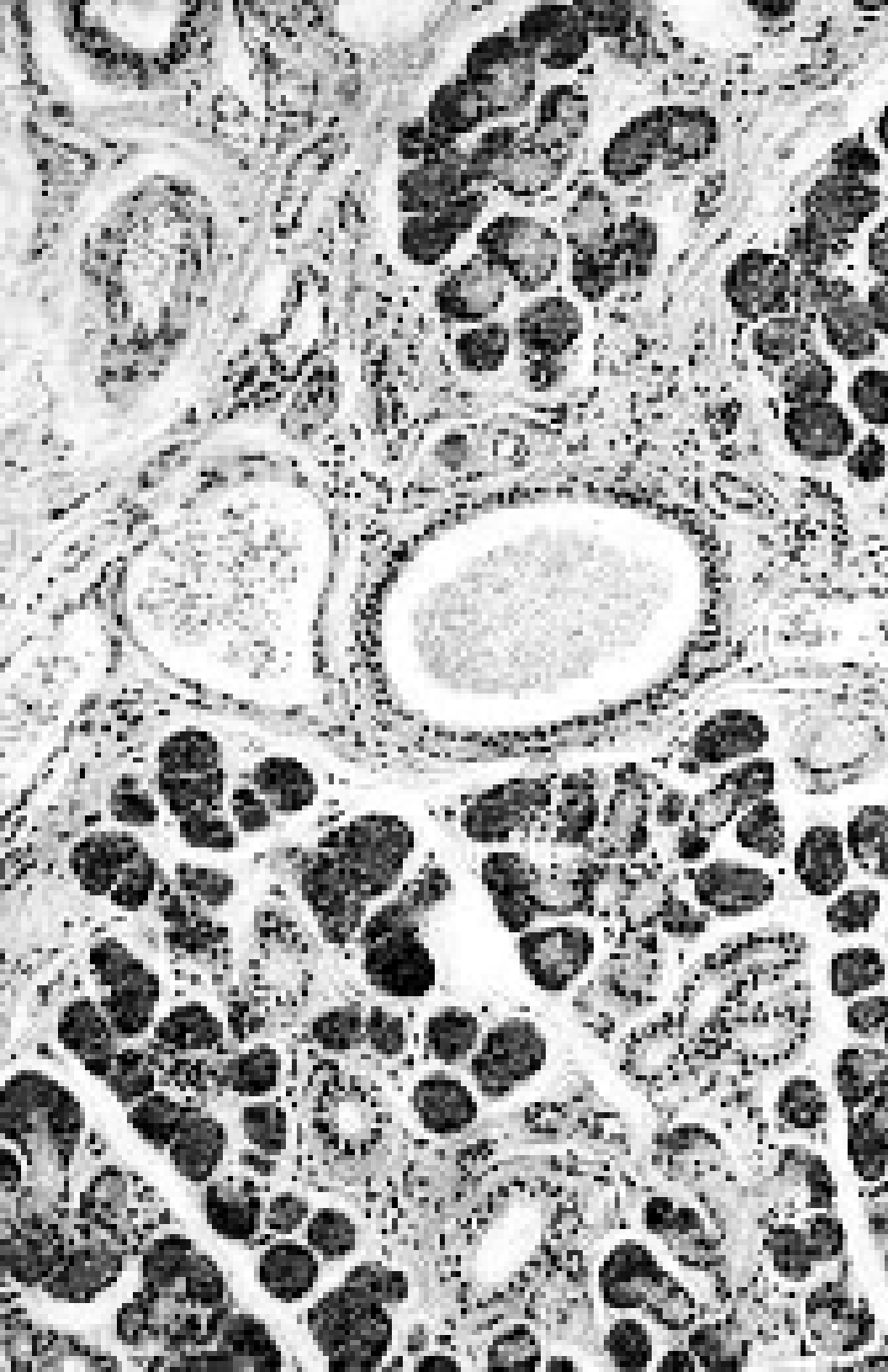


MICROWINE

Nicole Walker





MICROWINE

NICOLE WALKER

a 2015 Cleveland State University Poetry
Center Essay Collection Finalist



#81

ESSAY PRESS NEXT SERIES

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<i>Series Assistants</i>	Cristiana Baik Ryan Ikeda Christopher Liek Emily Pifer Randall Tyrone		
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<i>Book Design</i>	Aimee Harrison		

Introduction

– Caryl Pagel

It is in the vigilant inspection of detail that the scale of a crisis is revealed, and Nicole Walker—in a roving, roaming, romp amongst that holiest of all drinks—is concerned with this very level of particularity: how one bite of a peach contributes to climate change, how the growing conditions of a grape might relate to (future) revelry, and how a single seed of memory can jam up, or swerve, a train of thought. In *Microwine*, we are included in the natural consequences of observed conflict: “The heat and the mildew, the drought and the rain, the ocotillos and the citrus groves, the bear, the train, the ponderosa—each tiny detail in its oxymoronic gigantic effect.” It is a pleasure to follow Walker’s thinking as she dips in and out of memoir, research, interruption, paradox, and—most blissfully—desire.

All this global warming and I can't find a decent bottle of Rosé.

—Gabrielle Calvocoressi

Microwine

I do not come from a family of Italians who drink wine. I do not come from a family of French who drink wine. I come from a family of Utahns who drink wine, which made my family somewhat outcast in Utah. It also means my knowledge of wine is not inherent. It's as imported as the wine my parents drank—which was not wine from either Italy or France and definitely not from Utah but from California where they make big boxes of wine. My understanding of wine came from assumption, soap operas, and marketing.

Reunite on ice. Chardonnay on ice. Chardonnay out of a box. Light. Golden. Perfectly Californian. Dreams get wrapped up in that. Weddings in the vineyard. Toasting on the beach. A deck over the crashing ocean, glass of wine in hand, green to the back of me, a fantasy of blue to the front. And golden Chardonnay in my glass. Golden hair tumbling down my back. Everyone wants California. Chardonnay. California in a cup.

When I started working at the Oregon Winegrowers I learned this: the first rule of a good wine? Let it be red. Of the sips of wine I'd taken from my parents' cold glasses, Chardonnay tasted like salad dressing, filtered through burnt walnut shells. But Pinot Noir. That tasted like cherry blossoms in winter. And so it began. A new dream. No wedding. Instead, I would buy

a winery myself. I would have great big parties in my vineyard in McMinnville on tables lined with wine and salmon. During harvest, we'd have an old time grape stomping party. Off with your shoes. My children would run through the vines. *Wine Spectator* would visit. Take pictures of my wine, sun filtering through the glass, stained with red, still letting sun through.

Except, of course, we're in Oregon. There is no sun. There is also no million dollars to buy this winery. There are no children. *Wine Spectator* must have lost my phone number. I adapted. I moved on from the Oregon Winegrowers to the Oregon Humane Society. If I couldn't have a lot of wine and vines, at least I could have a lot of cats.

Micromeria

Micromeria just means mint. Not even tiny mint. Lots of mint. Lots of kinds of mint. Mint. If you plant it anywhere, it grows like bamboo. My old boyfriend's dad, Roger, right before he moved from one house in Tigard, Oregon to another house in Tigard, Oregon, planted bamboo along the fence. The instructions for planting bamboo read: line a deep hole with black plastic, otherwise, the bamboo will grow unbounded, taking out fences, roses, tulips, small fruit-bearing trees, and uprooting foundations. Roger, did not like his neighbor. The neighbor had built the high fence without asking Roger how it would be for him. The fence blocked not only the sun but also the sunset. He planted the bamboo without a bit of plastic to line the roots, keep the bamboo on his side of the yard.

Three miles away, in his new yard, Roger planted lavender. He planted lemon verbena, forgetting it was a member of the ever-large mint family. Now the bees

cover his yard, rolling in the flowers, getting their backs all sticky with syrup. The smell permeates the walls of the house, even the small room in the back of the house, where, now aged by Parkinson's, Andy's dad likes to bind his shaky form. The house murmurs with the hunger of bees.

Growing up in Salt Lake, I didn't know I came from a desert. Having been born there, arid mountain and brown summer grass were normal. But when I moved back from Portland, where even the asphalt turns green, layered with a crop of mildew, cracking drought covered everything. Even what looked like soft green grass would snap in bony half when you pulled a blade from the ground. I put fliers on my neighbors' lawns suggesting they try xeriscaping or at least stop watering the sidewalk. I collected rainwater to water my garden even though it is illegal to do so in Utah because, in Utah, someone downstream owns those water rights. I felt smug in my rebellion. I sat on the back patio drinking wine imported from California. I felt guilty for the fossil fuels that brought me my drink but I felt confirmed in my smugness knowing I was drinking someone else's water right.

[It's a cliché to say that you worry about the planet for your kids. But it was true. I pictured a planet turned from an Oregon into a Utah. Where would the children play if not between rows of green vines? Where would they dream of getting married? How would they celebrate without wine?]

I have no winery but I do, finally, have some children. My son Max likes wine already. He is three and when I finish a glass, he is allowed to take the last sip, which is really no sip at all but it's enough to tickle his tongue. I hope I'm not subjecting him to a lifelong problem with alcohol. And I certainly hope I'm not coloring his palate with red wine so that, when he grows up, he rebels and drinks white. For now, he is content with the droplet

of wine. He is outside playing in the dirt because we have no grass. We live in Flagstaff, Arizona now. It's drier than Utah. The green that we have here is not bottom-up green like they have in Oregon. It's top-down green with the branches of the ponderosa. I'll take it. If the ponderosa will. I heard somewhere that if these trees burn down or otherwise die, new Ponderosa won't take their place. The monsoons are too short now. The snowpack too shallow. Something will take their place. Maybe even something green. But it won't be grape vines.

Max stumbles over one of the lava rocks in the front yard. I set down my wineglass and run to him. A rock has split open the skin on his forehead. He's OK but what I would give for a fall-softening lawn. In Salt Lake, I thought grass was such a sin but now that I have kids, I have changed my mind. It's funny how having kids changes your mind about how to be a good environmentalist. My friend Misty tows her five-year-old daughter to school in a cart attached to her bike and then rides herself to work. I live in Arizona. I drive my car. I have two kids. I have become so the opposite of Portland-good. Instead, I'm practically the poster-child of contributor to climate change. The winegrowers are trying to be optimistic about climate change. *It's worth a try*, I think. Why spend your days imagining whole forests desertified? Whole ice caps melted? Whole polar bears drowning? Humans are basically optimists and people who grow grapes are good at looking at the bright side of things. In Canada, thanks to global warming, vintners are already hoping they will be able to raise cabernet sauvignon grapes. You cannot grow cabernet grapes in Canada, one would think. The season is too short for cabernet grapes, which require a long, warm growing season. Pinot noir, a cool-air loving grape, does well there. And yet, what with all this global warming, the Canadians are hoping to plant cabernet now. When the vines

finally produce mature fruit, they believe the climate will have changed enough to support fruiting of the grapes.

The winegrowers are thinking across several levels of adaptation, from the variations that will happen outdoors to what they can do indoors in the winery to adjust their practices to compensate for these changing fruits. "One is what can we do in the vineyard to adapt to what looks to be very variable and very challenging weather," says research scientist Gary Pickering. "The second general approach is what can we do in the winery in terms of adapting to changing the juice composition that we may start to see." The vintners are good at something I am not: adapting to incremental, but eventually extreme change. And patient. They're planting now for an eventual future.

Microweather

Greg has a Doppler app on his Android. It made me want to get one too, so I download a version. His is better—more clouds, more green. Greg doesn't seem to be the kind of guy who needs to know the future or even the present in such satellite detail. He's the kind of guy whose kids eat all the bacon and whose kids get to choose the playlist on their iPods that we all listen to. The kids each took a peach and took one bite. They let the water run while they're brushing their teeth.

But who am I to talk? I stole the bacon from the kid's plate when I thought he was finished eating—no one likes raw bacon but me right? And I pee and therefore flush every hour, using my own fair share of water. And when I kept talking about how sweet one of the twins was to my two year-old, how did the other twin feel, when he

was busy playing with my six-year-old? It is a gift to be annoyed about others. It's a prophylactic against self-gutting. Who doesn't like a single bite of peach? Who can exist in a room of others and not wonder where do I get off stealing bacon? And who am I to trouble the weather, hitting refresh, refresh, refresh? I want the rain here and the sun over there and some small machine and some large machine and my big machine-colored eyes are going to collaborate. All my caring—all my resistance to bacon-eating (in others) and my disbelief that *Metallica* is playing before noon—is not going to concentrate on clouds moving east and south. I cannot funnel and I cannot protect. I am out in the wind and the rain and the accusations fly straight out of my mouth and right back around to me, like any weather-driven system on a round planet. But if I stop talking bad about myself and possibly also others, the winds come from directions they don't normally. It's worth my effort if only to get me out of the house and away from the negativity of bacon and the positivity of '80s metal bands.

The winegrowers fight other natures too. Phylloxera, almost microscopic, pale yellow sap-sucking, aphid-like insects that feed on the roots and leaves of grapevines, destroyed over half the grape vines in Europe in the nineteenth century. Vintners combated the problem by grafting well-known grape varieties like cabernet sauvignon to relatively unknown rootstock from the United States. Because phylloxera is native to the Americas, that rootstock has some inherent resistance. But now stubby toe and pin nematodes, roundworms that eat at the roots of vines, have become increasingly difficult to deal with because rootstock resistant to phylloxera isn't resistant to nematodes.

Nematodes withstand even with synthesized chemicals. Winegrowers, especially small producers, prefer a non-chemical solution anyway. To adapt their fields to the nematode onslaught, instead of fighting nature, embracing it, viticulturists plant mustard, which repels the nematodes. Sulfur for mildew, fans to circulate air to prevent vine rot, tents pitched over vines to keep the frost from turning the grapes to otter pops, and a willingness to pull up merlot vines and substitute pinot noir after the merlot-snubbing movie *Sideways*—winegrowers bring natural resources, technology, and pure stubbornness to make their plants adapt to change, and simultaneously change their ways for the stubbornness of the plants. Such flexibility leads to cabernet being planted in places you never thought possible, like Canada. In seven years, those cabernet vines will be producing complex wine grapes, if climate change makes it hot enough.

I adapted once. I used to drink beer. In Portland, even when I worked at the Winegrowers', I drank more beer than wine. As much as Oregon would like to be wine country, Portland proper is beer land. IPAs and reds, ryes and pales, wheats and porters. Beer beer beer everywhere. Twenty-ounce pints at The Horse Brass with Andy. We broke up there. Nick and I made out in the parking lot and then never saw each other again. Jonathan and I talked about not getting married at the long table in the corner. Two twenty-ounce pints add up. Maybe the beer was driving the men away.

When I moved to Salt Lake, I switched to wine. And then I got married.

Solution solved, as my husband, Erik, would say.

Maybe a man dreams of marrying a woman who drinks less than him ounce by ounce even though he knows she's keeping up drink by drink.

Microbursts

1. The ravens fly low through the trees. I believe they want a little of my hair. Like X-wing fighters, they seem to be targeting my head. They must think that I am water or at least a source thereof, or perhaps I'm just in their way, drinking my mason jar full of ice. I leave the jar outside sometimes. Maybe they'll take the bait.

2. I shouldn't yell I shouldn't yell I shouldn't yell but why in God's name can't you wear other shoes. No two-year-old should be so adamant about wearing flip-flops. I don't mean to lift you up hard and put you down in your crib soft but I didn't even say no, I just suggested that possibly, you might want to wear other shoes to play soccer or baseball or run outside without getting sand and rocks stuck in your sandals. You sit down in the dirt, getting your pants as dirty as your soles and take off your flip flops every 16 seconds to wipe off the sand and the rocks and then you put the flip flops back on and run and trip and cry and blame me for letting you wear those stupid shoes.

3. I got caught out. My hair is stupid swiveled. My skirt, drenched. You think the clouds are just teasing you but they are as big of assholes as I am. They wander by, you beg them for rain, they blow out of town without even letting loose one drop. And then the next thing you know, you and your computer and your book are outside. It looks pretty clear, except for that one cloud. You type a sentence, copy a passage, drink from your mason jar. And then out of nowhere, you are swimming in your own stew,

a combination of misplaced trust and self-deprecation. You would run from this downpour but you've been asking for it, you know. Plus, you too, who were insistent on dumb shoes, cannot run away from this storm in flip-flops.

When I worked at the Oregon Winegrowers Association, I had been an English major, not an oenologist. But I could type and I could put a sentence or two together about how the wine grapes in Oregon grew at the 45th parallel—just like Burgundy, France. Truly, that band of latitude was the only similarity we purported. The smaller details like microorganisms in the soil, the amount of limestone and volcano in the soil, the winds, the truly micro-matters did not make it into our publications. We liked to talk about how the plants behaved similarly (no, identically!) to the famous burgundy grapes of France, where grapes have been adapted to make wine for centuries.

There's evidence that humans have been growing grapes since the beginning of time. Or, at least, 3200 BC Thucydides writes, "The people of the Mediterranean began to emerge from barbarism when they learnt to cultivate the olive and the vine." Wherever humans have adapted to live, grapes seem to follow. From the Republic of Georgia, to the near east, to Germany and France, to Canada, people have figured out what type of grape can grow where and they plant it. Optimists. Although climate change does not bode well right now for grapes grown in bordeaux or for cold-loving grapes at all. Pinot noir likes a cool climate. Cool is far away. Maybe there will be no cool. But the Canadians persist. We'll move the ice wine vines farther north. Make way for long, dry summers. And, as it warms and dries up in Arizona, cool, wet, Canada is looking better to me every day. Perhaps I can pack up my desert plants and move north too.

My daughter Zoe wants to move north too but not to Canada, to Salt Lake, where her cousins live. She thinks it's stupid we live far away from our family. "It's my dream to live with Lily." Lily is her cousin who is the same age as Zoe. She tells me at least twice a week, usually when I'm driving and swearing at traffic even though, compared to real cities, there is no traffic in Flagstaff.

"It is my dream that I have a job so I can feed you and your brother." But this is not really my dream. If I can't have a winery on a river, then I would very much like to have wine with my mom and sisters in Salt Lake City. I am with Zoe on what Flagstaff lacks: a river, a winery, two sisters, my mom.

Zoe describes the dreams in the present tense, "I am eating an ice cream cone with caramel sauce. It is my dream," and even in the past tense, "When we were in Disneyland, Lily and I went on a roller coaster that got you all wet. Cameron and Valerie didn't want to go because they would get all wet but Lily and I didn't care. We got all wet. Even our underwear. But then it is so hot, we are dry in like five seconds. It is my dream." To Zoe, dreams are ongoing facts. Perhaps that is innocence—the understanding that you're already living your dream. My job is to crush her, a little, like a basil leaf, tell her she'll get used to living away from her cousin. It is the hardest part of being a parent, feeding them bad news by the spoonful, inoculating them against worse news later on.

Microprairie Dogs and Microturkey Vultures

Seventy days it hasn't rained. It's a record but when I turn on my tap, the water still runs. On the drive home from Kayenta, horses were licking the side of the road, hoping

whatever had spilled from that F-150 ahead spilled something lappable.

Nearer to my house, the prairie dogs run into the road. My daughter Zoe screams when she sees them on the yellow lines. They pile upon the stripes, for some reason. Perhaps they think, as I do, that massing together brings rain. Maybe they're trying to cover up the yellow that is obviously preventing the black monsoon clouds from letting go their water. Maybe they are trying to get to the other side, where the houses have hoses. The yellow lines bar them from access.

I should bring a bowl of water to them, although that may be somewhat like littering—big pink bowl in the middle of the prairie dog town. And I'm no scientist. I shouldn't interfere with their ecosystem. And yet, I already am sucking up all their water through my pipes. I water the daisies with them. Daisies from Mt. Shasta who somehow think this desert-living isn't so bad, as long as you have a Nicole to tend to you.

I still might take the water to the prairie dogs just like I still might take the chicken drumsticks that have gone bad in my refrigerator out into the woods. I worry that the vultures might get salmonella but I'm pretty sure they're stomachs are prepared for rotten chicken. I worry more that they may become reliant on my chicken delivery service and next week will start amassing on the fence. I'll try to go running through the gate with my dog and they, sensing no chicken, will find Nicole meat tasty enough. Or they'll at least look at me with their turkey necks. Chicken-loving cannibals. So instead I throw the chicken in the garbage. Five chickens died for those ten

legs. And now the vultures are hungry and the prairie dogs are thirsty and so I have a glass of wine, turn away from the forest, turn away from the prairie dog town, look at the sunset, look out to sea, and save some water.

Even though Zoe's dream is to live in Salt Lake, we are all beginning to understand that we actually live here, in Arizona. Flagstaff is awesome. We live within driving distance of eleven national parks and monuments. If we are cold in the winter, we can drive two hours south and find swimming-suit weather. If we get too hot in Phoenix, we can gather our jackets and drive north. We are adapting to this variable place. There are people who sought this state out, who chose these varied climates on purpose. Even wine people. There's a guy, Eric Glomski, who grows wine grapes in Arizona on purpose. He looked for a way to stay in Arizona and found it by buying Page Springs Winery. He makes wine with Maynard James Keenan, lead singer of the band Tool. They sell their wine at fancy restaurants in Phoenix. Eric may be my hero. He also may be my fool. I'm going to find out why he chose to grow grapes in one of the weirdest climates in the world. He engenders the oxymoron that is Arizona: see some red dirt. Stick a plant in it. Wait for the monsoons.

Adaptation is a strange thing. The verb "to adapt" suggests that it's the thing that can move, the agent's, the human's, the bear's job to change according to one's circumstances, as in, there is a tsunami coming toward me. I should move out of the way. I will indeed step off of this beach. Evolution assumes that the species adapts to the world, not the other way around. A lot of humans don't have to go searching for water. A lot of humans have the water brought to them via pipes and faucets and water treatment plants. You'd think humans would see that climate change a-coming and move out of the way, i.e., change

their ways. But humans are humans. The verb "to adapt" is not always intransitive. "I adapt" may be used more rarely. The transitive (adapt to me, adapt the climate, adapt the plants, change for me) is more common. Plant plants that I like to eat and drink. I move this plant and that plant and the wine tastes better now.

Microsnow Leopard

Noun: Ounce.

ounce²

[ouns]

noun

1. snow leopard.

Origin

1300–50; Middle English *unce* lynx < Anglo-French; Old French *once*, variant of *lonce* (erroneously taken as *l'once* the ounce) < Vulgar Latin **luncea*, derivative of Latin *lync-* (stem of *lynx*) lynx

ounce¹

1. a unit of weight equal to one sixteenth of a pound (avoirdupois); 1 ounce is equal to 437.5 grains or 28.349 grams oz
2. a unit of weight equal to one twelfth of a Troy or Apothecaries' pound; 1 ounce is equal to 480 grains or 31.103 grams
3. short for fluid ounce
4. a small portion or amount

I don't know how it happened. I was reading online about snow leopards and how they're losing habitat, and, now worse, the tree lines, the actual place where trees can grow, is moving up, thanks to you-know-who (Voldermort. Global warming.), are moving up. The snow leopard finds the heavy fact of trees non-negotiable. He prefers the liminal space of snow and sky. Snow leopards have been on the verge of extinction since Peter Mathiessen's great book where he tracks the snow leopard through the Himalayas where he meets many lamas, where he never sees a snow leopard. A whole book of never finding. A whole world of too much finding. While I'm reading, I'm also looking up micro words, as I do every day. I clicked twice. Once on snow leopard, once on dictionary.com. And the lynx, another name for snow leopard, somehow shows up under ounce. How we pronounce our deaths. No one can take it all at once. A draught of tar a day. An aspirin an hour. A sip of petrochlorate in the water. I am done. I am done, I say every day. I do not think I can do this any longer. This living slow. This slow dying. This world squeezes out snow or leopards ounce by ounce. The snow leopard, unfound by Peter Mathiessen, does not exist already. He is a figment, smaller than an ounce. He moves as tree lines move—through hair, and ounce, and lynx, and shift. If no one bothered looking, he'd be safely splitting the difference between *ouns* and *unce*. He'd be throating the vowels. Coughing up the narrow split. He'd be Middle English, Middle Passage, middle-aged. He'd be done, he'd say every day. Done lynx. Done ounce.

It is summer. The university is out and I have the kids. It is the West so we are, as always, in the car. On our way down

to Sedona, Max and Zoe sing the four songs we know all the words to. "Mockingbird," "Frog Went a Courtin'," The Baby Song from *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, and "Baby, You Can't Love One." But we don't really know all the words to "You Can't Love One." We make up the one that rhymes with the number four: "Baby you can't love four because you can't fit through the door."

"Why does love make you fat?" Zoe wonders. I think of wine and look at my soft stomach. Why indeed?

"I don't think it's fat so much as you can't fit all four people at once through the door."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"No. It doesn't but neither does five: can't love five and stay alive."

"Yeah. Love won't kill you."

"No. Probably not," I say. But truly, I don't know.

After Sedona on the way to Page Springs, the road turns flat and dismal. Like cow-flat and chaparral dismal—the kind of scrub plants that hug tightly to the ground, like arctic tundra, but, in this case, to stay close to the water and tucked under from the sun, confusing again the way a plant grows for why it grows where it does. Like there's no way anyone could grow anything delicious down here, let alone grapes. But then you turn left and find Oak Creek again. Birds fly outwards from the river like there's somewhere better to go. They figure out quickly that there is not any place better than the river and do an about-face. To the right, as the road twists by the creek, riparian vegetation abounds with cottonwoods, willows, reeds. To the left, full-on desert sand. You get whiplash between the oxymorons—lush to the right, vapid to the left, abundance to the right, scarcity to the left.

Arizona has a long wine history, dating back to the 16th century when Jesuit priests tended vines and made wine for ceremonial purposes. Most of the grapes in Arizona are grown near Tucson, in the southeastern part of the state. But lately, in the northerly parts between Sedona and Cottonwood, a few pioneer-types are trying to grow grapes and make wine. Coming from Oregon, where winegrowing made some sense—45th parallel and all, I could not imagine what anyone was thinking about trying to grow grapes here. I asked Eric in what sense it was a good idea to try to grow wine here. Didn't he notice Arizona is, six-to-nine life zones notwithstanding, mostly a desert?

He told me, actually, grapes don't need that much water, once they're established. I didn't ask how much was not that much. He laughed anyway and said that here in Arizona, his two most difficult weather-related problems were mildew and frost. Unlike in Oregon, when it rains in Arizona, it rains in July and August. This is hard for wine-farmers because late summer is when the grapes need to ripen. It's not so bad for the cabernet grapes—they're loosely packed and can dry out the next morning but for grapes like Pinot Noir, it's rough. They're such a tight-skinned grape that when the water gets in, it can't get out. The grapes rot from the inside. And then, because although this is Arizona, it's still northern Arizona. A frost can creep down the mountain in the night and kill grapes as late as May.

The temperature in Sedona is hotter than in Flagstaff. When it's freezing in Flag, Sedona's usually fifteen degrees warmer. In the summer, when you want it a little hot, it's already too hot in Sedona. A hundred degrees in May. However, Sedona in some ways seems more sustainable—the creek flows through it and plants would have more natural sources of water. I'm a little

jealous. Owning a winery, on a spring, next to a creek. Maybe I should move here.

Microtopography

When I was thirteen, my boyfriend's mother used to drive us to Sugarhouse Park. At Sugarhouse Park, she would sit us next to the rocks by the river. The river came from the mountains. The river came over the rocks. The rocks made the river flow hard. The rocks gave the river what gravity and slope couldn't. Bubbles. My boyfriend's mother made us sit by the bubbles to inhale the negative ions that she promised would make us happy. We sat by the river as it rushed and as it bubbled. We breathed in the bubbles, happily. On the ride home, my boyfriend drove. I sat in the in middle. His mother sat to my right. I held a bag of Doritos between my legs. He fished for chips. He fished with his finger. His eyes looked straight ahead but his finger never stopped. His mother told us about a river too far away where the water fell fifty feet. The whole canyon was full of ions, negative ones, looking for some positive ion to catch itself onto, to tickle its magnet, to pull the whole fabric closer to its edge, to threaten to punch through the plastic and make something purely invented, real.

Born in Chicago, raised in Boston, Eric went to Prescott College, in Northern Arizona. "Until I moved here, I had no real sense of self and no real sense of place. I majored in landscape ecology. I discovered how important it is to belong somewhere and relate to a landscape. I fell in love with AZ and shortly after fell in love with wine."

I loved Arizona a little more now that I knew wine could grow here. If Oregon is my Arcadia, my dream of a self-sustaining place, a place where even if the rest of the world fell apart, I could live self-sufficiently, then maybe this little bit of Arizona could be called my Oregon. Here, there are grapes. I could raise honeybees. My dream has always been to have goats. I would milk them. I like goat cheese with my wine.

As Eric and I sat on the deck, my kids ran through the grape vines. Max pinched leaves of sage from the herb garden. He walked over to me, put his fingers in my nose. "Smell my fingers." Eric laughed. It sounded like a pull-my-finger fart joke but Max didn't know that. Zoe looked at Eric, laughing. Did she know the fart joke? No. She didn't. She wanted something.

"Can I pick some grapes?" She asked him. She's a little shy. She must have really wanted some grapes to ask a grown up.

Eric hesitated. "Just a couple. They should be ready." This Arizona winery dream was a good substitute for an Oregon one. I clicked through my set of marketable skills—cooking, weeding, braiding hair (good for tending vines?), Photoshopping, wifing (we're both married to other people, but heck, I'm from Utah), arguing this here wine is as good as a Boudreaux looking for a way to insinuate myself here permanently.

But it was getting hot on the deck. Eric and I, trapped by the niceties of interview, set up our conversation station and that's where we would stay no matter how hot it got or how much wine or water we wanted. Zoe came back over and opened her mouth to ask another question but I shot her a look. I had told both her and Max if they came with me on this interview, they couldn't interrupt. But now that she went back to play, I wondered what she needed.

After college Eric became a professional ecologist, specializing in river ecology. He spent a lot of time walking up

and down rivers. Because pioneers settled along the river, he discovered abandoned homesteads where the settlers had left behind orchards of pears, apples, and quince that still produced fruit. He started making wines from these fruits. Once he made an apple wine under the tutelage of an apple wine mentor. He remembered tasting the wine and it reminded him exactly of this one place in along the creek. The wine acted as a conduit of very specific place—you might call it a microclimate. Working as a scientist at the time, the experience was expansive. He came to see the art in the making. "You can paint the landscape, like Monet. Wine gave him the opportunity to be a scientist and an artist and to express the landscape through a liquid." He took time off from teaching at Prescott College and began working at wineries in California. "I really wanted to come back and make wines that expressed *this* place."

"One day I was driving down the road and I saw this place for sale. I had actually hiked along this river before, in my previous life, and looked up here and thought, that is the most beautiful place I have ever seen. I mean, would you ever think we were in Arizona?"

I look around—green vines, green cover crops, maybe alfalfa keeping out weeds under the vines, shade from the winery and out-buildings, hanging willows over the creek, the creek itself. The whole scene is distinctly non-Arizonan. It's odd to me that to make an Arizonan wine, you have to find some of the least Arizona-like, at least on the surface, land around.

But Eric sees this place as distinctly Arizonan, not because it is sun and desert but because it's nuanced. He's found a niche, a fold in the hillside, a bend in the creek where both the possible and the impossible meet. He researched sites all over the state—looking at water supply, soils, geology, elevation, hot and cold temperatures and then he thought about economic

factors but kept returning to Page Springs. The owners wanted to sell more land than Eric and his partners could afford but he described his dream, drew a picture of this place for them. He convinced them to sell him just seven acres. The rest he would buy later. "Those owners are kind of like parents to me. They're so proud of what I've done. They come at least once a year to check in and say 'We're so glad we sold this to you!'"

Microfire

It started small. Not two kids with rubbing sticks. Not two members from the Nation setting pranks behind dumpsters. Not two ATV riders with very sunburnt necks sparking their batteries. Not two hippies who spaced putting sand on their fire. Not even overachieving squirrels. Not ravens with a match. No there was no direct cause for this fire that is burning over 7,000 acres for this fire that is the *Bambi* Disney version, forcing squirrels and skunks and raccoons to flee and *is also not* Disney-like in that humans evacuate their fire-magnetic homes and shelter at the Yavapai Community Center. Take refuge. Get away.

Evacuations are not all that rare anymore. Last year, the big fire out by Payson, and two years ago, the Wallow fire, largest fire in Arizona history, and three years ago the Schultz fire and then also the one that had our house-sitter packing up her car with all the pictures she could find of our kids and the pictures that our kids had drawn and the things that looked like important pieces of paper, drawn by the kids or not, as she frantically tried to call us as we camped so ignorantly out by Sycamore Point just thirteen miles away but too far for cell service and too far

to know that the fire called Little America was turning towards us and the winds were up and the humidity low and in June in Arizona you should know better and keep a pack of memorabilia packed and ready to go because you are human and you will forget everything that you ever learned without a piece of paper on which to write it down.

You had better treasure that paper. The trees. They are burning down. The trees, some say, will not come back. The trees need certain conditions. Some humidity. Some rain. Some days where temperatures are below 32 degrees. Other plants will grow. Juniper and chaparral. Pinyon pine. Maybe we can make paper out of juniper upon which we can invest our memories and protect them from a fire that is coming since fires like that just aren't that rare anymore.

In Prescott, no one is blaming anyone directly. At the Yavapai Community Center, a man sits on the edge of his cot. Another man stands a couple of miles away, white lines through black ash. In the Center, a woman quiets her baby. The baby is hot and the corner seems the coolest, quietest space. Back at the fire, a woman digs her Hotshot shovel into the ground. Fire lines. They used to work. Maybe they will work today. There is another man, a fire detective, walking the line between forest and the Center. In between, he will find the cause, but never a direct one. Human-caused for sure. All the fires now. Just touch the air. Touch the ground. It hasn't rained for months now. The humans are good at so many things: starting fires and stopping rain.

I'm beginning to see why Eric has been successful. It's a degree of that optimism mixed with a willingness to give up small parts of the dream if you have to. When you're negotiating a deal, you have to be willing to walk away. Eric would have built his winery somewhere else if the Page Springs land worked out, but if you're a good negotiator, you won't have to. Your optimism is contagious. This is Arizona not California but I'm going to grow grapes in the desert anyway, he seems to have declared. Eric never changed the roots of his dream, but he was willing and able to train the vines up and around his dream.

Now Max and Zoe play hide and seek in the rows of vines. In between, grass. Max trips and falls. And he gets right back up. No rock opening the skin on his forehead this time. Ah, grass in the desert. Maybe dreams can survive climate change. I know that at least rationalization will. We can have grass and wine. We'll just have to learn to like it a little hotter.

Page Springs became an actual winery but not without its setbacks. "Even with all the research we did, we still got our butts kicked by Mother Nature." You can know everything and still know nothing. Climate is the primary detail, with grapes. Eric chose Page Springs because of the soil, its volcanic material, an extrusive igneous rock, blackish kind of gray basalt. Underneath that basalt is a bed of limestone. Layers of complicated soil make complicated grapes. The Verde Valley was an ancient lakebed. The volcanic material flowed on top of it. Limestone is one of the golden jewels of winegrowing. Limestone, because it has a high pH, limits the vigor of the vines. You want the vines to suffer so they put more energy into the fruit.

I know what he's talking about. I've pinched the flowers off tomato vines to force more energy into the already growing tomatoes to give them more flavor or to make them bigger. Suffering for greatness. Perhaps that's the true nature

of adaptation. In the harshest climates, don't those plants produce the most brilliant flowers? Wine grapes are not like food grapes—which are easy. You want them sweet. You want them seedless. Wine grapes are an extreme, complex fruit. But as a winemaker/artist/scientist, you're choosing a harsh path. The scientist in you is balancing the acids, the sweetness, the yeasts. You measure and you test. The artist in you is looking for an aesthetic. Unlike adapting purely for survival, something else is desired. Once your needs are basically met, you can start to apply taste to basic amenities. Like choosing where to live, making good wine is adapting the grapes to doing more than feed you. They're pleasing you. The plant's suffering made the flavor more pleasing.

The kids are getting hungry and I am getting thirsty. There is wine, El Serrano, and bruschetta, prosciutto, and fig with pistachio butter, in the building just a hundred yards up the hill. But this is the dream, sitting on the deck by the creek, watching the kids play, hearing about the acrobatics of wine growing. I sit. I look up the hill. It's not so far. It won't be too long. I'll get to the wine and food soon enough.

Eric pays attention to the bands of elevation too, but not in my anxious, dream-needy way. His obsession isn't mine. His dream isn't a dream of sitting and drinking. It's a dream of making it work. I do get that. I'm married. I'm a writer. I'm working all the time. I try to align my obsession with Eric's. The band of elevation in this state that is conducive to growing grapes, roughly between 3,500 and 5,500 feet. If you go too low, it gets too hot and your grapes lack acidity. Acid is a big part of what makes wine wonderful. Wine is actually quite acidic, the average pH is 3.5—like a mixture of lemon and orange juices. You need it cold enough to prevent the wine grapes tasting like Welches. If you go too high, above 5000 like

Munds Park or Flagstaff, you can't actually get the grapes ripe enough. They won't develop enough sugar. The wines would be too acidic. You would also deal with winter kill issues and spring frosts. Down south you also deal with drought and too much heat.

So within this little band throughout the state, the wine industry grows. They might have wineries in Phoenix one day, but they're not going to grow great grapes there. Too hot. Too sweet. Eric works within that band, but there are striations and fluctuations within that band. They partner with vineyards in the Chiricahua Mountains near Wilcox that are close to 5500 feet, which is higher than Page Springs, but because of the funnel of cold air coming down from Flag, Page Springs suffers more frost.

Eric claims that the distinctiveness of place comes out in the wine. "I've also been most surprised by how unique and distinctive our wines are here. Pinot noir is one of my passions. I can taste pinots from Santa Barbara, from Napa, from Camieros, from the Russian River, it's pretty easy to tell where those came from. I guess I really look forward to the day when people can say, this came from Arizona." He's looking forward to the day when people can vicariously experience this microclimate in their little bottles of wine.

But that variation presents challenging management issues too. If the tiniest variation can lead to different outcomes, then unless you know all the permutations of variation, the outcomes will not turn out as you had hoped. In a little vineyard right below the deck upon which we sit, there's a gentle slope that leads to the water. Eric planted two varietals, mainly Grenache, near the bottom of the river where the river materials are mostly gravel and sand. Grenache is known to be incredibly vigorous and the gravel would keep the vines in check, vigor-wise, and

let the grapes, which like it warm, produce a good mixture of sweetness and acid.

But he was wrong. Lower is not always warmer. The river valley drains cold air all the way from upper Oak Creek and the edge of Flagstaff. Cold air is denser. It each night literally flows down like water, down this valley bottom. It flows across the bottom of this vineyard planted with grenache. They realized that the bottom of the vineyard is radically colder. Eight years later, he still hadn't gotten a crop off those vines.

Eric shakes his head like he can't believe this happened to him, after all that research, after being a river ecologist, for god's sake. I picture the cold coming down like a ghost, nipping those grapes in the bud, forcing their vines to tuck under toward the ground. These grenache were not adapting at all. Even though from where we sit, it's like 102 degrees. If I were a grenache vine, I'd be sprouting grapes out of my sweaty head. But it's the nighttime temperatures that make the grape blossoms stay tucked safely in their vines.

Microbees

Cari is an Academic Advisor. She is very organized, very thin, and very beautiful. She is also very quiet and reserved. When I met with her in her office, she sat me down to ask how I have been since last we worked on that committee together. I said, "Fine, how are you?" and she said, "Good." She loved her job at the University and she loved her husband who was a lawyer. Her kids were just a bit older than my kids, maybe that's why we sat down, to talk about kids, but I brought up how my grandma had just died and then she brought up how her best friend had just died. Her friend had developed a virulent breast

cancer but the friend could not say aloud that she was dying. She too, like us, had kids and a husband and she too loved her job and she did not want to die so when the doctors in America said there's nothing we can do for you, the doctors practicing a differently organized, alternative medicine in Mexico said, no no, we will save you. They laid her down and put a glass upon her breast. Under the glass swarmed a dozen bees. The bees stung and stung, trying to sting the cancer out of her. The body, stung by the bees, retreated into submission. But the cancer, more organized than the bees, did not. The cancer killed her like the cancer does. She died in Mexico without her husband or her children but with her breast, swollen, expanded and stoic, an erect testament to the attempt to keep things together.

Cari went down to collect her friend's body. Cari, thin as glass, put her head against her friend's chest. She knew she was dead but she swore she heard inside the ribs a swarming sound. She couldn't lift her friend's swollen body but she could take home, in a jar, a handful of bees, their hind ends wet with blood and cancer. Stinger-less, the bees lived while Cari drove to the airport, crossed the border, shuttled up the mountain, and returned to her office where she sat the jar on her desk, and, before her next meeting, held the glass to her face until the bees made enough noise to make a sound like Cari's friend's name.

Beehives are collapsing all over the planet, scientists say, for two reasons. One: pesticides used to kill other insects kill too the bees. And two: bee farmers replace honey with corn syrup, tricking the bees into thinking that their home is still safe instead of just sweet. There are qualities in honey that do not exist in corn syrup to help natu-

rally protect the honeybees from the pesticides that are now killing them. Now, in the bee colonies, honeycombs crack and fold like Alexandrian libraries. Disorganized. The flowers aren't going to pollinate themselves. And it turns out, wheat, strawberries, and all food (alfalfa, oats, sage brush, buffalo grass) for animals-as-food, are flowers pollinated best by bees. Who knew the whole world was held up by the organized waxing and waning of bees?

The last time I saw Cari, at the President's reception, she was slumped in the chair. She said she'd seen me running on Butler as she drove down the hill. I asked her if she lived in Amberwood, the neighborhood I run through. She said that she used to. Now she lives on Mt. Elden, which she doesn't like as much. I wonder if that's why she's sitting in her chair rather than greeting guests—living somewhere she doesn't want. Maybe her job turned sour, maybe her kids have gotten old, maybe she herself isn't well or maybe she's remembering her friend still dead in Mexico, or perhaps she's thinking of the bees and wondering how the bees are managing to keep it together. She should try to sit up but even the chair she's sitting in does not look so strong itself.

"We tried all these different things—built straw bales to act as a wall, a fan that takes air from the ground and shoots it into the sky. Years and years later, we finally said, fuck it. Pulled out those grenache vines one-by-one and planted a French American hybrid. Gewürztraminer and Soave-blanc. That's just one of many examples that you learn about microclimates by farming. When you live a lifestyle when your economic sustenance is directly linked to the cycles of nature, you have no choice but to become very conscious of those things."

It's not the machinations, in the end, that will make a difference. Eric and I can't even manage to move out of the sun in temperatures over a hundred degrees. Humans are too slow to change. What makes me optimistic is this: Eric can imagine the force of cold air, the will of red grapes, the size of a barn, the humidity of a valley, the effect of a slope, the amount of sulfur on a grape, the rate of water flowing through Oak Creek per minute, the burble of the spring, the sway of a cottonwood, the birth of his child, his love of pinot noir, his fascination with old homesteads, the first taste of apple wine. It's the capacity to hold the minutia in the head, the ability to hold every tiny thing together simultaneously. The heat and the mildew, the drought and the rain, the ocotillos and the citrus groves, the bear, the train, the ponderosa—each tiny detail in its oxymoronic gigantic effect. If we begin to notice and to remember every tiny thing, life gets longer, the world gets bigger, we begin to hear the voices of millions of microorganisms in the soil saying, look what I can do. And the humans: Look what I can see. Expand your focus and the world becomes numinous.

Microrgasms

The dog has run off again but I think I see her tail between two trees in the distance. It could be bark. It could be dog. I crouch down and yell, "Come," and she runs toward me with such a rush that she nearly knocks me over. Thank god she wasn't tree. Below branches I find an owl pellet all tangled with the superfluous, to the owl anyway, parts of a mouse. I look up. A fan of feathers or a fan of branches? Thrill is the slightest breeze. I run because these legs are almost strong enough, this body almost small enough to run like I ran when I was ten and

those bones knew no difference between running and flying. Flutters. Miniscule chills: a tiny burble from a frog in a shallow stream. A puzzle piece locked in place. A slow hand tucking hair behind ear. A bus tumbling over shallow but regular enough to establish a kind of rhythm. A banana shake. Head tilted back, neck exposed. A hip protruding. A turn of the head. A look from someone who knew you when and knows you now. A stumble-trip but save! just a step-hiccup over a root of a tree that would like nothing better than to see you run.

But in this very moment, the kids are sweaty. Their faces are flushed in the way only Scandinavian skin flushes—like a sunburn. I have to stop Eric. I know he could explain a lot more about what I want to hear. That wine is a realizable dream—that we won't run out, that I won't have to travel to Syria to see how they make wine in places even hotter than Page Springs, that my kids will have grass and water, that the dream of the future is a lot like my dream of the present. He could tell me that but it's too hot and my kids aren't going to make it. I leave Eric sitting on the deck and walk toward the fence surrounding the wine property. We walk to the gate that reads, "no alcohol beyond this point" and walk through. I'm wearing sandals, carrying Max, holding Zoe's hand and we trip over rocks and slip on the red desert sand but we go a little faster anyway. It's a little bit longer to get to our spot, the one we come to every time we visit this place but here, you can take your shoes off. There's a long granite rock that reaches out over the water where we can put our toes in.

"It's so cold," Max says as he plunges his feet in. But it's not so cold that he pulls his feet out.

“This is my favorite water,” Zoe says. I know. It is the best kind. The river kind that moves around your feet, that cools you down, that isn’t so deep you’d drown but isn’t so shallow you’d be muddy, where coyote willow grows from the banks and herons hide between its leaves. Where an eagle flies overhead and the climate is neither hotter nor drier because your toes say it is cold and it is wet. You could stay in this moment forever where the dream is that this water is a kind of wine.

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Author Bio



Nicole Walker is the author of four books: *Microcosm* (forthcoming), *Egg*, *Quench Your Thirst with Salt*, and *This Noisy Egg*. She edited *Bending Genre* with Margot Singer. She is nonfiction editor at *Diagram* and associate professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona, where it rains like the Pacific Northwest, but only in July.



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