

BRITISH
COLUMBIA
ART
TEACHERS'
ASSOCIATION

Re-Imagining 2

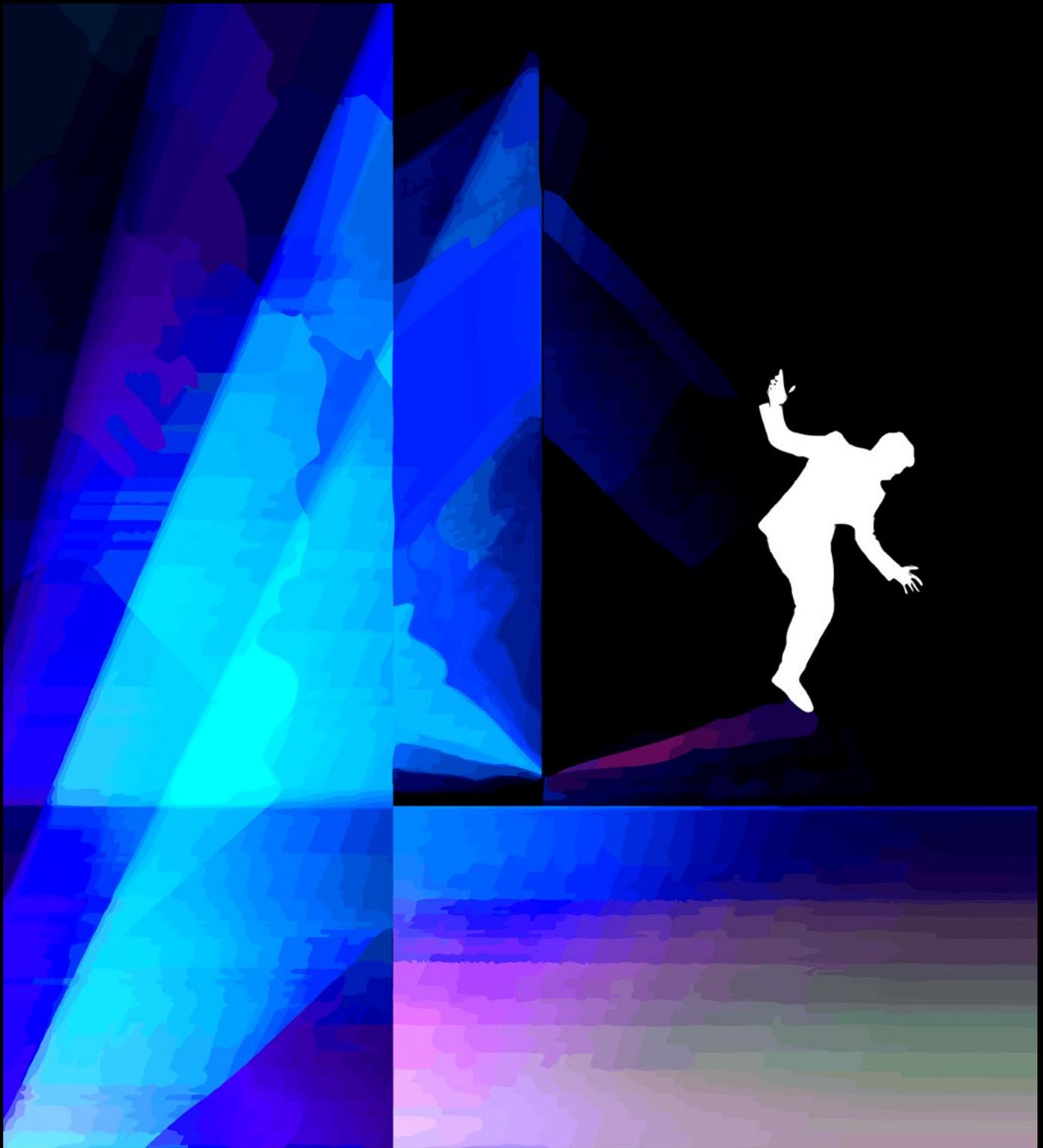
Art Education

BCATA Journal for
Art Teachers

Vol. 63
No. 1, 2021



BCATA is a
PSA of the BC
Teachers'
Federation



SILENT VOICES

ARE YOU LISTENING?

by Bill Zuk

Nature deficit

A lack of exposure to and experiences in nature has been described as 'Nature deficit disorder.' The term was coined to describe people, especially children whose lives are so structured, scheduled and sheltered that they spend very little time exploring outdoors. It has been suggested that this affects their ability to develop a healthy relationship and respect for the natural environment. Offsetting this disorder through schooling will require planning and organizing art education programs and engaging students in outdoor experiences as they become more aware of the benefits of the natural environment and its impact on their well being.

The urgency in Oxton's (2021) remark suggests we must become much more aware of the natural world and become advocates for outdoor education, what Oxton refers to as voices for the voiceless: "It's time we all stand together before it's too late".

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/15365218.Paul_Oxton

Who are the silenced and who are the silent voices, and why are they important?

Comments by the Dalai Lama shed light on the silent voices of Nature:

"Life is dear to a mute creature as it is to a person. Just as one wants happiness and protection from pain, just as one wants to live and not die, so do other creatures, so does all of wildlife that is voiceless in making decisions about its existence". <https://quotefancy.com/quote/789914/>

Socratic questions in the form of poetic phrases provide us with ideas about *the nature of Nature*:

Is it a breath of wind
The air we breathe
A babbling brook
The beauty
Of a cresting sea
Wildlife roaming free?

Albert Einstein advises us to expand our circle of understanding and compassion when it comes to Nature: "Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of Nature and its beauty" <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3>.

There are many reasons for considering the importance of *silent voices*; the question of 'why we should listen to them' raises important questions about our relationship with the natural environment in an era of sweeping change.

Stewart Udall's testament is revealing: "Plans to protect air and water, wilderness and wildlife are in fact plans to protect our own species". <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/>.

Should the *arts* be involved with the challenges and sweeping changes of modern times? Should we engage with the events of human history referred to as the *Anthropocene*? This is a period when we are branded as *culprits* and *disturbers* of the environment. Many of us are culpable of disturbing landscapes through invasive mining, polluting the air we breathe and the water we drink. We are charged with depleting aquatic and forest resources, and of endangering wildlife, leading to extinction of many species. The answer is clear: "Yes, we should all be involved because our lives depend on it, indeed *all* life depends on it.

Through ignorance, insensitivity and greed, our planet is under siege. There are many things we can do to alter the impending disaster that is *global warming* and *climate change*. Human impact on the natural world has contributed extensively to this calamity but there are things we can do to address this looming disaster. We can and we *must* inspire a greater awareness and appreciation of the natural environment. This includes developing personal relationships with the natural world, reversing the trend that has led us to distance ourselves from nature.

We can do things to make the world more desirable, livable and beautiful. This begins with changing our attitudes and taking action to protect what we consider to be precious, conserving what we feel is vulnerable, and 'holding dear' everything important to the natural order of the planet. There is a role for the arts in these endeavors.

Insert 1) Tipping point

Bill Zuk is a multimedia artist and Professor Emeritus of art education at the University of Victoria. His studio practice involves combining elements of printmaking, poetry, sculpture and film related to Nature experiences, creating a greater awareness and appreciation of the natural environment.

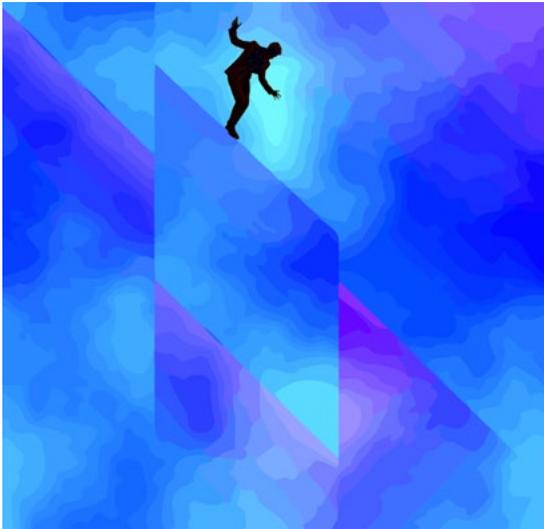


Figure 2 **Off Balance**

These images (figures 1, 2 &3) represent several aspects of balance in a world of upheaval. The first involves a *tipping point*, perhaps a *point of no return*; the second, a feeling of being thrown *off balance* - reeling, feeling out of control. The third graphic depicts a level of perfect balance, here represented by the metaphor of mind and body unity achieved in a yoga studio.

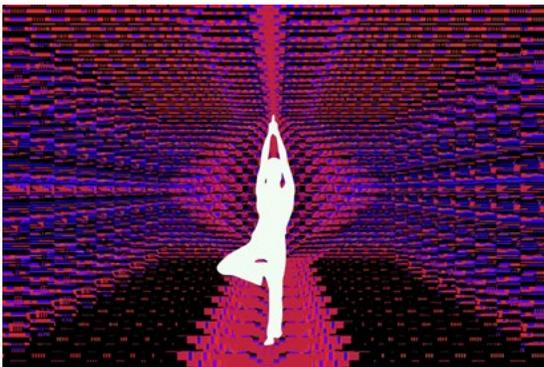


Figure 3 **Perfect Balance**

Prologues and Film Making

The process of creating an animated film to explain *silent voices* involves storytelling. One of the best means of telling a story involves a sequence of visual events known as the storyboard, an organizational tool that provides the basis for rehearsing, preparing musical scores, creating soundtracks, and engaging animation.

Prologue

Out of respect for bilingualism, a prologue in English and French provides an introduction:

**Are you listening
Can you hear me?**

***M'écoutes-tu?
M'entends-tu?***

**We are
The voices
Of the earth
The cosmos
And life
In the wild
And free.**

***Nous sommes
Les voix
De la terre
Du cosmos
Et la vie
Dans la nature
Libre.***

**Of things
So very tiny
Things
You cannot see.**

***De choses
Si minuscules
Choses
Qu'on ne peut point voir.***

**We are
The breath
Of wind
In forests
Meadows
Lakes
And mountains
Of all life
In the seas.**

***Nous sommes
Le souffle
Du vent
Dans les forêts
Prairies
Lacs
Et montagnes
De toute vie
Dans les mers.***

**And
In this world
Of upset
Will you
Help us
Will you listen
To our pleas?**

***Et
Dans ce monde
Bouleversé
Nous aideras-tu
Répondras-tu
À nos prières?***

Singing voices blend into various rhythms and refrains that repeat throughout the film.

**Help us
Help us
Please.**

***Aide-nous
Aide-nous
Je t'en prie.***

No more silence

***Plus de silence
Plus jamais de silence***

STORYBOARD AND FILM

The storyboard consists of images and poetic interpretations related to the care, protection, and revitalization of the natural world. Questions are raised, contexts are considered, and images are used to explain the need for *listening*.

Silent Voices (Figure 4)

We are introduced to a field of cobalt blue that moves from the left side of the composition to zig zag shapes and graduated blends of red, orange and yellow. They fill the area with jagged patterns. Will we feel buoyed by the brightness of shapes and colours or unsettled by the angular sharpness?

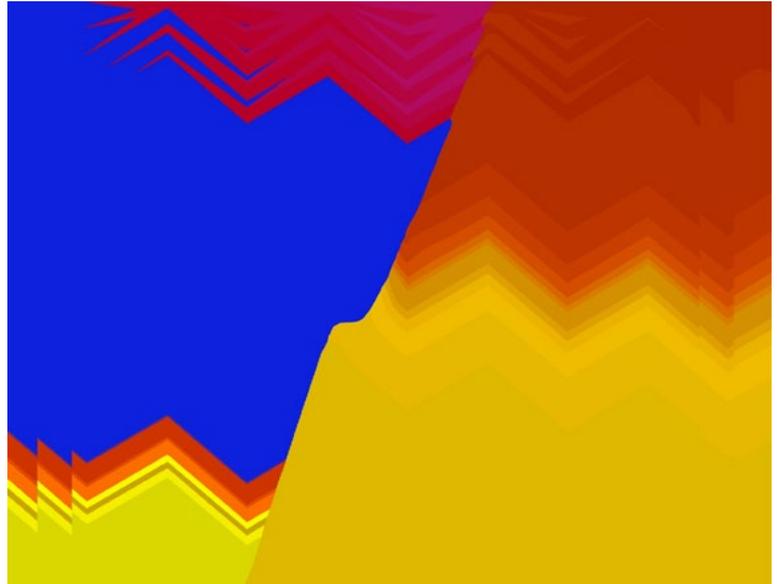


Figure 4 **Geometric zig zags**

Who speaks for us?

Our voices are silent

We are not heard. (Figure 5)

A proliferation of primary colours in the composition gives rise to silhouetted eagles and seagulls in the skies. Midground colours blend into the scene; three sharp beaked birds in the lower foreground are conjoined; the outline of a loon is embedded within this silhouette. Is *anyone* aware of the diversity of wildlife and the way it should be treated?



Figure 5 **Sky Birds**

Should we look in the mirror as one of the great humanists, Mahatma Gandhi suggested: “The way we treat the wilderness of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another” <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/s>.

Butterflies and bird life continue to fill the skies. Who is there to listen and appreciate the cacophony? (Figure 6)

We are the birds

The bees

And butterflies

Filling the skies

With colours

And fluttering wings

Who will listen to us?

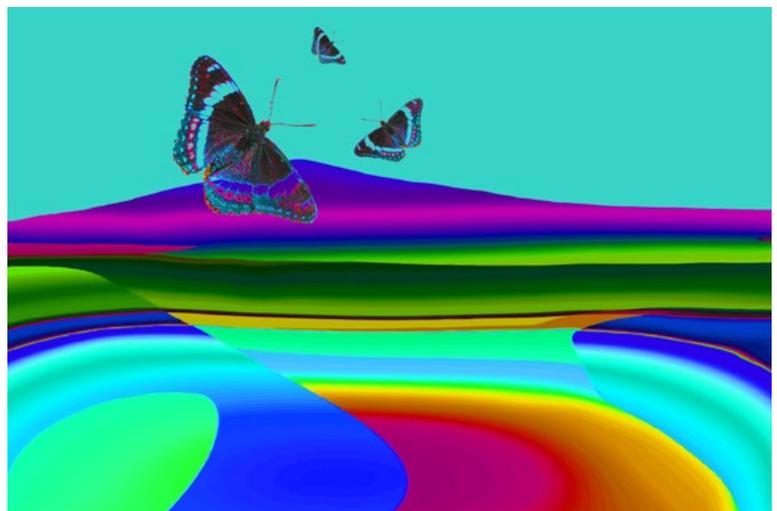


Figure 6 **Birds, Bees & Butterflies**

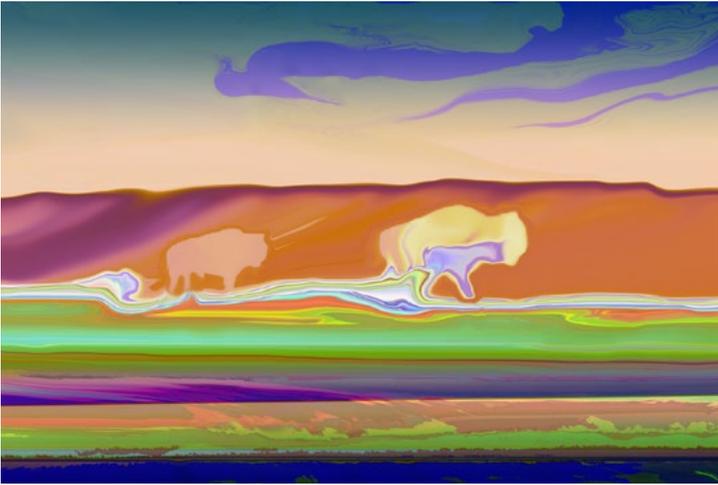


Figure 7 **Bison Landscape**

The scene shifts from 'species in the skies' to 'beasts of the plains'. Bison are central to the composition; the undulating colours of a bison mother are depicted alongside her calf; a sense of harmony prevails. A bear and her two cubs are featured in the next composition indicating a rich diversity of animals in the hills and wooded valleys. (Figure 7 & 8)



Figure 8 **Bear and Cubs**

**We are the wildlife
Bison and bear
Roaming
The hills and wooded vales
Rolling meadows
And ancient plains.**



Figure 9 **Wolf and Moon**

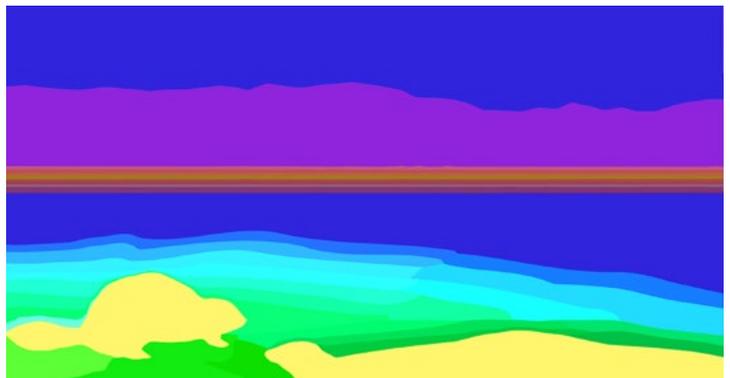
The creatures of the deep forests and rocky dens are numerous but the wolf, an apex predator, is an iconic creature. We see a wolf, absorbed by the swirls of the Aurora, head pointing to the skies. Its howl is mournful and echoes in the curving flow of graduated blues. The secretive wolverine is in its den, hidden from prying eyes. (Figure 9)

**We are the wolf and wolverine
Hidden
in deep forests
And rocky dens.
Who will listen to us?**

In a dramatic shift of scenery, we are introduced to a composition of simple shapes and colours featuring outlines of a beaver and an otter that occupy the ponds and lakes streaming to the seas.

**We are the beaver and otter
Swimming in sparkling ponds
And glistening lakes
In bubbling streams
And flowing waters
That rush out
To the sea.**

Figure 10 **Beaver and Otter**



In a scene lost in the mists of time, mountain goats ascend steep mountain cliffs with remarkable agility; the poetry refers to mountain sheep, cousins to wild goats. (see figure 11)

**We are the rock sheep
Climbing
Through mists and clouds
To glaciers
And ice capped mountains.
Who will hear our voices?**

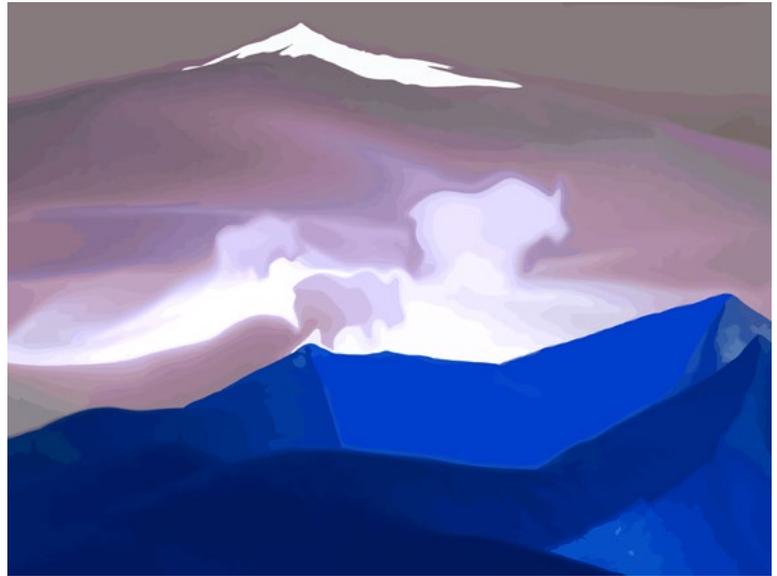


Figure 11 **Mountain Goat**

Caribou herds migrate across the tundra on ancient pathways to the calving grounds. Over the millennia, their numbers have steadily declined, however, they remain an iconic symbol of the northern wilderness. (see figure 12)

**We are the caribou
Migrating
On paths
Of rubble
Rock and stone**



Figure 12 **Caribou Migration**

As the contemporary industrial era encroaches on the Arctic wilderness, we observe upheavals and 'invasions' - oil, gas and mining operations gain prominence. The deafening roar of machinery, the scattering of pipelines criss-crossing the landscape; the imposition of hydroelectric dams flooding pathways of the caribou, seriously affecting migrating populations; sending animal populations into sharp decline.

What steps are being taken to protect these magnificent animals and their habitats? Are we listening to their plight?

Here we see ripples on the landscape with caribou crossing pipelines but they become absorbed by their surroundings; sharp pointed radials slow their progress, taking a toll on their energy and spirit.



Figure 13 **Pipeline Landscape**

**Pipelines in our midst
 Oil spills
 On our hooves
 Smoke heavy
 In our lungs.**

**Heartbeats racing
 With bursts of fear
 Who will listen to us?**

(See figures 13 & 14)

Some of the greatest diversity on this planet can be found in the oceans where we have a plethora of seals, salmon, sea lions, oysters and eels. However, the waters of the world are being overfished, polluted, and mistreated, lacking care, protection and respect.

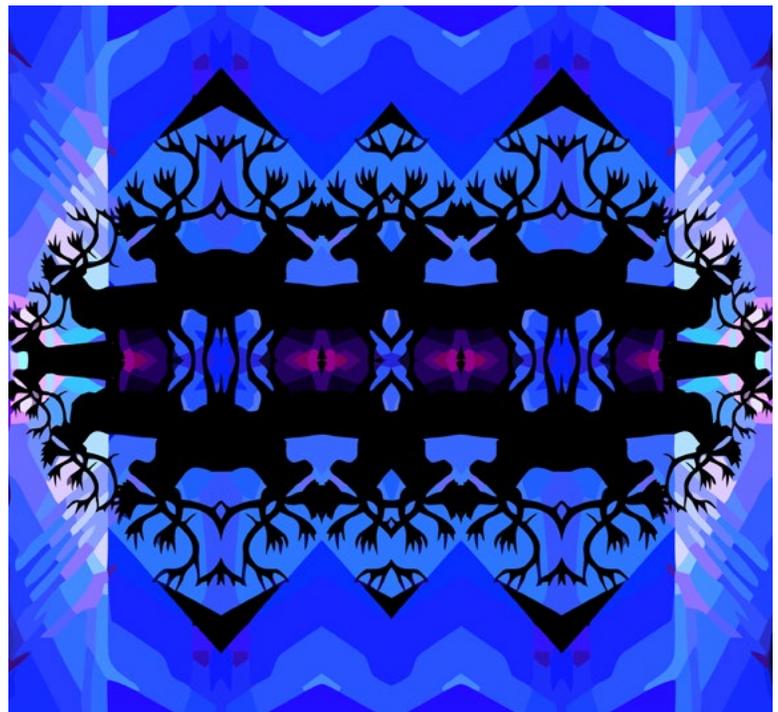


Figure 14 **Absorbed by Pipelines**

**We are the LIFE
In oceans and seas
Seal, salmon and sea lion
Whales and sea wolves
Oysters and eels
Starbursts and spiral shells
And wiggling jellies.**

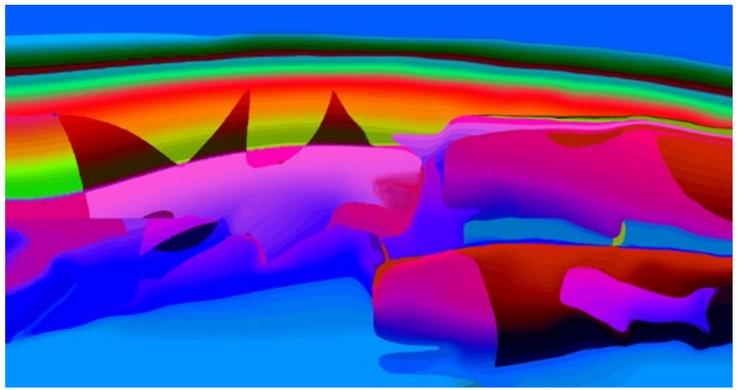


Figure 15 **Ocean Life**

We see a broad band of blood red colours running across the sea, a sign of 'red tide.' This phenomenon occurs when warming oceans produce toxins rendering sealife poisonous for periods in the summer. Graduated colours of blue appear overhead but this does not conceal the fact there is more acidity in the oceans affecting the growth and development of shellfish. Will the red tides and acidity increase? Is there a way to 'stem the tide'?

(see Figure 15)

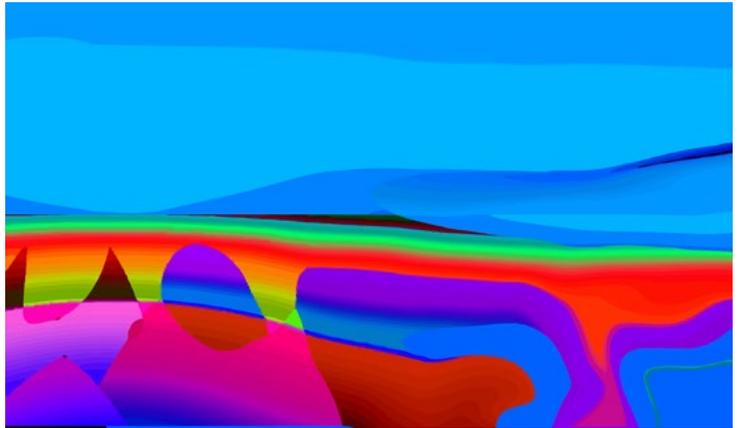


Figure 16 **Red Tide**

A landscape undulates with graduated colours while a pod of whales gather to ponder their existence in polluted waters.

(see Figure 16)

Mythical sea wolves swim in the waters; the faint outline of an octopus is evident overhead. The threatened animals must decide what to do: stay or move on to cleaner waters.

(see Figure 17)

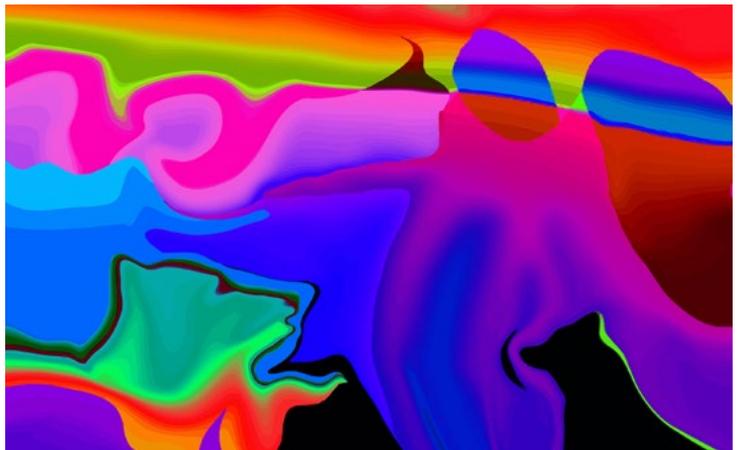


Figure 17 **Sea Wolf and Octopus**

Portions of the previous scene are evident; undulating colours in a horizontal landscape emphasize the wide expanse of ocean; orca fins protrude and a bulbous fish enters from the side. A hand reaches up from the base of the picture with blue fingers, a symbol to halt pollution. An ultimatum is issued: STOP!

(see Figure 18)

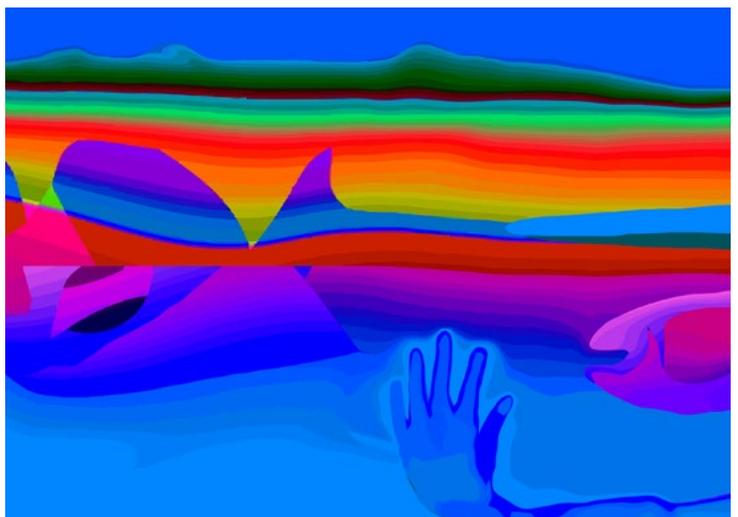


Figure 18 **Stop**

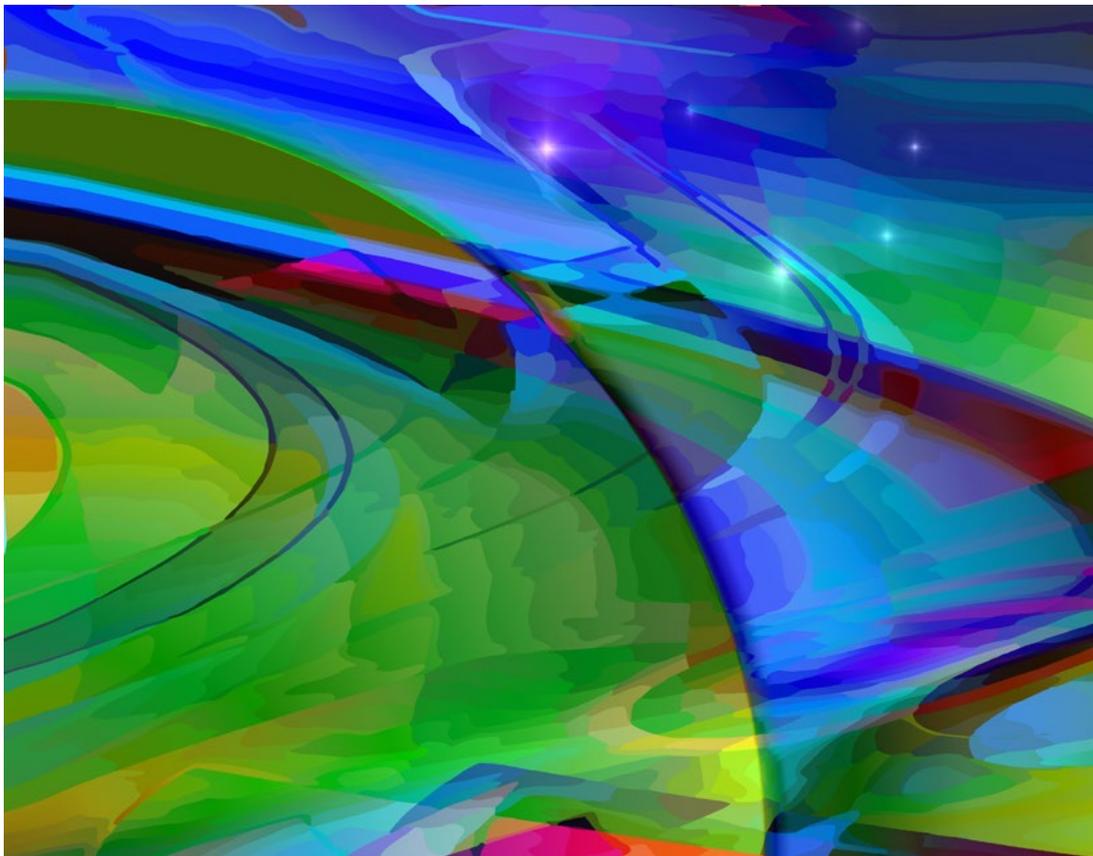


Figure 19 **Asking for Change**

**We breathe with fear
Who will listen to our voices
Crying in pollution
And acid seas?**

A major shift of scenery occurs with a dynamic view of earth and the cosmos, rippled curves, arcs of blue, and a starlit sky. Are these the metaphorical cries of a planet pleading for change towards greater balance and harmony? (see figure 19)

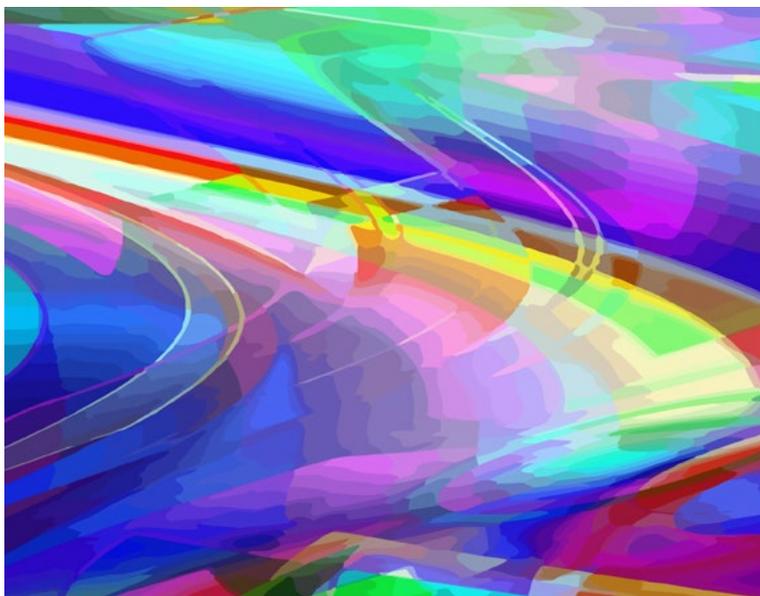


Figure 20 **Cleansing**

**We are the cries
Of a planet
Asking for change
For balance
Calm
And harmony**

The dynamic elliptical shapes remain. There is however, a shift in the clarity of the atmosphere with cleansed oceans, clear skies, and clean air. Are the questions about creating a more habitable world being answered?

**That speaks
Of love
Of land
Of clean waters
Clear air to breathe?**

Circles and curves of the earth radiate in streaks and strands to the atmosphere. This scene changes to a more desirable and habitable world.

(see figure 21)

Graduated radial colours with yellow at the heart of the earth, and rings of green and blue fill the atmosphere with life giving oxygen.

(see figure 22)

**Who will listen
To the cries
Of things
So sacred?**

Repeat patterns of silhouette faces appear in a cosmos filled with stars symbolizing protection and care, offered by elders to the newborn and future generations. The elders are anchors of solidarity, a foundation for the future. Everyone listens as they speak.

(see figure 23)

**Our newborn
Our elders
And future generations?**

**Who will listen
As we speak?**

**No longer
Silenced**

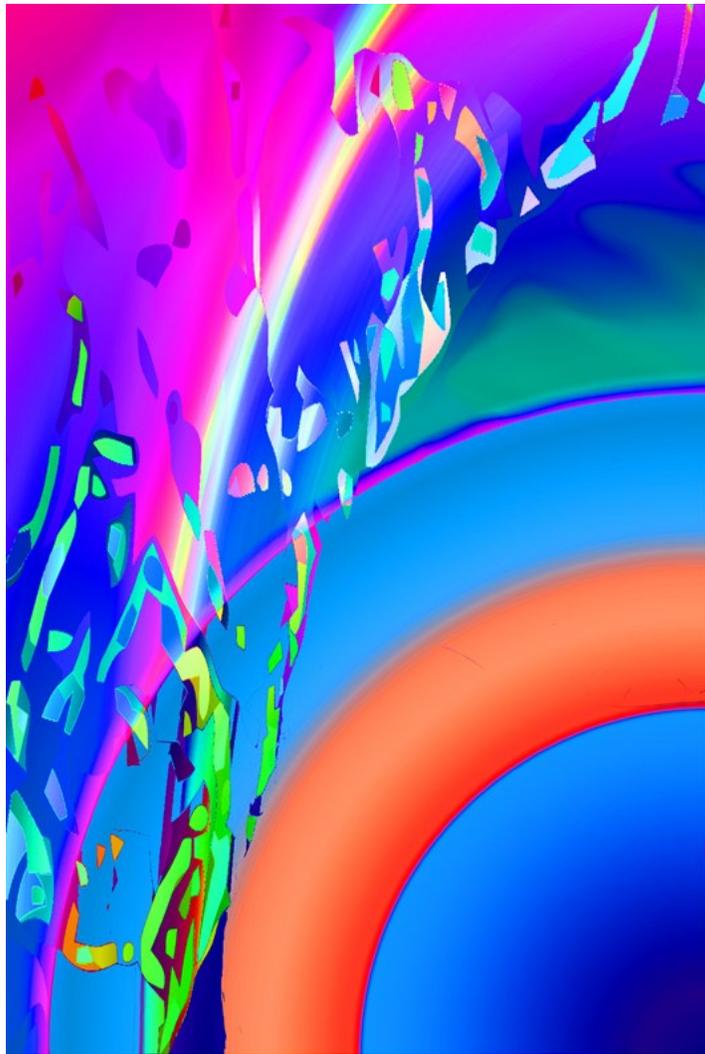


Figure 21
Desireable

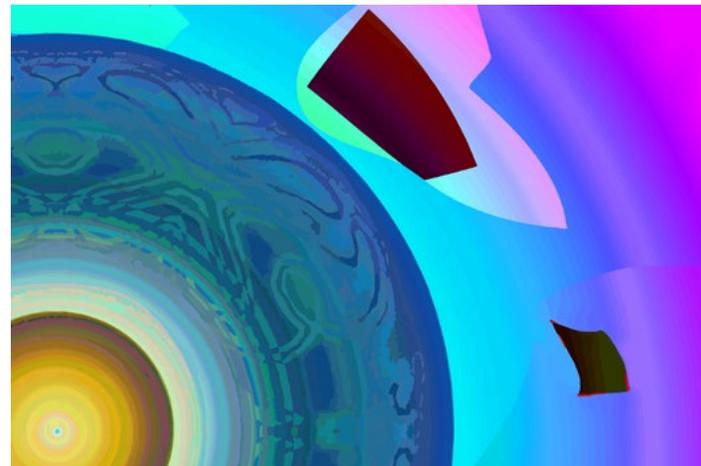


Figure 22
Glad



Figure 23
Elders

A sign of hope is evident as sunlight radiates from a core of colourful, overlapping geometric shapes spreading into the atmosphere. (see figure 24)

**Unveil the deeds
Of darkness
Move into the light**

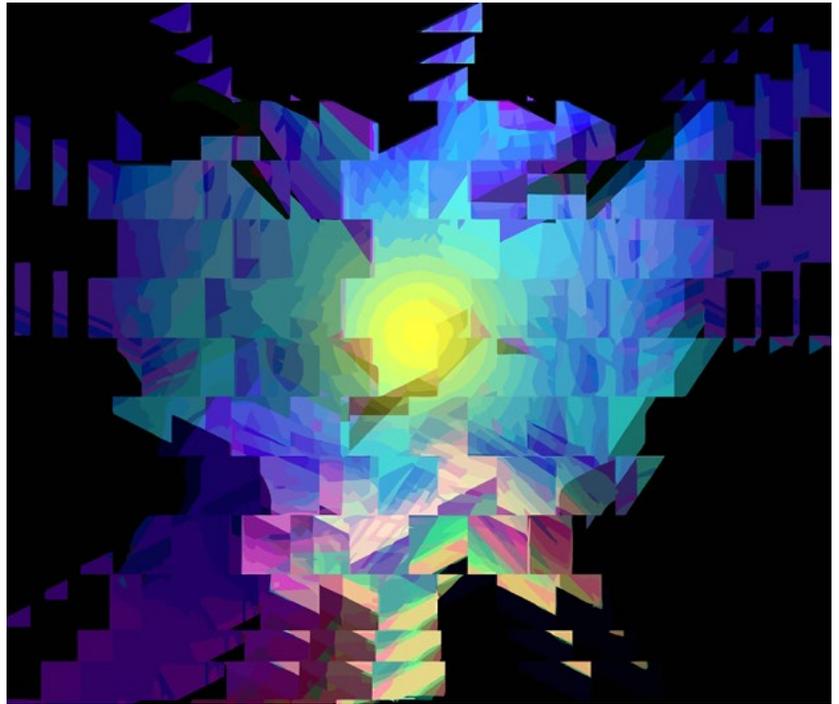


Figure 24 **Hope**

A pyramid rises from the base of the picture plane, balanced by a colourful diamond shape enclosing a double circle. (see figure 25). Is this a beacon of energy, hope, and renewal for a more hospitable world of the future? Can our efforts of acting together make a difference to our well being or has our fate been sealed by natural forces and the heavy footprints we have left in the past? Only time will tell.

**Into the light
Of the
Millennium.**

Slogan art

Slogans are a good starting place for creating art that promotes care and protection of the natural environment. They usually consist of brief, easily remembered phrases forming the basis for persuasive messages.

Posters and Promotions

How can the importance of the natural environment be emphasized and brought to everyone's attention? How can a combination of text and visual art combine to promote the care and protection of the natural environment?



Figure 25 **Beacon**

Create posters to promote the care, protection, and vitality of the natural environment based on the following slogans OR use ideas originating from your creative genius:

- 1) Wildlife: Save it to cherish or leave it to perish
- 2) A priceless treasure, save it with pleasure
- 3) Let's go wild for wildlife
- 4) Conserve wildlife for a better world
- 5) Save wildlife, save the future
- 6) You can, if you believe you can
- 7) Dream, believe, achieve

The image of 'Helpless' (figure 26) created by Zuk, interpreted by Ahmed in Zuk and Ahmed (2020) tells how an image with a title can inspire a provocative, poetic response:

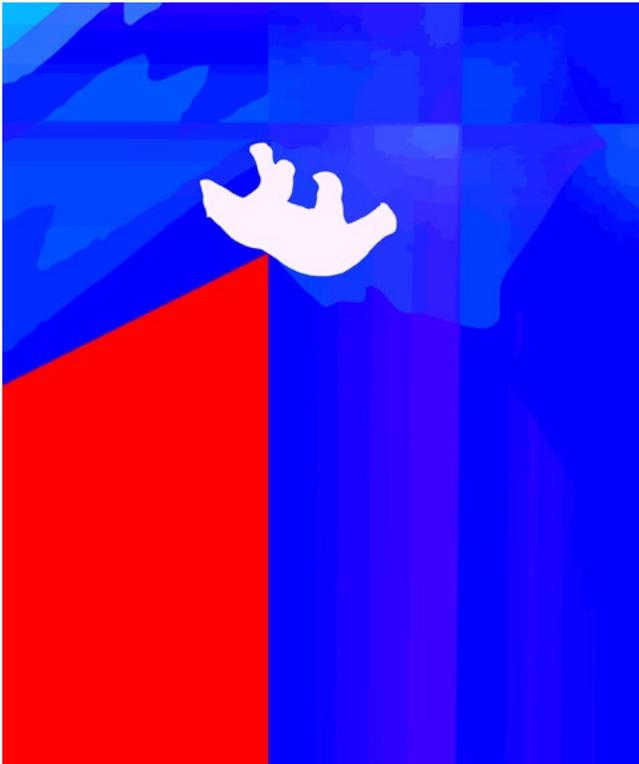


Figure 26 **Helpless**
Helpless

We've gaslit the earth. Speaking as part of her. Pretended too long that we don't have cancer. All that's left to us is a violent radiation, and to stop pretending that we are one vast wild thing balancing on the tip of a melting pyramid of ice. (p. 57)

Conclusion

There are many ways to promote a greater awareness and appreciation of the natural environment concerning wildlife: it may begin with nature walks, the study of naturalists, and an examination of visual artists who are dedicated to promoting the well being of the natural environment. It could also begin with an exploration of wilderness societies and organizations committed to making the world a safer and more habitable place. These resources represent direct ways to explore nature ideas in the school curriculum and weave them into every grade level. It is time for silent voices to be heard and time for everyone to listen.

Selected readings

- Ackerman, D. (2014). *The human age: The world shaped by us*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Gregerson J. (2021). *Climate action challenges: A proven plan for launching your eco-initiatives in 90 days*. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- Kohn, E. (2013). *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature deficit*. New York: Algonquin Pub.
- Meir, D. et al. (2020). *Nature education with young children*. New York: Routledge.
- Rich, N. (2019). *Losing earth: A recent history*. New York: Ferrah, Straus and Giroux.
- Sala, E. (2020). *The nature of nature: Why we need the wild*. New York: National Geographic.
- Zuk, W. and A. Ahmed. (2020). *Endangered: Cry of the wild*. San Francisco, CA: Blurb Pub.

Appreciation and thanks

To Astrid Brouselle, University of Victoria for the French translation of the prologue;
 To Bob Dalton, co-editor of the BC Art Teachers' Journal for his astute editing advice;
 To Kari and Mark for their musical adaptation of the prologue in the animated film;
 To afrofe fatima ahmed and other poets and artists who sing praises about the importance of the natural world.