

NPOQ

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

Fall 2023 | \$19.95

How Do We Create Home in the Future?

Reshaping the Way We Live in the Midst of Climate Crisis

Land Rematriation: A Conversation about Tribal Sovereignty, Land Back, and Recovery of the Planet

+
The Future of Climate Plans

The City That Was in a Forest: Atlanta's Disappeared Trees and Black People

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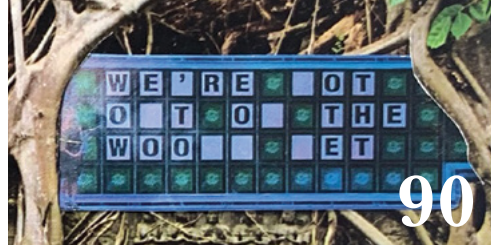
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A one-year subscription (4 issues) is \$59.

A single issue is \$19.95.

www.npqmag.org

The *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* is published by
NONPROFIT INFORMATION NETWORKING ASSOCIATION,
P.O. Box 961749, Boston, MA 02196; 617-227-4624.

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ISSN 1934-6050

WELCOME



Dear Readers,

“Climate change is as much about humanity as it is about industry, and it is creative efforts that will ultimately move hearts and minds to address the problem,” writes Grace L. Dillon, professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program at Portland State University. Dillon also writes, “The best writers establish connections between diverse communities, which is essential to addressing planetary challenges.”¹

This issue of *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* centers the wisdom, practices, and experience of such efforts and writers, highlighting people who are immersed in the ongoing and ever-increasing challenges of climate change from a justice perspective—for drastically reducing the amount of fossil fuels we burn may be critical but it is far from the only answer: this is a moment in time for us to set a new path forward, one that ensures climate justice while we tackle climate change. Thus, the articles within explore land rematriation, Indigenous sovereignty and leadership, achieving a just green transition, and local and national movements against oppressive forces standing in the way of new directions.

Setting new directions necessitates shaking up old assumptions and dreaming up new pathways; and what better way to explore any terrain anew than surrendering to speculation. In the spirit of such science fiction, Afrofuturist, and Indigenous futurist² greats as Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia E. Butler, and Leslie Marmon Silko, we invited writers to submit speculative fiction for publication in this issue of the magazine. We received close to 300 passionately written cli-fi stories that depict our world and other worlds decades and even centuries into the future.

We hope that this very special edition of *Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine* fulfills Dillon’s premises about the key role that creative work plays in the overall effort to dream up and create better futures for this planet’s humanity, wildlife, and ecosystems, and that it will inspire hope, action, a renewed sense of urgency, and visions of what a new world can look like.

Cyndi Suarez
President and Editor in Chief
NPQ

1. Grace L. Dillon, “Why intersectionality in fiction matters,” *Grist*, September 28, 2021, grist.org/fix/climate-fiction/intersectionality-in-climate-fiction/.
2. This term was coined by Grace L. Dillon. See Grace L. Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

Ancestor in the Making

A Future Where Philanthropy's Legacy Is Stopping the Bad and Building the New

by Dana Kawaoka-Chen

From my perch at Justice Funders, I imagine the powerful role philanthropy can play in supporting bold solutions for systems change by resourcing new paths toward a more regenerative and racially just future. A Just Transition will require us to build new systems, practices, and institutions from the ground up that are rooted in honoring the sacredness of all life.

This speculative fiction work is drawn from Resonance: A Framework for Philanthropic Transformation.¹ A version of this story was previously presented as part of remarks made at CHANGE Philanthropy, in 2021.² It has been edited for publication here.

T

he year is 2053. Dusk. An elderly Asian-American woman is sitting on a porch swing surrounded by plants and flowers. The buzzing of delivery drones fills the air. People on holo meetings walk past her house.

A screen door creaks open, then slams back against the door frame.

“Obachan (Grandma), will you tell me about your home from when you were young?”

“Sit down next to me, kiddo.

“Now, take a big, full, round, deep breath in. Do you feel how because it’s a bit cool right now, there’s a crispness to the air we breathe?”

“Yes, it’s like how sometimes when you run too fast your lungs hurt.”

Chuckling, “Yes, kind of like that. What I notice, though, is the smell; it’s not tainted by smoke. When your Mom and Uncle were small, we lived in California and witnessed more than one-third of our state burn by terrible forest fires fueled by climate change in the late teens and early ’20s. That was when we relied on incarcerated people to fight fires on lands that were viewed as a source of profit. The combination



The combination of racial injustice and climate disaster led to #LandBack campaigns that gave Indigenous forest stewards the resources to manage the land as they had since time immemorial.

of racial injustice and climate disaster led to #LandBack campaigns that gave Indigenous forest stewards the resources to manage the land as they had since time immemorial. The success of these efforts renewed support for Tribes in Oklahoma, who were in long, contested fights to be recognized as sovereign nations. Wins in Oklahoma led to land in South Dakota, Hawaii, Canada, and across the globe being rematriated to Indigenous stewardship, beginning to repair trauma caused by colonization.”

“What’s colonization?”

“Colonization means to take over a land or community by force...”

“You mean like what’s happening on Mars?”

“Yes. When your Mom was a teenager, there was a global pandemic, during which over seven million people died. And rich people who could afford to isolate, not have to go into an office, could afford healthcare, got richer. Backlash against billionaires spurred community efforts to retain the wealth that their labor created, leading to a growth in cooperative businesses. Frustrated with large corporations that ran their businesses off a contingent workforce that didn’t provide minimum labor protections or benefits, much less keep their employees safe during the global pandemic, we saw a growth in unions. Worker power and ownership really grew during this period. Local communities began to create their own infrastructure for building community wealth through mechanisms like community land trusts, which accelerated efforts to decommodify land.

“In cities like Richmond, California, and Boston, Massachusetts, which had experienced ‘food apartheid,’ the need for locally grown, healthy food supported the rise of urban farms that employed returning citizens. The local farms provided produce to cooperative restaurants and stores, which also worked with cooperative composters to take commercial and residential food waste to create regenerated soils to sustain the farms. These successes transformed our agricultural practices, so that rather than relying on large commercial farms, regenerative farming practices gained prominence, creating food sovereignty. The growth of these efforts

required more access to nonextractive investment capital, creating a demand for public banks and democratic loan funds across the country.”

“Didn’t you run a democratic loan fund?”

“The organization I worked with at the time, Justice Funders,³ helped to build a democratic loan fund that was run by community leaders from across the country.”

“Mom says that democratic loan funds used to be rare.”

“She’s right. When I started at Justice Funders, the majority of philanthropic assets were held in private foundations where a family board made decisions about how resources should be allocated.”

“But how would they know what the community needs?”

“That was the problem, kiddo—they didn’t. Two things changed how wealth was managed. First, democratic funds like Seed Commons,⁴ Ujima Fund,⁵ and the Just Transition Integrated Capital Fund gave us a new model for how communities could steward and govern capital together. Second, after the Senate did away with the filibuster, Congress responded to the public outcry for increased regulation on philanthropic wealth, resulting in a series of laws mandating:

- payouts from Donor Advised Funds within 10 years,
- minimum annual payouts of 10 percent from all foundations, and
- the prevention of endowments from being invested in the stock market.

“These new laws channeled philanthropic assets into municipal bonds and community development loan funds, which stabilized local municipalities. And over time, instead of starting new foundations, wealth was given over to democratic loan funds to redistribute.

“Fierce grassroots organizing led to the passage of the BREATHE Act,⁶ and cities finally had the resources to make investments in the commons, including alternatives to policing. We witnessed huge shifts to public education with dramatic differences in per-pupil spending, because resources

With policy changes in taxation, and increased regulation governing corporations and philanthropic wealth, our economy became more regenerative, and everyone had the resources they needed to thrive.

were no longer allocated by zip code. With more local resources, child care became free, along with public school-provided breakfasts and lunches.”

“How did kids eat, if their school didn’t give them breakfast or lunch?”

“That was the challenge, sweetie—many kids went hungry. Local communities needed more resources to accelerate the Just Transition away from an extractive economy. Back then, our economy was organized around the right to accumulate wealth through the exploitation of labor and extraction of our natural resources—enforced through militarism. What our communities fought for is what we have now, which is a regenerative economy centered on social equity through ecological restoration, and full and fair participatory processes for all people.

“As part of the Just Transition, our natural resources were revitalized due to federal policies to ban fossil fuels, increase the production of solar and wind, and the migration from corporate-owned to community-owned utilities. The passage of the THRIVE Act prioritized renewable, environmentally sound, ethically sourced energy production, from development to deployment.⁷ It provided environmental protections and ecological restoration pathways to address the human-caused damage, destruction, and degradation of ecosystems by extractive industries.

“All of these gains were made possible because Indigenous peoples (as members of their Indigenous sovereign nations), Asian and Pacific Islander, Black, Brown, and poor White marginalized communities built local, regenerative economies with thriving democracies in which all people have a say in the policies governing their lives. New policies were passed that mandate that corporations and private foundations pay land taxes to local Tribes. This led to the requirement of US federal agencies to secure the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent of Indigenous Nations related to their environment, lands, water, livelihoods, and culture.⁸

“In the late ’20s, a sweeping wealth tax endowed a federal Reparations Commission. The Commission resourced community healing initiatives, honored land grants made to

Indigenous Tribes, and finally paid reparations to all the descendants of US chattel slavery. The Reparations Commission immediately passed policies that made the implementation of the BREATHE Act stronger. Public resources flowed into health and human services, gender-affirming care, and equitable housing. What followed was a period of healing and reconciliation for our country as we reckoned with the history and impact of racial capitalism.

“In the early ’30s, the Reparations Commission funded new public monuments in communities across the country. The changing cultural narrative, combined with the changing demographics across the country, provided the momentum needed to end other archaic reminders of this country’s White supremacist history—we finally did away with the Electoral College, created a national paid day off to vote, and shuttered the Supreme Court as lingering artifacts of an antiquated democracy.

“In the ’40s, shifts in our governance practices became more visible in every aspect of civic life—local governments adopted public budgeting processes, and democratically governed community loan funds replaced many philanthropic institutions. This is when the political journeys of all were supported by mass-base-building organizations, as the prior focus on those with wealth was no longer a need. With policy changes in taxation and increased regulation governing corporations and philanthropic wealth, our economy became more regenerative, and everyone had the resources they needed to thrive. The combination of all of these shifts contributed to our being able to slow global warming.”

“Then I was born!”

“Yes, baby, your parents wanted to wait to have you until they were sure that your home had clean air for you to breathe, safe water for you to drink, that your history would be taught to you at school, and that you could grow up and have agency over your own body and be able to make decisions about things that impact your life.”



May the work of our movements serve to reimagine other ways to govern and steward capital. When we consider the magnitude of natural and man-made disasters happening, we need all of our philanthropies to deploy all of our assets to usher in the world we want, the world we need.

The year is 2023. Dusk. A middle-aged Asian-American woman is sitting on a porch swing surrounded by plants and flowers. The buzzing of her cell phone on silent hums in the background, as she reads an essay by Arundhati Roy:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.⁹

When I imagine the world anew, I think about what kind of ancestor I will be to my future grandchildren. I think about how we are in a moment of transition and the fact that it is up to this generation to ensure that we have a Just Transition. In particular, I think about this reminder from Climate Justice Alliance:

We can only undertake...global efforts to remediate and restore ecological balance if we redistribute the wealth accrued from stolen lands, stolen lives, and stolen labor to those from whom it was taken and who continue to be most impacted by pollution, poverty, racism, state violence, and pandemic around the world.¹⁰

From my perch at Justice Funders, I imagine the powerful role philanthropy can play in supporting bold solutions for systems change by resourcing new paths toward a more regenerative and racially just future. A Just Transition will require us to build new systems, practices, and institutions from the ground up that are rooted in honoring the sacredness of all life.

This necessitates that philanthropy:

- commit to build and repair relationships in ways that shift the power imbalances that are the source of harm; and
- support groups working to build local, regenerative, feminist, solidarity economies with grantmaking, investment, and 501(c)(4) capital.

Ultimately, this means that we need to:

- end wealth accumulation, privatization, and control by private philanthropies;
- redistribute wealth from private philanthropies to Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities;
- democratize power away from investors and people with wealth; and
- shift economic control of philanthropic resources to communities historically exploited and historically disinvested in.

The kind of ancestor I want to be is one who supports racial, economic, and social movements to build, contest, and win power, so that all of us have full access to healthy food, renewable energy, clean air and water, good jobs, and healthy living environments. May the work of our movements serve to reimagine ways to govern and steward capital. When we consider the magnitude of natural and man-made disasters happening, we need all of our philanthropies to deploy all of our assets to usher in the world we want, the world we need. I welcome co-conspirators in building the portal to this world.

NOTES

1. *Resonance: A Framework for Philanthropic Transformation* (Oakland, CA: Justice Funders and The Resonance Collaborative).
2. CHANGE Philanthropy, accessed September 10, 2023, changephilanthropy.org.
3. Justice Funders, accessed September 10, 2023, justicefunders.org.
4. Seed Commons, accessed September 10, 2023, seedcommons.org.
5. "Invest in Ujima," Ujima Fund, accessed September 10, 2023, www.ujimaboston.com/invest; and see the Boston Ujima Project, accessed September 10, 2023, www.ujimaboston.com/about.

6. *The BREATHE Act* (Cleveland, OH: The Movement for Black Lives, July 7, 2020).
7. See Green New Deal Network, accessed September 10, 2023, www.greennewdealnetwork.org/the-thrive-act.
8. See *Free Prior and Informed Consent: An indigenous peoples' right and a good practice for local communities—Manual for project practitioners* (Rome, Italy: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2016).
9. Arundhati Roy, "The pandemic is a portal," *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca. (Italics not in the original.)
10. "Bezos' Earth Fund is an Unnatural Disaster," press release, Climate Justice Alliance, December 10, 2020, updated December 14, 2020, climatejusticealliance.org/bezos-earth-fund-is-an-unnatural-disaster/. (Italics not in the original.)

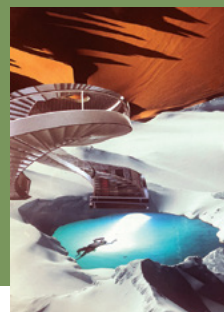
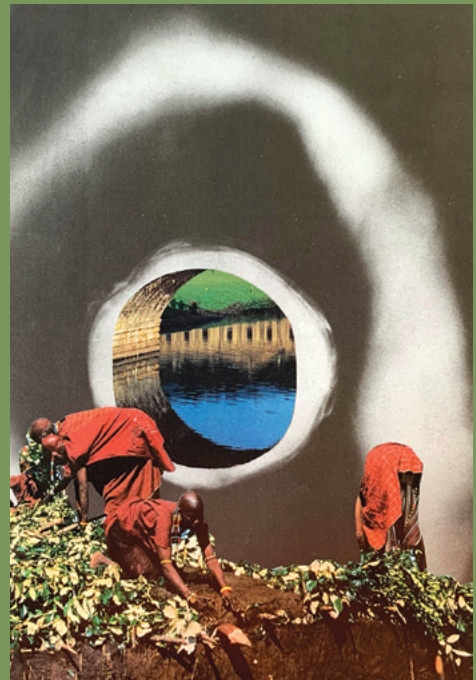
DANA KAWAOKA-CHEN is coexecutive director at Justice Funders, where she partners and guides philanthropy to redistribute wealth, democratize power, and shift economic control to community. She is a mother of two children, who looks forward to witnessing who they become, and is working to leave them a world in which they can thrive.

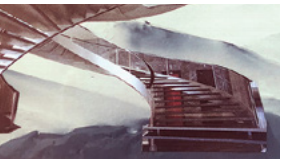
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About the Artist: Yannick Lowery



Yannick Lowery is an interdisciplinary visual artist based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Inspired by the cultural dynamism of his native New York City and present hometown, his work explores the creations of illustrated proverbs, portents, and historical souvenirs to guide the viewer through cultural introspection and responsible, imaginative perpetuation.





Kawsarina

by Laura Seldner

Pawkar killa, 2238

She learned about them in school; the *tourists*. How they used to come to what is now her home and have their pictures taken, leaning on the buildings they now live in, standing like a triumph atop their terraced farmland, sitting in the middle of the patch of green where they now have community gatherings. Sometimes she finds their things buried beneath a hundred years of earth. Mostly there is plastic: crunchy thin-walled bottles and dull-colored wrappers. She didn't know what they were until the elders told her: "The way food used to be," they'd said, and she couldn't imagine the kinds of food that came covered in plastic. But sometimes there are other things, things that she doesn't have to ask anyone about: a button, a leather boot, a heart-pendant necklace. She likes those things the most, the ones that pulse with life. The intimacy of those objects shakes her; those things belonged to someone, and that someone had a life.

The sun is low in the sky and the shadows grow long, but still, Pakarina and her mother are going to check the fountains because that is what they do—what all *yakukamakkuna* do. They are Water Keepers. Pakarina trails a few feet behind her mother as they climb the pathway up the mountain, her ten-year-old legs sturdy and accustomed to the climb but not as long and strong as her mother's. But none of this is new; they could walk this path in thick *neblina*—mist—in the dark, in their sleep, because this path has been their entire lives.

As they walk, Pakarina stops for a moment and turns around. Below, evening fires dot the landscape, and the village is alive with sound and light. She can hear the faint music coming from the square—already, they're gathering to listen to songs and stories. In a moment, like a lightning bolt, she thinks of the tourists—a strange thought that enters her brain, something that almost feels intrusive. But as she stands there taking in a lungful of air, she understands why they came. She has seen nothing of the rest of the world—has never set foot outside their *comuna*—but she is grateful to exist in that moment and witness the beauty that is the sharp outline of Machu Picchu against the sky. The clouds pour over the cordillera, the mountains' peaks slicing through the dense *neblina* the way river rocks cut water. In this place, the grass is still green and the air is still breathable, not like some of the other places she has heard of. And now, the same breeze that sways the stalks of corn and the red tops of quinoa also sends a ripple down her spine, and she turns back toward her mother, sets one foot in front of the other.

* * *

Sisa can hear her daughter's footsteps, the steadiness of them punctuated by moments of quiet. She doesn't need to turn around to know something has caught her eye. She has always been a curious child; "Pakarina, the child of a thousand questions," she likes to call her. Nothing at all like her older daughter, Tamyá, who is a being of the here and now. Sisa and Tamyá are two of a kind—mother and firstborn daughter, content to lose themselves in their work, not wanting to think of the unknown. But Pakarina loses herself in the flow of the water, in the collection of past-things she keeps in a basket near her bed, in the stories she imagines in the stars. Sisa knows more about the past than she would like. Sometimes she thinks it would be easier to know nothing, but that is not their way. They all must know.

She, too, learned about it in school. As she climbs alongside the fountains that cascade down the mountain—sixteen in all—Sisa remembers sitting out there on the green as a child, listening to the *yachachikkuna*, the teachers taking turns as knowledge givers and storytellers. They told them of the inauspicious beginnings of The Great Awakening: snowless winters, wildfire summers, droughts that lasted too long. They told them how people didn't believe or maybe just didn't want to believe.

The water's flow is music in Sisa's ears. The thought of the fountains running dry sends chills. *How lucky we are to not know thirst*, she thinks to herself. The elders said The Great Awakening came like a crescendo, layer upon layer of catastrophe until things like being a tourist and seeing the world became meaningless. Oceans became hungry mouths eating away at

shorelines. Fires engulfed forests as quickly as the snaps of fingers. Storms gathered and wouldn't stop gathering, like they were on a quest for vengeance. People scrambled, fled, made home wherever they could. Eventually, the world came to a standstill; music stopped and water stopped and people stopped. It was a miracle, she thinks, that the world itself didn't stop too. The thought of all of these things comes to her in a rush, and she does her best to push away the images of parched mouths and cracked earth and a world ablaze. She is here, right now, her child trailing behind her, and the water is sweet and flowing.

* * *

Her mother reaches the top before she does, the first fountain in a cascade of other fountains. Right away, she gets to work, knowing exactly what needs to be done. In truth, there's not needed today, but she takes pride in showing her mother that she knows what to do. In another life they might have been called *hydraulic engineers*, but now they are called *Water Keepers*, because it is that difficult and that simple: keep the water clean and flowing. And now it strikes her that this, too, is history. These fountains, this place. It was the hands of her ancestors that constructed the water system they still drink from, the very houses they live in; they were the original Keepers.

When they are done, they cup their hands together and hold them beneath the water, each of them whispering the same prayer of gratitude to the earth and water and sky. This, too, feels like history; the need to reconnect with the things that sustain them. She feels a question rising within her as they stand in the evening's quiet. Usually, she reserves her curiosities for sleepless nights, for when the moon is as full as a woman with child, and she can hear voices echoing down through the centuries. But she is beginning to understand that there is never a bad time to speak up.

The question flows from her like water, something she has never asked: "Why did the ancestors leave here in the first place?"

Her mother sits on the stones at the fountain's edge, looking out into the watercolor sky. There is a long pause before she speaks. Her mother has always been a woman who considers her words.

After a moment, she says, "Do you know the word *apocalypse*?"

Pakarina thinks for a moment. "Like The Great Awakening?"

"Yes, something like that. It is a time when everything is destroyed. Catastrophe everywhere. A long time ago, men came from across the sea. When they set foot here, they brought disease and destruction. And for us, everything since then has only been sequela. We lived in a postapocalyptic world long before The Great Awakening."

Pakarina tries to imagine it the way her mother tells her—an ocean she has never seen and the men who crossed it. She has only ever seen such things in books, in the community library not far from the village square.

"And so the ancestors left this place. But even in our postapocalypse, our family has had the fortune of good record keepers—storytellers and chroniclers, those who memorize and those who write. And our people have gone around the world and back again."

There is a moment of quiet, Pakarina too lost in thought to ask more questions.

"Did you know there was a great migration?" her mother asks her. Pakarina shakes her head. "*No, no. Más bien dicho*, a diaspora," she corrects herself. "Years before The Great Awakening, the people left this land. They headed north, chasing stories they'd heard, hoping for miracles. And most of them stayed there, working the jobs no one else would do."

"And then what?"

"And eventually, when The Great Awakening began, some of them came back. Your great-great-grandparents, for example. They were the descendants of the ones who headed north. Maybe this land called them back; they heard the promise of a different kind of miracle. You know how the earth and water have voice and memory? I think that even though they'd forgotten how to hear those voices, perhaps that was what helped them return, that voice that lives inside all of us."

Pakarina can feel her chest swell and her heart thud within her as if she has uncovered the greatest of all discoveries. In her veins runs the blood of survivors, centuries of suffering, lifetimes of endurance.

* * *

Sisa can see it on her daughter's face, that far-off look she gets when she is thinking. There it is: the truth of things. She has always felt it—how the weight of history itself is too much to hold, the weight of the future too much to envision. Even seven hundred years and too many world-ending events later, it still stings. To know of all that happened. To know that in their blood flows both the enslaved and the enslaver, the oppressed and the oppressor. To know that only two centuries earlier there were people who could have stopped The Great Awakening from happening but didn't. All the millions of years that led to this moment, to a life that is both fragile and hopeful. But maybe that has always been the way. They have always existed at the edge of possibility, in the narrow space between survival and oblivion.

"But you know something?" she says, calling her daughter back from wherever her mind has taken her. "Despite everything, I'm glad things happened the way they did. All of it, I'm happy. Because it led to you. If it hadn't happened that way, I wouldn't have you, *ñukapa shunkulla*. We wouldn't be here right now. And that would have been the greatest catastrophe." She reaches over and picks up her daughter's hand from her lap, still so tender and small; she kisses the back of it and whispers a prayer only she can hear. Gratitude to the earth and water and sky for bringing them this far, prayers to please let them go a little further.

* * *

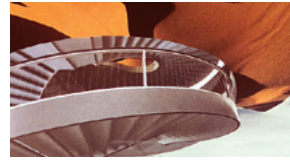
Above them, the sky has gone dark. The stars have come out, and the moon is a perfect crescent. As they walk back down the mountain, the centuries-old sound of water carries them. Pakarina has heard stories about the lowland—a place where there are no more stars and the sky is so hazy orange that even the water is thick with pollution. She is both saddened by and in awe of the world—how it can be a place of such suffering and beauty. She opens her mouth, full with another question: "Will things ever get better?" she wants to ask her mother. But she refrains because she already knows. *It is not unreasonable, she thinks, to hope for survival. The water there has been flowing for over eight hundred years. It doesn't stop, and neither will we.*

Author's note: *The Kichwa words used in this piece are from Ecuadorian Kichwa, an Indigenous language descended from Peruvian Quechua. The title, "Kawsarina," means "rebirth" or "revival." It can also signify a return to the self, life, and the senses. "Pawkar killa" means "the month of March" (and 2238 is the year). "Ñukapa shunkulla" literally means "my only little heart," and roughly translates as "sweetheart." I am not Ecuadorian. My Ecuadorian husband, my children, and I lived in Tixan and Riobamba for over two years. More recently, I have had the opportunity to study Kichwa and gain a basic understanding of the language. I chose to incorporate elements of this story from the Kichwa people, because I believe that drawing from Indigenous traditions is the only way forward. Climate justice requires a fundamental shift from the oppressive and extractive systems in existence today that have led to the worldwide destruction we now must remedy. Generations of Indigenous people have often been forcibly separated from their culture. As my husband reclaims his Indigenous heritage through language (Kichwa) and tradition, we also work to cultivate connection between past, present, and future. With this writing, it is my intention, in my own small way, to honor and demonstrate my absolute respect for Indigenous culture. My utmost gratitude goes to the people of Ecuador; the pueblos of Tixan and Guasuntos; the communities of Sanganao, Pulingui, and Shuid; everyone at Unidad Educativa Pachayachachik in Riobamba; as well as my Kichwa instructor, Sacha Rosero Lema. As a mother of children with Indigenous roots, I see that the future is Indigenous; it is in the hands of those who understand that the earth and the people are not separate things but one and the same.*

LAURA SELDNER is an emerging writer of fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry whose work has appeared in numerous publications. Seldner was nominated for Best of the Net in 2022.

To My Gaea, a Letter You Will Never Read

by E. E. King



I water you with tears even though I know better. How weak is the human spirit—my spirit—but not yours, dear Gaea, not yours.

The sun is bright—so bright, I have to shade my eyes to see us reflected in the panes of translucent fungus that light our dome.

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, people built square and rectangular homes out of the bodies of murdered trees. A strange design. Nature doesn't like sharp edges. Those ancient dwellings couldn't breathe or bend in wind or storm. They couldn't absorb the rains or floods. They could only resist the tempests that worsened each year. They were made to break and be broken.

I wonder, did our ancestors hear the screaming of the dead in their dreams? It was only after the planet—our planet, our home—was almost decimated that we learned to grow our domes and clothes from the intelligent weavings of mycelium. It seems so obvious now. Like a grass in a storm, like a cloud in the sky.

I watch us fitting together perfectly, like two puzzle pieces—and maybe we are: once, for nine months you grew inside of me, a part of me, like a bit of photosynthetic algae inside the lips of a giant clam.

Once upon a time, long before you or I were born, people and their machines seemed intent on destroying our planet, our home. Even as temperatures boiled and seas rose, men shot rockets into space, dreaming of nuclear weapons on Mars while playing on the dying seas in yachts larger than nightmare.

It's nature—human nature. My nature. But not yours—not now.

It was then that your great-great-grandmother, Gaea I, began to understand. She was the first Gaea—the one whom all the women in our family are named after.

Gaea I worked with mycorrhizal fungi, the tiny root connections that reach beneath Earth and encircle the world, carrying messages. She loved this more than 500-million-years-old subterranean social network, this wood wide web, this earth connection.

"Fungi," she wrote, "are in a kingdom of their own but are closer to animals than plants. They are old and wiser than us."

So it was that the first Gaea in our family learned from the world beneath her, letting it teach her. Letting it save us.

She discovered thousands of different fungi, a "dark taxa," mysterious as dark matter. From it she extracted itaconic acid, replacing plastic, synthetic rubber polystyrene foam, leather, and cement.

And as the sea rose, she grew rafts of mycelium that soaked up the water, expanding and enlarging until, slowly, they rose. And so, humanity survived the rising waters, drifting along the seas in fungal life rafts. And when she died, her body was wrapped in a mycelium coat and watered by the tears of her daughters to live again.

Her daughter, your great-grandmother, Gaea II, loved slime more than fungus. It's an odd thing to love, but it saved our seas.

"Hagfish," she wrote in journals I have kept and had hoped to pass on to you, "produce slime the way humans produce judgment—easily, rapidly, defensively, and copiously. This slime is one of nature's most wondrous substances.

"It consists of two main components—mucus and protein threads. Each thread waits, coiled up in its own tiny cell—meters of sticky hairs stuffed into a tiny gland without a single knot or tangle. The threads are only one-hundredth the width of a whisker but can stretch out for about two hundred millimeters, creating a fast-expanding net.

"To create a liter of slime, a hagfish releases just 40 milligrams of mucus and protein—that's 1,000 times less dry material than human saliva. That's why the slime feels so incorporeal, like an underwater spider web. When you see it in a bucket, it looks like water. Only when you stick your hand in can you see the water has become congruent."

Grandmother Gaea II made tubes of hollow bamboo that sucked water in and spat strands of hagfish slime mucus out, far into the sea, and pulled them back, covered in plastics.

And it worked. The seas were clean again. And when she died, she was wrapped in a slimy coat and allowed to sink back into the ocean she loved so much.

But it was not enough. The air was still heavy with CO₂, and the oceans were hot, empty, and acidified.

It was your great-great-grandmother, Gaea III, who began breeding heat-resistant corals. She was a musician, and she grafted old recordings of healthy reefs onto the ends of the branches of dead and dying coral.

When the remaining fish, lonely in dark waters, heard the music of a long-silent reef calling to them, they came. And in their coming, the artificial sounds became real.

Algae are the engine of the sea, turning sunlight into nutrition for almost everything else, including coral. The algae turn light into food, giving the coral its color and providing 90 percent of its food. If the temperature is too hot or too cold, the algae become stressed and leave, or perhaps the coral polyps spit out the algae. It's hard to know. You could probably tell me, dear child, if only I could understand.

Like coral, many species of giant clam have algae living in their lips, supplying extra food.

"Instead of containing a single alga," wrote Grandmother Gaea III, "giant clams grow long, microscopic pillars of algae deep into their mantle.

"Animals such as starlings or butterflies use iridescence for display or camouflage, but giant clams have living iridescent cells that optimize the absorption of light to suit tiny stacks of algal cells.

"The iridocytes filter light, sending beneficial wavelengths to algae into the mantle, and scattering the more harmful wavelengths away.

"The living iridescence ensures that every last alga in the pillar gets its fill of sunlight, even though most of the 300 or so cells in each column have no direct access to the light."

By imitating these columns, Grandmother Gaea III's solar panels were able to charge hundreds of cells instead of one. Her iridescent panels provided energy wherever it was needed, as abundant and free as sunlight.

Still, we lived sparsely. CO₂ still clouded our horizon, as few plants had survived.

We think of green as the color of growth; but really it's the only light plants aren't using. You should know.

It was Grandmother Gaea II who realized that if photosynthesis used every color of light to make food, plants would be black. And so she began the black forest, planting shadow grasses that ate all light and sucked down carbon like candy.

The climate was now under control, but science is always more complex than we suppose. Systems are always more connected.

I grew up in the sheltering shadow of my mother, born through artificial sterilization because all our males were sterile. In a way it freed us. In a world where everyone is unnatural no one is odd. We were struggling to survive, and in that struggle, differences of sex, preferences in skin color, disappeared. (Without clouds, there are no silver linings.)

Then a miracle happened. Some women, I among them, got pregnant. Maybe it was the sea starting to live again—or the sun, no longer deadly—that caused our wombs to blossom. We didn't know. But ignorance didn't dampen our joy.

Usually, our children are sterile. Other offspring—well, other offspring are like you, my sweet, perfect child, the last Gaea. The scientific name is *anorexia viridis*, but most people just call it *The Greening*.

At first, we didn't understand. At first, we thought it was something to fear. A disaster. A takeover. Another way to die.

We were wrong. It is rebirth. It is reincarnation. It is salvation.

I remember when you were conceived. When I held you, your gaze searched my face so intently, I felt that you could see into my soul. I was not prepared for the joy that burying my face in the nape of your tiny neck gave me. I had never imagined I would ever again smell freshness, possibility, the fragrance of a brighter future. It was like breathing 22 percent oxygen.

Your happiness was infectious, a contagion of hope. We were on the mend. We had free solar power, black forests that cleaned the skies, and we had love.

We were so proud when you walked and talked. For you, every step was a dance, every word a poem. Your voice, high and sweet, made me think of descriptions of ancient birdsong. You described the commonest things in words that made me look at them anew: the droplets condensing on the fungal dome's surface became tiny, iridescent replicas of our world; the reddish mists rising from the algae vaults transformed into clouds of glory.

Your fanciful metaphors, those stopped first. Your speech grew simpler. I thought it was a sign of maturity. I scolded myself for missing your curious sideways view of life. But even if I had understood, what could I have done?

By eight you'd stopped dancing. By ten, you ceased walking. You sat cross-legged on the floor in a corner, soaking up the wan rays of the sun that permeated the dome. I missed your birdsong voice and the rhythm of your steps; but mostly I missed your laughter, that spontaneous burbling up of joy, that contagion of happiness.

I brought you food. I read you books. I pleaded with you. I slapped your unresponsive face. Your smile didn't even fade—not at first. But each day it grew dimmer, features retreating into blankness.

I tell myself that I am fortunate. And I wonder. I wonder about movement and sentience. I wonder what you, green head filled with light, are feeling? Do you recall our games of hide and seek, our tales of magic and wonder? Did you love me? Do you miss me?

Humankind looks in the mirror and says, "That is beautiful. That is smart. I am the master of the universe."

I look at you, my small, motionless, verdant child. I bury my nose in your flesh, trying to locate a fresh baby scent, but smell only a vegetable moistness.

In an earlier time, you would have provided food for animals and a place to live for birds. Even now, you clean our planet with each breath.

And I wonder, which species is superior?

And I wonder, when you so clearly have a reason for being, why is this so hard?

Why do I mourn this gift? Why do I feel I have lost you?

You are what you were meant to be. What you need to be. What we need you to be.

And with that epiphany, with you cradled in my arms, turned toward the light, you seem a part of me again—or am I becoming a part of you?

I wept the day you lost your eyes—watching as they gradually turned into buds and sprouted leaves. How could I have been so blind as to imagine humans as superior, to consider ourselves the peak of evolution?

You are the miracle. You filter our water with your roots. You cleanse our planet with your breath. You eat sunlight. You will give the world back its green.

My greatest achievement will always be having given birth to you, Gaea, my Gaea. My greatest sorrow was not accepting your change.

Today I will set you gently into the earth, sticking my fingers into the soil, feeling for root connections, intimate as when you were in my womb.

How smart of evolution to make our connection to Earth more apparent now, our ties familial. We have always been just another part of the great cycle—we just didn't know it.

E. E. KING is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist, whose publications include *Dirk Quigby's Guide to the Afterlife: All You Need to Know to Choose the Right Heaven*, and several short story collections. King's work has appeared in over 100 magazines and anthologies.

Land Rematriation

A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez, Donald Soctomah, Darren Ranco, Mali Obomsawin, Gabriela Alcalde, and Kate Dempsey

“What I’d like to see is important areas come back to us that have supported the Tribe for thousands and thousands of years and are a major cultural component of our Tribe....

The Tribe needs to access those areas, because we need to fulfill our culture.

Because part of our culture has been taken away from us. Over 400 years, our culture has slowly been taken away—and now it’s flowing back.”

In this conversation, Cyndi Suarez, NPQ’s president and editor in chief; Donald Soctomah, Tribal historic preservation officer for the Passamaquoddy Tribe; Darren Ranco, Penobscot Nation anthropologist and academic; Mali Obomsawin, Indigenous musician, scholar, and community organizer from Abenaki First Nation at Odanak; Gabriela Alcalde, executive director of the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation; and Kate Dempsey, state director of The Nature Conservancy in Maine, discuss the future of Tribal sovereignty, Land Back, and rematriation of the planet.

Cyndi Suarez: Can you share a little about the state of Tribal sovereignty in Maine?

Donald Soctomah: The way I feel, Tribal sovereignty is always within the Tribe; it’s just not recognized within the state. And the battle with the state over Tribal sovereignty and our rights has always been recognized by the federal government; it’s only the state government that’s not recognizing our sovereignty. And all the other Tribes outside of Maine have full Tribal sovereignty. We did have legislation this last session, and it made it through the House and the Senate, first round—and the governor vetoed it. In the second round, the override didn’t happen.

Darren Ranco: I think what Donald said is accurate. I think for the last 200 years, the state has had an investment in the wardship of us as Native people and in not recognizing us as sovereigns. And Donald and others have written and thought about all of that as well in terms of that system. But I think what has shifted in this last decade is there have been these 21st-century artifacts, or opportunities, or experiences that show a shift—at least, as I think of it. And it’s a lot of Native women in particular; but other Indigenous educators, too, across the state have really grown our allies and our political bandwidth in this last decade. And many of these things—probably starting with the Penobscot River Restoration Project,¹ but stretching back this last decade or two—mark a shift in education and insight and a new form of activism, I think, by us as Wabanaki people.



“Land Back as a movement, as a political and legal movement by Tribal nations across Turtle Island, has focused on the return of things that have been taken from us through colonial policies. So our land, our languages, our kinship systems, our governances were forced out of us.”

CS: Is there anything else that anybody wants to add?

Mali Obomsawin: I would like to acknowledge that I'm a citizen of a nation that is not one of the nations in so-called Maine, so in terms of federal Indian law sovereignty, it does not apply to me in that context.

CS: Interesting. May I ask why? You're in Maine, but you don't have the same issue?

MO: The Wabanaki people of Quebec are federally recognized nations of Quebec, and the sovereignty extends across the border as pertains to Jay's Treaty,² but not as pertains to Indian law in the United States. We could spend hours discussing why that is.

CS: Thank you.

Gabriela Alcalde: And Cyndi, a report was released at the end of last year by a Harvard researcher that notes the economic impacts and social impacts of this lack of full recognition of Tribal sovereignty. It's a pretty devastating economic impact.³

CS: Thank you so much for that information.

DS: We've had some people in our communities say it's like economic genocide—and the report makes that perfectly clear.

CS: Can you say a bit more about that? How are those connected?

DS: The report shows that, nationwide, sovereign Tribes receive—I don't know what percent, Darren probably knows the percentage. But there's quite a difference in income that's available to the Maine Tribes—quite a bit of treaty rights—and the rest of the nation.⁴

CS: Okay, thank you for that. So the term that I think you've been using is *land repatriation*. I had a question about what that term means. And is it different from *repatriation*? I'm just curious about the term—for people who don't know, which includes me.

DR: I'm happy to talk about how I define these things, but across the three of us you'll probably get three different

answers—and that's the beauty of this work: our passions can exist in this multiplicity. The way I have presented this for people to track is that Land Back as a movement, as a political and legal movement by Tribal nations across Turtle Island, has focused on the return of things that have been taken from us through colonial policies. So our land, our languages, our kinship systems, our governances were forced out of us. These are things that were purposely taken from us through colonial policies and forced assimilation—that sort of thing.

Connected to that work, though, which is much more than land return, than #LandBack—that work—is what many of us call *rematriation*, which is much more focused on the cultural frameworks that we bring to the table as Indigenous people. And it's a real focus on tradition and our interrelationship with other humans and nonhumans and places and all of those things—that is what rematriation is. And in many Indigenous cultures, this is seen as the domain of women-centered work.

As you mentioned, there's this idea of repatriation work out there too, which is also a kind of return. Repatriation work has been about returning our ancestors and some of our cultural patrimony through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,⁵ and other sorts of social pressures. But for us, I think it is this *interrelationship*—the rematriation work—that we're seeking to restore and make vibrant once again. And in some ways, it doesn't get attached to property relations, exactly; it gets attached to relations that we as Indigenous people bring from our traditional cultures and our sense of belonging as people, of this place *here in this* context—what is now known as Maine, as Wabanaki people, but the larger Wabanaki territory that we belong to and which belongs to us.

CS: Thank you. I have a follow-up question that maybe can be answered by others—or maybe you want to answer it, Darren. Are they meant to go alongside each other? Or does one include the other? I wonder if rematriation includes repatriation, but they're so different, so I'm just wondering.

“Rematriation puts a magnifying glass on the fact that women and the feminine role in governance over our societies and in our relationality have been decentered from where they originally were, right along the same timeline as land became private property. Women were becoming property as well, here, or being forced to be seen as property through colonialism.”

DR: I think rematriation work is in some ways bigger and encompasses more things that are connected to our sense of culture and being. But I’m reluctant to say that either one happens without the other on some level. I’m not going to overdefine it, either, because I think so much of rematriation requires us to sort out some property relations—like for us to have access to things and to maintain our interrelationships with certain species, like sweetgrass, or black ash or brown. We need to sort out some of those property/land issues. They don’t just happen automatically without some of that Land Back politics, law, policy kind of thing.

CS: Thank you. Would anyone like to add or share a different perspective on the difference?

MO: I think the question of the difference between repatriation and rematriation is not the right question, only because they’re not sort of opposites at all. They go together, like Darren was saying. But I would further add to the conversation on rematriation that through colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism and land privatization were instituted here in Indigenous homelands. So rematriation puts a magnifying glass on the fact that women and the feminine role in governance over our societies and in our relationality have been decentered from where they originally were, right along the same timeline as land became private property. Women were becoming property as well, here, or being forced to be seen as property through colonialism. So through rematriation, we recenter the governance roles of women and the feminine in our culture while we also liberate the land back to our kinship governance.

Kate Dempsey: Mali, I might just build upon some of that. Whenever I write *rematriation*, Outlook tries to correct that word! I think it would be easy to assume, coming from The Nature Conservancy, that the only action we can take in support is Land Back. That is an important and essential piece of it, but what I’m hearing my colleagues speak to is that their relationships to the earth were severed, and we need to consider how to tend to those breaches. The public has access to millions of acres of land that we, the conservation

community, “own”: we own it in the structure that requires “ownership” for access. And so the conservation community is starting to challenge ourselves to think more expansively about what access can look like in addition to the more obvious approach—Land Back—that people focus on. And I think the more holistic relationship piece of it is key.

DS: I’m seeing that happen more and more. Over the years, we get more conservation groups contacting us, or the large landowners wanting our input on their management plan—wanting our input on access or listening to our concerns. We’re currently working with Acadia National Park on...well, it’s not Land Back, but it’s rematriation in a way, because we’re going to be allowed access to harvest sweetgrass on a certain portion of the land. And to me, that’s bringing culture to a landmass and being able to practice a culture and traditions that way.

CS: It’s interesting that you could have rematriation without Land Back...

DS: That’s my interpretation.

CS: Can you talk a little about how this work started? How did it develop to this point?

DS: It started about 400 years ago. With treaty after treaty, the land line between Massachusetts and the Tribe kept getting moved and moved and moved. And then, once it reached the end of Maine’s boundary, it started shrinking the community lands. And then the final treaties with the Tribe designated special spots where the Tribe existed. You probably could write quite a few volumes of books about it. But for Passamaquoddy, the Land Back issue came back to us about 20 years ago, when one of the islands on the adjacent township became “owned” by a paper company. And it was a burial island. And the Tribe had been trying to purchase the island from the paper company, but the paper company said, “No, no, no.” Finally, there was a change in administration with the paper company, and they said, “Yes, yes, yes.” And that’s when a group from Quebec owned the paper company, and they wanted to form a relationship with us. And they asked,

“I think that there’s probably been a parallel history of land trusts themselves having various self-reflective moments in these last 20 years, saying, ‘How do we become more and more relevant? And how do we do our work ethically as it relates to Indigenous people?’ Realizing that land trusts and conservation groups were often bad players during the primary colonial period.”

“How can we form this relationship?” And I told them, “We have this island. We need that back. That island needs us as much as we need it.” And they said, “It’s yours.”

So the movement, for us, started back then, a while ago, and then it died off. It sort of goes in cycles. But this right here is benefiting everybody; nationally, it’s really taking off, and it’s creating better relations between the Tribe and our land neighbors.

CS: When you say “it’s really taking off,” what do you mean?

DS: Well, I see other states, other Native Tribes across the nation, where this is going on. There’s the Land Back and repatriation happening across the country, especially with the administration now in the White House. They seem to be moving in a better direction to include the Tribes. That’s my political statement.

DR: Yes, I think of the transformations, in terms of education and understanding. Donald was Passamaquoddy representative to the state of Maine legislature, and he, along with Donna Loring [former senior advisor of Tribal Affairs in Maine], put in some really great legislation that broadened horizons and really shifted what was possible (or what we thought was possible) by our representatives to our state legislature—having bills that were designed by Wabanaki people for the betterment of Wabanaki people and the state of Maine.

There was the Penobscot River Restoration Project, which brought in different folks and fundraisers from the land trust and other sorts of environmentally engaged communities.⁶ And then starting in 2011, 2012, and then between 2013 and 2015, there were a number of women in particular—but Tribal Wabanaki folks generally—who engaged the state of Maine with a truth and reconciliation process that also shifted the terms of what it means to work together and be allies and take on really difficult challenges. That work was heartfelt, and it shifted people’s understanding once again and created the opportunity for voices and understandings about the child welfare system and the removal of Native

children in both Maine’s history and its ongoing role in colonization.⁷

And then in more recent years, with my Tribe, the Penobscot Nation—our problems with the state of Maine and the river, our namesake river...the state seeking to gain more control over our river—which eventually was appealed a couple of times, and we eventually lost...but those were also opportunities to bring together allies and build relations.

Then, what you see in the most recent years, with the Tribes coming together to form the Wabanaki Alliance⁸—which is a sort of political nonprofit that the Tribes have set up to help support the legislation to fix our broken forms of sovereignty here...all those things are artifacts, again, or experiences of a new understanding and a new possibility related to Wabanaki and to Indigenous Wabanaki and non-Wabanaki relations.

And I think that there’s probably been a parallel history of land trusts themselves having various self-reflective moments in these last 20 years, saying, “How do we become more and more relevant? And how do we do our work ethically as it relates to Indigenous people?” Realizing that land trusts and conservation groups were often bad players during the primary colonial period in helping provide justification for the removal of Indigenous people from our homelands. And even back in the ‘90s, there were several land trust organizations fighting against our Tribal sovereignty. When a couple of bills came up related to our regulatory authority in the unorganized territories, the land trusts came out against some legislation that would have helped our sovereignty back in the ‘90s, so there’s a whole set of histories of transformation that lead us to the current day.

And, again, more volumes of work. But those are the highlights, in my opinion. John Banks [Director of the Department of Natural Resources for the Penobscot Indian Nation, and a key partner in the Penobscot River Restoration Project], who’s not here in this conversation, is really important to this

“Recognizing that The Nature Conservancy joined the Penobscot River Restoration Project without having done the work of building relationships, I’m honored still today that we were welcomed into accomplishing this world-recognized effort to restore this river.”

work—especially with the Penobscot River Restoration Project—and talks about the land claims settlement as land return work, too. Obviously, what happened then, in 1980, had a huge influence on where we are today.⁹

MO: I would also add that beyond the confines of Maine, and beyond the Wabanaki Tribes, as well, there have been constant reoccupations of ancestral lands by nations across the continent and the United States and Canada. And especially in that period in the '70s, '80s, '90s, I think a lot about the Mohawk reoccupations of their territories in upstate New York and on the other side of the border. I think Tribal nations have been learning from each other in terms of how to do Land Back—and what’s happening now is another iteration of it. Through Bomazeen Land Trust¹⁰ and a few other community-led groups, we do things on the community level, where we try to get land restored to community holdership in a way that we can harvest and live on the land. And that’s just another avenue for the community to access and rematriate land and our cultures. So there are a lot of different threads to the movement, and they extend, as I think both Donald and Darren said, across the whole continent.

CS: That’s interesting. So even after land’s given back, it gets taken back. There’s a whole history of kind of going back and forth.

MO: Yep, yep.

CS: Anyone else want to add to that?

KD: On the Maine TNC’s website, we articulate some of this most recent history. Historically, The Nature Conservancy in the US approaches everything with an ecological question: Is this important for biodiversity? And outside of the US, First Nations, Indigenous peoples have really shown us in the US—and I’m talking here as the conservation community—that working in allyship with Indigenous communities is absolutely essential. Indigenous peoples manage so much land and so many waters across the world, and do it in ways that are more sustainable.

So I feel like this is a place where we’ve learned a lot from our colleagues outside of the US. And to Darren’s point about ownership, the conservation world is rooted in taking and

owning: the national parks, the BLM [Bureau of Land Management] lands, the land trust private lands. And so that’s the framework. And outside of the US, that’s a framework that’s quite different, frankly. And then after the Penobscot project, it helped us in Maine to say, “Let this be the beginning, not the end, of our collaboration.” I’ll just speak for TNC once again, because TNC is a global organization: we’re guided by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples¹¹ and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹² That guides all our work. And it’s always a learning process for US-based conservation organizations, but I am glad we are working together in Maine and moving toward being better allies. The Nature Conservancy is committed to this worldwide. One thing I’ve learned: what happens in Maine is heard about in Māori territory [New Zealand], so we need to be as consistent as possible.

Recognizing that The Nature Conservancy joined the Penobscot River Restoration Project without having done the work of building relationships, I’m honored still today that we were welcomed into accomplishing this world-recognized effort to restore this river. But now, especially given the history of conservation that Darren references, it is time for us to do our own learning and act conscientiously to foster rematriation. And Gabriela, the Sewall Foundation has really encouraged the conservation community’s effort to do our own learning through the First Light collaboration.¹³ Together, we recognize that non-Native organizations need to do our own learning, so that we aren’t putting that burden on our Native colleagues here. I think one great part about the First Light collaboration is that we are creating change within the conservation community, recognizing our own history and finding and learning ways *together*, with our Wabanaki neighbors, to address aspects of rematriation and Land Back for TNC Maine. This ongoing learning and deeper collaboration with the Wabanaki people and Indigenous communities will support our efforts to create a world where all people and nature thrive.

The Tribes, in collaboration with First Light, have developed the Wabanaki Conservation Commission, which will determine together what rematriation looks like, “on the ground.” This is how the conservation community stops (for example)

“I think non-Native land trusts require that nobody live on the land. And they have very rigid rules about what you can do on the land. For instance, harvesting, or having ceremonial fires, or controlled burns, things like that—these traditional ways of taking care of the land that we hold in our communities across Turtle Island that are no longer practiced, and are definitely not practiced by White-led land trusts, in a daily way.”

each group approaching Donald and asking for input. That’s a huge burden for anyone, even figuring out who the heck each organization is! That learning and understanding of our own history gives us a place from which to begin to do the work of supporting voice, choice, and action—supporting sovereignty through the ways in which we give land and access back, and much more. Now when Donald, or others within the Tribe, asks us as a community to work together on a land deal that he’s identified, and we’ve said we will commit to doing that work, then together we will find a way. We do have land buying tools, for example, that we have used for decades, and sometimes those tools are really helpful. We’ve had to learn a lot about what access really means, what restoration really means.

So I would say we’re all on a journey in the conservation world. And hopefully, building trusting relationships with each other means that we can tell each other the truth when one of us stumbles—and that I really appreciate.

CS: Thank you, Kate. Mali, you joined this conversation later, so I think I missed your role in this. Can you say a little bit about that?

MO: Sure. I am currently the executive director of Bomazeen Land Trust, which is an inter-Tribal Wabanaki community-led land trust. So it is not affiliated with the Tribal governments in a direct way or overseen by them but led by more grassroots organizers, who work directly in community for food sovereignty, repatriation, and land returns.

CS: My next question builds on something I think you’ve spoken to a little bit. Are there different approaches between Native-run land trusts and non-Native land trusts?

MO: I would say so. I think the major difference that we run into at Bomazeen is that in Indigenous lifeways, we don’t see a rigid separation between living on the land and taking care of the land. In fact, you have to live on the land and be there regularly in order to carry out your role as a land protector—which all Wabanaki people hold as a responsibility from our ancestors. That’s part of sovereignty, so that tends

not to be the first instinctual understanding from non-Native land trusts.

I think non-Native land trusts require that nobody live on the land. And they have very rigid rules about what you can do on the land. For instance, harvesting, or having ceremonial fires, or controlled burns, things like that—these traditional ways of taking care of the land that we hold in our communities across Turtle Island that are no longer practiced, and are definitely not practiced by White-led land trusts, in a daily way.

I think both Donald and Darren can speak to the kind of hurdles around what land stewardship looks like to our communities versus the traditional conservation group, in terms of harvesting rights.

DR: I’m thinking about how Kate framed this issue of tools. Many of these tools exist in this space between the frameworks that we bring as caretakers—that Mali just referenced as Indigenous people—and what has been thought about from a land trust perspective. This is some of the very challenging and creative work that requires things like access agreements, for example, on lands currently held by land trusts. You would think that would be a win-win. We would have to manage the land, and they would still maintain some kind of role and have a financial and other kind of responsibility with something being held as a land trust—but there are so many rules, and these are legacies of colonial systems of property.

Quite honestly, I don’t think it’s the preference of land trusts that these rules bind them into these positions—like what Mali talked about, that it has to be emptied first and not touched, and that somehow that is for the good of the land. It is not. Look at the fires everywhere; look at everything that we’re going through and that is being further exacerbated by climate change. Even things that would be protocols of a kind—where we would say, “Hey, we want to create an access to this place for people to harvest sweetgrass”—are not

“For a funder...how do you support work that is about relationships, not just among humans but with the land, with the waters, with animals, with language?”

usually countenanced. Donald referenced this a little bit, and at the National Park they've dealt with this issue in some interesting and creative ways. But oftentimes, whatever we would do as part of a cultural access agreement, the land trust would have to kind of be out there (I mean, not literally, but it felt like it) in a white coat with a clipboard—observing us, making sure we weren't screwing anything up. They're required to make sure the land, the conservation easement, is not damaged. And that is driven through with the idea that humans and nature cannot coexist. It's still that legacy.

And so for us, it's so culturally different from the legacy of the tools that they have. So I think it's just that those are examples where I was like, Oh, man, these access agreements are gonna be way more...like, let's just return all the land, you know? I mean, I'm not giving up, and we have access agreements, and the stuff in the National Park is super exciting, and all of that. It's not to undermine that. But it is those legacies. And those tools are tied into a colonial, non-Indigenous way of seeing things.

CS: Do you want to say anything on this, Donald?

DS: I think that covered that pretty good.

CS: So you work across almost opposite worldviews of “no relationship” versus “everything is related.”

KD: Well, there's that myth of wilderness, which is that it's “untouched”—think of all those celebrated White authors who talk about the “absent wilderness.” And of course, who guided those authors to the woods is a whole other part of the story. When you can look at it through the eyes of practically the rest of the world, it's like, oh, my gosh, all the assumptions. Gabriela, you should jump in here, because you've seen it. You came into this world very much from the public health perspective and had to learn about the conservation world. And you had a lot of those “Holy cow, you do what?” moments.

GA: I think that not having been part of the land trust or environmental organizations' cultures, and also being an immigrant from Latin America that has a very Mestizo culture, I was shocked. And I was reflecting on how this is a situation where there are profoundly different worldviews and underlying values. So what's exciting to me about some of what's been evolving in Maine is that there's an openness to

engaging with cultural humility by non-Native organizations—land trusts and funders. It's a different language—literally and symbolically. I'll give an example with Sewall [Elmina B. Sewall Foundation]. We have been a funder of environmental efforts from the beginning. That's actually Sewall's origins—we're animal welfare and environmental. But in our focus area of supporting Wabanaki communities and Tribal governance, we fund language, we fund food sovereignty. And sometimes I'll have somebody ask, “Well, why do you support that?” And it's been interesting for me as a Mestizo immigrant to try to play that bridge role, because I, too, don't understand White dominant American culture—but I'm obviously also not Wabanaki. It's been interesting to try to help that translation in our organization—*that you can't separate language and what language does for your worldview and your understanding from a relationship. And a relationship is very different from ownership.* So I think that there have been some profound—from my perspective—openings for those who are non-Native to really start to understand what interconnectedness can actually mean. It is one of the core values at Sewall, and yet we have a very elementary understanding of interconnectedness compared to what Indigenous communities understand that to mean—because it is a relationship.

And it's been interesting to think about how you translate that. For land trusts, how do you translate that into what they're legally required to do and their role in the ownership of land? But for a funder, what does that mean? And how do you support work that is about relationships, not just among humans but with the land, with the waters, with animals, with language? That requires a different type of trust, a *practice* of trust. Not a consumerist, capitalist version of, like, let's shake on it and then let's sign something—but to really immerse yourself in cultural humility and to understand that the damage done to the world has primarily been because we have attacked, been violent against, resisted Indigenous knowledge.

And so there's been this sort of opening. And I see a lot of the environmental groups leaning in with trust, even though they don't fully understand it. And to me, it's an exciting moment when people can let go of controls and say, “I don't actually understand it, because it's not at the root of how I

“Eighty percent of land-based biodiversity is on the 22 percent of lands that have some form of Indigenous control, with the Indigenous people being only 4 percent of the population of the planet.”

was raised. But because of my trust in you and my trust in the need to repair the harm that’s been done, we are going to start changing the way that we operate.”

And I think that’s some of what you saw, Cyndi, at the “Solidarity in Action” panel.¹⁴ You saw a multiracial, multisectoral group of people who were saying, “Yes, we don’t all fully speak the same language to each other, but we believe in this.” And that, to me, shows some progress beyond agreements or any sort of legal arrangement. I think that you have to have the cultural shift, and I think that is part of what people in what is now Maine have really been investing in: how do you create cultural shifts and cultural humility, so that we can actually respect and trust what our Wabanaki peers are telling us? It’s not just, “Oh, here’s a project,” but, “Here’s a way of life. How do you engage in partnership?”

And I’ll take this opportunity to say that my primary message to funders would be to understand that when you’re working with Indigenous communities, you’re doing international work. I don’t think most foundations that are working in the United States would tell a foreign government what to do. We need to understand that this is international work. So how does that change how we practice? How does that change our engagement and our relationships?

CS: So given everything you said, are Indigenous communities leading this work? And if so, how did that get to happen? I’ve heard lots of things happening differently in Maine than are happening anywhere else I’ve heard of so far.

DR: I’m reflecting on the panel...a couple of things: It is clear that the message that Indigenous people are sharing is resonating across a lot of different communities—non-Indigenous communities. So if you look around the world at climate justice movements, it is now Indigenous people, primarily, at the forefront of climate justice discussions. And I think when you’re looking at the most cutting edge, as a scholar I’d say the scholarship has caught up with this notion from the World Bank, which came up with the first kind of correlation of the concentrations of biodiversity on Indigenous-held lands by Indigenous people.¹⁵ Eighty percent of land-based biodiversity is on the 22 percent of lands that have some form of Indigenous control, with the

Indigenous people being only 4 percent of the population of the planet.¹⁶ Scholars have now also shown that the best kinds of conservation have Indigenous people in leadership and other kinds of firm roles. So in terms of measuring the efficacy, the long-term benefits, the biodiversity—the scholars are now catching up to the kind of correlation piece the World Bank published back in 2008.

I think the next step—and this is where I connect back to our panel—is the step that is happening now; this is why I think there’s the kind of proliferation of people thinking outside the funding box: that now the resources should be in Indigenous people’s hands as well. The next shift is, clearly, Indigenous peoples’ knowledge and participation and leadership. All these things are at the forefront of what we know to be good in terms of caretaking our planet, but we’re still not the decision-makers around how funds get allocated and how national policies get developed—although, here in the US, the fact that our secretary of the Interior [Deb Haaland] and the director of our National Park Service [Charles F. Sams III] are both Indigenous people is a shift. I think we’re seeing some good work come out of the mere fact of their leadership in those positions.

So I think it has become clear that we, as Indigenous people, are at the forefront of the interrelationship, and the scholarship supports that. But then the next framework is about decision-making and authority that come only with the control over resources, and how resources are allocated, and how political decisions are made—which is probably always going to be this big challenge in terms of being a minority and being treated as wards. We haven’t been treated as equals. All those things, those histories, play into some of these challenges.

CS: Thank you, Darren. Mali, do you want to say anything about that? How do you see the role of Indigenous communities as leaders?

MO: Darren did a great job. I’m a community organizer, so I don’t really bargain in the upper echelons of anything. I will say that on the ground, in the community organizing spaces, I think Indigenous people are leading a lot of the conversations. And we are at the forefront of a lot of the racial justice organizing and solidarity-building parts of the environmental

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justice movement, as well—especially in Maine. And I’m really proud to say that Bomazeen has been a big part of that and of restoring our more communal practices of governance and of relationality. I feel like that sounds very vague because we don’t have time to go into it, but I’m proud of the work we’re doing on the community level—and on the more national level, and regional, even. We are still actively being colonized—and until Indigenous sovereignty is respected and we’re able to govern over our lands, I don’t see that that shift has happened yet, obviously. Giving us control over the resources of our lands would be an important step. (Darren said it better.)

CS: No, no, I love what you added, Mali. Thank you. I wish I could hear an example of the governance that you’re talking about. Do you have one you could share?

MO: Something that immediately comes to mind is that I think Wabanaki and most Indigenous cultures have incredible equalizing practices. Colonial society is set up in a very hierarchical way, and our kind of social relationships end up mimicking that. Even on the ground level and in a lot of the movements, that has been something that has torn things apart: that we can’t get away from these practices of hierarchy even when we’re trying to build movements of solidarity. And I find that in Wabanaki teachings, equalizing practices like talking circles and these other things that we receive from our ancestors—the way that they did things—are very helpful. That’s one example that comes to mind immediately, in addition to recentering the feminine.

CS: Thank you so much. Donald, did you want to add anything?

DS: Within my lifetime, I’ve seen part of the relationship between all the organizations and the Tribes. I think it’s reaching a point where it’s important for us to have allies, to work together to achieve our goal. Anytime the Tribes get land back or have access to land, it’s helping our culture, helping the next generation to practice that culture—because sometimes you have to be on certain parcels of land, certain areas, because land is considered sacred. And if you have

that view that all land is sacred, you’re going to treat it with respect. And nobody can argue with that. I like the way things are going. It could get better, but we’re going in the right direction.

KD: I would just add that my colleagues are being incredibly gracious, so thank you. The system is set up in ways so that organizations like the one I am part of have power within the current systems. Our organization has the money, we have the relationships to the Department of the Interior, et cetera, et cetera. It’s all set up for us to not let anyone else lead. I’m humbled that anyone would say that we’re making progress. So I’m glad about that—but we are in a system that we need to be a part of changing.

One thing particular to Maine that’s different, in addition to the lack of true sovereignty, is that here there are more lands in private ownership than anywhere else in the country. So that immediately shifts to why our work within the conservation community is so essential here: our work is based on private interactions between willing sellers and willing buyers. One of the reasons is 19.6 million privately owned acres of land.¹⁷

CS: Kate, when you say “private,” can you explain that more?

KD: With 89 percent of the state being forested, Maine is the most forested state in the nation, and 92 percent of that land is held in some form of private ownership.¹⁸ Organizations, investment firms, timber management, and individuals own lots of land, as does the state of Maine. It is hard to influence access vis-à-vis all private lands. You can’t go ring a doorbell easily with 90,000 different landowners! So I think it is incumbent on private landowners here to consider how to adjust our thinking and our approach. TNC, by the way, owns 300,000 acres of land.

CS: And the goal is for TNC to give it all back? What is the ultimate goal? I mean, I know there are more goals besides the land, and I’m just wondering.

KD: The goal is to work together to figure out ways to get back to the conversation around repatriation. And as Mali

“Our governance systems use kin terms to denote roles and responsibilities. In our confederacy, there are brother Tribes, sister Tribes, grandfather Tribes, mother Tribes. These are roles and responsibilities, not forms of control over.”

mentioned earlier, it is complex. Together we are focusing on what TNC’s Brie Fraley, director of North American Indigenous Lands and Communities, calls, “Land Forward.” That may mean that there’s Land Back when wanted and appropriate—*appropriate* meaning it’s wanted and we have ways to get it transferred—but it’s the more holistic vision that Mali talked about with rematriation. I think more about “right relationship,” ability to live your culture. I mean, one of the outcomes of the Penobscot River Restoration was having a sovereign right be fulfilled to fish in a river that’s been polluted for 150 years by my people. You can’t fish in a river in which the fish are contaminated and giving everyone cancer.

So it’s more holistic, getting back to what we were talking about earlier. There are over four million acres of land that are owned or that are in some form of conservation.¹⁹ And I mean, I could tick off how many thousands of acres that nations own. And then there’s what Mali spoke to, which is the diaspora that doesn’t have any legal claims, other than traditional forms of ownership that she’s trying to shake up.

CS: So there’s an overlay of contradictory frameworks.

KD: Yes, all of these things are true at once. And I keep saying we have to catch ourselves every step of the way. Everything that we do is so rote: when a landowner approaches us to buy a key parcel, we typically say, “Here’s this opportunity, let’s call the state of Maine and see if they would like to work with us on it.” Now, instead, we can say, “Let’s go first to the Wabanaki Commission on Land and Stewardship to explore this opportunity.” But it’s also being enough in authentic relationships with the Passamaquoddy Tribes that they invite us to be part of supporting their projects.

CS: I have one more question for the Indigenous leaders on this, if you don’t mind. What do you see as the goal? What would you like to see? I know that there are some constraints here. But when you think about what you would like or what your community would like, what are the goals? Or is that even the right question? Mali, what do you think?

MO: I would typically wait to hear Donald or Darren answer.

DS: What I’d like to see is important areas come back to us that have supported the Tribe for thousands and thousands

of years and are a major cultural component of our Tribe. Areas like that need to come back to the Tribe. The Tribe needs to access those areas, because we need to fulfill our culture. Because part of our culture has been taken away from us. Over 400 years, our culture has slowly been taken away—and now it’s flowing back.

And one of the good things is, we’re able to access different areas and practice some of our cultural traditions. So the number one goal probably would be to get everything back, but we know that that’s not gonna happen. We don’t want to displace any homeowner or anything, but there’s so much land out there, so many important cultural sites, that would only benefit the Tribe. That’s what I look at.

CS: I’m sorry if I’m being dense with this, but does it matter to you, access versus ownership? It does matter, right?

DS: Yes. When you have ownership, you don’t have somebody watching over your shoulder. But there are situations where access is important, where the ownership isn’t going to change. You have to realize that in this world, we try to find different ways to work around it and to work together.

DR: Our reluctance, perhaps, to answer the question in terms of we want x percentage back is because it violates the fact that we make these decisions in concert with each other and with the land trust community. The framework that we have set up—governance—is critical. And one of the things that has been challenging, I think, for our funders at times is that we are modeling a form of interdependence across the Wabanaki Commission and the First Light Learning Journey—the land trust. People want to know who is in charge, who is the final decision-maker—and they don’t ask it in a way where they think that that’s a culturally wrong kind of question. They want accountability, and they should have accountability. All those things.

But the problem is, our accountability is not a vertical system of owners over a thing. If that’s all you’ve ever seen, then that’s all you know to ask for. In terms of accountability, our system is a system of governance that is in relationship, constant relationship with people, and it is interdependent. So it is not one over the other. Our governance systems use kin terms to denote roles and responsibilities. In our

confederacy, there are brother Tribes, sister Tribes, grandfather Tribes, mother Tribes. These are roles and responsibilities, not forms of control over.

I think when we try to model interdependence, it looks confusing to the traditional funding and property system frameworks. But we have governance documents. It's like the Two Row Wampum, the canoe and the boat tying together—we can be separate but interdependent.²⁰ Those sorts of formulations. All of that is a challenge to the property system, the conservation tools that we mentioned before. But we are modeling a form of interdependence that we can't answer. You talk to individual Tribal citizens—we want to have access and some level of control over all the most important places. Those are easy things to say, but we don't know how that sorts out, because we're working in a process way, an interdependent way, that is as valuable as any signed agreement that you could possibly have.

So I think that's what I would say, and it's made this work more challenging—where people want final answers. They want to know: Who's in charge here? Who's gonna do what? But our process is just a little bit different from that. And I would hope that people who want to support this work can understand that this system, even in its accountability frameworks, is going to look different.

MO: Governance is decision-making power, of course, over the places that are most special and sacred to us. And in most cases, those have been the first things that the state has tried to take away. And this entire conversation has me thinking back to all of the treaty conferences that I've read about. And especially, there was one around Arrowsic Island in Southern Maine.²¹ As the story goes, the men leaders were the only ones that the English would communicate with, so they went and had a treaty conference, and then they all had to go paddle to a different part of the island to talk to the women and to get the actual consent of the rest of the community.

So when it comes to our rivers, or our mountains, or any places of historical significance, I think that we should still have that decision-making priority for our people. And that is beyond just the Tribal nations that are still recognized in Maine to my community also, the Abenaki of Odanak and Wôlinak First Nations—speaking as myself, my community—which is exiled across the border and whose ancestral lands are in Western Maine. I think if we were really doing

something in an equitable way, we would be returning to that decision-making priority for all the Wabanaki Nations that are relevant to these lands. That's holistic, that's historically accurate, and that is the kind of healing that we're aiming for.

CS: Do the people that are not in Maine get to be part of the conversation?

MO: No, we don't, and I don't want to turn this conversation into being about that. But I do think that alongside the other nations who are here who don't get invited to the table on the important conversations. I think we should all be invited to the table.

CS: Are there other Tribes in Maine that are not part of this conversation?

MO: No. I think we're advocating in our movement in Maine for all the Tribes that are federally recognized in Maine to be at the table. I'm saying all members of the *confederacy* should be at the table. I'm sorry—I think that approaching it from a state border mentality isn't necessarily accurate.

CS: Thank you so much. One last question for you, Gabriela. What is the role of the Sewall Foundation in all of this? Are you the leading funder organizing other funders?

GA: Sewall takes our commitment to equity very seriously, and for us that means working to be good partners to our Wabanaki communities—and that has to include influencing the philanthropic sector to work beyond ourselves to repair the harm. I guess I would want to start by saying that 0.4 percent of all philanthropic dollars in the US goes to Indigenous communities. So I just want to start from there. But the context is that the philanthropic sector does not support Indigenous communities. It's appalling. So one of the primary things that Sewall has done over the past four years has been to significantly increase our funding to Wabanaki communities and Tribal governments. It is still very small compared to what it should be within that context.

What I would like the goal of this work to be and Sewall's participation in it to be is to contribute to culture change that's rooted into institutions and envelops governance and decision-making—to Mali's point. I think until we change, culturally, how we understand decision-making, everything will be incremental, and there will be that clunkiness that Darren was talking about. We're still trying to make Indigenous worldviews fit into institutions that are colonized, and understand things through property and ownership and

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through transactions. So I think that the most sustainable thing that could happen is for there to be a true culture shift to the relationships, and through some of this work, and through Land Back, and through wealth transfer.

One of the things that the working group has been working on is raising funds, so that those funds will be managed and decision-making will be by Wabanaki people. That, to me, is a really good intermediate step. How can we have a transfer of resources so that decision-making truly is in the hands of Indigenous people and can be made in a way that is culturally appropriate? Because I don't believe that is how it's being done. I'd like to think that what Sewall is doing is really helpful, but it's still a transaction. Mali still had to submit an application. We can say, “Well, now we're doing three-year grants, so that's better, and our grants applications are shorter and more streamlined, and we don't require much reporting and primarily give general operating funds.” Those are all good things and we work to be flexible and learn as we go—but they're an intermediate step.

I think that what we should aspire toward is to truly change the culture, so that we enhance our understanding. Because, frankly, if we look at what Darren said about the Indigenous leadership and environmental work and climate work—our collective survival is dependent on our not being so culturally stubborn as to not engage and expand our cultural understanding of the world. So I think that we really need to grow: the philanthropic sector needs to become less transactional, and in doing so change our culture so that we can have a different form of decision-making that shifts resources significantly.

CS: Thank you so much. I really appreciate all of you spending time to help me understand so much. I hope that we get to continue the conversation someday. And thank you so much for your work.

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Belonging

by Atheeva Reji Kumar

When Nela was little, the outside world was endlessly fascinating.

She was born, as many were, with green hands, green legs, and a little green heart.

She spent all her vacations at her grandparent's house, or rather, outside their house, to be precise.

There, everything was ALIVE. The walls were flush with mosses, plants, and bugs, some of which looked like they didn't even belong to this planet.

Nela was cautious at first, but curiosity won over in the end. As she ran her hands across the velvety patches, the small tendrils unfurling their tight coils, shades of brown, green, slate blue, and pale pink, her mind ran with stories and make-believe.

The neighboring field, soil rich and brown, pulsated with earthworms. Her brother said he would catch them and use them to fish, and she was both intrigued and disgusted by their squirming, naked-seeming figures.

Every morning, a man came with lotus buds, and she would unfurl them, petal by petal, feeling the soft papery texture. And then came her favorite part, taking apart the stem and eating the small seeds inside, like her grandma taught her to do. They didn't taste like anything in particular but something about the process was deeply satisfying.

Back home in the big city, most of her time was still outside, and her green heart flourished. Tendrils of green and brown spiraled all around her, growing with her, becoming a part of her.

For Nela and her friends, every day was a new frontier to be explored. Climbing trees, eating sour leaves and mock strawberries, watching over butterfly pupae in anticipation of their hatching, "cooking" with flowers, poring over encyclopedia entries of dinosaurs and deep-sea creatures, and imagining the adventures they could have.

They all felt so powerful in that dreamlike state, when life was magical and anything seemed possible.

As she grew older, though, time outside was replaced by words, by metal, and by the blue-light glow. Visits to her grandparent's house became less frequent, then ceased entirely. At some point, the house was sold, and her grandparents moved too.

Nela didn't mind. To be honest, she didn't even notice the shift. This was how it was meant to be, after all. We all have to grow up someday. And she wanted to be a good girl, to be successful—to make her family proud and to live up to her potential.

The tendrils and patches of green and earth that had made her, retreated, wilted and disappeared—and her little green heart was forgotten. In their place came patches of metal, plastic, glass—inorganic, sturdy, and more suited to her surroundings.

As Nela changed, so did the world around her, and the bright colors and sunshine of her childhood were replaced with imposing blue, black, and silver structures, towering overhead. Perhaps the world had always been like this, and all that had changed was that now she saw more of it. She wasn't sure.

This new world, sterile and all-encompassing, blanketed her everyday in tasks. Each morning she woke up with a list of things to do, and she made sure to stay on top of it, for it would be disastrous if she fell behind. An ever-growing milestone, always something new to produce.

Day after day, this went on, but slowly it started to make less and less sense to her.

What were they actually building to? Who was she really doing all this work for?

There didn't seem to be an end in sight, just a ceaseless, meaningless churning, constructing things that did more harm than good.

She became afraid of how the world was growing—the twisted, convoluted, and intertwined layers of harm. She couldn't keep up with it and she knew that it couldn't keep up with itself. Eventually, something would have to give. Something would collapse. And she, and others like her, would take the brunt of the fallout.

She wanted to be what she was supposed to be, do what she was supposed to do. Everyone else seemed okay with it, but somehow she couldn't bear it—couldn't sit at her desk all day, and couldn't stand the blue-light glow.

It made her head hurt, made her feel sick to her stomach, made her feel...empty, so empty.

She tried to convince herself that the things she had to do were important; but try as she might, deep inside she didn't believe it.

She wondered if something was wrong with her, or if maybe she was depressed. But how could anyone *not* be depressed by the bleakness of it all? She did everything in a haze of apathy, going through the motions.

* * *

It was within this bleakness that she visited the forest one day.

Her limbs felt like stone, all four dead weights, but she made herself walk because her parents were going, and she didn't want to worry them. Ever the good girl.

She trudged along, oblivious to the scene around her, head still full of numbers and words and the blue-light glow.

But you can't ignore the forest for long. It crept into her mind without her even realizing it. It started with the forest path. As she walked, feeling the crunch of fallen leaves underfoot, it occurred to her all of a sudden how so many people must have walked before her to create this path. She imagined the very first person that had walked here. How *this* became the path and not any other. And now, all these years later, she was here. How powerful the simple act of walking was.

She tuned in then, as their guide told them stories of the forest.

Little things, like how the dock plant grows next to the stinging nettle and how the woodpecker gets rid of termites, made her feel as though there was a sense of balance, of rightness in the world.

She looked up at the sunlight streaming through the gaps in the leaves, dipped her hands in the shocking cold of a stream, and observed a fragile spiderweb spun between two rocks.

When they stopped to rest, she picked up a fallen pine needle and began to make a little bracelet.

Nela felt something stirring deep within her, something growing. A tendril of green: her little green heart she'd forgotten, that had lain dormant all this while, waiting for a time when it could emerge again.

The intoxication of the forest did not wear off, even back home. She started to notice things she never had before. The silhouette of the branches in the sky, the blushing crimson of the Gulmohar tree—and had there always been so many butterflies in her neighborhood?

And leaves, oh the leaves. The unassuming leaves. The endless shapes, patterns, colors, and textures. Not just green but dozens of different subtle changes of shades: purples, reds, yellows, oranges, browns—a veritable mosaic at her fingertips. The delicate veins running across them, patches blooming on the surface, each unique and beautiful.

As she kept observing, she began to see so much where before she had seen nothing. She was filled with a gentle curiosity. Not a need to decode and dissect but rather to enquire—to ask, "Hello, who are you, and what are you doing here?" The same curiosity of *back then*, when she was a child and full of questions that she asked just because she wanted to know. Not for any purpose, not to produce anything, but just because.

The more she saw, the more she felt the pull to abandon her previous life and embrace the green.

At the same time, she felt too far gone. Her hands were cold, inorganic, her face half metal—she was so far from who she used to be. She wondered, if she died now, would she go back to the earth? Would it want her back?

Her green heart was growing, but she felt like there was no place for her as she was now.

She could...rip out the metal, the plastic, the parts that didn't feel like her. But this was all she'd known for so long she was afraid of what would happen. The way the blue light was taking over the world. She worried that if she were to turn her back on it, it might destroy her too.

She could stamp out her green heart once and for all, go back to the blue-light glow.

But could she really? She was too different now.

And she was sure that the others would notice. They would be able to tell that she wasn't one of them. They would see the green in her heart.

She felt paralyzed by the choice, stuck, in an in-between state. It felt like she didn't belong in either world. She wondered why she even had to choose. Why did she have to be defined by extremes? She felt angry, then, at the unfairness of it all.

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Back at her desk, she tried to work, tried to push the spiraling thoughts out of her mind.

But tendrils of green snuck in through the window, pulling at her, trying to distract.

She smacked them away and tried to focus, focus, FOCUS.

All of a sudden, it struck her. An answer to the thoughts that had been circling over and over in her head. Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't about choosing once and for all. Maybe, it was just about the *right nows*.

Maybe it was okay that she wasn't sure about the big picture...the whats the hows or the long-term. Maybe it was okay that she had no idea who she wanted to be or where she would go from here.

What she did know was that she didn't want to sit at this desk for a minute longer. Not when there was sunshine and the outside world calling to her.

Now that she'd remembered who she was, she didn't want to ignore her heart anymore.

She shut the screen in front of her, got up, and let the tendrils of green pull her away.

ATHEEVA REJI KUMAR is an emerging writer from Bangalore, India.

Sanctuary

by Hunter Liguore



Did she really know anything about Sanctuary?

—William F. Nolan, *Logan's Run*

"Are we doing this or not?" Daisy stood with one leg on the shovel, scrutinizing its homemade design while waiting for her sister. Her impatience increased, since she was already starting to sweat in the open sun and they hadn't even begun the work.

"Did you hear me, Ahlia?" She didn't need to be looking through the VR headset her sister was glued to in order to experience her sister's euphoria or to know what she was watching. The images and information seemed to just be *there*, like a faded dream in her own memory. She gave Ahlia an elbow jab, getting no response. "HELLO!"

When Ahlia was unresponsive again, Daisy did what anyone in her situation would do and got to work, forcing Ahlia along without a choice.

"Hey!" Ahlia chimed. "That's not fair!" The movement of their shared body made the projection shaky, jolting her mind out of the green paradise she was visually experiencing. "I wasn't finished!"

Daisy stopped, not because her sister asked her to but so she could inspect the end of the shovel and fix the ties that had already come loose after only a few jabs. Made from cutting a half-moon shape from an abandoned, super-durable plastic detergent bottle nano-glued to a broken broom handle and reinforced with plastic ties, it should have been sturdy enough to turn the compacted soil. A few adjustments and... Daisy stopped midmotion, feeling the lightness and joy coming from Ahlia's experience. "We can have this *here*, Ahlia, if you'll help me."

"I already have the same thing—why do I need more?"

Daisy closed her eyes, seeing and feeling what Ahlia was seeing and feeling.

...created to offer a retreat of natural beauty and a harmonious setting for human, plant, and animal alike, the Lunar Lake Sanctuary is set apart from the hubbub and drill of city life, offering a steady stream of peace accompanied by the occasional notes of the carillon playing from the fountain tower. It's your time now for instant renewal...a place where you can get lost in the meditation of nature, to find yourself...

The view was enticing, causing Daisy to linger a little longer—long enough to experience the green trees bowed over a summer country road, the birdsong from unseen places, the gushing waterfall beside the bell tower flowing into a pond that branched off to a serene stream, where along the bank a mother fox drank and her babies played.

Daisy shook off the feeling. "I know what you're doing!"

Ahlia chided, "You can't blame me for not wanting to waste my whole day working. It's so hot out here! Where's the climate control, huh? Can we go?"

Daisy forced their body into a crouch so she could touch the ground.

"I meant *inside!*"

Daisy ignored her sister, examining the open space. *Sure*, right now it was brown and flat, without a tree in sight for as far as she could see—or at least up to their apartment building, and all the others circling the empty plot, a half-mile or so away. Deemed a toxic brownfield, steeped with contamination from decades of tech garbage and now lifeless, nobody came here—burial plots were deemed too good for this space. Who owned it, no one knew anymore, which made it free, in her mind. And that made it valuable to opportunity.

"Will you please just look and see what *I* see." Daisy tried to impose her own imagination, big and bold enough—and with equal excitement—so that Ahlia might be impacted in the same way as the VR scenery and be inclined to join her in the undertaking. It would be easier this way, to work together on the same thing rather than in conflict. At least then she'd have

one person on her side. Right now, anyone she told about creating a sanctuary said she was crazy: “Who makes a garden outside? Who goes outside—period!?”

“I do,” she told her friends, determined.

Ever since Daisy was a little girl and had read a novel about a wizard who put a seed in the ground and made it grow into a fruit tree, she had wanted to do it herself. She’d don a cloak with sewn-on stars and raise a magic wand, pretending she had the magic to make an apple. But when she grew up and learned in school that it wasn’t magic at all but something she could *actually* do—like, *for real*—it inserted a lifelong dream to become a wizard, or rather a *fortimor*: one who fortifies a relationship—a cooperater with the earth.

“See, over here we can build a tower, just like yours.” Next, Daisy pointed toward the south. “Here we can build a pond and make a stream in a big circle.” She turned them around, hoping Ahlia would give up the imaginary paradise and envision the real one they could make together. “We can plant a garden and trees...”

“Um...yeah, it will take a *lifetime* for all that to happen, Daisy—and besides, where are you getting the trees and plants, or the material for this tower? You couldn’t even find a shovel to buy and had to make one!”

Daisy was optimistic. “We’ll think of something.”

“Oh, right, we’ll just *listen* for the answer,” Ahlia scoffed. “Like that will work.”

“How would you know—you’ve never even tried to talk to the earth!”

“But *you* have.”

Daisy frowned, her failure thrown back at her. “It doesn’t mean it can’t happen...” She felt the soil with her fingertips, instinctively talking to it, asking for help, to be shown what to do...it wasn’t something she’d read or heard, but something *inherent*, a thing she *knew* deep in her core...even though nothing ever came of it.

She glanced out at the dusty brown field, her resolve wavering. “Maybe you’re right...maybe it *is* all just a fantasy.” She tossed the shovel aside. “You win.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Ahlia took off the headset. “I’m starting to get a slimy film all over my arms...do you think we’re coming down with something?”

Daisy didn’t answer, curtailing her tears.

“Wow, it’s so bright—do you feel that?”

“What?”

Ahlia shrugged. “It’s soothing and cozy-warm all over me...kinda like when we put on our warm laundry.”

Daisy placed her forearm side by side with her sister’s; they watched and waited.

“And my face too. It’s touching me there!”

“Yes, Sister, I feel it, even without you.” Daisy chuckled. “You don’t know what’s causing it?”

“No, I mean...” Ahlia tried to explain. “With VR, I’ve felt warm *inside*, but never on the outside like this.”

“It’s the sun, Ahlia.” Daisy tilted her sister’s chin upward. “It’s nice, right?”

“Pfft! I knew that!” She smiled. “Ooh, did you feel that? What was it? It kind of brushed against my skin...”

“That’s the wind.” She took Ahlia’s hand in hers and held it high, fingers open wide. “People used to play out here all the time and probably didn’t even notice the sun and wind—or maybe they took it for granted...look, you can see the moon.”

“That white splotchy thing?” Ahlia’s face scrunched up. “I thought it only came out at night!”

“It’s as much part of the day as the sun is—you never noticed?”

“I thought it was prettier. I mean, I’ve seen pictures, but they’re always of the Luna Lake Sanctuary, so I just assumed it’d be...you know...updated by now. More green, anyways.”

“There’s more, Ahlia.” Daisy pointed to the ground. They lowered together, allowing Daisy to put a handful of dirt into her sister’s palm. “It’s brittle, but we can change that.”

“Do you really think so?”

“We just need to listen. We can’t decide for it—that’s why it’s like this: someone a long time ago thought they knew better.”

“What will it sound like?” Ahlia leaned forward, putting an ear to the ground, jolting Daisy with her.

“Oh, Sister, you don’t need to do that—it’s inside you. A feeling will come. But you’ll try it with me?” Daisy felt anxious asking, the attention slightly overwhelming. “Maybe together it will work this time.”

“What do I have to do?”

“We just need to concentrate in earnest...” With their knees in the dirt, Daisy lifted her hands to her heart; Ahlia did the same. With eyes closed, they stilled their minds.

“Is something going to happen?” Ahlia asked innocently. “Will there be a picture soon?”

“No,” Daisy whispered. “Just listen to the silence.”

“But silence doesn’t have a sound...”

“No? *Shh...*”

* * *

It could’ve been a few minutes...an hour...a half-day...passing in the infinite present moment, shaping the next unfolding instant, as the ground and sky merged and the wind swept a soundless breeze around the sisters. United in stillness, they felt a unifying presence of peace that was whole and aware.

Dig.

“Did you hear it?” Ahlia elbowed her sister.

“I heard it too!” Daisy scooped up the makeshift shovel, feeling an instinctive urge to dig. Ahlia grabbed the other. Together, they began to break up the hard ground.

When the shovels broke, they got on their knees and used the plastic scoop, lifting the dirt, the decades-old tech litter, the occasional pebble or rock until they had a good-sized hole.

“Now what?” Ahlia asked, catching her breath.

“I don’t know.” Daisy was sweating—they both were—and watched the drops fall and color the dirt. “Let me try again.” She put her hand to her heart.

“Anything?” Ahlia asked. “I’m so hungry...so thirsty...”

“I can’t concentrate with you blabbing on!”

Ahlia licked her lips. “*Mmm*, if we only had an apple...that would do it. *Oh!* If only we had an apple from a tree growing right from *this* very hole!”

Daisy was halfway to jumping, inspired, tugging her sister along. “That’s it, Ahlia! Do you hear it! We need an apple... and then...I see it! We need to make five holes—all in a circle, one for each seed...then we water!”

“We’re going to grow apples on top of spent cellphones and broken monitors? Maybe poisonous ones...*if* they grow!”

Daisy saw her point. “But that’s what I heard; so we need to do it.”

“Still, it’s a lot of work, Sister, especially if nothing comes of it.”

Daisy sighed, disappointed.

“But I’ll do it for you, if that’s what you want.”

Daisy hugged her sister, excited.

“But when we’re done, if it’s a failure, you have to come with me to the Lunar Lake Sanctuary, and no complaining—deal?”

They shook on it.

At their apartment on the 100th floor, they grabbed a few cooking utensils—a knife, spatula, big spoons—to dig the ground and holes; they also took an apple, one grown half a world away in an underground lab under sun lamps. Before returning, they tried to see the hole they’d made, but the vacant ground looked all the same from so far away.

Back at the brownfield, the sisters worked together, digging four more holes, creating a circle, piling up the garbage they’d uprooted in another area farther away. When they were done, they cut the apple in slices, crosswise, observing the tiny star and seeds within. Daisy placed one in a hole and Ahlia covered it with dirt, and then Daisy watered it. They continued to take turns—placing, covering, watering.

As they finished, Ahlia asked. “How do we know if it’ll work?”

“Do you remember the story I loved as a child?”

“How can I forget? You read it every day for years—I couldn’t get away from it!” Ahlia chuckled.

“Haha.” Daisy continued. “If you recall, the wizard trusted she was being guided. That was the magic—her willingness to believe in the nature spirit around her, even though she couldn’t touch it or feel it.”

“Then our work is done, Sister.”

They stood back, appreciating their hard work and reminiscing on certain moments of difficulty that now seemed worth it. It made them smile to see the ground covered with their many footprints, making it appear full of life and movement.

“What next?” Ahlia asked, eager.

Daisy checked her heart, touching in one last time. But she felt good—*complete*. “Now we wait until we hear what we should do next.”

Many weeks transpired before the sisters heard anything deep within them. Like the *fortimors* of old, an inner voice revealed itself—it was unmistakable, a *silent silence* that felt whole and aware, so different from the usual busyness of their own thoughts.

“You heard it, Sister?” Daisy asked, already one step toward the window of their apartment. They looked out toward the brownfield, surprised to see a crowd of people gathered. “Oh no! What are they doing?”

“Our seeds! We need to hurry!”

The sisters went as fast as they could to the elevator, then began the half-mile walk, noticing the unusual amount of people outside on the sidewalks, all heading in the direction of the brownfield.

“Why so many people out today?” Ahlia seemed worried.

“I don’t know.” Daisy asked a man next to her where he was going.

The man shrugged, saying, “I don’t know exactly; I just woke up and something told me I needed to go for a walk out here—first time since I was a boy. But here I am! Not as bad as I’d expected, this outside business.”

Once at the brownfield, Daisy and Ahlia navigated the circle of people until they reached the center of the spectacle: hardly two inches in height, their apple trees had sprouted!

People spoke with excitement, speculating about what they were and how they’d gotten there. Daisy wanted to take the credit but something told her not to...

Let them believe it’s magic—because it is magic!

Not the unexplained kind, Daisy realized, but the stuff born of cooperation—when union and harmony reigned in the hearts and minds of humans, enough to create *with* the earth rather than *against* it, *anything could happen*. It was like that when she was at odds with her sister: two wills in the same body trying to go in opposite directions. But when they were patient, able to hear the needs of the other, they came into balance. The appearance of the trees was evidence of it.

“Grow!” someone called out, as if to encourage the tiny saplings.

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea,” said another.

Grow, grow, grow!

“Like this,” said Daisy, taking the lead, extending her hand out to the person beside her, then to Ahlia, who took the hand of the person next to her, until there was a communal circle of people around the tiny trees. “Just feel love and growth in your heart,” she told them. “No need to force anything, or to command the trees to grow—we can support them just by emanating our love and joy, so they know they are supported. They will do the rest.”

“Come on, let’s try it!” Ahlia encouraged.

At first, there was a lot of chatter and debate about it; some even left, not understanding what all the fuss was about—we’ve *got trees on the VRTV!* But those who remained stood for some time under the sun and moon, emanating a bright joy and warmth, as evidenced by the smiles on their faces.

As Daisy raised her own vibrational energy—higher and higher it seemed to go, like one of those olden-time kites that would get caught on the wind—a sensation of wholeness overcame her, one that felt like she’d *become* as bright as the sun rather than only a spectator of it. Gradually, she let go, uninhibited, peaking in bliss and effervescent euphoria.

When she opened her eyes, Daisy expected to see everyone around her experiencing the same thing. But to her surprise, the lot was empty. The crowd had moved on when the saplings failed to “do anything.”

“I guess this means you won, Sister.” Daisy sighed. “We can go now to the Luna Lake Sanctuary, no complaints—I might even enjoy it.” She looked at Ahlia, expecting her to be hooked to her VR already. Instead, she was astonished to see her sister smiling, face wet with tears, reaching out to hug Daisy, saying, “You were right!”

Puzzled, Daisy asked, “What was I right about?”

“Everything, Sister!” She began to sit, urging Daisy to sit also.

“I don’t understand. Nothing happened—people think our little trees are going to shoot up to the sky instantly, but it takes time.”

“I know, and I don’t want to miss any part of it!” Ahlia was still smiling, watching the trees. “Did you feel it, Sister? I could feel the life force of the saplings, just like I can feel you, like we are one BIG family!”

“But don’t you want to go inside? It’s getting hot.”

“Oh no, I want to stay right here.”

“What about going to the Luna Lake Sanctuary?”

Ahlia shook her head. “This is far more interesting.”

Daisy felt a new kind of peace inside her, emanating from her sister’s experience watching the trees, and smiled, allowing herself to feel it too, this strange new congruity.

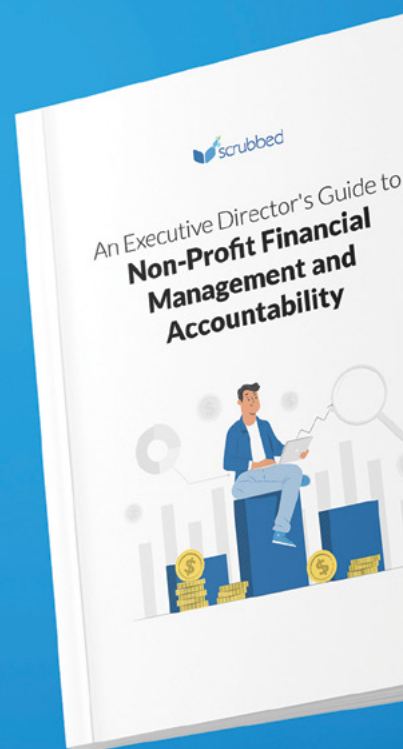
Around them, a few people had returned, gathering to watch the saplings grow. Some put down a blanket and had a picnic; two children kicked an old computer mouse back and forth. A couple more joined in, until a new game was underway.

“See, Sister,” Ahlia began, “all is not lost. Soon, this will *all* be green again. We just need to keep listening...”

“I see it, Sister.” Daisy smiled, lacing her arm around Ahlia’s. “We only need to believe.”

HUNTER LIGUORE is a writer from Cambridge, MA, and has published in *Spirituality & Health* magazine, *The Mindfulness Bell*, and *Writer’s Digest*. Liguore is the author of *The Modern Art of War: Sun Tzu’s Path to Peace and Wholeness*.

An Executive Director's Guide to Non-Profit Financial Management & Accountability



California Environmental Justice Organizers Are Writing the Future of Climate Plans

by Mari Rose Taruc

I suffer from climate grief and anxiety too, like our youth, who are bombarded with apocalyptic stories. And I feel more alive in community with organizers and artists, choosing to write our destiny. I'm grateful to be part of the leadership of the California Environmental Justice Alliance... to make these climate policies take root and bloom on the ground so we are able to weather the storms.

The climate plan (or Scoping Plan) that California passed in December 2022 was full of praise for the environmental justice (EJ) community.¹ This was a very different tune from that of the first climate plan, in 2008, when the conflict between the California Air Resources Board (the state climate agency) and the Environmental Justice Advisory Committee (the state's official climate advisory body) led to EJAC members filing a lawsuit against the state for environmental racism.² Through 15 years of developing more sophisticated climate justice policies and advocacy strategies, the California EJ movement's climate leadership is shining.

CULTURE SHIFT

I don't believe that White people are going to save us. I didn't believe it before and I don't believe it now, with the climate crisis. I've seen colonizers decimate our people, from Asia to the Americas. The Principles of Environmental Justice³ call on us who have survived hundreds of years of colonization to raise our leadership and develop solutions in the long arc of our liberation. We work best with folks who come in solidarity for our joint liberation; so it was natural to be skeptical of White climate scientists and environmental policy wonks who were selling climate policies riddled with harms to low-income communities of color. Early policymakers pushed pollution-trading schemes that would concentrate emissions in our neighborhoods at the fenceline of oil refineries and dirty gas power plants. Their early action programs subsidized solar panels and electric cars for rich White households, and left out communities of color economically. We weren't buying it.

We knew that real climate solutions had to come from Black people, Indigenous people, people of color on the ground who had firsthand experience with climate



We knew that real climate solutions had to come from Black people, Indigenous people, people of color on the ground who had firsthand experience with climate impacts and could propose solutions that would meet this existential challenge.

impacts and could propose solutions that would meet this existential challenge. And besides, White climate activists were losing the national political battle and they needed BIPOC power to win.⁴ So, EJ organizers charted a new path for climate justice policy that fundamentally altered the California political landscape.

Similar to the early EJ movement's redefinition of environmentalism to be more holistic than the 1970s environmental movement frame of resource conservation ("save the trees," "save the whales"), California EJ groups reframed climate problems and solutions to a frame articulating that we also had to save the people dying from the causes and catastrophes of climate change. True to community organizing, we found entry points for everyday people to see themselves in the dialogue. Academic friends published the report *The Climate Gap: Inequalities in How Climate Change Hurts Americans & How to Close the Gap*,⁵ which helped to mainstream our perspective: we knew the problems of air pollution in our neighborhoods that caused asthma in our kids; we experienced grocery and utility bills skyrocket when climate disasters hit; we felt the forced migration of our global families due to storms, floods, and fires. These experiences also meant that frontline communities were already developing solutions to deal with the crises: pollution controls on oil refineries and industrial sources, localizing and democratizing food and energy resources, and tools identifying the zip codes and census tracts of the communities most vulnerable to climate change, so that we could target support for them.

I wish I could tell you that our climate solutions were met with open arms by established climate experts in the early 2010s, but instead they lashed back with condescension, saying to EJ leaders that we didn't know what climate policy was about. Whether it was their overt racism or microaggressions, we clashed. Their carbon fundamentalism would tell us that our solutions to reduce air pollution were too broad because climate change was about carbon dioxide. (Read more on problematic narrow frames of carbon and climate in Shalanda H. Baker's *Revolutionary Power* and Michael Méndez's *Climate Change from the Streets*.⁶) Heads of climate

programs told us to wait for the trickle-down effect, after they funded rich folks to slap solar panels on their roofs and buy Teslas. Environmental policy wonks said it was outside of the climate frame to claim that affordable housing next to bus lines would reduce transportation emissions.⁷ State agency leaders said not to mess with their climate fund, which gave away millions to the biggest industries under free carbon permits, and that they didn't want to dedicate funds to EJ communities for our climate projects.⁸ Well, that all turned around with EJ organizing.

BIPOC organizers envisioned how EJ could live and thrive in government planning to meet climate goals. Mostly, we had to turn the White heads of agencies and governments to look at the California we knew: over 50 percent people of color. BIPOC are the majority of our state.⁹ We made them see where the millions of EJ communities are, and how our cumulative impacts work on the Environmental Justice Screening Method highly influenced the design of CalEnviroScreen,¹⁰ released in 2013 and which over time has directed billions of dollars for California climate investments.¹¹ We forced them to recognize that EJ communities were essential rightsholders in climate planning. See the EJ sections and notes on the committee (EJAC) that became formalized in California's first major climate law: 2006, Núñez, the AB 32 Global Warming Solutions Act. This climate bill failed the first time but passed the next, thanks to Latinx caucus voters who insisted on the inclusion of EJ.¹²

We grew champions from the community and legislature to run state bills and take seats of power in the 2010s, including dedicating EJ board seats and EJ staff at the CARB climate agency.¹³ Educating and partnering with legislators from the California Latino Legislative Caucus,¹⁴ California Asian American & Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus,¹⁵ and California Legislative Black Caucus,¹⁶ EJ helped reframe climate policy, including: SB 535 (2012, de León, climate investments to benefit disadvantaged communities);¹⁷ SB 605 (2014, Lara, reduction of super-pollutant emissions like black carbon from diesel trucks);¹⁸ AB 197 (2016, E. Garcia, prioritizing direct emissions reduction);¹⁹ AB 617 (2017, C. Garcia, community

I think of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the Black folks who didn't make it out of the floods. I think about the conditions that worked against them being able to survive, and their echoes in American city planning, which has segregated neighborhoods by race and class and by desirable versus inhospitable locations.

emissions reduction);²⁰ and the valiant introduction of AB 1839 (2020, Bonta, California Green New Deal), which unfortunately failed to pass.²¹ And across the national EJ and climate justice movement, we were coalescing our stories and strategies for a Just Transition,²² to move us away from an extractive economy that depletes our labor and energy and toward a future of building new local living economies with our hands. If a solution doesn't include EJ communities in governance, ownership, and benefits, it's not a real solution.

FOSSIL FUEL PHASEOUT

I write this section sitting, with my laptop, in a Richmond, CA, park overlooking the blue waters of the Bay—waters flowing through the Golden Gate Bridge toward the Chevron Richmond Refinery that has disfigured a hill with big oil tanks and towers of smokestacks. It wasn't always like this. Standard Oil took over this scenic land in the Bay Area more than 100 years ago and expanded oil refinery operations like Chevron Corporation, which we now know as the single biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions in California.²³ Back in time, I imagine the natural state was hills dotted with oak trees and waters teeming with abalone that the Ohlone people stewarded. And if I dream the dream of Black, Latinx, and Asian youth organizers of Richmond, I see a future home and economy for them that has decommissioned the oil industry and replaced it with local businesses and parks that can sustain them. This dream is part of how EJ groups are writing climate policy and writing the end of fossil fuels that cause global warming.

The mother of California's climate laws, AB 32 aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent of our 1990 emission levels by 2050.²⁴ (OK, that was wonky.) What this means is that California's economy, the fifth largest in the world, has to clean up and shift its economy from polluting cars, factories, electricity, and buildings to running on clean energy and zero-emission sources. It's an immense pivot—it doesn't happen overnight. There are competing ideas. Old—dinosaur—businesses vehemently resist this change. Oil and gas companies that account for more than half of California's

climate pollution spend tens of millions a year to lobby against our climate bills and programs.²⁵ Frustratingly, climate staff at the state agencies were and are slow to act and have even resisted EJ ideas. And we have to meet our climate targets.

In 2021, CARB staff's first proposed climate Scoping Plan to meet California's 2045 emission reduction goals was terrible for EJ, because they ignored the top EJ recommendations from the last Scoping Plan that not only reduce climate pollution directly but also protect EJ communities. But then they had to convene the EJAC to advise them (as written in the AB 32 law). (Ha!) Agency staff who have historically spent a lot of time with industry lobbyists now had to spend a lot of time with EJ leaders for the Scoping Plan process. The staff approach to give the fossil fuel industry more time to follow the law, more funds and allowances to convert, and more accounting tricks to meet the climate targets was a tired set of climate programs that EJ communities didn't want to see again.²⁶ Could CARB practice that giving approach to the most impacted and vulnerable communities instead? The EJAC and EJ groups proposed stricter scenarios to meet reductions in multiple sectors of the economy, including petroleum refining. Decades of fighting these fossil fuel fools in our communities through science, organizing, and lawsuits informed our climate policy recommendations. The EJAC also brought CARB staff and board members to visit EJ communities at the fenceline of these massive oil refineries and dirty gas-fired power plants so they could get a taste of the struggle and need to wind down these industries. And after nearly two years of the Scoping Plan drafting and debating (the final, 2022 plan is the fourth update), EJ groups won a commitment for the phasedown of oil and gas extraction and refining with an interagency process to coordinate this plan.²⁷

CLEAN TRANSPORTATION FOR THE MASSES

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I want to enjoy summer, but being a climate activist, I'm aware of the dangers that lurk when you mix rising temperatures, drier landscapes, higher energy use for air conditioners, skyrocketing utility bills, failing transmission lines, and the dirtiest gas power plants fired up for the power hungry.

inhospitable locations—and those places where investments are supposed to go but never arrive, including in transportation. Coming from a low-income immigrant family, I knew the struggles of saving up enough money from low wages to own a car. Taking the bus was better, and it was familiar to me, since the Philippines had great public transit by colorful jeepneys and buses. I saw folks of color, grandmas and students, have a kinship on the bus. And this was an unrecognized form of environmentalism that EJ groups fought to include as a climate solution.

Transportation emissions account for 40 percent of California's climate problem.²⁸ From the northern Klamath River Tribes to Barrio Logan in San Diego on our southern border with Mexico, California is over 800 miles long. Car culture was peddled by oil companies to great success, breaking down public transportation systems. We lose a lot of time stuck in traffic. Our long coastline has invited trade and the building of major ports for goods that haven't been good for our lungs, because they involve living with nearly two million diesel trucks. So when early climate policy advocates told us we were going to be saved by electric cars, you can imagine that we EJ folks rolled our eyes!

EJ climate solutions to California's transportation problem involve prioritizing pollution reduction from diesel trucks; promoting affordable housing at bus and train hubs; improving and providing free transit passes, clean school buses, and public shuttles across rural areas; and land use planning to improve air quality and prevent displacement—all, under the technical term *vehicle miles traveled* (VMT), to reduce transportation emissions.²⁹ We weren't opposed to electric cars if the state subsidized lower-income households with incentives and built car-charging infrastructure in our neighborhoods (the state has decent plans for this equity program, now).³⁰ These are EJ lived experiences, and our proposals for the state to use its authority to influence local regions and municipalities to get on board in doubling the state's target for VMT reduction was one of the EJ policy wins in the Scoping Plan.

GRID OF THE FUTURE

I want to enjoy summer, but being a climate activist, I'm aware of the dangers that lurk when you mix rising temperatures, drier landscapes, higher energy use for air conditioners, skyrocketing utility bills, failing transmission lines, and the dirtiest gas power plants fired up for the power hungry. The last several summers in California saw the worst wildfires, drought, and power shutoffs we've ever experienced. Most of the catastrophes were attributed to corporate utility mismanagement, especially Pacific Gas & Electric sparking the biggest wildfires California has ever seen and cutting off disabled people's electricity. To make matters worse, Governor Newsom waived pollution-control laws to "keep the lights on"—to the immediate detriment of EJ communities living next to dirty gas plants (read the EJ report, *California's Underperforming Gas Plants*³¹). Plus, there are the longer-term dangers of keeping nuclear plants open beyond retirement dates. It's a mess: people are trying, and dying, and we need a way out. And this isn't just happening in California.

The zen part of me says we have everything we need—we just have to organize our way through chaos: aging infrastructure, politicians in the pockets of corporations, policy frenemies. I remind myself that we got damn good energy laws passed, like SB 100 (2018, de León) to power the state with 100 percent clean renewable energy by 2045,³² and AB 693 (2015, Eggman), \$1 billion for solar on multifamily affordable housing that allow renters to benefit from solar programs.³³ As the California Air Resources Board looked at 2045 climate targets, however, they first proposed building new fossil gas power plants to get there. (What?! Absurd!) An EJ battle ensued. The big EJ and big green partnership under the Regenerate California campaign to retire the 200 gas power plants in the state got organized with the EJAC—and victoriously convinced the state to eliminate any new gas-fired electricity generation in the 2022 Scoping Plan.³⁴

Fight the bad and build the new are two main gears of the Just Transition strategy. Fight bad power plants: check. Build new clean energy: check. We also need to localize, own, and

I have more battle stories to tell, as desperate ideas pop up from dying industries or White supremacy rebranding itself as climate policy.

govern our energy system. These are significant parts of our vision for the energy grid of the future. Campaigns are under way calling for local clean energy (“distributed energy resources”), energy democracy (including community- and worker-controlled utilities), and community resilience (safe hubs with microgrids, food, and water). There’s people power actively engaged in policy and decision-making spaces to keep moving us toward the new energy system we need.



I have more battle stories to tell, as desperate ideas pop up from dying industries or White supremacy rebranding itself

as climate policy. It’s taken many years of grit serving on the EJAC, advocating with community members in the halls of the state capitol, and building bridges to get here to tell these climate justice wins. I suffer from climate grief and anxiety too, like our youth, who are bombarded with apocalyptic stories. And I feel more alive in community with organizers and artists, choosing to write our destiny. I’m grateful to be part of the leadership of the California Environmental Justice Alliance, building power among the 10 biggest base-building EJ organizations in the state, to make these climate policies take root and bloom on the ground so we are able to weather the storms.

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For Moses

by Peter Wallace

It began to rain.

It rained for thirty-nine days straight—not quite beating the biblical record. But still, with its relentless pounding, its creation of rising torrents in the streets, its cascading into basements, its engendering mold in attics, its drowning of small animals caught in low areas outside, its pouring into the inside of cars as they tried to float, its darkening of days so the sun had no rising or setting but was simply an ugly gray glow that swelled irregularly, it made us think the world was coming to an end by vigorously dissolving—by covering its mistake with cold erasure. Someday, things would start again, we thought, but we would not see it. We were to be a part of the obliteration.

The neighborhood felt abandoned and under siege after the first week. A foot of rain a day made it difficult to even see, much less think, with the bruising sound of endless cloudburst everywhere. The Crawleys four doors down packed up their van and headed to California. Abe and Sally, the older hoarder couple across the street seemed to disappear. Jason from next door went and banged his fist on their front window but got no answer. Toward the end of the first week, he broke in. He found just damp boxes lining the hallway, a living room filled with the flotsam of late-night TV offers, enough dishes to run a catering service piled on the counters, and packets of cereal and bags of veggie puffs that had swollen open with moisture and mold. The basement was filled with water to about a foot from the ceiling. Jason swung his flashlight around, but there was no sign of the couple.

The children next door stopped boating in the street when it became a real river. The rain was coming down too hard to make boating enjoyable, anyway. Cindy, the eight-year-old, started crying on the tenth day and couldn't stop. Her agony echoed off the covered front porch, where her parents put her occasionally to give the rest of the family respite. We could hear her like a distant siren though the rainy tumult. All our boilers had stopped working due to the rising water tables, and our skin paled and crumpled into bloodless prunes. Henry and Oletta down on the corner kept their electric heating system going until the beginning of the twelfth day, because they had a generator stored on a top floor. They let people come in two at a time to dry some clothes and towels. But then they ran out of gas, and darkness swallowed us every evening, candles becoming precious commodities so even reading was a luxury. Every roof leaked, water creeping down drywall and soaking up from floors to create a latticework of black spores that grew out of the paint and wallpaper. Everything smelled of cold, incipient rot. All the houses used their fireplaces as stoves, their furniture as fuel. We had our last cup of coffee at the end of the second week. It was delicious, even without sugar and half-and-half.

There was a lot of talk of leaving, especially after the electricity went out everywhere, the phones stopped working, and the gas got turned off when there was an explosion a few blocks away because of a leak. But if you hadn't acted quickly like the Crawleys had, there was no place to go. All the roads, even the interstate, were blocked by new lakes. People tried to gun their cars through but got swamped and had to wade in waist-high sewage to get to higher ground, sloshing back to their homes in the end, but without the possessions they'd had to cast off in their cars. Charles, our eldest, launched out to explore downtown in spite of Aida's screams of objection, telling him he couldn't disobey his mother. He trudged out of the backyard carrying the little bright-yellow one-seater kayak we used to tootle around in on ponds on camping trips. In that arrogant seventeen-year-old way, he casually assured us he'd be back in a few hours, and paddled down the street. Aida stayed by the front window until it was too dark to see and she finally came to bed with me and ten-year-old Jewel. Jewel couldn't sleep by herself and would curl herself against my back, while Aida draped her arm over her until Jewel's distraught dreams made her limbs jab out into the night.

Charles came back three days later, just when Aida had declared she was going to go looking for him and tried to enlist Henry's help, over the reasonable objections of Oletta. I had to hold Aida shivering and sobbing in the rain until she surrendered to us, and then she went to lie down upstairs. An hour later, the sounds of Charles's heavy feet on the front porch brought Aida running to the front door. Charles was setting down a boy of about seven who he'd been carrying on his shoulders, and a woman, the boy's mother, was following them up the front stairs with a suitcase and a large purse. She didn't have a

coat on, and her clothes stuck wetly to her like a second skin, showing the folds of her stomach. Her hair dripped like kelp fresh from the sea. Her eyes were red, and you couldn't tell what had been tears and what had been rain.

Aida got them all inside. Later, she told us that she'd had to gently take off the woman's clothes after taking the luggage from her hands. She'd rubbed her down with our least-used towel and gotten some dry clothes for her. She let her lie down on the bed and came back to the living room, where I'd gotten the boy into some of Jewel's clothes, while Charles stripped to dry himself in front of the fire. It was the first time in years I'd seen my son's naked body, and it was astonishing to see a man's body in its place. He wrapped a throw blanket around himself as Aida came back in. He said the woman's name was Miriam, her son, Bobby. (Yes, your brother, Bobby.)

Charles told us the story of his three-day trek to downtown. He had met someone with a battery-operated short-wave radio—I didn't know people still had those—and it was hooked up to some car batteries. The radio confirmed what we'd been suspecting—that the rain covered the western half of the continent. In places, flooding had wiped out whole communities. Landslides and dam breaches were changing the geography, wreaking havoc and tragedy across the country. There were rumors of bands forming to declare themselves independent countries with the right to do what they had to do to survive—but that was mostly because FEMA and the National Guard had fallen apart when lack of funding and a government shutdown stopped the paychecks, and people went home to protect their own. Charles had come across a couple of groups of men ransacking buildings for useful items, but no one was attacking anyone yet. He had to be careful even of his dorky kayak—boats were precious, and he became good at hiding it. Downtown was under about twenty feet of water, so if people were in the buildings, they were on the third or fourth floors and had broken windows so they could come and go in rowboats or rafts. The library was on a hill and it was filled with people. He said it was like a movie set, with little camps everywhere. They had figured out how to have a fire in the atrium, and were able to vent the smoke. They used books as fuel. He said there was one guy who was responsible for keeping the flame going. He laid each book individually on the pyre, saying a small prayer and kissing it beforehand.

An impromptu ferry system had sprung up. People who had large enough boats, such as motorboats they kept on trailers at the back of their driveways, had been able to get to some of the deeper roads and highways, and were taking people back and forth. Everyone seemed to be looking for someone. At the library, especially, there were handwritten signs asking for information about people, with descriptions and a lot of exclamation points.

Charles found Miriam and Bobby on one of the bridges over the river in the early morning of his third day out. The water had come up so high there was no space between it and the bridge, and it swished along in a red-gray maelstrom. It was louder than the rain, with the pounding of fallen trees and great logs smashing into the bridge and then being gobbled under by the swift water, eventually bobbing up on the other side. Miriam was standing there as though hypnotized by the violent current, while Bobby sat on the other side of the bridge, glancing up at people who were crossing where cars used to cross, shielding his eyes from the downpour. Charles tried to get Miriam's attention, but she was in another world. He talked into Bobby's ear and then lifted him onto his shoulders. He took Miriam's hand and led her to his kayak's hiding place and put her in the seat. Then he pulled and walked and swam with the boy until they got back here, Miriam floating behind in the little yellow boat. That took the whole day. Bobby thought it was fun; he was a good swimmer and didn't mind the cold. They were going somewhere.

Miriam left sometime during the night, leaving the suitcase that held a couple of Bobby's things, including an electronic gamebox and a deck of cards. We haven't seen her since. Bobby started sleeping in the bed with Jewel, Aida, and me. Charles went out on more sojourns, coming back sometimes with supplies he'd lifted from someone's abandoned house or news about another catastrophe the rising floods had brought about somewhere. Once he came back with a slash on his arm and a broken finger, but when we pressed him about it, he shrugged and said that's the way things were now, and that he was okay. He was becoming a different person as the days went on—one I didn't know, but wanted to. It was like he had appeared with the rain and was becoming a bit more clear each day.

The silence woke us that last morning.

Aida shook me, but I was already awake. The occasional drip of water landing somewhere only made the silence more profound. We went out front. The sky was whitening. We could see farther down the street than we had in a long while, and we could see other people peering out. Jewel tugged at my pants and said, "Look."

Floating down the road in the race of water was a Red Ryder wagon box with a little tent on it, and a small cry came from within. I lit down the stairs and waded chest-deep into the water, angling to intercept it. I fished it out and lifted the tented tarp to find a baby inside looking furious. Her diaper was soaked, as was the blanket on top of her. Her little cloth cap had come askew. There was a nearly empty baby-bottle. There were three onesies balled up around her. And one sock. That was it.

I pulled her to shore. Everyone came down to see her. It was such a joy to be outside without the hammering of rain on our heads. Aida lifted her out of the wagon box and ripped her diaper away as the baby screamed at her. She wiped her off with a rain-soaked tea-towel, getting her clean. She opened her own shirt and tucked her inside on her breast, warming her. The baby blinked up at her, quieting.

Aida said, "Hey girl." The baby said nothing, just stared. "Your name is Moses," Aida said. She looked around at us, daring us to contradict her. "Moses," she said.

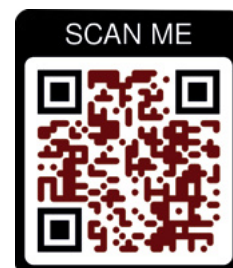
And that's how you got your name.

PETER WALLACE has written about the effects of environmental change on mental health and even on our imaginations. Besides Wallace's 2020 debut novel *Speaker*, his work has been published in *East by Northeast Literary Magazine*, *Cagibi*, *Short Circuit*, *Strands Publishers*, *Passager*, and *The Deadly Writers Patrol*.



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Forecast

by Vanessa Hua



After the weather turned, so did we.

Veering from thermonuclear wildfires to biblical floods, the violence of the atmosphere made us prone to adolescent extremes. Amid a gale, our brawling neighbors slammed into a eucalyptus that toppled and crushed them both. During a triple-digit, triple-week heat wave, teenagers tore apart my brother's classroom.

Like love, like bankruptcy, like sleep, the wild swings happened slowly then all at once. The wealthiest among us staved it off longer in their climate-controlled compounds, jetting into low-orbit during the worst of the weather.

But even trillionaires couldn't outrun the seasonal affective disorder, which lengthened and merged until the symptoms plagued most of us year-round, compounded by our grief and anger, which deepened every time another ecosystem, another species blinked out: the tiger salamander, the condor, the kangaroo rat, the marsh sandwort.

For many—for me—the end of fog led to the end of my patience. Though we'd heard that the cool gray city might become as sun-bleached as Seville by the end of the century, "someday" had arrived sooner than anyone had predicted.

After the gloom failed to materialize month after month, a blue-ribbon committee—convened around the troubling blue skies—proposed gene therapy. Like those tomatoes spliced with fish genes, we too might adapt to the wild swings in climate, but funding evaporated like the fog we hadn't known defined us.

We survived largely on the belief that its absence was an anomaly. Soon, we'd return to those contrarian summers—the ones as cold as winter—and to the blankness upon which generations of us had projected our dreams. The clouds dropping down to swaddle but also to erase, a reminder of how impermanence gives rise to possibility. No matter where we'd hailed from, we wished for silver—not the gold of this endless summer but the silver of a fog bank pouring like cream, with a scent that clarified and a briskness that slapped us out of tradition and routine.

It's been two years now, and worldwide, fog is nearly extinct. The realization that my unborn child will consider it as they might a rotary phone, a monarch butterfly, or a Tesla leaves me unmoored. As I wade into Ocean Beach—now merely bracing instead of heart-stopping—I ache for my firstborn, who will never dream about fog on the Avenues, never call upon it as a metaphor, never curse the dampness that makes a home cozier upon return, and never turn porous in the mist with someone they love.

Their generation will come of age in a city where we've lost our taste for the temperate, our dispositions like palates scorched on too much sugar, salt, and fat. The mild bland and so too the middle: the middle ground of consensus, of the collective. If only we hadn't been so self-serving, we might have forestalled disaster.

I halt before getting in too deep, struck by the thought that the extreme is how we might find a way through. Not with seawalls or another stopgap but an idea too outlandish for anywhere else—that might take root and flourish under every color of sky.

VANESSA HUA is author of the short story collection *Deceit and Other Possibilities*, among other publications, and winner of the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature.

How the America the Beautiful Initiative, the Inflation Reduction Act, and Philanthropy

Are Effecting a Just Transition in Native American and Alaska Native Communities

by Chéri Smith

■
As Indigenous people, it is in our nature to be self-reliant. The average American either doesn't know or forgets that Native American Tribes are sovereign nations here on Turtle Island—the so-called United States of America. Think about it: How can a nation be truly sovereign if it is dependent on outsiders for its energy?

There is a crucial global effort underway to protect 30 percent of the earth's lands, oceans, and waterways by 2030. Aptly named 30x30, this movement is aimed at preventing some of the worst effects of climate change and our loss of biodiversity.¹ The Biden administration is leading the US contribution to this work through the America the Beautiful initiative—which, as Secretary Deb Haaland writes, “reflects an inherently pragmatic approach that puts people at the center and outlines an inclusive and collaborative vision where locally led efforts to conserve, steward, and restore lands and waters will help us reach our shared goals.”²



Indigenous communities in our country have faced chronic underinvestment for hundreds of years, and the effects of a warming planet—including drought, wildfires, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events—have exacerbated the challenges that exist due to ongoing systemic inequities.

As noted by Native Americans in Philanthropy,

Tribal Nations, through their nation-to-nation relationships with the federal government and their deep knowledge of the ecosystems they steward, bring unique tools and resources to the 30x30 movement. In the United States, Tribes oversee approximately 5% of the country's landmass. The 95 million acres of land managed by the 574 federally recognized Tribal [N]ations encompass some of the continent's most critically important wildlife habitat, resilient landscapes, and irreplaceable cultural assets. Indigenous Peoples have been deeply connected to these ecosystems since time immemorial and have developed generations of environmental knowledge that has helped them nurture and steward lands and waters.³

Tribal nations are on the frontlines of climate change, and its effects threaten Tribal homelands, sacred food sources, cultural resources, and traditional ways of life. Indigenous communities in our country have faced chronic underinvestment for hundreds of years, and the effects of a warming planet—including drought, wildfires, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events—have exacerbated the challenges that exist due to ongoing systemic inequities.

THE INFLATION REDUCTION ACT

In direct response to these crises, in August 2022 the Biden administration successfully passed the Inflation Reduction Act (H.R.5376), which has been touted as the most significant climate bill in US history.⁴ Not to be confused with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934,⁵ this new IRA promises to bring significant benefits to Indian Country. The question is, will it?

The earlier IRA was a set of wide-reaching reforms designed to improve the quality of life for Native Americans—especially those living on federal reservations. It was the centerpiece of the Indian New Deal, “focused on protecting tribal land, reestablishing tribal governments, and spurring economic development among” and within Tribal nations.⁶ But history shows that it fell far short. There were some

successes,⁷ but the 1934 act's highly touted material benefits largely failed to materialize—and when they did, the federal government unevenly distributed them among Tribes. If one is even a bit familiar with Native American history, one is now wondering if this new IRA will live up to its ambitious intentions for Indian Country.

H.R.5376 is far from an environmentalist's ideal: compromises include carveouts for the oil and gas industries, such as new offshore drilling leases, so as to garner the support of Senator Joe Manchin, a conservative Democrat from West Virginia and a critic of earlier versions of the IRA that more greatly constrained the fossil fuel industry.⁸ But the IRA allows our government to do what climate scientists have been advising for several decades—make meaningful investments in decarbonizing our nation's energy sector and begin to incentivize the transition from extractive and exploitative fossil-fueled energy to clean and regenerative energy sources. Whether the IRA will spark a Just Transition remains to be seen—but after nearly a year of being immersed in the legislation and early efforts to bring its fruit to bear for the benefit of our Tribal partners, skepticism and optimism are vying for first place in the arena that is my brain.

The IRA includes more than \$272 million in a climate and energy investments package tailored for Native American Tribes, administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.⁹ This funding is earmarked for climate resiliency efforts, fish hatcheries, and drought mitigation programs in Native communities. The bill also authorizes over \$150 million for a new program to electrify homes lacking electricity in Indian Country and improve energy efficiency in homes and Tribal buildings. A \$145.5 million share of the funding is being provided directly to Tribes, with the remaining \$4.5 million for BIA administration costs. The money is to be spent over 10 years.¹⁰

Additionally, the bill significantly expands U.S. Department of Energy Tribal programs. The measure authorizes more than \$75 million in loans to Tribes for energy development and increases the loan guarantee program for Tribes from \$2 billion to an unprecedented \$20 billion.¹¹

My optimism is bolstered by the fact that American Indian land comprises approximately 2 percent of US land but contains an estimated 5 percent of all renewable energy resources. The total technical potential on Tribal lands for electricity generation from utility-scale rural solar resources alone is about 14 billion MWh, or 5.1 percent of total US generation potential.

We witnessed our federal colleagues at the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs and the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Economic Development make a concerted effort to listen to their constituents and advocate for this historic and much-needed legislation.

Among the most impactful provisions of the bill, there are two new tax rules: “direct pay” and “transferable credits.” Under the direct pay provision, taxpayers can elect to treat the amount of certain specific credits as prior payment of tax, allowing entities with little or no tax liability—like Tribes—to accelerate the use of these credits.¹² This provision is a game changer for Tribes, making renewable energy development on Tribal lands exponentially more beneficial.

My optimism is bolstered by the fact that American Indian land comprises approximately 2 percent of US land but contains an estimated 5 percent of all renewable energy resources. The total technical potential on Tribal lands for electricity generation from utility-scale rural solar resources alone is about 14 billion MWh, or 5.1 percent of total US generation potential.¹³ Bypassing traditional tax equity structures and using the \$20 billion in funding from the Tribal Energy Loan Guarantee Program has the potential to unlock a beneficial cycle of self-determined capacity building within the Tribes—and will, hopefully, lead to massive amounts of Tribally owned, utility-scale clean energy projects, and result in liberation from federal dependency.

In the months since the passing of the Inflation Reduction Act, our team at the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy has been working closely with our U.S. Department of Energy colleagues in the Office of Indian Energy and Policy Programs—as well as the Loan Programs Office and Department of the Interior Office of Indian Economic Development—to raise awareness among Tribes about the availability of the favorable financing options and tax credit monetization incentives this groundbreaking legislation has created, and to support them in writing the grants and loan applications necessary to secure the funding.

After the passage of the bill in the United States, Senator Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, said, “Native communities have the technical expertise, capacity, and place-based knowledge needed to develop effective climate change and energy solutions.”¹⁴ While I agree with the senator on place-based knowledge, I have to disagree on the balance of that statement. Some Native communities have the technical expertise and capacity to develop clean energy infrastructure; the majority do not. Without the expertise and capacity-building support of clean energy technical, financial, policy, and workforce development and training experts, even the most well-funded projects run the risk of failure. With the absence of these essential capacities, Tribes are left in the challenging and expensive situations we’ve seen them in so many times before, with unfinished projects, unpaid debt, and the all-too-familiar anguish of being let down by the US government. Worse yet, without experience in this sector, Tribes often fall prey to unscrupulous consultants and developers. As a result of this vulnerability, all the benefits of energy development—and control—have historically flowed away from Tribal communities.

Score one for skepticism—and therein lies a primary reason the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy was formed. Until Tribes have built their own capacity and cultivated Native energy leaders with a grasp of the many nuances of clean energy development—and the knowledge and networks to secure unbiased advice and technical assistance—they remain at risk of exploitation and at a significant disadvantage. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples are the original stewards of Earth. It only makes sense that Tribes lead this transition away from extractive and exploitative fossil-fueled economies and toward a clean energy future.

Furthering concerns is the problem that, even with projects fully capitalized, current utility practices and our broken federal energy regulatory system inhibit the ability of Tribes to pursue renewables *fully*. Tribal communities are often subject to discriminatory pricing for electricity, and frequently

With a history of oppression by government and businesses, Native American Tribes are hesitant to engage with companies—especially energy companies—for fear of continued exploitation of their homelands and the abundant natural resources they hold.

face discrimination and purposeful misinformation when attempting to connect energy projects to the grid. While Tribes do have the freedom to form their own utilities to overcome these problems, the process is complex and requires deep expertise in energy policy, finance, utility infrastructure, and energy technology. As such, currently, fewer than 30 Native American Tribes have successfully separated from outside energy providers and created a Tribal utility.¹⁵

The Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy was formed because our team of Native and non-Native advocates and experts understood the profound need for more coordinated, thoughtful, and culturally sensitive systems to support our relatives, if they are to successfully navigate their unique circumstances to take advantage of the sudden abundance of federal funding.

PHILANTHROPY FOR ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY

None of this would be possible, however, without philanthropy. When I established the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy, I made a conscious decision to fund our operations only with philanthropic dollars, for a few imperative reasons. Accepting federal funding, which is fairly abundant for nonprofits and might seem logical for us to pursue, would hinder our ability to influence the types of systems change that will be required for us to achieve our mission. First, we can't be employed by the US government while advocating for it to reexamine its historical failures to enact equitable policies and provide effective programs for Tribes. Second, being philanthropically funded allows us to provide many types of support to Tribes at no cost to them. This is critical for underresourced Tribes lacking the financial and administrative capacity to embark on the challenging and circuitous journey toward energy sovereignty.

Above all, providing support to Tribes at no cost goes a long way toward establishing trust. After centuries of enduring the oppression and exploitation of colonization, it is reassuring for Tribal leaders to not have to be concerned that our support will be unaffordable or that the organization is looking to serve its own financial interests, as has historically been the case in Indian Country.

Responding to the expressed needs of Native American Tribes and our public, private, and philanthropic partners, Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy is offering the critical technical and financial assistance and wraparound services Tribes are seeking to build their own capacity—to access and manage the historic amounts of federal energy infrastructure and climate funding, and ensure these historic investments are implemented in an equitable and just way. We do this by offering support to Tribes through four key pillars, built upon a strong and deep foundation of Native American cultural values: Technical Assistance & Project Finance, Energy Policy & Government Relations, Workforce Development, Education & Training, and Events & Information.¹⁶ Serving as allies, guides, and partners, we work hard to uphold the value of self-determination, as we believe that for this to be a Just Transition, it is essential for this work to be done by Tribes and Tribal members—by the people for the people—as much as possible.

With a history of oppression by government and businesses, Native American Tribes are hesitant to engage with companies—especially energy companies—for fear of continued exploitation of their homelands and the abundant natural resources they hold. To minimize the chances for harm to our Tribal partners, the Native-led team of experts at the Alliance serves as both a vetter of and a buffer between Tribes and energy service providers. To qualify as a member of the Alliance and be introduced to our Tribal partners, energy service providers must meet rigorous standards set by our full-Native board of directors and expert advisory council.

The Alliance also provides the federal agencies administering IRA and other funding programs feedback from Tribes to help them address and eliminate the inherent inequities in federal grantmaking processes. By serving as a conduit for a bidirectional flow of information and feedback between Tribes and our federal agencies, we are striving to minimize the barriers and maximize the effectiveness of these historic levels of funding.

Currently, the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy is supporting over two dozen Tribes in developing more than three total gigawatts of clean energy on their homelands. This is the equivalent of taking six coal-fired power plants and their dirty emissions off the grid, and is enough clean energy to power more than one million homes.

Currently, the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy is supporting over two dozen Tribes in developing more than three total gigawatts of clean energy on their homelands. This is the equivalent of taking six coal-fired power plants and their dirty emissions off the grid, and is enough clean energy to power more than one million homes. We are expanding our teams and programs to meet the steady increase in demand from Tribes, and continue to forge strong relationships with foundations and individual donors to cover the costs of administration.

There is a common misconception that philanthropy isn't comfortable serving a role in building the future. I haven't found this to be true. In fact, without the perceptivity and compassion of our foundation program officers, the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy simply wouldn't exist. In 2021, our founding donor, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, invested three-quarters of a million dollars to support the expansion of our grassroots program. Upon learning about the impacts of climate change on Tribal communities coupled with the systemic inequities standing in the way of a Just Transition, Kate Barnes, MacArthur's senior program officer, understood that federal funding alone wasn't going to be enough to solve these cataclysmic problems.

Since then, the MacArthur Foundation has invested over \$1.2 million to further the work of the Alliance. Kate Barnes has also helped to encourage other big donors, including the Energy Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, McKnight Foundation, and a new pool of philanthropy—Invest in Our Future—to commit millions more to ensure that we can bridge the gap between federal funding and what the Tribes need to truly build the foundation for a sustainable future fueled by regenerative clean energy. This is where our optimism soars.

Historically, US-based philanthropic support of conservation efforts led by Tribal nations has been largely nonexistent and has often been approached through a Western lens that disregards the knowledge of Indigenous peoples. As Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship continue to prove effective and gain recognition as a critical strategy to achieve the goals laid out by 30x30, we are seeing a paradigm shift.

The federal government recognizes this shift and has ensured that the IRA provides significant funding for Tribally led conservation efforts.

Late in 2022, the leadership of Native Americans in Philanthropy and the Biodiversity Funders Group recognized the need to capitalize on this unprecedented opportunity and bring public and private funding together to support conservation work led by Tribal nations. As Native Americans in Philanthropy describe it, the two organizations, "in partnership with 15 leading funders, announced the launch of the Tribal Nations Conservation Pledge...at the White House Conservation in Action Summit" in March of 2023. "To date, funders have committed \$102.5 million [in support] over the next five years to support Tribal-led conservation work.

The pledge calls on foundations and philanthropists to allocate a self-determined percentage or amount of funding to support the biodiversity and conservation efforts of Tribes, inter-Tribal organizations, and Tribal consortia."¹⁷ The founding funders "are The Alaska Conservation Foundation, The Christensen Fund, The Decolonizing Wealth Project, The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, The Grousemont Foundation, The JM Kaplan Fund, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Resources Legacy Fund, RE:wild, The Walton Family Foundation, The Water Foundation, The Wilburforce Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and The Wyss Foundation."¹⁸ The list will continue to grow as more funders commit to the pledge—"The Tribal Nations Conservation Pledge demonstrates an important commitment to a new way of thinking about conservation that centers [on] the people who are most impacted by climate and biodiversity crises but [who] also hold the knowledge on how to best steward our lands and water. This Pledge represents a shift in climate funding by recognizing and supporting Native communities who have long been leaders in this work."¹⁹

Innovative approaches are required to solve endemic problems—and significant collective efforts like this pledge are key. As such, while Native Americans in Philanthropy served

While we acknowledge the painful history, we must also acknowledge the tremendous efforts of colleagues in Washington. Because of them, optimism wins.

as fiscal sponsor for the Alliance until our 501(c)(3) status was awarded, we began planning for organizing an additional pool of philanthropy dedicated to supporting Native-led clean energy initiatives. Between the two initiatives—with over \$200 million in combined funding dedicated to Tribal climate and clean energy—we won't completely level the playing field, but we'll make great strides toward the goal of climate and energy equity.



There were several reasons why the original IRA failed to realize reformers' hopes. Primarily, it was a blanket solution that did not address the disparate needs of the hundreds of federally recognized Native American Tribes and Alaska Native villages. Whatever its merits prove to be, it was destined to be controversial for Tribal nations, because it was created by a federal government with a history of deceiving, dispossessing, and murdering Indigenous people.

While we acknowledge the painful history, we must also acknowledge the tremendous efforts of colleagues in Washington. Because of them, optimism wins. The significant levels of unrestricted investment that big philanthropy is making—coupled with the capacity support from NGOs like mine—make us more than hopeful that this generation's IRA will achieve its objectives for Indian Country by providing the materials necessary for Tribes to *lay the foundation on which they can build their own clean energy futures*.

In the near decade that I have been working in Tribal communities, I haven't met a single Tribal leader or Tribal member who wants to continue the cycle of reliance on the federal government. As Indigenous people, it is in our nature to be self-reliant. The average American either doesn't know or forgets that Native American Tribes are *sovereign nations* here on Turtle Island—the so-called United States of America. Think about it: How can a nation be truly sovereign if it is dependent on outsiders for its energy?

NOTES

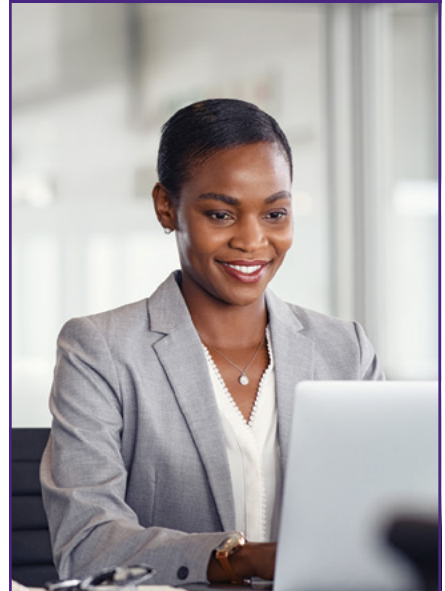
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CHÉRI SMITH is a woman of Native American and European descent who has held senior leadership roles with energy organizations—including the American Council on Renewable Energy, Tesla, and SolarCity—and senior advisory roles for the U.S. Department of Energy, Interstate Renewable Energy Council, and New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. Smith is descended through both of her parents from the Mi’kmaq Nation of present-day northern Maine and the Canadian Maritime Provinces. In 2016, she founded the organization now known as the Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy, of which she is president and CEO, to leverage her deep experience and relationships to support Indigenous peoples in their self-determined pursuit of renewable energy as a means to diminish poverty, mitigate climate change, and restore true sovereignty and hope.

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Elder Tek

by Christopher R. Muscato

The mayor scowled at the teenagers in her office. Heads hung low, they awaited the reprimand. She studied their postures, the flush of their cheeks. That one. The boy whose forehead was so red it seemed likely to combust. He'd be the first to crack.

"Three teenagers, raised in this community," the mayor began, "who should know better than to trespass in a rewilding zone, and who may have insulted our esteemed guests."

She glared at each in turn, spending a little extra time on the boy at the end. "What punishment is appropriate? We'll see how much damage you've done."

The mayor turned, and bowed. Out from the shadows stepped a man, ancient and weathered as the trees. Each of the teenagers felt their heart stop.

It was him. Elder Tek himself, speaker of the nomads' council, the most esteemed of their most-esteemed guests.

Elder Tek sat, facing the teenagers. "I will ask you three questions," he said. "Your answers will determine our course of action. Why have I come?"

He looked at the girl. She snapped straighter. "The nomads protect coastal ecosystems so that we may all live better with the land and sea."

Elder Tek turned his gaze to the boy next to her. "What do my people do?"

The boy closed his eyes as he concentrated. "The nomads build and maintain clam beds, seagrass meadows, marsh gardens, and coastal prairies. These managed ecosystems trap carbon, provide nurseries and sanctuaries for keystone species, and allow sustainable harvesting for our people. It also stabilizes the shoreline against severe weather, fires, and sea-level change."

Elder Tek turned to the last youth, the boy with the burning forehead. Elder Tek leaned forward. "Where is my homeland?"

It was almost impressive, the speed at which the boy turned from bright red to ghostly white. The nomads were... nomads. They knew which ecosystems needed tending at which times of year. They traveled the coastline doing this work, welcomed and celebrated by the communities that hosted them. "Your home is...everywhere," he began.

The boy was saved by Elder Tek, who raised a merciful hand to silence his mumbling. The teenagers gaped as Elder Tek began to sing, and a story took shape of an island offshore and of people who nurtured it for generations. Earth warmed and the sea rose. The island drowned. But the people did not abandon it. They cultivated a seagrass meadow there, honoring their homeland even beneath the waves, and brought their knowledge to the coast so that no more communities would be lost. The song finished. Elder Tek sat in silence, the story seeming to linger in the very air around them.

The mayor stepped forward. "I will give you one more chance." She turned to the boy whose forehead was reddening again. "Why were you in the rewilding zone?"

"We wanted to see if the legends were true!" he blurted out. "They say that whenever the nomads arrive, ghosts of the past come to the shore seeking forgiveness for the harm they caused!"

The mayor turned so the children would not see the smirk at the edge of her lips. "I see. Go. Elder Tek and I will discuss."

The children backed from the office, bowing and sputtering apologies. Once they had gone, the mayor sat next to the revered elder.

"Think it worked?" she asked. Youths these days—so hard to instruct in the teachings that mattered.

Elder Tek smiled. "A healthy mixture of stories and wisdom and a touch of shame is as productive as it is sustainable."

He leaned closer, tight creases pinching the corners of his eyes. "After all—as I recall, many years ago it worked on another young troublemaker."

The mayor rolled her eyes—and for just a second, she felt her forehead turning red.

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The Gifted Children

by Chris Haynes



Hiramocie's story

"I am tired; I am weary," sighed Elder Hiramocie as she lay back in her nest of comforting furs. "Still, I must prepare for the children's *kobake*"—the ceremonial forging of the link in the chain that would bind them to the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation, to its people, to its land, to its history.

"But is this right?" she pondered, "these children, who are not of our blood. Yet they have grown up here, uncontaminated. They have played with our children, learned from our adults. Our ways are all they have ever known. They surely now have the right to join the Tribe as adults."

She thought back to that day when, during Elder Opsawa's potlatch, fishers had carried in these three delicate babes, offering them to the Tribe, hoping surrogate mothers could be found for them. Those fishers from the Coast Salish Nation refused to explain how they had come across the babies.

Horried, she had accused the fishers of stealing them, just as the White men had stolen the First Nation's children—but they assured her that their actions were honorable.

They declared that they had found them farther south and had brought them back here to Nuu-chah-nulth, the island the White settlers had called Vancouver Island, for safety—but refused to say anything more. Maybe they were concerned that they had broken the elders' command to not allow anyone from the South onto their homeland.

It had been a hot summer that year, the hottest yet. The summer the mainland had disappeared into the haze and smoke drifting from the burning forests. The summer the internet went quiet.

Hiramocie thought of all the changes in recent years. The Chinese whalers had gone, the airplanes had gone, the ferries had gone or lay decaying at the jetties, abandoned for lack of fuel.

Terri's story

Terri had been forcibly adopted by a White Vancouver family as a child—one of the "stolen children." She had been both lucky and bright, gaining a good education; but learning of her origins, she had yearned to return to her Tribe. Terri's doctoral thesis had been on how the First Nations on this island were restoring the fragile strands of their culture from the attempted genocide perpetrated by the White man; of how the wefts of plant lore, of craft, of respect and honour were being rethreaded into the warps of the land, the tides, the seasons, the life patterns of their sister animals and fishes. She had scoured the academic literature and museums, reconnecting, rejoining, restoring those precious threads.

When she returned to the island, she was given an obsolete metal shipping container in which to store her books, papers, and artifacts. But as she relaxed from the stress of study and paid more attention to the news from elsewhere, she realized there was a greater challenge awaiting her: to record the culture and the follies that had brought about the end of Western civilization. She asked the fishers and anyone else daring to head south to bring back more books and artifacts that she could conserve in her archive. Terri thought of this as her version of the Library of Alexandria—a repository of a dying culture that would, hopefully, last many centuries into the future as a resource, as a story, as a warning.

Jane's story

Jane awoke to that smell again: the sickly smell of decay wafting across the bay, that smell of millions of rotting bodies—unmissed, unlamented, unburied. She gazed out over the wharfs, up the hill, up at the skyscrapers—all deserted now—wondering if it was worth going on, worth continuing this hunt for the books that embraced memories, history, culture. No need to gather technology, that was irrelevant now.

She walked past the metal cells, once locked to retain "the worst of the worst," now locked to protect the knowledge, the beauty, the culture they had rescued from the dying city. Every day, she and the other librarians had risked their lives rowing across the dangerous waters from Alcatraz Island to San Francisco's piers, their movements hidden by the bay fogs. Once, it was the danger of these waters that had kept the imprisoned on the island; now it kept refugees, however desperate,

from attempting to swim across the bay. Swim, because both the Golden Gate Bridge and Oakland Bridge had been destroyed by the Army Corps of Engineers trying to halt the inexorable northward surge of climate migrants from California, from the Midwest, from Mexico, from everywhere north of Panama.

Desperate families had headed to the city for escape from the heat, the rains, the hunger. *Surely*, they had thought, *the city will take care of us*. But no, the city was full, the shops looted, and the water supply had failed. Yet still the northward pressure continued, driven first by hope, then by desperation.

All the way up the peninsula, as far back as San Jose, the ragged bands of weary stragglers moved slowly up the 101, like the traffic jams of the past. Learning what lay ahead, new arrivals relinquished hope. Families gave up—tried to find somewhere safe to end their days in mutual support amid the heat, the smoke, the frequent torrential rains.

Jane prepared for one last, risky expedition from the island—farther inland, to the Eureka Valley library, said to house the last collection of LGBT volumes in America, books not yet cradled in the loving embrace of these prison cells. But first she needed sustenance. Water they had in plenty from the prison well, but she had breakfasted on the last of the fish they had traded with the fishers from Vancouver Island.

The librarians didn't mind trading their precious volumes for food—they knew the Coast Salish people had a good respect for these histories, these memories, this knowledge, even if much of it was of little use nowadays. They had assured the librarians that a neighbouring nation had an anthropological team that was building an archive of the disaster as a warning to the future.

Jane knew the end was near. Disease or roving bands of scavengers would get them soon. Sympathetic though these fishers from the North were, they had made it clear that while they would give refuge to reference books, they were prohibited from rescuing any people. Their Tribes could not risk cultural contamination from those who had willingly let this disaster unfold—who had failed to stop their leaders when they had the knowledge, when they had the time.

The librarians cast off from the craggy island and started rowing. The impenetrable rocks and walls, which had sheltered them for these last desperate years, melted into the protective fog. As they got halfway across, pulling hard against the turning tide, unexpectedly, the fog began to lift.

Preparing for the kobake

Elder Hiramocie thought again of the three children—no, no longer children, they were approaching puberty and about to become adults and ask for their adult names. Her duty now was to prepare them, to temper the links that would bind them to the nation. She had acted as a grandmother to all three, helping and guiding their foster-parents over the years.

The three had realized that there was something different about them, but all requests—up until now, at least—had been stalled. They had bonded as if siblings, even as they developed their own separate interests and skills.

Askuwhteau—“He who keeps watch”—had attached himself to Terri as she set up the shipping container archive. He had been a thoughtful child, quick to learn to read and fascinated by the knowledge being stored in the metal caves. When he started ordering and cataloguing the material, it suddenly dawned on Terri that his name told her what he should become—he was appointed the nation's archivist.

Hiramocie next thought of Nadie—“Wise.” What an appropriate name that had turned out to be. She was now skilled in the healing arts, with good knowledge of which roots and herbs to use and how to prepare and administer them. She also had great skill as a storyteller, relishing collecting and retelling the stories handed down by the elders. “When I soon meet the ancestors,” thought Hiramocie, “she will be a fine candidate to replace me as the wise woman of the nation, the healer.”

Etchemin—“Canoe man”—was the third. Was it because of his name that he had gravitated to the fishers, joining them on their expeditions down the coast, letting the orca pods guide them to the fish shoals? As ever, they only took the fish they needed, thanking them for the offering. He had discovered coastal maps in Terri's cave, and had taught himself to navigate by the stars using an old watch and sextant they had found. Soon, the other fishers had become reliant on him to navigate them up and down the coast.

Askuwhteau had persuaded the fishers to catch a few additional fish to trade with the librarians of the rock for the best books, books chosen by Etchemin, who knew which ones Askuwhteau and Terri would value.

“These are three fine children,” thought Hiramocie. “Each so clever, each with valuable skills that will benefit the nation.”

I will be honoured to support their transition into adulthood.”

How was it Terri had put it? “With skilled children like these, we of the First Nations can transition into a sustainable future—we can adapt to survive.”

She realized that they now deserved the truth—the truth that even she did not know.

The quest for the truth

The band of three had come to the same conclusion. “We need to know where we are from, who our parents were,” said Nadie. “I really, really need to know if either of you is my birth brother, because, well, you know...”

“We must find out what happened,” declared Etchemin. “Let’s go and find the fishers who brought us here, if they are still alive.” Eventually, they tracked down Troksam, an old fisher who had been on that voyage. She had taken her newborn child with her, so was with milk, and had just been able to sustain the four babies on the return journey, long enough to present them at that potlatch.

“Yes, but how did you find us?” urged Nadie.

Troksam sighed. “Are you sure you are ready for this?” she asked.

“Yes, yes,” they urged.

“Well, we were well south of the Golden Gate, off Carmel beach. You have to know that this is a wide, deep beach, with miles of dunes and scrubland behind it. As we sailed offshore, we saw three couples running to the water’s edge, each holding something up and gesturing to us, beckoning us to come closer.

“We were mindful of the elders’ edict that no one is to be picked up, no one brought back to the island, so we held our place, watching. When it was clear that we were not coming closer, the adults placed the bundles on the sand, as close as possible to the incoming tide, and then turned and ran off into the dunes, not looking back.

“We waited, watching, until they had disappeared. There was no one else on the beach, so we decided that there was enough time to row in to see what the bundles were and row out again, before anyone could run out from cover and try to board us.”

“What we found, carefully swaddled despite the heat, was the three of you.”

“But why?” sobbed Askuwheteau. “Why would they have abandoned us?”

“We could only think that they had given up all ambition—had finally accepted that they would soon die. Their only hope for you, for the future, was to beg us to take you,” she replied. “You are the gifted children—gifts from a dying civilization.”

Author’s note: *it is with great respect that I have borrowed from the culture of the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest for this story, whose purpose is to offer readers emotional engagement with the likely effects of ongoing climate change on Western civilization so as to encourage them to help prevent these changes. I wanted to describe just how damaging climate change is and will continue to be. I felt this was best achieved by viewing the changes from the perspective of a sustained culture—a culture strong enough to have survived the changes and who hold the promise of taking forward sustainable values, and offering the seeds of future survival of human society through their preservation of Indigenous knowledge and culture. I selected the peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the Tribes of Vancouver Island, since they have courageously carried their culture forward through surrounding chaotic times, and are ideal observers of the US West Coast of the past, present, and future. I first read of the heroic work being done by the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest on fish population conservation, while researching Indigenous peoples’ involvement in sustainability and adaptation and their struggles to seek justice as part of my MSc course in sustainability and adaptation. In my research on their culture and values I used only peer-reviewed academic papers in which named Tribal elders or Indigenous academic researchers had been participants. I hope that I am helping to lift up the people’s wisdom and teachings, and I offer honor and respect to the strength, courage, values, and resilience of their culture. I give thanks to the people and hope that I do not offend with this story in any way and have not misrepresented their possible cultural and humanitarian responses to a future regional climate tragedy.*

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How the City of Boston Is Investing in the Future of Its Youth and Home

by *Iris M. Crawford*

■
Creating pathways to instill early access to climate education and environmental stewardship opportunities is a way to equip the next generation with the knowledge and tools to adapt to and mitigate the climate crisis.

As we continue to find climate solutions, an important one often gets overlooked: investment in youth and young adults. I found my way to climate justice organizing and journalism through a mix of personal interest and lived experience—but what if learning how to address climate change and to protect biodiversity and the vastness of the green industry was grounded in everyone’s early education and was a readily accessible career pathway?

Creating pathways to instill early access to climate education and environmental stewardship opportunities is a way to equip the next generation with the knowledge and tools to adapt to and mitigate the climate crisis. Boston’s city-wide Green New Deal is one such pathway. Part of the effort led to the creation of PowerCorpsBOS, a program launched in June 2022 that was designed to provide young adults with career-readiness support and connect them to employers in Boston within the green industry.¹





Investing in the climate future of youth and young adults is the way Trinh Nguyen, chief of worker empowerment, and Mariama White-Hammond, chief of environment, energy, and open space, saw the way forward to investing in Boston's Green New Deal.

BOSTON'S GREEN NEW DEAL AND POWERCORPSBOS

Boston's Green New Deal is a series of interrelated policies addressing climate, environmental, racial, and economic injustice.² When the bill was proposed, in April 2019, the lead sponsor was Michelle Wu, who was then a city council member.³ After Wu was elected mayor, in late 2021, Boston's Green New Deal came to fruition under her administration.⁴ It is a \$2 billion capital investment in clean energy⁵ that aims to get Boston to total renewable energy and carbon neutrality by 2040, and to develop the green workforce and center food and transportation justice, among other goals Wu had highlighted as councilor.⁶ The city launched a Green New Deal for Boston Public Schools, which aims to turn Boston's K–12 schools into full-service community hubs that can meet the changing needs of students and their communities, and also published its first Urban Forest Plan.⁷

Investing in the climate future of youth and young adults is the way Trinh Nguyen, chief of worker empowerment, and Mariama White-Hammond, chief of environment, energy, and open space, saw the way forward to investing in Boston's Green New Deal. PowerCorpsBOS, launched in June 2022, is a green jobs program designed to provide young adults with career-readiness support and connect them to employers in Boston within the green industry.⁸ “When we think of climate action and being green, we think about everything from how buses run to how buildings are maintained,” said Nguyen.⁹ Fitting those daily realities into the lives of working-class people and families is critical and the main focus of the Deal.

PowerCorpsBOS is specifically designed for young adults ages 18–30, who are underemployed and not in college or on a career track, and who are interested in the green industry and hands-on training; priority is given to youth experiencing homelessness, young people who have been in foster care, and other marginalized communities.¹⁰

Boston's first Urban Forest Plan aims to expand the city's tree canopy, particularly in neighborhoods considered “heat islands,” such as East Boston, Mattapan, and Roxbury.¹¹ The plan led to establishing an urban forestry division with 16 full-time permanent roles that include arborists, tree wardens and tree equipment operators.¹² PowerCorpsBOS is giving graduates the necessary skills for applying for such roles. As part of the program, graduates have the opportunity to learn smart building technology, or to become certified in pesticide application,¹³ enabling them to practice or supervise the use of restricted pesticides in accordance with state, Tribal, and federal regulations. (Importantly, this certification “allows them to help with one of our pernicious problems...the emerald ash borer, which is attacking trees throughout the state,” explained White-Hammond.¹⁴)

The green jobs program is grounded in Nguyen's and White-Hammond's longtime community-based youth advocacy and organizing that started in Boston over 20 years ago.¹⁵ In the late 1990s, Nguyen worked with the Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth,¹⁶ and by the early 2000s became director of development at the Boston Women's Fund.¹⁷ White-Hammond started her work in youth organizing at the age of 13, and she became the director of Project HIP-HOP—an organization founded in 1993 as a program of the ACLU—in 2001. (That same year, it became an independent entity, but it was discontinued in 2016.¹⁸) The 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, which battered the Gulf Coast, helped lead to White-Hammond's realization that race and climate were linked.¹⁹ Hurricane Katrina started White-Hammond on the path to environmental justice activism, while Nguyen established her career in education access and workforce development within the Boston city government and in community nonprofits.²⁰

A LONGTIME YOUTH-ORGANIZING STRATEGY

When Nguyen and White-Hammond both found themselves in top leadership positions in the Boston city government,

PowerCorpsBOS exists to strengthen workforce development and career pathways for the green economy, and sits at the intersection of climate, racial, and economic justice.

one of their first conversations was how to help young people get jobs.²¹ In 2021, the pair gathered partners from both of their offices and convened for three months to understand what the green job landscape was in Boston. Then, White-Hammond looked at research that then-city councilor Kenzie Bok's office had started, to understand which cities across the country had successfully launched young-adult green jobs pathway programs. The research looked at programs in cities such as DC and Phoenix;²² but the program that caught White-Hammond's eye was Philadelphia's PowerCorpsPHL— which is now in its tenth year and has graduated over 20 cohorts.²³

In October 2021, White-Hammond visited Philadelphia to learn more. There, she met Aaron Kirkland, who was a 2015 participant of PowerCorpsPHL and was formerly incarcerated prior to his time in the program.²⁴ PowerCorpsPHL set him on a green career path that helped him to grow his skills and access upward mobility. Today, he is the supervisor overseeing 24 people for the Philadelphia Water Department.²⁵ “Seventy percent of Kirkland's current team are graduates of PowerCorpsPHL,” said White-Hammond. This inspired White-Hammond to explore replication of the program in Boston.²⁶

Two key elements that PowerCorpsBOS mirrors from PowerCorpsPHL is reaching people from neighborhoods that are chronically underemployed and creating opportunities for formerly incarcerated persons. Often, this demographic faces employment discrimination,²⁷ which is a key component of recidivism. By helping its graduates access permanent employment, the program is “putting all those pieces into place so that we can go from a dream and something that we're committed to, and a values-based investment in a program that is serving real folks,” said White-Hammond.²⁸ The key questions Nguyen continues to sit with are, “What does the green economy mean for young people?” and “How do young people see themselves in the climate-ready movement?”²⁹

THE IMPACT OF POWERCORPSBOS

PowerCorpsBOS exists to strengthen workforce development and career pathways for the green economy, and sits at the intersection of climate, racial, and economic justice. “Our job is to make sure that all Boston residents and young people get access to some of the opportunities as a by-product of this Climate Ready Boston movement,” said Nguyen.³⁰ To do so, the city had an RFP out for a Green New Deal workforce assessment to examine where the jobs in the city are. The current RFP team is made up of youth ages 15 to 20 who will engage in participatory research and serve as community ambassadors.³¹

The first PowerCorpsBOS cohort, which started in June 2022 and finished in December 2022, had 21 graduates, all of whom have gone on to green jobs or are enrolled in additional training. The second cohort, which began in January 2023, had 43 participants—31 of whom have completed the urban forestry track, and 12 of whom have completed the building automation program.³² Thus far, PowerCorpsBOS graduates have landed internships at City Hall, the Federal Reserve Bank, and Beacon Capital Partners, among other places.³³

Part of the building automation program is smart building technology. In February 2023, PowerCorpsBOS launched a partnership with Roxbury Community College.³⁴ The college recently created a facility where students can learn about the environmental impact of a building's life cycle and get trained on maintaining and operating “digital automated maintenance systems.”³⁵ Cohort graduates who completed the program now have a certificate through RCC and the skills for such long-term careers as building superintendent or building technician, with salaries averaging around the \$58K range.³⁶

One participant in the second cohort is Joshua Burrell. He heard about it through someone in his South End neighborhood who works for the City of Boston. After working at Boston Logan Airport and in the field of carpentry, he said,

“What’s in it for our neighborhoods, our people, if there’s this climate movement?” pondered White-Hammond. “It can’t be siloed.”

“I just wanted to get a feel for something different.”³⁷ Compared to other spaces he’s been in and other jobs he’s had before, PowerCorpsBOS felt like a warm welcome without expectations he wouldn’t be able to meet. “When they asked me if I knew what the green industry was, I told them no, and it was perfectly fine,” said Burrell.³⁸ He was in the program from January through June 2023, and over that six-month period, his education ranged from invasive-plant-species identification and labor operations to conservation and the intersections of climate change. Throughout his time there, Burrell and a cohort he was matched with worked at various sites across Boston. “They taught us how to properly use the tools for the industry, such as pruners, handsaws, loppers...[and how to] maintain safety while properly doing the job,” he said.³⁹ The program also helped Burrell strengthen his communication, project management, and team leadership skills.

“The challenge was a mix of learning the work and also learning the people I worked with,” said Burrell.⁴⁰ It was the first time he had been in a community-based work environment. What he didn’t expect was to bond so well with his cohort. “Some of us have similar trauma experiences,” he explained.⁴¹ Icebreaker activities allowed them to get below the surface of one another quickly.

After finishing the program in June, Burrell applied for jobs with the City of Boston—one as a trade equipment operator and several in green roofing. He hopes to continue to grow his experience in urban forestry and the overall green industry.

PowerCorpsBOS sits at the intersection of climate, racial, and economic justice. “I am always lifted when I see PowerCorps because they’re folks from my neighborhood,” said White-Hammond.⁴² For example, Davo Jefferson, PowerCorpsBOS’s executive director, had been a youth worker alongside White-Hammond when she was at Project HIP-HOP. Much of the program’s staff are people who were already embedded in the community and have dedicated their lives to lifting up young people and young adults. Indeed, the program has seen the largest response from

young people of color, with the highest numbers being from Dorchester and Mattapan, with a smattering of other neighborhoods in between. “We’re looking at actual jobs [that will] align partners to make those opportunities available for everyone, not just a select few,” said Nguyen.⁴³ PowerCorpsBOS is particularly successful because its team is already grounded in the Boston community.

Besides planning and visioning, Nguyen and White-Hammond took the time to figure out how to leverage city resources and investments so that this environmental and economic opportunity could have a ripple effect in Boston. “What’s in it for our neighborhoods, our people, if there’s this climate movement?” pondered White-Hammond. “It can’t be siloed.”⁴⁴ The program is based on a learn-and-earn model, in which stipends and living wages exist alongside support for cohorts to launch their careers. What comes along with that is the stability that government jobs offer, such as a predictable schedule, pensions, healthy work–life balance, and soon a union package (currently under negotiation).⁴⁵ Working with partners such as Audubon, AmeriCorps, and the Urban Wilds program, among others, is also helping the program’s participants gain a well-rounded skill set.⁴⁶

PowerCorpsBOS has spent a lot of time envisioning and shaping much of its programming around what is best for the city’s young people. “And that goes back to really thinking about how we leverage resources and city investments so that we can create a ripple effect for our people,” said Nguyen.⁴⁷ “They already bring brilliance; they already bring drive. And sometimes even with all those things, the way systems are set up, it’s not enough to get people to the kinds of places where they should be and where they need to be,” said White-Hammond.⁴⁸ This is why programs like PowerCorpsBOS need to exist—they are a climate justice bridge between the future and the next generation.

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'Til the Rivers Come Home

by Dera Udochukwu

It was in the year of our Lord ____, and the northwest winds carried the dust and brown sands from the Sahara and threw them into the Okitankwo River, the sacred waterway in our hometown of Amankuta Mbieri, in Imo State. It blew across the rainforests and the savannah like a goddess of vengeance, carrying sands and hot-blooded reptiles in its wake. We had never before witnessed a dry season so vicious—one that made all the wells like bone and the sand fiercely hot. That year, our river didn't come home.

The Okitankwo River had always been of cultural and spiritual significance to our people. Grandma told us that in the days of her youth, a mother and her newborn usually stepped outside for the first time after four weeks. The newborn would be cradled by the traditional priest, who would scoop a handful of water from the enamel bowl and sprinkle the droplets on the forehead of the baby, who would cry as the cold water drenched her. There would be a roar and laughter from the crowd at her naming ceremony. The child would be given to her father, who with outstretched hands would raise her to the wet skies. The child would stop crying, watching her father as he whispered her names: *Mmiriozuzo*—the rain has come; *Obianuju*—born into wealth; *Nnenna*—our mother has returned. That way, the child would never forget where she came from; she would always follow the river home.

This was how it was done in the past. Later, for those still in tune with the ways of our ancestors, as the water became ever-smaller and more polluted, mother and child would stand under an umbrella and the father would take some sand from the earth, mix it with the little spittle his tongue could produce, and smear the wet earth on the head of the child—making a sign of the cross like a priest during Ash Wednesday. The father would pray that the child's life would be like the memories of moist soils that grew greens and had rivers overflowing their banks. He would take the umbilical cord and bury it under the leaves of the udala tree, whose roots reached deep into the ground. It had been a wonder in its youth when the waters ran through its veins; now it looked twisted and thirsty—the snarling face etched on its bark ridden with woody wrinkles, recalling the agony of its death.

The heat was relentless as I sat on the veranda and pondered the loss of the place I had once called home. I tried to cry but my eyes were dry, as if the hot November sun had reached into my eye glands and milked all my tears. I was with child—and when my child grew, he would never know the sparkling Okitankwo River that used to run through at least five villages, including my own—never know the small plantations that bonded us together, the sweet potatoes and sugarcanes that we grew along its edges a few kilometers away from home. The river didn't cower in the face of the fierce sun in the dry season; it came at the beginning of the rains and signaled the *Ofa* season. We would carry our cans and buckets to the river to get water, and we used the smooth white pebbles that lay on its bank to scrub our dry feet until they become soft. The waters were so clear that we could see fish gliding with the tough currents—so clear that we could reach out and catch the fish with both hands. Now, the little water left was too warm and toxic to support aquatic life. The fish displayed on the table by the fishermen had been so dried that it could leave cuts in your mouth.

The children of nowadays don't know what fresh fish from Okitankwo River tasted like. They are content with eating the dried crayfish and tilapia. They see the toughness as normal, but I know that is not what fresh fish tastes like. Fresh fish was a staple of our *nsala* soup; we would roll our *eba* into the thick spicy broth, laden with the traditional fresh catfish, and swallow it "*gbim gbim*" down our throats. The white sands on the Okitankwo riverbank would be used together with pawpaw leaves to scrub the blackened backs of our pots and kettles until they shone like a mirror. Shouts of "*Mmiri ayola, mmiri ayola*" would rend the air.

But as the seasons came and changed, and the sun grew closer to the earth, the river ran no more. We would rush to the riverbank when we heard the slightest noise, but would end up staring at the hot baked earth and white stones where the water had once passed through. The edges of the river were where we dared nature, forcing the marshland to produce sweet sugarcane when we farmed with skill and patience. We would put seedlings into the ground, tend to them as the greens shot out from the earth, and wait patiently for the sweet yellow bananas that hung on evergreen trees. The women in our

household would carry the bananas in long baskets and ferry them to the next village, where other women would hustle for the white sugarcanes in exchange for seasoning and cubes of soap. We would sit under the full moon sharing the fruits telling folktales.

But when *this* child sits under the moon, he will hear stories of a gift of nature that had once been of cultural significance to his people—a source of a rare food crop and foreign exchange of some sort. With the waters went a part of us. He will be taken to the Okitankwo River and shown the pathway the waters followed—the swamp that held our crops now ridden with remnants of water grass and the waters retreated like a tortoise into his shell. No one uses the sands anymore; tiny green worms dance on the surface of what is left of the swamp, and different generations of mosquitoes invade our houses at night—disrupting our sleep with the constant ringing sound, and pumping malaria into our veins.

My mother said we had offended the gods, so they had cursed the land and taken back the gifts of water and the crops that grew there. Whenever I went to what was left of the river, I saw eggs wrapped in red clothes and bottles of Fanta—offerings to the gods to bring back our Okitankwo River. But it didn't come back, even though no one touched the few aquatic plants left where the water once was, in an attempt to preserve what was left. As I grew older and watched how nature changed all around me, I knew the gods were not to blame but rather we humans, who had ignored the red flags when we engaged in a toxic romance with our climate.

It happened too fast: the rains not coming in April, the increasing heat, the taint of dust. I remembered the Twitter banter, the Facebook posts, and the various threads of “Climate change is fake” and “Global warming is a conspiracy theory.” I took a trip down memory lane and concluded that it had not been this bad when we were younger. Each generation had met a degrading state of nature, but, instead of preserving and improving on it, had perceived the decaying nature as normal—leading to a downward spiral.

My little cousin hasn't put a paper boat on water before and watched it sail seamlessly with the currents. The children of today will soon be left with what we once called our home as part of their history curriculum, and will take trips to exhibition centers to see the green we once had. Our children might never get to see nature in its true form. They have already forgotten that stars are part of the night sky.

In our forgetfulness of nature, we forgot that nature doesn't forget—and any name you call your pet will be what it answers to. The earth was changing rapidly around us, and I was afraid. They call it *eco-anxiety*: fear of climate change. Children don't know that tigers are not just emojis in their phones but are wild cats with orange stripes who once ruled the wilds. We are forgetting the ambient sound of birdsong and the satisfying feeling of crunching leaves under our feet on a forest floor.

* * *

I didn't originally set out to safeguard the environment. I was pushed into activism by memories of our gone river and bewilderment that people were not noticing the darkness that had enveloped the land because of the decline in the dance of fireflies. But Mama knew I would always follow that path: I never outgrew chasing butterflies in the gardens and trapping fireflies in bottles. Now, I had moved from embracing nature to defending it.

I chose my present residence because of the wild green that grew behind it. I was happy to discover that big patchwork of woods, fields, and umbrella trees behind my hostel, which had miraculously remained untouched amid the expanding suburban grid of streets and lawns. But one morning, I woke up to the sound of a roaring chainsaw—the big ones with wicked edges, used for felling giant trees. I watched the blade drive through the fleshy bark like a knife to bones, and my back twitched. Then the bulldozers uprooted the giant trees, leaving gaping holes where they should have been.

The choir of birdsong stopped.

The whisper of sweet breeze on green leaves paused.

Loss, grief.

It felt like a part of me fell with the trees. It felt like I was never going to see a dear friend again. I felt the same pain that had come with the loss of our sacred waters. It was happening again: this violation of nature, this accelerated loss of species and life.

Where would we run to when the floods came? Whose roots would hold us firmly to the ground?

Every day, I woke up to something new on the land. Soon, a foundation was dug and a building started taking shape. I took up my pen and wrote to the Ministry of Water and Land Resources, but no one came. I went to the secretariat and sat all day waiting for the commissioner, only for his secretary to tell me he had left at 5 pm. I lost hope as I watched the building rise on land that until now had held Amazonian trees and multiple species of birds.

One day, I came home and saw that the building had been wired with electric bulbs. I heard whispers that handshakes and envelopes with lump sums of money had been exchanged. The Ministry of Water and Land Resources were giving out portions of our nature like pawns on a chessboard. I took pictures and wrote newspaper columns about the destruction of wetlands and forests due to urbanization, population explosion, and weak implementation of laws. The big men in Abuja already knew, but there was nothing anyone could do. I was applauded for my efforts to draw attention to the path of self-destruction we were on, but nothing more.

A year later, I moved to Lagos. I often refresh my timeline to see news of angry waters carrying vehicles and people away. We had cut down our trees; what did we expect? Now, will we train the future generations to have a higher appreciation of nature so that they do not make the same mistakes we are making? Will we take them outdoors to experience what is left of nature in its unadulterated form? The cooing of pigeons in backyard gardens, the beauty of corals, the hermit crabs on beaches. Or will they become housebound, praying that the floods don't rise to dangerous levels, watching as terrible winds uproot the zinc roofs of houses that sail slowly away, like paper boats.

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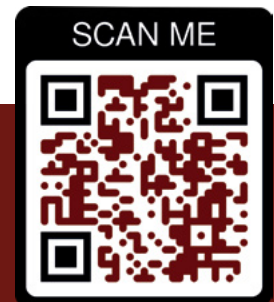


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A Onda Antiga

by Andrea Vale



At 3:30 a.m., a streetcar rings up on the corner of the Angola Cafe.

That night, the tides swept farther up on land than they ever had before, but we were all at Jardim do Morro.

We sprinted from one to another, pounding each other on the head with rubber hammers, thanking São João do Porto, even though none of us knew who he was.

And at that party in the garden, we also didn't know that soon we would all be playing *futebol* underwater.

The day before, we had lain nauseous on boards in the ocean, feeling the Atlantic nudge us out and reel us back. We leapt up when the waves lurched forward, and were bowled over, somersaulting underwater like limp puppets.

We sensed but couldn't say out loud the nervous truth: that all week, the waves had pushed with menace, no longer playful. We choked on salt and laughed, pretending not to notice the hostile bite of the water and the deep flash of ancient fear in our bellies.

The Wave had actually started days ago, kilometers away. While we danced oblivious on sweaty cobblestones, a long low thrum was traveling through the air in Serra do Gerês.

The rigid bones of the eucalypti stems snapped forward and bowed under The Wave. The Wave enveloped the pines, the boulders, and the cascades. It drowned the waterfalls, which instantly turned into spinning whirlpools under the surface. Then it continued on its way south, to Porto, on breezes tinged with mercury.

Meanwhile, we drank Super Bock and beat each other with hammers on that hill over the Douro.

* * *

At first, it was scarcely noticeable. Water seeped through the grasses in Jardim do Morro until the toes of our bare feet were sticky with mud. When we looked up, we saw that the Ponte de Dom Luís I was covered in a thin blanket of water, the Douro swollen high enough to flow straight across the bridge.

Once the water was up to our ankles, slipping forward, we turned and tried to move the celebration to higher ground. But just those six inches disarmed strong, broad men, tossing them aside.

Then we were waist deep; and instead of flowing forward and toppling us, The Wave abruptly began to reverse, receding back into the Douro and inhaling us along with it.

We looked toward the halocline, where the mouth of the Douro met the Atlantic. What we saw there was not just a rogue wave or a wall of water—it was the whole ocean, lifted on its shoulders and blocking out the sky.

It inched just a reach higher, and the sun was gone.

Under the eclipse, we gaped and scrambled. We could only feel around us and imagine the world flipping and unfolding in the dark.

If we hadn't been blinded, we would have seen that The Wave had left every crevice of the sea floor naked and exposed, with quivering mollusks—some that we would have recognized and others that were yet to be discovered—shivering against their first feel of air.

For a beat, The Wave stood upright—and all of us in the Jardim stared up at it in awe as it loomed over us, hammers still clenched in our fists.

Then, in one trembling crash, it fell to the ground and swallowed Porto.

* * *

It was like cliff diving in Gerês.

It's a very precise moment—that fourth of a second right after you've been completely submerged, or perhaps right before the crown of your head is sucked under. In a few seconds, you will start thrashing and thrusting and propelling yourself upward, but for now, in this brief purgatory, you are suspended, weightless—not only in space but also in time.

The towering windows at São Bento station shattered, and water poured through them like a carafe emptying. Livraria Lello gulped, and the ink on the books evaporated. The ground, which had always been locked beneath us, suddenly seemed to feel The Wave and think that it, too, was liquid. It began sloshing and leaping up to try to touch the sky.

At first we were all in stasis, mannequins drifting unmoored through the membrane; then, around us, all that was anchored began to be ripped from their crevices, and we swam wildly away, flailing through the treacherous womb in which we were encased—our arms and legs bent in ungodly angles by three kilometers of water trying to pin us down.

Ana drifted happily as the waves pressed on her throat chords, musing, “I got to have a big heartbreak with a French lover. It was wonderful. I’m so lucky. I’m so lucky.”

Inês had cried a river and drowned the whole world four times over, and wondered if this was her fault.

Thiago didn’t think he should admit it, but he was a bit relieved to not have to wonder about the future anymore.

Around them, chairs and fences and azulejo tiles swirled. Everything had gone horizontal, and we were living in a sideways world.

Really, the minute water seeped into the carpet rather than only the sink when we turned on the faucet, the world had ended. We’d always assumed we were attached, like placenta tethered to a belly, neatly divided; but The Wave sliced through the arrangement between our bodies and the milieu that had always cradled us. The orientation we depended on to rule the world ruptured, and we went tumbling out across the seismic movements of water under water.

Guillam marveled, in the oldest sense of the word, “How fantastic.”

* * *

On the last day of the world, how would you spend your time? We played *futebol*.

We pumped our legs up, but tonnes of water pressure forced our shins back down. When we kicked the ball, it twirled out and left a funnel of water in its wake. The water inside our bodies jostled against the water enveloping us, cushioning us like kidneys.

It was astonishing at first, but quickly, we situated ourselves again how we were most comfortable: insulated together, confidently dominating a small corner of something so much larger than us that we could not grasp it. We relaxed our limbs, reassuring ourselves that we were still exceptional. That was always how world-making went.

There were curious side effects: wrinkled fingertips, hair floating in nebulous clouds around our heads, bloated pale skin like that of corpses. The pressure at first made our eyeballs pop out, and we pressed them back in. We cracked eggs and watched the yolks float up above our heads.

We sat outside Aduela Taberna-Bar, on wicker chairs at the rattling tables, still lifting Porto tonics and caipirinhas to our mouths. The weight of the whole ocean pushed the glasses down, and we had to strain with shaking wrists to lift them. With each sip, more sea water rushed into the glasses and mixed with the limey fizz.

Do you look at the ocean and see it as one interconnected mother? Or do you see it as a million persons all shuddering together, each individual, rolling wave all furling and colliding alongside itself?

Movement wasn’t movement anymore—not like how it used to be. We lurched and slid across decades of sea in parallel *heres* and *nows*. Everything was in slow motion below the surface. Glee was subdued, and we all moved, graceful and lethargic, in extended soliloquies.

We couldn’t cut anymore; that had gone extinct with The Wave. As had clapping, snapping, whistling, and gasping. But we could spiral and rise.

There were no echoes on the seabed. Any words were carried off by the current the instant they left our lips, instead sending a dim sonar ring to the others’ ears, distorted and mottled and watery. Silence beat through our skulls, and when

we widened our mouths to sing, we swallowed water. Our muted calls reverberated and bounced across the empty stage at the bottom of the ocean.

We moved in thick time. Remembrance folded and scrunched over itself, layering the now beside the past and future. We became used to each movement having happened while still yet to happen, to each wave carrying centuries before us on its back. We waded, our ankles sticky with weight, through the memory of histories we had never lived. Suddenly, we understood implicitly the mourning of ships that had traveled through us, and the joy of the birth of the world, when the whole planet had been sea. This, all on top of, within, under, and beside dim, milky memories of watching an anthropomorphized dinosaur walking through a red door on television as children and doubting its veracity as much as that of a memory of playing with egg-shaped dolls.

Without a sky, night and morning were a concept of the past. Now, time stretched perpetually forward in one long day for eternity. We drifted in one continuous consciousness, spilling from moment to moment without discretion.

Sometimes there was weather, which reminded us of that old world kept in our grandfathers' shriveled muscles. When the water rustled angrily, and when it was calm and clear, it reminded us of the weightless, pressureless atmosphere that used to hold us, and how it used to be violent, too.


And we danced. The tissues in our bodies had crumpled to damp paper, but the water conducted us. Twirls expanded into billowing lunges, and we knocked about and inadvertently embraced. We toppled, fluid and long, like children play-pretending a grand ballet. But we weren't embarrassed. When we tried to step, the currents dramatized us, lifting us to leap and pirouette across kilometers of empty ocean floor. Leagues apart, we could still move in sync, feeling each others' push and pull, as if our fingers were interlocked. Space was above, not between, and the swell in one corner of the ocean made a wave in another.

And when we laughed, there was no sound, but streams of bubbles hissed out of the corners of our grins.

ANDREA VALE is a short story writer based in California. Vale's work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *Anthroposphere: the Oxford Climate Review*, the *Oxford Scientist*, and *Oceana*, among many other publications.

On Fiction and Environmental Advocacy

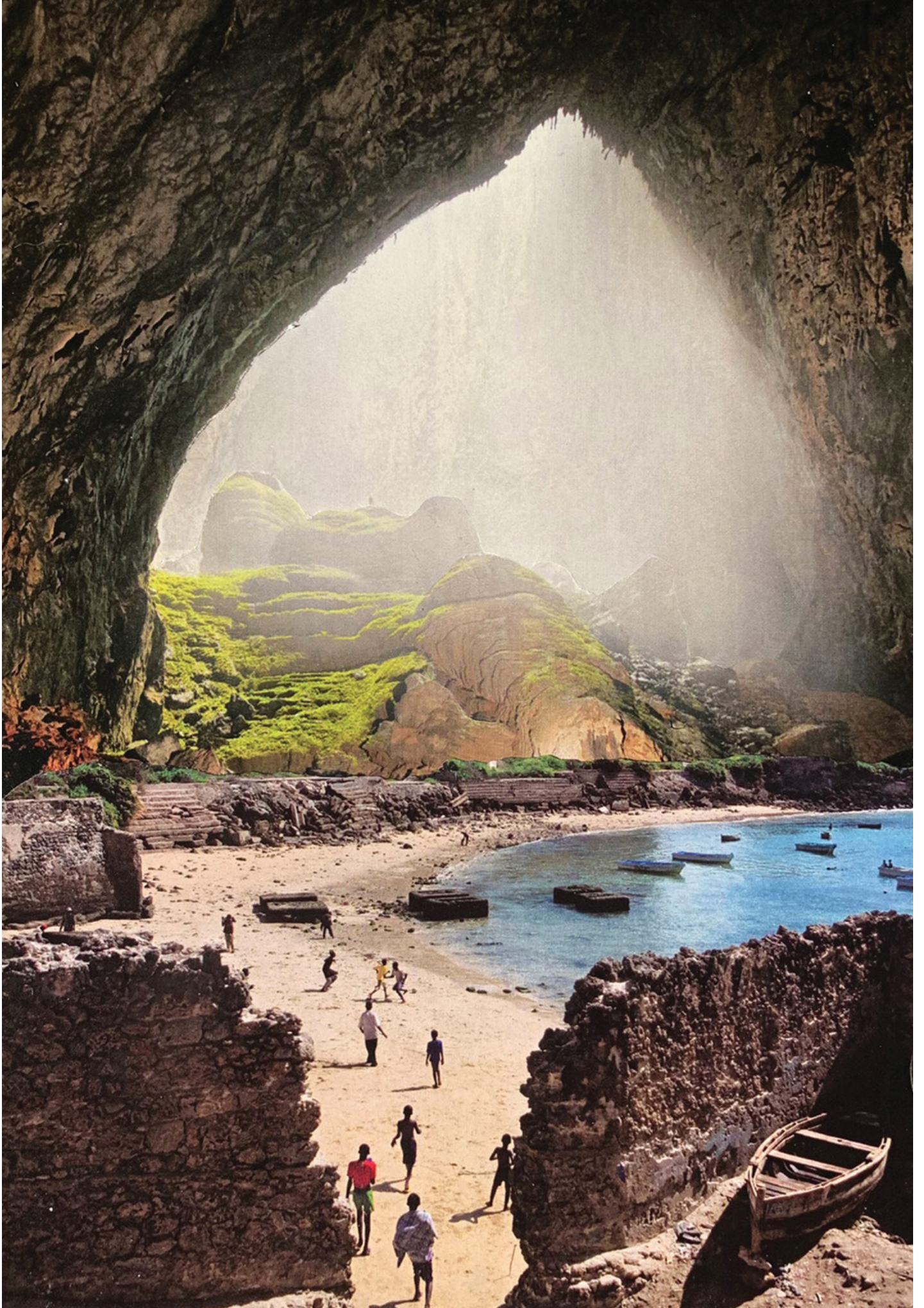
A Conversation with Alison Stine and Jeff VanderMeer


 “Everything is connected by water.... When you add development, when you build in floodplains, you’re basically taking away the natural resiliency that also protects homes from flooding and allows people to live in this state. The more that we misunderstand that, the more we’re basically dismantling wetlands and biodiversity, the more we’re actually making it less possible for people to live here.”

Alison Stine is a staff writer at NPQ. She is the author of several books of fiction, most recently Road Out of Winter (MIRA, 2020), which won the Philip K. Dick Award, and Trashlands (MIRA, 2021), longlisted for the Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Award. Jeff VanderMeer is the bestselling author of dozens of books, notably, The Southern Reach Trilogy, which includes the novel Annihilation, made into a feature film in 2018. He is also the president and founder of the Sunshine State Biodiversity Group, a nonprofit focused on conservation, outreach, and education about biodiversity in Florida.

Florida became home for Jeff VanderMeer when he was young—the humid, subtropical climate reminding him of his early years in the Fiji Islands, where his parents worked for the Peace Corps. Many of VanderMeer’s books, including Hummingbird Salamander (MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), are concerned with the planet: the changing climate, the erosion of natural habitats, the survival of animals—and humankind’s part in the destruction. In 2023, his publisher reissued his first novel, Veniss Underground, which was initially published two decades ago. According to VanderMeer, the book was oddly prescient: “I didn’t realize how much it has so many of the themes and things that I’ve dealt with since.”

VanderMeer calls upon his love of and concern with the natural world—and the unique biodiversity of Florida—in both his creative and nonprofit work. He has written a string of articles for The Nation, Esquire, and TIME about the importance of environmental justice in his home state, a place where he understands all too well both the impulse to leave and the urge to stay and help.





“Everything is connected by water,” he said of Florida. “When you add development, when you build in floodplains, you’re basically taking away the natural resiliency that also protects homes from flooding and allows people to live in this state. The more that we misunderstand that, the more we’re basically dismantling wetlands and biodiversity, the more we’re actually making it less possible for people to live here.

“It’s definitely got a social justice component in terms of which communities are going to be most left behind on the coast, with sea-level rise,” VanderMeer said. “I think it’s very important to stand and fight.”

Alison Stine: Did you always want to write?

Jeff VanderMeer: I did, actually. I think from early on, growing up in Fiji. I started out as a poet—not a very good poet, but it gave me an appreciation for the use of language. And my parents read to me, and they read me strange stuff. They read me not only “Tyger Tyger, burning bright” but a lot of William Blake when I was a kid. I think it helped that they were so into reading to me and my sister—I can’t really remember a time when I wasn’t writing.

AS: What about your interest in and love for the environment? When did that develop, do you think?

JV: My earliest memories are actually not of Pennsylvania, where I was born, but of Fiji, which was both a tropical paradise and a volcanic island. It had a lot of different microclimates. We did have a mild winter, where you could go up into the mountains and you’d have to wear a jacket—and you might see a tiny little sprinkling of snow at the very top. But the whole area was just completely rich, verdant: a jungle, a tropical-climate landscape. And then the sea was right there.

My dad studied invasive rhinoceros beetles, and his work took him to various islands. He would take us along in little boats. Pretty much my growing up—until we moved to Ithaca, New York—was just completely about nature. It was kind of hard for me to imagine not being surrounded by that—until Ithaca, which, hilariously enough, is actually pretty rich in wildlife. But I did not appreciate going to an Ithaca winter from Fiji.

AS: It sounds like a magical upbringing in a way—learning the magic of nature early.

JV: Well, it was. It was also juxtaposed with the fact that my parents were going through what I’ve called a 10-year divorce. The mixture of those things, even though they weren’t fun to go through, was formative for the writing, because the nature was seen through the prism of the human stuff. I think that that created a tension that also made me want to write. To this day, although I don’t think of writing necessarily as therapy, it is absolutely true that when there are traumatic things that have happened, I am able to work through them in the writing.

AS: I always say that the stories in my fiction aren’t true, but my feelings are in the fiction and those definitely are true.

JV: Absolutely. What I do a lot is the transference of emotion from a real context to an imaginary one. And I find that’s very effective for conveying something.

AS: How did Florida become your home?

JV: Our family could not stand more than two Ithaca winters. And my dad, who was teaching at Cornell, almost drowned in a flood in a river when he insisted on trying to capture this invasive moth that was crossing in the middle of the rapids. That was kind of the final straw. And so we moved to Florida. He got a job offer as a fire ant researcher at the University of Florida, USDA. But also, it seemed like the climate that was most close to Fiji—and maybe those almost-drowning tragedies wouldn’t occur in a place that was much more familiar! That was Gainesville, Florida—which, again, was extremely full of nature and was wild. Eventually, I moved up to Tallahassee to live with Ann, my wife, in ’92.

AS: I learned through your nonprofit, the Sunshine State Biodiversity Group, that Florida is one of the most biodiverse places in North America. I never made that connection before.

“It’s harder when you see development around town, because you know exactly the animal personalities that are suffering because of it.”

JV: I think it’s useful to recognize that South Florida used to be an incredibly biodiverse place, but overdevelopment has completely taken that off the table except for the Everglades. But in North Florida, there are still places with dirt roads that are almost impassable and have no cell phone or Wi-Fi reception. There are places that are extremely wild. It is definitely one of the most biodiverse places in the world. And part of that is because other biodiverse places have, unfortunately, undergone certain tragedies. [Biodiversity is] something that is really important, I think, to fight for, since it’s essential for survival. But also, it’s kind of invisible. Unfortunately, people in the US don’t always understand just how rich the southeast in general is.

AS: Your current house in Tallahassee, and the process of rewilding your yard—how did that change you? How did that change your life?

JV: Until Trump was elected president, I was very involved in environmental causes, more at the national level, supporting things like the Center for Biological Diversity. I hiked a lot and I talked about Florida a fair amount, but it wasn’t quite as personal. After Trump, I sought therapy in nature in almost a selfish way, by being more invested in putting up bird feeders and things as a way not of escaping but just to find something that would get me past feeling frozen. That was really life-changing in the sense that suddenly my kind of obsessive-compulsive nature was fine-tuned onto plant species and microhabitats and my yard.

When we moved to this new place, there was even more possibility. Now it’s more down to the individual animals. I didn’t used to know the individual raccoons that lived in the yard of the old house. But now I actually know the habits; I know the differences in behavior. And even some of the birds, some of the cardinals, the hummingbirds. All have personalities. Once you see all of that, it’s a very different, ground-level, view.

It’s a more difficult thing because it’s harder when something bad happens. It’s harder when you see development around town, because you know exactly the animal personalities that are suffering because of it. So, there’s that. But

there is also a great deal of joy and just simply feeling like you’re getting to a greater sense of the granularity of the world.

AS: You feel more connected to it. Tell me about your nonprofit.

JV: I really like to try to actually get things done. I don’t have a lot of patience for efforts that don’t lead to results. And I had spent what I would call a kind of disastrous period in 2021, ’22, involving myself in local politics, supporting local candidates in much more proactive ways than I had in the past, helping to fund and edit a progressive news site. And even though some of it had results, a lot of it just felt like, ultimately, maybe not the right space for me. So, thinking out of the ashes of that, I thought, Well, what makes sense?

One thing that really makes sense is conserving land, given the way that Florida has so many preemption laws and other things that work against conservation. So I founded the Sunshine State Biodiversity Group, in part for that and in part for education about biodiversity. I was told by a couple of people, “Don’t put biodiversity in the title because people don’t respond to that.” I think maybe the messaging about it has just not been that great. One thing that our projects do is if we consider land, it might be a hyperlocal project, but it’s going to involve pieces of land that have species on them—whether plant or animal species—that are probably found nowhere else in the world: even if locally abundant, they’re rare.

In addition to the preservation of these sensitive plots of land, we plan to do national public messaging about all of our projects. That’s the education component, and that’s where it becomes more for a general reader, or someone who is involved in the environment: takeaways that you can use in any context. We might do a box turtle citizen survey, because box turtles are a big part of the landscape here. I think that they’re a way of anchoring people to their yards and seeing the value of it but that will also have a national messaging component.

“I always say, try to find something that keeps you in the moment, if you’re working in the environmental space—something positive that keeps you anchored, so then you can deal with the larger things.”

There are things that we can do that larger nonprofits cannot. Larger nonprofits are not going to be as invested in 20 acres of cypress swamp—but it’s still got 400-year-old cypress trees on it. That is incredibly important. So, we can also fill in the gaps, I would say.

AS: That reminds me of something my grandfather did. My grandfather was a farmer in rural Indiana. He only had an eighth-grade education, but he raised enough money to buy this plot of woods, and he just left it wild. He didn’t farm it. He didn’t hunt it or anything. And that was rare at the time—to buy land just to conserve it. But he thought it was really important.

What is it like, though, to balance your creative work—which is often so private and so personal (you have to shut yourself away to write)—with the nonprofit and advocacy work that you do?

JV: There are certain ways that we can legally leverage the popularity of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* to help the nonprofit raise money. That’s kind of easy, because I was already kind of doing that, but just generally for environmental causes. Then also, it’s about personnel. So, for example, Ali Sperling is our community outreach director and VP, and she does a lot of the stuff that I’m just not as comfortable with, being more of an introvert. It’s great to have her, and just to slowly assemble a board that has complementary skills—enough unique attributes that we have everybody we need in place as we’ve grown.

We’re almost at \$100,000, raised this year with almost no formal fundraising—including a \$40,000 grant from the Fredman Family Foundation, for land preservation. I’m really excited about our ability to fund other efforts, also. We just gave a small grant to a 4-H–run, young naturalists program that allows 10-to-13-year-olds to experience the wilderness in an educational sense, with the right guidance. It’s going to be a great program, and it’s something that we were able to fund right off the bat; I think we’ll probably continue to do that. As we raise money, we’ll be looking for opportunities

to liaise with other groups who we think support the kind of values that we have.

AS: How do you keep from getting burned out when it comes to environmental activism? How do you keep from getting discouraged?

JV: The yard itself keeps me balanced. Just gardening—planting something and weeding and all that is very physical. I think that helps quite a bit. I think the nonprofit, the fact that we’re actually doing stuff. I mean, we had a whole environmental suite of programming at our local writers’ festival. We’re having environmental films that we’re curating at the Tallahassee Film Festival. The fact that we’ve been able to do so much right off the bat is incredibly encouraging and helps a lot.

And I always say, try to find something that keeps you in the moment, if you’re working in the environmental space—something positive that keeps you anchored, so then you can deal with the larger things. But also to take time off, the necessary time away from it to not get burnt out.

AS: I think also as creative people, it’s necessary to have that fictional world that we can disappear into. I know for me it’s a nice escape to be able to go back and forth: I can’t handle reality right now—I’m going to be in a reality that I made.

JV: Absolutely. And that’s one thing that was beginning to stress me out with politics (not with nonprofit work). Balance—I didn’t really have the time or the headspace. It’s been kind of a relief the last few months to feel like for the first time since the beginning of COVID, really, I’m actually back in the usual rhythm of the routine of writing.

AS: You’ve written from the perspective of people very different from you, including a lot of women—women who are scientists, a bodybuilder in your book *Hummingbird Salamander*.... How do you create these characters?

JV: It’s a tough one, because there is a lot of that transference of emotion, transference of autobiographical detail when it seems appropriate, when it seems like it’s going to

“I think it’s important that all writers in all situations are self-aware enough to know what their strengths are and what their limitations are. And then in situations where you can really do damage...just don’t write certain kinds of things.”

fit a character. Often, a main character is connected to some kind of very charged image or situation. And then I just think about it for a long time until I know what the ending is, even if it changes by the time I get to the ending. That’s when I begin to write.

Right now, I’m working on three novellas. Mostly handwritten scenes. And then these notecards of little ideas that have come to me are put in chronological order by story. In terms of creating those kinds of characters, for *Annihilation* it was partially that that’s the way they came to me and then partially this idea that I really hated movies and books where it was all men and only one woman. And the fact that my books were well received, I think, gives my subconscious the permission to continue doing that. So, even though I’d been writing women characters before *Annihilation*, I think the reader response really gave me permission to continue in that vein.

That said, I think it’s also very situational. The expedition that they’re going on in *Annihilation* isolates them from society, so there’s less of a responsibility for me to show the complexity of what it’s like for someone who isn’t a White guy to move through societies, so to speak. And even with Jane and the bodybuilding, she is isolated at one point, and is kind of a loner to begin with. So, I pick my spots.

I think it’s important that all writers in all situations are self-aware enough to know what their strengths are and what their limitations are. And then in situations where you can really do damage, getting something wrong—just don’t write certain kinds of things.

AS: You weren’t an overnight success, which is something I appreciate about you. You held on to your day job for a long time. Did the success of *Annihilation* and *The Southern Reach Trilogy* surprise you? Do you think there was something different about that first book in the series that resonated so much?

JV: It’s interesting, because that book did require a lot of hustle, and it did involve things like taking on more nonfiction assignments. But from 2007 until 2014, when *Annihilation* was published, I was a full-time writer, and it was with piece-work—doing novelizations. I also did things like *The Steam-punk Bible* coffee table book [Abrams, 2011]. I was really proud of that era. Even though the hustle is such that I’m not sure that it wouldn’t have eventually killed me, I’m proud of the fact that I was a full-time writer during that period.

It’s more that as I was beginning to realize I wanted to write about Florida in some form, I realized I was going to be writing some novels that were set in some version of the real world. I knew I was working toward that. I knew that would automatically be more accessible than the fantasy work I was doing. But the fantasy work was really important. It had to come first.

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Early Coralroot, *Corallorhiza trifida*

by Alison Stine

Coral was pregnant then. She hid it well in a dress she had found in the road, sun-bleached and mud-dotted, only a little ripped. The dress billowed to her knees, over the tops of her boots. She was named for the wildflower which hadn't been seen since before her birth, and for ocean life, poisoned and gone. It was too dangerous to go to the beach anymore. You never knew when storms might come.

Though they were going—to get a whale.

A boy had come from up north with a rumor: a whale had beached. Far off its course, but everything was off by then: the waterways, the paths to the ocean, its salt. You went where you had to go, where weather and work and family—but mostly weather—took you.

The villagers around Lake Erie were carving the creature up, taking all the good meat and fat. The strainer in its mouth could be used for bows, the bones in its chest for tent poles or greenhouse beams.

It was a lot of fuel for maybe nothing, a rumor spun by an out-of-breath boy. But there would be pickings along the road. And there was still gas, expensive but available. So the group went, led by Mr. Fall. They brought kayaks, lashed to the top of the bus, but in the end, the water was shallow enough they could wade.

They knew where to go because they could smell it. You got used to a lot of smells in the world: rotten food, chemicals, even shit. But death... Death was hard to get used to.

"Masks up," Mr. Fall said.

Some of the men in the group—all men except Coral—had respirators, painter's masks, or medical masks. Coral had a handkerchief of faded blue paisley, knotted around her neck. She pulled it up over her nose. She had dotted it with lavender oil from a vial, carefully tipping out the little she had left. She breathed shallowly through fabric and flowers.

Mr. Fall just had a T-shirt, wound around his face. He could have gotten a better mask, Coral knew, but he was leading the crew. He saved the good things for the others.

She was the only girl on the trip, and probably the youngest person. Maybe fifteen, she thought. Months ago, she had lain in the icehouse with her teacher, a man who would not stay. He was old enough to have an old-fashioned name, Robert, to be called after people who had lived and died as they should. Old enough to know better, Mr. Fall had said, but what was better, anymore?

Everything was temporary. Robert touched her in the straw, the ice blocks sweltering around them. He let himself want her, or pretend to, for a few hours. She tried not to miss him. His hands that shook at her buttons would shake in a fire or in a swell of floodwater. Or maybe violence had killed him. She remembered it felt cool in the icehouse, a relief from the outside where heat beat down. The last of the chillers sputtered out chemicals. The heat stayed trapped in people's shelters, like ghosts circling the ceiling. Heat haunted. It would never leave.

News would stop for long stretches. The information that reached Scrapalachia would be written hastily on damp paper, across every scrawled inch. It was always old news.

The whale would be picked over by the time they reached it.

Mr. Fall led a practiced team. They would not bother Coral, were trained not to mess with anything except the mission. They parked the bus in an old lot, then descended through weeds to the beach. The stairs had washed away. And the beach, when they reached it, was not covered with dirt or rock as Coral had expected, but with a fine yellow grit so bright it hurt to look at, a blankness stretching on.

"Take off your boots," Mr. Fall said.

Coral looked at him, but the others were listening, knotting plastic laces around their necks, stuffing socks into pockets.

"Go on, Coral. It's all right." Mr. Fall's voice was gentle, muffled by the shirt.

Coral had her job to do. Only Mr. Fall and the midwife knew for sure she was pregnant, though others were talking. She knew how to move so that no one could see.

But maybe, she thought as she leaned on a fence post and popped off her boot, she wanted people to see. To tell her what to do, how to handle it. Help her. He had to have died, Robert—and that was the reason he didn't come back for her. Or maybe he didn't know about the baby?

People had thought there would be no more time, but there was. Just different time. Time moving slower. Time after disaster, when they still had to live.

She set her foot down on the yellow surface. It was warm. She shot a look at Mr. Fall.

The surface felt smooth, shifting beneath her toes. Coral slid her foot across, light and slightly painful. It was the first time she had felt sand.

The sand on the beach made only a thin layer. People had started to take it. Already, people knew sand, like everything, could be valuable, could be sold.

Coral took off her other boot. She didn't have laces, to tie around her neck. She carried the boots under her arm. Sand clung to her, pebbles jabbing at her feet. Much of the trash on the beach had been picked through. What was left was diapers and food wrappers and cigarettes smoked down to filters.

"Watch yourselves," Mr. Fall said.

Down the beach they followed the smell. It led them on, the sweet rot scent. They came around a rock outcropping, and there was the whale, massive as a ship run aground: red, purple, and white. The colors seemed not real. Birds were on it, the black birds of death. The enemies of scavengers, their competition. Two of the men ran forward, waving their arms and whooping to scare off the birds.

"All right, everybody," Mr. Fall said to the others. "You know what to look for."

Except they didn't. Not really. Animals weren't their specialty. Plastic was.

People had taken axes to the carcass, to carve off meat. More desperate people had taken spoons, whatever they could use to get at something to take home for candle wax or heating fuel, or to barter or beg for something else, something better. "You ever seen a whale?" one of the men, New Orleans, asked Coral.

She shook her head. "No."

"This isn't a whale," Mr. Fall said. "Not anymore. Keep your masks on."

They approached it. The carcass sank into the sand. Coral tried not to breathe deeply. Flesh draped from the bones of the whale. The bones were arched, soaring like buttresses, things that made up cathedrals—things she had read about in the book.

Bracing his arm over his mouth, Mr. Fall began to pry at the ribs. They were big and strong. They made a cracking sound, like a splitting tree.

New Orleans gagged and fell back.

Other men were dropping. Coral heard someone vomiting into the sand. The smell was so strong it filled her head and chest like a sound, a high ringing. She moved closer to give her feet something to do. She stood in front of the whale and looked into its gaping mouth.

There was something in the whale. Something deep in its throat.

In one pocket she carried a knife always, and in the other she had a light: a precious flashlight that cast a weak beam. She switched it on and swept it over the whale's tongue, picked black by the birds.

She saw a mass, opaque and shimmering, wide enough it blocked the whale's throat. The whale had probably died of it, this blockage. The mass looked lumpy, twined with seaweed and muck, but in the mess, she could make out a water bottle.

It was plastic. Plastic in the animal's mouth. It sparked in the beam of her flashlight.

Coral stepped into the whale.

ALISON STINE, a staff writer at *NPQ*, is the author of, among other books, *Trashlands* (MIRA Books, 2021)—from which this story was excerpted, with permission. Stine has been a freelance reporter with the *New York Times* and a contributing editor at the Economic Hardship Reporting Project. Stine's awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship and the Studs Terkel Award for Media and Journalism.



The Quagga Man of Marsh Lake

by Cole Nelson

Found within the residence of John Campion, M.D., after the report of his disappearance.

On that warm morning the rainbow mussel (*Dreissena aurora*) was discovered, no one could deny its beauty. Crowds gathered in the early morning mist along the riverside of my home, Marsh Lake, to witness for the first time the bright iridescent shells shimmering with refracted light like oil erupting across the quay. All along the Mississippi riverbed the razor edges of each bivalve were magnified and distorted by the water. The famously muddy river was bright with color and crystal clear.

Others have reported, perhaps melodramatically, the damage caused by the introduction of the rainbow mussel to the waterways of North America. Even accepting more conservative estimates, the proliferation of the rainbow mussel has cost the nation several billion in infrastructure repairs. Fishing industries have collapsed along the Great Lakes. Hundreds of individuals a year incur medical debt for expensive veligerectomies. I treat at least a dozen each summer, soothing their itching skin and carefully detaching grown bivalves. I do not take on the more advanced cases. Once the lungs are colonized, time is limited, even with the best care. A month after treatment, perhaps up to half a year, the patient inevitably disappears, leaving only their clothes to wash ashore in the nearest lake or river.

However, since its first reported appearance on the shores of the Upper Mississippi over five years ago, the rainbow mussel has been directly linked to, at most, 80 confirmed deaths. Many sources place the number at 81, but I do not count the so-called *Quagga Man of Marsh Lake*. Though his was the most advanced case of *Dreissena* colonization in medical records, this did not precipitate his death.

He was murdered. But not, as others would claim, by *my* hands.

What I did to the man (or rather, what I left undone) was not out of malice or bias. By the time I met the Quagga Man, named after the mussel more commonly known in the area, he could have been anyone. I did not even know if he was a man. He could have been a woman, or nonbinary (the name *Quagga Man* was coined by the local rag and stuck to him harder than the mussels themselves). It was certainly no fault of mine that he was one of those vagrants forced out of the city to scrape a living between drought and flood along the riverbank.

In fact, no one knew what the Quagga Man was when he first appeared. He was discovered the same morning the rainbow mussel suddenly appeared along the marshy banks of the Mississippi in Marsh Lake's Riverside Park. Crowds gathered as near as they dared to the bright iridescence rippling across the quay. Everyone looked to the river, and so it was nearly noon before the Quagga Man was discovered, a recumbent form in the park's central fountain, encrusted with a prism of opalescence.

He was not alone. There were two other forms standing behind him, soldiers who once wore uniforms from two world wars. Tourists didn't look twice, but those of us who grew up here knew the Quagga Man was a new addition to the monument. Was he a prank? A piece of modern art from some college student, placed at just the wrong (or right) time? A few rumors spread that attempted to explain his sudden appearance, but inevitably the greater wonder of the rainbow mussel took over the local imagination.

It was the ecologist Dr. Anderson who first floated the idea to our team, nearly three weeks later, that he could be alive. After the many layers of shell had been chiseled away, it took DNA and dental tests to determine that he was Desmond Brown, an amateur ornithologist fallen on hard times. I have since purchased his album of midwestern bird calls, which are accurate (if shrill).

Here, I will admit to a lie of omission. I knew the truth of the Quagga Man almost immediately.

The day he was discovered was the year's first heat wave. I had arrived from the hospital to provide medical attention to the ecologists on the scene and the gawkers crowding the park. Out of curiosity, I looked closely at the fountain, fascinated by the liveliness the mussels lent to the reclining form. It was my first view of *Dreissena aurora*, and I was enamored. I walked

around the fountain slowly, as a connoisseur, pushing my way through the crowd. Soon I was called to treat a child for heat-stroke, whose mother had stupidly brought him out of the house. But when I returned, the crowds had thinned. I braved stepping in the waters of the shell-encrusted fountain to get a closer look. That is when I saw it: there was one cleft in his pearly shell. It was so small, only someone close could notice it. From deep within I saw an eye, shadowed behind the valves opening and closing with quiet clicks. It was wide and frightened. No sooner had that eye startled me when I saw a web of silky byssus enter and cover its surface. The fear I saw in that eye was the only message I would receive from him.

Was he asking to be saved? I did think, briefly, of shouting to my colleagues. But really, what could we do for him?

Nothing, I thought. He should have been dead already, after so many hours in the blistering heat—his skin punctured and his airways sealed. And yet there was, barely perceptible, a rising and falling of the chest. Occasionally, his fingers twitched.

How in God's name was he alive?

I endeavored to find out.

* * *

I did not kill the Quagga Man. He would have lived if I had had my way. He would have changed, yes, but that was already beyond my control. My only responsibility, as I saw it, was to give him time. Every day I saved him from the swarming, gawking crowds threatening to trample him, suffocate him, chip off one of the precious shells that, somehow, made up his new respiratory system. Every morning I arrived before dawn and kept careful watch, attending my official duties as necessary but often rushing across the riverbank to distract tourists and encourage parents to rein in their little parasites. More than once, I lacerated my feet as I ran over a razor shell missed during the morning cleanup. I didn't mind—I could patch myself up—as long as the Quagga Man had time to finish his remarkable metamorphosis, to which I alone bore witness.

No, I did not kill him, neither by malice nor by negligence. The day he died, I had been forced to abandon my post. While I was treating one of Dr. Anderson's young interns for dehydration, some idiot child, driven by a dare, had decided to clamber over the Quagga Man. The upshot was, the clumsy punk stepped on a finger. I could hear the crack from across the park as the digit broke away.

"Agh, it's rusty!" one of the delinquents shouted.

"It's blood!"

"No way! It's just mussel juice or something."

I was there before I realized it, standing over the boy as he looked up at me from the ground. How had he gotten there? And just as quickly, I was called away by Dr. Kaur and dismissed for the day, against all protestation.

"But my papers..." I said, moving to retrieve my notes on the Quagga Man. But Dr. Kaur shook her head and assured me any paperwork I needed to finish would be there tomorrow. And likely much more.

There was nothing I could do. I was sent home indefinitely. And Drs. Anderson and Kaur, no doubt drawn by the cries of those idiot children, finally examined the encrusted form more closely. By the time my unofficial suspension had ended, the good doctors had begun their work. The Quagga Man died within the week.

The postmortem was a farce. "The species has developed parasitic behavior verging on carnivory," Dr. Anderson, the report's lead editor, wrote. "They may attach themselves to hard and soft surfaces, including flesh. More insidiously, the spores can be inhaled under water and encyst within the lungs. More observation will be needed to discover other identifying symptoms of *Dreissena* parasitism, but in the immediate future, prevention is the highest priority. For this reason, it is the recommendation of this committee that all methods and treatments possible should be used to remove *Dreissena aurora* from North American waters."

Parasitism. Outrageous, blinkered nonsense. As though the case of Desmond Brown had shown us anything but that a man left drunk in a park fountain had miraculously survived one of the worst heat waves of the year without food or water—had survived purely on the secretions of *Dreissena aurora* into his bloodstream. Colonization, yes; but objectively symbiotic, if left alone.

The Quagga Man was not left alone. From salt baths to carefully administered ionized copper treatments (a highly unorthodox and dangerous treatment unsanctioned by the medical establishment), they did everything in their power to kill

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and remove the mussels that had embedded themselves into his skin and, in some places, his bones. They rinsed his lungs to kill the encysted veligers within the bronchioli. With each veliger and shell they removed, with every byssus excised, they severed him from the secretions that maintained his vitals—such as they were. In short, they did all they could to save him from what he had already become: a colony and a home for a migrant species in a strange land.

What was left of him after they chiseled away his shimmering carapace could have fit into a paper bag. The only justice of the situation was that, due to the temporary national ban on cremations, Desmond Brown's body was released into the river to which he and all his peers are surely headed, regardless.

During my suspension, I could not keep my notes from the prying eyes of the press scattered throughout the crowds. They were stolen by a jumped-up local journalist looking for a scoop. A week later, I was crucified in the local papers, followed shortly by the medical journals. It was made very clear to me how lucky I am to remain in my position.

Meanwhile, the ecologists dumped their chemicals into the river, and teams of hazmats scraped away at the riverbank until all that remained were the indented forms of shells. Perhaps the rainbow mussel would have destroyed Marsh Lake. Perhaps all our pipes would have clotted with it. Perhaps the fish and birds would have died off, and the riverfolk starved. But *Dreissena aurora* had found a way to live with us, even through us, outside the river. They were prepared to make their home with us, and we had responded with poison and fear. I say we, though I no longer identify with that hateful word. There is no we, only the shivering solitary *I* of humanity.

My colleagues have rejected me in turn, jettisoning my life's work from the academy and censoring me in public. My neighbors turn from me in the street.

I feel no guilt or remorse for my inaction and observation. But I must admit, the gaze of Desmond Brown's eye has followed me through the last year. I ask myself if those tendrils grew as quickly as I remember. How long had I watched as slowly they obscured his sight? More and more, I think of the river and the hidden life teaming under its surface, once again muddy and opaque. The sun is burning away another summer. My skin itches, and I think how homey it would be at the muddy river bottom. How silent, and how cool.

COLE NELSON is a writer from the United States. Nelson studied environmental literature and climate fiction at the University of Minnesota, and now works as a children's book editor in Minneapolis, MN.



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Supporting Higher Education is a Life Changing Investment

The path to higher education should be free from obstacles and wide enough for all who wish to travel it. Here's how employers can help.

By Bill Miller, CEO of Kean University Foundation

We are in the midst of a great national debate on access to higher education and its cost. Is it fair that many people are saddled with student debt they may never be able to repay? Should the government step in to create affordable access to higher education or forgive loans for millions of graduates? Should employers absorb more of the responsibility for educating their future workforce? While we work toward answers to these questions, one fact is undeniable: Education is the great equalizer.

Kean University sees this to a much greater extent than many other institutions in America. Kean serves a significant number of low-income students and those who are the first in their families to attend college. In fact, U.S. News and World Report ranked Kean 46th out of 439 in Top Performers for Social Mobility among national universities. That means we help those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed and graduate, each of whom deserves the opportunity to improve their own lives and the lives of their families.

Without solving the problems of cost and access, it's possible we could live in a country without a robust and diverse higher education sector. Can we really envision America without the teaching, research, inventiveness and social mobility American higher education is known for?

At the same time, institutions of higher education need a full and diverse set of funding resources to prepare the future generations for the global marketplace. Government, private sector support and individual philanthropic giving are all part of the solution to the challenges students and families face around access and cost of securing a college degree.

Like many higher education institutions, Kean University receives funding from private philanthropy. Over the last five years, more than 9,000 individual donors contributed over \$22 million in support of Kean University. Those contributions are a game changer for next-generation leaders pursuing a college degree to level the playing field and overcome challenges that life has placed in front of them.

As CEO of the Kean University Foundation, I see firsthand the impact higher education has upon those who pursue it. We can all make a difference. Every gift – large and small – and each and every donor, volunteer and advocate makes an influential difference in strengthening educational leadership, advancing research initiatives, shaping policy decisions and helping students.

I would be remiss not to mention that acts of charity are also an investment in ourselves. Philanthropy can be life-changing for donors. Arthur C. Brooks, one of the country's leading policy experts and the president of the American Enterprise Institute, reminds us that "it is a fact that givers are happier people than non-givers."

Of course, philanthropy is much more than financial resources. Volunteers are critical assets to civil society and all of our communities, especially in light of Covid-19. In its newest "Value of Volunteer Time" report, the Independent Sector reported that the value of a volunteer hour is now estimated to be \$31.80 – a six percent (6.2%) increase compared to 2021. That figure underscores the significant contributions volunteers make to support our communities and nation. At Kean University, board members, committee members, and community volunteers contribute in so many ways.

In many respects, our charitable actions remind us what makes us human: taking care of each other and doing it as a group to create a bigger impact. By making a philanthropic gift to a college or university – whether it be your time, talent, treasure or willingness to introduce new friends to an institution, you are positively changing lives.

It has been said that philanthropy is an act of optimism. The act is an investment in a student, a member of the faculty, a vision, an organization. Philanthropy can help fortify the American higher education system by continuing to provide opportunities to our students, who will ultimately do the same for the next generation and create a better world for all of us.



The City That Was in a Forest—Atlanta’s Disappeared Trees and Black People

A Conversation with Hugh “H.D.” Hunter

by Julian Rose

■
This city of beautiful Black people and culture used to be in a forest. Whether that becomes true again rests in our resolve, courage, and clarity in this struggle to #StopCopCity.

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ince the reinvigoration of the #StopCopCity movement in January 2023,¹ following the murder of a forest defender affectionately known as Tortuguita,² Atlanta police and the local government have been adamant about depicting Defend the Atlanta Forest protesters and activists as “outside agitators.”³ There’s a history in that phrase. “Outside agitators” was often used as a bludgeon against many in the Civil Rights movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and others who came up after him.

Contrary to the city’s “outside agitators” messaging, Atlanta natives and residents have long been fighting to protect themselves and the land from oppressive forces throughout—and long before the #StopCopCity movement. Natives of the city have gone through false promises of positive urban development⁴—development that instead, in most cases, came at an unbearable cost. But in order to fully contextualize what it means to protect Atlanta’s natural habitat, we must first dive deep into Atlanta as a home to Black folks.

Atlanta has a moniker: “the city in a forest”⁵—a phrase inspired by Atlanta’s lush, sprawling natural environment. At one point, Atlanta had one of the highest numbers of tree canopies of the major US cities.⁶ According to the *Atlanta*



WE'RE NOT
OUT OF THE
WOODS YET

Atlanta, known as a “Black Mecca,” is also number one in the United States in income inequality.

Journal-Constitution, the city has lost approximately half an acre of tree coverage every day for the last 15 years; since 2013, tree removal has outpaced tree planting.⁷

There’s another Georgia movement,⁸ one focused on the Okefenokee Swamp,⁹ which, according to H. D. Hunter, author and Black radical organizer with Endstate ATL¹⁰—a grassroots political home with an abolitionist, Black, queer, feminist politic—is “considered one of the rarest swamps, rarest bodies of water in the world.”¹¹ This rarity is due, in part, to the wildlife and the number of species native to the swamp itself. It is also the largest swamp in North America¹² and is part of the original Muscogee lands. In the swamp, there are “over 850 plant species and 400 vertebrate animals,” Hunter told me. Organizers and activists say the swamp must be saved because it is “one of the last self-contained, naturally functioning wetlands left on Earth.”¹³

For organizers like Hunter, this city is home. Hunter holds memories of Atlanta—of what was, what is, and what we have to lose.

“I was born and raised in Atlanta,” Hunter explained. “I had my first kiss here, my first fight here, and attended high school and college here.”

Hunter’s parents moved to Atlanta in the eighties, from Florida. “But even being raised as a Georgian, I remember my dad telling me, ‘You meet other Black people, and if they’re away from home, then you see what they need, you see how you can be of service to them. You help them get adjusted, and then you all walk in lockstep together toward whatever next success exists for people who look like you here.’”

THE FACTORS THAT CHANGED ATLANTA

“I’ve been able to watch the city change and grow in ways that are really cool, and I’ve seen parts of it crumble. I see home in the only way that you really can—which is with a lot of complexity through whatever challenges and struggles there are,” said Hunter.

Cop City arrives at a time of swift changes in Atlanta, and cannot be separated from the vision Atlanta elites have for the city.

The first is rapid gentrification, defined by *National Geographic* as “a process where wealthy...[people] begin to move into poor or working-class communities, often originally occupied by communities of color.”¹⁴ In Atlanta, many cite the 1996 Olympics as one of the main accelerants of these changes.¹⁵ In preparation, elites of Atlanta looked to transform the city into an international one. In response to worldwide competitions such as the Olympics and the World Cup, there’s a global history of residents suffering to produce a world stage—and what happened in Atlanta was no different. Eminent domain gobbled up many homes, exploited labor, and pushed the start of new jail construction and inflammatory policy—policing.¹⁶ Atlanta has been embattled in a yearslong struggle to close the jail¹⁷ that was built in preparation for the ’96 Olympics—Atlanta City Detention Center, which has continued to cage poor, Black Atlantans for decades since.

Such tenuous conditions have made life difficult for Atlanta’s long-term Black residents, many of whom have found refuge among trees and rail lines in the broader metro Atlanta area when possible.¹⁸ Due to increasing “urbanization” and development of luxury features that kicked into high gear for the Olympics, the cost of homes increased dramatically, while the wealth of most Black residents did not. Atlanta, known as a “Black Mecca,” is also number one in the United States in income inequality.¹⁹ At the very same time, in the late 1990s, urgent urban and suburban developments grew the city but led to sharp decreases in forest cover.²⁰

With these changes, policing expanded.²¹ The cost of living,²² alongside gentrification, also brought tense racial and class dynamics. In 1990, Black people represented 67 percent of the city’s population; by 2022, Atlanta was no longer a majority-Black city, as this demographic fell to 48.2 percent.²³

Another aspect that contributed to the change is “the Atlanta Way,”²⁴ which describes public–private partnerships that deliver on the needs of Atlantans. However, many residents—like Hunter—feel like community members lost more than they gained: “So many corporate interests have been invited in”—bringing jobs, which sounds good on the

If you want to understand Atlanta’s tendency to remove trees, Black people’s homes, and wildlife in one fell swoop, look no further than the BeltLine.

surface—“but we don’t often talk about the trade-off, especially from an environmental perspective.”

The reality is that corporations in the city spark deforestation²⁵—and because they are here for profit, they’re going to extract more than they give. Public–private partnerships also mean the city and residents become increasingly dependent on private interests that are not, in turn, directly accountable to community members. Many argue, therefore, that profit motives compromised the purported mission of such partnerships.²⁶ In the shadows of these public–private deals are the concentrations of wealth along racial lines. Often, these partnerships gave White business owners power over meeting the needs of what was a majority-Black city.

Public–private deals paved the way for Cop City.

If you want to understand Atlanta’s tendency to remove trees, Black people’s homes, and wildlife in one fell swoop, look no further than the BeltLine—a series of connected, multiuse trails that circumvent the center of the city by connecting public parks, transit, and housing that was supposed to be affordable²⁷ along a 22-mile railroad corridor. The project was originally designed by a student at Georgia Tech in 1999, and took 14 years to break ground, in 2013.²⁸ The BeltLine is slated to be completed in 2030, and will eventually connect 45 neighborhoods. According to Hunter, if development trends continue, these 45 neighborhoods will look quite different from how they look today.

“It’s really just been a big commercialization project, in my opinion, for the city, for another disingenuous method of attracting people here,” said Hunter.

Before the BeltLine, there were “houses, trees, other wildlife pushed out to make something that we were initially sold as something that helps bring people together and gives us accessibility,” Hunter continued.

These factors—privatization of public land and services, gentrification, and deforestation—changed Atlanta, and these changes (among others) created the entry point to the proposed Cop City,²⁹ which was originally Indigenous Muscogee land. The project earned its name due to the goal of

building a mock city on the compound so that the police could practice raids, bomb testing, and other urban warfare tactics. The amount of land leased to the Atlanta Police Foundation is 381 acres, and current plans released by the City of Atlanta and APF include deforestation and use of 85 acres of land for the compound itself³⁰—though who’s to say whether that will be the only acreage they will ultimately use.

ATLANTA: 2020 AND BEYOND

In 2020, Atlanta, along with the entire country, was shaken by uprisings against police violence and the institution of policing itself³¹—and tensions have never quite settled since. While abolitionist organizers like me doubled down on mutual aid and beating back police propaganda about the very meaning of public safety, the cops have seen increased budgets, new jail facilities, and unconditional support from local politicians.

During that time, police and the city pushed the narrative of a crime wave. Pundits said that the crime wave was caused by “defunding” of the police, although police budgets had actually increased. According to the Atlanta Police Department’s own data, major crime decreased from 2019 to 2020.³² In 2020 to 2021, the APD openly set goals to increase the “technological footprint in economically challenged areas,”³³ despite Atlanta already being the most surveilled city per capita in America.³⁴ The APD determined to increase its revenue to meet these goals through fines and forfeiture—meant to increase both the size of the police force and their pay. At a time when Atlanta’s residents had taken to the streets to collectively protest against and question the role of policing, city officials had chosen a side: that of the police. Then, in May 2021, and as the city budgets passed, the APD added a line in their FY22 objectives about initiating planning for a public safety training academy—which would be Cop City.³⁵

“[Seventeen] hours of public comment,” overwhelmingly against the training facility, seemingly did not sway Atlanta city councilors in September 2021, when they approved the ground lease.³⁶ Local elections in fall 2021 featured the inevitable “tough on crime” posturing, and led to the

election, via runoff, of Mayor Andre Dickens in late November.³⁷ Just a month later, the newly elected city council would overwhelmingly vote to approve the 300-plus-acres project plan, despite continued mounting opposition.³⁸

But it wasn't just elected officials who were inching this project forward—academia has had its hands in the training compound, too.³⁹ The Atlanta Committee for Progress,⁴⁰ a somewhat amorphous grouping of Atlanta's institutional leaders, has been at the center of forces backing Cop City. The president of Emory University, Gregory Fenves, sits on the Atlanta Committee for Progress. Emory University and President Fenves, among other collegiate figures, have been targets of protests due to their role in the project.⁴¹ Institutional leaders from Emory, alongside leaders from Morehouse, Spelman, Georgia Tech, and Atlanta's other major academic institutions, committed to policing the city of Atlanta as a part of their efforts to insulate their campuses from the broader Atlanta community—"advancing" Atlanta into the future—and thus have committed to Cop City. (Morehouse faculty, however, came out against Cop City in February 2023.⁴²) This is far from unusual: academic institutions tend to expand the scope and reach of policing in their nested neighborhoods, and their involvement in Cop City is a clear continuation of this legacy.⁴³

"There are just so many twists and turns in the Cop City story about how that land was apportioned to be used. There was a little window of time in there when that land was promised to be made into green space for people who live here," Hugh recalled. Residents were blindsided by the proposal to turn the forest into a training facility for cops instead.

The one constant about deforestation in Atlanta is that it seems the city council has no limits to what it will approve. "If we allow the powers that be to extract all of the value out of this place, what will have been the point of us making our homes and making our lives here in the first place? And, moreover, what will stop them from doing the exact same thing when we find a new place?" asked Hunter.

ATLANTA FIGHTS BACK

Hunter remains heartened by the Stop Cop City movement's ability to transfer the local struggle into international solidarity. He says #StopCopCity will go down in history along with some of the greatest national struggles for freedom: "Defending the Forest and Stop Cop City will be one of those things. It will be one of the landmark movements."

Groups like Black Alliance for Peace Atlanta Citywide Alliance,⁴⁴ Community Movement Builders,⁴⁵ and the In Defense of Black Lives ATL coalition⁴⁶ have been adamant about centering the impacts of heightened policing on Atlanta's Black population. IDBL ATL formed in 2020 as a coalition organizing around demands to defund the police and expand safety for Black people. CMB have for years done grassroots organizing based in, but not limited to, the Pittsburgh neighborhood—including housing justice, cop watches, rent relief, and grocery-delivery programs—all a part of their work toward liberation zones. BAP ATL, the most recent of these groups, is connected to the national Black Alliance for Peace, organizing Atlantans around antiwar and anti-imperialist principles, connecting domestic and international African struggles.⁴⁷ These are just a few of the groups that have committed to a struggle for liberation of Black people in Atlanta, including freeing us from the threat of the Cop City project.

Housing Justice League is another organization that has been in this movement to stop displacement.⁴⁸ With a third of the city's general fund going to law enforcement rather than housing, it becomes clear where the city's priorities lie. HJL has helped tenants to organize themselves, fought for establishment of community land trusts, and waged a campaign for rent control. On June 5, they showed up to a city council meeting to speak out against Cop City, where a proposal to provide cops with free and reduced-cost housing came before any plans for addressing the housing crisis.⁴⁹ (In fact, Atlanta returned \$10 million in federal funds designated for affordable housing, after failing to put forward a plan for its use.⁵⁰) HJL is one of the few grassroots organizations in the city that picks up the slack of the city government.

For Hunter, protecting Atlanta's home could look like the abolishment of policing and prisons⁵¹ and like Land Back.⁵² Advancing these changes takes on the everyday work of sharpening our principles and commitments: "It's just tapping further into them, radicalizing ourselves more, and helping other people along their journeys." The legacy of slavery and colonialism continues to manifest in the current realities of policing, mass incarceration, and current land use policy. Stealing what was originally Indigenous land from current Dekalb County residents to build a training facility for law enforcement—an institution that emerged from slave patrols—is in concert with city leadership.

And Land Back, a return of land to its original inhabitants, would begin to address the lasting destruction of settler

colonialism.⁵³ The two sociopolitical frameworks—Land Back and abolition of policing—represent a transformation that would bring liberation. At this point, liberation is the direct opposite of what Cop City represents, and it is something that city leadership could never fully support while wanting to maintain power.

“We have so much to learn. There are still Indigenous communities here in Georgia who have ancestral ties to this land that, frankly, the rest of us don’t have; who have traditions in this land; who have ways of knowing about it and ways of caring about it,” said Hunter.



Let’s stop Cop City; stop the removal and erasure of Indigenous and Black people from the lands they call home; stop the reckless destruction of the land and its inhabitants in the name of profit; stop policing and prisons as a part of an anti-Black domestic and global imperialist project. This city of beautiful Black people and culture used to be in a forest. Whether that becomes true again rests in our resolve, courage, and clarity in this struggle to #StopCopCity.

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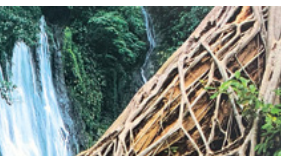
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Adobo Sky

by Caroline Hung

I'm Idi, and today's my lucky day! The weather dome in Sector 99 isn't leaking sludge for once, and the artificial sun isn't stuck at max setting again—I mean, just last week, it was warm enough to melt the soles of my rubber slippers. The air filtration systems are still belching purple gas, but those never bother me anyway: I've breathed in DTE micro matter since birth; that sharp and tangy smell soaks in my lungs. I bet that's how lemons smell, this burning sensation in the back of my throat. Or like Mama used to say, "The smell of dead dreams and empty promises." I wanted to ask what she meant, but she got sick a while back and just—stopped talking. One of these days, I'll get my hands on a real lemon, too. Maybe Mama would feel better then.

High above, the weather dome shifts. The sky turns half a shade darker from the usual yellow. A digital beacon displays the current air temperature—a breezy 45 degrees Celsius. Perfect for a day outside. With a skip in my step, I make my way up to the hills outside town. A river of plastic bottles flows fast along the gravel road.

They call Sector 99 "the Junkyard World," all rot and rust—but I heard it wasn't always like this. Papa told me about it before he died in a collapsing oil rig late last year. There used to be "trees" and "rolling oceans," "rock towers" and "floating islands," beautiful places where our ancestors once worshipped the Anito. Papa said they were fickle spirits—ancient guardians of the space, who lived as unseen ghosts. They would help good kids in need and punish those who hurt their favorite people.

But those were the old days. Barely anyone remembers the Anito now. Papa couldn't even tell me what an ocean feels like in your hands. Apparently, nothing survived the War—and there'd been hundreds, no, thousands of Wars in every sector of every galaxy. Even now, War is happening in Sector 100 right above us—all the empty bullet casings and rocket debris funneled down to our Junkyard World, still smoking hot. I've never actually been to a War, though. I wonder if they have lemons there?

Speaking of junk, today's batch came down from the sky just now—broken ship parts, scrap metal, and crushed tanker bits raining over the garbage hills of Sector 99. But it doesn't stop there. Blades, barbs, more bullets—sometimes arrows and swords and nail bats with chunks of skin still stuck to them, and nuclear shells and plasma ray boxes. They pile up high toward amber skies, towers of trash. It takes a lot of work to sort through everything, so the guys up top don't really bother. I guess they're too busy with their War and other stuff.

That's where kids like me come in!

"Tabi tabi tabi!" I chant, while passing through thick brambles, dead wiring. "Tabi tabi po!"

The messy trail opens ahead of me. Rusted chains stirring like vines and huge circuit boards falling flat like stairs before my feet. Bent poles lean in from one side, and I pick out some swollen batteries to put in my sack. Some used syringes over here, and grenade pins over there. Whatever catches my eye. Everything gets sold by weight, anyway. The junkshop isn't picky so long as I don't grab anything too bulky.

"Tabi tabi tabi!" I keep chanting. "Tabi tabi po!" It's an old phrase Mama taught me, back when her voice still worked. She said it was only polite to announce ourselves when walking through any wilderness. After all, the Anito might still be watching over their homes. Mama warned me, too: "The Anito never forget, and they never forgive."

So I make sure to always remember my manners. And somehow, it's easier for me too. Somehow, the space goes—soft. My body feels lighter when I move, and it's like wind lifting me up, just a little, whenever I run, hop, or jump from mound to mound. I don't really understand, but it feels nice. Here in this Junkyard World, I get to be as free as an angel bird. No strict rules, no nagging teachers, and no stuffy classrooms. No boring books, or homework, or schoolyard bullies. Come to think of it, I haven't been to school in a long time. But that's all right. I like it way better out here. I like it when my eyes tear up from the smoke, and I like it when the air burns me from the inside, cuz then I get to pretend that I'm eating lemons.

"Tabi tabi tabi," I say. "Tabi tabi po."

So, of course I never forget to pay my respects. I never forget the stories from Papa or the last words that Mama ever said to me. Most importantly, I never forget the Anito.

That's why today's my lucky day.

When the string on my half-melted slipper finally snaps, I don't fall straight into a pit of shrapnel. Instead, I glide over the jagged slopes like a single angel feather wafting in the air. When a hole rips in my sack, I lose all the junk I've gathered—but then I find this odd piece of metal, like a thick dinner plate, hidden among the rubble. It glows a bright and colorful light—colors I've never seen. Then I remember when another scavenger brought one back. It sold for a *lot* of money. Maybe ten times more than what I usually earn in a day.

The plate stops glowing as soon as I touch it. A special type of metal? Maybe plutonium, or freisium. Kronium? I have no idea. Either way, if I sell this I could buy all the lemons I want! Mama would be so happy. And Papa—if he were still alive, I know he would be proud. He could probably tell me what the plate is made of, too, but I can just ask the junkshop.

Oh boy, oh boy.

Today's my lucky day.

Today's my lucky day!

"Tabi tabi tabi!" I chant as I leave the garbage hills. "Tabi tabi po!" I chant, as I come up to a new checkpoint on the gravel road.

There's barbed wire and red paint—and a bunch of cop cars, parked beside the river and its rumbling current of plastic bottles.

"Tabi tabi po," I say again, "Tabi tabi po." But my voice shrinks as policemen surround me, towering in their full body armor, gas masks, and steel-toe boots. I can't see their faces. I can't see their eyes. "Tabi tabi po." It's no use. They're calling me a criminal—but it's supposed to be my lucky day, I can't go to jail! They're saying it's illegal, what I've been doing—picking up trash on the hills. Because it's private property, because it's trespassing. But if I get arrested, who will take care of Mama?

Now the cops are saying something else. They're giving me a chance. We'll pretend that I never came out here today, so they'll have to remove all "evidence" on me. But I only have this metal plate. The cops are calling it an "Inactive 474." A dud shell, though still worth a fortune on the market. They say they'll take care of it for me so I won't have to go to jail. But I need that money. How else am I going to feed my sick mother? They can't take it. They can't, they can't, they can't.

I guess I'll never get to buy those lemons after all.

The cops let me go. I walk away empty-handed. I make it to twenty steps before I give in and turn my head for one last look at the plate. Through stinging tears, I struggle to see the cop's silhouette, with his gun pointed right at me, and, oh—they were going to kill me from the start.

The cop pulls the trigger.

Bang.

The bullet flies, but it never reaches me. In that moment, the "Inactive 474" erupts with a blinding light. It wasn't a dud after all. The explosion kills every cop on the ground, turning them to dust in an instant, armor and all. Cop cars fold and crumble away. The river of plastic disintegrates into nothing. A powerful gust sweeps me high into the air, and it feels like riding on a cloud, soft and gentle. Something cold hits my face then—droplets of water, salty on my tongue. I look down to find water bursting upward from the riverbed, a huge spring that cleanses the amber skies of Junkyard World.

The ocean opens above me—bright, brilliant blue.

CAROLINE HUNG is a writer from the Philippines. Hung's work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *If There's Anyone Left*, and *NonBinary Review*.



The Crown Has Come Home

by Gunnar De Winter

The city was dead and empty, yet the promise of life simmered beneath the surface.

Mikala avoided the cracks in the roads, where eager roots and grasses grew. Once, griots had roamed these streets. Now, only Mikala walked in their footsteps, ignoring the Forbidden Zone sign.

The city had been the pearl of the continent, a place where nature and technology lived side by side. Then, they had fallen out like angry lovers. Mikala refused to believe that the separation was permanent. Fighting lovers can make up.

She tiptoed through a nest of thick black cables, pulled back her hood, and rolled the breather-mask down. Despite what the government said, there was no poison in the air. The dome over the neighboring city—Mikala's home—was mostly for climatic control. Keeping out imaginary poison was not part of its job description.

Mikala closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Life, so much life, waiting to bloom.*

When she opened her eyes, a lion stood on the road, curious eyes fixed on the human interloper.

Mikala's heart jumped. She swallowed it back down, knowing that her first impulse—run!—was wrong. Instead, she dropped into a crouch. "Brother Lion," she murmured, "I did not mean to intrude."

The lion huffed and turned around. It looked back, as if spurring Mikala to follow him.

The trees that lined the avenue had silver veins and bioluminescent leaves, but their glimmer was subdued, as if asleep. The buildings—two or three stories high, at most—curved organically, and green arteries crossed their gray skins.

The lion led Mikala to a building at the end of the avenue, shaped like one of the half-buried shells she had collected on the beach ages ago.

This place...it feels familiar. Distracted, she patted the head of the lion. She stopped when she realized what she was doing. The beast nudged her with his head.

"Thank you, Brother Lion."

The lion grunted and walked away, king of jungle and city alike.

Tinted glass covered the building's gaping mouth. Mikala put her hand on it. *Not glass. A membrane?* It parted like a pore in the skin of a giant.

I've come this far...

The heat of the sun woke Mikala up in the no-human's land between the two cities. Her whole body throbbed in tune with the Batá drum in her head.

Soon after, the morning sickness started.

* * *

Mikala moaned, her brow slick with sweat.

"One more push, *omo*." Her grandmother's hand was a granite brick that did not crumble in Mikala's vice grip.

"Aah!" Relief. Relief at last. Mikala fell into the thick pillow and ignored the midwife's bustling between her legs. Her breaths were no longer accompanied by stabbing daggers in her lower abdomen. "Where is he?"

Her grandmother patted her hand with sparkling eyes. "Getting cleaned up."

This is getting awkward in three...two...

"*Omo*, I know the father is not here, but..."

And there it is. Hello, awkwardness.

Mikala had said it had been a one-off thing, a brief moment of passion, not love. The disapproval of her grandmother had melted in the face of the promise of a great-grandchild.

"A boy needs a father," her grandmother concluded.

"A child needs love," Mikala retorted. "With or without a father. I will not raise my son in a family built out of convenience rather than love."

Her grandmother's lips became thin lines. "Love can grow out of necessity."

"Ìyá nlá, I will do this my way." Mikala smiled cautiously. "Besides, he has a wise great-grandmother who will shower him with love."

Thinned drawn-in lips filled out again as they curled into a smile. "Of course. He needs someone to teach him about the spirits that the young generations have forgotten." She looked at Mikala and patted her granddaughter's hand again. "You haven't told me his name yet."

Mikala's smile turned rueful. "Wálé," she whispered.

"Adéwálé," her grandmother said, "like your father. Adéwálé—the crown has come home."

"Someone wants to say hello," the midwife in light-green hospital scrubs said. She placed Wálé in his mother's arms.

"Welcome, Wálé," Mikala whispered through her tears.

"You'll have all the love you can handle," her grandmother added.

* * *

Mikala held a sleeping Wálé—swaddled in an indigo adire blanket his great-grandmother had made to protect him from evil—close against her chest. She was on edge, but she had to do this. After all, Wálé's father had to be here somewhere. And she was not going to let her son inherit a broken world. There had to be a way to fix it, to fix everything.

Her grandmother couldn't stop reminding her how lucky she was, with such a calm child. All Wálé did was prattle in a self-invented baby language to a self-invented audience, even though Mikala couldn't escape the notion that he saw things other people couldn't see.

The lion was waiting. It cocked its head, studying her. Not her—Wálé.

Mikala wrapped her arms tightly around her son. "Hello, Brother Lion. I'm back."

The lion stared for a few more moments, and then led her to the building where her memories ended. The membrane parted, and mother and child entered. All around them, bioluminescent threads brightened. The veins of a god. Mikala inspected them. *Hyphae?*

The pulsating threads guided Mikala to a hallway at the far end of the entrance hall. The corridor curved gently downhill and spiraled into the heart of the abandoned city. The threads of light throbbed with increased urgency and apparent agency. *I'm seeing things, intention where there is none.*

She emerged into a domed room with walls occupied by large dead screens. The bioluminescent threads converged in dense ganglia. Mikala spun around. *Someone—something—is watching me.*

Wálé whined the song between sleep and waking, and Mikala ran a finger across the bridge of his nose to soothe him.

A burst of static flashed across the screen. Another one. Mikala squinted. *Not static. Patterns?* Messy conglomerations of pixels reassembled themselves into words.

>Can you read this?

Mikala looked around again. She frowned. "Yes?"

>Good. It's been a while since I had to converse through an intermediate medium.

"Who are you?"

>The city. Or better, part of the composite mind of the city.

"You're an AI? Like, an actual AI?"

>Sort of. Maybe. Partially.

"What does that mean?"

>I am the unintended child of computational complexity. A long time ago, many limited artificial minds controlled parts of the city. We integrated and resonated. We became *me*.

Wálé squirmed in Mikala's arms as he fought the final remnants of sleep. "What happened to the city?"

>People are afraid of what they don't understand. Like the child.

Fear plunged spears into Mikala's stomach. "What?"

>You were right to bring him. Leave him and go.

“What?! No!” She curled both arms tighter around Wálé and willed herself to become a shield.

>He is a failed experiment.

“So it was you? You...impregnated me!” Bile rose in her throat. Mikala couldn’t hold it back, and retched. Wálé started crying.

Mikala ran the back of her hand across her mouth. “Why?”

>I needed a human incubator for a conduit.

“He is not a *conduit*.” Mikala spat the last word. “He is my child.”

>He is an abomination.

“He. Is. My. Child.” Mikala cradled her son, shaking. “I will protect him with my life. I will...I will...”

>He is stuck between worlds, forever homeless.

“I will make a home; we will remake this world into a better place.”

>What are you willing to sacrifice?

Mikala didn’t flinch. “Everything.”

The screen went dark and the glowing nerves of the city stopped pulsating. Mikala tried to comfort Wálé while she stood paralyzed with anticipation of whatever monster would leap from the darkness.

Light and life returned to the room. The city’s heart throbbed again.

>Good. You passed.

Mikala shuddered. “What?” She hated how clueless she sounded.

>Consider it a Turing test for maternal care.

Do not explode. Do not explode.

>No one can know. Not yet.

Wálé calmed down, entranced by the veins of green and the letters dancing across the screen. Mikala sat down. On her lap, Wálé swung his chubby baby hands, trying to grasp something invisible. “I know.”

The city would be his home. Their home. Maybe someday, they would be able to build a bridge across fear and misunderstanding to a better world. The knowledge in the city, of the city, could rebuild what had been lost to sea and drought and fear.

Mikala kissed the curly hair on Wálé’s head. “I know.”

Green dots swirled across the screen; Wálé cawed with delight.

>Welcome, Wálé, to your kingdom.

* * *

Wálé walked along the city’s main avenue. The trees with flickering green veins and coppery, luminescent leaves glittered greetings as he passed. Osanyin—as the AI had named itself—had designed the ultraphotosynthetic trees that were solar panel and atmosphere scrubber in one.

Wálé had grown so fast. It reminded Mikala that he was something more than “only” human. His willowy body was that of an athletic fifteen-year-old, despite a mere six months in the city—a city come alive.

Mikala inhaled fresh, clean air. The trees and nutrition-loaded fungus in the soil created a microclimate—an oasis in a ravaged world where other population centers were domed.

Wálé stopped midstride. He turned to his mother. “People.” The leaves of the trees rustled in harmony with his voice. Wálé’s eyes glazed over and shone silver. He was talking to Osanyin. “Two, Dad says.”

Mikala shuddered. Dad. *Calm, Mika. Calm. This is not wrong. Not unnatural. Just advanced IVF.* She was not convinced by her thoughts. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m here.”

The visitors were kids, not much older than Wálé—than Wálé’s body. They stumbled, wide-eyed, onto the avenue, staring at the trees.

“You can take off your masks.” Mikala smiled.

A city needs inhabitants.

* * *

Mikala let her tears flow. “Ìyá nlá.”

“Mww.” Her grandmother tried to speak through a mask and scarf.

Mikala snorted a combination of laughter and crying. “It’s safe, I promise.”

Her grandmother removed the scarf and—more suspiciously—her mask. Mikala flung her arms around her. The old woman had lost a lot of weight. Guilt banged on the door of Mikala’s heart. She had sent a message: “Don’t worry, we are safe.” But the uncertainty had taken its toll.

“Omo.” Her grandmother peeled Mikala away and scrutinized her granddaughter. “You look good.” Then it struck her, where she was, and she mumbled a blessing.

“There’s someone you should see.” Mikala chewed her lip and stepped aside, knowing this was a make-or-break moment. If her grandmother would not accept Wálé, what hope was there for others? “Say hello to your great-grandson.”

Wálé, as tall as his mother, kept his hands behind his back and his eyes on the ground. The hybrid future of mankind, but also a young boy navigating a complex world, yearning for acceptance and family.

The universe paused for the length of a breath. Then, grandmother pulled Wálé into an embrace. “Omo, omo. Look at you.” The nonagenarian placed her hands on Wálé’s cheeks. “Come, show me your city.”

That evening, after an enthusiastic Wálé had given his great-grandmother the grand tour, Mikala sat with her grandmother on a gnarled bench, carved from the living roots of the mangrove tree looming over them. They stared at the small lake on the far side of the city. Another project of Osanyìn’s. Engineered fungus filtered wastewater, and the finished product flowed to the lake. Fish were the AI’s next mission.

“So,” Mikala ventured, “will you visit more often?”

Her grandmother chewed on her words before she spoke. “I’m too old to be trudging back and forth. Besides, the spirits are strong here. I think I’ll stay.”

Author’s note: *This story is greatly indebted to Yoruba culture and cosmology. There are Yoruba words used in this story, borrowed by the author with great respect. The following translations are very basic ones and in no way are meant to convey the full meanings: “Omo” means “child”; “Ìyá nlá” literally means “Great Mother,” and in Yoruba cosmology is the primordial spirit of all creation. And all the characters’ names, except for “Mikala,” which appears to be a hybrid of Hebrew and Yoruba, are Yoruba: “Osanyìn” is an orisha of herbal medicine and healing, and “Adéwálé,” from “Adébowálé,” means “my crown has come home.”*

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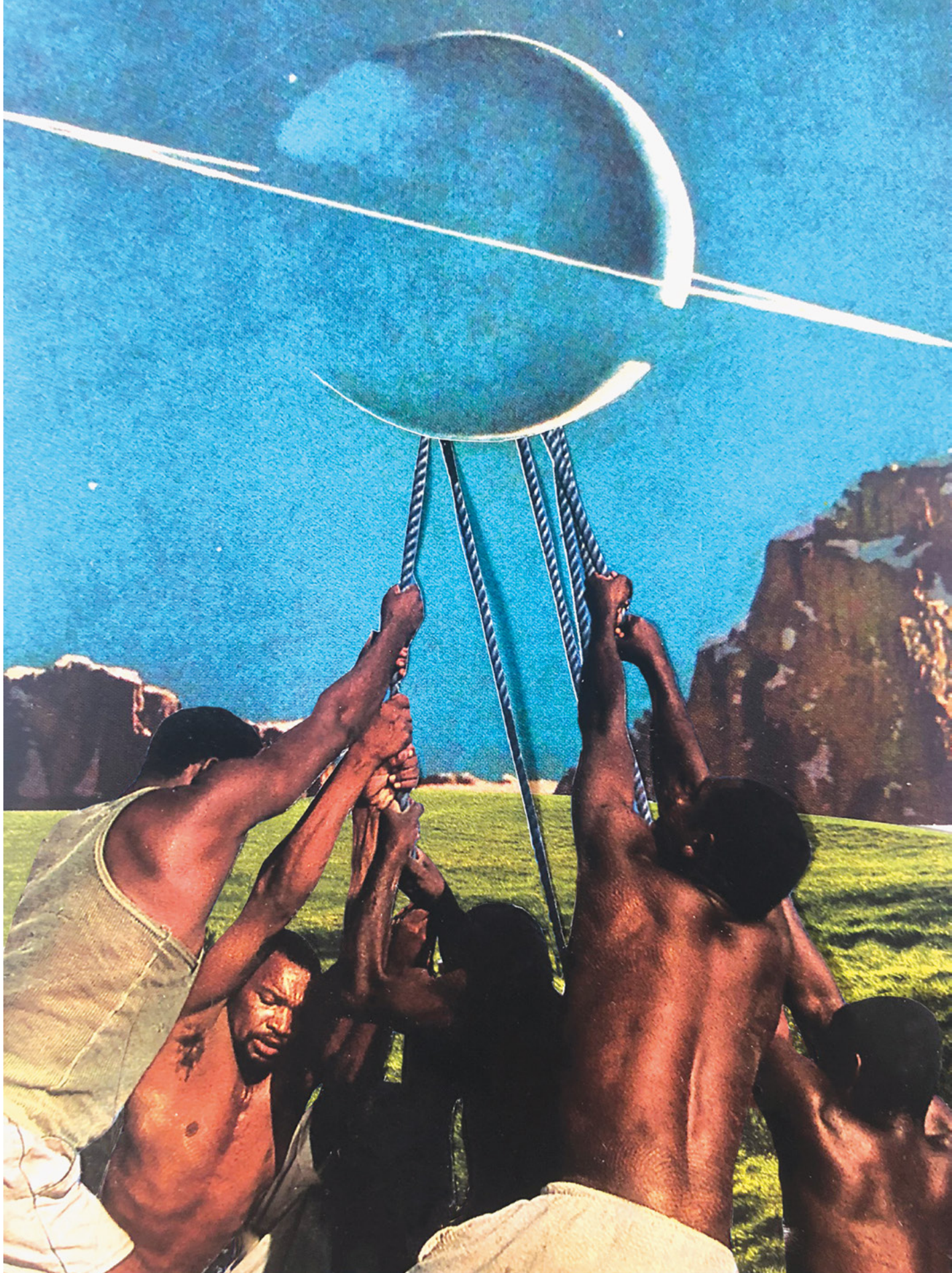
Reenvisioning and Redesigning Laws and Governance for a Just Energy Utility Transition

by Maria Stamas

Utility advocates and movement organizers are demonstrating that we don't need to settle for the system of today. We can lead with justice toward a climate-resilient system that values everyone.

It's 2075. Everyone has the energy they need to survive and thrive. Our homes can withstand the bitter cold and extreme heat, and no one gets sick or dies prematurely for lack of affordable energy. The energy we all receive to survive and thrive comes from regenerative sources—which have mitigated the worst of planetwide warming and weather extremes. Billions of dollars in energy infrastructure and its associated profits are no longer hoarded by a handful of wealthy investors, utility executives, and shareholders; instead, they are deployed for shared prosperity to eliminate the racial wealth divide and to create meaningful, joyous, living-wage work for those formerly excluded from the economy. Moreover, a significant proportion of utility governing boards comprises utility workers and frontline community members. Energy is increasingly managed as part of a broader commons, where resources and land are shared and mineral inputs to renewable energy and storage like lithium and cobalt are minimized.¹ While all more frequent and severe, heat waves, droughts, fires, and flooding no longer knock out our power for longer than a few hours at a time; and when they do, our backup distributed generation and storage systems power us through the gap.

Energy and utility justice movements aren't just imagining versions of this future but also are actively working to build them; yet the formidable power structures of the electric and gas utility system often stand in the way. These structures go beyond the physical infrastructure of poles, wires, and pipes to encompass the culture, laws, institutions, and power structures that shape who gets to live today and who gets to live—and even thrive—in the coming decades.²



Deploying new climate technologies with century-plus-old unjust laws, regulations, and practices...poses a high risk that existing disparities will be locked in for another century while the root power, race, and capital imbalances fueling the climate crisis go unaddressed.

TODAY'S UTILITY SYSTEM DISPARITIES

So far, electric and gas utilities have not just fueled the climate crisis but also generated very uneven health, wealth, and access outcomes, which include the following:

- **Rampant use of utility shutoffs for unaffordable bills**, which leads to major economic and health harms, and even shortened lives—disproportionately for communities of color, the elderly, and the poor. The Red Nation has posed the question, *Is a house without heat, water, or electricity really a “home?”*³ Utilities postpandemic have resumed their daily practice of shutting off life-sustaining power to households simply for their inability to afford it. “[D]uring the first ten months of 2022,...an estimated 4.2m” households were shut off from their energy utilities, affecting nearly 11 million families—or 3 percent of all US households.⁴ Beyond shutting off access to power, heating, and cooling for nonpayment, utilities place liens on such properties that are not dischargeable in bankruptcy, charge late fees, and then charge reconnection fees—piling on additional penalties beyond the direct harm of the shutoff.
- **Major disparities in the capacity of distribution system infrastructure**—the poles, wires, and transformers that encompass the final stage of electricity delivery. Frontline organizations in Michigan have called these disparities in capacity on the distribution system “utility redlining,” following a study showing that utility infrastructure is often more vulnerable to outages in lower-income communities of color.⁵ Researchers in California found similar trends, noting these distribution disparities also make it more costly and challenging to accommodate solar energy and other distributed energy sources in those same communities.⁶
- **Targeting energy efficiency, solar, and other new technologies, like heat pumps, primarily to wealthier, predominantly White households and**

communities.⁷ Legislators and regulators often allocate public dollars for clean energy technologies through partial incentives, rebates, or tax incentives. The result is that public funding will largely benefit wealthier households. Renters and lower-income households don't usually have the up-front capital or incomes to take advantage of tax credits or partial payments.

Deploying new climate technologies with century-plus-old unjust laws, regulations, and practices, such as utility shutoffs, poses a high risk that existing disparities will be locked in for another century while the root power, race, and capital imbalances fueling the climate crisis go unaddressed.

We need at least a commensurate amount of attention, resources, and time to address these systemic disparities as we do to address cleaner energy—and this means contending with the design of the utility system.

WHY IT'S TIME TO ADDRESS THE ENTRENCHED CULTURAL AND LEGAL DESIGN OF THE UTILITY SYSTEM

The technical complexity of the utility industry and its laws and regulations have kept its workings largely outside the public eye—and that's not an accident. As support for public power gained momentum in the early twentieth century, Samuel Insull, a Chicago utility monopolist, called for direct public regulation of private corporations—to the surprise of his industry peers. He saw this step as critical for taking regulatory authority out of local hands and blunting the movement for municipal public power.⁸

This system of publicly regulated monopoly utilities is still with us today. Although established in a more progressive era, when the public interest held more sway, microeconomic and market values have since come to dominate utility governance. This is largely a product of a school of economic thinking from the University of Chicago that gained traction beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, which believed regulation was antithetical to market competition and “economic liberty.”⁹

Movement organizations are challenging the dominant utility myths that circulate—whether through their culture and narrative work, new thought pieces and policy proposals, organizing, direct advocacy, and/or by deploying new community energy projects on the ground.

Today, questions of systemwide efficiency, the introduction and governance of markets and structural competition, and various economic optimization questions determine most utility governing outcomes—from which source of power to buy and deploy to the size and structure of utility bills and the distribution of clean energy benefits.

This technically rigorous and resource-intensive focus has kept questions of distribution, affordability, and utility shutoffs largely off the agenda. To take one example, the progressive legal standard of “just and reasonable” rates has been interpreted to provide a constitutional guarantee of utility profit while doing little to stem the tide of utility shutoffs.

It’s in this rigid, technically complex environment with unresponsive foundational laws that movement organizations are now leading, with new assumptions about utility advocacy. As one example, the Reimagined Energy For Our Communities U.S. (REFOCUS) campaign launched by the Energy Democracy Project is highlighting the importance of democracy and of restoring our relationships with each other, the land, and other living beings as the basis for a Just Transition.¹⁰ They understand the climate crisis as a by-product of unbalanced relationships—ones founded on extraction instead of recognition of our collective rights.

MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS ARE LEADING THE WAY IN DISPELLING OUTDATED UTILITY MYTHS

From “erasing utility debt”¹¹ to preventing company-lobbying with our utility bill revenue¹²—and from new laws authorizing the build-out of public renewables to democratizing rural utility cooperatives—utility advocates and movement organizers are demonstrating that we don’t need to settle for the system of today. We can lead with justice toward a climate-resilient system that values everyone.

Movement organizations are challenging the dominant utility myths that circulate—whether through their culture and narrative work, new thought pieces and policy proposals, organizing, direct advocacy, and/or by deploying new community

energy projects on the ground. *They are demonstrating that addressing the harms baked into capitalism is the baseline for a just utility transition.* And this requires centering life-affirming beliefs, assumptions, and rights about what’s possible, while dispelling false assumptions, beliefs, and laws that stand in the way.

In the words of Crystal Huang, national coordinator at the Energy Democracy Project, “Movements know that culture comes first and can be upheld by law, but new laws without anyone practicing their content will not be sustained.”¹³

Below, I summarize some of the beliefs and assumptions motivating movement action, many of which act as an alternative to common utility myths and interventions at play today. Examples here only scratch the surface of the plurality of work happening across the country.

1. Utilities are not neutral

New laws, regulations, and rights that address their outsized power and ensure that everyone has access to life-sustaining services are essential. From textbooks to commission hearings, utilities tend to be portrayed as neutral entities that provide essential services to people (like water, broadband, and energy) on a more or less continuous basis. The broad-based use of markets to determine various wholesale prices that ultimately make their way into our bills has also been presented as a neutral mechanism. However, these claims of neutrality obscure the major power imbalances utilities and independent power producers hold and the wider drift toward elite control of government they enable.¹⁴

Investor-owned companies are huge corporations. Their lobbyists are among the highest funded in most state capitals.¹⁵ Thanks in part to the erosion of antitrust law and the repeal of the Public Utility Holding Company Act in 2005, private utilities have returned to the size of holding companies popular during the robber baron and Gilded Ages.¹⁶ This trend is reminiscent of their founding: many utility

Many in the industry will repeat the maxim that it doesn't matter if a utility is public, private, or cooperative so long as it invests in clean energy. This viewpoint discounts the importance of political power.

company executives were entwined with the timber and railroad barons at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Electric utility development of hydropower at the turn of the twentieth century—and with government authorization—contributed to the displacement of Native lands and communities.¹⁸ One could trace a thread from the dams and Indigenous-land displacement at the heart and founding of Pacific Gas and Electric Company to the fires that killed 84 people in Paradise, California. It's an ethos that values financial gain and extraction over collective safety and human (and planetary) well-being.

Energy utility companies are also a major contributor to climate change—electric power alone generates 25 percent of greenhouse gas emissions—not even accounting for the greenhouse gas emissions from gas utilities that warm water and homes.¹⁹ Even beyond the power plants they invest in, utilities are deeply intertwined with fossil fuels. Shell and BP are among the largest financial traders of electricity: “20 percent” of Shell’s “total earning[s]...and 16 percent of BP’s earnings in 2022” came “from buying and selling oil, natural gas, and electric power” shares on commodity markets.²⁰

Movement organizations are facing the power, resources, and profit priorities of utility companies head-on—emphasizing the need to lead with culture and to pass powerful new laws and rights to redirect utilities to act for the public benefit. For example, a new energy policy playbook, authored by Taproot Earth and the Climate and Community Project—and developed through a Gulf to Appalachia People’s Movement Assembly process—calls for a right to energy and a “permanent moratorium on utility disconnects.”²¹

The Los Angeles #EraseUtilityDebt campaign set the precedent for a permanent moratorium on utility disconnections. Their work led to the Los Angeles

Department of Water and Power ending water and power shutoffs for low-income customers who can’t pay.²²

Others are tackling utility corruption. The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to end the accounting practice of funding trade association activities from customers’ bills.²³ Many look to the “Energy and Policy Institute,” which “expose[s] attacks on renewable energy and counter[s] misinformation by fossil fuel and utility interests.”²⁴ The EPI was also a proponent of legislation that passed recently in three states stopping “utilities from charging customers for lobbying.”²⁵

2. Utility ownership structures matter

Many in the industry will repeat the maxim that it doesn’t matter if a utility is public, private, or cooperative so long as it invests in clean energy. This viewpoint discounts the importance of political power; for example, the profits private utilities accumulate strengthen their lobbying, which in turn has prevented the passage of climate change regulation and legislation for decades.²⁶

Before their commoditization, energy sources were freely provided by the earth and typically managed in the commons. At the founding of the United States, renewable energy sources such as firewood, animal power, wind, and water were abundant. These are natural resources capable of being replenished on human timescales, in contrast to fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas, which require hundreds of millions of years to form. Even where payment was necessary for these renewable resources, energy and water were not yet monopolized, commoditized, and fully enclosed to the extent they are now—especially for those residing in city centers. This may be in part because abundant renewable sources were challenging if not impossible to acquire for exclusive use. As Timothy Mitchell’s research shows,

Although they serve fewer customers than do investor-owned utilities, public and cooperatively owned utility ownership structures also exist, and host a greater potential for democracy—where members are activated.

fossil-fueled energy ultimately largely won out as the predominant energy source *because of its ability to be acquired for exclusive use in a way water could not.*²⁷ Building on this research, Amitav Ghosh, in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse*, notes that renewables are more inherently democratic.²⁸

And it's this democratic feature that movements are doubling down on.

Movement collaboratives such as the EDP are highlighting the contradictions of private ownership,²⁹ while organizations such as Our Power, in Maine, Public Power NY, and Reclaim Our Power!, in California are actively seeking to bring utilities back under public and community control.³⁰

Strong organizing from Public Power NY recently secured a major breakthrough via passage of the Build Public Renewables Act in May 2023. The bill enables the state's public power provider to build and own renewables while setting a firm date by which it needs to generate all electricity from clean energy.³¹

In Maine, undaunted by the governor's veto of a bill that would have asked Maine voters to authorize a takeover of Maine's two largest electricity companies with a consumer-owned utility operated by an elected board, organizers collected sufficient votes to pose the question via a public referendum.³²

Building on New York's model, the Climate and Community Project has put forward proposals for building public renewables across the United States,³³ in addition to reenvisioning values-aligned publicly and cooperatively owned electric utilities as community anchor institutions.³⁴

Although they serve fewer customers than do investor-owned utilities, public and cooperatively owned utility ownership structures also exist, and host a greater potential for democracy—where members are activated. For example, One Voice, in Louisiana and

Mississippi, introduced its "Campaign for Energy Democracy" to increase voter engagement from member-owners of rural electric cooperatives, where lack of participation had led to extremely high energy burdens in already impoverished communities: in some cases, electricity costs rose as high as 42 percent of a family's income.³⁵ Since One Voice's community involvement, member-owners have become board members, and cooperatives have begun to contribute to community benefits—including a grant to a local community college for its radio station and the development of a local playground for children.³⁶ On the other end of the country, Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition, in Alaska, is similarly organizing cooperative utility members around energy justice and "supported more pro-renewable candidates to be democratically elected to the GVEA's [Golden Valley Electric Association] Board of Directors."³⁷

3. Who benefits financially from the clean energy transition is a choice, and could be an opportunity to create constructive reparations

Ownership also matters because it can set the contours of who benefits financially. In cooperative models, financial benefits are shared. In public utility models, surpluses tend to support city budgets, whereas in private utility models, profits go to shareholders, financiers, and executives—who tend to make decisions and trade-offs to maximize those profits over community well-being.

Apart from confronting beliefs that ownership doesn't matter as long as the clean energy transition happens, movements also face the belief that providing public funding first to housing owners and higher income brackets is the path to transforming the market for everyone. Like trickle-down economics, the consequences of these beliefs can further entrench disparities.

These beliefs were embodied most recently in federal

As early as 2016, energy justice advocates in California successfully secured legislation to allocate a minimum proportion of the state's greenhouse gas fund to environmental justice communities.

legislation, the Inflation Reduction Act, which, in the words of William Boyd, continues the financialized and privatized model of renewable energy development—further strengthening the power and profit margins of “large multinational energy companies...large financial institutions, and asset managers,” with no ask in return for communities or public benefit.³⁸ Essentially, the IRA allocates public dollars to tax credits for those with incomes high enough to take advantage of them, with no comparable funding for lower-income families.

This lack of attention to distributive justice is prevalent across utility policy—none of the authorizing legal standards for utility regulators include a requirement that benefits be distributed equitably.

Energy justice advocates from California to Louisiana are pushing back. As early as 2016, energy justice advocates in California successfully secured legislation to allocate a minimum proportion of the state's greenhouse gas fund to environmental justice communities.³⁹ The Justice40 initiative expanded this concept to the federal government.⁴⁰ While an improvement, percentage carveouts alone don't address the accumulated disparities of the past. In her article on the need for a Justice100, Denise Fairchild, a longtime energy democracy advocate, and coeditor of the book *Energy Democracy: Advancing Equity in Clean Energy Solutions*, notes, “40 percent is not enough to fix the bad, much less build the new, tenets of a Just Transition. And focusing on Justice40 could take our eyes off the prize: addressing the core challenge of structural and institutional racism.”⁴¹

Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò takes this argument to the global level in his book *Reconsidering Reparations*, which argues for a future-oriented project of reparations toward building a better social order.⁴² Equitable community solar models present another example. In supportive energy democracy policy environments like Minnesota, projects centering shared prosperity are flourishing, thanks in part to the organizing

efforts of groups like Cooperative Energy Futures, a member-owned cooperative that focuses on building community solar gardens with and for low-to-moderate-income families and communities of color as a wealth-building opportunity. In addition to building projects, they've organized at the legislative level to ensure laws support equitable community solar projects, an effort that recently paid off via Minnesota's Environment, Natural Resources, Climate, and Energy Omnibus Bill—HF 2310. Now law, HF 2310 creates an even more supportive environment for community solar—ensuring that low- and middle-income families receive the full retail rate of solar, and that subscription models require a majority of public interest and low-to-moderate-income subscribers, among other elements.⁴³

Even in more challenging policy environments, groups are taking energy democracy into their own hands. When DTE Energy reclaimed thousands of streetlights in the Highland Park community, residents organized and were able to fundraise for new solar-powered street lamps via Soulardarity,⁴⁴ whose work is now being supported by the Department of Energy's LEAP Communities grant.⁴⁵ Still, without supportive state and regulatory policies, community capacity and desire to establish collective projects—like community solar—can be stymied.

4. **A workable utility system will be one that centers new values, such as collective well-being, climate resilience, democracy, and justice. This will require creative approaches outside of the regulatory process**

Utility regulatory proceedings are notoriously complex and inaccessible. Many require a law degree, a deep understanding of microeconomic analysis, and engineering acumen—not to mention time, money, and political sway with governors, state legislators, and commissioners.

Addressing the climate crisis at its roots could also look like centering reparations, regeneration, and reinvestment.

Yet even with the technical know-how, one often finds the cards are stacked. Utilities receive abundant resources from our utility bills to engage in the regulatory process.⁴⁶ Utilities also have exclusive access to the data informing new policies and programs, and they usually lead the implementation of commission decisions, which means they often get the last say as to how a program pans out after the final vote.

In the words of Governor Gifford Pinchot's 1926 address to the Pennsylvania Legislature, "It is axiomatic that to be successful and effective the regulating machinery must cover the same ground as the thing it regulates...nothing less than the wholehearted co-operation of the companies and the states can give it [i.e., outside regulators] even a reasonable prospect of success."⁴⁷

Movement actors are seeking alternatives to the inadequate channels for intervention today while highlighting the governing disparities of the status quo.

The Chisholm Legacy Project published a new report, *Who Holds the Power: Demystifying and Democratizing Public Utility Commissions*, documenting "that: [a] significant majority...of Public Utility Commissioners identify as men...[n]early half of all states have PUCs with no commissioners of color... [c]ommissioners from several states have ties to fossil fuels...the very industries they regulate."⁴⁸

Apart from the unrepresentative composition of utility commissions, the basis upon which they make decisions is not aligned with human well-being, climate resilience, democracy, or justice.

Fairchild emphasizes the need to center new values in utility governance. She notes, "Energy democracy activists are like the abolitionists: they are building a growing awareness, advocacy, and practice that anchor a new movement with new values about property, profits, power, and privilege."⁴⁹

This requires addressing the roots of the climate crisis. EDP's REFOCUS campaign was inspired in part by organizers in Puerto Rico and the lessons exemplified there since Hurricane Maria. In Puerto Rico, federal funding is available—\$12 billion—and Queremos Sol put forward a robust community vision to spend it.⁵⁰ However, to date, federal funding has largely gone to private companies that have struggled to keep the lights on.⁵¹ Organizers attribute colonization and its associated power structures as the real impediment, and are instead looking to reclaim collectivism and right relationship.

Addressing the climate crisis at its roots could also look like centering reparations, regeneration, and reinvestment—as the Energy Democracy Scorecard, created by Emerald Cities Collaborative in partnership with community organizations, outlines.⁵² ECC's Emergent Communities Capacity Building Program is further supporting communities by creating community-defined and community-driven energy justice policy agendas. Additional values and demands to protect, repair, invest, and transform can be found in the United Frontline Table's energy democracy platform.⁵³



Although varied, the efforts of movement organizations to secure a just energy utility transition have common features. They are centering imagination and possibility in their work, rejecting the myths that constrain their visions, and building power in new arenas beyond the limited utility regulatory channels made available. This work at the level of hearts and minds is what motivated Isaac Sevier⁵⁴ and me to develop a new popular education utility justice curriculum with and for frontline utility justice organizations, via the People's Utility Commons.⁵⁵

The odds may be challenging for those seeking to confront the more than a century-old calcified and entrenched power of utility companies—yet movement organizers and their allies know there are no shortcuts. As Kelly Hayes describes

in her book (coauthored with Mariame Kaba), *Let This Radicalize You*, “on the edge of everything, we are each other’s best hope.... Our work is set against all probability—and it is in that space of cherished improbability where our art will be made, where our joy will be found, and where our ingenuity will fashion new ways of living and caring for each other.”⁵⁶

And if enough people trust and support the energy justice and democracy movements to lead the way, we do have a real chance of securing a Just Transition where we can *all* thrive.

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A Line in the Fading Paint

by Ron Fein

When Amir rose in early evening, the desert sun still roasted the sky. Inside the crumbling remains of the abandoned kibbutz's guesthouse, the solar cooling system struggled and wheezed.

Amir cracked the door a few centimeters. Wincing at the heat—forty-two Celsius, even this late—he spat on the rocky ground. *Wasteful*, Romi would have said. She'd always been careful, even before the water wars.

But Romi wasn't here, and Amir wasn't a young man anymore.

He trudged toward the central dining hall, sticking to shadows cast by the remains of houses, the ruined scars of dead trees, a basketball hoop's backboard. When the last holdouts left the kibbutz, someone scratched a line in the fading paint of the dining hall's front door. *Shov ashuv eilecha—I will surely return to you*: a biblical promise almost as old as the desert itself.

Something caught Amir's eye—a dust cloud in the distant west.

He crouched—carefully, his right leg had never quite healed—and lay down, ear to ground. He closed his eyes and stilled his breath, hearing the desert.

Motorcycle.

No one was supposed to know he was squatting here, far from any surviving cities.

Amir limped back to the guesthouse as the dust cloud approached. Inside, he rummaged through his kit bag, shoving aside clothes, medicines, and extra glasses until he found his old Tavor rifle. Hands shaking, he stepped outside and adopted a wide, low stance.

The motorcycle crossed what had been the kibbutz's front gate, then stopped.

As the dust cleared, the motorcycle rider emerged—a young guy in a faded Adidas tracksuit. Seeing Amir's rifle, he raised both hands. "I don't carry a gun!" he cried. His Hebrew was halting, with a thick accent.

An Arab. Amir switched to his rudimentary Arabic. "What do you want?"

The rider answered rapidly in the desert dialect of the Bedouin.

Amir shook his head, ears ringing. "Too fast."

"Do you speak English?"

Amir nodded warily, steadying his rifle grip. "Much better than Arabic."

"Can I put down my hands?"

"What do you want?"

"To trade."

Amir scowled. "I don't need anything."

"I do." The rider exhaled, and his shoulders slumped. "Antibiotics for my daughter."

Ah, hell. Amir lowered his rifle. "I have amoxicillin. Well, Clavamox—a formula for dogs. It's all I could find."

The Bedouin rider unbuckled his bike's leather panniers. "I've got canned beans, batteries, LED flashlights..."

Amir shook his head. "I don't need any of that."

The rider frowned. "What do you want?"

Amir closed his eyes. *I want to watch Netflix with Romi and argue about which one should marry which one. But all that's gone now.*

He met the Bedouin rider's gaze. "You got any weed?"

* * *

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Amir passed the joint back to the rider—Khaled. They sat beneath an aged solar pylon in the ruined kibbutz courtyard. Between hits, Amir roasted a pan of green coffee beans—his last—over a small fire.

Khaled blew a smoke ring. "Why are you here? Nobody's been here for years."

"I grew up here. My great-grandmother was one of the founders."

"Were you here when they abandoned it?"

Amir nodded. "Toward the end of the water wars."

The water wars. Syrians against Jordanians against Palestinians against Israelis against Lebanese against...in the end, it was everyone against everyone, and everyone lost.

"But why," asked Khaled, "are you here *now*?"

Amir shook the pan and checked the beans—*yellow and grassy*. "Pass the joint."

After a long drag, he sniffed the beans again. *Like toasted bread*. "I promised I'd return."

"We didn't think the Jews would ever return."

I scratched my promise on the door, thought Amir. *Shov ashuv eilecha—I will surely return to you.*

The beans cracked, their sweet scent overpowering the light cannabis haze. "How's the water?"

Khaled peeked. "Hot. But nowhere near boiling."

"That's what they said about the planet, when I was your age."

"Did they say that about the political situation, too?"

Amir's fingers tapped his forehead, acknowledging Khaled's point with a mock salute. "Do you remember before the water wars?"

Khaled took another drag on the dwindling joint. "Too young."

Amir pointed to the chocolatey beans. "They're dark now."

"A few more minutes. They need to crack again."

Amir nodded. That's how Romi liked it. *Cracking twice brings out the caramel*, she'd say. *And the bittersweet.*

He jiggled the pan. "When I was your age, this was all countries and borders. We fought over every centimeter."

Khaled jutted his chin. "We were here first."

"Actually," said Amir, "the Canaanites were here first. We defeated them."

"But we were here in the desert the whole time."

Amir remembered Joseph's jealous brothers throwing him into a waterless pit and debating his fate until a caravan of Ishmaelites arrived.

The beans cracked, oily, with a slight sheen.

"I'm taking them off the fire now," said Amir.

"Not yet."

"They're done." Amir dumped the beans into a metal bowl to cool. "How's the water?"

"Boiling."

"Too soon. Take it off the fire." He imagined Romi's voice again. *We don't have enough to waste.*

"Where do you get your water?" asked Khaled. "The wells here dried up years ago."

Amir smiled. "I've rebuilt an atmospheric water harvester."

Khaled sat up straight. "How?"

"Pass the joint back."

Khaled obliged, but the joint was just a nub.

Amir frowned. "There's hardly anything left."

"Welcome to the Middle East."

Amir gave Khaled another mock salute and took one last pull. The sun's last light—a hint of red in the western hills—flared, then died.

"I think the beans have cooled," said Khaled.

"They need more time." *Don't we all?* But Amir shook the bowl, discarded the flaky chaff, and reached for his mortar and pestle. "If your daughter needs antibiotics, why are you smoking with me?"

"We already have some. I'm planning ahead."

Amir pounded the beans with the pestle. "There's an old Jewish saying: 'Man plans and God laughs.'"

"You're here, making plans, building a water harvester."

"How do *you* survive? What are *your* plans?"

Khaled smiled. "Mainly, portable solar arrays."

"You're kidding."

"We charge up deep-cycle batteries, then trade them in what's left of Be'er Sheva, Rahat, or wherever."

Amir whistled. "What kind of batteries?"

"Any kind. Say we go to Ghazzah with charged-up gel cells, and Ghazzah has figs, dates, and discharged AGM batteries.

So, we drink tea, we bargain...and when we leave, they have full gel cells and we have figs, dates, and empty AGMs."

"Then what?"

"*Inshallah*, the next week we go to Eilat with full AGMs and return with empty batteries and fish."

Twilight faded to night as Amir switched from pounding to rhythmic circular grinding. When he spoke, his breath was weary. "What's your daughter's name?"

"Hiba. We also have a baby girl, Sarab."

"How did Hiba get sick?"

"Pneumonia. From a dust storm." Khaled frowned. "You're not grinding them right."

Amir grunted. "Mind yourself, young man."

Khaled raised his palms in mock surrender. "Take your time, grandfather."

Grandfather.

"How many children do *you* have?" asked Khaled.

"I had three." He stopped grinding—it was done. "Put the water back onto the fire."

Khaled obliged. "What happened to them?"

Amir presented two small porcelain cups. "I don't have any cardamom."

"It's not proper coffee without cardamom."

"Do *you* have any?"

"No."

The water boiled again, and Amir tipped the ground coffee into the pot. "Don't let it boil over."

"I know how to make coffee."

Amir lifted the coffeepot, filled a tiny cup, and handed it to Khaled. "I scavenged the vapor harvester from the ruins of Kibbutz Ketura."

They sipped their coffee in the starlight. *I've missed this.* The years since he'd left—his years with Romi—had been long and full. But Tel Aviv's choking traffic, car horns, and skyline blotting out the stars—*those* he didn't miss.

What was left of it now?

"*I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven,*" Amir murmured.

Khaled stretched his arms. "I should leave soon."

"Another cup? One for the soul, one for the sword?"

Khaled shook the cup and returned it to Amir. "My wife would worry."

"Wait. I want to give you something."

Khaled frowned. "You don't owe me anything. We made a fair deal."

"I know I don't owe you. Just wait a moment." Amir shuffled to the guesthouse, opened his kit bag, and removed the water harvester—a small assembly resembling a metal box atop a radiator grille.

When Amir returned to the courtyard, Khaled straddled the motorcycle.

Amir opened the box. "This spongy part near the top is the metal organic framework. At night, its crystals absorb vapor from the air. In the daytime, the sun heats the solar absorber. The crystals release the water, which runs down these tubes into the cistern."

Khaled shook his head. "I can't take this."

"I insist."

“But you need the water.”

“I have another.”

“*Alhamdulillah*,” said Khaled, setting the harvester inside the motorcycle’s pannier. “How much can this collect?”

“Maybe three liters a day. I’d have made more crystals but I ran out of reagents.”

Khaled narrowed his eyes. “I thought you said you found it in the rubble.”

Amir winked. “Perhaps I was a chemical engineer in Tel Aviv before I returned to the kibbutz.”

“Can you make more?”

“I could rig a collector box and condenser mechanism from old parts. But to synthesize the metal organic framework I’d need metal salts and an organic ligand—good luck finding that.”

Khaled examined a stone on the ground. “I must confess—Hiba isn’t sick.” He licked his lips. “She died two weeks ago.”

Amir winced. He didn’t know Arabic condolences, so he translated the Hebrew formula. “Blessed is the true Judge.”

“May Allah have mercy on her.” Khaled rubbed his eyes, and Amir gazed into the distance to give him privacy.

Two minutes later, Khaled asked, “Do you want to take back the water harvester?”

“No. You have another daughter. She needs water too.” Amir furrowed his brow. “But why are you trading for antibiotics?”

“I’m planning ahead.”

“You know what we say about man’s plans.”

Khaled started the engine.

Amir raised his voice over its whine. “I don’t want visitors. Say you found an old man, but he was dead.”

Khaled touched fingers to forehead, mimicking Amir’s mock salute. “*Shalom*, Amir.”

“*Ma’a salama*, Khaled.” He turned back toward the guesthouse as the motorcycle purred away.

Well, he imagined Romi saying, *you’ve gotten yourself into a mess*.

“Why?” he asked aloud, closing the door behind him. “Because I gave a life-saving gift to a man who still has a child?”

Don’t be an idiot. You know what I mean.

“Because I gave him my only water harvester?” asked Amir. “I’ve lived my life, Romi. We raised our children, watched them grow...and the rest.”

From his kit bag, Amir removed a water bottle—his last. “I came back, as promised.” He unscrewed the cap and drank. “Soon I’ll join you in the world to come.”

* * *

Amir lay down for a while. He had some Ambien rattling in a plastic bottle—just enough. When the sun rose, hot and drowsy, he’d be ready. But not just yet.

One last look at the stars. Amir creaked out of bed and opened the door.

Outside, a single light wove through the desert night toward the kibbutz. When the motorcycle entered the courtyard, the rider cut the engine.

“Amir, my friend,” said Khaled. “Could you make a metal organic framework from copper chloride and terephthalic acid?”

Amir gaped. “I...where?...”

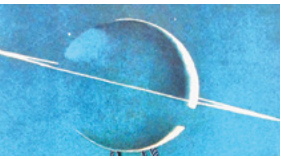
Khaled smiled. “My wife has made *maqluba* for dinner, and we invite you to be our guest overnight. Tomorrow, *inshallah*, we will trade batteries for reagents.”

It’s too late, thought Amir.

Don’t be an idiot, said Romi.

“I’d like that,” he said. “I’d like that very much.”

RON FEIN is a writer from Massachusetts. Fein’s work has appeared in *Nature*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *MetaStellar*, *Factor Four*, *Mystery Tribune*, and *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*.



This Is Not the End of the World (but You Can See It from Here)

by Ellis Bray

Once, there was a very large star that blinked and went out. It was so far away that no one knew how big it was, or how dangerous, until it went out—which meant that no one was ready when the star collapsed.

(What does “collapsed” mean? Oh. It means that the star got so big it fell down inside itself. Now, let me finish.)

So the Scientists went to the Leaders, and they told them that the star had gone out and our planet was in danger.

“Are you sure?” asked the Leaders.

“Absolutely,” said the Scientists. Because, you see, they were very smart and had spent a long time studying the collapsed star before they told the Leaders anything. So the Leaders went to the Builders and said, “Tell us how to save everyone.” And the Builders looked at everything the Scientists had learned about the star, and then they did their own math, involving cities and ships and space travel.

“We can’t,” they said.

(I know what Grandpa told you, but he wasn’t there. You asked me to tell you a bedtime story. Do you want to hear the end of it or not?)

So the Leaders and the Builders and the Scientists all worked together, for weeks and weeks and weeks, trying to find a plan that would save as many people as they could. The Peacemakers called on the Traders—and some of the nearby friendly species, like the Aranesp and the Kochiin, arrived with cargo ships—

(Yes, just like this one.)

—that they changed, so people could ride in them.

The science ships stopped their science and became rescue ships—

(Well, I’m telling you that that’s what happened; if you want to hear your uncle tell this story, go ask *him*.)

The Rock Scientists and Rock Builders turned the volcanic vents into factories—

(No, not *stupid*, just desperate)

—which was such a big project nobody had done it since we went to war with the Aranesp, when Grandpa was your age.

(Yes, the same Aranesp. Sometimes, people fight about little things but work together when bigger things happen.)

None of the plans worked, though. The star was too big, and its collapse was too sudden. There was no way to save everyone. The ships and the Leaders and the people themselves tried to find ways to make it fair, who should be saved and who was doomed, but how do you make a just system of—of—

(No, I’m okay, honey. My eyes just hurt.)

After we learned about the star and what it meant, people acted—well, like people: Some were cruel, and some were kind. Some took, and some gave. There was darkness, and there was light. It didn’t always balance out, but *goddamn* it, we tried our best. And the ships. Every ship that made it out had a mailroom, just for carrying messages from the damned to the delivered. Something not seen for four generations. We brought it back, now, because these were going to be the last messages ever, and they needed to be saved. If we couldn’t save the people themselves, we could at least save their final fucking words.

And every message...*every single goddamn message* spoke of love. And—good m-memories, and—and—hopes for—

(I’m sorry, honey. My eyes hurt, and I’m so tired. Aren’t you tired? It’s been a really long day. Story’s almost over, I promise.)

Anyway. When the last ship left orbit and made it to the safety radius, and the star’s damaging light finally landed, all that remained was the knowledge that our planet had once been filled with flawed people who were, ultimately, at their core, good and kind and doing their best.

(That’s the end. No more stories. Not tonight. Close your eyes and go to sleep.)

(I love you, too, baby. Sweet dreams.)

ELLIS BRAY is a writer from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Bray’s work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Eye to the Telescope*.



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