



Growing Coal

Megan Bush

Perhaps this is a story about fear.

I am afraid to have children.

I can see that child. Charcoal hair and eyes like mine—but with Justin’s sleep-puffed cheeks. And he’d move just like his father: scrunching his eyes and lips in stubbornness or flapping his arms to music as if he can dance. He’d be shy and all too aware, too easily touched by the sentiments of others. Perhaps he, like me, would gain the nickname “big ears” when caught eavesdropping on adults one too many times.

I was born and raised in Alaska, have lived here most of my life. In my childhood, adults didn’t talk about climate change, or if they did, my big ears didn’t hear. They were good adults. They taught me to work hard for what I believe in; they taught me to love wild places. They taught me to find joy. I learned well: I side-step other feelings easily for laughter.

Or perhaps this is a eulogy.

I stare out at my birch grove yard, standing in front of an idea. What would the future look like without humans? A sense of resting floods me: responsibility rinses like stinging sweat from my neck, my face, my hands. No more cement creeping forward. No more farm-runoff. No more carbon. I had not realized I felt such responsibility. These are heavy things.

Here is an easy metaphor. I have paddled down a stream, playing God, looking for signs of beaver. I have made certain the stream remains unplugged and thus—what I thought—healthy. No dams like my dark hair, no clogging of drains.

I remember spending one night, however, sharing the banks of a stream with a beaver. The Alaska Range Mountains stared at us, and the tundra gleamed gold and green prisms in the late-evening. I sat on the

cabin porch, watching my dogs and the scenery. I'd long forgotten the lodge I'd noted when I first arrived and the gnawed pyramids: pillars of progress, like birch tombs.

The beaver's tail crashed against the crystalline surface. I jumped. My husky, the beaver's intended audience, yipped happily in surprise. The crash came again, the lake's surface churning in concentric circles. *Go away*, that beaver said. I bet it was a male.

Beavers mate for life, and they live in families. The female stays in lodges when they have young, while the male gathers food and protects their territory. Young spend their first two years playing and mimicking their parents, learning tools of survival, making mistakes. Sometimes, older siblings stick around after they're grown, babysitting in exchange for home.



Perhaps this is a story about selfishness.

I let go of climate change advocacy because I was tired. Weekends in college I'd watch friends scamper off to ski hills, without a care in the world, while I pushed pamphlets and held signs in town. *Where was their sense of urgency? How could they have such fun?* I was jealous. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen my efforts inflict change, and I ached for the freedom I saw in their unburdened attitudes.

Then one day, I let go of the pamphlets and drove to the mountains. What I found was incredible and addicting: happiness for the colonial outdoorsman, my own brand of the American Dream. I zipped up and down mountains on chairlifts that could power cities; I drove to trailheads; I re-found wild places. I forgave myself for not doing everything—or anything—and focused on relationships: relationships with place, with people. I learned to love from more than just a distance.

Now I would like to love a child. There it is. *This surely is a story about selfishness.* No one in their right mind would have a child when looking into the climate changed future.

I see that child grow older. He's twenty. He chews on his bottom lip when he's anxious, and he's lost—like I was at his age, like I still am. He moves like his father: taut shoulders, long strides. What will there be for him? What salmon? What place? What dreams? I wonder about his home. Do I have to face a future where I want there to be humans?

He tethers me to a resistance I'd rather not work for. I'd rather inhale in a garden and exhale on a yoga mat, stay in the present. *Let yourself be*

happy. I'd rather spend my time floating and not face the tidal wave.

I know I inhabit a binary. I know what balance means. And yet: children do not often allow for balance. Nor does the immediacy of climate change.



“Good night. We are gonna raise wild children in a small cabin, and they will live on bear and fish and crab,” Justin writes. He is at the northern tip of Alaska, working tangentially for oil. This money will go into what we have set aside for property. Oil dollars seem a paradox to our values, but there are so many paradoxes I cannot keep up: I fly, I drive, I eat food from a store, and I buy clothes from China. The ingredients to the smart device that sent his words were mined from somebody's home, constructed by somebody's child. The ways in which I am at war with myself are too many. “Kiss kiss,” he texts.

Perhaps I am writing about my love story. Or perhaps this is an essay about faith. I want to believe in the little boy with blue eyes and black lashes, toddling through tide pools in my fantasies. Wild, like the land he comes from, just as Justin says. I want him to live here, I want him to have a home.

Without that little boy, I don't care about humanity. After all, my favorite places are still nearly peopleless. Sure, I care about friends, about family. But I don't believe human displacement will happen on a large scale in our lifetime, so I don't worry about them. I almost long for something to push us to a different mindset. I almost long for the crash. Let us hit rock bottom. Let us crawl our way out. Let the ice caps melt. Let the waters rise. Let the migrations stray. Let the whales go extinct. Let us be humbled like Rome. Let us become a Mayan Tomb. This is not the first apocalypse to be witnessed.



When I was 22, I studied abroad in Greece. While my classmates and the world fell in love with the Parthenon, I fell in love with the Caryatids, three stone women on an awkward, strange temple called the Erechtheion. Most people don't even know another temple shares space on the Acropolis, but it's there.

On the day we visited, we stopped at the Erechtheion. My professor, an American expat who inexplicably had picked up a British accent, leaned against the stone structure in bored familiarity. “This was built

in the years after the Parthenon, right after plague decimated Athens' population," he droned.

After? I thought, confused. *They knew how to build something as perfect as the Parthenon, and yet they were compelled to build this haphazard temple in the years after?* The Parthenon happened in Athens's golden age, the short blip of time when Athens believed their civilization to be invincible. The Parthenon stands as a symbol to Rational and Just gods of civilization triumphing over the older gods of nature. The Erechtheion, on the other hand, though constructed second, was a temple to the older gods, the wilder gods. I can see these worshippers, whose civilization was crashing down on them as their families died from plague. I can hear them whisper, *Nature, you hold the power: please help us.*

We circled the Erechtheion, like industrious beavers, scribbling notes. I noticed how the temple roof did not align on each side, and that no two sides matched. And yet, the decorative trim wound in spirals and points as delicate as lace. In structure, it was strange. In detail, it was perfect. I came back to the Caryatids, women staring off into Athens' blue hills. The waves in their skirts seemed so intricate they could rustle in the wind. "We have less information about this temple than the Parthenon," said my American, British, Greek Professor. "But we do know that in times of heartache and depression, our art turns superficial. We want happy, light, and silly things to cheer us up. Hence, the star of the Great Depression: Shirley Temple."

Now both Parthenon and Erechtheion are remnants of civilizations gone.



Justin, a jokester, a clown, is a serious man. When he dances, he looks like Shirley Temple trying to river dance. It makes me laugh. We both deal with our inability to fathom the future and our inability to change other humans by, perhaps, running to the woods. To grow a garden, hunt and fish. To come and go without anyone knowing we were there. To let others be greedy while we forget they exist. This is our dream.

On our second date, Justin taught me to skin a beaver. On the phone, he insinuated that I would be watching; when I arrived he handed me the knife.

I had never before skinned an animal. Justin rested the beaver on its back. It looked vulnerable, its belly firm and easily palpated. In parts, the fur was soft, and in others, blood chunked the fur into a mohawk. I

could see rat-like teeth protruding from a dark strip of lip.

"Cut here, then here, then here," Justin said, making a line from chin to anus. I pressed my knife along its belly, and it slid in. "Not too far," he said. The beaver's mass relaxed into the ground as I cut a line down its stomach. Then our hands grabbed fur and pulled; my knife brushing the tissue strands holding skin to muscle. They snapped easily, like silk thread. Skin peeled back slowly, surely. "Just keep the hide taut."

It was spring, and sun beat down on the tops of Justin's cheeks, the spot where other people's shadows reside. It made him look young, despite the beard, despite the receding hairline. I fell in love with the way he gave instruction but let me make mistakes, shrugging when I nicked the hide. He told stories of his first few times skinning, the many ways in which he had ruined different hides. It was kind.

I didn't love this task. But as I pulled and cut, I knew I wanted to be faced and reminded—often—of my mortality. I wanted to understand the violence my existence causes with every inhale, with every bite of food. I wanted to always feel it, always touch it.

"You know that hunter-gatherer lifestyles and living-off-the-land are not sustainable if everyone were to partake," my parents have said.

I know.

"I don't think I want to keep hunting beaver," Justin said recently. "I've heard that beavers mourn their dead for weeks."



I have a feeling I am facing, or trying to, the moment when I will become an adult. *Perhaps that is the story.*

"My son died in an avalanche in 1989," a mother tells me. 1989 was 24 years ago; I was three when he died. It is a tangential detail to what we are discussing, but her eyes well up. She can barely finish the story she was about to tell.

"I'm sorry. That...doesn't usually happen to me anymore," she says. Her smile flutters to a place that's vulnerable. Her son's life. I wonder what he looked like.

Some days, the idea of human extinction sounds like lapping ocean on a boat's hull. We can go to sleep knowing the Earth is in better hands than human gods; it is on its own. After a short while, the world will not grieve for us. It will not remember.



Motherhood would begin from somewhere very, very selfish. *Or is this story hope?*

“Our job in life is to make the world better for the next generation,” my great-grandfather, an immigrant and a peddler, told his daughter. I wish I could bring a child into the world believing this.

Justin combats my precise use of semicolons with crassness. “Someday I’m gonna knock your ass up!” he writes.

It works. I laugh. Even like that, it sounds romantic. They say that hopefully each child begins with a love story. I wonder how old he’ll be when he understands that love is monstrous.



Or is this story hope?

Growing up, when I was upset, I ran away to the cemetery down the street, my sketchbook in hand. It was an old cemetery, with gravestones as old as Juneau’s first colonizers. Moss took over older stones, though the place was well kept. It was not a place of mourning for me; it was a place to draw. Usually, I sketched fireweed and fiddleheads, my back against a mountain ash tree. I knew, rationally, that it was a graveyard and that people’s loved ones rested there. Now I even know that before white settlers, this area was a Tlingit fishing grounds. And yet, I struggle to grieve for dead places or people I’ve never known. I still love that graveyard.

I do not mourn the land beneath Boston or San Francisco. To me, these cities are wonderful and magnificent piles of cement. There is something magical about the winsome houses arching up the Bay Area Hillside, laughing at the sea. I cringe when I hear of wetlands paved over or suburban sprawl marching through empty hills. But in a generation, that sprawl will be someone’s loved space. I rarely miss the Woolly Mammoth. I think my old growth forests are beautiful, and I don’t think of the tilled yellow cedar.

I am so afraid.

That little boy, I bet, will grow up like a nymph, with a tree house and a wooden sword, loving his imagined places, unaware of what is gone.

From the Top of the Street Lamp Post

Krishna Mohan Mishra

To build the house, his brother had borrowed seven hundred thousand rupees from Nepal Bank Limited, City Office, where he worked as a teller. Every month the bank cut ten thousand from his salary. “It’ll take five years,” he grumbled at every meal, his face—sharp-featured, brown-eyed, like Raju’s, inherited from their father—showing dents above his eyebrows. Raju tried not to look jaded.

“Five years isn’t an age,” their mother said. “It’ll pass quickly.”

When Niranjana looked around chewing, she followed his eyes smiling brighter than her white widow sari and admired what they paused at – the arched door frame, the glossy walls, the straight line where their stone-gray met the white of the ceiling right above the ventilators. This did remove his hollows and brightened his face. The occasion that really loosened him up, though, was when somebody, usually a friend of his, came by. She’d join in when he showed the visitor around, starting with his study just across from the living room.

Raju would sit upright and let himself relax—math didn’t excite him anymore. He heard them as they walked out one door and entered another. Back in the living room, drinking tea, the visitor would still be praising, most of all, the bathroom tiles, where Raju had slipped twice, and the bay windows through which his brother often caught him sneaking out in the morning. It cost twelve hundred thousand, Niranjana would say, attempting a modest smile, leaning back on the sofa, his legs crossed above the coffee table. Day after day he’d worked out its cost, and their father, a building contractor’s foreman, had told him labor charges and the prices of materials. Now, though nobody ever mentioned his house, he grinned from a framed picture over the TV, his dimples around the corners of his mouth like two little crescent moons,