

# THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2021 ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER



## MAGGI VAN DRUNEN

HONORABLE MENTION Grades 10-12

I've always loved the turquoise-blue sky, the brisk morning air smelling faintly of wet soil, the way the hum of cicadas floats fluidly through the air. It's always been easy to appreciate, easy to love, the serene and beautiful parts of nature. But something I could do without? A diesel truck, loud and obnoxious, leaving a stream of pungent fumes following. Then another car, the crunch of asphalt drowning out the delicate swish of the trees. Most likely not what you would picture when you think of a natural paradise to observe, contemplate, and unwind. And it's not. This is the residential portion of Gallup, New Mexico, where house cats are the apex predators.

As bland as it may sound, the neighborhood around my house became my natural space, the place where I observed the organisms that thrived around human inhabitants. It began three months into the pandemic, when the panic of the virus really set in. Being a chronic overthinker, the unknown made my head a place that was inhospitable.

So, I began to run. Physical movement was my way of trying to escape the scariest parts of my mind, my way of trying to convince myself that I still had a measure of control over my life.

My route was simple, around the corner, along the sidewalk and then to the base of a steep hill. I struggled day after day in reaching the summit. I would run, walk down, run up and then repeat; trying to create my own pattern that would somehow overpower the one that my head had knotted into. An interesting curiosity began- gradually, I started to integrate myself into my miniature environment. At some point, perhaps subconsciously, I plotted out where each of the rabbits likes to hide, where slippery spots of ice were prone to form, which cats belonged to which houses. There's the tree with the sweeping branches, the birds nesting underneath someone's roof, and the patch of sidewalk which almost always had droppings from some sort of animal. I learned to befriend some of the neighbors' dogs and to avoid eye contact with others. Paths through the shrubs used by the cats slowly became part of my routine. It was not always pretty; the only way to map out where the low-hanging branches are was to get hit by them, and the knowledge of what spots to avoid is only learned by scraping poop off your shoe day after day.

Those mornings, noons, and nights spent on that godforsaken hill eventually gave me something far more covetable than physical fitness. Becoming fully immersed in the workings of the creatures of my hill gifted me insight into many of my own issues. I learned many things from watching the birds alone; they never tried to force the seasons to change or stay stationary, but instead adapted and flowed with their circumstances, just like their ancestors did before them. Their world is always being altered, and recently, mine was too. The small dog that would nip at my heels whenever I passed his house was actually quite the coward, and would flee at the slightest movement in his direction. He, like many things, was not as he seemed.

That is one of the greatest beauties in the natural world; how it exists as something completely foreign yet so very familiar. Naturalists have observed this for years; Aldo Leopold himself created powerful pieces of philosophy hidden in descriptions about the things he observed. When immersed in an ecosystem, reflections of the human experience are everywhere. After all, we are not very different. Things happen out of our control; we lose to disease and new predators alike.

I am no naturalist. I do not travel to remote locations and write poems inspired by the mountains. Running started as a coping technique to alleviate my anxiety, but it evolved into something that served to ground me in the midst of a global crisis by engaging me in the ecosystem around me. I learned that nature, wherever it is found, is a powerful tool to open your perspective and give you insight into how the natural world often functions in parallel to your own.