

many hundreds of husks, peels, heels, and shavings into the box's musky maw, it seems hardly to have grown any fuller.

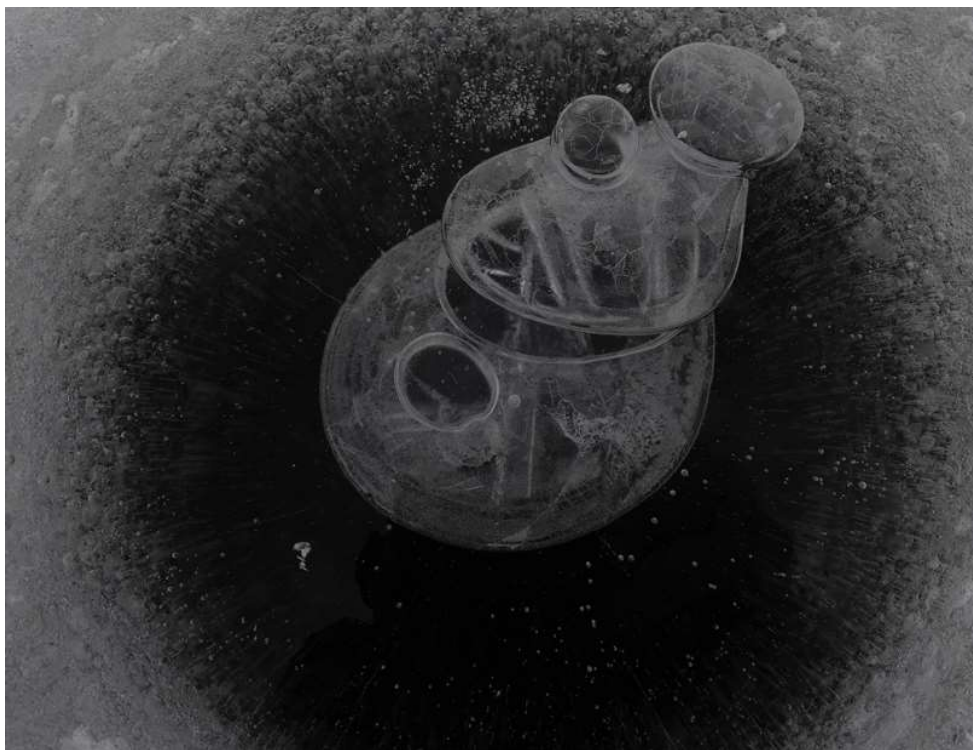
In the morning, I walk to my compost like a pilgrim approaching a shrine. My offerings are humble—espresso grounds, oatmeal leftovers—but I am confident they will be appreciated. My cat paws to my side as I lift the cover; she knows what is coming and loves to watch. Together, we scan the black mass, assessing its health. I give it a preparatory fluff, mixing the drier periphery into the moist center.

And then it happens: I dump my scraps. At first I mix them with a spoon. Then, when I've achieved a certain degree of integration, I dive in both hands, lifting and fluffing this animate, edible diary. I tear at the peel of a parsnip. I rip at the wedge of a cabbage. I cannot decompose as my microscopic workers do, but I can help them with their labor. *Here, let me mash that almond. Let me snap that stalk. Can I get you a spray of water?*

What pleasure there is in watching food de-manifest itself! Orange peels are my favorite. At first they seem so sturdy. But within a day they begin to soften, literally warming to their surroundings. Within forty-eight hours, they are squishy to the touch; by day four, they have developed a sugar-plum delicacy. Then, by day five (*how?*), they are gone.

Though composting gives me a version of the satisfaction I imagine others take from gardening, the two endeavors are spiritual opposites. My excitement is a kind of photonegative of the food producer's—joy not in the appearance of life but in its evaporation. I am not *growing* celeriac or kale; I am, rather, *un-growing* them. This is anti-alchemy, the exquisite transformation of something into nothing.

I began the experiment as something noble and virtuous. It is, to be clear, both



*Ice Hole, any more info?*

these things: waste that deteriorates in a landfill emits methane, a harmful greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere. But as these months have gone by, my relationship to the box has shifted. I now see composting not as a chore, but as an activity. It is something to do with my hands, a way to be still with myself when the rest of humankind is in tumult. I suppose you could call it meditation by way of decay. If the world's collapse—its decomposition, as it were—is to be a clamorous riot, I choose a quieter, calmer form of breakdown.

I run my fingers through the earthy remains. I linger under the calming warmth of their weight.

*Harrison Hill's writing has appeared in GQ, The Cut, The Guardian, Travel + Leisure, and The American Scholar. His first book will be published by Scribner.*

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## First Colonizers

KRISHNA ANUJAN

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**TWO HUNDRED** and fifty thousand mold spores can fit on the head of a pin. These microscopic fairies stay inert for weeks, hovering in the air around us, waiting for a warm, damp opportunity to strike. To multiply. They inhabit the fuzzy boundaries between physics and biology, life and not-yet-life. Is and is not. As a human living in the Anthropocene, I like to think that I have substantial control over at least some of the life around me. I can build walls. Doors. A roof. I can decide who comes in. But once something is built, the mold spores will inevitably descend.

Idol-makers in the South Indian temple town where I grew up believe that chiseling the eyes turns an inert statue divine. This step of breathing life into stone is the final phase of their process. For other stones in the world, it is mold spores that mark this transition, that bring life to the surface.

A couple years after I moved out of my bedroom in my parents' house, black mold moved in. Uninvited, emboldened by my absence, it decided to animate the wardrobe where I left behind clothes and personalities that no longer fit me. The mold danced around the white-painted plywood boards in dark spots like negative constellations until one day my mother had enough. I imagine she stood with one hand on her hip, staring out the kitchen window while contractors recited quotes, angling her jaw a little and furrowing her eyebrows like I do when I listen intently. Before they arrived with drills

and chemicals, she salvaged whatever tangible memories remained: school report cards, the giant black diary she gave me on my sixth birthday, class photos. The rest she left to the will of the destroyers. My grandmother and 104-year-old great-grandmother likely looked on with varying levels of comprehension as the drama unfolded. But even after an expensive remediation, we knew fresh mold was just one harsh monsoon away.

Spores of all kinds are notorious. Consider Krakatoa—the volcano near Indonesia that erupted in 1883, cleaning the ecological slate with a wave of fiery lava. This newly empty island, isolated and buried in ash, captured the curiosity of modern ecologists seeking to understand the succession and colonization of ecological communities. Spores got there first, as they always do, swirling on sea winds. Hundreds of millions of years ago, before flowering plants arrived on the planetary

scene, spores were evolution's way of dispersing early plants—like mosses and ferns and fungi—into new lands. Those first spores on Krakatoa might have been mosses, or they may have been fungi, relatives of common mold.

When a mold spore lands on a surface, it promptly begins making identical copies of itself. Building a colony, a field of twins. Sometimes they sit in sisterly circles, contained and satisfied. Other times, they reach out, branching in tangled generations. New copies in the fungal colony are connected to each other through a growing network of hyphae, filaments that exchange food and information. These hyphae derive their name from the Greek root meaning “to weave.” As in a tapestry. They talk to one another in chemical tongues. They *are* each other. In a colony of spore babies, who can tell where one individual ends and another begins?

During the pandemic, after ten years away, I moved back into my old room, or rather, *my mold room*, for eight months. I cleaned out a desk to share with my mother, one near a window overlooking tall mango and wild jackfruit trees and a bed of taro. I hung Buddhist prayer flags, and she shelved her books within reach. Here, we worked side by side, occasionally watching a mongoose family run along the boundary wall outside, pausing to stare at us through the glass.

My mother and I, even after years apart, sometimes catch ourselves blurting identical sentences at the same time. We smile to acknowledge our shared consciousness, a twinning across generations. The mold on my wardrobe says, “We know how that feels.”

*Krishna Anujan is a tropical ecologist who loves the weird, wonderful world we live in. She is from Kerala, India, and has a PhD in ecology and environmental biology from Columbia University.*



## About the Photographer

*ERIK HOFFNER is a photojournalist and Orion's former outreach coordinator. Ice Visions is an informal collaboration between the ice fishing community and elemental forces, which Hoffner has documented while on skates for more than twenty years. When fishing holes refreeze overnight, these perfect circles are transformed into scenes at once dreamlike and tactile. Tiny bubbles are fixed in place by inches of new ice and come to life as eyes, stars, cells, galaxies and more when rendered as black and white photographs. Visit [erikhoffner.com](http://erikhoffner.com) to learn more about this work.*