

# WHAT FLOWS THROUGH US

Lauren Trail



## ARTIST STATEMENT:

Despite their size, the Great Lakes are vulnerable, just as humans are. *What Flows Through Us* is a graphic novel memoir that follows a girl as she visits Lake Michigan and the Indiana Dunes with her family. The novel draws parallels between her story and the history of fresh water along the Indiana coast of Lake Michigan. The story uses place and memory to reflect, educate, and empower readers to enact positive change within their own environments. This work also asks us to understand our own relationships with water and consider how interwoven our lives are with the water that flows through our landscapes and bodies.

Lauren Trail is a writer and illustrator from the Chicagoland area who grew up swimming in Lake Michigan. She combines her passions for art, writing, and the environment to inform and enlighten people to create change within their own communities.



With a passion for water, nature, drawing, storytelling, and so much more, I found the year-long process and project of IP as daunting, overwhelming, and complicated. How do I make an impact on my community with my work? When do I know to stop the research that so heavily drives my work and focus on making? How do I make something that will be educational, entertaining, but also for me? These were all questions that spun around in my head. And yet, despite the uncertainties, I found this year to be one of profound experimentation, reflection, and production in ways that pushed me to grow as an artist.

While the graphic novel *What Flows Through Us* unpacks environmental issues related to water quality, industrialization, and history, it goes beyond the goals of research and education that I had intended. Through process and reflection, I was able to unpack the building pressures that I have felt in my own life and acknowledged the importance of my relationship with water and the Great Lakes. I pushed my abilities as an artist, writer, and storyteller, illuminating the wide variety of opportunities available to me moving forward.



# Shaped by Water: The Creative Process

## Human Connection to Water

I found that my love for the environment stemmed from my love for water: growing up outside Chicago with Lake Michigan, trips to the Indiana Dunes with cousins, visiting Aunts and Uncles on the east and west coasts. I understood that the water that supplies our bodies and our planets is essential to our lives and the protection of our future. This led me to ask, how could my artwork engage wide audiences to care more for water and our environments?

Initially knowing that my environmental interests came from my passion about marine environments and people's relation to them, I began to research the idea of 'the importance of water.' Referencing images filled with underwater photography, utilizing my favorite media like documentary *My Octopus Teacher* and tv series *The Crown*, as well as collecting a series of items I gravitated towards which included photographs of celestial clouds or the Pompodour fabric pattern from *Reformation*, I cultivated a collection of water references I found inspirational.

It was during this process of gathering research that I began to dig deeper into the question of "Why water? Why is it important?" I created a list of various people, activities, and places to which water is relevant to human life, ranging from recreational use (like swimming) to science and exploration, to drinking water, to baptism in a church. I compiled a list of why water is relevant and worth talking about. Based on this research, I planned to create a series of large-scale portraits of individuals whose lives are centered or based on important components of water.

As I began to explore components of this idea, however, it came to my attention that 'why is water important' was too broad of a topic, and one that I kept feeling would need more context and information. While many of the ideas from these beginning iterations followed through into the final iteration of my work, it was an essential step that helped me to see what information I wanted to further explore in later iterations of my work that lead to my product.



1. Pompodour fabric from *Reformation*. Was drawn to the organic forms and monochrome color palette-details I hoped to incorporate within my final work.
2. Photograph by G L E H N via Pinterest
3. Photograph by Tyler Roussel

## The Romanticization of Water:



1. Acrylic paint sample iteration, 5 x 7 in. Exploring water and its relationship to pressure and what that may look like within portraiture.

While collecting information on water and still contemplating the use of portraits and narrative, I became interested with the concept of pressure and its relationship to water and humans. We all feel personal pressures in our lives: school, career, mental, physical, social, etc. As more stress and activities pile up, the pressure to succeed and survive builds. Pressure also can be used in context of water—pressure builds the deeper you sink. I found this connection fascinating and one that I wanted to experiment with. How could portraits potentially portray the pressure that a body physically feels as they are exerted to pressure, but also emotionally feel? How do environmental pressure on our environment and our future also play a role in that relationship?

While I pondered, researched, and wrote about this connection, I also thought about the contrast between the beauty of water and how our environments are portrayed with the degradation that they are facing in our modern era. I began to look at drawings by Zaria Forman, who makes large scale pastel drawings of glaciers in hopes to bring awareness to an area of the world that is rapidly changing due to climate change. Her work inspired me to create my own samples of water from pastel as I continued to explore the romanticization of water. I also referenced the romantic painter, Thomas Cole, who is a prime example of classic romanticism and its depiction of environments. I noticed that in both artists' work, they idealized versions of nature. But what if those beautiful images could instead portray the awful degradation that our environments are experiencing? How could such imagery show these growing pressures? It was during this stage of creating that water and the way it was depicted started to become more metaphorical.

After a few ideations, I was still feeling the desire for more information and substance needed to be included within my work. It was through this segment of my process where I learned that while I love to create 'fine art' pieces, I feel much more satisfied with work that includes and is informed by a variety of sources. As an artist, a main goal of mine is to provide a new perspective or insight to audiences, which draws heavily from research.





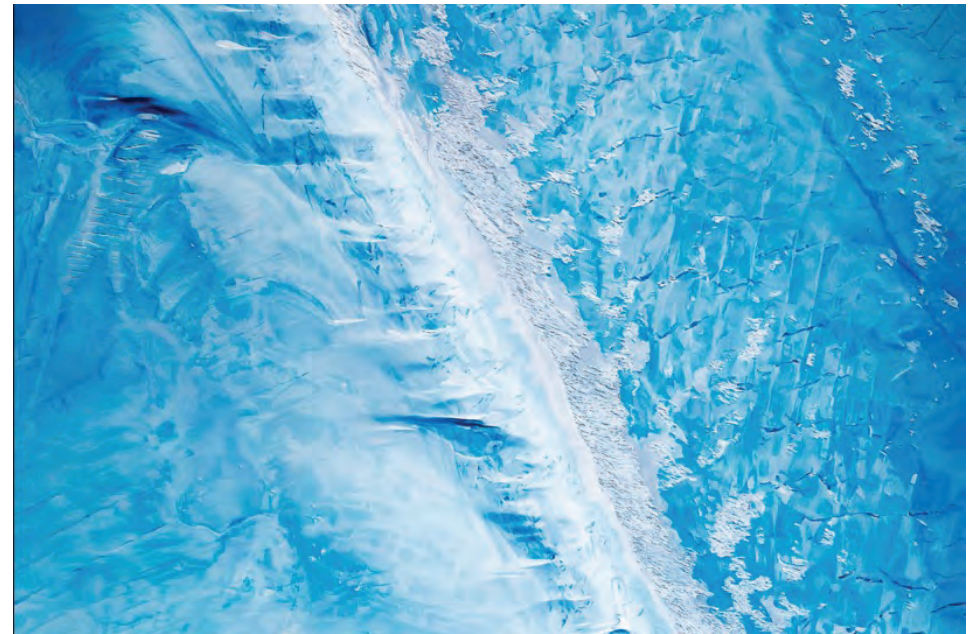
1. Oil Pastel on Paper, 11 x 17 in. Utilizing realism and romantic tactics, this work was a sample of how I could utilize the romanticism of water to highlight environmental degradation. While the image is beautiful, pollution is also very prevalent.



2. Chalk Pastel on paper, 8 x 11 in. Sample of potential techniques and materials that I could use to portray water, similar in style and intention as Zaria Forman's work.



3. Perito Moreno Glacier, Argentina No. 1, December 13th 2018. 68 x 102 in, soft pastel on paper, 2020. Sample of Zaria Forman's attention to detail and bringing melting glacier to life.



4. Garfield Glacier, Antarctica. 60 x 90 in, soft pastel on paper, 2018. Another sample of her work and beautification of something that is decaying.



## The Intersection of Art and Science: Information and Education

While I felt a strong passion towards revealing how humans connect to water and the environment, I continued to gravitate to statistics related to the topics I was uncovering. Whether it be water consumption, algae blooms, or PFAS contamination, I began compiling notes with all my findings, despite not knowing if I would incorporate them into my work. My research on water quality in the Great Lakes was what led me to choose Gary, Indiana as one location of interest for one of the graphic novels I had planned to create. The Late Great Lakes: an Environmental History by William Ashworth was the most useful resource when building out the information that I wanted to include. With sections specific to certain issues like sludge, this source, as well as the PBS documentary, Shifting Sands, were essential to understanding I wanted to deal with various water quality issues that the Great Lakes have faced over the past decade.

Having taken a lot of classes in design, but also environmental education, I think that the research process behind my book reveals a lot about my creative problem solving and ideation. I have always enjoyed creating work that has the option to be informative if audiences choose to engage with the content in that way. I think that being informative but not forceful is a great way to spread awareness. Approaching research in this way also helped me to understand what would be beneficial to include within my book and finding ways to incorporate it in ways that are engaging and new, but also not overwhelming. For me, art has always been the medium in which I can combine all my passions into one project: science, education, writing, and the environment. As I continued to develop my project, this continued to become clear and a theme that I hope to continue to incorporate within future works.



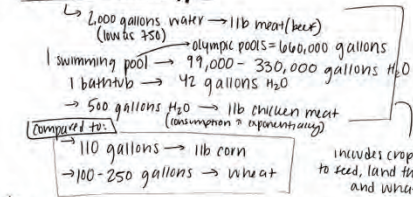
1. Page from final book, highlighting research on native animals to the Indiana Dunes. A main goal of the final book was to incorporate information in a seamless way, as presented on this page.



# Water Consumption - Food

"Water footprint"  
 US = 2nd highest meat consumer in world  
 x 40% US land used for agriculture  
 ↳ 11 billion kg of nitrogen  
 300 million kg of pesticides } used annually

## 1 lb meat vs 1 lb veggies



1 week = recommended eat  
 ~ 3 lbs meat  
 ↳ 6,000 gallons H<sub>2</sub>O (if not meat!)  
 ↳ that's ~ 142.9 baths someone could take!  
 ↳ or a small pool daily to aquatic life + remove O<sub>2</sub> from the water

↳ US has 330 million acres of agriculture  
 ↳ agricultural runoff/pollution worsened around factory farms  
 ↳ overgrazing, poor feeding, animal management  
 ↳ ~236,000 farms w/ factory farming/animals (CAFOs)  
 ↳ creates 500 million tons of manure (from EPA doc)  
 ↳ create water quality issues/can kill + ruin shellfish  
 ↳ also can contaminate local groundwater

uses of nutrients, pathogens, sediments, metals + pesticides  
 ↳ in H<sub>2</sub>O cause algae blooms!  
 ↳ especially impacts streams/lakes  
 ↳ flows into local watershed - effect surface + groundwater

fruit + veggies → 37 gallons of water  
 ↳ 115 gallons of H<sub>2</sub>O  
 ↳ note - certain products require more than others  
 ↳ also note % of pesticides/chemicals used on crops changes

(from Waterside.org)  
 ex: Nitrogen on tomatoes → 90% applied → 142 lbs/acre/year  
 Phosphate/Potash on tomatoes → 87-93% → 111-182 lbs/acre/yr  
 generally → applied only 379 lbs/acre of fertilizers to crops  
 ↳ what happens when all this washes away, where does that go?  
 ↳ what about when many farms?

10-13-P

(the carbon footprint)  
 water footprint = water consumption per person  
 (amount fresh water consumed to create products)

from: water footprint network website

- ↳ looking @ best/most efficient way to consume or reuse things
- can show economic benefits of products across areas
- also need to take into consideration local water resources (is the area scarce w/ water or in a wetland?)
- \* you should encourage use to regulate businesses → creates more innovation/progress

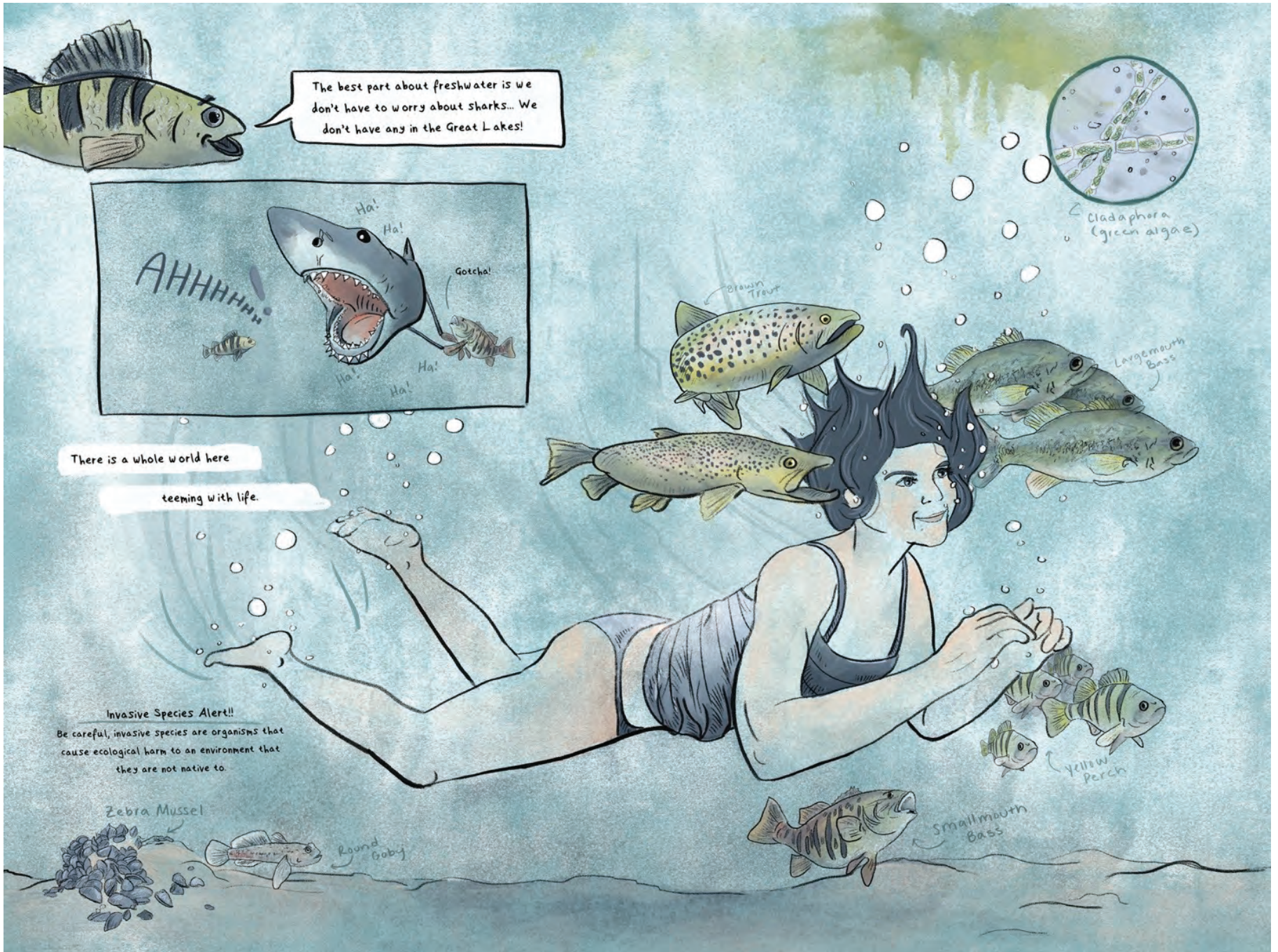
US	Canada	Saudi Arabia	Chad
297 million ppl	30.9 million ppl	21.1 million ppl	8.61 million
820,000 million m <sup>3</sup> /year	72,000 million m <sup>3</sup> /year	39,000 million m <sup>3</sup> /year	13000 million m <sup>3</sup> /year
↳ ~7,800 litre/day per capita	↳ ~6,400 L/day per capita	↳ ~5,100 L/day per capita	↳ ~4,000 L/day per capita
- 80% internal - 20% external	- 79% internal - 21% external	- 34% internal - 66% external	- 99% internal - 1% external

- depending on where nations are / what water resources - spend more on water  
 - more water = more exports + products to use water towards  
 \* wanting more sustainable, fair, + efficient use of fresh water  
 ↳ how does this tie into the great lakes??

Especially when talking about environmental issues, I think that it is essential to collect information through primary documentation, research, and interviews to use to create the most entertaining, yet truth-based, story that you can. Through this method, then one can understand the pressures that those impacted by the story are really feeling. I was able to reflect on Indiana, the setting of my book, because I grew up going there. Whether it be running up the sand dunes with cousins, my grandpa teaching me to swim in Lake Michigan, or taking my dog on walks, many of my memories growing up are rooted along Indiana's coast. By using my own experiences as a form of research, the details of the story came naturally, and allowed for my narrative to be more relatable for readers.

1-2. Sample pages of research conducted on water consumption. Exploring how human actions relate to the amount of water we consume and how that would visually translate or become incorporated within a portrait.





1. Spread from printed copy of 'What Flows Through Us.' Illustrates the ways in which research and information can be incorporated within a narrative but not forceful onto the reader in a successful way.



## Reflective Storytelling: Combining Science, Reflection, and Narratives

With some much information, ideations, and then personal reflections, I was finally drawn back to storytelling and power that a narrative can have on audiences. While I had experimented with the potential of portraits, a graphic novel was a perfect way for me to combine all of the research and various themes that I had been exploring previously in my process. While I had initially thought that I was going to create six small graphic novels all centered on different narratives and issues related to water quality around the Great Lakes, I found that given the time and detail I intended for each book, only one would be feasible.

It was after many Venn diagrams and journaling that I felt drawn to work on the narrative that was to be based on my own story and connection to the industrialized Indiana coast. Generally, I have always been drawn most to the stories that are based on real stories (or even better yet, are fully true).

It was during this time and revelation about the power of true stories that I decided not only to make a graphic novel in Indiana where I grew up going to visit my cousins on the sand dunes, but to make the narrative fully based on my own experiences. Connecting back to previous iterations of my project that explored pressures, as well as how water can be important to a human and their development, this story became a culmination of all the work I had previously done this year, packed into a single narrative. And while I wasn't certain how

much of myself I wanted to convey throughout the book, the reflective nature allowed me to introspect on my own experience with this place.

Several sources inspired me at this point. Most influential to this project were *Oil and Water* by Steve Duin which found a seamless way to combine fact based information within an entertaining plot, as well as *This One Summer*, by Jillian and Mariko Tamaki, which not only was visual inspiration but focused more on the personal pressures and coming of age component that I wanted to incorporate within my own novel.



*1-2. Reference photos and memories from visiting cousins on the Indiana Dunes. These served as references within my book, and inspiration for the narrative.*



CHI → Sink or Swim (copy, NY)

Requirements

- common! common, we are going to be late!
- peering over
- I walk downstairs, check phone
- screen: "Mmm: Are you guys here to hang?"
- last night - still no response (sad)
- mom: hope you I already had swim teeth would miss practice → I figured up could swim in lake I had a chance
- I take bag, put in car "because mean"
- I do how that essay is "fishy tho..."
- "can finish today" this will be good for you

No I've always loved going to the lake, (car driving away)

- images of family car (except when there's more)
- Dad slamming wheel "???"
- turn off air, driving its nose enough that we go a lot,
- insert 2 maps + where going
- "it's not escape"

mean coming out of car

- parents gathering things
- make sure to hold onto record
- Nathan you know she's going to make a run to the beach?
- Nathan holding her, (over shoulder)
- in her response
- "I think please again... set a new minute posted on facebook - there is and see - and remember "this seems to dance" "sign"

"Common Lawman!" Dad

- put to winning over beach
- some people say Nathan's gonna (over grandpa's saying in the airport of another)
- I always assume their mothering about the parents...
- (pic of them, in bed on maps) get cars about how missing us know without parked Areas, who they go to)
- and I know they're bad. They look kind enough.
- closet of them
- bubbles about how much they posture, etc.
- "in a restrained way, it's still beautiful. right?"
- "swimming on beach w/ ocean towards"
- "I have a lot of special moments growing up here" (each pic of family/fed photos)
- I returned to swim home...
- (whole swim sequence - they looked)
- insert about where under in the water
- "maybe that's why I love being by the water to breathe"
- (change of winter)
- (transition into water up sand dunes.)
- "mom: I going up dune"
- "oh! that time, you should smell some candles from school to to me!"
- "I see, I don't think they but the beach here"

"Don't like the beach? That's our youth."

- "maybe - maybe and not for it."
- "Lester. Are you okay?" (talk about how being excluded → some not after water on top)
- "maybe that's why they always been drawn to water... the lake at it and it was so beautiful and yet I know Lester knows the summer (all things wrong). People are like that too. It's disappointing."

"Sometimes when I'm swimming these days I think of a lot of people I used to swim with."

Sink or Swim

- when I was 10 I should just swim - but the water's - sometimes maybe on by it's really.
- sometimes, that the water, I can clearly see the parents - and it's my fault.
- (all the things I do but need to do later)
- "I remember..."
- "sometimes, I see the sun swimming to maintain, giving me more (lighting waves, frustrated)
- but now, I just float. (about that of me floating)
- "I let the waves wash over me, with every thing weighing down on me. Sometimes it feels like I could let myself sink, drowning in the pressure."
- "but I don't have to sink."
- "good and bad waves come"

"go back on broken"

- "sometimes being"
- "that's a good kid, L"
- "math class"
- "there ocean ball"
- "L. that's please again, see pic of the water"
- "triple - mom see - you don't see it yet like that"
- "pace up"
- "continuing about feeling better w/ this"
- "run into girl from school"
- "oh boy! ... she been mean being to me, would you believe she laugh together? we can't do it together"
- "smile"
- "daddy home"
- "can't see like that"
- "I'm not"
- "I'm not"
- "I'm not"

1. Initial draft of written narrative for 'What Flows Through Us'

2. Watercolor and colored pencil iterations. Sampling different medias to use for the graphic novel, these iterations also began to explore memory and the relation to the industrialized coast.





## Book Production and Final Iterations

After deciding that I was going to create a graphic novel centered on the coast of Indiana, I began to create the written narrative, storyboards, and design parameters for the book. I selected a muted, limited color palette, a handwritten font, and watercolor digital brushes and worked to create templates for illustrations so that production could move quickly. While creating the entirety of the content of the book within two and a half months, I learned a lot about working productively, organizing, as well as collaborating with others. I workshoped the book in two separate classes in addition to with friends and family. I found that continuing conversations about the content of my book, the personal stories I was exposing in my narrative were important.

Finding the right ending was very important in order for me to complete this book. When talking about the environment, it can become very easy for the tone and direction of the conversation to become negative and overwhelming. Aimed at younger audiences with the hopes of creating positive change within reader's communities, this book was a challenge to find a balanced solution that is both entertaining and educational without becoming depressing. The solution that I came to resulted in creating a narrative that was rooted in personal experiences with the information woven within. This allowed readers to decide how much information they wanted to intake, while also not being overwhelmed. In terms of the ending, a large challenge was understanding that the issues I address within my book do not have a simple solution. I found that it was best to not create a false reality, so I choose to leave the ending as one that does not pose a solution but instead asks the question of 'where do we go from here' with resources for the reader to engage with. Through this ending, while not what I had initially planned, I discovered the reality of coping with environmental pressures and that not every story needs to have a solidified ending.

During my creative process, I think that storyboarding was a very informative process that allowed me to learn about my work-



1-2. Images from my studio, wall of completed spreads with sticky notes. This wall helped me to visual the overall visual style of the book, make edits, and see my progress.



flow. Spreading completed pages across a wall of my studio and using post-it notes to add components that needed to be changed, I came to understand the bigger picture while also looking at the tiny details on each page that then lent themselves to the larger picture. As I worked, I learned when to spend the time to leave things and keep working, while also knowing when certain components needed attention that would benefit the final product. Noticing the post-it notes also draws attention to the growth that I had over the course of this project- both in terms of how productive I was with fewer notes later in the process, but also emphasizes my attention to detail to create the best story that I could. By creating a book that is both educational and entertaining, I encountered many challenges, though discovered that a book of this sort is not only in demand, but one that is very feasible in order for us to continue to bring conversations of environmental degradation into day to day life.

Overall, I feel as though I did achieve my goal of wanting to bring a story to life that has meaning both on a personal level, but also for our planet. There are components that could be improved, as with any project, but I am happy with the final form that it has taken and the sheer effort that went into the project. That being said, the story is a lot more centered on me and my experiences than I had planned,

1. Printed spreads from final of *What Flows Through Us*. This specific section is rooted in my memory of how we viewed the industrialization when we were kids, and the contrast between the beauty of the space, but the environmental issues that the area has faced for over a century.
2. Sample storyboards. While drawing the images for each page took at least two hours per page, the written narrative, and then storyboarding process also had to be completed before actual production could begin.





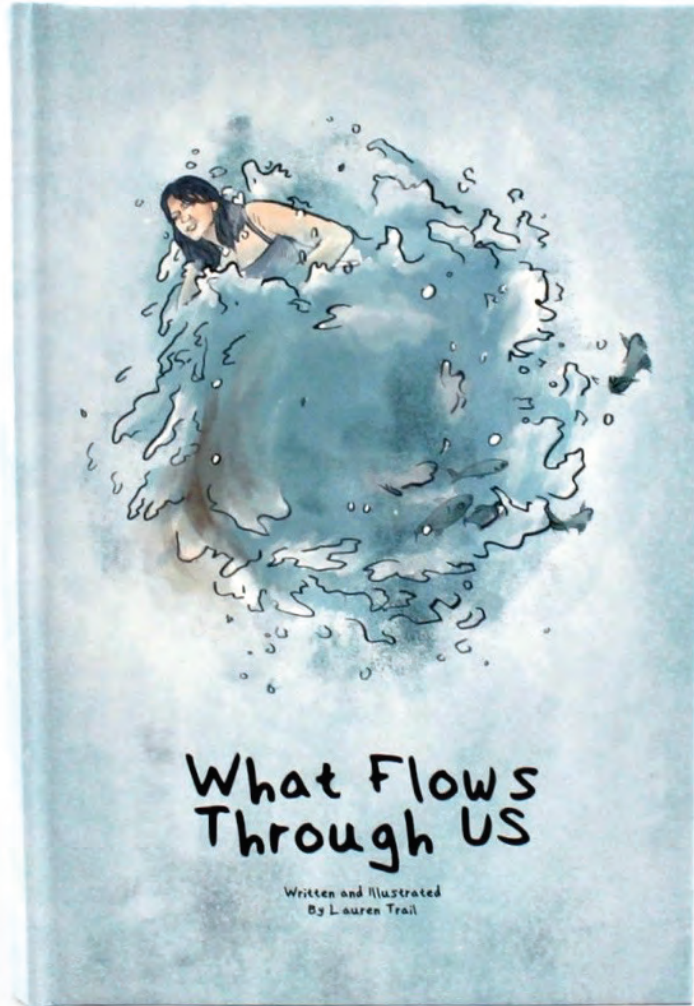
though I have received lots of feedback that the vulnerability of the story makes it more relatable. By digging into the more personal content of this story, it becomes more universal and relatable to many audiences, making it easier to connect with and a more successful story. In the future, I hope to continue to draw of my experiences and the stories of others to make sure that the narratives I am telling are as rooted in truth and emotion as they can be—it is through emotion and investment that people want to help and become more involved in environmental efforts, so I hope to continue that. How I tied in our surroundings and specific information within a narrative is also something that I think was well achieved, as this project still makes an environmental statement, though not in an obnoxious way.

Moving forward, I would love to continue to illustrate and write my own books to create more environmental education and awareness. After this project, I feel that I have greater grasp on storytelling and what the stories I create can mean for my audiences. Overall, this process has given me more appreciation for the book and storytelling process and has been such a rewarding process filled with so much pride that I would hope to continue to continue creating.

*1. Sample artwork from book. This image was one of six that were printed onto posters and displayed at the exhibition.*







# What Flows Through Us

Written and Illustrated  
By Lauren Trail



1-2. Sample spreads from printed copies of book.

Top image: Highlights spread that incorporates more information and history within the narrative.





1. Page from final book, highlighting research on native animals to the Indiana Dunes. A main goal of the final book was to incorporate information in a seamless way, as presented on this page.