GOOD FIRE

Visual Narratives of
Wildfire Ecology

JENN JOSLIN

Long may the good fire burn,
across the land and through our hearts.

Contents

“I am writing with my burned hand about the nature of fire.”

Ingeborg Bachmann

Introduction

There is much to ponder, research, and discuss when it comes to human impact on the environment. No topic is black and white, no issue has a single solution. This rings truer than ever when examining the effects of wildfire in the Anthropocene.

Despite an abundance of scientific research and indigenous knowledge accumulated over generations, the concept of fire as a natural process integral to the health of global ecosystems eludes the general public [1]. We fear it, we banish it, we vilify it.

This aversion to fire is not new. Upon arriving in North America, white colonists were in awe of what they believed was a vast land of pristine and untouched wilderness. Swept up in the romance of an idyllic landscape, colonists molded the narrative that nature was Other and *civilized man* must live apart from it. Thus began the white man's dogged attempt to conquer this new world, mercilessly ravaging "uncivilized" indigenous communities and eradicating their cultural practices, which largely included intimate knowledge of reciprocal living with the landbase.

In all of their brutal ignorance, colonists failed to recognize that fire-based land management practices were one of the major forces that forged the very forests they so revered [5]. Indigenous communities had long understood the dual nature of fire and embraced its capacity for both regeneration and destruction as they harnessed its power to tend the land, perform ceremonies, cook, and communicate.

Today humans are responsible for roughly 85% of wildfires in the United States [2]. Human-caused climate change, uninformed land management practices, and centuries of aggressive fire suppression are some of the major disrupters of natural fire regimes [6]. As megafires rip through the world on an unprecedented scale, it is past time to face our unfounded fear of it.

The term "good fire" is used to refer to fires that are intentionally set to achieve specific ecologic or cultural benefits. While placing human morals like "good" or "bad" on natural processes is generally myopic, in this context the term is a helpful way to delineate naturally-occurring fires (and small-scale, intentional burns) from out-of-control wildfires.

We know fire is necessary—now our work is to simultaneously emphasize the dangers of megafires while educating on the benefits of fire as a natural process [5]. It is highly necessary to stress the fact that much of today's conversations around fire are not a debate about fire itself, but about *the unnatural force it has become.*

Fire challenges our ideas of what it means to live in reciprocity with the wild. It casts light on our need to hold space for conflicting truths at once. Through these paintings I am exploring the duality of fire: grief and acceptance, love and loss, death and regeneration. This work is my way of channeling my feelings of fury, fear, and fragility while watching the world burn around us.

So, here I am, writing with my burned hand about fire: how it shapes us, and how we shape it.

My hope is that our scars will remind us of the consequences of fearing the flame. To truly understand the full story of the natural world and humanity's place within it, we must burn and burn and burn.

Jenn Joslin
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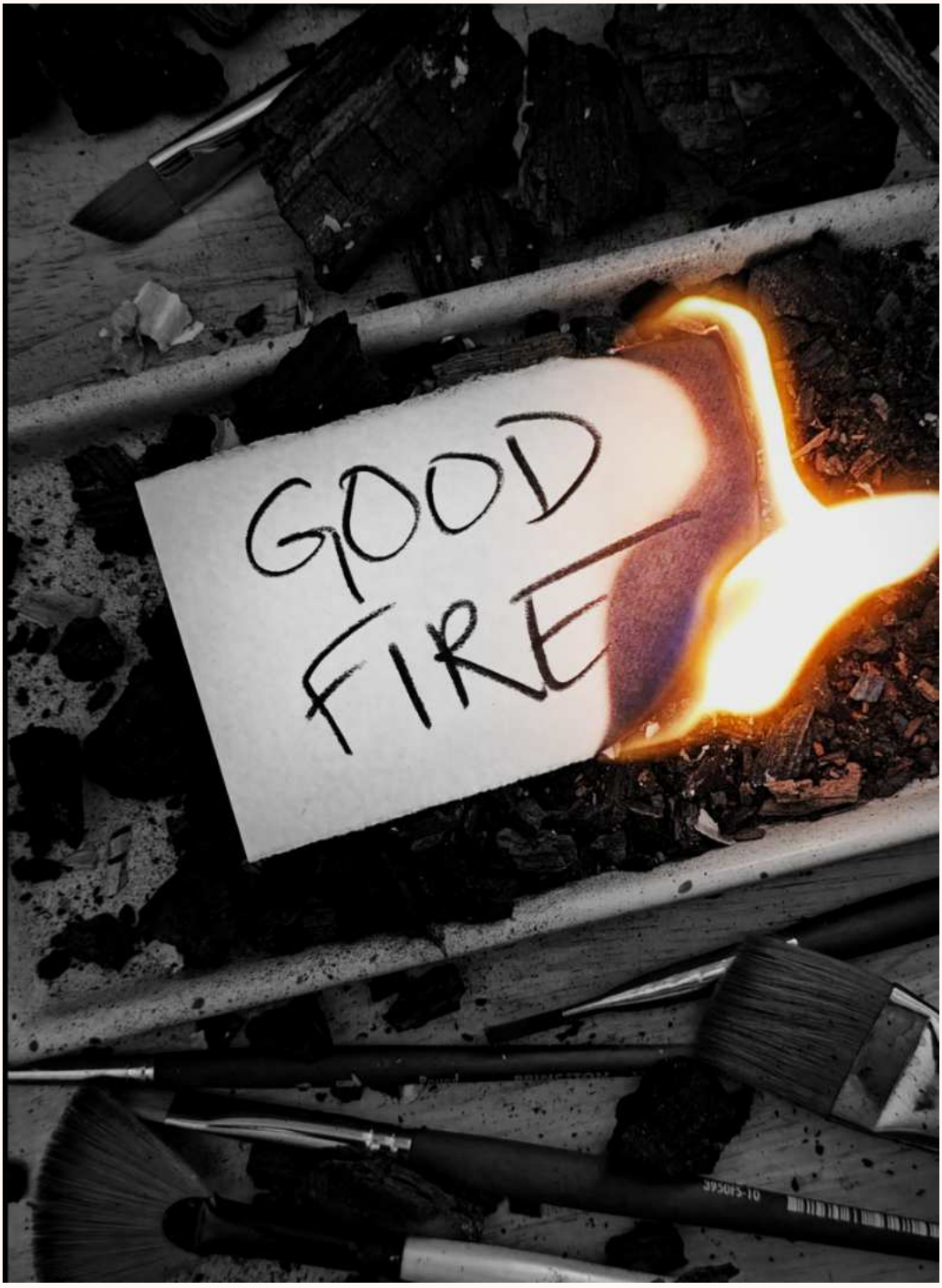
About The Work

These 10 pieces were crafted over the summer of 2025.

The first and last pieces of the series were drawn using charcoal foraged from a local forest after a fire. I snapped small chunks of bark from a charred tree as I hiked through the burned woods and brought them home with me, using some bits to draw with and grinding down others to use as a fine powder. The background of these pieces was created by holding a lit candle to the wood panel, letting the smoke accumulate on the surface. Read more about this process on page 2.

The other 8 pieces were painted using acrylic paints on wooden panels with the same foraged charcoal mixed into the pigments wherever ashy ground is depicted. All panels were sanded, primed, varnished with a gloss coating, and wired by hand.


GOOD
FIRE

Leavingtake
Foraged charcoal, graphite, and smoke on birch panel
11” x 14” x 1.5”

“What goes too long unchanged destroys itself. The forest is forever because it dies and dies and so lives.”

Ursula K. Le Guin

To create the first and last pieces in this series I used a technique called *fumage* where smoke is used to “draw” on paper. I lit an unused birthday candle and moved the paper across the flame, experimenting with the angle to create variations of dark and light.

Once there was enough smoke on the panel I used my fingers, a goose feather, and a small eraser to remove some of the smoke in the lightest areas like the owl’s eyes and feathers.

The charcoal used to draw this piece was foraged on a summer day as I explored Oregon’s Table Rock Wilderness during the summer of 2024. To my horror, this area was burned in 2020 and closed to the public for a couple of years after. These trails taught me how to exist in wild spaces through my early adulthood after a childhood spent very much separate from the natural world.

Using charcoal from this area for this body of work felt like a fitting memorial to a wilderness I hold close to my heart. The pain of watching megafires swipe through the land I loved was a lesson in softening through the pulsing ache of loss and transformation. The trails there taught me much about the natural world, and those experiences forever fuel my creative work.

The piece got significantly darker when I varnished it, blurring many of the initial lines of smoke and charcoal. Alas, in the spirit of embracing the unpredictability of change, I went ahead and kept it in this series. The added darkness makes it seem like we are peering through a thick haze of smoke, trying to make out what and who is hidden there.

To Thus Forswear Beginnings
Acrylic on birch panel
16” x 20” x 1.5”

"Our arrogance as a species is only a few degrees away from us claiming that we invented, not discovered, fire."

Mokokoma Mokhonoana

For centuries western culture has feared fire, shutting our ears to its smokesong.

Restoring natural fire regimes is crucial for ecological balance. Frequent, intense fires are too destructive to gently cleanse the land–instead they wipe the proverbial slate almost entirely clean. Of course life comes back, but in a wholly disturbed and disjointed way that favors species already naturally adapted to fire. Most wildlife, including plants, insects, and microorganisms who are essential to the foundations of healthy ecosystems, are severely at risk.

Foundational species like the Monarch and countless native insects who often have small ranges are particularly at risk. Monarch butterfly populations have declined by over 80% in the last 20 years, partially due to fire disturbance resulting in habitat loss [3]. These extreme fires devastate critical habitats, threatening human and more-than-human life. Although they do not take up much space, they are key players in every ecosystem, contributing to pollination, nutrient cycling, and as a major food source for wildlife.

When habitats are compromised by extreme fires, the ecosystem - and humanity itself - suffer from the ground up.

Firehawk
Acrylic on birch panel
16” x 20” x 1.5”

“Do you remember when you were young and you wanted to set the world on fire?”

Against Me!

Black Kites are considered the most abundant raptor in the world. When I painted this piece I was thinking about the Black Kites in Australia who habitually congregate in large groups around active wildfires.

Eyewitnesses have observed the birds, often referred to as “firehawks”, flying away with burning sticks to drop them at the edge of the burn, expanding the fire and catching prey as they flee the flames.

This behavior is virtually the only documented instance of fire being used as a tool by wild animals.

Fuse
Acrylic on birch panel
16” x 20” x 1.5”

"We have met the enemy,
and he is us."

Walt Kelley

When fire is suppressed for decades and beyond, the land grows thick with fuel. Plants like Himalayan Blackberry suffocate the understory, their thorny brambles trapping swaths of dry leaves and other detritus. This tangled tinderbox serves as perfect fodder for even the smallest spark to turn into a roaring inferno. Ironically, the land is both burning *and* fire-starved [5].

Fire is imperative to the health of most ecosystems on earth [1]. In the absence of flame, understory plants tend to overgrow without the check-and-balance role fire brings to an ecosystem. As Tim Ingalsbee, firefighter and fire ecologist says, "fire suppression has addressed small, short-term risks but ignored catastrophic long-term risk." [5]

For creatures like the Northern Rubber Boa, these fires are a serious threat. Although this species is quite adaptable and can be found in numerous habitats across the US, they rely on cool, moist burrows and are slow-moving, leaving them unable to escape rapidly-moving fires. Without regular upkeep of the land to prevent extreme overgrowth (especially of non-native species), both the land and its inhabitants struggle to survive.

Blackline (Kindling)
Acrylic on birch panel
16” x 20” x 1.5”

“Let the guilty bury the innocent.”

Ian McEwan

A blackline is a strip of burned land around the perimeters of the burn unit that acts as fuel breaks (barriers) to prevent the fire from spreading beyond the intended burn area.

Here a young fawn tucks herself among a verdant patch of native wildflowers in a young forest. All around her a blackline has been etched, a dark mark of death upon the land. She knows nothing of the burn that’s coming to swallow her whole, cannot comprehend the flames that will to lick her carcass clean. She only knows that her instincts tell her to hide, to wait, to stay safe among the daisies waiting for a mother who will never return to her.

Both fawn and forest are in their childhoods. This early seral stage of a forest has one of the highest biodiversity levels of wildlife at any other point in its development [4]. The stage is dressed for a bright and thriving future. However, large-scale logging, development, and climate change threaten the integrity and longevity of these young and fragile ecosystems. Swaths of wilderness are bulldozed, razed, and ravaged on a massive scale that the natural world simply cannot keep pace with.

We take with no regard for what’s down the line. By direct destruction of the land and indirect disruption of natural processes like fire, we condemn our landbase and its inhabitants. We sacrifice kin as kindling, desecrating our home and stealing the world and its ecosystem services from future generations.

What They Left Us Of The Stars
Acrylic on birch panel
16” x 20” x 1.5”

“Everywhere I look I see fire.
That which isn’t flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames.”

Annie Dillard

Wildfires can grow and move rapidly and unpredictably, roaring through the land as a disorienting chaotic inferno. Thick smoke douses the sun-and-starlight. Ash chokes your lungs and blazing embers burn your skin. You can’t see, can’t breathe, can’t orient yourself well enough to escape the blaze.

Wildlife is incredibly capable of sending disturbances in their habitats. Many of them are able to flee or fly to safety, and some even burrow underground to shield themselves from the flames. Despite their instincts and adaptations, many animals don’t stand a chance against the enormous size and speed of a megafire.

Even for highly mobile animals like birds, a large fire can be their death sentence. The flames are too hot and too fast for even their strong wings to contend with.

In this piece a barn owl caught in a sudden conflagration soars higher and higher up toward the stars, intending to use them as a map to reorient herself back home. The fire is hot on her tail, stretching its scorching fists to grab at her feathers. The last thing she sees before the fire swallows her whole are a few faint stars, nearly imperceptible through the shroud of sickening smoke.

Embers of smoldering feather, bone, and talon shoot through a soot-dark night, sparks fly like stars; guiding lights ushering her to a different kind of home than she had expected to return to on this red-sky night.

Bone Fire
Acrylic on birch panel
16” x 20” x 1.5”

“Those candle flames were like the lives of men. So fragile. So deadly. Left alone, they lit and warmed. Let run rampant, they would destroy the very things they were meant to illuminate. Embryonic bonfires, each bearing a seed of destruction so potent it could tumble cities and dash kings to their knees.”

Brandon Sanderson

A ragged red fox, *Vulpes vulpes,* perches atop an extinguished bon fire fueled by the skulls of her wild kin. Her paws dig into the charcoaled bark of the Garry oak tree that was hacked down as a sacrifice to the flames. Its ancient branches, home to hundreds of species, ribbed limb after limb to be burned at the stake, the bon fire leaving nothing but bones and ash to mark the grave of a once thriving oak habitat.

While researching this series the term bonfire came to mind, and I played around with ways to tie the word to an ecologic concept. I learned that bon fire doesn’t mean “good fire” at all. It actually is derived from “bone fire”, a nod to large fires being set to discard unwanted things, including animals (and humans).

As more people move into rural areas - referred to as “Wildlife-Urban Interfaces”-wildlife and habitat destruction increases. The potential for human-caused fire also increases, which, ironically, means fire poses a bigger threat than ever to the humans who live in this interstitial space between City and Wilderness.

Old Flames
Acrylic on birch panel
16” x 20” x 1.5”

“To love is to burn.”

Emma Thompson

This piece tells the story of the firelovers, the ones who flock to the flames. Some species have adapted to thrive in landscapes that fire has passed through, staying for only long enough to mate and raise their young for a season or two before moving on to fresh burns.

They thrive on change.

I originally wanted to create a lush portrait of a landscape post-fire, rebounding in joyous verdancy, packed with pollinators and plants and life galore.

But my heart clung to a quieter scene, one I’d read about long ago: how Black-backed Woodpeckers thrive in the ruins of freshly-burned forests, making their home among the charcoal-charred land.

It is also a scene that stirs up dormant embers of memory I thought were long-extinguished, about old love and the grief that lingers in its absence.

Some days these embers shoot up a spark or two, bringing me back to hazy summer days exploring the woods, kissing between moss-laden trees, and sleeping beneath stardust skies. Discovering the world, myself, and what it means to love wholly and truly, and eventually accepting that everything burns eventually.

So we firelovers learn to live with the flames, our burnscar hearts adapting to the landscape of our lives as it shifts in and out of fire seasons.

Ashes, Ashes
Foraged charcoal, graphite, and smoke on birch panel
11” x 14” x 1.5”

“Ashes, ashes, we all rise up…”

Alix E. Harrow

EPILOGUE

"Let us remember Spring will come again
To the scorched, blackened woods,
where all the wounded trees wait
with their old wise patience."

Charlotte Mew

The term "green up" in fire ecology refers to the land being reestablished by pioneer species like plants, insects, and birds post-fire.

After a burn, the land recovers. How quickly depends on the severity of the fires, but eventually the gray-ash ground begins to glow with pops of green seedlings. Pioneer species like pines and ferns take root, insects arrive to bore through fresh deadwood, and birds follow close behind to snack on their larvae.

Come spring, the blackened burnscape will be showered with a vibrant display of wildflowers. These plants thrive in the nutrient-rich ash left behind, quickly recovering the scorched earth and providing food and shelter for returning wildlife.

Beargrass blooms in gentle white clouds, camas unfurls its delicate purple petals, and fireweed stands tall and proud above them all, a signal that life has returned and a new story is set to unfold.

BONUS: THE MAKING OF "*GOOD FIRE*"

SKETCHES

"What They Left Us Of The Stars"

"Fuse"

"Firehawk"

"To Thus Forswear Beginnings"

SMOKE & CHARCOAL PROCESS

A chunk of foraged charcoal from Oregon's Table Rock Wilderness

Using a flame to "draw" with smoke on a birch panel

Smoky background (thanks to an old pack of birthday candles) before drawing the subjects with charcoal and pencil.

Using a goose feather to make marks on the Northern Spotted Owl in “Leavingtake”

Early stages of the monarchs in “Ashes, Ashes” using my finger and an eraser to highlight the wing spots.

PAINTINGS IN PROGRESS

AFTERWORD

The irony of releasing this work almost exactly 5 years after Oregon's Labor Day fires of 2020 is not lost on me. This collection was scheduled to be released at the end of August nearly one year in advance, and it was only after I'd completed the series that I realized how aligned the theme was with the anniversary of these devastating burns.

I accidentally found myself travelling to the Corvallis area during the first week of September, fleeing a dangerous relationship and living situation. I packed up my dog and drove south from Portland to collect myself for the weekend, hoping for time and space to figure out where to take my life from there.

I found a hotel and got a much-needed night of sleep. When I woke and opened the curtains it was still dark out. Did I wake up early? No, the clock showed it was after 9 AM, yet the sky was a thick dark red-brown. A storm? No–*a fire.* I looked down into the hotel pool and saw not water, but a thick layer of ash.

I knew a fire was burning across the highway the day before, fairly well off from where I was travelling. During the night the winds suddenly shifted, causing the fire to change direction and speed. It grew quickly and spread across the region like a bruise, spewing ash and smoke in its wake.

Standing in the hotel parking lot I struggled to breathe. The sky had turned a viscous red and I held my breath as long as I could while I looked up traffic and fire reports on my phone trying to figure out if it was safe to drive back to Portland.

After talking with some folks who were also gathering information, I decided to take a chance and make my way up the I-5 before the fire spread further. The thick haze engulfing the freeway slowed traffic down to a crawl. Stuck between semi-trucks and passenger cars I watched the air swirl and flash above me, stroking my dog's ears as his white fur glowed red in the apocalyptic light.

I remember finally reaching the outskirts of Portland and watching the nightmare sky give way to a bright and cheerful blue. When I drove into the city it seemed like I had entered an entirely new world, crossing a barrier between hell and elsewhere.

But the fire grew, and by the end of the day the wall of smoke that had choked the southern part of the valley rolled into the city.

For weeks smoke sat in the region, unmoving and ominous. This was the first year of the pandemic. We were under lockdown orders and some of us were sick with COVID. Now we had dangerous levels of particulate matter to contend with, which was so high some days that it surpassed the upper limit of the measurable air quality scale. Portland experienced the worst polluted air in the entire world during those weeks.

I figured out how to deal with my living situation, but it was not without great pain and heartache. Big change is always unsettling, even if it's for your own good in the long term. As the fires burned and my lungs burned with them, part of my life was burning in its own way.

I am going to let my past self tell the rest of this story, because she was there and can tell it better than present-day me. Below are excerpts from my journal that I wrote as the fires burned that September. I have included photos from that time as well.

"The extreme consequences of the havoc we have wrought on this planet are unfolding. The air in Portland is rated hazardous with no sign of improving; visibility is less than a mile; your eyes burn and your throat gets painful and starts to close up after just a few seconds outside; a fine layer of particles covered my drawing desk when a window was accidentally left cracked before conditions worsened."

"Watching our forests burn, breathing in the charred bodies of trees hundreds and thousands of years older than we, hearing of the mass exodus of human and animal lives fleeing from dangerous areas, and understanding the weight of all we've lost hit me harder than anything I can remember.

The days and weeks I've spent hiking and camping through these forests over the last few years were immensely transformative as I navigated my late 20's. Those forests raised me. I'd venture out alone, get lost for days, wander up mountains before dawn, swim naked in secret fern-lined hot springs, warm myself by hastily-made fires near trickling creeks under the moon and the night and the stars. No plan, no idea what I was doing, but learning along the way and staying open to everything.

I was not raised in this area, but I grew up here. I learned the exhilaration that comes with solo travel, the confidence of figuring out roads and maps, of being on a first-name basis with the birds and plants and rocks you meet along the way. I fell in love with this now-burning world while wading through undammed rivers, drank from pure glacial springs while laughing under blue skies, raced up mountainsides in the near-dark to catch the sunrise as it exploded over craggly peaks covered with delicate alpine wildflowers. I walked off grief, stomped out fear, swam through loneliness."

Photos taken from Salem (Northwest Oregon) and Portland (north of Salem bordering the state of Washington) between 9/8 and 9/10, though the smoke infiltrated the city on the 6th. They show the fire encroaching on our hotel, driving through it on the freeway, and the smoke giving way to blue sky–briefly–as we drove into Portland.

Air quality index and the many, many fires burning on the west coast that year.

I'll end this book with another excerpt from my past self. Below she takes us with her to get reacquainted with the land post-fire, reunited with the forest that the charcoal I used to create this series was from.

“A triumphantly sweet return to one of my most coveted havens, a state rec area not too far outside of the city.This forest was struck by a large wildfire in 2020 and was closed for over a year. I was hesitant to visit because I didn't know if my heart could bear to behold the potential extent of damage wrought upon some of my most beloved trails.

The damage was obvious. Many trees are now charred a striking black and the understory lies awkwardly balded, absent of its lush-growing plant life. Fewer birds seem to punctuate the airy silence of the woods, and even the river feels more empty, slower, less intertwined with the land it flows through.

The forest, bare-faced, seems to lie in a state of shock from the fiery trauma. Dormant, paused, waiting for a sign that the coast is clear and life can start anew. Though life is already working on making its comeback, it is a big undertaking and is a process that seems slow to our narrow human understanding of time.

Although those footpaths I'd wandered over for years were now brutally altered in appearance, still I felt the surging sense that I always get when embraced by this place: the deep and unmistakable awareness of being home.

This land, forever changed, still offering its endless wisdom, now echoing its message even more loudly through the extra space left by what was sacrificed to the flames: *home.”*

The End

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She enjoys hiking with her 16 year old pup Charlie, reading speculative fiction, and getting lost in deserts, wetlands, and everywhere in between.

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