

“Close Your Eyes and Listen”
by Sakena Washington

an essay inspired by Ginger Brooks Takahashi’s Drip, Seep, Run in Schenley Park
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“Close your eyes and listen,” Miss Carol said. “What do you hear?”

At least once a week, Miss Carol extended this simple, open-ended prompt to me and my fellow campers at Green Valley Day Camp. I was nine years old when I first attended Green Valley, a small camp in Glenshaw, Pennsylvania, just eight miles north of Pittsburgh. It was there that two self-proclaimed hippies created a community ranging from tiny tots to middle schoolers and immersed us in the bliss of outdoor fun. We learned archery, played red rover and field games, swam twice a day, tie-dyed shirts in the sun, and took hikes. Lots of hikes.

From the camp’s main gate, a long pebble road led to the clubhouse where we sang songs, made art, took naps, and played board games on rainy days. Just beyond the rickety, back screen door, an inviting path led deep into the untamed woods.

Carol was her given name, but everyone called her “Mother Nature.” It was a term of endearment for the woman who took us on our first hikes, taught us how to make sassafras tea and identify poison ivy. The first time “Mother Nature” prompted us to listen, she led us to a clearing with an arrangement of large rocks and tree stumps that formed a rugged seating area. If we were too rowdy, which was always, this exercise calmed us down.

After a few moments of stillness, Miss Carol gave us the cue to speak, and we bubbled over with endless observations, clipping each other’s words and sentences. One by one, we called out nature’s soundtrack—the drumming of a woodpecker, the song of a young cardinal, the gentle bristling of leaves, or the steady trickle of the nearby creek. We were eager to identify all the sounds, the ones we recognized and the ones that weren’t so familiar to our curious ears. After we named every living thing, we stood up to form a single line and walked to the creek just ahead.

I was transfixed by this tranquil scene. I stood in the creek, ankle deep, gathering and skipping rocks and watching minnows slither by and dart from my toes. I stared at the impossible hillside and quietly wondered how many drops of water it took to form its curves and shadings. My eyes traced the length of each tree, their brittle patterns of bark and massive trunks. I marveled at how the branches and leaves formed a perfect canopy above my head. I wondered how long ago these trees were seedlings, how long ago these mountains had no valley.

Long before mindfulness became a commodity, nature offered it to me for free. It was the first time I learned how to unplug, how to be present, and how to pay attention to all the creatures and foliage that surrounded me, in Pittsburgh and beyond. In the wake of the pandemic, amidst the noise and social unrest that threatened my very livelihood, I returned to this childhood ritual to remind myself how to rest.

Located at Schenley Park’s Hollow Run Trail, Pittsburgh artist and educator Ginger Brooks Takahashi’s *Drip, Seep, Run* calls me back to this time, when all I needed was a simple prompt

to quiet my mind. Takahashi's art is tucked back in the forest where a groundwater spring is brought to the surface and runs gently into the nearby creek. Surrounded by sandstone basins and natural flora, the piece invites visitors to Schenley Park to do the same—to pay attention, to contemplate, and to let their ears and eyes wander.

When Takahashi was first commissioned to create a piece of public art, they pored over research of the city's long forgotten public water springs. The concept was informed by a series of conversations that began with members of the Squirrel Hill Historical Society, Friends of the Neill Log Steering Committee, and the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition. Through these early talks, coupled with research on Schenley Park at Heinz History Center, they began to learn more about the Catahecassa Fountain.

Historical documents reveal that Catahecassa was built in the early 1900s to create a public water fountain that sourced a groundwater spring in Schenley Park. It wasn't the only one in Pittsburgh; at the turn of the century, there were many fountains like this throughout the city that provided basic access to fresh water while serving as a community hub for nearby residents. Years later, when these spigots were removed and catch basins were filled in, their absence left many to rely on modern plumbing.

The history of groundwater springs intrigued Takahashi, as did the topics of sustainability, accessibility, and human connection. And with that, the concept of creating a site where visitors could contemplate, rest, and consider their relationship to water was born.

“For me, being in the park means learning about plants and human relationships to plants, so I am constantly identifying and introducing plants to others on my walks,” Takahashi said. Sustainability ties in deeply with their artwork through plans to repair the existing trail and plant native groundcover that tells a story about folk medicine and reproductive justice through selecting plants traditionally used as abortifacients.

Drip, Seep, Run is a gentle prompt for each of us to pause, listen, and connect—at times beyond our comfort zones. But above all, it is an invitation to rest.