

Accepting Knowledge as Suffering:

A Contemporary Re-Imagining of Kamo no Chōmei's Hōjōki

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Foreword

The sky glows a hellish orange, the scent of burning hair permeating the air. A cacophony of snapping wood and collapsing structures overpowers screams as fire whirls engulf those not fast enough. The horizon, similarly aglow, offers no refuge. To all trapped within this burning testament to man's power, the world must have seemed to come to an end.

Though the Great Fire of Angen occurred in 1177, such horrific scenes ring with a disconcerting familiarity. We have begun to witness an oppressive deteriorating natural environment; forest fires engender hellscape across swaths of land, severe weather events demolish cities, and droughts imperil food security. However, we have yet to adopt wide-scale, international regulations to counteract climate change. Contemporary American society thus inhabits a world amid transition. The uncomfortable uncertainty of whether we will remedy climate change breeds a collective nostalgia for an ignorant, optimistic past.

My time immersed in nature during my youth established an environmental baseline that has long since passed. My occasional desire to escape a constant stream of depressing information is far from unique. However, I also harbor a sense of responsibility to remain informed, especially in an intellectual environment that demands relevant knowledge of contemporary political ongoing. When I read the *Hōjōki*, I identified with Chōmei's reliance on his inner self and (attempted) detachment from the materialistic world. Though few Americans desire to view life as suffering in our hedonistic culture, I do feel that my generation's "woke" movement revolving around social inequalities and environmentalism has an ascetic component.

Knowledge, I have found, is a form of suffering. As the Judeo-Christian Bible states, "for with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief" (Ecclesiastes 1:18). Indeed, the more I learn about the cruelty of our world, the more hopeless I feel. While information can inspire change, it can quickly breed fatigue and apathy. Still, I choose to remain an informed citizen, as I can only achieve my vision of intellectual enlightenment through this discomfort.

The following text attempts to produce a contemporary version of the *Hōjōki* modeled around certain facets of my identity. My goals for this paper are twofold. First, I attempt to use this future conceptual self to explore my ideal hermitage by imagining my preferred setting, devotion (besides Buddhism), and fate. Second, I composed the text to reflect the narrative structure and literary techniques of the original *Hōjōki* as an opportunity to analyze how critical themes of the text complement or contrast facets of the 21st century. Specifically, I found the *Hōjōki*'s depiction of nature one of the most

compelling and relevant lines of thought. Considering the gravitas of climate change and my interest in the subject, I primarily analyze and re-imagine the Hōjōki through the lens of environmental studies.

To more accurately follow the Hōjōki, my fabricated self has exaggerated personality traits and holds some opinions besides my own. His post-college life, and his circumstances, are purely fictional. I will refer to the character as “Gray” because that is my middle name and because his personality is ambiguous. Lacking the same literary prowess as Chōmei, the following text lacks his level of nuance, literary knowledge, and general complexity. However, I arrive at the same heavy conclusion as him: perhaps all my efforts to achieve enlightenment, even in an ideal imagined setting, would be in vain.

Maxwell Maveus

An Account of my Studies¹

The valley carved by the stream remains forever, though its waters have long since dried. The goods which litter this **bed** now blow away, only to be replaced by more waste. Trash is constantly discarded in an ephemeral act, **yet** its impact lasting for lifetimes. And so it is with polluters in this world, and with their possessions.²

In the utopia we have built for ourselves, we travel across a town in minutes, the world in hours. We are invisible within a horde of moving vehicles shaping our land and sky. Each year another forest is felled, a new development sprouting forth from its land. We distract ourselves with our toys as the world burns around us.³ Yet the great estates of the powerful and the hordes of disposable items of the poor disappear within a lifetime. This is civilization, no different from litter in a ditch.

How have we progressed to this point? Is there anything we can do to reverse this? It is my duty to know.⁴ Our corrupt society deserves nature's retribution, yet it **resolves** itself of any culpability. The answer eludes me as to why we should so often remain willfully ignorant. Immersed in such a selfish world, moments of clarity and accountability are as fleeting as April snow.

¹ *Hōjōki* translates roughly as “An Account of my Hut.” Given that this re-imagined tale traces the hermitage of someone committed to studying the environment, I have titled the piece “An Account of my Studies.”

² Born in 1155, Chōmei straddled Japan's **upsetting** transition from the late Heian Period (794-1185) to the beginning of the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). As the 12th century neared its end, Kyoto faced a series of dramatic calamities. In 1177, the city caught fire during a typhoon, causing approximately 1/3 of all buildings—including the Imperial Palace—to burn to the ground. Only three years later, a tornado wreaked havoc in the city. At the same time, aristocratic culture had begun its decline. This unstable background thus provides context for why Chōmei viewed everything in transience. Chōmei utilizes contrasting verbs and nouns to reinforce this, such as referring to the big and small or the poor and wealthy. I try and incorporate opposing ideas throughout this re-imagining, in this case contrasting an “ephemeral act” with “lifetimes.”

³ The *Hōjōki* describes houses “burning down,” an allusion to “The Parable of the Burning House” in the *Lotus Sutra*, demonstrating Chōmei's **literary prowess**.

⁴ In contrast to Chōmei's intellectual humility, where he states “I do not know” in response to his rhetorical questions about life, **Gray views his own ignorance as an obstacle that must be overcome** (Kamo no Chōmei, 1212/2013). His form of enlightenment is fulfilling his perceived duty.

As I first came into consciousness to see the world around me as it truly was, a series of unfortunate events plagued the globe.⁵

It would have been the seventeenth day in the seventh month of 2022. The heavens sent a single lightning bolt to the Coast Range of Northern California, a great and mighty fire spreading over one million acres.⁶ For four long months, the fires raged, reducing countless homes to mere ashes. Great estates and humble abodes burned alike, the fire offering refuge to none. Smoke blinded those who did not escape in time. We allowed the sight of our possessions and wealth to turn to dust to move us to tears. Years of accumulation, a lifetime of consumption, gone in a moment. What was truly lost?⁷

Everything we do is in vain, but how incredibly useless it is to devote a life within capitalism's grasp. Yet how particularly telling is our reaction to the fires: not one of change, but one of apathy. Emissions continued to rise annually, and fires continued to spread. We had become capable of subduing the environment, so it grew powerful and resentful.

Again, on the twenty-third day of the ninth month of 2022, a great hurricane erupted to move across the East Coast, causing mass flooding. It was as if the Earth laughed at our stupidity, dumping torrential rains as soon as we began rebuilding from the fire.⁸ My family in Naples bore witness to their neighbors' houses having walls violently ripped away, yet other homes remained unscathed. It turned roads into rivers, yards into bogs. In a live video, I saw a green glass bottle smash into the Port Royal Pier, an insignificant yet violent explosion of glass obscured in the bottom corner of my screen.⁹ The video chronicled the entire pier's descent into the gulf's murky depths.

⁵ The *Hōjōki* contains a series of environmental disasters that Chōmei witnesses: a massive fire, a destructive typhoon, a plague, a famine, and a gigantic earthquake. Though I have not seen these events directly, I realized I had read about contemporary versions of each disaster occurring over the past 2 years.

⁶ The August Complex Fire was the largest forest fire in California's history, burning more than 1,032,600 acres (US Forest Service, 2021).

⁷ Chōmei poses this same compelling question as he recounts the burning of countless treasures. However, he does not specify how much of *what* was lost, leaving his question open to interpretation. It could be that he ponders the amount of time wasted accumulating material things, which is the interpretation I attempt to propound.

⁸ Hurricane Ian caused between \$50 billion and 65 billion in insured damages (Newburger, 2022). Flooding was particularly acute in Lee County, Florida, where my closest thing to a childhood home resides.

⁹ Chōmei recounts diminutive details of the disasters, especially in telling the earthquake. As historian Hairong He argues, his clarity indicates that these were episodic memories (involving personal experience) rather than semantic memories (conceptual). He wields this information to suggest that these events traumatized Chōmei and that composing the *Hōjōki* was a form of therapy (He, 2021).

I later wandered streets from childhood, unable to recognize spaces once dominated by man's purportedly indelible monuments. The devastation was not to end there as Ian moved northward. Could this be a message from God, a sure sign the end was upon us? Questions like this arose from my grandparents, willfully ignorant of their own small role in enormous destruction.¹⁰

Shortly after that, in the eleventh month of the year 2022, the Republicans gained control of the house, maundering on about their love affair with emissions.¹¹ Television personalities instructed the public to be thankful, as they had also been expected to gain control of the Senate. Besides, regret could not avail anything in a representative democracy; we were forced to accept the majority's will. Even our complaining was all too predictable—how silly to believe the democrats would do much of significance with an absolute majority. While we were distracted, the Supreme Court acted in its natural state, limiting the power of the Environmental Protection Agency.¹² Then again, maybe we had just resigned our hopes of influencing a bureaucracy far beyond our reach.

Unbeknownst to myself at that time, or perhaps purposefully unimagined, ruin would befall what little greenspace was left around me. Old-growth oaks dotting my university's campus would be cut down in a day to make way for a gallery of landscapes. I witnessed as wild fields became massive mounds of dirt and waste, all in the name of human progress.¹³ Nobody any longer seems interested in preserving what little grassland is left, as it will soon be home to more solar panels.

I had the opportunity to visit home around this time. The woods behind my house had been partially cleared to install a new natural gas pipeline. Not much further away, sensitive bird habitats had

¹⁰ Historian Izumi Kuroishi attributes the late Heian period as the beginning of the age of mappō, or the belief that Buddha's law was starting to degenerate in popular culture (Kuroishi, 2016). In Western thought, perhaps eschatological Judeo-Christian thought parallels the same core fears. My family believes the world will end via divine retribution within my lifetime, and I was raised on this pessimistic belief.

¹¹ The Kamakura Period can be defined by the emergence of nationalism and a new warrior class, as the Minamoto and Hojo military clan rule. Fiefs and manors replaced courtiers and government officials. American Trumpism, superseding large swaths of conservative nationalism, resembles the militant nature of the Kamakura government.

¹² In June of 2022, the Supreme Court case outcome of *West Virginia v. Environmental Protection Agency* severely limited the federal government's ability to regulate carbon dioxide emissions (Cohen, 2022).

¹³ Chōmei laments the decline of Kyoto after the capital was moved. What remained “transformed into a space of destitution, despair, fear and danger which rendered people felt helpless and desperate” (Leung On Yuk, 2011). He observes tragic scenes as social networks broke down, such as a baby breastfeeding “unaware that its mother was dead” (Kamo no Chōmei, 1212/2013).

been destroyed to make way for a metro line extension. The old wilderness was subdued, while the new buildings had yet to rise. They focused on targeting greenspaces in poorer areas, with no concern for the injustice of their actions.¹⁴ The great irony in all of this is that these projects are so-called “green.” Instead of reforming our consumption or current economic model to be more sustainable, we tried to find less destructive methods to support our flawed ways. Environmentalism had undergone a terrible transformation, and environmentalists became indistinguishable from other industry leaders.

I often hear those of generations before mine discussing how nature used to govern our world. It was once unimaginable to think the entirety of the Earth could be destroyed by humankind or that nature could express such fury for man’s folly. This was because we had not yet harmed ourselves. We saw the death we reaped, but it was not until we paid our debt with human lives that we began to worry. We need only compare the silence of the morning dawn to the welcoming birdsong of a past age to see the decline.¹⁵

America does not contain the world. A terrible war occurred in Ukraine began, killing thousands. Though it would seem this was not tragic enough: the war caused the energy transition to stall, and big oil witnessed record profits. Worse yet, the war compounded a famine over 3,000 miles away. Though our interconnected, industrialized world can foster connections, it too leaves everyone interdependent. **Dependency on fellow man should always be avoided.** Soaring food, fuel prices, and sapped funding starve children in South Sudan.¹⁶ I can only imagine the horrific cries of a new mother who watched her child shrivel and waste away.

I would be remiss not to mention the plague that swept the world in 2020. Did we understand we would one day pay for infringing upon nature? Our wretched interactions with animals likely allowed the innocuous novel coronavirus to first transmit to humanity, and from there, it was only a matter of time

¹⁴ Social-ecological systems begin to degrade when greenspaces or nature preserves are destroyed.

¹⁵ Chōmei has a strong nostalgia for the past, as evidenced by his lauding of former rulers. In environmental studies, shifting baseline syndrome (SBS) is the phenomenon of slowly shifting norms for an acceptable condition of the environment from a generational lack of experience with past, ideal conditions. Chōmei appears to be experiencing an uncomfortable transition where he still knows the glory of court culture due to his age but **may have felt isolated in a society that had never seen the aristocracy flourish.**

¹⁶ The War in Ukraine required reallocating funds from The World Food Programme away from 1.7 million people in South Sudan, causing mass famine (Davies, 2022).

before another plague emerged. Trapped within the concrete prisons we called cities, millions died. For many, their last vision was of a blank wall or, if lucky, a neighboring brick tower.

There was a silver lining, of course. Worldwide emissions dropped, and smoggy skies once more became blue domes.¹⁷ As I continued working from home, I was disgusted by the eagerness of salarymen to return to their daily commutes. Knowing how better the world was with us at home, I could not comprehend why someone would be foolish enough to return to the old days. I am deeply disappointed in my fellow man for their unwillingness to make minute sacrifices for the good of the world.¹⁸ Do they not understand that suffering is worth it, if not inherently valuable—and deserved—in itself?

A rather severe earthquake struck Turkey as we began exiting the throes of the pandemic. I was sipping a cappuccino at work when the notification alerted me that yet another city had fallen to ruin, killing over 45,000 innocent lives. Rushed construction and faulty oversight in the name of economic progress left buildings especially vulnerable.¹⁹ Half of a team of grade school girls divided between two neighboring hotels died in a structural collapse. I listened to an uncle espouse his grief; his pain lamented in an unknown tongue.

There was an ephemeral moment of clarity during these turbulent times, a brief appreciation of the gravitas of climate change. All experienced humility, and much shame, as we witnessed the consequences of our actions. The Earth mistakenly gave us a few years of relative peace afterward, and our hearts quickly forgot our collective unhappiness in the industrial world.

I implore all to accept this truth: the Anthropocene is suffering, our civilization impermanent.²⁰ Though our lives are short, the impacts of our actions are not. To ignore this truth is to hasten our downfall.

Imagine you live in a large city. You already lack access to the natural world and are likely susceptible to flooding and sea level rise. So, perhaps you move to a rural area where tornadoes and great

¹⁷ Such sentiment is beside my own, as it can border on eco-fascism.

¹⁸ According to Chōmei, the plague fatigued citizens so severely in Kyoto that they could no longer carry wood and other fuel sources. It became so severe that some dismantled old temples as part of “vile” times (Kamo no Chōmei, 1212). It is unclear whether Chōmei critiques the affected for stooping so lowly, so I chose to make Gray’s classist undertones more obviously visible.

¹⁹ Glanz and Yeginsu (2023).

²⁰ Fundamental to Buddhist thought is the belief that all life is *dukkha*, or that all life is suffering. The root of suffering is attachment to this world. Many grasp onto pleasurable and pleasant items instead of accepting we must encounter what we dislike. Here especially, I attempt to mimic the didactic style of Chōmei’s writing.

winds threaten your safety. You become reliant on a fragile grid without backup emergency services and must emit more than your urban counterparts. You are expected to live in a pre-approved sustainable manner, tote bag and all, while participating in an economic system that inherently wreaks havoc on the natural environment. Continue your performative actions, and the world burns; fail to do so, and you are ostracized.²¹

How can one help, where can one go, and what can one know to make a meaningful impact on this world? At the most fundamental level, what is our responsibility to this Earth?

I came into a small fortune after my parents passed.²² I initially invested in ESG funds, though the market was to treat me poorly.²³ I withdrew what I had. My childhood house held my fondest memories, but the surrounding land had been sublet to developers to maintain the family estate. Besides, drought had turned our green meadows to the yellow of canola flowers. I sold what was left. Homeless, I temporarily moved into a modest apartment.

Unfortunately, the apartment building used natural gas generators. Not only was I still contributing to the problem, but I also spent my time pursuing meaningless pleasures and shopping endeavors. It was modest, a mere fraction of my childhood home, so I suppose, in that sense, I had begun an ascetic lifestyle. Being in a city proved burdensome.

Relationships foster sin. In my early career, I was shocked by how rampant corruption had become in the sustainability consulting realm. Greenwashing and explicit lying felt crucial for every document I produced, and to deviate would mean the end of my career. My mind withered, unable to accomplish greatness due to worldly distractions. I told myself I could only achieve enlightenment if I set out to understand the Earth's mysteries.

God knows I tried. I entered university with a romantic vision of a future where humanity lived in tandem with nature; I foresaw a world devoid of reliance on humungous, polluting corporations. I immersed myself in environmental studies, slowly adding to my mind's burdens. What was I met with for

²¹ Often, it is easy to feel hopeless when there is no clear solution to escaping climate change. For Gray, the key is to embrace it.

²² This line indicates that Gray comes from a privileged, wealthy background. In line with *Nikki Bungaku* (diary literature) from the Heian period, Chōmei omits information about his privileged background. As the second son of Kamo no Nagatsugo, a senior shrine priest, he was afforded a courtly upbringing and education (Hare, 1989).

²³ ESG: Environmental, Social, and Governance. ESG funds have been known for their shoddy background checks and general unreliability as promising markers for identifying a company's environmental mission.

my effort? A string of failures, heartbreaks, and hopelessness.²⁴ And so, on my 34th birthday, I resigned from my job and moved to Canada. I no longer had family left, so I had no place I needed to be.

Now at forty, I have moved further north into Canada, chasing the climate of my childhood.

I could afford an estate with all the amenities I wanted. Instead, I constructed a modernist earth dome outfitted with numerous solar panels and triple-pane windows.²⁵ It is anything but ordinary, defined by its dramatic curvature, various textural elements, recycled bottles spotting its side, and large glass atrium of the south wing.²⁶ I have no phone, no television, and no news subscription. Just abundant academic books, free from human opinion. I was to resign chasing some great solution to climate change. Instead, I was to devote my life to intellectual pursuits, ultimately reaching a state of enlightenment whereby I could more productively contribute to the environmentalist movement.

I could not become ignorant; I had to embrace the world's suffering. However, I could not let global disasters distract me. A constant flow of bad news serves little purpose, and emotions would only slow my technical analysis of climate change. I needed to reach a scientific understanding of nature and devote every day to that end.

I have remodeled my tiny abode in my ample free time. I added a compost system I built from local pine, filled with earthworms I shipped from Oregon. I created a small vegetable garden in the western section of my yard, from which I harvest lovely crisp cucumbers. Inside I have begun gathering cuttings of plants to propagate a small army of *monstera* for the little atrium. My bed is along the eastern wall so that I may wake with the sun. I maintain a small laboratory, with a copy of Charles Darwin's *On*

²⁴ Chōmei faces a series of failures in his life before taking tonsure. He had expected to come into his father's position, and when that did not pan out, he tried to become the superintendent priest at a subsidiary shrine in the Kamon Shrine complex with the help of Gotoba. However, the incumbent at the Kamo Shrine rejected this appointment, causing "Chōmei's wounds [to run] too deep" (McKinney, 2013). Perhaps in this way, his retreat allowed him to avoid confronting his ambition's slow decline and to exercise a modicum of control over his fate. Gray similarly faces a series of tacit setbacks and failures.

²⁵ Gray's structure focuses on its sustainability rather than modesty or size as a reflection of his contrasting goals from Chōmei's.

²⁶ Gray's care for nature is entrenched in the orientation and composition of his earthdome. Similarly, for Chōmei, "the orientation of the house was essential for his inspiration by the surrounding natural world" (Kuroishi, 2016). While its size reflected his detached from worldly goods, its mobility allowed him to relocate to experience his favorite aspects of each season.

the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection prominently resting. My shelves contain Jihong porcelain I use as vases for wildflowers, my departed father's Oribe ware collection, and a framed picture of Rachel Carson.²⁷ I am, in this way, partially resolved by my guilt for driving climate change.

I live north of the Boundary Waters, surrounded by towering pines. I fastened a small rainwater purification system and use the lake water for bathing. Each morning I am greeted by birdsong and soft grass beneath my feet. The blades run up to the edge of the woods, meeting a galaxy of vibrant, effulgent wildflowers proliferating the rich topsoil. The forest blocks the sun—I at once step onto a carpet of pine needles and am transported to the night world. The breeze seldom rises past a gentle thrush, carrying frozen crystals in the late winter. In spring, the scent of my freshly cultivated wisteria invites me to explore the outdoors. The sky turns a deep golden purple on Autumnal nights, lighting the golden trees ablaze.²⁸ When I have exhausted my research, I excuse myself to step outside and laze to my heart's content.²⁹ I am my own authority; my work is completed at my own pace. Within my own Eden, how could I not be incensed to save the rest of paradise?

No Eve rests within this garden; no other can welcome sin.³⁰ Sometimes, if I have the energy to do so, I create a new playlist for an event. My music taste is odd, but nobody can judge it as such. I've gathered the songs over a lifetime from myriad friends who now live apathetic and hedonistic lives. I listen by myself, for myself.³¹

²⁷ Jihong porcelain and Oribe ware are both demonstrable of typically upper-class taste, marking that Gray has traveled and comes from a courtly-esque background. Instead of Chōmei's Buddhist texts, such as the *Lotus Sutra*, Gray owns two foundational texts of the biological and environmentalist realm.

²⁸ The description of the forest as "ablaze" is intended to contrast with the earlier discussion of fire and as an opportunity for Gray to reinvent and eventually overcome climate-induced trauma.

²⁹ This passage is intended to convey Gray's increasing emotional and poetic attachment to his surroundings.

³⁰ Chōmei makes ample reference to classic Buddhist literature and Japanese folklore throughout his work. For example, he claims that he hears "the song of the *hototogisu*, and at each call he affirms his promise to lead me over the mountain path of death" (Kamo no Chōmei, 1212/2013). In folklore, the *hototogisu* (a cuckoo bird) was believed to know about the soul's journey after death. Having grown up Presbyterian, Gray alludes to the first chapter of Genesis in the Judeo-Christian Bible.

³¹ Chōmei plays the flute in isolation, claiming it is for himself. However, doing so prompts him to discuss relationships. It seems that music here evokes social memories, as if his instrument is a means of communicating with others. Gray creates playlists, a common social activity, both because he cherishes them and because they allow him to indirectly connect with past friends.

When I feel lonely, I approach the still lake waters to gaze upon my reflection. Small ripples refract my face into myriad facets. I see my mother in one, my father in another. The longer I stare into this shallow abyss, the more tragic memories rush into my mind.³² I feel safe, forgiven, even loved—how could I not when the wildflowers nip my nose with their subtle fragrance?

As the years increased in number, my time in the lab shortened.³³

I was sure I could engineer a panacea within a year, but the days here blur together. I questioned the urgency of an energy transition—how can the world die as monarch butterflies paint the trees around me orange? The world I saw each morning was beautiful and healthy. Besides, I simply desired to learn—there was no explicit, physical thing I was expected to produce in my solitude.

Though I see little point in staying informed on current events when my past already motivates me, I cannot avoid overhearing the news when I patronize a local cafe.³⁴ I hear of significant floods in the global South and mass famine across central Europe and northern Africa. Holding a croissant, I cannot but feel a twinge of relief to know my noble mission is best conducted in a serene setting.

As many books as there may be, I am supposed to understand this world. The wise owl studies his prey so that he knows when to strike, and his reward for his patience is another chance at life. Or, I suppose, the owl once did, before this world took him and myriad other species away as a form of retribution. I speak of impermanence, but can nature ever triumph? There are no longer any more pleasures it can offer me. I crave no wealth, no recognition. All I want is to help this world and serve as a steward of her secrets.

Others do not continually innovate from a stance of pure altruism. For most, money corrupts their minds. For others, the promise of accolades and recognition skews their research. Others still become lost

³² Though subtle, this paragraph aims to suggest that Gray is still in mourning. He is dealing with additional trauma after losing his entire family. For Chōmei, his father's death is inexorably linked with the derailment of his future career. Still in his teenage years, the role of the shrine superintendent transferred to someone besides himself when his father died of illness (McKinney, 2013).

³³ Thus indicating that nature and its immediate pleasures have become a distraction; Gray has become attached to his immediate, idyllic surroundings. Wilderness paradoxically distracts Gray from his environmentalist mission, similar to how Chōmei allowed his very means of detachment—his hut—to gain significance of its own.

³⁴ The isolation in the *Hōjōki* is partially illusory. Indeed, Chōmei was relatively close to the capital and regularly ventured into town. Nature played a crucial role in Chōmei's attempt to renounce the degenerate world of mappō, yet his form of wilderness remained somewhat tamed (Kato, 2020).

in the learning process, with no fruits of their labor ever emerging. But I will create something meaningful; I will discover something that will support fellow man and the environment simultaneously. I harbor the weight of understanding how dire our situation is. Being one of the few who do so, I am responsible for continuing to enrich my mind. Besides, from whom would I want support?

When I go into town to purchase goods, I sometimes miss the simplicity of living in a community with abundant resources. I can sense that others perceive me as eccentric or pretentious, and the misguided desire to change into my finer clothes can feel overpowering. Nevertheless, such trivial emotions fade when I return to the woods. Those who live complacently in a capitalistic society prefer to ignore their personal contributions to climate change. They blame politicians and corporations yet do little to make any meaningful impact. They work for corporations that hasten their own demise. Their suffering, which they repress, will only return greater in the end. Better to accept culpability than to pretend everything can continue down this suicidal path.

Like the pitiful remains of arctic ice, my life will soon melt away. What have I accomplished by enjoying the pleasures of this sliver of nature? My fundamental mission was to pursue a purely scientific understanding of climate change and avoid apathy, but instead, I grew fond of spending my days blissfully ignorant at the lake's edge, composing poetry and journals.

Had I done anything before my hermitage? Did my actions, a drop of water in humanity's ocean, have any impact? I kept moving northwards to reject this changing world and its suffering despite claiming I embraced it. I have nothing to show for my knowledge, which I allow to wither like wild crocus more each day. I sometimes even question whether fleeing the world was the correct action. Could I have devoted my life to a career that did something to mediate our world? Served as a forebear in the renewable energy transition? Is my Earthship anything more than a joke which still perpetuates our religious devotion to economic growth?

Ultimately, I am a fool. I chose not the most meaningful path in life nor the most selfless. I chose one of ease and relative innocence, one which would avoid future failures. I tried to hold myself accountable, to embrace my guilt, culpability, and a scientific understanding of nature. Yet I find pleasure in watching a dragonfly land on a blade of grass wet with morning dew, drifting away from my studies to pretend I am once more a child. How easy it is to pretend that the world is fine! I was once ambitious, swearing I would one day reach an epiphany that would help save humanity. I renounced that world in the name of climate justice, but to what extent have I defamed her to avoid confronting my own naivety? Deep down, in the darkest corner of my heart, perhaps I always knew enlightenment would elude me.

Emotions cloud my mind when I reflect on my scientific understanding of the world. I avoided apathy but became too emotionally attached to the insignificant wilderness at my doorstep. On my deathbed, I can only offer a prayer that the pitiful remains of Earth be saved.³⁵

³⁵ During Chōmei's lifetime, chanting ten nenbutsu was "considered the absolute minimum for achieving good birth" (Allik, 2014). Despite this, Chōmei only says two or three nenbutsu on his deathbed. Thus, he recognizes that he has failed to grasp the authentic experience of nenbutsu by the time he dies—or at least the future version of Chōmei which is presented. The author is unsure whether he will deserve salvation, though he leans on the pessimistic side. In one final selfless action, I chose Gray to pray for the Earth to be saved instead of himself.

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