

Sunil Amrith reads an excerpt from “The Burning Earth: A History”

I had the most thoroughly urban of childhoods in an Asian metropolis that grew vertically. My memories are of harbor lights and darkened movie theaters and air-conditioned shopping malls. I paid little attention to the natural world, though nature seeped into my life unnoticed. To this day, the rain I love is the rain that thrilled me then: rain that arrives abruptly and falls in sheets from stacks of inky afternoon clouds.

“I believe that whatever time you're born into shapes your perception of humankind vis-à-vis the natural world,” writes novelist Annie Proulx. And so my perception rested on separation. I grew up in Singapore, an island city that imported almost all its food and even its water, a city as committed as anywhere on the planet to remaking nature for human ends.