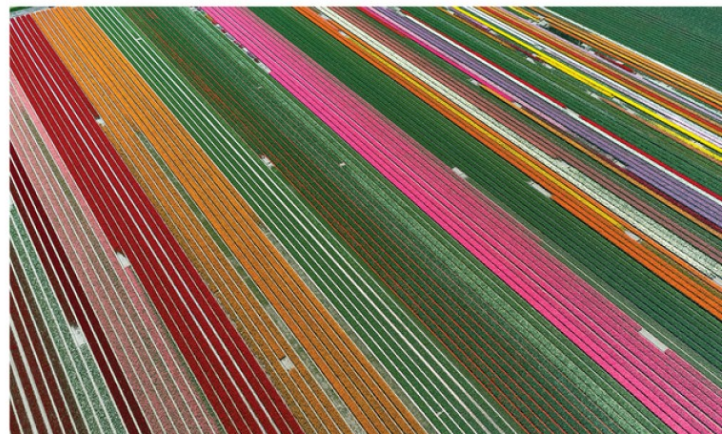
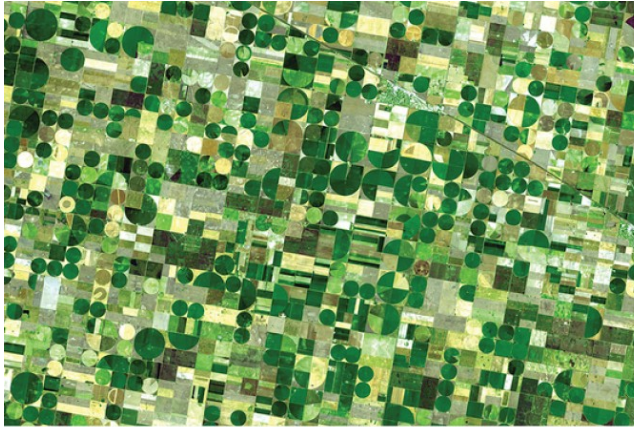


Field: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Field.”

Readers Write in the [December 2022](#) issue



Clockwise from upper left: Center-pivot irrigation: NASA | Soccer: miroslav_1 / iStock / Getty | Tulips: sjo / iStock / Getty | Winter: alisbalb / iStock / Getty

*In response to our request for essays on field, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **Wind** and **Splash**—[read more](#).*

The fields of my childhood led up a short rise to a single tree, perfect for picnics. It was there, nestled in the long grass among the tree’s roots, that my brother found a small, green snake. I remember how delighted he was— and how frightened yet fascinated I was. The only snakes I had encountered were of biblical cunning and fantasy proportions. This little serpent, coiled softly in my brother’s hands, brought new possibilities to life. Perhaps Eve was not overwhelmed by the serpent’s evil and superior wiles. Perhaps it was simply cute.

These hilly fields, like some lost Eden, have remained in my imagination fixed like a photograph, their grass spreading in all directions, full of potential snakes and excitement, the lone tree standing tall against the cloudy sky, resolute and brave, its roots still writhing in the long grass as though they would one day walk.

Over the decades, I met the occasional fellow exile like me from the small English village of my childhood. Some who had stayed longer than I reported exponential growth, housing booms, estates encroaching on the hilly fields. It seemed more than likely that these fields would no longer be there. But it was the green grass snake I wondered about. Where would it find its home now?

Though I drove many times from England to Wales, I never did take the detour. I never showed my children the house where I first knew death and joy. I avoided updating the images that I kept, faded but intact, in the back of my mind, of the river that flowed toward the fields and sometimes flooded them.

But then came Google Earth. From thousands of miles and decades away, I zoomed in on the church and the pub next door, still called the Globe, from whose parking lot headlights would arc across my bedroom ceiling at closing time. I followed the river past the primary school, past the new roofing business. I found the fields, still where they should be. I could not find the tree, only hedgerows full of them. No amount of resolution would have found the descendants of the snake, nestled in the grass or in some child's hands, full of the thrill of safe danger and innocent trespass.

Our house is gone, torn down and rebuilt. Our house number got lost in the new mix of concrete and brick. It doesn't matter, as long as the field still harbors its secrets: striving roots that long to break free, tangles of grass and clover, daisy chains abandoned by small hands reaching instead for the little serpent coiled in the shadows, as though summer would never end.

Rosalind Hughes

Euclid, OH

How much dirt does it take to make a field? The container garden on my balcony held several pots of dirt. When the pandemic came and constricted our lives in so many ways, that small apartment became the scope of my days. This was extended only a little by bike rides on a nearby trail, grocery trips, and whatever social connections my unstable internet allowed. Compared to the global scale of a pandemic, my bit of earth felt small.

I focused on little things, like tending my balcony garden. I needed something I had the power to care for, a little space out of which I could coax some color and beauty. The two potted strawberry plants bore no fruit that year, but I didn't expect them to. I could no more expect strawberry plants to produce in the upheaval of planting than I could expect human beings to flourish in the upheaval of a pandemic. I felt kinship with their barrenness. When the time came, I cut back the strawberry plants to winter over.

I read the book of Jeremiah with a new love. Jailed for his prophecies, his nation under siege, he buys a field from his cousin. It seems unlikely in these circumstances Jeremiah will ever have need of the field, and yet he signs the deed, pays his cousin, and declares, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15). He purchases the field as a sign: life will once again be lived there.

I thought of Jeremiah's field when, one snowy day in March, I glanced down at the stump of a strawberry plant and saw a small green shoot reaching for the sky. Perhaps in that small gathering of pots and dirt I'd found more than I expected. Perhaps I'd found a sign that life will once again thrive.

Callie Smith
Indianapolis, IN

From Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*:

There is treasure buried in the field of every one of our days, even the bleakest or dullest, and it is our business, as we journey, to keep our eyes peeled for it.

I grew up in Gary, Indiana, in the late 1980s and '90s. If you're familiar with the city and the time, then you know what I mean. It was when Gary became one of the poorest cities in the US; violence, gangs, and drugs were the norm. It was routine to hear that one of your friends had been shot or that they were dead. I found love and hope only at home, where we were taught to make the best out of every situation.

Our home was the third house from the end of the street. There was an empty field next to it and then an abandoned house. The empty field was used for all sorts of things. Sometimes my younger siblings and I would play catch or kickball there. My father would park his van or my mother's car there when they needed his mechanical expertise. We walked through the field on trips to the corner store to get candy and chips or cigarettes for my parents.

While incarcerated, I would sometimes find myself thinking of that field and what its empty space meant relative to my culture, to the city itself. Our empty field, like so many others, had so much potential, but no one cared for it or took the time to develop it, except to make sure it didn't encroach on our property.

As the oldest boy I was always tasked with the yard work, which included keeping the yard free of the weeds and tree branches that grew from the field over and through our fence. The grass burs, or "sticker bugs" as we called them, caused small welts and scratches on my ankles.

I took breaks to find the ripest fruit on the mulberry tree. The greenish yellow ones were sour, and the red ones were pretty good, but there was nothing like the dark purple ones. After checking for the small spiders that infested the mulberries, I'd pop one in my mouth. That sweet taste stays with me even now. I feel the juices running down my throat.

My childhood home eventually burned to the ground, leaving the field free to expand its infestation of natural growth. Gary went from 170,000 people to fewer than 80,000. It's as if my small field has grown and infested not just my home but the whole city in my absence. Overgrowing the populace, displacing people, overwhelming the landscape with neglect and poverty. There are no laborers to tend the fields. All those homes have become empty lots.

If I could invest in that land, instilling the love and hope that I was given in our home, I would spread seeds of love, toil with the sweat of hope, and reap with the endurance of grace. We do not recognize the potential of the marginalized nor of the land that they reside on. The results of uncared-for land are the same as those of an uncared-for culture: they tend to grow wild, destroying dreams of family and community, marring the beauty of creation and confusing the uninhabited with the inhabited. We call these places ghettos and the communities poverty stricken.

I wish I could taste the mulberry again—not any mulberry but the ripest berry from the tree next to my house. I wish I could be irritated again by the sticker bugs. Most of all I wish I could have seen what my field and home would become and labored to preserve more than just memories. My city is a forgotten city, and my field is all but forgotten.

James Enoch Banks
San Antonio, TX

Graveyard Fields is a favorite hiking spot for my family, with its rhododendron thickets, hardwood forests, waterfalls, pools, and fields full of blueberry bushes in summer. I've heard the name comes from a time long ago when a fire devastated the forest. The remaining burned stumps reminded locals of headstones in a graveyard.

Once, on our way to camp there, we stopped at a store for supplies and noticed the headlines on the newspapers by the counter: Princess Diana had died. We all felt sadness and grief. Her son William was born the same summer as my son, and I had always empathized with her. It seemed like a dark cloud settled over our adventure.

That night literal clouds burst overhead as we tried to sleep in our tents. My son wasn't feeling well and was ready to go home, but it was too dark and treacherous to try to hike back up the rocky trail to our car in the parking lot. I prayed for our safety all through the night.

The dawn finally came, and with it a reassuring surprise. The night before, while preparing our campfire, we had discovered a long-forsaken plastic toy sheriff nestled in the dirt and leaves. He had once been red, but the sun had faded him to pink. We called him Little Pink Floyd and left him on a rock beside the campfire. When we awakened and crawled out of our tents, he was still standing there with his little pistol raised up in the air. Not even the winds and rain had knocked him down.

We laughed at the idea of Little Pink Floyd watching over us all night long. We knew in our hearts that it was really God listening to our prayers and keeping us safe, but we took Little Pink Floyd home with us as a reminder of God's care.

Janet B. Edwards
Mills River, NC

I was only about five years old when I worked alongside my parents and brothers to plant hundreds of pine trees, but I understood that we were trying to protect the fields so the wind wouldn't blow the soil away. My dad loved the 80-acre farm where he had lived since age 17, and he was proud that he had been able to improve the fertility of the fields. As a family, we knew the joy of watching those little pine saplings grow into healthy, mature trees. Dad never grew tired of strolling down the lane between the fields to take in their beauty.

In Dad's hard work and dedication to improve the soil, I learned what it means to be a steward of God's good earth. But it was only in tending my own garden as an adult that I began to recognize the invaluable lessons I had learned working alongside my parents. As a child, I had been convinced that I would be a much happier person if I didn't have to help plant, weed, and harvest. Now I understand how God feeds our spirit as we work the soil and watch the miracle of growth.

As Dad aged, he hired others to do the hard labor of farming, but he continued to teach me lessons of faith. In his 80s, he was diagnosed with advanced cancer, and in those final months, I witnessed the strength of his faith in a God who is the provider and sustainer of life. In what would be his last summer on earth, Dad found such deep joy in experiencing God's creation in the fields of his farm. He saw God's grace in the early morning dew as it sparkled in the sunshine on the newly sprouted plants.

As Dad's body weakened, he spent more and more time in his chair in the living room, looking out over the fields. "I have so enjoyed watching that field of beans grow all summer, now I want to watch them ripen," he told me one afternoon. Over the next few weeks, he and I watched together as the soybean plants turned from green to the beautiful golden hue they reveal at the end of the growing season.

As Dad took his last breath that October, I looked out at the fields and felt satisfied that the season of life was complete for the soybeans, the corn, and for him. Every autumn my spirit is rejuvenated as I witness the golden splendor of harvesttime.

Ethel Stears

Three Rivers, MI

There is a small cornfield behind our place, nestled between our back pasture and the horse farm across the way. The river flows on one side, and the north side is bounded by a short, sharp hill rising up to the back of a church parking lot. It's

maybe two to four acres of secluded land.

I like to walk the perimeter of our six-acre farm as often as I can, at least along the river side—usually once or twice a week. In winter when the leaves are down and the corn is cut low, I extend my walks to include this little field. The riverbank is lower here, and there's a good view of our place from this vantage point.

Farmer Dave across the river comes through with his tractor a couple times a year to plant and harvest what he can and to spread manure. But it's a little scrap of land. He must not get much return from it. It seems the corn is there out of habit. Last season he lost some when floodwaters from Hurricane Ida poured across the lower corner ten feet deep. The same flood took down three trees in our lower pasture and the fences with them.

Otherwise, few people come here. This field is a sanctuary. The animals who find it reside here relatively undisturbed. It provides them safety, shelter, food, water, and refuge—everything they need. Deer are ever present but nearly always keep hidden. A red fox lives in the hillside. When there was heavy snow last winter, I saw its tracks fanning out from the back corner, across the patch of cornstalks down to the edge of the water and all over the lower part of our farm. We are pretty sure it has eaten several chickens. So have the redtail hawks we see overhead. Bald eagles come by, low upriver hunting fish. We see them more in winter when the leaves are down. Sometimes they perch on a high branch for a while. And the gray heron, ducks, and Canada geese are here every day—the river a landing pad that draws from all directions.

I am only a visitor here. There is no work for me here. Nothing to improve or mend or feed. I come only to observe, to consider the landscape, and to give quiet reverence.

When we bought our place we were told this field is not developable. We don't quite believe it; things can be built everywhere for the right price. Every now and then we think we should inquire about buying it ourselves, to protect it. To have some say in what happens to it. But on my walks when I lift my gaze to the backside of our pasture and the wooded hillside, I see too much that needs tending already. So I am content to be a visitor; it is enough to know this field is here.

Chad Martin
Lancaster, PA

When I memorized Psalm 23 as a little girl, I was bewildered by the verse “thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” I could see in the picture on the Sunday school wall that the shepherd boy used the crook on his staff to rescue the lamb that had fallen. That was comforting. But a rod?

When my husband and I visited Italy we stayed in a remote villa, and I was thrilled one morning when we saw a large flock of sheep crossing the pasture below and heard the unique munching sounds they made as they snatched grass while sauntering slowly along. I had a compelling urge to talk to their shepherd.

We hurried across the field, waving and smiling as we called to him. This shepherd was not a boy but a grizzled, toothless, and gray-haired man. I told him that my grandfather had been a shepherd in Italy too. He didn’t understand English and I knew very little Italian, but he poured out welcoming words as we nodded and smiled. He continued to tell us his story, never taking his eyes off the moving hundreds of sheep. At one point as he chattered happily, he raised the thick rod he carried, drew back, and with stunning accuracy that reminded us of Tom Brady, tossed it yards away near a lone sheep that was wandering off the path. The poor thing quickly jumped back in line with the rest of the herd.

I wish I could have told this guardian of sheep that he had just beautifully demonstrated the meaning of a phrase I had questioned for so many years. His use of a rod was not to strike a wayward lamb but to lovingly guide and direct its path.

Sylvia Greenway
Houghton, NY

Throughout most of elementary school, I got straight As—except in handwriting and physical education. While handwriting was simply an annoyance to me, physical education could be genuinely frightening. I was a year younger than most of my classmates, and I was small for my age anyway. It was common knowledge that I was the weakest link in Red Rover, that I would duck if the tetherball was spiked in the direction of my head, and that when I swung the bat I would inevitably miss. My main survival strategy was avoidance. I tended to get a sore leg when it was time to play softball, and I would encourage my classmates to cut ahead of me in the at-bat line.

But I truly mastered the art of avoidance during the game that my Germanic-heritage teacher called Prussian football—a variation of kickball in which multiple

runners are allowed to stack up at each base. I particularly loathed Prussian football, because the rules don't allow fast runners to pass the slower runners in front of them—and running fast was the one athletic activity I was really good at. The innings were long, and I was always assigned to the far corners of the outfield when the other team was at bat.

One day as the teams were switching places, I ran out to the most distant corner of the outfield and prepared to be bored. Then I noticed a little patch of grass near me that jutted behind a bend in the retaining wall. I sidled over, checking that none of the teachers were watching me. What would I find back there?

It was a grassy patch of earth, too small for the mower to reach, with tiny white wildflowers springing up in the tall grass. It was the most beautiful field I had ever seen! I looked back over at the teachers, and then I snuck into the small space. It was just big enough that I could hide behind the wall if I sat and tucked my knees underneath me. I craned my neck and peered over the wall. A rousing game of Prussian football was going on without me, and nobody was looking for me. It was glorious.

I stayed in that small paradise for three innings, never missed by the teachers or my teammates. When the game was almost over, I snuck back into the outfield where my teammates were stationed, a tiny bracelet made of wildflowers ringing my left arm.

Lucy Johnston
Austin, TX