

2019

## Thinking of Doggerland: Experiments in Climate Fiction and Narratives of Human Rights

Evan Tims  
*Bard College*

---

### Recommended Citation

Tims, Evan, "Thinking of Doggerland: Experiments in Climate Fiction and Narratives of Human Rights" (2019). *Senior Projects Spring 2019*. 193.

[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2019/193](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2019/193)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2019 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

# Thinking of Doggerland

Experiments in Climate Fiction and Narratives of Human Rights

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
and  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Evan Tims

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2019



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my many advisors for providing a wealth of new ideas and valuable critique during the course of this project. Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins, Thomas Keenan, Joseph O'Neill, and Peter Rosenblum helped me navigate the complex and often challenging terrain of my stories and the themes of my analysis, and I am deeply grateful for their insight. I am also indebted to Gidon Eshel, who met with me multiple times to discuss climate change and literature from both a scientific and artistic perspective, and Yuka Suzuki, whose coursework and conversation led to many of the ideas I explore here. I would also like to thank my family for being supportive during this process (care packages included) and for encouraging my sense of curiosity and interest in the natural and academic worlds.



## Table of Contents

### Part I: Introduction

The Stories that Tell Stories.....	2
Literature and the Real.....	6
Literature and Rights.....	10
Climate Change and Rights.....	14
The Problem of the Future.....	22
Imagining the (Un)Expected.....	26
Examining Climate Fiction.....	31

### Part II: Fiction

Assisted Living.....	42
On the Bus.....	59
The Water Witch.....	66
The Drowned Coast.....	78
Notes on the Ocean Gift.....	94
Thinking of Doggerland.....	102

Bibliography.....	114
-------------------	-----



# Part I

## Introduction

*Science describes accurately from outside; poetry describes accurately from inside. Science explicates; poetry implicates. Both celebrate what they describe. We need the languages of both science and poetry to save us from merely stockpiling endless “information” that fails to inform our ignorance or our irresponsibility.*

–Ursula K. Le Guin, “Deep in Admiration.”



*The Stories that Tell Stories*

Climate change is a remaking of the world. Familiar landscapes are redesigned by the sculpting forces of wind and water, given new strength by changes to global temperature. Shifting rainfall patterns rewrite human relationships with nature, defining our dependency on technological intervention. The old threat of storms and erratic floods has taken on monstrous proportions, threatening local environments and built landscapes. These are realities of both truth and fiction. They are informed speculations because they are legitimized by available data and contemporary experience, and they are fictional insofar as they seek to delineate the character of an as-yet-unrealized future. This is not to suggest that informed speculation is unscientific, or that the imagined possibilities of future climate change are complete fabrications. Instead, I argue that a critical avenue exists for understanding the relationship between climate change and modes of speculative imagining. The predicted worlds of climate change are real dimensions of political action and comprehension of the material problem itself. This project is an effort in taking the imaginative elements of climate change seriously through literature and formulations of human rights.

Climate fiction is an emerging genre, often classified—not without some indignance—as a branch of science fiction. The classification makes for easy marketing and articles, and often the works do deal with remarkably similar themes of brutality, losses of rights, and destruction. The work is defined by its willingness to engage with the phenomenon of climate change, often in a contemporary or speculative context. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson’s 2018 article, “The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers,” explores the feelings and experiences of readers of the genre. He finds that while reading climate fiction offers inspiration

for environmental activism and for imagining the future possibilities of climate change, it also spurs “intense negative emotions.” This impact can possibly outweigh any political or social benefit to the genre because it may encourage readers to avoid engaging with the issue in any real depth.<sup>1</sup> Given the wide crossover between authors, readers, and environmental activists, it should be expected that a great deal of fiction would minister to the deep anxieties experienced by much of the reading public over the potential catastrophes associated with a global rise in surface temperature. Even if mainstream fiction might prefer to steer clear of the speculative or dystopian elements suggested by narratives that deal with the future, there at least ought to be a wealth of work that navigates the particular stresses and cultural responses to the contemporary political debate and fears over the possibility of destruction. But this is not the case. Despite Schneider-Mayerson’s claim that climate fiction has exploded in popularity over recent years, climate fiction has only enjoyed a dynamic increase relative to its previous status as an almost non-existent theme. While several major authors such as Lydia Millet, Barbara Kingsolver, and David Mitchell have produced work over the last ten years that foregrounds global environmental concerns, the vast majority of contemporary literature evades the subject, and there are very few authors who center the bulk of their work on the issue. The climate fiction that does exist, which I examine in the last section of this introduction, tends to employ apocalyptic narratives and largely similar motifs about life and death.

“It matters what stories tell stories.”<sup>2</sup> This is one of the central claims of Donna Haraway’s essay “Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene.” In essence the phrase highlights the importance of recognizing the “stories,” or narratives and

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, “The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Study of Readers,” *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 473-500. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156848>

<sup>2</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore (PM Press, 2016): 45.

ideologies, which give rise to understandings of the world. It matters what stories tell stories because the authorship of new narratives is always premised upon the histories and contexts of the author. This does not mean that the content of stories will always be determined by their foundations. On the contrary, Haraway is arguing that one must consider both the genealogy of stories in terms of their contextual origins and the possibilities for departing from the expected norms of storytelling.

Climate fiction is an avenue for examining what I refer to as the climate imaginary, or the collection of stories, beliefs, and figures that contribute to the popular understanding of what climate change looks like in the future and present. The climate imaginary describes a loose network of associated themes and narratives that are centered on depicting the different futures made possible by anthropogenic climate change.<sup>3</sup> There is no unified imagined landscape, nor is there one particular public that is doing all of the imagining, but one can locate the recurrence of specific themes and some of the sources that tend to hold the most influence over the speculative landscape. It exists at a variety of scales, from an individual's dreams of a flooded future to a policy maker's vision of potential climate refugees. It also influences a number of scales, from an individual's emotional responses to environmental activism to billions of dollars in international aid focused on preventing climate-induced migration in low-lying countries. It has no one source or form, but it can be seen in the novels, IPCC emissions scenarios, and dinner-table conversations that seek to examine the possibilities of destruction and survival in a twenty-first century increasingly defined by its environmental context. Measuring it, defining where it begins and ends, and determining its exact content is not the aim of this project, but it is

---

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the concept of the climate change imaginary, and on work that foregrounds an analysis of the differing social forces at work in its constitution, see: Timothy W. Luke, "The Climate Change Imaginary," *Current Sociology* 63, no. 2 (2014): 280-296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392114556593>

sufficient to say that a plural collection of beliefs and speculations exists about the future impacts of climate change, and that these speculations are enormously influential in the realm of policy and public action.

In the critical portion of this project I explore existing climate fiction and formulations of the relationship between human rights, climate change, and literature in a series of interconnected essays. My intention in this section is to provide a survey of related concepts, and to suggest ways in which literature and human rights might be productively re-oriented toward climate change. In the second half of this project, I explore a variety of contemporary and speculative worlds of climate change through fiction. The process of writing demanded careful consideration of the possibilities engendered by the Anthropocene, and it allowed me to imagine how the world might look in a variety of contemporary and speculative contexts. Reading and writing encourages a kind of experience or presence within a narrative. The reader can perceive events that are described artfully as real, and they themselves can feel, touch, taste or see the object of such narrative descriptions. It is the experience of the climate-changed world that offers something different from data-driven analysis. Experiencing, even in such a limited form, the characteristics of material environmental change can allow for new avenues of both conceptualizing of such impacts and empathizing with their subjects. By engaging with academic work and policy in addition to literature, I aim to prove that the worlds made possible by dreams and poetry are crucial in exploring how climate change has and will come to define the twenty-first century.

*Literature and the Real*

Literature seems to be uncomfortable with climate change. The very categorization of climate fiction as a genre distinct from literary fiction suggests that the subject doesn't quite fit into the diverse array of themes that are allowable in mainstream writing. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, novelist and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh argues that climate change occupies the same space as werewolves and monsters in literary categorization. By analyzing the basic structures of the modern novel and the historical development of the form, he explores one of the critical questions of contemporary literature: why is there so little non-allegorical fiction about climate change?

Ghosh's argument rests on both the history of the novelistic form and the statistical and managerial discourses that mark the era of governmentality and scientific analysis of the natural world.<sup>4</sup> He writes: "Indeed, it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel."<sup>5</sup> Ghosh finds that the reason behind this banishment of climate change to the realm of the fantastic is related the sense of reality that novels strive to create, particularly in contrast to earlier forms of narrative. He writes: "before the birth of the

---

<sup>4</sup> By governmentality I am referring to the use of the term by Michel Foucault, which defines a transition from forms of governance based on violence toward forms based on the management of citizens' biology and survival, a process that involves the collection of new statistical information and social control enacted through discipline and observation.

<sup>5</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016): 7.

modern novel, wherever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely.”<sup>6</sup> To exemplify the “unheard-of and the unlikely,” he references several epic poems and dramas that center on fantastical occurrences, arguing that before the evolution of the modern novel during the Enlightenment most forms of fiction described improbable events that did not seek to reproduce a sense of the everyday reality experienced by the reader. He traces the concurrent development of the idea of “probability,” or a way of viewing the world in which the regime of material influences around us are generally predictable and understandable with the right tools: “Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under a shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience.”<sup>7</sup> The modern novel is thus a realm of the probable and the expected insofar as it strives to produce a sense of the normal, “...through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday.”<sup>8</sup>

Climate change, however, is anything but expected. It is characterized by increasing unpredictability, an environmental regime of uncertainty that exists in moments and examples of the erratic. Sudden storms, floods, and wildfires are the phantoms that now lurk outside of our sense of what constitutes the normal, and yet they themselves are the substance of the new real. Ghosh’s “extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel” remain distant from contemporary experience, but the surreal character of an unpredictable climate now has a legitimate claim to being the most fundamental tendency of the Anthropocene. Ironic, then, that it remains housed outside of the bounds of what Ghosh sees as serious literature. Ghosh asks, “why should the rhetoric of the everyday appear at exactly the time when a regime of statistics, ruled by ideas of probability and

---

<sup>6</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 17.

improbability, was beginning to give new shapes to society?”<sup>9</sup> In response, he locates a shared history between novels, the idea of the normal, and governmentality. Stories of the everyday are part of the “rationalization” of life, the remaking of existence into an object of certainty and prediction. What happens when life itself no longer follows these rules, yet literature itself still clings to a concept of a “normal” no longer in existence?

Climate change is an ongoing phenomenon. The transition from the Holocene, a geological epoch marked by ecological stability, to the Anthropocene, the period during which humanity has produced vast geological impacts on the material world which will be visible in a future fossil record, is well underway. Indeed, many claim that the Anthropocene began several hundred years ago, with the patenting of the modern steam engine.<sup>10</sup> One could argue that climate fiction is not taken seriously simply because fiction that deals with an imagined future makes unverifiable claims to realism and is therefore outside of the bounds of what many call serious fiction. However, climate change is as much of a historical and contemporary problem as it is a speculative one, meaning it might still find purchase in historical and contemporary work. Given the level of public anxiety and awareness on the issue of climate change, and its role in influencing common discourses, it might be imagined that climate change ought to be a major, if not central, dimension of literature. This is not, however, a didactic claim about what contemporary fiction should be dealing with in a moral or political sense. I don’t insist that literature should explore particular issues because of their relevance to modern politics or their moral content. But if Ghosh is corrected in identifying a tendency of self-styled serious literature

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>10</sup> This definition of Anthropocene is often accepted, but it is not unchallenged. Others, notably Jason Moore and Donna Haraway, have proposed alternative titles with different historical frameworks, including the Capitalocene and the Chthulucene. See: Donna J. Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore (PM Press, 2016): 34-76.

to embrace a concept of the authoritatively “real,” then the failure of the bulk of modern literature to critically examine what is perhaps the most fundamental material and conceptual shift of the twenty-first century would hint at a kind of betrayal of one of the norms that literature has historically enacted—a claim to what constitutes the real.

The failure of literature to contend with phenomena that are vast, destructive, and even visible is not unprecedented. W.G. Sebald, in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, describes an almost complete lack of postwar German literature that so much as mentions Allied bombing campaigns: “Indeed, it seems that no German writer, with the sole exception of Nossack, was ready or able to put any concrete facts down on paper about the progress and repercussions of this gigantic, long-term campaign of destruction. It was the same when the war was over. The quasi-natural reflex, engendered by feelings of shame and a wish to defy the victors, was to keep quiet and look the other way.”<sup>11</sup> Sebald finds that German writers had “feelings of shame” and even a sense of rebellion that contributed to this silence. Allied bombing reduced entire cities to rubble, killed countless people, and became a shared experience in German society, and yet it produced no works of literature. As we stare down the potential for climate catastrophe, this same silence seems to exist at the heart of contemporary literature.

---

<sup>11</sup> W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003): 30.



*Literature and Rights*

Many of the examples of climate fiction that I discuss in a later section focus on themes of human rights in relation to environment, particularly the ways that flooding catastrophes and failures of crop production spur the refugee crises and humanitarian disasters that are historically legitimized possibilities in the context of environmental change. These authors therefore strive to produce a sense of realism in the midst of speculative fiction by grounding their imagined worlds in the all-too-familiar realities of crises of human rights. In the literary climate imaginary, it therefore seems that questions of human rights are central to the problem of climate change. Many authors have articulated distinctive relationships between rights and literature, and I rely on these claims to consider how human rights, literature, and climate change are mutually constitutive and reflective regimes of influence, and how their relationship might be oriented to reflect a changing climate.

In Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights*, she claims that the relationship between literature and rights is genealogical, and that human rights came into existence in association with the modern novel. In particular, she extends arguments made by Benedict Anderson regarding the production of national community through written language to the basic premise of imagining that others can be like oneself: "What might be termed 'imagined empathy' serves as the foundation of human rights rather than of nationalism. It is imagined, not in the sense of made up, but in the sense that empathy requires a leap of faith, of imagining that someone else is like you."<sup>12</sup> Anderson's *Imagined Communities* claims that nationalism is a recent invention, constituted by the printing press, newspapers, and public reading spaces, which engender the shared experience of receiving information at the same time as others. This experience is

---

<sup>12</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007): 32.

connected with the production of community, or nationalism, because it allows for a sense of belonging and relationality to take root in one's understanding of the state community.<sup>13</sup> Hunt believes that the mass-produced novel has a similar impact. She draws from the history of several notable texts, including Rousseau's 1761 novel *Julie, or the New Héloïse*, and the responses they caused in claiming that fiction helped provide the space for the empathy that was associated with the creation and protection of rights. Crucial to her argument is the claim that fiction provided a new kind of psychological space; before the advent of the form many people simply spent little time considering the possibilities of the suffering of those outside of their own class, and characters—often female or less privileged—granted readers (who themselves were typically male and upper class) a broader sense of the internality and experience of other minds. Hunt does not necessarily claim that rights are always about empathy so much as argue that the kind of empathy facilitated by literature contributed to the imaginative space that led to the development of rights. The psychological space that she identifies therefore allowed for an expanded perception of others across physical distances and social classes. It is clear, therefore, that fiction can provide an avenue for influencing imaginative landscapes and perceptions that have enormous material impacts on the wellbeing of others.

Joseph R. Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* deals with the bildungsroman as a representation of the marriage between human rights law and narrative. In particular, he articulates the relationship between normative rights and fiction as one of mutual constitution rather than mere representation: "I take for granted—although I aim to show how—that law and literature are discursive regimes that constitute and regulate, imagine and test, kinds of subjects, subjectivities, and social formations;

---

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

that they are ‘machines for producing [and governing] subjectivity’ and social relations.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, law and literature are equal partners in producing “social formations,” and one of literature’s key functions is to “imagine and test” possibilities of sociality and subjectivity that are also actionable and of concern to regimes of law. Slaughter also claims, with some caution, that literature allows for the empathic space for imagining rights: “Therefore this book does not offer a euphoric celebration of human rights as just the thing that the world needs now; nor a defense of the sentimental power of literature...nonetheless, I share a cautious critical commitment to those humanist ideals and a qualified belief that everyone should know why human rights are important, that we do need a little human rights just now, and that literature does have a capacity to minister to that need.”<sup>15</sup> While he is not interested in a “euphoric celebration” of rights and literature, he does rely on the idea that “literature does have a capacity to minister to” the need for human rights. Slaughter and Hunt therefore both substantiate the claim that literature and human rights are mutually constitutive, and that historical analyses that seek to outline the advent of rights ought to contend with the production and distribution of fiction as well. I extend this argument by claiming that human rights is a crucial and unavoidable avenue for imagining and articulating the social problematic of climate change and that literature can offer both the empathic space and the imaginative capacity for exploring “kinds of subjects, subjectivities, and social formations.” If human rights can be seen as an avenue for mediating the social changes engendered by shifting environmental contexts, then it can be imagined that literature that examines themes of climate change has a role to play in influencing the social possibilities of the Anthropocene.

---

<sup>14</sup> Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007): 8.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, 6.

It is perhaps ironic to use human rights as a venue for imagining literary ways of exploring climate change, given that such projects will foreground the human experience at the expense of imagining broader environmental subjectivities. One could argue that climate fiction ought to do its best to avoid the human altogether, or to entirely escape the tendency to situate narratives of world in the dramas of human suffering. It may be the height of anthropocentrism to believe that literature designed to navigate environmental destruction caused by humanity should work to produce empathy toward other humans when what the world may need is more empathy and attention toward the non-human. However, narratives of climate change must also acknowledge that the central figure of the human, or the anthropos at the center of the Anthropocene, is plural and complex. It is easy to fall into tropes of human versus nature, but just as the idea of a singular and unified nature ignores the localized complexities of environs and spheres, the figure of the universal human is inadequately imagined. Jason W. Moore argues that the term Capitalocene is preferable to Anthropocene because it foregrounds the hierarchical social relationships at the core of environmental exploitation rather than a unified anthropos.<sup>16</sup> Donna Haraway goes a step further in advocating for the term Chthulucene in order to dignify the relations between humans, nonhumans, networks of influence, and institutions of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore clear that the idea of the central human figure at the heart of the Anthropocene is faulty, and that there is no universal human to avoid when it comes to anthropocentrism. That is, narratives of climate change ought to consider the hierarchical and exploitative relations between humans as well as environments in order to critically engage with

---

<sup>16</sup> Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: on the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, No. 3 (Spring 2017): 594–630.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>

<sup>17</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore (PM Press, 2016): 34-76.

the reality that all humans do not have equal impact on the global environment. A new form of literature designed to examine issues of climate should perhaps foreground the complexities of human sociality after all, in order to fully articulate the hierarchies and inequalities that comprise the systems of environmental exploitation that make large scale climate change possible.

Narratives of climate change can therefore be conceived of as narratives of human rights insofar as human rights is concerned with identifying unequal and exploitative dynamics between human social groups and individuals. Ghosh's vision of a "transformed and renewed art and literature,"<sup>18</sup> could therefore locate its narratives within social responses and suffering in light of climate change.

### *Climate Change and Rights*

I argue that human rights offers another avenue into understanding broader currents in the popular public imagination of climate change, and that human rights displays a version of its own gap when it comes to fully embodying and exploring the problems of climate change. This may be its own reflection of the problem of the literary imaginary given the historically constitutive relationships between the two forms. Indeed, it is worth considering how climate change poses the need not only for new kinds of literary imagination but also new articulations of rights.

Limited formulations exist for considering the relationship between human rights law and climate change. A frequent interpretation of existing rights is the right to a healthy or safe

---

<sup>18</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016): 172.

environment. Melissa Thorne,<sup>19</sup> Dinah Shelton,<sup>20</sup> and James Nickel,<sup>21</sup> scholars of human rights law, authored papers that examine this claim in the 1990's which are frequently cited in discussions on the subject, particularly by the two special rapporteurs appointed by the U.N. to establish a linkage between rights and environment, John Knox<sup>22</sup> and Fatma Ksentini.<sup>23</sup> To varying degrees, all of these authors claim that normative human rights ought to, or already does, establish a "right" to exist in an environment that does not pose a threat to life itself. The Stockholm Declaration, or *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* in 1972, also makes a clear and precise claim to a right to the environment along with an imagined social relationship to nature. The text proclaims:

"Man is both creature and moulder of his environment, which gives him physical sustenance and affords him the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth. In the long and tortuous evolution of the human race on this planet a stage has been reached when, through the rapid acceleration of science and technology, man has acquired the power to transform his environment in countless ways and on an unprecedented scale. Both aspects of man's environment, the natural and the manmade, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights-even the right to life itself."<sup>24</sup>

The declaration poses a broad view of human evolution, described as "torturous," and the advent of technology that gives humanity the power to "transform his environment," at scales which are incomparable to prior human-nature impacts. The declaration claims, "Both aspects of man's

---

<sup>19</sup> Melissa Thorne, "Establishing Environment as a Human Right," *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 19, no. 2 (1991): 301-42.

<sup>20</sup> Dinah Shelton, "Human Rights, Environmental Rights, and the Right to Environment," *Stanford Journal of International Law* 28 (1991): 103-38.

<sup>21</sup> James W. Nickel, "The Human Right to a Safe Environment: Philosophical Perspectives on its Scope and Justification," *Yale Journal of International Law* 18 (1993).

<sup>22</sup> John H. Knox, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment* (N.p.: Human Rights Council, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Fatma Zohra Ksentini, *Human Rights and the Environment*, Research report no. Final Report. (N.p.: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> UN General Assembly, *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* (N.p.: December 1972).

environment, the natural and the manmade, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights—even the right to life itself.” There is also a claim that “natural” spaces are equally crucial to the survival and enjoyment of life and rights by human beings, not merely the stable or comfortable manmade environments of homes, cities, and parkland. In this view, the environment is a constant foundation for the iterations of human rights, providing the material, spiritual, and aesthetic possibilities of a productive human-nature relationship.

The declaration also makes arguments regarding the kinds of governance appropriate to environmental problems, and even describes a dynamic in which cultural and national borders, along with socioeconomic boundaries, are dissolved in the face of the destruction of the unified global environment: “The protection and improvement of the human environment is a major issue which affects the well-being of peoples and economic development throughout the world; it is the urgent desire of the peoples of the whole world and the duty of all Governments.”<sup>25</sup> The text therefore envisions a central and universal human that exists beyond historical boundaries in relation to a singular global environment, in the context of a unified “whole world.” Thus, environmental protection is a unifying tendency, one that shrinks a multiplicity of spatial and temporal cultures and geographies into a singular whole. This imaginary can be compared with other views of the re-orientation of perceptions of space. Heidegger, in “The Thing,” writes, “All distances in time and space are shrinking,”<sup>26</sup> in light of technologies of media and the destructive possibilities of the nuclear bomb. In *Railroad Space and Railroad Time*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes about the annihilation of space and time caused by the advent of European railway system. The railway shrank the distance necessary for reaching new spaces and destroyed the originality that towns and geographies maintained when they were frequently visited by travelers. The

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

railway bypassed these spaces, making them liminal or transitory in nature, and reduced perspectives of Europe to a more unified monolithic, especially as the railway allowed for the standardization of time-units.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the production of technology or new social formations has historically allowed for shrinkages of the world and denials of specificity and meaning of geographical space. Cultural and social comprehensions of space have been historically constituted rather than universal throughout time, and a new regime of environmental and humanitarian discourses reduces the multiplicitous nature of global space to an individual object of representation and understanding. The imaginary of the Stockholm Declaration and other scholarly work on human rights and the environment, which articulate a monolithic humanity in contrast to a singular natural world, similarly reinvent perceptions of space and time. These views therefore produce a sense of global community and empathy that derives from an orientation toward the environment as a universal problem with universal responsibilities. Discourses of environment and rights are not passive descriptors of the need for the standardization of new protections but, as Slaughter argues, regimes that constitute new subjectivities and social formations. The text of the Stockholm Declaration goes on to define the meaning and value of the environment as well as make claims as to the cause of environmental problems: “In the developing countries most of the environmental problems are caused by under-development.”<sup>28</sup> By ascribing environmental catastrophe to under-development, rather than development itself, the text avoids criticisms of being anti-business or anti-technology that it may otherwise have faced and contributes to networks of influence that determine the possible social formations in the Anthropocene.

---

<sup>27</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, “Railroad Space and Railroad Time,” *New German Critique* 14 (Duke University Press, 1978): 31-40.

<sup>28</sup> UN General Assembly, *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* (N.P.: December 1972).



The idea of the climate refugee offers an inroad into a growing climate imaginary realized through policy and discourse. There have been few legal cases that seek to establish protections for people forced to migrate due to environmental change. The extension of refugee protections to climate refugees is therefore largely without precedent, making the basic category of the “climate refugee” not yet legally constituted. However, the figure of the climate refugee is a persistent and powerful motif of a contemporary political regime increasingly focused on predicting and managing potential future outcomes. In “Staging Climate Security: Resilience and Heterodystopia in the Bangladesh Borderlands” Jason Cons, an anthropologist, describes efforts to “emplace” citizens of environmental at-risk regions of Bangladesh. For Cons, emplacement is a project that seeks to ensure potential climate refugees remain where they are rather than migrate and cause problems for governance:

“Much new programming deployed in the borderland zone by international NGOs and donor organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) focuses on the need to manage climate change’s displacing outcomes...In other words, emplacement programming mitigates against the figure of the climate refugee by offering technologies designed to keep people in (their) place.”<sup>29</sup>

The climate refugee in Bangladesh could pose a destabilizing influence on regional governance. Indeed, in some ways it already does. The city of Kolkata, where I spent the summer of 2018, is home to a substantial number of undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants who have been forced to migrate from environmentally unstable spaces. It is not merely the threat of typhoons and flooding that forces these migrations, but the loss of economic opportunity and freedom associated with development projects such as shrimp aquaculture that rely on increasingly standardized and structured local economies. Shrimp aquaculture in particular floods the land

---

<sup>29</sup> Jason Cons, “Staging Climate Security: Resilience and Heterodystopia in the Bangladesh Borderlands,” *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (May 2018): 268.

with salt water and destroys farming possibilities, and it relies on fewer laborers than other forms of agriculture. The “new programming deployed in the borderland zone” is a collection of projects that, like shrimp aquaculture, seek to provide possibilities for continued existence in a region increasingly inundated by the rising seas. Yet many of these projects problematize pre-existing economic relations and further stratify the divide between wealthier farmers who are able to articulate themselves as entrepreneurial subjects, therefore reaping the rewards of development projects, and those who lack the capital or know-how to navigate the complicated terrain of such initiatives. These projects are the focus of a development regime increasingly concerned with the potentially destabilizing influence of the climate refugee. In South Asia in particular, countries such as the Maldives and Bangladesh are the focus of what some scholars have termed anticipatory governance: “The broad thrust of this work is that an increasing alignment of planning with security concerns has ushered in a paradigm of anticipatory governance.”<sup>30</sup> The term refers to strategies of planning and social programming that are concerned with anticipating the problems of a foreseen future and working to mitigate them in the present. This regime has material influence over the lives of farmers in Bangladesh who are the recipients of development projects and forms of international governance, and it influences decision-making at the highest level. It is clear, therefore, that the figure of the climate refugee plays a role in determining the contours of the present and the possibilities of the future, making narratives of human rights and environment influential contributions to the climate imaginary.

The right to a clean environment and the climate refugee are two formulations that work to incorporate the impacts of a changing climate into existing human rights norms and practices. These perspectives therefore assume that climate change requires no new interpretations of the existing norms associated with international human rights. Instead, the influences of climate

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

change are analogues to preexisting social issues, such as the migrations caused by war and the physical injuries caused by unsafe contexts. In this view, climate change is reducible to already-imagined and explored narratives, similar to how existing examples of climate fiction typically use familiar motifs of war and death to situate environmental concerns in recognizable landscapes. Just as I claim that this lack of further imagination—and the broader lack of substantial work on the subject in the literary context—contributes to a stunted and perhaps harmful climate imaginary, it is also clear that the relative neglect of the issue within human rights scholarship can be linked to a failure to articulate the new possibilities engendered by an unpredictable Anthropocene. There are, however, examples of more radical formations of rights and the idea of justice that provide a glimpse of how the rights regime—and even literature—might more fully articulate these influences. One example is environmental justice, a social movement and body of academic literature that examines new possibilities for equality and resource distribution, among countless other iterations, in a changing environment. Ideas about the rights of future people, or as-yet-nonexistent citizens, have also been around for several decades, and this concept is highly relevant for thinking through the unique challenge of climate change to the literary imagination. As Edwin Delattre writes in 1972, “The current awakening to the existence and significance of ecological structures has generated discussion of a number of philosophical questions. This is so in part for the reason that concern for the maintenance of ecological balance is in several senses related to concern about the quality of life in the future. It is not only the immediate future which is at stake here but the future and quality of life of generations yet unborn.”<sup>31</sup> Delattre goes on to consider the question of whether or not future people have rights, ultimately deciding that the meaning of the question is unimportant compared to broader issues within ecology. Our understanding of ecological structures, or fields of comprehension like

---

<sup>31</sup> Edwin Delattre, “Rights, Responsibilities, and Future Persons,” *Ethics* 82 no. 3 (1972): 1.

atmosphere and biosphere, opens us not only to contemporary problematics of nature and culture but also, necessarily, concerns over the future. As we move from ecology to environment and finally to Anthropocene, newer and larger scales demand a comprehension of time, or a perception of human lifetimes in the context of a *longue durée*. From the broadest possible perspective, it is clear that a consciousness of the globalized whole has demanded a shift in our temporal imaginary from the present-historical to the present-future, by which I mean the temporal perspective that anticipatory regimes have regarding the value of present action in mitigating future challenges. Future peoples therefore have rights because it is assumed that our present actions will have a meaningful and material impact on their conditions of possibility as they relate to survival and enjoyment of nature. Robert Elliot claims, “It is argued that the present non-existence of future persons is no impediment to the attribution of rights to them. It is also argued that, even if the present non-existence of future persons were an impediment to the attribution of rights to them, the rights they will have when they come into existence constitute a constraint on present actions.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, for Elliot, the question of existence is unimportant. It does not matter that these citizens do not yet exist, because if it is conceivably imagined that they will exist barring material changes in the contemporary environment then those changes ought to be constrained by our understanding of how they might prevent or impact as-yet-nonexistent people. It is perhaps radical to imagine that people who don’t yet have a literal existence ought to be enshrined into human rights to an extent that determines the legality of contemporary actions, especially in the context of regimes of carbon-based development that seek to better life in the present.<sup>33</sup> Yet regimes of anticipation, as Cons proves, already have a massive influence on

---

<sup>32</sup> Robert Elliot, “The Rights of Future People,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (1989): 159-169.

<sup>33</sup> It is also worth considering that regimes of development, and indeed much of human rights, stakes a claim to the betterment of future people at multiple levels. The future is therefore a site of justification and an object of planning throughout variations of social change, but the granting of legal rights to as-yet-

governance. It is clear that governmentality is concerned with the existence of future people, not only in terms of the construction of ideals about legacy but also in the sense that future people will cause threats to ongoing regimes of power and control. If human rights is a check on the powers, entitlements, and obligations of modern states, and modern states are increasingly focused on their relations with non-existent yet predicted people, then perhaps human rights has an obligation to seriously consider the possibilities of the rights of future people. There is little consensus on this issue, but what is clear in terms of the intervention of this project is that articulations of rights and climate change are inroads into viewing a broader climate change imaginary that constitutes political and discursive realities of the present.

### *The Problem of the Future*

Derrida's 1984 essay on nuclear criticism, "Full Speed Ahead: Seven Missiles, Seven Missives," offers a framework for thinking through the idea of the future in relation to a possible apocalypse. Although Derrida's work is centered on the problems of the nuclear age, his ideas about the social meaning of catastrophe, the unprecedented powers and questions of technology, and the obligations of the humanities are useful for thinking through the influence and nature of the predicted climate crisis. His essay begins by asking a question of the humanities: "How, in the face of the nuclear issue, are we to get speech to circulate not only among the self styled competent parties and those who are alleged to be incompetent, but among the competent parties

---

nonexistent people stands in contrast to the poetics or rhetoric of defining the value of a movement on the basis of its future merits.

themselves.”<sup>34</sup> Derrida frequently refers to the “incompetent” humanities in contrast to the techno-scientific and politico-military structures and powers, which he considers competent in terms of their material influence and perceived agency. His concern is how the humanities, which are capable of exploring questions of morality and meaning in relation to nuclear technology, relate to and might constitute regimes of power and influence, or how “to get speech to circulate...among the competent parties themselves.” For Derrida, the competent parties have never been more powerful yet more in the dark about their choices. There is no “model” for those in power to base their choices on because the nuclear threat is unprecedented: “Among the acts of observing, revealing, knowing, promising, acting, simulating, giving orders, and so on, the limits have never been so precarious, so undecidable.”<sup>35</sup> He therefore considers the nuclear age to be one that is faced with new and unknown limits to growth, power, and imagination. His related point is that the nuclear war is unprecedented precisely because it has never been explored or experienced before, which therefore means that the imagination of potential catastrophe is the source of the complications and powers of the nuclear age rather than historical examples. Similarly, climate change as a monolithic threat is unprecedented. Limited climatic shifts and catastrophes have occurred, as with limited usage of the bomb, but the most influential fears are not of limited use but of the total destruction promised by both the nuclear war and climate change: “But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it...it has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event.”<sup>36</sup> Climate change and nuclear war are therefore “non-events” that are constituted by the acts of “talk[ing] and writ[ing] about it.” The events themselves are

---

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” *Nuclear Criticism* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 20-31.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

constructed purely by language, as they have no reference: “The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real reference (present or past) of a descries or a text.”<sup>37</sup> The difference, of course, is that nuclear war is a more precisely imagined moment, whereas climate change is a far more diffuse and gradual phenomenon marked by singular points of evidence. The nuclear imaginary is constituted by a countless array of speculative discourses and narratives, and the fact that it resulted in substantial literary contributions stand in another contrast to the influence of climate change. However, if it can be argued that Derrida’s identification of an “absent object,” holds true for climate change in the sense that both phenomena consist of imaginaries defined and articulated by language, then it is all the more notable that climate change has resulted in very few literary efforts.

“The growing multiplication of the discourse—indeed, of the literature—on this subject may constitute a process of fearful domestication, the anticipatory assimilation of that unanticipatable entirely-other.”<sup>38</sup> One only has to read works of nuclear criticism alongside popular fiction from the Cold War to prove that the specter of nuclear war was immediately and expansively articulated in written forms, whereas the premise of Ghosh’s work is that climate change has presented an entirely opposite phenomenon of narrative silence. Fictional narratives ask certain things of the enemy that are difficult to transcribe when it comes to climate change. Nuclear war, by contrast, is easily navigated through fictional narrative. Although nuclear war is an all-encompassing event, it does have enemies, and those enemies have internality that can be explored and rebuked in the form of national bodies, others, and political institutions. There are opportunities for survival and prevention that involve clear antagonists, and its effects are localized in the form of damage and destruction. Climate change, while it can be personified to

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

some extent in CEOs and deniers, does not have antagonists that are so easily folded into existing narratives of war and heroism, nor can the destruction of those antagonists prevent the event itself. Climate change is altogether too diffuse, and it demands acknowledgment of interconnectivity in order to make narrative sense of the threat. Nuclear war fragments the world into local spaces and individual characters that can ignore the world at large beyond the simple motif of global destruction. The effect of climate change seems to be rather the opposite, in that its narratives are of the loss of the human identity in favor of broader, more interconnected ways of seeing. However, as with the nuclear age, fictions about climate change are one of the few ways of accessing and articulating its contours, which becomes the process of determining what, exactly, it is:

"Reality," let's say the encompassing institution of the nuclear age, is constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened (except in fantasy, and that is not nothing at all), an event of which one can only speak, an event whose advent remains an invention...an invention also because it does not exist and especially because, at whatever point it should come into existence, it would be a grand premiere appearance."<sup>39</sup>

The “encompassing institution of the nuclear age is constructed by a fable,” just as the institutions of anticipatory governance are predicated on narratives of how climate change might figure into stability and governmentality. As with nuclear war, “at whatever point it should come into existence, it would be a grand premiere appearance.” That is, whenever climate-induced migrants truly begin destabilizing regimes, or crop failures force redistributions of wealth and food, or flooding decreases the conditions necessary for the pursuit of life, it will be the grand appearance of the first unified global catastrophe that truly shakes the balance of life in all places at once. It is obvious then that for the moment, as anticipatory regimes and discourses influence

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 32.



contemporary life, they are based on fictions and fables of potentiality rather than history. Accessing those narratives through fiction could therefore be seen as a possible aim for writers, as expanding the contours of imagined climate possibilities would entail contributing to a broad fable that impacts not only the present but the real conditions of the future.

### *Imagining the (Un)expected*

Doggerland was once a region that connected the British Isles to mainland Europe. Largely grassland and rich forest, it hosted human populations before 6,200 B.C. Tools and remains have been dredged from the ocean floor in the British Channel and above the Dogger Bank, proving that what is now the quiet depths of the sea was once a space of life and survival, where people formed groups, made objects, and told stories. Presumably, they imagined that their home would remain more or less above sea level during their lifetimes. They were wrong. Rising sea levels associated with the end of the last glacial period slowly subsumed the low-lying regions around 6,500 B.C.<sup>40</sup> The land itself sank as the massive weight of glaciers disappeared, forcing adjustments to the height of the landmass. An event referred to as the Storegga Slide, a mega tsunami originating near the coast of Norway, likely flooded much of the remaining land in short order and had an immediate impact on the human population. Whatever was left of Doggerland probably vanished with the collapse of Lake Agassiz, an enormous glacial lake covering much of modern North America which drained into the ocean over a period of a few years and caused a precipitous rise in global sea levels. What was once unthinkable became the case, and then it became the norm, so much so that it was forgotten in our collective and

---

<sup>40</sup> Vincent Gaffney, Kenneth Thomson, and Simon Fetch, *Mapping Doggerland: The Mesolithic Landscapes of the Southern North Sea* (Archaeopress, 2007).

recorded memory until boats started pulling up animal remains and tools from the dark recesses of the Atlantic.

“I suspect that human beings were generally catastrophists at heart until their instinctive awareness of the Earth’s unpredictability was gradually supplanted by a belief in uniformitarianism—a regime of ideas that was supported by scientific theories like Lyell’s, and also by a range of governmental practices that were informed by statistics and probability.”<sup>41</sup> For Amitav Ghosh, humans have an instinctive sense that the Earth is a place of rapid and unexpected change. Events that upend the expected contours of the natural world were frequent throughout our evolutionary history. However, scientific approaches to nature after the Enlightenment have replaced this belief, which is perhaps associated with a kind of caution and fear, with “uniformitarianism”—the idea that change is slow, regular, and remarkably predictable. Thus, in realms of governance and discourse, the environment has been imagined as a stable regime. Accidents, while not uncommon, are not the norm but instead exceptions that can be carefully mapped and predicted in order to reduce their impact. A world of uncertainty has been remade into a kind of library that can be read with the right equipment and training. Survival is a matter of finding the right book. This has not always been the case, nor, it seems, will it be in the future. Contemporary climate change will hardly be the first time that human beings face rapid and unprecedented shifts in a previously stable world.

Further back in our history, these catastrophes grow hazy but no less dramatic. Around 70,000 years ago, there is some evidence that the human population was reduced to between

---

<sup>41</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016): 25.

three and ten thousand individuals.<sup>42</sup> The genetic bottleneck theory explains the relative lack of genetic diversity among the modern human population. It seems that the Toba super volcano erupted around that time, and that there was likely a population reduction during the same period. Whether these two events are linked remains controversial, but it is probable that a catastrophe involved a substantial destruction of the human race at truly apocalyptic levels. Human beings were, in every sense of the term, endangered species.

Nonetheless, all of these events ended and were replaced with a sense of the normal. What constitutes the normal is historically dependent and highly contextual, but the idea of normalcy itself is a powerful one. It is another term for expected, or even predictable, and it is this idea that Amitav Ghosh considers. Uniformitarianism—the concept that things are generally the same and change happens too slowly to be noticed—is a comforting belief, not to mention highly useful for modern planning. Yet in the midst of climate change the very concept of predictability is losing its power. One only has to look at the different emissions scenarios outlined by the IPCC to see that even the greatest statisticians, climatologists, and other experts can only agree that there is a variety of possible near-futures, ranging from moderate shifts in seasonal climate to truly catastrophic inundations of coastline and erratic weather patterns. What is remarkable in the face of this knowledge is that we still buy life insurance, invest in 401Ks, plan futures for our children and, most shockingly, do virtually nothing about climate change. There is perhaps a lack of conceptual capacity encouraged by the regime of predictability that precedes the very possibility of imagining that things can be so different as to demand immediate change.

---

<sup>42</sup> Stanley H. Ambrose, “Late Pleistocene Human Population Bottlenecks, Volcanic Winter, and Differentiation of Modern Humans,” *Journal of Human Evolution* 34, no. 6 (June 1988): 623-651. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jhev.1998.0219>

Adriana Petryna, an anthropologist known for her work on biopolitics in Ukraine, spent months researching modern practices of wildfire management and modeling. Her essay on the subject, “Wildfires at the Edges of Science: Horizons Work amid Runaway Change,” explores the newfound unpredictability of contemporary wildfires:

“Abrupt ecological change implies a deepening incompatibility between human and geological time scales, understood as a temporally dimensionless invisible present in which only dangerous surprises can emerge...I have been foregrounding a different set of concerns pertaining to an all-too-real human struggle to maintain responsive capacity relative to an absent object...When destructiveness obliges us to revise knowledge calibrated to conditions that no longer exist, marking horizons beyond which the world as we know it disappears is itself an exercise in delimiting the knowable, and thus livable, world.”<sup>43</sup>

Like Derrida, Petryna identifies the “absent object,” or predicted but as-yet unrealized extent of climate change that demands action and planning in the present. However, modeling wildfires and predicting their effects has become obsolete in a hotter, drier world. The scientific tools that allowed for the development of highly effective survival training and management techniques are dissipating given the increasing temperatures of the wildfires that render protective tents and gear useless. Knowledge that forests can only burn once per several years, or that burned forests quickly return to life, is no longer accurate as burned-through woods can catch alight again only weeks later. Petryna’s concerns deal with the perception of temporality and the imaginable world. Understanding the limits of our predictive capacity is “an exercise in delimiting the knowable, and thus livable, world.” The “horizons,” or extent of our understanding of the future, are markers of the new limits of scientific understanding.

What is left when science can no longer predict the future? If there is too much uncertainty, it seems that non-scientists are unclear on how much is actually at stake in the

---

<sup>43</sup> Adriana Petryna, “Wildfires at the Edges of Science: Horizons Work Amid Runaway Change,” *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 4 (November 2018): 570-595. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.4.06>

climate conversation. When multiple parties with legitimate evidence claim a variety of scenarios, the potential for destruction loses its sense of immediacy. Imagining the future in light of conflicting reports thus becomes the work of people with better data, better tools, more precise and more alien to non-scientific modes of comprehension and expression. Climate change thus becomes synonymous with science, and fiction about climate change becomes science fiction—writing that largely focuses on the impacts of technology on human life rather than shifts in the material conditions of the climate regime. Therefore, I argue that a major tendency has evolved in fiction and public discourse to deem certain forms of analysis appropriate to the question of future climate change. These forms of analysis tend to devolve into highly simplistic narrative arcs and a kind of uncritical scientism in the form of a reliance on data-driven frameworks. By uncritical scientism I do not mean to invoke a critique of the science of climate change—which, must I really add, is solid—but the idea that scientific forms of analysis are the best tools for examining a speculative future and unpredictable present, whereas art and literature are less serious or more poorly equipped. The simplistic narratives I refer to are pieces of climate fiction that reduce climate change to apocalyptic stories, at the expense of broader and more imaginative engagements with the Anthropocene. If science cannot yet determine the exact nature of future climate change, and fiction only portrays narratives of total destruction or loss, then it is no small wonder that climate change invokes a set of fears and anxieties that result in either complete denial or fatalism. However, fiction that explores the possibilities of life and experience in the context of an altered climate, while maintaining an awareness of the *longue durée* of human survival in a variety of shifting environments, may provide alternative imaginaries and therefore expand the responsive capacity of readers.

*Examining Climate Fiction*

“All of the sudden everything was different, as if a cloud of gas had been released. It was incredible how everything could change, thought Marcia, even the smallest details. There was no need for catastrophes or cataclysms...on the contrary, an earthquake or a flood would be the surest way of keeping things as they were, of preserving values.”<sup>44</sup> “The Proof” by César Aira is a story about an interruption of the normal. It has nothing to do with climate change, and yet it explains the basic premise of a great deal of climate fiction. Three young women—two “punks” and Marcia, an innocent and intelligent girl—critique the normalcy of everyday life in Buenos Aires before attacking a supermarket in a bizarre terroristic effort, replacing the world they live in with a space of mystery. All of this happens in the context of the easily predictable streets of Buenos Aires, and Marcia examines how the truly erratic becomes possible in the banality of the everyday. For Marcia, an “earthquake or a flood,” catastrophes that are normative despite their unpredictable nature, are the “surest way of keeping things as they were, of preserving values.” Disasters therefore reduce the chance for new social developments and shifts in perspective, instead either regressing or maintaining society in its original state.

As one of my primary modes of research, I read number of works of climate fiction: stories, novels, and a few that resist classification of form. I did not specifically explore fiction that deals with other environmental problems like extinction and deforestation, focusing instead on works that directly name and foreground climate change itself.<sup>45</sup> The bulk of the fiction that I focus on here also falls outside of the typical designation of science fiction, or fiction that

---

<sup>44</sup> César Aira, *The Little Buddhist Monk & The Proof*, translated by Nick Caistor (New Directions, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> For an example of fiction that deals with more specific environmental crises, with a more peripheral theme of climate change, see *The Overstory* by Richard Powers.

explores the possibilities of new technology and the social responses thereof, because the examples of science fiction I found that do mention climate change typically situate it as an element of world building in order to grant space to more specific interests in technology.<sup>46</sup> I also read a few nonfiction essays and articles about climate fiction, often written by environmentalists, which make a few claims about cli-fi's value in an era that demands understanding and action. Unlike much of that writing, I am less immediately concerned about the potential for climate fiction to spur meaningful and specific material change in the work of environmental movements. It is possible, and perhaps likely, that more climate fiction will allow for more comprehension of the horrors that might await us and therefore grant climate activism a sense of emotional gravity and immediacy. But that is not my argument, nor was it my intention in writing these stories to spur specific policy changes. My focus is on the capacity for fiction to expand broader imaginaries of the present and its possible futures, and the ways in which engaging with climate change through a variety of narrative formats can allow for new perspectives on the possibilities for survival and change in the not-too-distant future.

What I found most remarkable in my reading is the extent to which climate fiction relies on a sense of things remaining the same, or of society regressing to an imagined state of nature or history of brutality. I found that these themes typically reduce to narratives about women's rights and bodily harm in a newly ancient world. This is without a doubt the most consistent trend in contemporary climate fiction. In David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*, a novel that characteristically spans a century of interwoven stories, a protagonist comments that the future

---

<sup>46</sup> For examples of science fiction that situate climate change as an element of worldbuilding in order to foreground technological or social developments, see *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson, as well as *The Water Knife* and *The Wind-Up Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi. For more allegorical science fiction about climate change, see Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*.

looks much like the past.<sup>47</sup> This makes sense within a narrative that describes power outages, devastating storms, and a resurgence of religious fundamentalism. It also makes sense in Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow*, where a Wharton graduate and successful businesswoman ponders her bodied risk during a kind of epidemic of masculinity when groups of men descend on a commune in Maine and battle for control.<sup>48</sup> In *Diary of an Interesting Year* by Helen Simpson, as in *The End We Start From* by Megan Hunter, pregnant women weigh their options—and male assailants and protectors—in the context of a drowning world.<sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> Finally, in *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins a woman relies on a male cult leader and a sometimes-boyfriend to determine the contours of her life.<sup>51</sup> The most agential choice she makes in the piece is when she decides to adopt her child. In Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, the protagonist mirrors the erratic changes to the local environment by navigating her confusion about family and marriage.<sup>52</sup>

Throughout these stories, women often describe feeling inadequate in light of their bodies and skill sets. They choose men to protect them, relying on boyfriends and strangers to provide safety and food. Their choices, when they do come, relate to childbearing, childcare, and men. They are also typically the victims of male violence and manipulation. By contrast, there's a certain honest simplicity to the men in these tales. They are, by and large, brutes, maladjusted savants, or manipulative assholes, but they are almost never victims. They rarely make choices based on the women around them, and when they do they tend to be framed as saviors. As in *The*

---

<sup>47</sup> David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks* (Random House, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Nathaniel Rich, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Picador, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Helen Simpson, "Diary of an Interesting Year," in *I'm With the Bears: Short Stories From a Damaged Planet*, ed. by Mark Martin (London: Verso, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Megan Hunter, *The End We Start From* (London: Grove Press, 2017).

<sup>51</sup> Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus* (Riverhead Books, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior* (Harper Perennial, 2012).



*End We Start From*, a female protagonist does make a bold choice and ends up rescuing a prior male partner—but only because she chooses to seek him out as a father figure to their child and a comfort in a world filled with meaningless violence. These stories reveal several fascinating things about the current climate imaginary. The first is that our visions of the future, as in *The Bone Clocks*, tend to rely on a conceptual framework of the past as a male-dominated environment where women are commodities, threats, or excess baggage. The second is that literary imaginings of the future tend to focus on themes of life and death—for which birth is often a convenient motif—by contrasting individual survival with civilizational collapse. When references to natural states of being or pre-civilization frameworks are made explicit, they are always vague and indeterminate. This is not intended as a dismissal of these works, because they deal with valuable themes relating to bodily harm, women’s rights, and environment change. Rather, the homogeneity of their thematic content is an indication of repetitive themes in the literary climate imaginary. Characters believe that the loss of civilization as a kind of social regulatory body and technological framework allows for the resurgence of behavioral traits inherent to human beings—namely, male domination and violence. Rarely do these works portray a world where, in light of catastrophic change, communities band together and work to maintain safety at a smaller scale. Civilization in these stories is a meta-phenomenon at the state and global level, and once it collapses there is nothing left except for the brutality of human nature. For these characters, and perhaps the authors, modern statecraft is thus the art of suppressing innate human tendencies. They rarely consider the possibility that helpful and safe communities are possible, let alone at all likely, in the context of a breakdown of large-scale technological institutions. The constancy of this theme can be taken as proof of an imaginative reliance on pre-existing narratives about human nature, masculinity, and the logic of civilization. These themes

act as a kind of crutch that perhaps salvage the reader—and dare I say the author—from delving into questions of real possibility in the context of a climate-changed world.

The danger of this kind of fiction is that it conveys a singular message: fix this, or it all ends. While there are arguments that the most extreme emissions scenarios might result in truly apocalyptic futures, such as in the case of the Methane Clathrate Gun Hypothesis,<sup>53</sup> it seems more likely that the twenty-first century will witness a variety of enormous changes to ecologies and built environments that, while impactful and potentially catastrophic, do not immediately result in the extinction of civilization. At the very least, if that is the ultimate result, then there are quite a few steps between now and then, and those steps are worthy of imaginative consideration. There are many alternatives to the American consumer ideal life of owning two cars, building a house, and maintaining a career in an office somewhere. The fact that the only alternative considered by this kind of fiction is one of destruction and anarchy is a very revealing tendency, one that reflects both an uncritical faith in the necessity of statecraft in its modern iteration and a perception of climate change as yet another disaster relegated to the ranks of nuclear warfare and viral disease. A disaster, in other words, that is most appropriately categorized as science fiction.

This work also tends to imagine that contemporary values, especially those of human rights and community entitlements, are also civilizational products rather than cultural values. If protections are nothing but legal infrastructures preventing the violent tendencies of humanity,

---

<sup>53</sup> The Methane Clathrate Gun Hypothesis refers to the hypothesis that global warming will result in a positive feedback loop through the release of methane from the seafloor. Methane is a greenhouse gas far more powerful than carbon dioxide, and if oceanic methane were released in vast quantities it could lead to runaway global warming. Comparisons have been made between the ultimate result of such a possibility and the runaway global warming theorized to have resulted in the current surface temperatures and atmospheric composition of Venus. See: James P. Kennett, Kevin G. Cannariato, Ingrid L. Hendy, Richard J. Behl, *Methane Hydrates in Quaternary Climate Change: The Clathrate Gun Hypothesis* (The American Geophysical Union, 2003).

then that is why they collapse once the long-standing alliance between governments and stable environments begins to dissolve. That is an important distinction, because it seems to imply that there is nothing cultural about human rights and the desire to protect others at all. In *The End We Start From*, for example, the efforts of the state to maintain refugee camps is always contrasted to the fully anarchic and individualistic “life on the road.” The duality between anarchy and government is thus also a contrast between human protection and pure chaos. However, it is worth considering that beliefs in human rights and equality are cultural and social as much as they are managerial. That is, if people maintain personal belief in these structures, then it is possible that they will remain despite a lack of governmental protection.

The world has ended more than once in a variety of places. States have collapsed, wars have occurred; entire societies have been wiped out. And yet in few cases has the end of one kind of regime, whether governmental or cultural, not been replaced by another. If there is any rule to history that I might dare to claim it is that people seem to prefer to exist in groups of some kind, with at least some consistent norms or structures. It is in fact difficult to imagine that the retreat of idealized capitalism will result in a pure anarchy where a gun-toting American public starts slaughtering their neighbors to acquire the last few remaining cans of Campbell's. It is more historically consistent to assume that people will form communities, that some kind of state will manage to perpetuate itself, and that humanity will not collapse into a state of nature in the absence of regular weather patterns. What is suggested is perhaps the furthest extreme of that conclusion: that amidst the chaos of a changing environmental regime and the uncertainty of a new world, people may instead prefer the comforting regularity of ultimate state control in the form of fascism, and that rather than clinging to individualistic consumerism people might instead be willing to sacrifice personal freedoms in favor of stability and normalcy. And yet, in

the majority of climate fiction, the loss of the state's control is considered to be an essential narrative component. It is clear that there is something preventing most literary imaginings of the future from perceiving the possibility that statecraft will remain even broadly similar to its current forms. Even the basic idea that community itself will persist seems a radical one. Part of this can be chalked up to the demands of narrative. Climate fiction is more readable, digestible, when it has the clear enemies and apocalyptic imaginaries we are familiar with. Climate apocalypse in fiction is also an easily politicized motif, as if some of the authors believe that showing the worst possibilities of climate change might spur more action in the present.

The setting of such stories also reveals a sense that most life is averse to a warming world. *The End We Start From*, *Gold Fame Citrus*, and "Diary of an Interesting Year," all take place in semi-desert environments. With the exception of J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, which takes place in an explosion of life and vitality in the context of accelerated evolution in light of climate change and ozone depletion, most of the speculative climate fiction I found explores arid and apocalyptic wastelands.<sup>54</sup> Notably, *The Drowned World* was written in 1962, far before the majority of climate fiction. While some examine flooding as an impetus to migrate, there is little work that is situated in semi-flooded contexts. Deserts occupy a particular place in the apocalyptic imaginary. They are often associated with nuclear catastrophe, from the motifs of testing and waste disposal in American deserts to the imagined post-war irradiated desert. The use of the desert as the typical climate-changed landscape indicates that climate change is associated on some level with the destruction of biological life in a similar vein to nuclear war. It is interesting to note how potentially unscientific this is. While widespread desertification is an obvious consequence of climate change, other areas will likely see increased

---

<sup>54</sup> J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (Berkley Books, 1962).

rainfall. Plant growth might even accelerate in the wake of increased carbon dioxide levels, and flooded landscapes could eventually produce more marshes, which are among the planet's most fertile ecosystems. Climate change is not a kind of irradiation in the way it is typically portrayed, which implies the destruction of the basic ability of survival, but a process that remakes environments into a variety of new spaces, including fertile ones. Even if biodiversity is reduced in rapidly shifting biomes, it is not obvious whether or not this will result in a decrease of net primary production in all ecosystems.

It seems, then, that climate fiction gets a few things wrong about climate change. It assumes that climate change is a negation of contemporary life, a reversal of both social and ecological norms. Climate change is imagined as facilitating the opposite extremes of survivability. In such works, it causes pure death—of humans, ecosystems, and social formations. What little life persists continues in forms that are not evolved or changed but regressed. Schneider-Mayerson's findings, that such works spur negative feelings and perhaps even fatalism, might relate to the extent to which climate fiction deals with a presume ultimate worst case scenario rather than the countless possibilities of life in remade environments. I began this project by planning a single novel about a group of climate refugees who migrate within the United States. The work was intended to focus on their sense of impending catastrophe alongside of their own suffering. The piece became associated with my own sense of foreboding, and it began encouraging an experience of fatalism. Looking back on my writing from that time, it seems to have a certain quality of lethargy, as though I was writing a story that had already been written. In many ways, I was. Existing formulations of literature and rights are well versed in the possibilities of recognizable social catastrophes. I wasn't making a particularly new contribution to the genre outside of the specifics of character and plot. As I abandoned that version of the

project and sought new stories, my plodding sense of tiredness was replaced with excitement. Envisioning the ways that climate change influences the world around me, and numerous possible future worlds, opened new realms of consideration. The process encouraged me to reflect on my own potential position in the context of a changing environment, and it caused me to navigate climate science data and predictions with an eye of curiosity more than fear. The creative element of this project was therefore an exercise in expanding my own horizons.

“How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned?”<sup>55</sup> Stories and imagined landscapes are interlaced with real policy changes and actions in the world, as regimes of anticipatory governance prove, and are also complicit in the kinds of inaction and fatalism that often defines modern environmental politics. The opposite of this lethargy, urgency, seems to produce apocalyptic imaginings—the “self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths” that compose much of climate fiction. The intervention I make here is to claim that climate change is a fruitful imaginative space, and that it can be used to think through shifting social dynamics and ecologies in the context of the remaking of the human and nonhuman world. I extend this argument by offering a collection of six stories that take place in climate-changed spaces. My hope is ultimately that by navigating the imagined terrain of future climate change through fiction, I can contribute to an alternative climate change imaginary, one that considers not merely the possibilities of destruction but also the opportunities for life in a remade world.

---

<sup>55</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore (PM Press, 2016): 39.



## Part II

*Man has constantly to sum up experience and go on discovering, inventing, creating and advancing...*

*Of all things in the world, people are the most precious.*

–Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.



## Assisted Living

Vyvian rolled down the hall, a small bundle of clothes in her lap. She worked the go pedal with her right foot, trying to accelerate her chair beyond factory limits. The beige walls moved past, interrupted by reproductions of famous paintings—*Water Lilies*, *The Scream*. She was attempting her twenty-third escape, and nobody was going to stop her. She was going home.

She passed the reception desk. The large bay windows in the waiting room revealed little about the outside world. Rain sluiced down the windowpanes and obscured anything that could've been seen through the dim light.

Snatches of conversation from the desk invaded her focus. "Tonight...that bad?"

"They're saying it'll be the worst in a century. Flooding, winds, god knows how many people will be killed in this. I'm out, that's for fucking sure."

"What about covering your shift?"

Vyvian reached the doors unnoticed and pressed the handicapped access button. Wind whipped the rain into her face as the door opened. She was confused—it wasn't meant to be like this—but her brain skipped over the inconsistency and she continued anyway, rolling beyond the slight bump of the doorway and out into the world beyond Simpler Times Assisted Living.

"What is—who is that? Shit, Vyvian!" There was a rushing of feet and words and then hands were gripping the back of her chair. All was lost. Before she was pulled back inside she caught a glimpse of a sky rioting in darkness, clouds shredding into shades of gray and purple.

"I think it's going to rain," she said.

Dinner. A game involving pictures and names had gone by, largely unnoticed by its participants. The common room was repurposed into a dining hall, and Marianne took her usual seat beside John, an ailing man with the memory, as she'd overheard a nurse say, of an English muffin.

"How are you?" she asked. His eyes travelled over his surroundings and registered her from an immense distance. He almost broke through into the present—Marianne thought he'd been closer than usual, certainly—but his pupils again took on a recessed, vague look and the moment was lost.

Marianne turned to her left. An unfamiliar woman with no hair and a vast neck was sinking into the depths of her chair. But eyes with real purpose looked up at her, and Marianne smiled.

"You're new," she said. "I haven't seen you before."

"You won't for long, either. I'll be dead in a day."

"Why do you say that?"

Someone came around and distributed the menus. The lights flickered a few times, and a low rumbling disturbed the air.

"It's mush, it's all mush," the woman said. Her voice went low and she strained toward Marianne as best as she could. "They put me here, you know. I didn't want to but they put me here. Stuffed me away like an old thing."

Marianne wasn't sure if she should tell the woman that she was an old thing. It wasn't clear if she was a "here," as a long-gone friend used to call the ones with a consistent access to reality, or a "there," the ones who lived in some other distant time, past or future.

“Mush,” the woman said when someone came around to ask her what she’d like. “I would like the mush please,” and she slid her plastic menu across the table. A bright voice said something meaningless in response. Marianne also ordered the mush, which was actually called green peas, and turned back to her new friend. She sensed promise.

“What is your name?”

“Gliese.”

“Marianne.”

“I would like to know your point, Marianne.”

“My point?”

“The endgame. What do you *do* here?”

Marianne thought on this as somebody presented her plate. She stirred everything around for a minute, the peas mingling with the carrots and potatoes. Her walker might be taken away next week. She’d been allowed to keep it so far, had been allowed to walk up and down the carpeted halls unassisted, but a chair was coming. The nurse had said so, and with the chair would come a pad that would go beneath her and if she got up an alarm would go off and someone would come and make her sit down again.

She was trying to think of a response to the question but the chair was all she could consider. When she was younger a number of criminals had been executed by what everyone called “the chair,” and here everyone used the same term.

“I think I would like to leave.” That was true. Her son would be coming to visit next week and she had a whole argument prepared, a kind of presentation, about why he should allow her to move in with him. He had a spare room and there was no reason why it wouldn’t all work out.

“Of course. Nobody wants to stay in jail. That’s how you know you’re not a mush-brain. The minute you’re okay with this place is the minute you’re done for. You’re not going to get out of the front door, though.”

Another rumbling came. Thunderstorms weren’t uncommon in the summertime but it was spring, and this thunder sounded sharper than usual, although Marianne considered the possibility that she didn’t really remember what it was supposed to sound like. The television in the far corner flickered, and the lights went off for a full three seconds. There weren’t any nurses in the dining room. Usually there were a few in case somebody choked but there weren’t. Marianne decided it was a sign, but she didn’t want to figure out what it meant yet. Mysteries were too rare for her to want to solve them all.

“I’m going to tell you a secret,” Gliese said, and presented Marianne with a closed fist. Slowly unfurling her fingers, she revealed a small plastic baggie and in it was a yellow pill.

“What is that?” Marianne asked, as she knew she was supposed to.

“It’s how we did some of the horses, back home. They’re hard to prick because sometimes they feel the needles and kick. Heard of a man who got his skull knocked in that way. Pop this pill in their water and they’re dead in an hour.”

“Is that for you?”

“It is. It’s my best friend. I can do it any time I want to.” She stared triumphantly around the room, as if she had defeated everyone—the other residents, the nurses, all the militaries of the world. They were hers because she could leave; she could take herself away when she wanted to. She had won.

“When?” Marianne asked. The lights flickered out again and a steady creak began filling the building, as though it were straining against something.

“Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow. We’ll see.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Marianne said, surprising herself.

“Don’t worry. I knew you wouldn’t.”

Randall was propped in a chair by the electric fireplace. He watched the fake flames move through their repetitive programming, the dull heat from the coils warming him gently. He was thinking about the old house. It had a long front porch and white windows that looked over the field. Somebody was going to have to fix the holes that were appearing in the upper part of the siding. It was most likely a woodpecker, rooting around in the cedar shingles for worms. He’d have to take a ladder up there tomorrow.

The nurse’s station was a few feet away, and people were speaking behind the little windows they used for distributing pills and information. Bits of the conversation leaked out.

“Management said we should keep somebody here. I can’t stay. I really can’t. The kids are at home. I have to leave by eight.”

“I do too. I need to cover the windows. I should just get out of town. We all should. We can let the cops take care of the folks here, or somebody. I’m not trained for this. I’m not paid for it.”

“Christ, we gotta call somebody in.”

The storm outside was worsening significantly. The lights flickered with regularity now, vanishing for a few seconds every minute or so. At that rate the power would be out overnight. Simpler Times Assisted Living had a few backup generators, but they were low on diesel.

A decision was made.

“Let’s just get them in bed. It’ll be easier once that’s done, alright? They’ll wake up tomorrow and they won’t know a thing.”

“No problem. They can’t fire us for this.”

Moments later a pair of large hands gripped the back of Randall’s chair and pushed him toward the little room that he shared with two other men. He couldn’t stand up on his own, couldn’t even lift his body from the chair, so they had to use a machine that looked like a meat hook to get him into bed. Straps went under him and he was lifted into the air and then he was lying back on a tiny bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking about his cedar shingles. The nurse attending him sighed, looking at her watch. The procedure had only taken a few minutes, but there were dozens of others.

Normally she’d leave him with a cheery “goodnight,” but today she left in silence. The light switched off, and the three men were alone with the rumbling of the storm and the milk of their own thoughts.

Marianne and Gliese were still talking at the table, their dishes long since cleared away. Marianne had established that her new friend was born in Kentucky and she’d had a husband, for a time. She had also learned that Gliese despised alcohol, thought that phones were responsible for most cancers, and that her favorite kind of tulip was a variegated trim, whatever that was.

Their conversation consisted mostly of Marianne asking questions and Gliese answering. Gliese didn’t seem worried about getting to know her interviewer, but Marianne occasionally added her own touches to the questions and responses.

“I took a bus down to Worcester, once. It was a dirty trip, there were all kinds of strange people on board,” Marianne said in response to Gliese’s complaint about public transportation.

“The buses are the worst of it,” Gliese responded. Everything she said had a kind of desperate urgency. She needed to impart as much information as she could before she euthanized herself with enough chemicals to down a full-grown horse.

The lights went off once again. This time the hum of returning electricity did not disturb the silence of the darkened room. It was dark and then it kept being dark.

“Generators should kick in any time now,” Marianne said.

“Generators send radiation waves at you. Goes right through the walls, into the brain. It’s the same with the phones and everything else. It’s all out to turn your brain into a mess.”

Marianne made a few sounds and waited for the lights to come back, but they didn’t. They lapsed into silence. Nurses were moving around, pushing the residents around in chairs. It was an hour before bedtime, but it seemed like everybody was going to bed early.

One of the head nurses shouted that the crane wouldn’t work anymore, that some of them could just keep sleeping in the chairs, and maybe they could up the dosage of Trazadone just for tonight.

Gliese seemed unconcerned with the weather. Her pill was still tightly clenched in her hand. She had a few others secreted away, but this was the one she’d decided to use.

“Why are you planning on dying?” Marianne asked.

Gliese straightened herself out a little, as if this were what she’d been waiting for.

“I would like to have my own power back. I’d like to show them what it means, now that they’ve stuck me away in here. It’s legal anyways. They can’t stop me, that’s the law.”

Marianne wasn’t sure if she should comment on the dubiousness of that claim.

“Assisted suicide?”

“Assisted? Unassisted. It’s my call.”

They waited for a time in the darkened room. The entire ground was covered in strips of glowing tape, and it was the same with the walls and most of the corners. It was like the building had changed into one giant line drawing, where just the shapes could be seen but nothing had been filled in yet. The sickly green glow-lights really didn't give off enough light to illuminate anything but them.

The nurse's movements and voices eventually faded to nothing. The front door closed a few more times, and then a buzzer sounded. Usually that noise indicated that the door had been locked, which happened every night at nine.

The clock hadn't been lit by tape but Marianne knew it was far earlier than that.

"We've been abandoned," Marianne said.

"We've already been abandoned. That's what all this is."

"No, by the nurses. I believe they've all gone home."

The two of them listened for further sounds, but there were none. A call bell rang, and then another.

"We should see the nurse's station, see if they're all gone for certain," Marianne continued. "I take a pill around now. I may become sick if I can't."

"You don't need pills," Gliese said, but they began to move anyway. Marianne rose from her chair and gripped her walker proudly, noticing that the handles had been dressed with glow-tape. The tennis balls impaled on the front legs were visible too.

Gliese's chair moved with ease as she spun her wheels. Hers was a manual chair, but her arms were still serviceable, and the two began the trek across the common hall.

The waxed floor gave off a few ripples of light here and there, and it was like they were crossing to another planet over a frozen sea. An image came to Marianne from something she



couldn't name: a ground of glass, or of mirrors, stretching on forever, meeting only clouds in the distance. A dream she had, or a movie she'd watched? She couldn't place it.

The two residents reached the threshold of the hallway and paused.

"This has never happened before," Marianne said. Her voice seemed too loud in the darkness.

"How long have you been in here?"

Marianne began walking again, and her tennis balls grated against the carpet as she stepped into the hall.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

The call bell rang again, and the two residents followed the sound to the nurse's station. The space was surprisingly navigable despite the darkness, and the glow-tape exposed any obstacles in their path.

The nurse's station was, indeed, abandoned. A small red light flickered behind the glass, and the call bell rang a few more times, but the room was otherwise empty. Marianne could no longer see Gliese's face in the darkness, but there was a small glint that she thought might be light reflected off of her pupil. She kept her eye on it as she looked for any other signs of life.

"It is strange, isn't it," Marianne said.

"Nothing to be done about it."

The wind outside grew more aggressive, and the entire building seemed to be straining against collapse. Wind lashed against the windows, sounding just like the carwash that had been located just east of the department store Marianne had gone to frequently in her thirties.

Marianne felt like there should be a rulebook for this sort of thing. Wasn't there someone who could be called? She knew the half-dozen workers didn't give a fig about them, but somebody must. It simply wasn't possible for nobody to care

"There has to be a solution. Somebody must be in charge," she said.

The building seemed to be shifting around them a little. The darkness itself was unstable, breaking with the sound of damage.

"This is a public institution, isn't it?"

"I believe so," Marianne said uncomfortably. She knew this was a public institution, and she was here because she had no money, along with everyone else involved in the operation.

"Then there's nobody to call."

"But there just must be a fix." Marianne's voice bordered on desperation for a moment, and she fought to restrain it. It wasn't that she was frightened, exactly—it was a very different feeling, more like a kind of incredible distance from everything she understood to be the case. She didn't care for it.

"I'm holding it in my hands. Might be enough for two."

"I don't mean that."

"But what else could you mean?"

"The building," Marianne said, feeling a little foolish as she gestured invisibly. "There's something wrong, I think we need to get help."

"You won't be able to. The door will be locked, no phones either. It's just us here."

"And all the rest. I'll wake them."

Gliese had no response to this. She remained in her chair as Marianne began the journey through the dark to the other rooms.

Marianne had been left in the dark before. At ten she'd become stuck in her father's potato cellar when the doors were stuck. She'd waited in the darkness without any light for an entire lifetime. Eventually he came and un-stuck the doors and she was free, free to move around in the light and breathe the winter air. For many years after, she dreamed about the cellar and refused to go into it alone. She couldn't remember much about those dreams except for the scent of soil and the certainty that somehow, by being in complete isolation, she'd broken through to another place that was populated by others. In the silence she could hear their voices and, while she couldn't understand them, their intent was clear: to take her with them.

They were speaking to her once again, but this time it was through the roaring of the wind outside of the walls and the creaking boards and metal that kept the storm from gutting the building completely. In the spaces between glow-tape and dim reflection she could even see them moving around, parasols and faces obsessing over her, whirling around just beyond definition.

She knocked on the first door she came across. Linda Parson's, she thought it was. The name of her roommate evaded her.

"Hello," she said. "Linda. Do you have a mobile phone?"

She opened the door and listened to the sound of the two roommates breathing. One of them was in need of a humidifier, judging by the desperate wheezing of each breath. The other was slower, more even. She thought about shouting or disturbing them somehow, but what would be the point?

Marianne continued down the hall to the next room. This, she knew, was Vyvian's room. Vyvian often sat next to her at dinner, for whatever reason, and spoke at length about the objects

around her. She always thought she was going home that day, or that she was simply out to dinner at a new spot downtown. For her, every moment was lived in the past. Nothing disturbed her.

“Vyvian!” She shouted. She wanted another person, even if that person was living half a century ago.

An indistinct groan greeted her. She waited, but there was no further response. She wanted to move further into the room but there was no glow tape on anything, and the only light inside was from the windows. Before there had been cars on the road, but now there was nothing except for the general illumination of the darkened world.

“Vyvyian, wake up,” she said again.

“Is it morning?” Vyvian responded, her voice thick with sleep.

“No. You have to get up. Are you in your chair?”

“He’s gone to the store,” she replied.

Marianne pondered this for a moment. “Get up,” she said again, with little hope.

“There’s a storm.”

“That’s right! There’s a big storm and we’re going to drown in it unless you get up. All of the nurses have left and we’re alone in here, so I need your mobile please.”

“Tell him to come visit when he returns.”

“Who?”

“It’s not often you see it big cloud like that. We’re very lucky, seeing a cloud like that. I never thought I’d see a cloud like that.”

Three weeks earlier Vyvian had vomited in the middle of a game of cards in the main room. She said after that she’d been worried about her phone; someone had stolen it. She’d

produced the phone from her purse later that night and remembered nothing of her accusation. If it was anywhere, it was in that bag.

Marianne took a step forward. True darkness this time—no edges revealed themselves to her. She had nothing but her arms, which she waved ahead of her. When she was a girl she'd gone into a set of caves and had found some pale crawfish in subterranean water. Her father had told her that things underground used touch to get around instead of sight, because everything needed light to see. He had wanted to eat the crawfish but Marianne scared them away by splashing in the water. It wasn't that she'd found them disgusting—it was that she didn't want to catch their blindness. Now, her arms functioned like their feelers, and she felt her edges dissipating, as though she was losing definition in the darkness and expanding like a balloon. She could be anything, even a wisp of smoke, and she admired the feeling until a jolt of pain ran up her left arm and she realized she'd slammed her hand against a wall. The sensation gave her form—there was a hand at the end of her arm, and there was a body at the end of that, and it all came together to make Marianne.

“I want you to tell me where you put your purse,” she said.

Vyvyan seemed to be thrashing around in response, based on the sudden rustling of blankets and skin. “They've stolen it.”

“Nobody has stolen anything, and I want your phone.”

The building moaned again and then Marianne felt something new: fear. They were alone and Gliese wasn't around to talk to, and she was planning on killing herself anyway. It was only Marianne, in this building, in this country, in the world. There was nothing to keep her from falling through the silence into the other side, whatever that might look like.

“Phone! Vyvian, where are you keeping your purse?”

“I can’t tell anyone.”

A new approach: “Vyvian I’m with the police, and we need to look at your purse to find the stolen phone.”

“My lord, thank you. Thank you now. It’s under the bed, that’s where I keep it. There was a program once that said to stick your purse underneath things, robbers never got down on their hands and knees, and I said to my son that...”

Marianne focused on the search with renewed inspiration. Feeling her way with nothing but ancient arms and skin, she made it to the corner of the bed, touching the softness of the coverlet. Now the trouble would truly begin. She could sit, and walk around well enough, but she couldn’t kneel or bend beyond ninety degrees. It was simply impossible, and she hadn’t had to pick something up from the floor since arriving at Simpler Times.

She considered several avenues of approach. By gripping her walker and slowly walking her legs out from underneath her she might be able to reach a point where she was almost lying down. Then she would just have to let go of her walker and land on the floor, a drop of a foot or so. It would hurt, and she might break something, but what else was there to do?

“Vyvian, how do you get your purse out from underneath the bed? Must be tough, a woman alone like you.”

“Oh it’s no trouble. I just swing an arm down, lift it right up.”

So it was close to the edge. The basic problem of bending her body enough to actually reach the purse remained unsolved. She felt around with one of her feet, traversing the length of the bed and dragging her leg underneath, until she encountered slight resistance. As the wind roared and the building seemed to reach a frenzy of creaking not unlike a kind of crazed symphony, she snagged the purse handle with her foot and hauled it out from beneath. She

thought she might even have her foot through the strap entirely, which meant she could drag it down the hallway back to Gliese with ease, if not some embarrassment.

“Thank you Vyvian,” she said as she departed, her leg with the purse attached like a lame limb.

It was some distance up the hallway, but before she came close to the nurse’s station she could tell something had changed. There was a deep chill and the air was moving. There were new sounds—the outdoor rumblings and washings had become more immediate, and there was a noise like glass scattering across the floor. Marianne picked up her pace and fought to drag the purse along with her, but it kept catching on the carpet. She remembered belatedly that it was some ugly beaded thing, a real monstrosity, and it was probably digging into the ground with every step.

“Fuck,” she said to the darkness. The people on the other side seemed to go into a frenzy, jumping and whirling along with the wind and the rain. “Oh shut up,” she added.

She reached the corner where the Nurse’s station had been. It was illuminated in a new way, and she could feel moisture in the air—little droplets driven before an immense force of wind. It was almost impossible to walk further, but she peered around the corner. The wind blasted back her cheeks and lips and she felt certain that her face would slide off.

The window was broken and the card table was on its side, which she could see through an oddly purple light. The wind and rain were pouring through the window, all of it an impossible roar, and through it Gliese was cackling—a sharp, dry sound. She gave a few whoops, and seemed to be singing, all at the same time.

“Gliese!” Marianne struggled to compete with the storm.

“Marianne! Come out here, it’s just marvelous,” Gliese screamed.

“Come here. Please!” Her voice almost broke with the tragedy of it all. Gliese was silent for a moment and then she came—even in a chair, she had to battle with the force of the wind that wanted to drag her into the outside world. It took her longer than it should have, because even she felt her limbs slowing in response to the cold, but soon enough she rolled past the corner and the two of them were in the relative safety of the hall.

“It’s beautiful,” Gliese said. She was dripping and sparkling with water and glass, and her bald head was its own source of light. “You really ought to join me.”

“I found a phone,” Marianne said, electing to ignore her request, “but I’m not sure which number to call. Do you think 9-1-1 would be right? I don’t want to bother the police.”

“The cops are lazier than the rest of us. Call em’ up, but don’t expect anything.”

“There’s another thing.” Marianne paused in her embarrassment. “I can’t see the numbers. I don’t know where they are.”

“Ah,” Gliese said. “And so you would like my help.”

For a moment their friendship seemed to disappear, being replaced with something far more animal. Gliese had a power that Marianne did not, and the possibility that she would withhold it was a real one, if small. Would it be a debate? Or a fight? Marianne was no longer certain, what with the wind and the rain. The storm had brought with it a primal choice.

“Certainly,” she said. “Not a problem. Give it here.”

Marianne handed her the phone and Gliese threw it, with remarkable strength, back into the room with the nurse’s station. By the faint crash it was likely that it had gone straight through the nurse’s window, or perhaps had disintegrated against the wall.

“Gliese, you fat fuck!”



“Aha! She lives yet.”

Marianne was filled with a kind of insane rage. She thought it possible that she might elongate, grow into some kind of creature beyond control. She would burn more brightly than a star, and Simpler Times would be remade into ash. This was all possible.

“Just enjoy the party, will you? There’s nothing you can do. Don’t you get it?”

Marianne found that she could not speak, could not quite locate herself—where she began, where she ended. The wind was louder, and the rain was reaching past the wet wallboard and filling her hair. At some point she had become soaking wet.

“Come with me,” Gliese screamed. “Come into the room and I’ll show you what I’m talking about.” She began rolling back out from behind the corner and the storm took her by force, whipping her sopping clothes and driving pellets of rain and ice into her eyes. She screeched, she laughed, she became every version of insanity that Marianne could picture, because at some point in this the world had become new.

Marianne did not quite dare to step into the full force, but she looked around the corner and watched. The wind and rain continued to pour into the room, where it soaked into the carpet and loosed decades of forgotten skin cells and dirt. Gliese fell silent, and Marianne opened her mouth to make words but stopped herself. This was no place for words. The storm itself was vast and stupid, ignorant of anything Marianne could add, unaware of her. The storm was what had come before, and what might come after, in countless numbers and variations. Its sounds and forces would remake anything it touched, and in it the dead could walk, the dying could live, and living could die.

## On The Bus

The bus pauses at a corner. Six people leave and three more get on. The ones leaving are wearing thin jackets, with overcoats clutched in their arms. Those that are already acquaintances share a brief laugh; those that are strangers remain silent.

May notices all of this from her window seat, four rows down from the driver. She's been watching the behavior of the bus-takers for multiple hours now, and she's beginning to feel conspicuous. The new riders know nothing about her—they haven't noticed her presence for half the day, nor do they realize that the small eyes above her scarf (pulled up to the nose) have been tracing them.

They file in and take their seats. They're heavily bundled and their skin is brightly colored from the outside air. Snow particles rapidly melt when exposed to the heating vents above the seats, contributing to the gravelly wetness of the floor.

The bus starts again and May leans back, pressing her face against the window. The conversations of strangers surround her.

“Robbie's is shut tight, they went home this morning. Don't blame them at all, but I could kill for one of their, oh what do you call it, it's got the cheese and that brown bread—”

“The kids are being pulled out of school. Can you believe it? They called us up and I had to leave work. I hardly think the assholes noticed, they're too busy trying to get themselves home.”

A man sitting in the row of seats across from May has been looking at her. She notices and her body goes rigid, the muscles in her back tightening and her arms drawing close to her

sides, a fortress preparing for war. This happens sometimes: the men watch and approach. It hasn't been that bad today, but she knows it doesn't matter if she's been lucky so far. Someone always says something.

He slides out of his own seat and sits down next to her in one casual motion.

"It's some weather we're having," he says. She doesn't look at him but she can tell he's a large man with the beginnings of a beard. His proximity sends her into a state of lockdown, her limbs drawing even closer and her body pushing hard against the window.

"Don't worry, I'm not a creep," he continues. "I don't think I'm crazy, either. I just wanna talk to somebody, and there's nobody else sitting alone."

The bus pauses at a stoplight and May involuntarily shifts forward in her seat, uprooting the small sense of ownership she's managed to carve out. If she continues to be silent he might decide she isn't worth his time and then leave. He might also grow irate. Perhaps if he believes her to be deaf he won't do anything at all, but that would require the power of reason. May is unsure which category of crazy he falls into.

"It'll keep dropping tonight, way below zero. Nothing like this has ever happened before, that's what they say. Weather's gone mad. This summer it'll be a heatwave, mark my words. People will cook in their own homes."

The upholstery is a thin plastic made to look like leather. It's slippery and un-absorbent, and May's right hand finds little purchase on it. She's wet from a combination of her own sweat and the constant shower of snow and ice from the riders as they come through the doors.

The bus pauses again. Three people exit and four people get on. The air that blows down the walkway is frigid, and May pulls herself together even more tightly. She hopes that the man

will move on to easier prey—maybe the new blonde girl who just walked by. The man doesn't seem interested.

“I like that you don't say much. Makes it easy to talk to you.”

They're on a long stretch of road beneath towering buildings that vanish into the dusky sky. Clouds of snow swirl beneath the streetlamps, but nobody is looking up. The temperature will drop below negative twenty-five tonight. That's what the radio has been broadcasting to the riders, but few have been listening except for May. Eighteen people will freeze to death before the following morning.

“My stop is coming soon anyways. I live in an apartment, central heating and all. Got two kids. Kids are alright, you know? They do alright.”

When May wants to disappear she tries to reach a different place, one that she draws from her memory. It's usually a patch of earth covered in pine needles. There are trees all around, and the dirt is dry. It smells of warm straw baked under an August sun, and she can rest in the shade of a fern. This was a real place, once. It seems to protect her from her surroundings.

In the seat in front of them, two immense women are talking about the weather.

“It's like an ice age. I can't live through this. Do you think this'll be normal now?”

The other considers this before responding. “No, there's no way that's the truth. It's gonna get warmer all over, not colder. Some kinda fluke this is, that's what I think.”

Their conversation makes it difficult for May to focus on her forest. The man has been silent for several seconds, and this makes her even more nervous somehow.

“My son doesn't like to leave the house much,” he says. “Not at all, really. He used to, but when he turned fifteen something just switched.” He snaps his fingers. “Like that. He liked to go into the parks and see friends before all that. He had friends before all that.”

May is still unable to discern what the man wants. He is not looking at her in the way that men do sometimes. He seems to barely be conscious of her at all. This is not what usually happens.

The bus is on a bridge above a river. May has always loved bridges. The engineering that must go into these constructions is a marvel. She thinks that being on a bridge is like being strung across infinity because she can feel the space above and below her.

The surface of the water below is frozen in great crackling sheets, and the lightly falling snow obscures most of the city around them.

“They say kids like video games. He has a few of those and he used to shoot at the characters all day. I took them all away, every last one, and threw them in the trash. Must’ve been hundreds of dollars in those games. You ever hear your own kid scream? You know what it’s like to hear the sound of them hating you in their voice?”

May works hard to ignore him. Even her problems are preferable, easier to consider. She grips the coins in her pocket. She can count them just by touch: nine quarters. No more, no less. She has a choice. The subway costs a dollar fifty, and she can ride it around until the early morning hours. At that point she can find a public bathroom and stand on a toilet until the platforms are locked up.

She can also keep riding the bus. Eventually it will come to an end, but no one seems to want to kick her off. She no longer believes that anyone will confront her for simply riding around all day. The drivers don’t seem to notice anything. She is new to this, and she can’t stop kicking herself for the fares she wasted by switching around in the morning.

“And now he just won’t leave the house at all. Stays in his room. Shades are drawn, he doesn’t even go into the rest of the apartment. It’s been a long time now.”

May decides that the man is probably telling the truth. He doesn't appear to want much from her, but she doesn't trust him. She resolves to remain silent, to pretend to be deaf or dumb. It will be easier that way.

The radio: "The deep freeze is really unprecedented. Freezing to death is a real risk in these conditions, so stay indoors, turn up the heat, and stay under covers. It's a great weekend to stay indoors with the family and find some fun activities or movies to watch. In fact, I've brought on local blogger Diane Welch to talk about the upside of all this—snow day fun!"

The bus comes to a stop again. The pattern of arrivals and departures has become a source of anxiety because it reminds May that she must eventually make a choice. The subway isn't really a viable option, and she knows this. The public bathroom trick is just something she saw in a movie once. She doesn't even know if there are bathrooms underground.

"I'm going home right now. Just like every day, and I still don't know what to say to him. He lives in that little room."

May is thinking about the forest again, about the warm spot where she is comfortable inside of her mind. It's difficult to hold the images in her head. The more she tries the more they break apart. The thoughts that she would like to avoid fill the black spaces left behind. She has to look at it sideways, that's the trick. The ferns, the trees, the dirt, all of it sideways, otherwise it gets scared off.

Outside of her window, the snow is falling more densely. The faces and buildings beyond are really just shadows, suggestions of mass.

"I think if the summer gets too warm he might come out. I'm not putting in the air conditioner this year. Could be a hundred degrees, could be more. He'll be forced to. Isn't that a sick thing for a father to say? Bake your own child out of his room?"

May doesn't want to think about the man or his son. She doesn't want to let any of the images he's making—the video games, the stuffy room—work their way into her head.

The radio is saying that everyone should stay indoors in this weather, that prolonged exposure is dangerous. The storm requires everyone to have a place to go. This, May is sure, is what defines it. It is a period of time in which people go to ground.

“I even got rid of his internet once. Thought that might really do the trick. You know what he did? He threatened to kill himself. To throw himself right out the window. I'd rather have a live kid stuck in his room than a dead kid nowhere at all. Or that's what I tell people.”

May wants to tell him to leave the boy alone. It seems to her like people move on strings, or rubber bands, that lead back to a box somewhere. No matter how far they go, they can always be pulled back in. There is an invisible web, drawing people toward the warmth and safety of walls. She thinks that no one can blame someone for wanting to stay inside.

“But the truth is, and here's the real story, that it isn't true. I wouldn't rather have a kid stuck in his room anymore. Disgusting thing to admit. I'm an evil father, an awful man. I would prefer him to jump out of his window then spend another second in that rank little room.”

The bus stops at a corner. May can't see much from the windows anymore, because the snowflakes have begun attaching to the glass. It is easy to imagine that there is nothing outside of the windows at all, that the whole world has been reduced to the inside of the bus.

The bus doesn't move. The riders are moving more slowly, taking their time gathering their things. This is of concern to May. This stop is different.

The man stands up without saying another word and shuffles toward the exit. Everyone on the bus is standing now, and May copies them. It is time to leave; the trip has come to an end. When she exits, she finds that the cold isn't so bad. Or so she tells herself. If this were a normal

night, she'd be curled up on the couch, with familiar voices nearby and a heating pad under her right shoulder. But this was not a normal night. Decisions had been made, and she was prepared to stand by them.

She watches the clouds of snow curl past the tall buildings, gray and simple. The snow will fall all night and cover countless people and homes, but the real killer is the cold. The estimates have been increased to negative thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit, enough to bring on fatal hypothermia within thirty minutes of exposure.

Standing by the bus stop, she waits.



## The Water Witch

The frogs die easy. They've got thick little skulls but if you hit them just right, with a stick or a hand, they stop moving fast enough. Then they go in an old plastic bag, the kind they don't make anymore, and you've got one more to carry home.

I've got eleven. That's my age, eleven, and I think each frog means a year of my life. I'm on the twelfth now. It's a fat one, shining in the sun with the little bumps on its back sticking out. I almost missed it, sunk halfway down in the mud, but James showed me how to see the lines on their backs and the way you can find their white underbelly poking out sometimes. The eyes are golden and orange.

I wait with the stick in my hand. I'm close by, a couple of steps away, and it isn't looking at me. The swamp is thick and busy today, like a city with animals each going their own way. They've all got jobs to do and houses to run, and I'm like a big monster come to smash through all of it and eat them. They're too dumb to know it, too slow. If I was one of them I would've moved away somewhere else by now, without the herons and me trying to smash and poke holes in them, but they don't know any better. Probably they don't even notice when they die.

I hit it hard. It jerks around really fast for a few seconds but the legs can't kick anymore, and I hit it again. It floats a little on its side now, in all the muck it stirred up. The eyes are still shining and golden but something is missing, and I'm not sure what. The big thwack I made scared off the birds and everybody is waiting, trying to figure out if I'll come after them too.

I stand up straight again, my boots filling up with the mud-water because I forgot to check how deep I was. Funny how warm it is, like a bath someone forgot about. I'll have to wash up in the river now.

There's a crashing in the woods right nearby. I freeze. It could be a cougar. They're supposed to all be dead but James says out here, things go by unnoticed and the government has better things to do than be keeping an eye on the cougars or us, for that matter.

"Mix! Mixie what are you doing in this mess." I know that voice. It's Eli. I think I'd take the cougar. I turn and look and he's coming down the bank, all red hair and green eyes with skin the same sick-white as the underside of the frogs.

"What's it to you," I say, and I make myself look like I've got business here, because I do and I need him gone. He's come and ruined it, he's made this woods into a place for him and I'm not a hunter or a water witch anymore I'm just Mix, called that because I'm mixed up, or because I mix words together. Nobody remembers exactly why I'm Mix but I don't like it in any case.

"What's wrong with a question? That's a lot of frogs," he says, looking down at my bag once he's right next to the water.

"And I need more, so you can get." Wait a minute. "Or you can help me."

He squints up his face and frowns in a way that shows off his big crooked teeth. "I don't want to kill frogs. They catch the mosquitoes. You want Malaria like my cousin? Or Zika?"

"Who says they catch mosquitoes?"

"Everybody. Everybody knows that," he says, kicking at the mud with his shoes.

"I don't think so. They eat tadpoles."

"You kidding? They give birth to tadpoles. That's how they get made, they turn into frogs."

"No they don't. They have little frog babies."

"You ever see the tadpoles with legs? Or the frogs with tails?"

“Well that’s just how they’re born.”

He’s shaking his head. “Man, Mix, you got it all confused. You got it all mixed up. Just like always.”

I feel my anger rising and I try to fight it because I know it’ll be no good, like the time I hit Sammie and then James hit me to teach me what’s right. I still got the stick in my hand and it’s just itching to slam him over the head, put him down in the mud like the frogs, but that won’t solve anything. But I might just do it anyway.

“I’ll curse you. I’ll put a curse on you and the water will come right up on the land and drown you. They won’t even know what happened,” the words are coming low and dangerous and I can feel real power in me now.

“The hell you talking about, Mix?”

“I’m a water witch. You hear about those? They control the water, they can tell it what to do and if you don’t leave me alone I’ll send it right up your nose and kill you.”

His mouth hangs open, and he starts to laugh, with a soft and stupid look on his face that I do want to drown.

“Alright witch, whatever you say. You’re too old for that shit, you know it?”

“You don’t know the first thing about me, do you.”

“Yeah? I know enough to know you’re lying.”

I shake my head. The whole swamp is listening, all the rotted out logs and branches and the frogs. They should know this about me too.

“You’ll see it,” I say and I turn back toward the water like I’ve got another frog to catch.

“You just wait.”

“Whatever you say, Mix. I got better stuff to do than help you catch these slimy frogs anyway.”

He leaves, walking away back up the bank and into the trees like nothing happened at all. I’ll lay a curse on him all right. I’ll tell the water to swallow him up along with his whole stupid family in that wrecked house of his. I could let it go this time. He would count himself real damn lucky if I do. But then how would he ever learn?

The swamp gets back to normal fast, the birds flying back and forth and fish slapping through the water. The brush all around is like a big cloud blocking out the sun, and it’s starting to set anyway, the sky getting pink and orange. I probably have enough frogs for James,

“I won’t curse him,” I say to the swamp, in case it’s listening. “I got more respect for you than that.”

It’s not far to get home. I just walk through the sticks until I see my messed up white walls and the black roof. We live closer to the swamp than anyone else, just my brother James and I, because it’s quiet and easy and nobody even knows we’re here. If anybody outside the town knew it was just us they’d probably make a problem out of it. That’s what James says.

He’s in the backyard, sitting on one of the old mossy armchairs that used to be inside. There’s a can of the stuff he won’t let me try in his hand, and he doesn’t even look in my direction until I come right up and dump the bag at his feet. He takes it, all thick with mud and slime, and peeks inside.

“That’ll do it,” he says, and nods at me in a way that makes me feel like I did pretty good.

“You’ll fix it up?”

“I’ll fix it up. Not till later though.”

“Might go down the road,” I say.

“Sure.”

I dump out my boots and put my stick back up against the house. The stars are coming out soon enough, and that means animals sneaking around and looking for food. I always want to be out when that happens, just because everything is like a big secret and sometimes you can see fireflies in the trees before they get eaten.

The road goes down to the shore, the real shore with open water instead of just the big saltwater swamp. It's a long walk and my boots start feeling heavy as soon as I'm halfway there. The swamp has arms that reach right across the road, lines of muck and branches that make it harder to walk on than the roads in town. Used to be there was all kinds of big houses right near the water, and people kept their boats tied up. But now pieces of boats are all in the trees, and the big houses aren't much except for a few walls and sticks that animals hide in. James says that the rich folks used to even live down here but I don't see why, since it's all halfway drowned, but he says it wasn't always like that.

Now the road is just for the people from the town who want to risk getting poisoned by the shellfish or don't know any better, and there aren't many of those so usually it's all for me.

My feet scuff and make plenty of noise, but I'm not worried about much. The herons and cats and everything else are just looking for frogs and fish. Mosquitoes are less bad here on account of the salt, too, so there's nothing that's trying to eat me. I've got business, same as them, same as everybody. We're all better off if we pay each other no attention.

Voices are coming out of the swamp on the left side, people talking and shouting. I keep walking, but I'm slow now, trying to figure out what they're saying. Could be the type of people who just pass through looking for somewhere better, and they don't usually bother anyone as far as I know but nobody in the town likes them. They aren't the real problem though. Every now

and then James and whoever else will talk about disappearances, people being taken away into something called the government program. When they notice me listening they usually shut right up about it, but our house is too small and I can hear as much as I like.

I start to see what's going on through the trees and my anger comes right back up because it's Eli again. Nobody else has hair like that, and I can see the orange on top of a big pale head. And with him is Annalise, who I don't talk to anymore. Behind them are Jackson and Jerem, the two twins. I keep my head down. They're standing next to a messed up house, halfway sunk into the ground. There's a light flickering nearby, and it looks like they've lit something on fire, a fencepost or a tree trunk.

If I don't look at them they might not see me. That's how it works with the animals, especially cats. You walk diagonal to them, cross in front of them, but as long as you keep your eyes away they don't even know you're there.

"Is that...hey, that's Mix!" Shit.

"I'm going somewhere," I say and I don't stop walking.

"Come here first," Eli says.

"Come on down, we got a fire going," Annalise says.

I stop but only because I'm out of excuses.

"You can get where you're going in a few minutes. We just wanna ask you about something," It's Jerem this time, his voice scratchy and thin.

There isn't much I can do except walk over to the road bank and step over into the grass and mud. Right away my boots are stuck, and I have to fight to look like I'm pulling them out easily because everybody's watching. They're standing in a circle right next to the house, and behind them is a big black hole in the wall like a wound.

“I told you she’d come,” Eli is saying to Jerem, and this makes me stop because there’s nothing I hate more than proving other people right. But I’m already there, looking up at their faces because they’re taller than I am.

“What are you burning?” I ask. The smell of smoke is raw and ugly, mixing with the sharpness that the swamp gives off whenever somebody breaks its skin.

“Old junk. Stuff nobody needs. It’s all forgotten anyways,” Jerem says. I don’t know much about him, but twins seem unnatural, like mistakes in the order of things, so I like them.

“Go on, ask her,” Annalise says. Everybody waits.

“Ask me what?”

“We were talking,” Eli says, “about what you told me earlier. That you’re a witch of some kind.”

“And so what?”

“We wanna see it,” Jerem says.

“Prove it,” Eli adds.

I’m quiet for a minute and the swamp starts to speak instead. Overhead some kind of bird is calling, and the water is making a spurt sound as I shift around. The sky is darker now, shot through with dirty purple. I could show them, I could make the water move around me and swallow up everything, even the town and my house. I could wipe it all clean.

“Maybe I will,” I say. “But not here. Water’s too tired here, too sluggish. It won’t lift its head for nobody, not even me.”

“Well then where else are we gonna go? Told you she couldn’t do it,” Annalise says, with a smile on her face like she’s won it all.

“I’ll do it,” I say. “But we gotta be at the ocean. Water’s happier there.”

“We walking all the way down there?” Eli says.

“Yup. I don’t make the rules.”

“Give us a minute,” he says, and he turns around and disappears into the big hole in the wall. I can’t see anything in there, not even his skin and hair. Truth is he’s the only one of the group I really know, and now that he’s gone I feel more alone than before. Jerem, Jackson, and Annalise are all looking at me like I’m about to make a big joke. Or maybe I am the joke.

“What are you doing out here, anyway?” I ask.

“We’re looking for old stuff. What is a water witch?”

“It’s somebody who the water listens to.”

“Like a dowser? I’ve heard of those. They hold sticks in their hands and wherever it points there’s a spring. You gonna tell us where to drink?” Jerem asks.

“Out somewhere without any water left maybe I would. Not here though. There’s too much of it. Dowsing won’t work.”

“How do you know?”

“I know the water listens to me. It always has.”

Eli comes out of the house and he’s carrying a big net, the fancy kind with the webbing stuck around a metal loop.

“If we’re going down there we better get something else out of it,” he says.

“You’ll get poisoned no matter what.”

“The jellies are safe, that’s what they’re saying.”

If the jellies really are okay, then I’m gonna want some too. They wash up sometimes in big mats, all clear and gross looking, but if you put them in a pan they come out white and taste okay enough.



We all climb up and out on the road. The sun is all the way down now, and there's just a little bit of light down at by the water. A few clouds are in the sky too, all dark and lit from behind.

We walk and a few of them are talking but I can tell that everybody's excited to see what happens next. It's not every day in the swamps that somebody promises to show off a witch's power. Mostly all that happens is when the planes drop these little pamphlets in town. They say LEAVE FOR HIGHER GROUND and RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMS and they talk about how the water will come up and take us away any day now. They used to send real people a few years back but then somebody took out a shotgun and something bad happened, I don't know what, and now they just fly around in the sky and drop papers in the air that tell us what to do. We use them as compost, mostly.

By the time we get down to the beach it's true night, with a few stars starting to show up. The big houses are just a few sticks in the water, and big concrete walls make it so there's not really a beach at all, just rocks and slabs and things you don't want to step on. The road just keeps going right out into the ocean, and we walk out until our feet and legs are covered. The waves aren't big, just little ripples really, and there's no wind. It's just warm air and water right out to where the last few dribbles of sun are coming up over the surface.

"Show us what you got," Eli says. "Didn't you tell me you'd send it up my nose earlier?"

Annalise laughs at that, but I don't pay her any attention. I'm in control now.

"It takes a little while. I tell it to do something and then it does it, but not right away. We just have to wait." I try to ignore how Annalise's eyes just rolled up into her head.

"Sure thing, Mix," Eli says. "Meantime let's get fishing." He takes out the net and begins dragging it through the water in big swoops. Jerem and Jackson go off to the side and start

pulling up rocks, looking for the limpets and crabs and whatever else that might be underneath. Annalise just sort of swishes her foot around and looks at the sky. Nobody seems too worried about me anymore. There's more interesting stuff in the ocean, especially when the water is warm.

I sit down in the water to wait. It feels real nice all the way up to my neck, especially since I'm still covered in frog smell and slime. I lean forward and push off the ground until I'm floating. My legs are drifting somewhere behind me and I think I could be dead or in heaven or wherever witches go.

"You watch out for those jellies," Eli says.

"They don't sting, and you haven't caught any yet either," I reply. I keep pushing right through the little waves, swimming right toward that haze of light shining right past the edge of the sky. I keep going until I'm even past the road.

"She's doing her witchcraft," Annalise says with a mean sound in her voice. She says it quiet but she doesn't know how the water carries voices to me.

I feel underneath me with my legs but there's nothing down there at all now. Just empty space, going all the way down to the core of the earth. The water and me are the same thing, all mixed together, and there's no reason at all why it won't do what I tell it to.

"Go and show them," I say with my mouth right under the surface, so it all comes up as bubbles. "You show them what we are."

It'll be dark soon, just like the first night when the water did what I told it to and I learned I was a water witch. That was one of the big storms that came and wrecked the last of the nice houses. I don't think I remember much before then anyways. The water came right up and poured through our house until it was all black and wet. There was somebody else, James says it

was our mom, who broke a hole through the roof and stuffed us both out into the storm. But I don't remember much of that, or what she was doing. I just know I sat up there with James for a million years with the wind and the water and the cold, and the whole time I kept telling the water to take anybody it wanted except for me.

I know I should've asked it to help other people too, to leave behind our mom or whoever else, but I just didn't think of it. I guess that makes it my fault, in a way.

"You remember now," I say into the water, "you don't forget."

Everybody's faces are dark and orange now when I look back at them. The water is just like my arms and legs, all a part of me, and it'll take some time but it'll do what I tell it. It's as true as anything. I keep floating there for I don't know how long, watching the trees and the big concrete walls and feeling myself mix into the water like mud.

"Hey, look!" It's Eli, pointing at something from the shore. He's further away than I thought. I turn, and there's a whole mass of lights far out on the horizon now. They're not stars or the moon or anything like that but human lights, made up in regular lines.

I swim back up the road until my feet touch the ground and I'm standing again, right next to Annalise.

"I wonder who's on that thing," she says, and there's no meanness in her voice now, only a soft kind of wanting.

"It's huge," Eli says.

It is. Even though it's right on the edge of the world, it looks like almost a whole city in the shape of a ship. It moves slow and easy right across the horizon, blotting out the stars on the other side and replacing them with windows. It's no container ship, because I've seen those and

they've only got lines on the tail end. This has people on it, about a million people, and none of them can us but we can see them.

"I told the water to show you," I'm saying, and everyone is looking at me again. "To show you what I'm made of. That's it, I guess."

"It's just a ship," Jerem says. "It's nothing special."

"You believe what you want," I say. "I know what I am."

We watch until it disappears again, fading out over the edge until we can only see the top lights. Even those go away, and then it's just the black waves and jellies we haven't found yet. But for the first time I'm feeling something I've never felt before about this place, and I think it's because I'm standing on this road that was a real working road just ten years ago according to James, and because that ship is still shining and moving and floating over everything that's been lost to the sea. It's the feeling that none of this will last, because maybe next year we really will move away or the water will come up and have another go at me.

"Let's just go," Eli says after a while. "I need supper."

They all slosh out of the water and stomp up past the beach. Nobody turns around and asks me to come but that's okay, because I don't need to go anywhere. I just stay sitting down on the road, watching the spot where the last lights winked out, thinking about how heavy all of the water in the ocean must be.

## The Drowned Coast

A creature emerged from the sea. It had a black body and fins instead of arms. Emma couldn't figure out what its face looked like, if it had a face at all beneath the mask and goggles wrapped around its skull. The rolling surf kept knocking it down as it struggled to walk toward the shore, the waves breaking into curls of white foam and dashing over its head.

Emma wondered if she should run. She was alone on the beach except for a woman and a dog she'd seen earlier. The woman had not said hi to her—she'd stared past Emma's face as though she wasn't there at all. The dog was not under the same spell as its master and it had pulled toward her, but the woman kept on walking.

The creature seemed to be taking the form of a human being as it managed to stand upright and resist the waves. A strange human it was—a container hung from its back, and tubes dangled from its face. It was possible that they were a scrap diver of some kind, searching for materials to sell after the storm surge. Maybe they were even working on commission, looking for some family's treasure. She had heard of such things on the news.

The creature that was now man waved at Emma. That was good—she was beginning to think she was a spirit, visible only to the dogs of the earth. She waved back. He walked up the beach, removing pieces of equipment and tubes, until his bald head was naked under the overcast sky.

“Not many others out here these days,” he said.

“I saw a woman with a dog.”

He studied her before sitting on the sand a few feet away.

“The water’s cold. You from around here?”

“I used to be.”

“I’m Mark. I used to be from just up the road a ways, but now I just live in a Motel 6. My old house is out there somewhere.” He gestured toward the ocean, and Emma followed his hand as it swept across the horizon. The clouds were beginning to break up, and a few streaks of gray ocean sparkled.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It was just a house.”

The beach was littered with pieces of the insides of things—bent plastic, pipes, wood. Emma dug through the sand with her fingers until she found a piece of metal to fiddle with. She needed these objects when she was nervous.

“I didn’t find much of anything today,” he continued. “There were more cars than usual, a lot of clothing and plastic. The deep sea doesn’t want to eat all of this. Sometimes it rolls further out in the tide but it always comes right back up. The current won’t take it all away.”

“Are you looking for something?”

“I’m trying to find something very important to me. I haven’t found it yet, but I still come out here as much as I can. That’s what plenty of folks are doing, just digging around in the wreckage. I just happen to be looking in the sea.”

“There wasn’t much taken from my house.” The piece of metal dug into her hand. “It was just ruined from all the water.”

“Water doesn’t care much for our things.”

“No,” she said, “I guess it doesn’t.”

He rummaged in a small pouch that dangled from his waist until he produced a clear ball with something in the center. He held it up and it gleamed in the light.

“A paperweight?”

“There’s a rose right in the middle, see? Someone managed to preserve a flower in molten glass without burning it. It’s been dead for years, probably, but it looks like new. Kind of a miracle, isn’t it? I’m looking for something a little like this.”

“I hope you find it.” Emma wasn’t sure what she was meant to say, or how much. “It must be beautiful underwater.”

“You should try it. The diving. Renting equipment is cheap, and they don’t ask for licenses anymore. If you’re here on Saturday morning, at ten, I’ll show you how it goes.”

“But why?”

“It’s better down there.” He stood up and began gathering his tubes. “See you, maybe,” he said as he walked away.

The whole procedure had taken five minutes at most. It was possible that it had been one of the extended daydreams she often had, the kind that got her into trouble at work and in school. But she could still see him walking toward the parking lot a mile away, and the further he was from her the more real the invitation seemed.

Diving into the ocean with a male stranger sounded like the setup to a perfect disappearance. In a sense that’s what she had wanted by coming up here and quitting her job without notice. She’d even thrown her phone away. But her version of a vanishing meant still living somewhere on the other side.

She walked back toward the car soon after, thinking about pottery and clothing whirling around a colorful tapestry of life at the bottom of the sea. She’d never been underwater, only

seen documentaries of reefs and the deep ocean where fragile creatures drifted like spun sugar. These places were half-destroyed now, according to the news, the corals bleached gray and the fish full of plastic. She still imagined that some kind of life must survive, especially with the rich pickings from a recent flood. Maybe she would find something beautiful.

She found the woman in the parking lot, trying to coax her dog into the trunk of her minivan.

The woman stared at her for a long time.

“Are you safe?” she asked.

“I think so?”

“Lotta weirdos out here,” she said.

Emma nodded and went back to her car. From the parking lot the beach stretched in front of her, a muddied crescent speckled with forgotten things.

The man had been right. Equipment was easy to rent from a dusty shop from a town above the floodline. The sign in the window saying LICENSED ONLY had been flipped over, and the woman behind the desk asked no questions. She paid and left and just like that she became an aquatic creature, if only for the next ten days.

Her parents were photographing the wreckage of the house and trying to figure out how to determine the value of an antique desk that had sat in the front hall, so they look little notice when she left on Saturday. The drive to the beach was a quick one, but she drove slowly. She wanted to take in every detail—the house that looked pristine from the road but spilled its guts into the backyard, the massive powerboat that lay like a broken spaceship across someone’s driveway, the McMansion that had somehow remained whole but only from the second floor up, its first story little more than a collection of stilts. All of this had been normal just a few weeks



before, and now it was this. The rising ocean and hurricanes had been something that newscasters and politicians liked to talk about, and then it had become a thing she could see.

The man was waiting for her in the parking lot, standing next to a normal-looking Toyota. The sight of the car comforted her—if it had been a van, she probably would've reversed. He waved at her as she pulled in, a cautious two spaces away.

“I didn't much expect to see you,” he said when she got out of the car.

“I wanted to come.”

“I'm glad you did. It gets lonely down there.”

Together they hauled a sled full of equipment to the shoreline, and he showed her how to strap on the oxygen tank and use the mouthpiece. The videos she'd watched online had explained different parts of the process, and she tried to impress him by showing that she already knew how to adjust her oxygen line.

“Is there anything I need to be careful about? Sharks, dangerous stuff?”

“Sharks have been up here more often in the last five years, but there's not much living out there now. Too much junk. We aren't going too deep but try not to rise too quickly anyways, otherwise there's a chance you could get the bends, and that hurts like hell. Just follow me and you'll be fine.”

They walked to the water's edge. The first step was shockingly cold, and the regret and fear that Emma had been floating above for the past few days shot through her in an instant. But he was telling her to keep walking and her feet were listening, and by the time she was waist deep her anxiety had transformed into excitement.

He showed her how to breathe while they adjusted to the temperature, and nodded at her once before diving into the water in a single flop. She was alone then, and she looked at the pale

blue sky while a strange half-thought formed—that she would be swimming up, not down. She dived.

Clouds of dust and sand, kicked up by the waves and the man's feet, sifted past her. The surface was strangely reflective, just a few inches away, and it was much noisier than she'd anticipated—the crunch of her equipment, the low hissing of the waves against the sand that scraped her knees. She began kicking and scrambling as best as she could, pulling her body through the water. The sun shone and it was bright, almost as bright as the world above.

They swam toward the deep. Every few moments the man would pause and look over his shoulder. The first few times Emma would try to nod or wave, wasting energy and time, but she soon just let him decide if she was okay for himself. The sand sank below them, and they tried to stay at an equal distance from surface and bottom. She did what he had told her to do with her tanks and the various tubes and somehow it all worked out—she didn't pop to the surface like a cork or drown.

The world grew quieter. Ahead of her was a dark horizon where the water hid nothing but more water. She was seized by the thought that she was staring across an entire ocean, filled with dangerous creatures and nuclear submarines and mountains of trash. For a moment she felt like everything in the sea must be looking directly at her, at the strange being from the land that had misplaced her body beyond the shore. But then she saw her first piece of manmade junk and she lost sight of the miles of water ahead.

It was a lump of pipes and concrete, torn from an unknown construction. It seemed almost rude in this land of soft water and gentle sand. The hard edges and pointed rebar were like a trap designed to stab through the underbellies of living things. She hadn't been here for the storm, had come home a full week after it happened. The damage on the land was superficial,

houses and trees uprooted and emptied, and things like concrete had seemed immune. But looking at the solid hunk of waste, it became clearer that the strength of the ocean must have been enormous.

The man waited for her just beyond it. They were in a heavier deep now, the surface multiple arm-lengths away. He pointed at the object, and then at her. He seemed to want her to dive further, to investigate it. She wasn't sure what to do. It looked dangerous, and she didn't want to go to the bottom alone. She shook her head, a slight motion, and he shrugged before swimming toward it with powerful strokes. In a few moments he was there, gripping the torn edges of metal with bare hands and looking at the sand nearby.

Emma tried not to think and dove. It took her some time to fight against the force of the oxygen in her body that didn't want her to sink and the weakness of her arms and legs, but she worked her way down, clawing at the water more than swimming. Eventually she managed to grab ahold of one of the curved pieces of rebar.

It was colder at the bottom, and there was a mild current she hadn't noticed before. It seemed to be indecisive, pulling her first toward the deep and then back toward the land, switching every few moments. The dusty surface was littered with clouds of waste. Seaweed and organic matter floated past her goggles, disturbed by her motion.

The man gave her a thumbs up. The thought came to her that she had no idea what his full name was, that she was at the bottom of the sea clinging to a piece of trash with a complete stranger. Oddly, this did not scare her. It felt more like a conclusion to something, an inevitability.

He released the object and kicked back, sending a flurry of dust blooming around them until it was caught by the current and dispatched in several directions all at once. He gave her

another thumbs up, and then motioned to continue. She thought she understood—the junk had been a kind of way station for adjustment before they began to follow the bottom. She let go.

Briefly spinning upside down, she caught sight of the surface. It was a rippling sheet of color, light fractured through tiny wavelets. It looked like cellophane, or tinfoil, or a jewel—it was too many things to be one. They were far deeper than she had imagined. This had all been above the land recently, forced above the shore by an unexpected storm, somehow made worse by warming temperatures and shifting ocean currents. The science was complex, but the results were not: the water had come to the land. It had taken a great deal with it. It had brought her with it too, uprooting her from the city where she had made her home after college and bringing her all the back to her childhood town. Only instead of taking the form of a storm, it was disguised as her parents, desperate for help cleaning up and some semblance of the past. It was clever that way.

The man kept swimming and she continued. She followed at some distance and mirrored his actions. He stared at the bottom, sweeping his gaze back and forth, searching for a particular piece of waste. There was plenty to choose from. Emma saw lawn chairs, a brightly colored bucket, and ghostly sheets of cloth that resembled jellyfish. There were countless collections of anonymous garbage and construction material. Plastic siding and great tangles of wood threatened to catch on her, and she worked to stay above the ragged edges.

None of it would be useable, and clearly none of it was of interest to the man. His gaze swept over all of it, never pausing. Emma's arms grew tired and a deep ache started in her legs. Soon she couldn't focus on the strange wasteland around her at all. The man noticed her struggling and turned around. He acknowledged her with a wave of his hand and gestured back

toward the shore. The rest of the way she focused entirely on moving her legs and arms, trying to ignore the intense pain.

By the time they reached the thin part of the water and stood on the sand, Emma could barely breathe. She felt like a failure, like she hadn't succeeded in her mission, although she wasn't sure that she could name what it was.

They had found nothing of interest, had retrieved nothing from the sea. The man was oddly upbeat, helping her remove the equipment from her back with a smile and telling a few jokes.

"What did you think?" he asked when they were on the beach.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"I'm sure you haven't. If you'd like to see it again, I'll be back on Tuesday."

"It's like an alien world, like nothing that's ever happened."

He laughed at that. "It's a common thing to say. Truth is, you couldn't be more wrong. You know why this coast has so many little islands made of stone? And how they're all pointed in the same direction?"

"Volcanoes?" she said, repeating what she thought she'd read years ago.

"This is what's called a drowned coast. All these islands used to be mountains and hills, probably carved out by glaciers. When they melted, not too long ago, the water rose up and turned it back into the ocean. It happens again and again and again," he said, pointing toward the low line of islands on the southern horizon.

"I didn't know that."

"Not many do."

"Did people live out there? Where the water is now?"

“Who knows? Maybe they’ll ask that about us someday.”

She paused. “What is it that you’re looking for, anyways?”

“I’ll tell you next time, if I feel like it. For now, just enjoy the ride. I’ll see you Tuesday, I think.” With that, he walked away, leaving Emma standing in the cold sand with her equipment by her side. She sat down and waited until his form disappeared into the trees near the parking lot.

She pictured the hills and valleys that must have once been above the sea, filled with miles of grinding ice and grassy slopes. Someone could have lived there. Maybe someone would again.

On her way home, she stopped at a gas station to change into her normal clothes. There was no one working at the register, but the bathroom was unlocked. The wall above the toilet had plenty to say: Ephesians 1.7, Scarlett Cray Is A Slut, ????????, Call Me For A Good Time. There were lots of signatures from locals and people passing through who felt the need to mark their presence in black ink. She had never understood this desire, but she looked for a pen. She wanted to write something about what she’d seen.

The devastation seemed cleaner on the rest of the drive home. At least on land the pieces of what had been were restrained to the ground. They didn’t drift or move against her skin. The powerboat by the roadside was exactly where she’d left it. She wondered if someone would come for it, and who would own it if they didn’t.

She stopped a mile from her house, pulling her car onto the shoulder and getting out. This part of the town was mostly fields, with a few patches of forest populated by graying houses and collapsing barns. They had been broken before the storm, and looked much the same afterward.

There were crickets calling in the parched grass along the road. They had come back,

somehow, in just a few weeks. The salt had killed most of the plants, but maybe there was something else to eat.

The question she'd been avoiding successfully since coming back from the city was more persistent than ever. Should she call her roommates, her friends, her coworkers? Send an email, mail a note? It could be some kind of explanation for her disappearance, a way of leaving open the possibility of an eventual return. They would be wondering about her, but probably not too much. She wasn't particularly close to anyone, not even her friends from college. They might not even register she was gone. She had always been the one to take initiative, to invite people over, and if she simply went away it was possible that none of them would think to reach out first.

There were others waiting in the wings to take her place, there always would be. A million of her could vanish from the city and there wouldn't be the smallest hiccup in any of the machinery. There was no problem created by her disappearance, no real loss.

The crickets sang and the houses stayed exactly as they were for a few more moments, and the longer she looked at the landscape the more it looked like a picture from another world.

On Tuesday morning she returned to the beach. The parking lot had a few other cars, and she could see the slight specks of human figures at the far end of the crescent. The sun was uncovered and the sea sparkled. It was still muddy from the wealth of new material that had been dragged from the land.

"You came back," the man said when she approach him. He was reclining in the front seat of his Toyota, the window open and the sharp smell of cigarettes obvious despite the ocean breeze.

"I did."

He opened the door and stood in the parking lot, looking out over the sea.

“It’s nicer today, isn’t it? People are coming back here, spending time at the beach again. It’s not like it was a few weeks back.”

“It’s like it’s back to normal,” she said.

“Could be.”

They gathered their equipment and started walking toward the shore. He seemed quieter, more subdued. When they reached the wet sand he stopped and dumped his oxygen tank on the ground.

“I told you I’d say what I was looking for,” he said. “It’s not something very nice.”

“That’s okay. It doesn’t have to be anything nice.”

He dug into the sand with his left foot. Emma felt like she was only really looking at him for the first time, and she took in his varicose veins and hairy chest. He was old, remarkably old, but without any excess fat. He was also tired, his eyes ringed with deep circles. How had she not noticed before? He looked too fragile to be taking strangers into the ocean.

“I would like to find her bones,” he said. “My wife’s.”

“Oh,” Emma replied in an involuntary sound of surprise.

“I don’t think very much will be left, do you?”

“There might be something.”

“Probably just bones, strung together with gristle, but I don’t know. There aren’t many fish here right now. It’s possible she’ll be just like before.” At this, he laughed.

Emma tried to maintain a neutral expression. Her primary feeling was disgust. It wasn’t an emotional revulsion but a physical one. The water she’d been swimming in, admiring, was the home of corpses. They were dissolved into the liquid and into her skin. Those clouds of waste were parts of people, or they could have been, once.



She'd never seen a rotten body in person, but she could imagine it clearly. The half-human form, the broken skin—it would be the worst kind of nightmare. She had been bathing in a graveyard.

“I wasn't here when the storm came,” he continued. “I was doing an interview for work. Way inland. She didn't want to come, didn't really like care for the job. I don't think she cared for me much anyways. But all of that could just be in my head.”

Looking at him again, listening to him talk about his feelings, brought a sense of shame. He was in pain. It was obvious, the most obvious thing, and she had missed it. All alone he was crisscrossing the deep, hoping to find what was left of his wife.

“I'm sorry,” she said, even though she knew how small and stupid it sounded next to the vast expanse of the sea.

“No need. I'm sorry enough myself.”

“Still.”

“Still. I understand if you won't be coming back, or diving this time.”

“I'll come.”

“I'm glad,” he said, and looked over at her. She stared at the sand.

“Do you think you'll find her?”

He shook his head. “She was probably carried out too far. There aren't any bodies left now, they've all been eaten. But maybe something, a ring, a scrap of clothing. There's always something left behind.”

He let her prepare her own equipment this time, only helping her when she had trouble attaching the oxygen tank to her back. When she was ready they dove once again into the surf. The water was far colder than last time, and the old aches began almost as soon as she started

kicking. It was surprising how different it was—the color was a lighter green, and the water was clearer than before. Somehow Emma had imagined the ocean was like the paperweight he had shown her, frozen in time.

The two of them moved toward the deep, suspended over the shifting sands below. The tone wasn't the same now that she knew his purpose. It was like she was in a cathedral, a place of worship. There was no chance he would find his wife's body, Emma understood that. But he was paying his respects by searching, proving something to himself, proving himself to the ocean.

The man allowed her to catch up once they reached a spot further out than the one they'd reached last time. Once she drew closer he took off again, staring at the bottom and moving in a regular grid pattern above the piles of debris.

She didn't inspect the ground much, afraid of what she might see. Instead she focused on the surface above her, and the dark horizon of water that stretched across the Atlantic. The feeling returned that there were countless eyes watching from the shrouded water, including the dead. But this did not frighten her as it did last time. She had not lost anyone of importance, or even any objects, not really. She had chosen to return.

The sunlight slanted through the water, creating shimmering curtains of green. She struggled to focus on the murmurs of manufactured objects below. But she tried, and it was obvious that today the sea spat up some of what it had taken. Bus seats, wooden slats, incredible amounts of anonymous plastic, twisted cloth—all of this covered the sea floor. They saw no fish, no jellies, no crabs, only the pale imitations of life made by drifting shopping bags and flashes of sunlight against glass.

There were factors that conspired to make this happen. There was the carbon dioxide, there were the oil executives, there was the moon, and there was a hurricane in a place where they shouldn't happen. But it had, and everything was unpredictable. These things would not lessen in her lifetime. They would only grow worse. Storms would come and smash the homes they rebuilt, the atmosphere would warm, and the fish would die. She knew all of this. But floating above a new jungle built of wreckage, it was hard to imagine that the future was someplace far away.

She floated, letting herself be taken by the currents. The sunlight was almost blinding above, and the dust obscured the light that could've revealed more of the bottom. The woman's body had probably dissolved by now, been broken into pieces by tiny mouths. It had melted into the sea. She'd become part of a swamp, a forest, or a cloud. The ingredients of life were around her—water, sunlight, and minerals. This was the same sea that had exploded into countless forms and variations of life a billion years ago, the same cradle she had come from. These were strange thoughts, but they came with increasing force. She had trouble figuring out where she ended and the man's wife began.

But her own problems were clear and hard, locating her in the midst of the water. It would be easy to go back to the city, easier than staying here. Her parents would understand, would probably prefer it that way. But there was something impossible about it, about the idea of making everything the same again, especially after seeing this.

She would have to make a decision soon. The man might find his wife's body too, and then he would have a choice, or a series of choices. These things would come, but all of it felt obscured by the weight of the sea. Here her edges could dissolve, could touch all of the life in the ocean. She could feel the movement of creatures to come, and those that had been lost. While the

man looked for his corpse, circling the landscape below, she watched the fractured surface and tried to imagine what she might do.

Notes on the Ocean Gift: Nature, Power, and the Replacement of Governmentality in  
Anti-Establishment Communes in the Northeast

*[Work in Progress, not to be distributed, entirely unfinished, and deserving of disposal]*

Stonington is a town like many on the coast of Maine.<sup>56</sup> During the state's mill boom in the mid twentieth century, a vast array of brick buildings, fanciful mansions, and small family-style homes were constructed near the coastline and along dirt roads in the town's dense pine forests. As the country's economic priorities shifted from rural manufacturing to a city-based information economy, thousands of locals lost their jobs. Rampant drug use and the brain-drain<sup>57</sup> of talented youth led to the region's overall decline, and Stonington was one of the hardest hit despite the seasonal influx of tourists that propped up a number of local business.

The period between 2020 and 2025 saw remarkable economic development in the state despite the overall decline of the American economy. In part, the reasons for both are the same. As college graduates and young professionals left major cities in the northeast due to the waning economy and high living costs, coastal Maine became an attractive destination for young talent and investment.<sup>58</sup> However, Maine's economic improvements were a brief interlude that preceded a period of financial and social downturn.

By 2030 the impacts of climate change had disrupted the northeast enormously. The slowing of the Atlantic oceanic currents had resulted in a rapid rise in temperature concurrent

---

<sup>56</sup> It's a depressing place, is what it is. I was supposed to be in Indonesia until the travel ban came into effect. Six years spent learning Ba'hasi down the drain, and here I am in a rotting little seaside village.

<sup>57</sup> Such an odd phrase, and a bit antiquated. Alternatives?

<sup>58</sup> It sounds like I'm writing a seedy travel guide or a museum description.

with the devastating and ongoing Great European Winter. The economy of coastal Maine, while benefiting from an influx of talent, was still largely dependent on tourism and an increasingly obsolete fishing industry.<sup>59</sup> Coupled with a series of devastating wildfires that reduced the forest coverage in the state by 6% between 2030 and 2034, a rapid population reversal occurred that saw almost 90,000 individuals vacate Maine for neighboring states. Additionally, after the failure of Yucca Mountain due to political backlash, Maine was seen as an ideal place for the construction of a long-term nuclear storage site. Growing support for nuclear power on the West Coast and Washington led to the construction of the Mt. Adams site,<sup>60</sup> which only encouraged the population decline.

Ultimately the convergence of a sense of increased climatic risk, environmental and toxicological dangers, and economic destitution led to the state losing a substantial proportion of its population. Those that remained also often migrated to towns and cities at higher elevations due to fears of rapid sea level rise in the event of a major collapse of the Greenland ice sheet.<sup>61</sup> As a result, by the early 2040's, towns like Stonington were half-drowned, economically and politically reduced, and populated largely by older members of the community with deep roots, lack of opportunity to move, and a touch of stubbornness.

However, every historical period has its counterculture. Fuelled by increasing economic disappointment in major city clusters and what many have described as a loss of narrative opportunity, members of a younger generation have begun appearing in towns like Stonington. The loss of narrative described by E.A. Baillard in "Contemporary Silence: The Loss of Decisions in the Drowning World," is, he argues, a description of the decreasing avenues of

---

<sup>59</sup> I don't miss lobster. Those sick little creatures, wandering the depths of the sea in search of rotting corpses, always made me feel disgusting. And the boiling alive...utterly beyond the pale.

<sup>60</sup> Mt Adams was also the location of a popular ski resort before snow stopped falling in the state. I recall burning my tongue on the hot chocolate.

<sup>61</sup> I rather regret being proven right about that one.

choice for younger people. Specifically, he discusses the lack of opportunities for narratives of growth, enlightenment, and adventure for those who have been raised under a system of storytelling that highlights the hero's journey. Even as late as the 2030's international travel was safer and more affordable, while the potential for breaking into new disciplines and finding meaning was an available life story for new graduates and students. Now, however, with international instability and a six-fold increase in U.S. Department of State travel warnings—especially to areas once coveted by young travelers, like South Asia and South America—along with prohibitive expense, the romantic ideal of travel has become a distant possibility. From a majority of 77% of those between the ages of 16 and 35 in 2020 who claimed that travel was a major aim and passion in life, only 32% said the same in 2039.<sup>62</sup> The result of all of this is that a number of individuals between the ages of twenty and forty have sought alternative avenues for growth and change as the possibility of conventional notions of success and personality development have become distant.

It is difficult to calculate the exact number of intra-state migrations during the 2030's, largely because avoiding taxes, governmental tracking, and prior relationships was often the point of these movements. However, C. Jennison's 2038 study on the subject, which tracks migrations by extrapolating reports by a variety of communities in the Northeast, argues that around ten million people probably vanished from their previous lives between '34 and '37. As the federal government has declined to release the numbers of non-tax paying citizens for a number of years, the estimate is one of the best available, and some have even called it overly

---

<sup>62</sup>I had a hamster for the first three years of undergrad and that little fucker had the best life imaginable. Never left his box, just slept and ate and kept warm while I had to go out of my way to suffer. Why the hell do humans design societies that simply make them work harder and suffer more? We've had every choice in the world at so many points in history to design whatever civilization we want and we just keep making it worse for ourselves. Maybe we deserve to drown in a flooded world. We should be hooked up to machines that feed us and bathe us 24/7 so we never have to go outside.

conservative. While the purpose of this study is not to validate the certainty of biopolitical analyses of population change, it is sufficient to say that the migration of youth across state borders is an enormous event, and some might say a problem.<sup>63</sup>

I arrived in Stonington to do preliminary research on my thesis in 2041. It was July eighth, and a smaller contingent of the local community had been celebrating a resurgent Pagan holiday that will be the subject of chapter 3. At the time, I didn't realize the significance of the date, but I later realized that my arrival could not have coincide with a more fortuitous moment. The holiday, which is much more of a contemporary phenomenon drawing from lost history than any kind of culturally continuous ritual, can be described as a kind of lengthy demand from Gaia, or what some members call the world-spirit, to provide "new meanings." One participant later explained: "We ask the world-spirit to give us the gift of direction." The holiday, which is the subject of the third chapter, led me to explore the relevance of [not sure yet, but I can revisit this if I actually write chapter three]

Finding housing was my first task, and it was indeed a revelatory one. My inquiry led me to a decayed brick building called "the salty dog," where an older woman named Anna lived alone.<sup>64</sup> She was one of the few originals that stayed through the environmental and economic chaos of the early 21st century, and she had a great deal to say once she realized that I wasn't one of what she called "the crazies."

---

<sup>63</sup> My old friend Jake is one of these, and my god I'm jealous. The lad just up and left one day and nobody's heard from him since. Hasn't logged into Facebook, hasn't used a phone, and hasn't paid his taxes in six years. I hope he's not dead, wherever he is.

<sup>64</sup> God, this place is a fucking wreck, that's what. No hot water, electricity for only four hours a day, there's mold in every room. If Yale had given me a survivable salary maybe things would look different. Maybe I could be in Indonesia instead, like I'd actually wanted, if the travel ban hadn't been in effect. Maybe I should've studied economics or computer science or corporate law like everyone else and then I'd be in a nice air-conditioned office, typing away until I put a bullet in my brain from the guilt and the bullshit. But here I am, in a dumbshit town asking old hippies about their thoughts on the world and acting like I'm So Very Interested in What You Have to Say, like it matters, like this place won't be Arizona 2.0 in another thirty years. C'est la vie.



“This old world’s gone mad, you know it? The crazies are just a part of that. It’s like lord of the flies out here, they’ve got pigs heads on sticks and they think they’ve colonized an untouched land. They think all of this is brand new, made just for them. But they’re living in people’s homes, and somewhere out there the folks that own these places will make their way back. It’s gonna get pretty real once these new folks who think they have god’s claim to other people’s property start clashing with the ones who own the deed, if you know what I mean.”

Anna described an attitude that I frequently noticed among my interlocutors, the idea that they had “colonized an untouched land.” Similar to the behavior of numerous artists and creatives who moved to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in the early years of this century, my interlocutors frequently described an association between destruction and a kind of societal cleansing that left open the space for re-colonization. Additionally, they believed that environmental destruction was a particular kind of cleansing that allowed for new possibilities of belief, social organization, and piety.

I continued our conversation as she showed me around the apartment, after I outlined the basic dimensions of my project.<sup>65</sup> My first question was why she chose to stay despite the social and environmental pressures in the region during her lifetime. “I was born here and I’ll probably die here. I don’t see much point in leaving when the whole world is going to hell. Where am I supposed to end up? California, where the ground is turning into desert and swallowing up everything else? Ohio, where the dust is so bad and poisoned it can kill you in a week?”<sup>66</sup> I don’t think so.” Her words seemed to expose a highly pessimistic view, which stood in sharp contrast to the later interviews I held with those who had recently moved to the area. I pressed the issue

---

<sup>65</sup> She required a great deal of reassurance, to say the least, as if she’s seen this all before. How many people are already writing the same thing as me?

<sup>66</sup> It bears mentioning that these claims are by and large inaccurate. In fact, their inaccuracy is a point of interest, because it implies the need for further research into the networks of information that span geography and influence decisions about mobility and survival.

further. “I think this place will be better off than most. There’s plenty of land up here, even if it’s looking less like good pine every year. Depends on how many people figure it out, that’s what I’m worried about it. It’s a pretty good secret. Except those crazies are really making a mess of things, writing about it and all. You said you aren’t a journalist, so I trust you. You think anyone’s gonna read what you’re writing about here?” I explained, in the most objective terms possible, that I doubted anyone outside of the increasingly narrow academic world was going to spare my dissertation a second glance. I doubt I’ll even remember it once I’m finished.<sup>67</sup>

Her response surprised me, because it indicated that her fears were in fact more social than environmental. The problem she identified was not that the climate would make life untenable but that the influx of new inhabitants would disturb an otherwise sustainable way of life. The view is echoed by many in similar circumstances. In *Chaos Mind: Social Demons of the Anthropocene*, Susanna Adeyemi describes the reductionist civil perspectives in Oklahoma regarding “Insurance Men,” or representatives of agricultural insurance companies who seemed to accrue most of the ecological ire that landowners had previously directed toward global carbon based civilization. As soon as the insurance men appeared, public debates and private conversations switched from themes of survival and meaning in an altered climatological circumstance to visible rage over the intervention of highly educated and seemingly untrustworthy businessmen who primarily intended to mediate compensatory claims for the large scale agribusinesses that had leased to smaller farming operations during the twenties.<sup>68</sup>

Adeyemi’s concern is that, amidst diffuse and overly threatening environmental changes, climate is personified in other social groups. This process has the effect of remaking climate change into something defeatable and actionable through typical civil processes, and it also

---

<sup>67</sup> I’ll delete this in the final version.

<sup>68</sup> Trash sentence.

circumnavigates true environmental action. Adeyemi identifies a recursive social mechanism behind this process that she relates to Michel Foucault's Panopticon:<sup>69</sup> "...it seems, therefore, that social control is increasingly exerted through expressions of group identity predicated on avoiding the recognition of the ecological prison that now determines the most material influence on daily life...it is an elegant and deeply dangerous process that release much stress about global meta phenomena through reduction to human figures" (Adeyemi, 2034: 19)."

Miranda,<sup>70</sup> a 27-year-old woman from Milwaukee, left a promising career in supply chain management for a major agribusiness conglomerate along with her husband for the sense of newness she believed could be found in Maine: "There was just possibility here, you know? Everybody else left. They freaked out about wildfires and sea level rise and just left it all. But, you know, in some ways that was a good thing. Because none of this would've happened if they hadn't left."

I asked if she wondered about the old inhabitants of her home, a doublewide trailer in a patch of poplars some distance from the sea.

"I think my house is full of their ghosts. But they're not unfriendly, it's not like they haunt me or anything. It's more that they encourage me to keep going, because I don't want to leave them here all alone. Without me, there would be nothing—the whole building would just rot away."<sup>71</sup>

The description of "ghosts" was strikingly prevalent among those I interviewed about their feelings toward the previous citizens of Stonington. The analysis of spectres, begun by Jacques Derrida, became a fashionable and important branch of cultural anthropology in the early 2000s, notably described by Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway. Ghosts can function as both

---

<sup>69</sup> It's been awhile since I've heard about that. It was really quite trendy during my undergraduate career.

<sup>70</sup> Insert a better transition here, if you somehow decide there's a point to any of this.

<sup>71</sup> I'll never publish this shit

a metaphor for the influence of social factors that have spectral characteristics, such as forgotten or unacknowledged history, and a cultural phenomenon in which concerns over mortality and meaning coalesce. In this case, I believe ghosts have a dual function. Miranda stated that the ghosts of the past residents, who were of unknown status, haunted her house. They could have well been alive, and indeed that was the general assumption of the current Skowhegan inhabitants. Their “ghosts” were therefore more like reminders of their presence, a description of lost hopes<sup>72</sup> and the empty space left by their absence.

I asked a similar question of Anna, if she noticed a presence characteristic to the region that she could associate with classic aesthetics of ghostliness. “I think the whole world’s haunted at this pointed. Everybody killed in wars, or starved, or aborted. Seems like there are more people dead than alive these days.”

It must be said that Anna’s tone during these conversations steered clear of pessimism. She made these statements as though they were entirely banal facts, and that they had very little bearing on her actual life as a landlord of the decrepit apartment building. In a sense, she almost seemed to revel in these ideas, because they were a source of meaning. They made her survival exceptional, especially in contrast to what she saw as the shallow motivations and privileges of those who had the ability to mobilize across state lines. In short, she saw her position in a “haunted” or tragic world as one of unique insight.<sup>73</sup> [Finish introduction later].

---

<sup>72</sup> I wonder if my advisor’s office is haunted by my ghost

<sup>73</sup> Seems like everyone I meet is doing better than I am. To have the confidence of the insane or the devoted at the edge of the world—that would be true happiness.

## Thinking of Doggerland

The apartment was closer to the ocean every year. When they'd bought it forty years earlier, the water's edge was a brisk walk away, and the young Ruth was always out of breath by the time she returned from what she called her "sunset strolls." Although she had expanded, turning limp and squishy in many parts, ballooning in one or two places and becoming bony in others, she could make the trip more easily now.

"You just have to get out of this place. You can't believe what you're missing. It's all different now," she said to her wife.

"The difference is what frightens me."

"It's not that different, I mean it's mostly the same. But there are all kinds of new things out there. You won't know until you look at it. Won't you go?"

"There's nowhere to go."

"There's everywhere to go."

"Not anymore."

This was a ritual, one of the many they'd fallen into after fifty years together. Her wife's response varied—sometimes a grunt, sometimes an extended debate—but the end result was the same: Ruth took her walks alone. They both knew she preferred it that way.

A few blocks down from their moldering building on what was once a very well-to-do avenue, the apartments were dissolving. That was the best word she could think of, if she had to choose one to describe what was going on. Their edges were blurring—brick crumbling into dust, thick roots penetrating walls, and roofs studded with grass. They were turning from hard lines

and crisp colors into porous constructions, spaces that allowed the world to creep inside. These were inhabited by much younger folks. They played loud music from the windows and stood huddled in mysterious collections on the broken pavement.

The groups rarely noticed Ruth. She was a fixture, and like many fixtures she blended into her surrounding environment seamlessly from the standpoint of a regular observer. The young people paid no mind to the flickering streetlights or the broken cars, rotted with saltwater, and there was no particular reason to pay attention to her either. She was beyond the possibility of attack or use-value, beyond the possibility of interaction at all. It wasn't so for strangers or new visitors, especially if they were young. If a young man or woman decided to walk down the street they became targets of attention, or new members of the old groups. Either way, they were objects that called for a response, whereas Ruth was more like an empty space between more important things.

Being old, it seemed to Ruth, was primarily a condition of being left out of things. There were years when she had been catcalled or robbed, and strangers had struck up conversations with her. Above all she was seen—she was studied, looked at, with a kind of human interest. That had been replaced with a more distant spectatorship around the time her stomach began to truly descend toward her knees and her face grew deep wrinkles. Piece by piece she was remade into one of the countless forgotten gray-haired people of the world.

Her own separation did not discourage her from wanting to take action. For Ruth action was the only possible response. The ailing buildings had to be dealt with, for starters. Colonies of mold and even mushrooms had invaded their own block, and the basement—once a serviceable laundry room—had been filled with a kind of living brown slime and the door permanently locked. The sewers and subway stations, tunnels that once kept the chaos of ocean and life far

away, had reversed. The sea now crept through the holes when the tide rose or a storm came, and ocean poured into sub-basements and platforms. These were fixable problems—they required money, and time, but there were solutions. The issue came with trying to grab the attention of a world that was distracted by more dramatic issues. Floods were everywhere, no longer abnormal events. Now they were routine for the coastal dwellers. They fled to upstairs rooms and packed fresh water in the attic, and waited for the sea to subside. That was another thing Ruth decided—the new world was one of waiting and seeing. She preferred to act.

“It can’t be helped. The basements are flooded, the mold is just creeping up the walls. No one will buy these old wrecks. Something ought to be done, you know it? Something just ought to be done,” she often repeated to her wife.

Ruth’s letters and phone calls to her senators and council members of choice were ignored, however. They were elsewhere, building new housing projects and debating machines that Ruth didn’t understand—great traps to pull carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, or rockets to send people to Mars. None of these made any sense to Ruth, not when her avenue had once been lined with magnolias and was now decorated with abandoned stoves, and especially not when her wife’s retirement fund from the university had shrunk to a trickle with no explanation.

The sunsets had also changed. When she was younger they stayed generally orange and yellow, comforting colors that bathed the steel and glass and turned everything golden. Orange had become a deep and dangerous red, and unnatural violet had begun creeping in. Now even shades of blue and the occasional hint of green stained the clouds that hovered over the sea.

There was dust—that was what the news-people said. It came from the Midwest, the once-fertile lands turning into a thin mist of chemical laden soil. Smog, too, had been collecting over

the sea, brought by some kind of wind pattern. She used to watch these reports obsessively, taking notes and bringing them to her wife's study before bed.

"Look at this," she would say, "look what it's all come to. It's falling to pieces, the whole world is breaking apart."

Her wife kept a number of maps pinned to her wall, the edges curled and torn. One of them showed a series of images of the English Channel morphing over time. The first was normal, and the others showed a bloated France and finally no channel at all.

The last map was what she pointed to.

"Doggerland," she said. "Fifteen thousand years ago this was all land, and people lived there in tribes. Then the glaciers melted, and a tsunami came, and by ten thousand years ago the whole thing was ocean. The trawlers haul up stone arrowheads sometimes. Look it up."

"But what happened to the people?"

"They left, or died. We'll never know. Point is the world has always been breaking apart. We just fooled ourselves for a while. It was always a scam."

That night the sunset was especially alien, a mixture of blue-green and red. The clouds were low on the horizon and even the stars were invisible in the darkness behind her. The lights of a passing ship were visible as the sunlight bled away, and she thought it must've been one of those new nuclear container ships larger than whole cities.

"This isn't my world anymore," she said out loud. There was movement near her and she stood rooted to the concrete. The stupidity of this outing became clear, and now she would be killed for it.

It was a stray dog—its snout began poking around at the dirt near her feet. It was seemingly unaware of her presence.



“Did you live out there?” she asked it.

There were rows of apartment buildings crumbling into the sea, and it was possible that one of them had been the dog’s home. A romantic notion, and one that she liked—it would suit the mood of all of this, be just tragic enough.

The dog ran away, of course. Few people came to the shoreline anymore, and nobody ever seemed to watch the sea. They seemed disturbed by it, hiding inside of their boxes instead. That was one of the problems with the whole mess, she felt. The people of Doggerland—had they watched the sunsets? Did they think their world was safe?

The buildings looked like gap-toothed skulls, missing chunks of teeth and jaw but largely whole above the waterline. On some nights she saw lights in the upper windows, small and insistent despite the scale of the ocean. People lived in them still, and she had no idea who they might be—people so desperate they would throw themselves at the feet of the sea, instead of running the other way as most people now did.

The horizon only gave her more questions. That was the problem with her wife, she suspected. She liked answers, easy solutions, and the cosmos of the apartment had only those. It was full of known things, familiar contours. It was easy to ask questions to. The ocean and the sunset and the crumbling buildings insisted on questions, demanded that kind of curiosity, but it refused to provide information. It was, and always would be, a refusal of knowledge. The beauty of the sunset was simply a trick to conceal that basic fact.

Her wife had once occasionally gone for walks, but now she refused to leave the apartment altogether. Ruth argued with her often.

“There’s just a lot going on out there. You should see it, the way the plants have overtaken everything. It’s interesting.”

“Plants are taking over in here too.” That much was true—vines from the outside were curling through the broken bathroom windows, and tiny gray mushrooms had sprouted from the rotten sills.

“You should just see it.”

“I can see from the windows, thank you very much.” The view from the apartment was limited, however—at the upper edge of the marshy zone, they couldn’t see much beyond the creeping tendrils of change. If she squinted at it, her wife could almost pretend nothing had changed at all.

Health didn’t convince her, either.

“If you don’t go outside you’ll be dead before eighty, and what will I do then?”

“You’ll go for walks, I expect.”

Despite their arguments, Ruth loved her. Her hair had only grown more beautiful as it grayed, and it now frizzed around her head in a sparkling cloud. Her eyes seemed to grow in size and depth with each passing year, even as her vision faded and she couldn’t read the cramped texts she once relied on for purpose and employment. She cleaned instead, rearranging useless little objects—a ceramic cat here and a bowl there—and fighting an extended campaign with the fungi in the windows.

Ruth obliged her, buying plenty of cleaning supplies when she took her bi-monthly journeys into the central parts of the city. There was a steady source of chemicals and scrubs, and her wife was happy. Ruth once considered refusing to buy anything she wanted, but it seemed that it would be a case of winning the battle and losing the war. Besides, she always made sure to chat with the grocery workers when she went out, and there was a certain privacy about those interactions.

Whenever she returned home she brought something new. This was a personal rule, and it didn't matter how many times the objects ended up in the trash. From the broken concrete of the shoreline she brought strange fusions of metal and plastic and sand, like stones made from unnatural materials. Occasionally she found a piece of well-rounded sea glass that had somehow survived the hard beach and been deposited above the tide. From the city at large she brought new flowers that bloomed in the dark crevices between skyscrapers, or frilly little plants that clung to the sides of buildings without soil or water. If she was shopping she would buy something she hadn't seen before, experimental new fruits and vegetables. She wanted to bring home the rats that sat fatly in little corners and holes, but she had no way of catching them and she didn't care for the idea of capturing a living animal.

Her wife didn't like any of the new things she brought home. Ruth hoped that they would accumulate as proof that the outside world still held beauty, but her wife refused to look at them, packing them away or flushing the soft plants down the toilet. Nothing that she did punctured her wife's careful bubble of attention. It just morphed around her intrusions.

One day she saw an air conditioner fall from the window of a nearby apartment. She watched the whole thing. It slowly tipped out of an upper story and came spinning down, shattering on the pavement. The brutality of it was a shock. The sound echoed through the quiet buildings and a nearby group of people paused to look. Ruth stood in the same place for a long time as the sky turned black. She'd been on her way to view a sunset, and this was the first one she'd missed in many years.

Instead of turning directly home when the stars appeared, she started walking through the forest of buildings to the east of her apartment. Her feet took her away from the central area of the city, where she usually went shopping once every week or so. There the city seemed to be

fighting to stay normal. The stores were air-conditioned, the windows were washed, and men and women wearing tight suits used the offices. Newness only appeared at the edges—in the vast sweat stains on the nice gray suits, in the way that people looked at each other, as if everyone else was a threat.

The east quickly turned into a place she didn't recognize. The streets were narrow and choked with cars and haphazard constructions. There were outgrowths to these buildings, stalls and sheds that were attached to the sides. Weeds grew from the potholes, and she passed a sewer drain that bubbled with seawater. She thought she should probably feel nervous, but she felt nothing at all.

People were on the streets, more so than during the daytime. A few crowds stood in the pools of light that fell from open windows, and individuals walked with purpose. They hurried past as though appointments and interviews had been scheduled for midnight and they were running late.

The hulks of brick towers and metal skyscrapers loomed above, and many of their windows were dark. Closer to the ground they were lit with colorful bulbs and the gentle glow spilled onto the streets, illuminating faces in every possible color.

Soon Ruth reached a part of the city that she was certain she had never been to before. At least, it was so changed by the night and the sea that she could never hope to place it in her memory. This was another shock to her, the fact that she had spent years in a place while the unknown was waiting just a mile or so away. And this was not the kind of unknown that lived in the ocean. This was the unexpected.

The constructions on the sides of the buildings—the tumors, as she was starting to think of them—grew thicker the further she walked. They turned into stalls with roofs and open windows.

Through them she could see people displaying rows of objects, things for sale. Some of it was scrap metal, as far as she could identify in the dim light. It was probably salvage from the sunken parts of the city, worth very little. The realization that this was a kind of black market gave her pause, but only for a moment.

The crowds were denser, and Ruth herself simply became a member of the public. No one was really paying attention to her. She was used to that, but it had been some time since she'd last felt like she had blended into a crowd. There was shouting and even laughing, and she saw young children sneaking underfoot. These were dead streets during the daytime, streets resigned to their fate. Hospice streets. Now they were reborn.

The storefronts at street level were mostly broken, and new doorways had been constructed. When she saw what was inside she finally came to a stop. What had once been superstores and shopping plazas were now markets, labyrinths of stalls and people. There were brightly colored objects lined up in rows, men sitting in folding chairs, families with children walking and picking up products for sale. All of it stretched into the guts of the buildings until her failing eyesight could pick out nothing but vague movements.

She walked into one of the markets, a store she had chosen at random. The smell of cooking food drew her through the gaping doorway and soon she stood inside of a narrow hallway, choked by piles of stuff and the people viewing it all.

“Ma’am?” A loud voice seemed directed at her. Ruth turned around and found herself facing a young man, probably in his forties.

“Yes?” she said, uncertain.

“You’re looking for the best cookware, aren’t you? It’s right around the corner here, and you won’t believe the kinds of discounts we’ll give you.”

She was overwhelmed. The information around her was a blank wall. There was too much of it to interpret, and she didn't know how to respond.

"I don't know," she answered honestly.

"You look like you've been in this city a long time, you know it?"

"Yes." This was slightly offensive to her, although it used to be a point of pride. "I'm just old."

"Sure, sure," the man continued. "You know what the good stuff is, so no need to trust me. Just come and have a look and judge it for yourself. No harm no foul, what do you say?"

She found herself led toward a large space that had been carved from the surrounding stalls. Tables and chairs and shelves were covered in pots and pans, all of it completely ordinary. It was strangely relieving. She picked up a teakettle, one that looked just like the kettle at home.

"How much?"

"For you? Not much at all."

The price was low, and she paid. She half-expected him to look up at her with confused eyes when she handed her bills to him, as if she were a trespasser in another country and she didn't have legal tender. But she did, and she began walking again after making her purchase. The kettle clanked against her thigh every few seconds.

The encounter had given her new confidence. She belonged here, that much was clear. She walked toward a young woman who was standing in a teetering pile of books.

"Hello," Ruth said.

"Anything in particular?" the girl asked. She looked bored, but her clothes were a light orange color that Ruth liked.

"Just looking."

She chose a book called Indoor Gardening, mostly just for the picture. It showed an old couple in an apartment filled with plants, mostly vegetables and bright red tomatoes. They were smiling.

She turned and began walking back out of the building. It had been hours, she was certain. Her wife would have no idea where she was. She might be worried sick, if she hadn't already fallen asleep.

A man behind a stall selling small red fruits waved at her.

"Forty five cents for these! You can't beat that."

At the man's voice she started walking quickly. She began to feel like if she stayed for another moment, had one more conversation with these people from another world, she would never find her way home.

The crowds thinned as she worked her way down the street, and the stalls began to turn back into tumors. There was one more vendor, a man she hadn't seen before. He had a dozen ornate birdcages lying around on the pavement. It was too dark to see what he was selling, but there was the suggestion of movement. She hurried past, trying not to ask questions.

The narrow streets took her in the general direction she thought was west. The moon rose overhead, transforming the black sky into a deep navy and illuminating the jagged towers above her. The color of her memory was fading as she walked across the cracked pavement. If it weren't for the teakettle banging against her thigh and the book in her hand, it would be easier to deny what had happened. But even with that evidence it began to feel like a series of events that happened to someone else, or a story she'd been told.

Eventually she came out onto the street near her home. There was the air conditioner that had fallen from the building; those were the trees that had taken root in the apartment building

near hers. Ugly music slammed from the windows and someone was laughing nearby, but otherwise the street was empty. The young people, she imagined, were back at the night-market, or party, or whatever it had been if not a dream.

Roots caught her feet as she walked over pavement that had become unfamiliar during her absence, and it took her some time to reach her block. When she caught sight of the entrance to her building she stopped. In the silver glow of the moon and the emptiness of the street, her wife was standing outside, waiting for her return.



## Bibliography

- Aira, César. *The Little Buddhist Monk & The Proof*. Translated by Nick Caistor. New Directions, 2017.
- Ambrose, Stanley H. "Late Pleistocene Human Population Bottlenecks, Volcanic Winter, and Differentiation of Modern Humans." *Journal of Human Evolution* 34, no. 6 (June 1988): 623-651.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Ballard, J.G. *The Drowned World*. Berkley Books, 1962.
- Cons, Jason. "Staging Climate Security: Resilience and Heterodystopia in the Bangladesh Borderlands." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (May 2018): 266-294.
- Derrida, Jacques. "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)." *Nuclear Criticism* 14, No. 2 (Summer 1984): 20-31.
- Delattre, Edwin. "Rights, Responsibilities, and Future Persons." *Ethics* 82 no. 3 (1972): 254-258.
- Gaffney, Vincent; Thomson, Kenneth; Fetch, Simon. *Mapping Doggerland: The Mesolithic Landscapes of the Southern North Sea*. Archaeopress, 2007.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Haraway, Donna J. "Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene." In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore, 34-76. PM Press, 2016.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).  
<https://doi.org/10.1006/jhev.1998.0219>
- Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- Hunter, Megan. *The End We Start From*. London: Grove Press, 2017.
- Kennett, James P; Cannariato, Kevin G.; Hendy, Ingrid L.; Behl, Richard J. *Methane Hydrates in Quaternary Climate Change: The Clathrate Gun Hypothesis*. The American Geophysical Union, 2003.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. *Flight Behavior*. Harper Perennial, 2012.

Ksentini, Fatma Zohra. *Human Rights and the Environment*. Research report no. Final Report. (N.p.: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1994).

Luke, Timothy W. "The Climate Change Imaginary." *Current Sociology* 63, no. 2 (2014): 280-296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392114556593>

Mitchell, David. *The Bone Clocks*. Random House, 2015.

Moore, Jason W. "The Capitalocene, Part I: on the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 594–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>

Nickel, James W. "The Human Right to a Safe Environment: Philosophical Perspectives on its Scope and Justification." *Yale Journal of International Law* 18 (1993).

Petryna, Adriana. "Wildfires at the Edges of Science: Horizioning Work Amid Runaway Change." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 4 (November 2018): 570-595. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.4.06>

Rich, Nathaniel. *Odds Against Tomorrow*. Picador, 2014.

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. "Railroad Space and Railroad Time." *New German Critique* 14 (Duke University Press, 1978), 31-40.

Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew. "The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Study of Readers." *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 473-500. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156848>

Sebald, W.G. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Translated by Anthea Bell. New York: Random House, 2003.

Shelton, Dinah. "Human Rights, Environmental Rights, and the Right to Environment." *Stanford Journal of International Law* 28 (1991): 103-38.

Simpson, Helen. "Diary of an Interesting Year." In *I'm With the Bears: Short Stories From a Damaged Planet*. Edited by Mark Martin. London: Verso, 2011.

Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.

Thorne, Melissa. "Establishing Environment as a Human Right." *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 19, no. 2 (1991): 301-42.

UN General Assembly. *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* (15 December 1972).

Watkins, Claire Vaye. *Gold Fame Citrus*. Riverhead Books, 2015.