



NATURE
AS INSPIRATION
&
TRANSFORMATION:

AN INTRODUCTION
TO WRITING NATURE POETRY

with aimee nezhukumatathil



The world is still stuffed with astonishments beyond our wildest imagining— isn't that the most alluring sentence *ever*?

Isn't that the sentence we should have pinned up on every bathroom mirror in the world, so we all see it first thing in the morning every blessed day before we brush our extant choppers?

—Brian Doyle, *Children and Other Wild Animals*



Who on earth would think to give solid glass bracelets to a four-year-old?

My eyes were big as quarters when I opened the box of bangles sent by my Indian grandmother. She thought it was time. I loved them right away: the shock of color when I held my thin wrists up to the sunny window, the clink and chime when I ran, the deep-drenched reds, blues, violets—nothing else rang so bold or brilliant in a Chicago winter. Outside, drifts piled higher than a toddler in Moon Boots. My father shoveled snow off our roof for fear of a cave-in. But I had my bangles. I ran from room to room just to ring them. Be careful, be careful, my mother said. You'll cut yourself if they break. And when I finally grew tired, I'd lie on the floor of our living room and listen for the strange sounds of winter: the scream of icicles as they slid off the edge of the gutters, the vermiculite in the cool soil of a houseplant begging for a drink. I held the bangles up to the ceiling light so I could fracture a rainbow across the room—so much power in a tiny bracelet of glass—the first time such radiance sprang from this little girl's hand.

As an adult, I'm still so drawn to light-soaked color displays. Some of the planet's most vibrant light shows come not from the land or air, but from the ocean. With the pulse and undulation of the comb jelly, hundreds of thousands of cilia flash mini-rainbows even in the darkest polar and tropical ocean zones. This zing of color is what tempts people all up and down the eastern coast of both Americas to gather walnut-sized comb jellies into their hands. But don't do this!



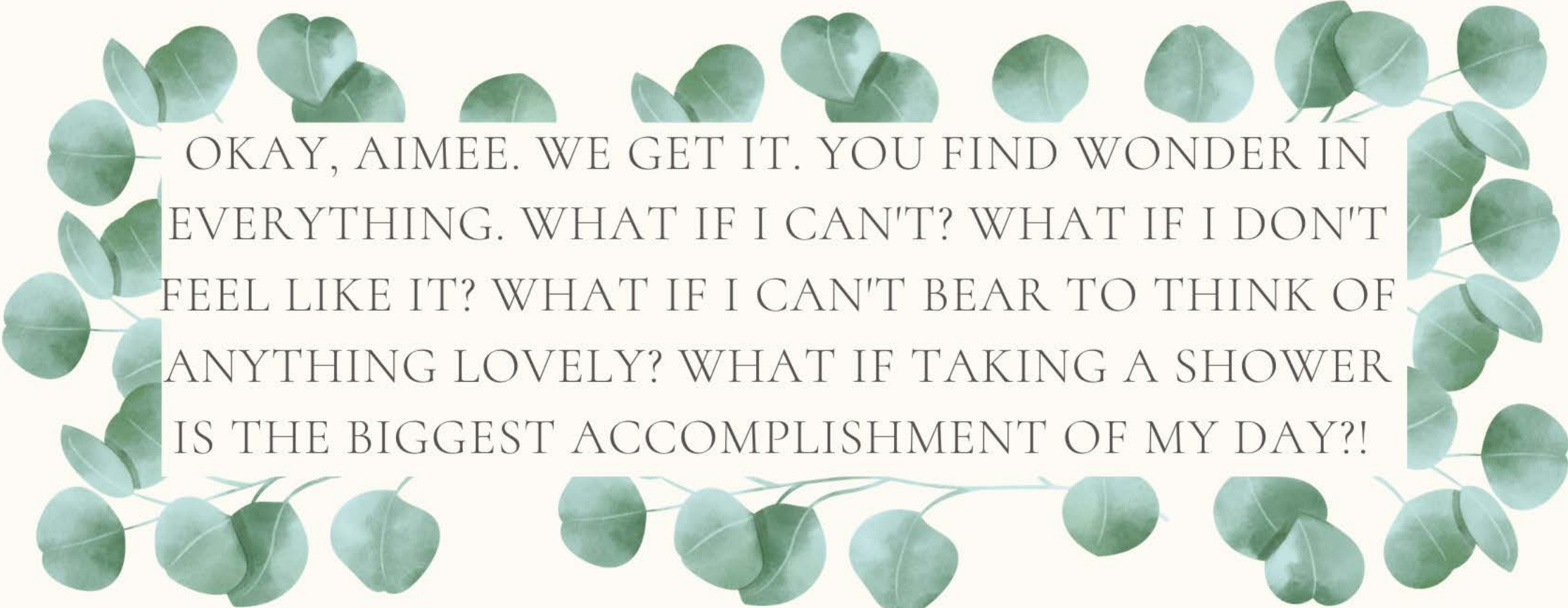
photo: Muhammad Mahdi Karim

Most are so delicate (thinner than the thinnest contact lens) that they will disintegrate in your palm. If you want to observe one up close, scoop it into a clear cup and take a look-see that way. And then, of course, please gently return it to the water. The comb jelly is a creature of delicacy. It doesn't sting, and it's not actually a jellyfish. It belongs to a whole other phylum, Ctenophora. Comb jellies can be as small as a single grain of rice or they can grow to over four feet in width—large enough (in theory) to gobble up a plump second grader whole. But they won't, because they are too busy waving their hair-like cilia around, too busy eating various fish eggs, and too busy eating other comb jellies.

When I see them in aquariums, I think of the first time I held my glass bangles up to the light. I have always been drawn to color—the hue and cry of joy—and I think perhaps it was because someone on the other side of the planet entrusted those bangles, that fragility, to me when I was so young. What a waterworld comb jellies make, suspending their millions of rainbows not in the sky, but in the ocean—sometimes so far into the way down deep and dazzle that only pale creatures like anglerfish and gulper eels take notice, perhaps imagining, for a brief moment, the delicious luxury of what it's like to be warmed by the sun after a rain.

-excerpt from "Comb Jelly," from *World of Wonders* (Milkweed Editions, Aug. 2020)





OKAY, AIMEE. WE GET IT. YOU FIND WONDER IN EVERYTHING. WHAT IF I CAN'T? WHAT IF I DON'T FEEL LIKE IT? WHAT IF I CAN'T BEAR TO THINK OF ANYTHING LOVELY? WHAT IF TAKING A SHOWER IS THE BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT OF MY DAY?!

SPOILER ALERT: THAT IS OKAY. To poet means to *make*. Sometimes you string words together in interesting ways. Some days you may not make with *words*. And that is just fine. The writing will always come. Some times you might need to make other things so the poems can come. But they will return. I promise.

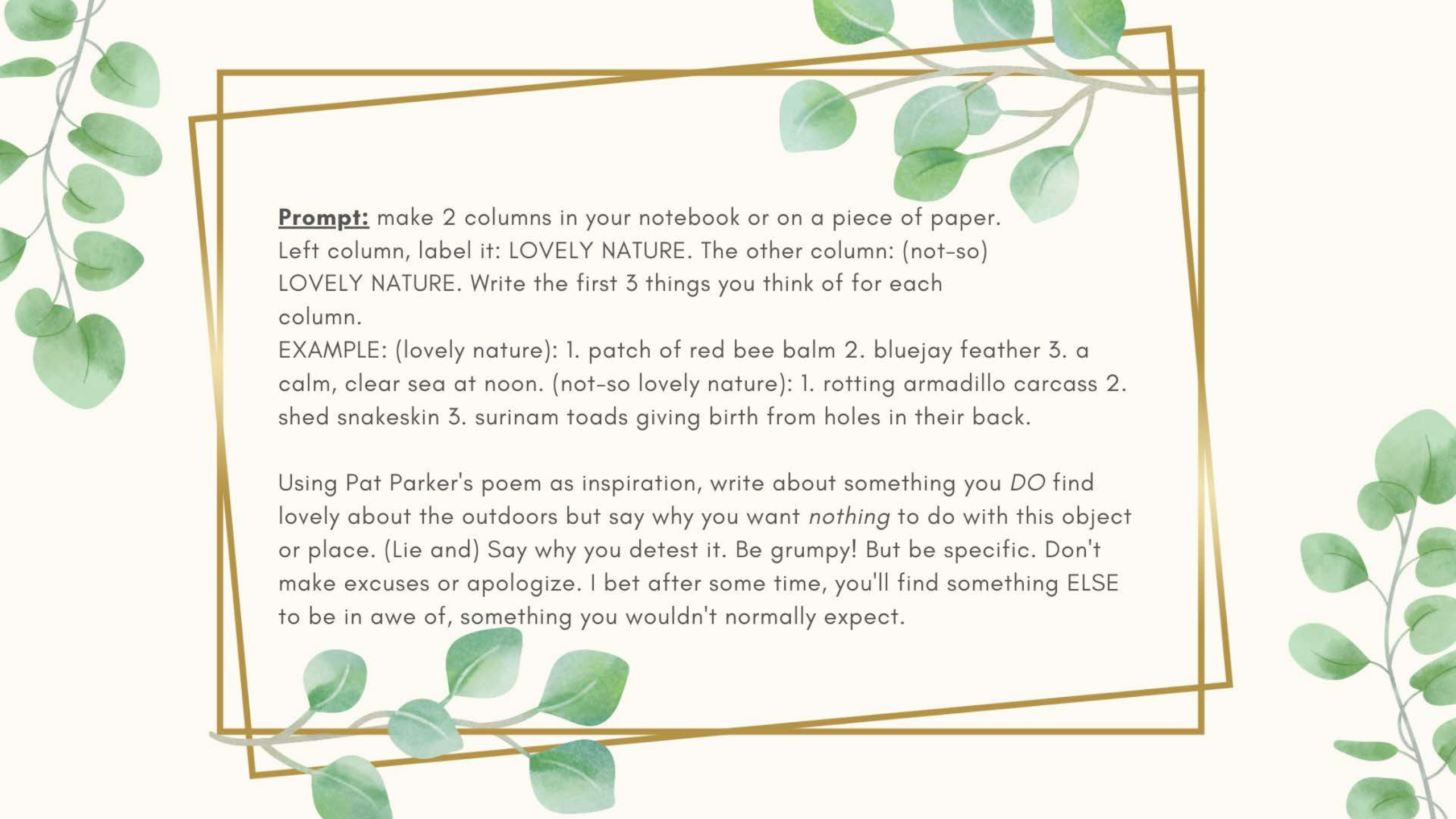


To Lynda

Sometimes
i don't want
to be a butterfly-
and fly dipping,
off trees & things-

would be
a caterpillar,
wrapped
in a cocoon
& you
are the threads.

-Pat Parker



Prompt: make 2 columns in your notebook or on a piece of paper. Left column, label it: LOVELY NATURE. The other column: (not-so) LOVELY NATURE. Write the first 3 things you think of for each column.

EXAMPLE: (lovely nature): 1. patch of red bee balm 2. bluejay feather 3. a calm, clear sea at noon. (not-so lovely nature): 1. rotting armadillo carcass 2. shed snakeskin 3. surinam toads giving birth from holes in their back.

Using Pat Parker's poem as inspiration, write about something you *DO* find lovely about the outdoors but say why you want *nothing* to do with this object or place. (Lie and) Say why you detest it. Be grumpy! But be specific. Don't make excuses or apologize. I bet after some time, you'll find something ELSE to be in awe of, something you wouldn't normally expect.

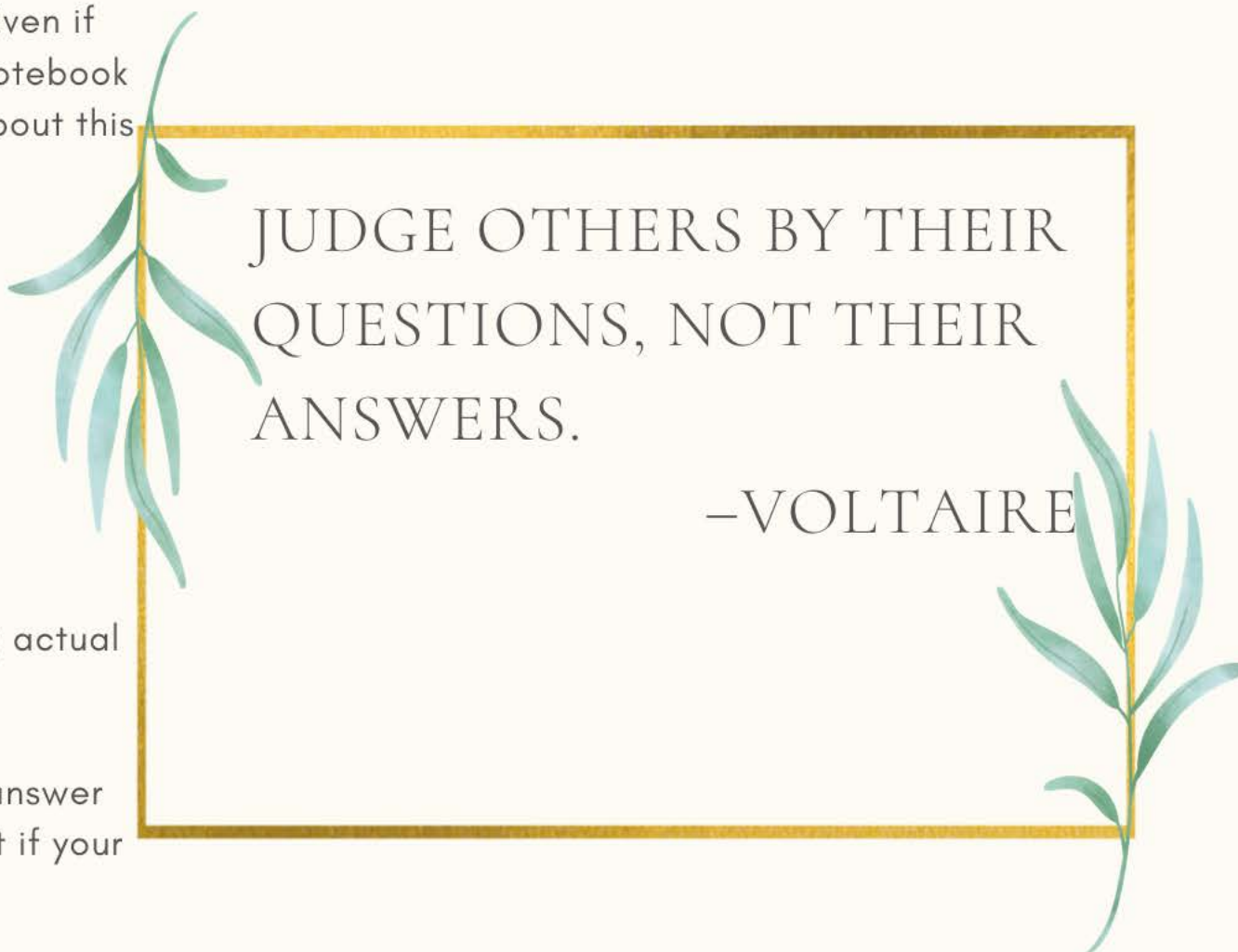
Prompt: Designate a blank journal your *Wonder Journal*--nothing fancy, a spiral notebook will do. This is low-stakes writing. Even if you can't make a full poem or essay, you can designate a notebook into just having a place for your questions and curiosities about this planet.

What do you wonder about regarding the outdoors?
Can you list THREE wonders? FIVE? TEN? Keep going

example: 1. How do leaves change color in the fall?
2. How do hummingbirds know how to fly south for winter?
3. What makes the sunset and sunrise pink or orange?

Q: What if you wrote down what you discovered after doing actual research?

Q: What if you wrote down your guess? What if you had to answer it even though it may seem ridiculous and illogical, but what if your answer "made sense" anyway?



JUDGE OTHERS BY THEIR
QUESTIONS, NOT THEIR
ANSWERS.

—VOLTAIRE



OPENING LINES (WITH A TWIST!)

Prompt: Make one of these an opening line to a poem, story, or essay.

A hippo can weigh up to 4 tons and run as fast as a person.

The cheetah can run a mile in less than a min.

Hummingbirds can fly backwards.

An ant can lift an object 52 times its own weight

Only female mosquitoes bite.

80% of the human brain is water.

Just like fingerprints, no two lip-prints are exactly alike.

A blue whale is as big as a b-ball court.

The average person spends over 20 years of his/her life sleeping.

An elephant is the only mammal that can't jump.

A giraffe's tongue is almost 2 ft long.

The giant squid's eyes are about as tall as a gallon of milk.

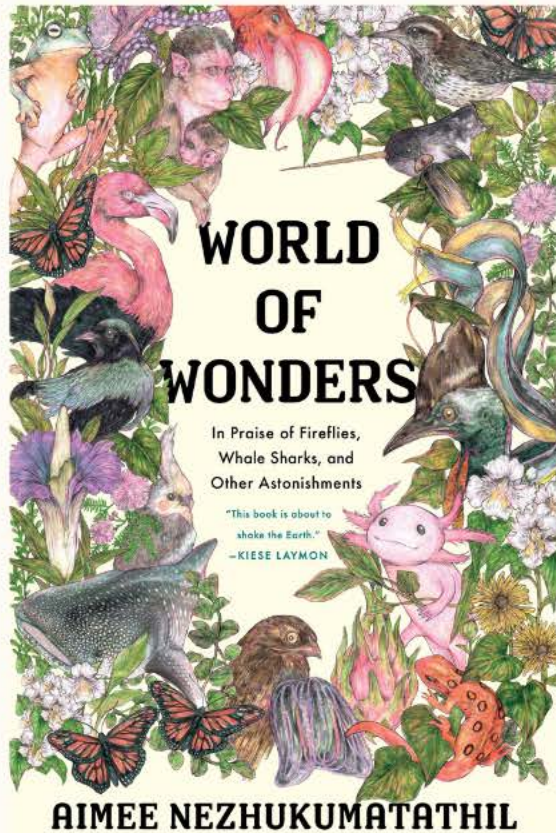
A sneeze can come out of your mouth at almost 100 mph.

Prompt: Designate a blank journal your Sky Journal--nothing fancy, a spiral notebook will do. This is low-stakes writing. Even if you can't make a full poem or essay, you can designate a notebook into just having a place for your observations about the sky.

1. Record day/time of your observation of the moon.
2. Make note of what phase it is in. Don't know all the phases? Draw and label them in your notebook. Sketch it!
3. Make a cloud report! note the day/time. Describe and/or sketch the clouds.
4. Teach yourself to identify at least 8 different cloud-shapes: cirrus, cumulonimbus, etc. Sketch them!
5. Make a sunset report: even if you can't catch the sunset from where you live, look up your town's estimate for sunset and describe what you see outside during that crepuscular moment. What do you hear at sunset? What do you smell? How about at sunrise?



MORE JOURNAL IDEAS: SKY JOURNAL



Coming Soon: August 2020 from Milkweed Editions!



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TRY TO BE CURIOUS.
KEEP WONDERING. BE KIND.