Re-Imagining America:
Rural Futurism, Speculative Fiction, And Reckoning With A New Era

By
Grant Tank Williams

Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics
Carroll College
Helena, Montana (2012)

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Signature redacted
Author

Signature redacted
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
(January 18th, 2017)

Certified by

Signature redacted
Ceasar McDowell, Professor of the Practice of Community Development
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Signature redacted
Accepted by
Associate Professor P. Christopher Zegras
Chair, MCP Committee
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
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ABSTRACT

At the close of 2016, the United States finds itself deeply fractured, caught between clinging to a nostalgic past and pushing for progressive possibility. As we stand divided, a set of emerging great challenges threaten to rapidly change the world as we know. At such a juncture, I argue that the practice of imagination can help us to break out of habitual thinking and routine practice to see our challenges, and ourselves within them, more fully and clearly. By imagining alternative futures, and communicating them to a broader audience through fiction, I propose we may better understand, collectively, how to enact our agency in the present to address these challenges head-on.

In this thesis, I argue for the practice of imagination through the lenses of three great challenges that we face as a nation: politics, the Anthropocene, and a culture of white supremacy. In an effort to identify and bridge the divides that exist within our current political and cultural moment, I propose a ‘rural futurism’ that centers the experiences, settings, and lives of rural America in imagined futures. I then operationalize the concept of ‘rural futurism’ on two levels; 1) the realizable potential of local democratic institutions, the rural electric cooperatives, as sites for democratic discourse and self-determination, and 2) speculative futures, communicated through fictional narratives, as a tool for developing critical consciousness in addressing the three great challenges imperative to re-imagining America.

I present eight speculative fiction stories of alternative rural futures set in the American south to ‘test’ the concept of ‘rural futurism’ as a tool for addressing these challenges. The stories were reviewed by a focus group of southern writers and organizers, who provide the analysis, as well as my personal evaluation, of the stories effectiveness in addressing the challenges described and their resonance with the experience and context of the rural American south.
Acknowledgements

This thesis project is a result of hundreds of conversations, experiences, and reflections that span my time in MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning and while working with One Voice Mississippi and We Own It on rural electric cooperative organizing. The last two and a half years has been a period of personal and intellectual growth beyond what I ever imagined. There are hundreds of people that should be acknowledged for their role in building this project and the person I am today. For brevity, I aim to call out a few notable persons who have directly influenced this project during its development.

I am greatly indebted to an incredible support system for any and all success in my attempt at marrying planning, theory-building, and creative fiction writing in this project. First and foremost, to my thesis advising committee for supporting my efforts to push the boundaries of a traditional masters thesis. Ceasar McDowell was supportive from the moment I proposed the project and has provided essential counsel through its trials and tribulations of the last nine months. Helen Elaine Lee has similarly been essential to this project. She has taken in a novice creative writer and, through endless encouragement and months of collaboration, helped me to develop my writing skills and, more importantly, my passion for writing. This thesis simply would not have been possible without Ceasar and Helen’s willingness to take the risk of an alternative thesis, to spend their time and energy throughout the nine months of developing the project with me, and for providing thoughtful insights, guidance, and support along the way. Finally, I want to thank Phil Thompson, Dayna Cunningham, and Justin Stiehl for their early encouragement and continued support of this project, and for the inspiration to tackle big challenges with creative approaches that challenge the status quo.

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Introduction

There is a simmering beneath the surface of modern life. It is a tension between the world we understand and navigate each day and the world of uncertainty that we are moving into. We find ourselves with one foot in the stable, historically-determined world of yesterday, and with one foot in the shifting, sinking and quickening ground of tomorrow. Now, the bridge between these eras is slowly dissolving and, in brief moments, they fold into one another, disrupting normalcy and hurtling us into the unknown:

- A moment of recognition that nothing is stable in the wake of a devastating flood.
- A train ride to work, in which all the passengers are physically present, but their minds have escaped into a multiplicity of virtual worlds through an LED portal.
- An election result, a thermometer reading of the nation, reveals a seething rage that threatens to tear down the established rules and norms in American politics and civic life.
- The incomprehensive statistics of the nightly news – 65.3 million people forcibly displaced across the globe in 2015.\(^1\) 16 consecutive months of record high global temperatures.\(^2\) Forecasts that staying below 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming may require immediately abandoning all fossil fuel exploration.\(^3\)

And, thus, we find ourselves in surreal suspension, hanging in the balance that calls into question everything we once took for granted. And yet nothing on the surface has (as of yet) changed for many Americans, though every watch tick brings us closer to the unknown, with January 20\(^{th}\), 2016 as the first milestone of the end of an era of relative stability. This dissonance, between our daily lives and a daunting tomorrow, can lead to paralyzing inaction. It can lead us to reject the future altogether and cling desperately to the past world. Or, we may take up the call to shed the clutching grip of yesteryear, and emerge, naked, anew, and wide-eyed into the hard truth of tomorrow. When we arrive there, a set of impending questions awaits us.

How do we grapple with such immense changes in the world? In what ways are we able to enact agency in navigating the entangled and confounding problems of the future? How will we survive? What tools do we need to develop now, in order to realize a brighter future or, at the very least, a livable future?

In this paper, I argue that the practice of imagination has been missing from the academic discourse, American progressive politics, and planning practice. And so we may find ourselves stranded in the transition between eras - using yesterday's tools to address tomorrow's problems. The practice of imagination and the envisioning of

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\(^1\) "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015."
\(^2\) Sheridan, “August Shatters Global Heat Records for 16th Month in a Row.”
\(^3\) Muttitt, “The Sky’s Limit: Why the Paris Climate Goals Require A Managed Decline of Fossil Fuel Production.”
futures may allow us to see the current systems for what they are, and to identify the in-roads towards alternative possibilities.

The practice of imagination is a call to reclaim the old planning practice of utopia. It is also a call to claim the practice of dystopia, which has been less explored in planning. Or, rather, it is a call to develop our imaginative faculties in the broad spectrum of speculative futures – in both the hopeful dream-states and the despairing nightmares. The imagination holds revelatory power, and it is essential to understand the many trajectories that lead from this current moment, both the paths of light and the paths of darkness, in order to act with sober clarity.

It can help to identify the leverage points of change for the practitioner and the activist embedded within the highly constrained choices of today's world. It can enable the theorist to interpret the world with higher clarity; to sift through the endless questions that beg to be asked and discover the most fruitful, and most essential, ones to address the impending world.

This practice also provides us with a tool for engaging and communicating policy, planning, and development agendas within communities. These futures, and the stories they tell, can provide communities with a space to hear and listen to one another's stories, to explore the trajectories forward, and to build empathetic bridges towards the world of tomorrow that reveal our roles within it and within the options on the table today. Any imagined future requires a grasp of the characters, settings, and happenings of such a scenario. The construction of futures is also a call to reclaim the practice story-making.

In this thesis, I aim to center rural America, the root of that back foot that clings to a past world, and its function within America as body politic, to explore the potential of imaginative alternative futures in dealing with the great challenges of our time. I further aim to explore the role of speculative fiction and story as a medium to communicate these challenges and the multiple possible futures that they forecast. As we come to a close of an era and embark into a strange new world, I ask:

- Can rural futurities be mediated through speculative fiction?
- If so, can speculative fiction shift how organizers, planners, and community members understand the great challenges of our time, and their impact on rural communities?
- To what extent can speculative fiction communicate the challenges and political questions of our time to disenchanted and marginalized communities in Rural America?

In the following section, I will lay out my argument for the role of imagination in grappling with our changing world. I argue that there is a particular need for the imagination within three pertinent challenges of our time: rethinking politics, grappling with the Anthropocene and the anticipated impacts of climate change, and
reckoning with the American cultural legacy of white supremacy. This section also serves as a literature review of the key theories and works that provide a far deeper examination of these great challenges.

After an overview of the role of imagination, I set forth an argument for the concept of ‘rural futurism’, the creative construction of futures that centers on rural people and places and their agency within a changing world. I aim to operationalize the concept of rural futurisms through a two-pronged approach; the realizable and the speculative.

This project started from my interests in re-imagining and organizing around one of the few lasting local and democratic institutions across rural America – the rural electric cooperative. In a time where the cries for change have reverberated through the 2016 election, I aim to demonstrate the role that electric cooperatives can have for communities striving to enact their agency for self-determination. I will provide a history of the electric cooperatives and their current role in politics and civic life. Through the lens of the cooperatives' history and present, I will then set out my argument for the role that it can play in realizing alternative futures for rural America.

While I have set forth a vision for the electric cooperatives, the electric cooperative members must take on the task of re-imagining rural electric cooperatives for themselves and their own desires and dreams. Such a process will require building empowerment in rural communities, and communicating important cultural, political, and environmental concerns to rural America. I will lay out the argument for speculative fiction as a tool for a Freirean process of critical consciousness-building within rural communities and detail how it lends itself towards the larger goal of re-imagining and realizing the electric cooperative as an institution of community self-determination.

After laying a theoretical foundation for the imagination, rural futurism, and the role of speculative fiction, I present eight short stories that aim to explore rural futures and communicate the key themes that a rural futurism needs to grapple with towards the goals of critical consciousness building. These stories were developed throughout the thesis research and writing period and aim to be in conversation with the theoretical argument for imagination.

The goal of the short stories is to ‘test’ their utility as a tool for critical consciousness building, for developing rural futures that speak to the desires, dreams, and fears of rural communities, and for communicating these ideas through accessible writing. As an initial evaluation of these stories, I have provided them to a set of writers, organizers, and activists that live in the American south and have grounded experiences with the context of the rural south. This focus group has been asked to read, review, and evaluate a set of the stories. In the Analysis section, I compile their evaluations as well as my personal evaluation of the process. Additionally, I detail
the next steps for this project, my assessment of its shortcomings, and the potential of speculative fiction moving forward.

**Introductory Note:**
In this section, I will utilize a set of short-hand abstractions that must be clarified and offer some initial tensions. Firstly, I use the short-hand of 'America' in reference to the United States of America, which may work to erase the important differentiation between the many Americas – North America, Central America, South America, Latin American, Native America. Secondly, I have substituted the term 'rural' for white Christian America and cultural conservatism. This, similarly, may erase the experiences of minority groups and, in certain regions of the South and Southwest, local majority groups of African-Americans and Latinos, respectively. Additionally, the term may work to erase the many cultures, identities, and ideologies that exist within the broad region of rural America. The important local distinctions for the context for the rural South will be addressed briefly in the following sections on rural futurism. Here, I use the rural short-hand to describe the general demographic group that identifies as culturally conservative or as white Christian America. This identity group, which I suggest reflects the nostalgic ideal of rural America, resides across rural, suburban, and urban landscapes, as well as regions of the country, but is deeply anchored across much of rural America. Fourthly, I use the statements 'we', 'ours' as a generality for Americans and, in specific cases, for the liberal or progressive reader that may have been wide-eyed, mouth gaping, at the outcome of the 2016 election. Finally, I want to set out from the start that this thesis fails to address two critical realms that are critical for re-imagining America – the role of technology in shaping society and the role of toxic masculinity and patriarchy in our society. This will briefly be touched upon in the analysis section.

**The Need for Imagination**

"Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust." – Ursula K Le Guin

To begin, I offer the metaphor of America as a body politic, one foot in each of two eras, and the body struggling to determine what its next move will be. The front foot, that of "progressive fundamentalism," is looking forward, with the belief that it understands the challenges at hand and has a set of solutions to offer that future. The back foot, that of cultural conservatism is unable, and unwilling, to move forward to meet the front foot and, instead, clings to the sense of security of a nostalgic past – yearning to 'make America great again.' The front foot believes itself to be the way forward, but did not reckon with how firmly the back foot was planted. Rather, in our echo chambers, our ideologically isolated communities, and in the dominance of urban-centric media and pop culture, it seems the front foot has seen the back foot as only a phantom limb, haunting its course forward through

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4 Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness.*
5 VanDer Werff, "Progressive Fundamentalism: How Hollywood and the Media Fortify the Bubbles We All Live in."
6 Daykin, "Could Social Media Be Tearing Us Apart?"
7 Bishop and Cushing, *The Big Sort.*
the ghost of history and enacted through the vote of the, we believed, slowly
decaying elements of rural America and cultural conservatism. We assumed, we
believed, the back foot to be phantom, not physical and thus unable to hold the body
back. But, the material reality, the truth of the physical back foot, firmly planted in
cultural conservatism, has been thrust into our faces in the election of Donald
Trump to the President of The United States. In light of this stretching, splitting,
dismembering, of the body politic of America, I aim to offer one, of many, arguments
for just what forces are at work in these times, and what can be done moving
forwards.

The immediacy of the new era is closing in on us: that of a spiraling-out-of-control
climate change; technological acceleration and its role in reshaping society; that of
increasing wealth inequality and the consolidating power of multinational
corporations; that of an increasingly diverse nation, culturally, ideologically, and
demographically. And, at the same time, the ghosts of history that we anticipated
haunting us, have not only become physical but, in fact, have regained control of the
body with the firmly grounded back foot; that of white supremacy, that of global
neoliberalism, that of the glory days of industry, labor, and stability for the middle
class. In such a moment, the question most pressing for progressives and liberals
becomes ‘what, then must we do?

We must fight, as ever, to reveal the inner workings of these challenges, to critique
the problems they create, and to defend the progress that is susceptible to repeal
under an ‘alt-right’ regime. We must, indeed, defend our politics and our
convictions for a more just and equitable world. And, yet, this will not be enough.

I argue that part of the work of progressives, planners, and theorists is to take up
the practice of imagination. The practice of imagination and the construction of
alternative futures can help us to develop our oppositional consciousness in
defiance of the current order; to develop imagined worlds, societies, economic
systems, and cultures that liberate our minds and guide our work towards a more
just future. Through these efforts, we can develop our individual-cognitive
capabilities to grapple with this world and the world we are moving into.
Additionally, we can use these imaginaries to communicate alternatives effectively
to speak to the dreams, desires, and fears of broader audience; to create a collective-
social process that may mobilize communities to act towards an alternative future.

In “The Sociological Imagination”, C.W. Mills argues that people can only interpret
their current moment, and its meaning for the choices we face, if they are able to
grasp the larger arc of collective experiences, through the broader socio-historical
forces that shape the inner life and the society as a whole. Through the sociological
imagination, we can see the collective, structural roots of our encounters, feelings,
and thoughts. The imagination, therefore “enhances reflexivity by liberating one

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8 Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*. 
from habitual thinking and practice, and opening up the conceptual space to notice the means by which one is structurally incarcerated.\(^9\)

The work of fully understanding America, which must precede and inform the re-imagining of America, is to recognize and explore the divides that need be reckoned with. It requires first identifying the key themes that give rise to the tensions and constraints to our imaginative capacities, and then to understand how these themes are being interpreted from both sides of the gaping divide. In uplifting the voices and experiences of both sides, while remaining grounded in our ideals, it may then be possible to build bridges across, and to collectively construct new futures.

In this section, I detail the need for imagination and the construction of alternatives, both to develop our own liberatory capacities and towards developing narratives that speak to a broader audience. At this juncture, I argue that future constructions that aim to re-imagine America must take on three critical great challenges: politics, the Anthropocene, and a culture of white supremacy. I argue that any effort to construct alternative futures must process and deeply examine these three great challenges, for, as I will detail, they are shaping the future this very moment. Thus, any effort to construct alternative futures must deeply examine how to break from the future being created by these challenges. With this theoretical grounding, I will then propose the need for ‘rural futurism’ as a means to comprehending the ‘other’ across the divide in the American body politic, which will frame the context of rural America and its institutions before exploring them through speculative fiction.

**Politics, Neoliberalism, and the American Dream**

Post-political theory claims that the fall of the Soviet regime, and the end of the Cold War marked the end of politics, and thus the end of history, as liberal democracy emerged as the prevailing and victorious mode of governance.\(^10\) This marked the current political era, in which capitalism and free market economies became “the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative.”\(^11\) Rather than demonstrating the true championing of democracy, however, the conflation of democracy and liberal economics has reduced “democratic life to the management of the local consequences of global economic necessity.”\(^12\)

This techno-management of the economy is largely removed from the arena of politics, excepting minor engineering, corrections, and balances that, at least on the surface, keep the economic system operating sufficiently. Yet, the performance of democracy continues on, despite lacking a real economic or political arena to

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\(^9\) Wapner and Elver, *Reimagining Climate Change*. Pg. 5  
\(^{10}\) Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.  
\(^{11}\) Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change.” pg. 215  
\(^{12}\) Ranciere, “Introducing Disagreement.” pg. 4
counter the consensus of neoliberal ideology. Instead, there is a “systematic foreclosure of the properly political dimension” and the arenas for democratic contention dwindle to fewer and fewer realms, giving increased attention to the arenas of identity politics and cultural politics. Thus, in moments in which there is widespread discontent with the post-political consensus, and an increased role of identity politics and cultural politics as the arenas for contention, grievances are able to find resonance within populism.  

As we have seen in 2016, the rise of populism in opposition to ‘the establishment’ and technocracy (President Obama declared that “nobody (is) more qualified than Hillary Clinton to serve as president” at the 2016 Democratic National Convention) has deeply resonated with a segment of the American electorate. The disdain for the establishment and ‘elite rule’ has, perhaps, been exacerbated as those with economic grievances have nowhere to turn to express their concerns for the economic restructuring that has joined the possibility of social mobility, and thus economic power, with educational attainment. But, as Laclau describes, populism is less about giving voice to the will of the people, and rather is about “giving form to the people” and the will of the people, (by) constructing an internal frontier, through the creation of images, and the telling of stories. The primary objective of constructing an internal frontier is to define who “the people” are, firstly through formative myths, such as “the silent majority”, “the heartland”, and “the real America”, and secondly through the exclusion of certain ‘other’ identities, in our case targeting specifically Latino and Muslim immigrants while continuing to dismiss the existence of Black America.

Some claim that the populist turn against establishment politics signifies the death of neoliberalism. This calls into question the post-political regime, and suggests “the collapse of the Soviet system merely prefigures the collapse of the American one”. However, the prevailing right-wing ideology of free markets and the call for the reduction of remaining domestic spending and environmental regulations suggests that the post-political condition may prevail all the same, while taking a hardline on identity politics.

Regardless, both the post-political condition and the rise of right-wing populism demonstrate a continued failure of the left to capture the imagination of the American electorate and, similarly, to offer alternatives that speak to the dreams

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13 Zizek, “Against The Populist Temptation.”
14 Ibid.
15 Obama, “President Obama Keynote Address at the DNC.”
16 Runciman, “How the Education Gap Is Tearing Politics Apart.”
17 Oudenampsen, Seijdel, and Melis, “Political Populism. Speaking to the Imagination.” pg. 13
18 Laclau, On Populist Reason.
19 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections On Violence.
20 Oudenampsen, Seijdel, and Melis, “Political Populism. Speaking to the Imagination.”
21 Jacques, “The Death of Neoliberalism and the Crisis in Western Politics.”
22 Wark, Molecular Red. pg. xii
and desires of the nation. The right has successfully leveraged a long-game of myth-making, media manipulation, and grassroots resourcing to mobilize and expand its base. They have built off of the ‘manufacturing of consent’ media strategies, which was established through the Cold War anti-communist agenda and has established new frontiers of fear targeting immigration and terrorism. Within this climate of fear, the right has provided the American people with simple, if not fantastic, stories to make them (white America) feel safe and secure. As George Sorel recognizes, democracy is based on the rational actor, but “populism is a site for the emotional construction of politics within democracy...Taking populism seriously, which we must, means we must take imagination, symbolism and mythology more seriously, as well.”

The Brookings Institutions, a liberal think tank, spends three percent of its budget on communications while the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation spends twenty percent on public relations or, as former VP Herb Berkowitz had described, “the selling of ideas.” While the left has been hard at work developing critique and facts, figures, and stats to support their arguments, the right has been selling their ideas, far and wide, across institutions and on the ground through effective stories, spectacles, and myths.

“We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create reality. And while you are studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” – Karl Rove to Ron Susskind

As Duncombe explains, reason and rationality have been core to liberal and progressive politics since the emergence of the enlightenment era. It freed us from the oppressive age of religious mysticism and feudalism through two core tenets. On the one hand, the logic of the rational actor empowered the emergence of a capitalist system, which liberated merchants and artisans. On the other hand, the reasoning man was central to the philosophical grounds for democratic theory. Furthermore, the utility of reason, facts, and data have resonated with and ensured a strong and steady base of progressive and liberal enlightenment-thinkers – particularly, those who have been trained in enlightenment thinking through the institutions of higher education.

But, now we must recognize that our base, and our basis of arguments derived from reason and rationality, are not enough. We are contending with what Duncombe

23 Lippmann, Public Opinion.
24 Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent.
25 Duncombe, Dream.
26 Sorel and Jennings, Reflections On Violence.
27 Duncombe, Dream.
28 Danner, "Words in a Time of War."
29 Duncombe, Art of the Impossible: Utopia, Imagination, and Critical Media Practice.
30 Ibid.
calls “the age of fantasy”, in which reality and spectacle have become indistinct; in which social media platforms, Wikipedia, and alternative news sites have created the democratic production of truth and, thus, the fluidity of truth; making a politician’s factual statements of less concern than the message being delivered. In such an “age of fantasy”, in short, being right is and has never been enough. Facts and critique matter less and the practice of democracy is primarily the work of making myths and convincing people to buy into your platform.

Progressive politics has done this in the past. The activists of the civil rights era, anti-vietnam protests, the New Left, and the Black Panthers re-created the world by exclaiming “take your desires for reality!” and by speaking to the dreams and desires of the people, moving them to act. Now, it is essential work for progressive politics to imagine alternatives in order to overcome the post-political condition and to challenge the rise of right-wing populism on its own grounds of myth-making, imaginative construction, and stories that resonate with people’s dreams and desires and address their fears. While the right has been vigorously working at the manufacturing of consent, Duncombe calls the work of progressive politics to manufacture dissent, by imagining alternative possibilities that work against the current regime.

With the question, if not the death, of globalized neoliberalism being raised by the owner of a multinational corporation with a history of exploiting workers, Donald Trump, then it is perhaps an in-road for the politics of the left. The success of Bernie Sander’s presidential campaign, predicated by the message of Occupy, and the growing Fight for $15 movement suggest that this may well be the case. This opportunity can be further capitalized on by the set of alternative economic systems being imagined, such as The Next Systems Project, cooperatives, and economic democracy, if it can develop a compelling narrative within the neoliberal regime.

If such an effort to imagine an alternative politics, and alternative economics, is to effectively reach beyond the progressive echo chamber, then it will need to resonate with the set of identities that have felt, and indeed have been, de-centered in American culture and in a global economy. With the demonstrated electoral power that white America stills wields, I argue that one dimension to pay attention to is being able to speak to whites who have felt themselves de-centered, and have turned towards history for their model of hopeful possibility, toward the rural and the working class.

31 Debord, The Society of the Spectacle.
33 Viner, “How Technology Disrupted the Truth.”
34 Oudenampsen, Seijdel, and Melis, “Political Populism. Speaking to the Imagination.”
35 Baudrillard and Poster, Selected Writings.
36 Duncomill and Poster, Selected Writings.
37 Ibid.
Grappling With The Anthropocene

Recent research forecasts that two-thirds of vertebrate populations will die out by 2020, as indexed by 1970 levels. Soil degradation rates demonstrate that the world may only have sixty harvests left and, by 2050, the productive land per person will be one quarter of the level in 1960. The marker for irreversible climate change has been set at 2°C of warming, while recent findings demonstrate that the world’s currently operating gas and oil fields and coal mines have the potential carbon emissions to take us beyond that level, without any further exploration and extraction. The list goes on.

The Anthropocene and its scepter, climate change, are the “mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms.” The concept of the Anthropocene is that man has established a geological era by changing the most basic physical processes of the earth. While the now tenuous victory of liberal democracy has been deemed the end of history, in Molecular Red, Wark claims that the reality of the Anthropocene marks, instead, the end of pre-history. For Wark, the Anthropocene demonstrates the end of the separation between man and nature, the deadly myth that has allowed us to operate in a system of everything-commodification without the recognition of planetary constraints. In somewhat of a hopeful reframing, the suggestion that the Anthropocene marks the beginning of history is a future-oriented framing to seek out solutions and systems within our inextricable tie to nature, rather than to cling to the systems, and lifestyles, that brought us here. Indeed, it challenges our very idea of freedom and our historical conception of agency, which has been predicated on being unchained from Nature.

The Anthropocene and Politics

The term the Anthropocene has been contested and critiqued on multiple fronts. The geological shaping of the earth’s processes has resulted from uneven development and will result in uneven consequences for the world’s peoples. Yet the environmental and climate movements have developed narratives that center on the totalizing effect on peoples everywhere. Solutions have developed calls for technocratic management and consensus policy-making, such as the Paris Climate

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39 Arsenault, "Only 60 Years of Farming Left If Soil Degradation Continues."
41 Ghosh, The Great Derangement.
42 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses."
43 Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man.
44 Wark, Molecular Red.
45 Ghosh, The Great Derangement.
Agreement. Additionally, the dynamics of the oil economy make the politicization of it all the more difficult, since the nation-state is not the primary scale of the oil economy and because climate activists "cannot put their hands on the real flows of power because they do not help to produce it. They only consume it." These approaches have folded climate policy in with a post-political condition, as well as the neoliberal consensus. This has reduced climate activism to a populist universalist humanitarian cause that derives its strength from fear and through apocalyptic imaginaries.

The climate justice and environmental justice movements have pushed back against the universalist populism of the earlier environmental movement by developing specific sites of political contention. China Mieville highlights that the impact of climate change is actually producing utopias and apocalypses at the same time, but in separate geographies and for different groups of people. He illuminates that the consequences derive directly from the processes of capitalism – the places that have suffered exploitation and are suffering the early consequences of climate change are quickly experiencing apocalypse while the beneficiaries of that exploitation are experiencing utopia at the same time. This lens suggests that "Wall Street is a way of organizing Nature" as well as labor, and the term the Capitalocene has been offered up as a more clear depiction of the era and its root causes.

The populist approach to climate change can also be seen as a result of the movement's emergence from within the 'Anglosphere'. These movements, such as 350.org, have largely defined the public politics of climate change, and its totalizing effects, while continuing to benefit from the systems that have created the problem. Rather than pointing to capitalism as the crux of the matter, Ghosh argues that we must identify the roots of the Anthropocene with the history of European and American Imperialism. With the Anglosphere's claim that we, and more specifically our ways of life, are in danger of climate change, such a politics of fear have pointed us in the direction of "the politics of the armed lifeboat." Preparations are already being made for this reality, as the Department of Defense "recognizes the reality of climate change and the significant risk it poses to U.S. interests globally."

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47 Ibid.
48 Ghosh, The Great Derangement. pg. 130
49 Learning to Die in the Anthropocene Reflections on the End of a Civilization.
50 Sutyngedouw, "Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change."
51 Mieville, "The Limits of Utopia."
53 Moore, "Wall Street Is a Way of Organizing Nature: An Interview with Jason W. Moore."
54 Ghosh, The Great Derangement.
55 Parenti, Tropic of Chaos.
56 Department of Defense, "National Security Implications of Climate-Related Risks and a Changing Climate."
While the consequences of the Anthropocene are severe and uneven, the reality of their impact on the American economy, particularly salient in the anticipated tie between decreasing agricultural yields and increasing food prices, suggests that a strategy of preservation of empire will be of utmost importance. Recent reports have heightened the fears of such a forecast, anticipating the costs of climate change at $200 billion of loss this century\textsuperscript{57} and reducing the average income of Americans by 10-50\% by 2100,\textsuperscript{58} which will be, of course, disproportionately distributed across the nation’s population.

The framing of “the politics of the armed lifeboat” offers another lens to the political moment and has brought into question whether Donald Trump is the First Demagogue of the Anthropocene.\textsuperscript{59} The resonance of a platform of anti-immigration is predicated on the manufacturing of consent, and its strategic shift from the strategy of anti-communism to the ‘war on terrorism.’\textsuperscript{60} The dominant fear-instilling strategy around terrorism offers insights into America’s stance on the uneven consequences of climate change, which anticipates the mass migration of people of color from thirsty, hungry, and drought-stricken regions susceptible to instability.\textsuperscript{61}

In an effort to marry the imperialist-driven lens on the Anthropocene, the historic and current flows of capital, and the entanglement of labor and natural resources, Donna Haraway has offered the term Plantationocene to capture these dimensions.\textsuperscript{62} This provides us with a key geography and history to point towards for the root of this crisis of man, politics, economics, and planet: that of the rural American South. This will be elaborated on in the following section on rural futurism.

As of now, the solutions offered to address climate change and the larger context of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantationocene are of five varieties: \textsuperscript{63,64}

- Markets will fix it
- Technology will fix it
- Individualize our accountability to our carbon footprint
- Individually retreat from civilization into pastoral life
- Give up

Of the first three varieties, the industry of responses, that of ‘Climate Inc.,’ aim to routinize practices of mitigation and adaptation, which only operate to maintain the existing political, economic, and social arrangements.\textsuperscript{65} The fourth points at least in

\textsuperscript{57} Davenport, “E.P.A. Warns of High Cost of Climate Change.”\textsuperscript{58} Burke, Hsiang, and Miguel, “Global Non-Linear Effect of Temperature on Economic Production.”\textsuperscript{59} Meyer, “Donald Trump is the First Demagogue of the Anthropocene.”\textsuperscript{60} Herman and Chomsky, \textit{Manufacturing Consent}.\textsuperscript{61} Ghosh, \textit{The Great Derangement}.\textsuperscript{62} Haraway et al., “Anthropologists Are Talking--About the Anthropocene.”\textsuperscript{63} Wark, \textit{Molecular Red}.\textsuperscript{64} Haraway, \textit{Staying with the Trouble}.\textsuperscript{65} Wapner and Elver, \textit{Reimagining Climate Change}. 

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a direction that recognizes the role of societal behaviors, particularly urban and particularly in developed countries. The fifth needs no address.

**The Anthropocene, The Self, and Our Collective Imagination**

In Norgaard’s Living In Denial, she discovers that the socially-organized denial of climate change, even in communities which accept its reality, is derived from an avoidance of uncomfortable feelings of despair, the sense of hypocrisy in our individual behaviors, and the magnitude of the problem. These have resulted in a cultural norm of inaction. Similarly, Ghosh describes the problem of the Great Derangement, in which we know that the transition to climate crisis is real and yet it fails to register in our collective consciousness. These proposals point to climate change as being “a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.”

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”—Fredric Jameson

Climate Inc. would have us continue on the current trajectory of techno-managerial responses, rather than to question the hegemonic order of global capitalism and imperialism, which will fall massively short of providing real possibility for a future. It is thus the work of imagination to liberate thought and action from the conventional approaches that Climate Inc. has set forth. Rather than focusing on the challenge as being beyond our selves, it is a challenge of how we understand ourselves and our way of making sense of the world. Indeed, “it is the crisis of the myths we tell ourselves. (And, thus) The crisis of stories”.

In short, the void of realizable alternatives and the dearth of our collective imaginations are central to the challenge of reckoning with the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantationocene. We are bound to the systems that we live within. Our current realities “provide most of the source material for our thinking about alternative realities and different futures.” In facing such an unprecedented problem, Wark claims that we “need speculative fiction that makes no claim to be a spokesmodel for the object world”, but rather to explore the limits of our imaginaries.

“The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world.” – The Dark Mountain Project

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66 Norgaard, *Living in Denial*.
68 Ibid. pg. 9
69 Jameson, “Future City.”
70 Wapner and Elver, *Reimagining Climate Change*.
71 *Earth Talk: Five Years on a Mountain*.
72 Wapner and Elver, *Reimagining Climate Change*. pg. 172
73 Wark, *Molecular Red*. pg. xxi
74 Kingsnorth and Hine, *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*. 

The work of imagining alternative possibilities operates on two reciprocal dimensions - the individual-cognitive processes and the collective-social processes. Future-oriented fictions can develop our ability to connect with the future emotionally and individually by exploring the meaning of one's life, identity, and values within alternative futures while also foregrounding the collective-social process of creating shared visions of the future. Thus, we can see the role of fiction as creating "political imaginaries that can inform and guide our future-oriented decisions". Wark calls for a collaborative imagination in the face of the Anthropocene that melds the understandings of working people, technical knowledge, and speculative fiction. The political opportunity of theory, Wark suggests, moves from controlling to communicative through the medium of fiction, which invites labor in to speak with and to grapple with it.

**Precedents for Re-Imagining the Anthropocene**

In the last several decades, many writers and theorists have risen to this challenge, and continue to call for more to join them as the imminent consequences of the Anthropocene draw nearer. They have derived early in the realm of science fiction and speculative fiction and, as the body of work grows, have developed into its own sub-genre of climate fiction. Much of the landscape of climate fiction lends itself towards dystopia and apocalyptic storytelling, which has provoked responses across the spectrum. On the one hand, Milkoreitt and others have claimed that climate-changed dystopias offer opportunities to re-imagine our society and interpret the meaning of human life, develops a sense of urgency, and helps us to identify political in-roads to making change to steer towards another direction. On the other hand, Swyngedouw argues that the fetishization of apocalypse only heightens the populist climate of fear and, potentially, shores the foundations for a "politics of the armed lifeboat." A further critique of dystopic climate fiction, and fiction more broadly, is that it can become a tool of escape from the trials and tribulations of daily life, and remains disconnected from the empathetic bridges towards others, as well as the decision-making processes of our everyday lives.

Other approaches to speculation, as it relates to the Anthropocene, have dealt more deeply with the hopeful, often within a landscape of despair. Donna Haraway is critical of the terms Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Plantationocene for their obsession with the history that brought us to this point. In an effort to turn towards the future, towards new beginnings, she puts forth the term Cthulucene and points us towards the need for multi-special kinship in which we learn to live and die well with one another, both human and non-human together. By using the concept of

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75 Wapner and Elver, *Reimagining Climate Change.*
76 Ibid.
77 Strauss, “These Overheating Worlds.”
78 Wark, *Molecular Red.*
79 Wapner and Elver, *Reimagining Climate Change.*
80 Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change.”
81 Kornhaber, “Westworld and the False Promise of Storytelling.”
compost, she suggests that we re-organize our understanding of ourselves to 1) explore how our survival requires recognition of our deep entanglements with nature, or the non-human, and 2) recreate modes of life that take the entire process of our living and dead forms into consideration.82

In Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower,83 a young woman, Lauren Olamina, recognizes that the belief systems that upheld the ‘normal’ world before the slow collapse are hindering the ability of her community to grapple with and survive within the new dystopic world of climate-changed Southern California. Lauren is the founder of a new religion, Earthseed, founded on the thesis:

“All that you touch you change, all that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.”

This new faith offers a sense of purpose and meaning for her and her followers in the landscape of despair. Through the book, Butler explores the role of belief systems, a sense of purpose, and the meaning of life as crucial elements to reorganizing how we understand ourselves within a changing future.

In Station Eleven,84 St. John Mandel explores the importance of culture and art within a world in which life has boiled down to the task of survival. Paulo Bacigalupi’s The Water Knife highlights the hydrogeological argument that overpopulation in the American southwest will result in severe water shortages in the near future, and the role an outdated water rights legal system plays in defining the region’s winners and losers.85 Barbara Kingsolver’s Flight Behavior explores the question of how to effectively communicate concepts of climate change in the midst of a mysterious event that has arrived in a struggling, highly conservative, and climate-denying faith-based community in eastern Tennessee.86

As we move into the era of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantationocene/Chthulucene, the work of re-imagining ourselves and the world in which we are embedded becomes a central task that precedes the building of solutions. Communicating these imaginaries through speculative fiction can assist in building empathetic bridges to the future and can be an instrument to the collective development of an orienting politics for shaping those futures in action.

82 Haraway, Staying with the Trouble.
83 Butler, Parable of the Sower.
84 Mandel, Station Eleven.
86 Kingsolver, Flight Behavior.
Re-Imagining Culture: Reckoning with White Supremacy

“The white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being.” – James Baldwin

W.E.B. Du Bois famously said, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” If there was any question left as to the twenty-first century’s inheritance of the same problem, in the wake of mass incarceration, the series of police shootings that launched Black Lives Matter, and persistent racial wealth inequality and school segregation, the 58% of the white vote in favor of the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States confirms that the twenty-first century has undoubtedly inherited the very same problem.

Omi and Winant describe a racial project as simultaneously an interpretation, representation, and explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. In short, race is an imaginary that has been specifically constructed to divide the American people, damaging each and every one of our abilities to realize our full humanity. In 2016, “millions of white voters have shown us that nothing existing on earth or in heaven or hell matters more to them than being white, and whichever privileges—real or fabricated, concrete or spiritual—existing as White in America provides.”

The sense of security, tenuous as it may be, that the construction of race has provided to those invested in whiteness has “undermined democracy, warped the Constitution, and weakened the nation’s ability to compete economically”. It is no surprise that the accumulated wealth of whites with power, business interests, and capital would vote to preserve their interests. What is particularly concerning is the vote of the white working class, which has a long history of learning to express their economic grievances primarily through the language of racism. In the 2016 election, 67% of whites without a college degree voted for Trump, representing a 14-point margin increase from 2012 and a 21-point margin increase from 2008. This demographic group has real pain. That they have opted to place their vote for a man who has built a portion of his wealth on the exploitation of working class people demonstrates a failure of the left to illuminate the class exploitation of the

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87 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time.  
89 Alexander, The New Jim Crow.  
90 Hannah-Jones, The Problem We All Live With.  
91 “Election 2016: Exit Polls.”  
92 Omi and Winant, Racial Formation in the United States.  
93 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time.  
94 Young, “This Is What White Supremacy Looks Like.”  
95 Anderson, White Rage. pg. 6  
96 Thompson, “Planning Ideas That Matter: Post-Election Debrief.”  
97 “Election 2016: Exit Polls.”  
98 Tyson and Maniam, “Behind Trump’s Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education.”
elite capitalist class as much as a success of the right’s long-legacy of re-enforcing
the education of white supremacy.

In White Rage, Carol Anderson concludes with an exercise in re-imagining the
history of reconstruction, integration, incarceration and voting rights. She states “it
is time to rethink America”.99 I would argue that the task is, additionally, to re-
image America. Part of that work is to re-imagine whiteness and expose the
damage that white supremacy does to both white people and people of color.
Another part of that work is to communicate these messages effectively to the
American people.

In The Racial Imaginary, Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda acknowledge that “we
are all... the bearers of unwanted and often shunned memory, of a history whose
infiltrations are at times so stealthy we can pretend otherwise, and at times so loud
we can’t hear much of anything else.”100 In writing and other creative tasks, we are
able to tap into our realms of our consciousness that are not at the forefront and,
thus, the revelatory power of our imagination. In line with Milkoreitt’s recognition
that our current world and the systems which we are embedded in construct our
imagination, Rankine and Loffreda extend this argument to our racial imaginary and
“the domain of culture, history, conditions we were born into and that preceded
us.”101 By writing specifically about race, in its complexities and discomforts, we
begin to work on the endless and unfinished task of disentangling, harnessing, and
expanding our imagination’s boundaries and to develop deeper understanding of
the complexity of our identities.

“There’s something about racism that has produced a fatalism that has impacted futuristic
thinking” – Alondra Nelson 102

The work of imagining futures, the bulk of which has been communicated to a
broader audience under the umbrella of science fiction, has historically applied the
erasure of race. While it has been argued that such futures are founded on socially
progressive tendencies, they are more often an evasion of the color line and operate,
covertly, to be racialized as white.103 By deeming race as something of the past,
rather than a truth of the future, the imagined worlds, resulting in a “blanching of
the future.”104

Afro-futurism, speculative feminism and queer theory have pushed back against
this, by foregrounding black, feminine, and queer agency and creativity, and using
the future as a place of liberation from the conditions of the present and the historic.
Black speculative fiction, or visionary fiction, has furthered these efforts by also

99 Anderson, White Rage. pg. 161
100 Rankine, Claudia and Loffreda, Beth, The Racial Imaginary. pg. 13
101 Ibid. pg. 21
102 Womack, Afrofuturism. pg. 41
103 Govan, “Connections, Links, and Extended Networks: Patterns in Octavia Butler’s Science Fiction.”
104 Rutledge, “Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The Racial Establishment.”
imagining alternative histories that lead to alternative present conditions. As described by the authors of Octavia’s Brood, Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha, these modes of speculative fiction pull “from real life experience, inequalities and movement building to create innovative ways of understanding the world around us, paint visions of new worlds that could be, and teach us new ways of interacting with one another.”

Rural America, predominantly working class whites, native peoples, Latinos, and, in the south, African-Americans, have felt themselves de-centered both in popular culture, urban and coast-centric media, and in visions of the future. For people without access to reliable internet, the techno-centric orientation of dominant society and works of futurism feel distant and removed from their realities. The feeling of disempowerment and despair can be seen through the toll of drug abuse and staggeringly high rates of suicide. By imagining rural futures that center on their experience and also explore the potential for enacting agency can provide a critical tool in building empowerment and liberatory frameworks. Given the prevailing culture of white supremacy within many of these communities, such a task of envisioning rural futures must also center the racial imaginary. By exploring futures where race is still real and difficult, rural futurism can also provide a space for grappling with white supremacy, the histories that have led us there, and the opportunities for collectively building a new world in which we discover and thrive in the potential of our humanity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that the practice of imagination must be applied with a critical sense of reckoning – reckoning with the back foot and the cultural tensions therein, reckoning with the post-political neoliberal global order, reckoning with the changing demands of capitalism and labor, reckoning with white supremacy in America, reckoning with climate crisis. These coupled and intertwined challenges suggest a need for multiple approaches to imagining alternative futures.

The efforts of speculative fiction work to shape and to expand our collective imaginations of possibility within the paralyzing challenges of today. In developing our emotional relationship with a multiplicity of futures, these realms of speculative futures help to create political imaginaries that inform and guide our future-oriented decisions in the present. Ghosh argues that the imagining of possibilities is not the job of politicians and bureaucrats, but the job of writers and artists. It is only in the foreground of imagining other forms of human existence that we can

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107 Rigg and Monnat, “Comparing Characteristics of Prescription Painkiller Misusers and Heroin Users in the United States.”
109 Strauss, “These Overheating Worlds.”
make possible a world which we do not yet know, and the politics to pursue such a world.\footnote{Ghosh, The Great Derangement.}

The imagination cannot be a place of escape and, instead, must be a place for reckoning. In order to reckon with our political moment and the firmly grounded back foot of the body politic, exploring the dreams, desires, fears, and futures of rural America is an essential task for building tomorrow’s world. As I have detailed in this section, such futures will necessitate that we take on the great challenges of our time, head on. I argue that re-imagining politics is essential to combat right-wing populism, as well as to break our neoliberal consensus and post-political moment. The challenge of climate change threatens to disrupt our ways of living and, for many, our chances of survival on this earth, and must be placed front and center to imagine alternative futures. Finally, the deeply entrenched divisions of race in American society continue to fortify the powers of white supremacy. Any possible future must take the reality of our racialized history and current moment into account. In an effort to further explore the potential of alternative futures, as a means to reckon with the bridge between eras, I explore the concept of ‘rural futurism’ and put forth a set of speculative fictions that attempt to grapple with the essential questions that such a body of work entails.

Re-Imagining America: A Theory of Rural Futurism

Rural America has long been the bedrock of conservatism and in resistance to change. As I have described in the previous section, there are many who live in rural America, or who have rural sympathies, who are adverse to the future and the change it is bringing with it. In the context of a highly resistant and nostalgic back foot of the American body politic, the question of what the future holds, and how we can align our visions for that future is particularly confounding. Thus far we, on the left, seem to have forsaken such a mentality, and have pushed forward in expectation of dragging the back foot along all the same. Such a strategy has clearly failed. What then does it look like to build a future that speaks to both our dreams and the dreams of our countrymen across the divide? In this section, I put forth an argument of ‘rural futurism’ as a means to examine this question, to re-imagine America by re-imagining rural America.

The rural operates in the American imagination as a place of lore and lure.\footnote{Gurley, "Why The Left Isn’t Talking About Rural American Poverty."} Nostalgic stories of the American frontier, a pioneer spirit, and the possibility of self-sufficiency through living off the land operate powerfully in the nation’s consciousness, the notion of the American Dream, and in the libertarian politics that fortify the conservative base.\footnote{Hochschild, Strangers in Their Own Land.} In contrast, the lure of rural America fulfills a
place of idyllic beauty, resonating with a fascination with nature yet a feeling of disconnection from the natural environment. This operates to imagine the rural as a place of peace and scenic wonder in which we can find respite or recreation outside of metropolitan centers.

These imaginaries hold power and operate through popular culture, political messaging, and the ways that we see ourselves. The imagined rural farmer and pioneer reifies the spirit of the self-made man within the tenets of American individualism and anti-regulation neoliberalism. The imagined natural splendor of rural place gives strength to the spirit of environmentalism while veiling the impact of our daily consumption on that very same environment.

Further, these imaginaries also work to obscure the challenging reality of life for many of the people in rural America, which places the political, economic, and social concerns of rural peoples out of view. 81% of persistent-poverty counties are designated non-metropolitan. Rural child poverty rates are higher than for urban children across every racial and ethnic group and that gap is only growing. Rural young people commit suicide at nearly double the rate of youth in urban areas and are much more likely to abuse prescription painkillers. Middle-aged white Americans without a college education, a group strongly represented in rural America, are for the first time in recent history experiencing a rising mortality rate, which has been linked to increasing rates of suicide and substance abuse.

"Despair is the collapse of forever into the strain of now." — Anne Amnesia

These social crises are deeply tied to the economic crisis of rural America, with stagnating job growth, declining wages, low education attainment, and limited economic diversity. While the process of rural decline has a long historical trajectory, closely tied to economic restructuring, automation of blue-collar labor, and the dominance of corporate agriculture and resource extraction, it has only recently emerged in the nation’s public eye, most potently with the rise of populism across rural America. With a governmental structure that gives disproportionate representation to rural regions, the lack of attention given to building a left organizing base and platform that speaks to the interests of rural peoples is striking.

113 VanDer Werff, "Progressive Fundamentalism: How Hollywood and the Media Fortify the Bubbles We All Live in."
114 Coontz, The Way We Never Were.
115 Johnson, "Rural Demographic Change in the New Century: Slower Growth, Increased Diversity."
116 Johnson, "Rural America Undergoing A Diversity of Demographic Change."
117 Fontanella et al., "Widening Rural-Urban Disparities in Youth Suicides, United States, 1996-2010."
118 Rigg and Monnat, "Comparing Characteristics of Prescription Painkiller Misusers and Heroin Users in the United States."
119 Case and Deaton, "Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century."
120 Amnesia, "Unnecessariat."
121 Bailey et al., Rural America in a Globalizing World.
122 Miller, "The Long-Term Jobs Killer is Not China. It's Automation."
The expectation that increasing urbanization and increasing demographic change will outlast the conservative strongholds, politically, has been placed into question, as rural counties become increasingly red and experience declining and stagnating employment, as shown in the figures below. (It is also worth mentioning that the economic decline or rural regions may be an early indicator of the wider spread impacts of the contraction of the welfare state, economic restructuring, neoliberal policy, and automation).

These dynamics give a general sense of the social justice grounding for centering the ‘rural’ in politics, planning and development. Yet, tackling these issues within the context of surging populism, and its turn towards authoritarianism, may make the solution spaces more confounding. In this despairing context, what does a rural future look like? Where are the sites in which rural America can enact agency towards their own self-determination? How do we begin to build rural imaginaries that speak to the dreams and desires of these communities while reckoning with the historic and current tensions that exist along the rural-urban divide?

To address these questions, I argue for a “rural futurism” and operationalize this concept on two levels – the realizable and the speculative. Using the framework of “envisioning real utopias”, I aim to offer a vision for a radical alternative future within the currently existing institution of the rural electric cooperative. These cooperatives are long-standing institutions with the mandate to be governed democratically and ensure shared ownership by their members. While the primary focus of these institutions has been delivering electricity at ‘the lowest cost possible’, their flexible legal and self-regulated status, their long-standing history of political involvement, and their design as economic development intermediaries offer in-roads towards an alternative future.

123 "A Country Divided By Counties."
124 "Rural Employment and Unemployment."
126 Cooper, "Electric Co-Operatives."
By placing the electric cooperative as the site for realizing alternative futures, it is then possible to imagine what the process of engaging rural communities, communities that have long been neglected in education and organizing efforts, might entail. Such a process will require a deep ground-game of engagement and education. It will also require an enduring process of empowerment and collective-consciousness building that may lead towards a mobilized and organized. At this time, cooperative members across fifteen states have begun to organize in their local communities and are networking their efforts through the emerging organizing and education platform, We Own It. While these developments suggest an exciting turn from the long stagnation in the cooperative’s democratic function, the organizing agenda has been primarily focused on local battles and incremental gains. The challenges being made include:

- increasing member representation on cooperative boards,
- addressing long-standing discriminatory practices,
- increasing transparency of cooperative finances and operations, and
- increasing the renewable energy generation profile of local cooperatives

The varying goals of these organizing efforts are critical first steps towards improved electric cooperative function and increased democratic governance. Additionally, their ability to network their resources, educational materials, and tactics demonstrate the potential for local organizing to build towards a larger cooperative movement. However, the achievement of these incremental goals without a larger vision for the future of the cooperatives and the rural communities they represent will fall substantially short of addressing the political, social, and economic issues across rural America.

I argue that a secondary-level of rural futurism can offer an essential tool towards the process of community empowerment and locally-driven visioning for a re-imagined rural electric cooperative – the tool of speculative fiction. As Ledwith describes in Critical Community Development, radical community development begins with the process of empowerment through critical consciousness building. Speculative fictions that center the rural in explorations of alternative futures can offer one tool, among many, to drive democratic discourse and inspire the political imaginaries of rural communities to articulate their own agendas for rural futures.\(^\text{127}\) In effect, by communicating a set of speculative fictions about the future of rural America, organizers and community members may be empowered to ask the essential question ‘what if?’

This question may lead to the question ‘what do I want to see the future look like?’ and, of even more import, ‘what can I do about it today?’ The goal for setting out multiple speculative rural futures, then, is not to prescribe the future, but rather to draw on essential themes that ignite a process of critical consciousness building. While I have set out a vision for the potential futures of the rural electric cooperative, it is the members themselves that must create their vision for the

\(^{127}\) Ledwith and Campling, Community Development.
futures they desire to see realized. Thus, the goals of a cooperative-centered rural future may be a guide towards thinking of the future, while the tool of speculative fiction offers itself as an ignition towards the local and democratically constructed vision for rural futures.

**Rural Futurism: Re-Imagining the Rural Electric Cooperative**

What would it look like to re-imagine local institutions and their role in achieving community interests, needs, and desires? What would it look like for distressed communities to take control of local institutions to develop local economies, local politics, and pathway towards community self-determination?

The rural electric cooperative (REC) has long gone overlooked for its potential to engage and organize disinvested communities towards achieving greater autonomy over their lives. The 905 RECs span 75% of the geographic area of the United States, as shown in the map to the right, and serves 42 million Americans in the most remote parts of the country, including 93% of the nation’s persistent-poverty counties and other counties suffering severe economic decline. As a cooperative, each person that receives electricity from the cooperative is a member and an owner of the company. As a member, a person is able to have a voice and a vote in cooperative decisions. As an owner, a person has an equity stake in the cooperative’s assets and revenues, proportional to their energy usage.

The role of the REC in these communities has been, and will continue to be, first and foremost a utility provider. Additionally, there are a number of advantages of the cooperative structure and the REC mission that demonstrate opportunities towards a radically re-imagined democratic institution. In order to fully understand the opportunities within the cooperative to achieve these goals, it is important to step back and develop a larger framework for rural futures. Harvey Perloff offers a theoretical framework for the grounded construction of futures that grapples with the continuity between the past, present, and future components of the future:

- The future that will be inherited from the past
- The future that is being made in the present
- The future to be made in the future

Using this lens, we can step through time to better understand the potential of rural electric cooperatives as an intermediary for rural futurism. In particular, this

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128 “National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Map.”
129 Perloff, “Education of City Planners: Past, Present and Future.”
analysis will focus on the geography of the rural South to explore the dimensions of history, present, and future possibility. This specific focus will be explored in greater detail in the following section on speculative fiction and in the following short stories. The rural South is an exemplary case of the struggle for overcoming difference and the reification of white supremacy, conservative politics, and climate change denial within working class white populations. It offers the context within which speculative fictions are able to explore the historic, present, and future dimensions of organizing and building within populations of difference. Additionally, the context of the rural American south is a critical focus to understand the long legacy of the southern roots that underlie American politics, the formation of the Plantationocene and the education system of white supremacy. As W.E.B. Du Bois once famously said, “as the South goes, so goes the Nation,” a statement that rings true in today’s times.

**The future that will be inherited from the past**

The history of rural cooperative movements and the politics they inspired date back to the mid-1800s for both African-American communities and small farmers. The cooperative platform was a key element of the Grange Movement, the Alliance, and the Knights of Labor, and later the Populist Party that these movements inspired in a time of dramatic technological, economic, and social change from the 1870s through the 1890s. During that time, the values of cooperation became embedded institutionally throughout rural America and would help facilitate the populist sentiments in defense of rural peoples against railroad monopolies, economic exclusion from banking institutions, and the interests of northern industrialists and southern plantation elites, alike. In 1891, the agrarian movement solidified into the Populist Party, pushing for collective goals for rural America (excluding, however, black farmers from its ranks) that held cooperative economics as a key tenet of its platform.

With rising influence in Southern and Midwestern politics, and with a strong ally in the vocal USDA, cooperatives began building national attention. The newly established National Farmers Union effectively created cooperatives and pushed for cooperative legislation. In 1903, the USDA developed the Farmer’s Cooperative Demonstration Program. In 1914 two southern representatives pushed through the Smith-Lever Act, which created the Cooperative Extension Service. In 1922, the National Farmers’ Union supported the Capper-Volstead Act, yet another integral part of legitimating cooperative development. These events marked the agrarian social movements’ influence on political outcomes and thus created the conditions

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133 Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism.*
134 “NFU.”
for cooperatives as widespread organizational forms to defend farmers against exploitation and to create local democratic structures. Agricultural cooperatives continued to grow through the depression-era with USDA support and still play an important role across rural America.

The agricultural cooperative movement and incorporation into state practices provides an important backdrop for understanding the dynamics that produced the USDA’s decision to establish a cooperative model for rural electrification in the 1930s, in response to the food security concerns of the enduring Dust Bowl and in an effort to bring rural America into the modern era of consumer capitalism. While the cooperative structure ideologically aligned with rural communities across the nation, the implementation of the cooperatives in the American South led to great disparities.

Cooperative ownership, formation, and management was closely linked to land ownership. Across the South, this focus in the electric cooperatives stood to primarily benefit plantation owners while excluding sharecroppers and tenant farmers, poor whites and African-Americans alike. It was left to the landowner’s discretion as to whether or not to provide electricity to tenant housing. In many cases, they did not. In other cases, they utilized the cost of electricity as an additional form of debt bondage to maintain the essentially feudal structure of sharecropping, sometimes going so far as to charge the electricity costs of the entire farm to the tenants (anecdotal information obtained through discussion in community meeting in Clarksdale).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s directly challenged the system of sharecropping and Jim Crow politics. On the one hand, there were the courageous efforts of rural southern African-Americans who organized their communities, developed educational programs, and attempted to register to vote in the face of racial violence. On the other hand, plantation elites rallied poor whites, most notably through the organization of White Citizen Councils, to utilize terror tactics to prevent the upheaval of the Jim Crow system. These efforts were focused on inciting violence, including lynchings, beatings, and firebombings, and economic intimidation by organizing business owners and employees to threaten black employment for those who attempted to vote or organize for civil rights.

Through the long process of local organizing and increased national media attention, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 overturned the system of Jim Crow, at least in legal terms, and provided a glimpse towards a hopeful direction for equal treatment of African-Americans in the south and across the nation. Civil rights organizations began working across the south to register

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136 Dittmer, Local People.
137 Ibid.
African-American voters and to support candidates running for elected office. In 1982, the Southern Regional Council recognized the rural electric cooperative as an essential element of this strategy that had been overlooked. This led them to launch the Cooperative Democracy and Development Project (CDDP), targeting twenty-one electric cooperatives across Black Belt counties in the rural South. As director Steve Suitts said, "The democratic control of rural economic institutions must be part of the strategy to change. In rural places like the Black Belt, the existing utility cooperatives are one of the first and most important economic institutions that the poor can help control."138 The cooperative board elections offered the opportunity to directly challenge the authority of plantation and business elite control and also recognized the great opportunity for community and economic development that the cooperatives offered. By this time, the USDA had designated electric cooperatives as priority intermediaries with direct access to USDA rural development loans and grants.

The CDDP recognized that, particularly in counties with large or majority black residents, gaining board representation could lead towards greater economic opportunity and equitable rural development. The organizing effort discovered, in addition to the known discriminatory practices, a history of exceptional financial mismanagement in many cooperatives, including excessive board stipends, nepotism in contract agreements, and cooperative funds utilized to finance segregated academy schools and country clubs.139 The long-standing cooperative boards, however, proved to be heavily resistant to change. Due to a lack of regulatory oversight, self-interested bylaw terms, and tactics of intimidation and exclusion, which included barring blacks from board elections and one account of attempted arson, the project ultimately failed to achieve its goals. Over the course of the four-year organizing project in the twenty-one cooperative service areas, the CDDP was able to elect one single board member through a multi-racial effort in Dixie Electric, Greenwell Springs, Louisiana.

The future that is being made in the present

In many parts of the country, and most notably in the south, the cooperatives continue to operate without oversight. Of the 47 states with cooperatives, only six states fully regulate rates and six additional states have limited regulation authority.140 Concerns of discriminatory practices remain and numerous examples of financial corruption have been revealed.141 In a recent report, The Rural Power Project found that, of the available data, 95% of cooperative board representatives in the South are white and 90% are men.142 Additionally, the electric cooperatives have power that reaches far beyond the domain of electric utility provision at the

138 Leifermann and Wehner, "A Question of Power: Race and Democracy in Rural Electric Co-ops."
139 Fitzgerald, History of Electric Co-operative Organizing Efforts in the South.
140 Grimley, "Just How Democratic Are Rural Electric Cooperatives."
141 Cooper, "Electric Co-Operatives."
142 Labor Neighbor Research and Training Center, "Democracy Lost and Discrimination Found: The Crisis in Rural Electric Cooperatives in The South."
local level. In thirty-eight states, the cooperatives have established a state association, fully funded by the member cooperatives, tasked with state network communications, lobbying activities, and managing campaign contributions, which have supported primarily Republican candidates with primary goals of maintaining minimal oversight of Public Service Commissions over cooperative activities.

At the federal level, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), the trade association and national lobbying arm of the cooperatives, has been deemed "one of the most potent and influential political forces in the country." The electric cooperatives operate across 80% of the nation’s counties, and are considered important constituents for 201 Congressional Districts and 92 US senators. The NRECA utilizes their role across the vast region to play an active role in environmental legislation, energy policy, and Farm Bill policy, but has also been found testifying before most major committees in its long tenure as a lobbying entity.

The NRECA also hosts the Action Committee for Rural Electrification (ACRE) PAC and the Co-op Vote get-out-the-vote program across rural America. In 2016, ACRE PAC spent $3,875,352, with 74% of federal campaign contributions expended on Republican candidates. The Co-op Vote effort, active in 47 states, has been lauded as hugely successful, reaching millions across rural America and claiming, as NRECA senior advisor Laura Vogel acknowledged, that the increase in rural voting this election “was due, in large part, to the Co-ops Vote message that voting is the only way to protect rural America’s interests.” The unprecedented margins of support for Trump across rural America demonstrate the politics of the rural electric cooperative sector at large.

The NRECA approval of a conservative anti-regulation is in no small part a result of their staunch opposition to the Clean Power Plan, for which they have played an active role in petitioning for a Supreme Court halt to the plan until litigation is complete. Electric cooperatives consume nearly 75% of their electricity from coal generation and have continued to push the narrative of ‘lowest cost possible’ through local cooperative ‘Straight Talk’ grassroots campaigns that highlight the concerns of clean power regulation to member pocketbook issues. One cooperative has gone so far as to finance climate denial research, with $100,000 of the cooperatives’ funds – all of which are directly received from members through their electricity bills. With a climate-denier appointed to the helm of the EPA and

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143 Instone, Social, and Enquiry, *Lines Across the Land*. pg. 213
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
146 “Opensecrets: National Rural Electric Cooperative Assn.”
147 Cash, "Co-Ops Vote Tapped Rural America."
148 Cash, “Clean Power Plan’s Day in Court.”
150 Cooper, “Electric Co-Operatives.”
the CEO of ExxonMobil appointed to lead the Department of State, it is expected that the electric cooperatives' strategy for cheap carbon-based generation will prevail for years to come, unless the cooperative members take matters into their own hands.

The politics of the electric cooperative sector demonstrate that they are an influential force in both state and federal policy battles. Additionally, they play an important grassroots role in constructing and reinforcing anti-regulation, pro-coal, and climate-denial sentiments. In the face of these challenges, however, cooperative members across fifteen states have begun to organize against the status-quo in their local cooperatives, and this movement is expected to grow. “The cooperatives still offer the potential to break the cycle (of poverty) in the rural South,” Steve Suitts says. “You could bring these rural areas back, if you built infrastructure to serve these community.”152 While many of these efforts are in their nascent stages, they are looking to the success and demonstrated changes within cooperatives that have undergone democratic challenges for a roadmap forwards.

There have been a number of cases of electric cooperative members successfully organizing and overturning their board, which has mapped a new direction for the cooperative strategy. Two of particular interest, the example of Ouachita Electric Cooperative in Camden, Arkansas and Roanoke Electric Cooperative in Ausable, North Carolina, are detailed in the articles provided in Appendix 1 and 2, respectively. Other examples of member-led cooperative reforms can be found on Pedernales153 and Choctaw Electric.154,155

Additionally, the NRECA and the ACRE PAC have a specific duty to uphold the interests of their members. As member-organizing efforts grow and, perhaps, achieve their goals of member representation, expanded transparency, and increased commitment to clean energy, there is a possibility that the NRECA and ACRE PAC can shift to match the interests and needs of a vocal membership base. The first steps, however, are building a unified vision and a widespread, empowered rural organizing base for voicing their demands to the trade associations and lobbying entities that they fully finance to represent them.

**The future to be made in the future**

In a 2013 study undertaken by a small cohort of progressive cooperative leaders within the NRECA, they declared that “the Purpose of the electric cooperatives is to power communities and empower members to improve the quality of their lives.”156 The 21st century cooperative purpose report called for increased member

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152 Suitts, The History of Electric Co-operative Organizing.
154 “CEC Petition Group Continues to Gather Signatures for Removal of Board.”
155 Cooper, “Electric Co-Operatives.”
engagement and education, strengthening democratic governance, and a greater role in community development activities. While this progressive report stands as a reference paper outside the norm of the cooperative world, it does indicate the simmering of a turn towards recognizing the power that the cooperative offers beyond simply utility provision. With the empowerment of rural communities as a compass, and in recognition of the cultural and political history of rural cooperatives, we can begin to map a strategy for the cooperatives' role in creating empowered and self-determined rural futures.

Energy Democracy for a Just Transition
One of the greatest initial opportunities for cooperative-led rural futures is to lead the charge for a just transition to clean power. Unlike private utilities that are indebted to investors and bottom line revenues, the cooperatives are charged to act in their members' interests rather than in the interests of capital. With an empowered membership base, the cooperative offers in-roads for far-reaching energy efficiency programming to lower member bills and save on generation capacity. During the energy crisis of the 1970s, the cooperatives were incentivized through federal programs to build out coal power facilities, which has placed eight cooperatives in the “Greenhouse 100” list of top polluters. However, many cooperatives are pressing forward with community solar projects, with 43 projects developed and 35 in the pipeline across 24 states. These projects have recognized the benefits of local shared ownership of renewable energy generation that cooperatives offer.

The substantial push for solar generation in recent years has been primarily implemented through third party providers, such as SolarCity. Corporate-led approaches to renewable energy may achieve a transition to clean energy in the coming decades, but the wealth created by such a transition will be amassed in the hands of very few investors. The goal of rapidly reducing our carbon footprint has developed incentives that essentially trade one group of wealthy coal power companies and investors or another group of wealthy solar and wind power companies and investors. While the solar and wind industry offer more jobs than the coal industry, this approach to a clean energy transition does not suggest an opportunity for wealth re-distribution.

Electric cooperatives, however, offer a utility structure that can lead the way towards a just transition by developing clean energy projects that are community or cooperative owned and ensure the creation and retention of jobs and wealth that are kept local. Additionally, massive low-interest loans and grants are available to do just that, through the USDA Energy Efficiency and Conservation Loan Program and the USDA Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program. Rather than

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158 “Greenhouse 100 Polluters Index.”
159 Aranoff, “How to Socialize America’s Energy.”
160 Ibid.
giving in to the “Straight Talk” narrative of lowest-cost possible, the opportunities in a just transition to clean energy can be uplifted by cooperative-member organizers as an economic development strategy and local ownership opportunity.

**Locally-Driven Community Economic Development Strategies**

Electric cooperatives were initially set up as an intermediary agent for community and economic development. The USDA offers millions of dollars in rural development loans and grants that electric cooperatives can access for local initiatives. One particular program to note is the REDLG program, which has provided $367 million in zero-interest loans and grants since 2009, utilizing electric cooperatives and public utilities as the financial intermediaries for local small business and community development funding. Additionally, the electric cooperative, under 501(c)12 tax status, can utilize up to 15% of their funds for activities beyond utility provision.161

The process of de-industrialization, the corporatization of the agricultural sector, and technological changes in the mining industries has thoroughly gutted the economy across many rural communities.162 Many rural communities often have one or two significant industries or employers, leaving them particularly vulnerable to shifts in the economy and globalization. Many of the industries that have left rural America are not coming back. Other industries have forced a race to the bottom approach to economic development as multiple communities and states vie for selection through tax incentives, low labor standards, and right to work policies.

The electric cooperative can offer an alternative way forward that centers the needs and interests of their members for community economic development strategies. This can be enacted by providing a hub for resources and development agenda-setting, pursuing USDA Rural Development funds and other funding sources, and building out community development with business incubations, workforce development training programs, and strategic partnerships with regional stakeholders (refer to Appendix 2 for more information).

**An Agenda for Rural Politics**

Excepting the Black Belt of the South, Native reservations, and majority Latino communities in the Southwest, rural America has been an anchor for conservative values and politics, which has been reflected in the cooperative’s political agendas and lobbying and campaign action. The long-enduring ground game of the Republican Party and, more recently, the Tea Party, has played off of a distrust for authority, a disdain for urban elite rule, and the libertarian sentiments of the American frontier man to strengthen its roots in these communities. Under the post-political neoliberal consensus, campaigns have focused particular attention to cultural and identity politics, uplifting the religious values of White Christian America and developing a climate of fear and protectionist ideology on issues of

161 "Tax-Exempt Status for Your Organization."
162 Bailey et al., *Rural America in a Globalizing World.*
terrorism, immigration, and urban violence. In 2016, the economic concerns of conservatives were added to this agenda, strongly represented by white, non-college educated, and rural people, placing the message of anti-globalization and nationalism into the limelight.

As described in the earlier chapter, this populist expression of economic concerns suggests a questioning of the neoliberal consensus, but has been grounded in a tax-cutting, anti-regulation messaging and has been followed up by a solidification of corporate business interests in the Trump administration appointments. The next four years offer an opportunity to engage these aggrieved rural communities that have put their faith in a president and a strategy that will unlikely demonstrate measured benefits for them. Through a deep ground game, education, democratic discourse, and cooperative organizing, an agenda that speaks directly to the needs of cooperative members can push back against the persistent exploitation of the rural vote for corporate interests.

By formulating a unified vision for rural political interests, separate from the national conservative messaging, cooperatives can utilize the Co-op Vote platform, the NRECA’s lobbying leverage, and ACRE to re-direct and leverage the cooperative members voice and vote in state and federal politics. One near-term opportunity to test such an approach to leveraging the power of the cooperative is the coming Farm Bill of 2018.

*Collective Control of Rural Natural Resources*
Climate change poses a grave threat to the world’s natural resources. Facing anticipated warming of 1.5 to 4 degrees Celsius and global population growth, the essential resources of food, land, water, energy, and mineral resources will likely become exponentially more valuable and the rights and ownership of these resources will be threatened by increasing privatization and corporate take-over. The electric cooperative stands as one of the few examples of shared ownership and localized democratic governance with the capacity to defend itself from outside and corporate take-over. The cooperatives’ ability to determine the sourcing of energy generation offers a great opportunity for a just clean energy transition in the face of climate change. As agricultural land and water resources become threatened by a warming climate, the electric cooperative may also offer an exemplary model for organizing and governing these resources, as well.

Corporate agriculture, with assistance through USDA policy, has severely damaged farmland with monoculture practices and mechanized farming has reduced the need for farm labor across great swaths of the country. A rural politics that centers the wealth of land and the benefits of redistribution or collectivization may serve to heal the damaged soil while also stimulating a resurgence of small farming across the country.

The electric cooperatives are situated beneath the USDA Rural Utilities Service department, which includes the rural water program. If the electric cooperatives
can demonstrate the ability to reform into democratically-governed institutions serving the interests of its members, they may serve as a model for the increasingly urgent need for improved rural water management systems. Additionally, the political power of the electric cooperatives may serve as a basis for challenging the corporate extraction of mineral resources, and its derived wealth, that is sourced within cooperative service areas.

**Rural Futurism: Speculative Fiction and Critical Consciousness Building**

"We must believe that we can make apparently impossible dreams possible, so long as we live out that existing, truly."\(^{163}\)

Margaret Ledwith describes a critical approach to community development as being deeply rooted in the process of critical consciousness building, the Freirean popular education concept of the dynamic between critical thought and empowered critical action.\(^{164}\) The story of a community is an essential component of this, in that it values the participants' experiences and the experiences of their peers, which introduces a lens into seeing how larger forces play out within their own lives.\(^{165}\) In this model, the role of the critical community developer is to create a context for questioning that helps local people make connections between their individual lives and the structure of society, which can then lead them into strategic action.

In the initial steps of organizing and educating within a community, answers are less important that getting people to think about the questions – "what are the real forces impacting your life? What concerns are there for your future?"\(^{166}\) The catalyst to stimulating this process can be multiple, but both Horton and Freire discuss in great detail the role of dreams as "the language of possibility," particularly for impoverished and despairing communities.\(^{167}\) They describe a popular education approach in which the facilitator creates a context where people can generate their political dreams, yearnings, and desires. Through such a process, a community is able to explore deeper questions of why they want what they want and, in the next steps, how to achieve that through their collective agency.

In this section, I argue that creating an emotional and imaginative connection to rural futures, mediated through speculative fiction, can provide a tool for walking people into alternative possibilities and the agency they have within the present, while also providing the context for deliberation and revelation of the interconnection between their lives and larger social, political, and economic processes. By stepping outside of the current moment, and the blinders that exist therein, the future provides a context to explore how the decisions we make today,

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163 Freire, *Daring to Dream.*
164 Ledwith and Campling, *Community Development.*
165 Horton and Jacobs, *The Myles Horton Reader.*
166 Ibid.
167 Freire, *Daring to Dream.*

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individually, in community, and as a nation, have important consequences tomorrow. Speculation, and the grounding question of ‘what if?’ can be effectively applied to reveal how certain elements of our history and current conditions will map on to a pathway forward.\textsuperscript{168} By communicating such projections through the medium of fiction, it is possible to develop a mental and emotional connection to those futures and to discover how our agency can be employed in the present to inspire action.

McAdam’s work on the political process model for collective action is a useful framework for understanding the possibilities and challenges for rural electric cooperatives to become the site of challenging the status-quo and constructing alternative rural futures.\textsuperscript{169} As described in the previous section, the discontent and economic grievances of rural America, and the empowerment of these sentiments through populism, indicate that these communities are ripe with political opportunities. The current organizing work in the cooperatives and the political and financial strength of the rural electric cooperative network suggests its utility as a mobilizing structure for rural communities. Similarly, the populist sentiments of rural (white) Americans suggest an initial step towards cognitive liberation, a condition that has long existed for other marginalized groups in rural America, in which there is collective recognition that \textit{something is wrong and must be addressed}. Yet, the faith put in an authoritative figure, as savior, demonstrates that the process of cognitive liberation, and its framing processes, must be further developed to enact for true potential of a movement.

A Freire/Horton approach to critical consciousness building through popular education can be utilized to build the cognitive liberation of cooperative members and provide a framework for developing a unified vision for alternative futures. Speculative fiction is one tool to connect this process with the futures that are being constructed. In order for this to be an effective tool, however, it must explore the essential themes at the core of re-imagining America: politics, the Anthropocene, and culture.

\textbf{Politics, Neoliberalism, and the American Dream}

Trump rode a wave of support for his promises to return jobs to economically struggling communities. As discussed in previous sections, this argument largely targeted globalization, immigration, regulation and high corporate taxes as the culprits for the current economic circumstances. While there were clear grievances against the current neoliberal consensus, the narrative that has been employed disassembles the complexity of the economic restructuring that has moved the American economy from an industrial and manufacturing economy to an economy concentrated on technological innovation, finance, health care, and specialized knowledge. Additionally, the conservative narrative speaks to the myth of American

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Wark, \textit{Molecular Red}.
\item McAdam, \textit{Political Process and The Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970}.
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individualism, the self-made man, and inherited racism while obscuring the role of neoliberal policy and the contraction of the welfare system in creating the conditions of economic decline. As Hochschild describes, the political ideology of rural and white working class communities is strongly derived from a hatred for taxes and the loss of honor predicated on the myth of the American Dream— the need for help but a principled refusal to accept it.\(^{170}\)

Trump's agenda and conservative policies will likely serve only to exacerbate the economic decline of rural and working class communities, particularly through increased corporate tax cuts and the rolling back of already-starved welfare programs, indicated with initial targeting of the Affordable Care Act. However, the importance of economic matters for rural politics opens a door of opportunity to developing a critical consciousness around issues of politics and economics. This moment also offers an opportunity to shift the distracting agenda of racial identity politics towards a class-based politics that may find greater resonance with left political ideas. Speculative fiction can provide 'what if?' scenarios that can initiate conversation around politics and economics. In particular, themes that address concepts of neoliberalism, the American Dream, class, and race offer in-roads to democratic discussion for illuminating the systems that impact people's lives. Additionally, by offering economic alternatives, such as economic democracy and cooperative economics, fiction can reveal the possibilities of locally-driven development and the electric cooperative as a model that speaks to the deep belief in local community self-determination of rural communities.

Speaking about economics and politics through fiction requires a shift in how we, on the left, communicate these issues to a broader public. In Death Beyond Disavowal, Hong proposes shifting our understanding of neoliberalism from a political economic structure to a process of disavowal of certain populations and, by extension, certain geographies.\(^{171}\) This argument is predicated by Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the power to make certain populations live and make other populations die through state instruments and technologies.\(^{172}\) In the history of rural America, several instruments and technologies were utilized to manage populations for the economic interests of elites and corporations. Core to this strategy was the management of enslaved African populations to extract the optimal amount of labor from each body for the economic interests of the plantation economy, and the nation's wealth. Additionally, the strategy to open frontier native-colonial borderlands for poor white settlers helped to slowly expand the protected lands for plantation and corporate interests at the expense of the lives of Native Americans and the poor whites who fought to secure the frontier as it expanded westward.\(^{173}\)

\(^{170}\) Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land.*
\(^{171}\) Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal.*
\(^{172}\) Foucault and Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader.*
\(^{173}\) Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power.*
Emancipation and industrialization, deeply intertwined as they were, required a shift in biopolitical instruments, including restricting the black vote and enforced segregation, among other effective strategies. The greatest shift, however, comes with the rise of neoliberalism, in which the goal of population management, domestically, becomes torn between ‘make live’ and ‘let die’ strategies for governing life, death, and health in the best interests of the liberal economy. This introduces a shift from surplus labor - those who could work but are kept from doing so to keep wages low - to surplus life - those who are no longer needed for the interests of the liberal economy.

The most powerful tool for managing surplus life in the neoliberal economy has been evident through the warehousing of people of color, most notably through the system of mass incarceration. The shift from the biopolitical instrument of slavery to mass incarceration has led Kali Akuno, co-director of Cooperation Jackson to question Black Lives Matter, declaring that “your (black) life did matter, when you were valuable property... (but) we’re not valuable property anymore.”

Blogger Anne Amnesia highlights rural America more broadly as a landscape of surplus life. She writes, “We aren’t precariously, we’re unnecessary. The money has gone to the top. The wages have gone to the top. The recovery has gone to the top. And what’s worst of all, everybody who matters seems basically pretty okay with that.” Rather than managing this population through the ‘let die’ warehousing of people in prisons, the acceptance of ‘letting you kill yourself’ in rural America even further individualizes the biopolitics of current neoliberal politics. Through this lens, the white working class and rural turn support for Trump, (in which he performed best in counties with the highest drug, alcohol, and suicide mortality rates), is perhaps best illustrated by the cry “Deplorable Lives Matter.” By projecting the impact of neoliberalism and biopolitical instruments of ‘let die’ into the future, speculative fiction can speak directly to the crisis of the current political and economic trajectory, while also highlighting the potential for alternatives that speak to the values of rural peoples.

**Grappling With The Anthropocene**

The issue of dealing with climate change is perhaps the most difficult question that we face, as we lack a cognitive understanding of the ramifications that these actions will have on a warming planet. In Strangers In Their Own Land, Hochschild identifies “The Great Paradox” for Tea Party members in Lake Charles, Louisiana – that in conservative and rural communities, there is a greater disdain for government regulation than for corporate exploitation of labor and environment.  

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174 Hong, Death beyond Disavowal.
175 Willse, The Value of Homelessness.
176 Schneider, “The Revolutionary Life and Strange Death of a Radical Black Mayor.”
177 Amnesia, “Unnecessariat.”
179 Hochschild, Strangers in Their Own Land.
This ‘paradox’ has fueled the polarizing sentiment of jobs vs. regulation in many states and in communities that are heavily reliant on energy, timber, mining, and natural resource extraction. This has been demonstrated through the 2016 election, in which 21 of the 22 states with the highest carbon-emissions per capita voted for Trump.\textsuperscript{180}

Just over six months after 194 member states signed the Paris Agreement to keep global warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius, a climate denier has been appointed to head the Environmental Protection Agency, a climate skeptic to head the Department of Energy, and the Secretary of State appointment has gone to the CEO of ExxonMobil, which has funded climate denial science for several decades.\textsuperscript{181} Recent reports indicate that currently operating oil fields have the potential to push us past the line that has been established with the Paris Agreement, 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming.\textsuperscript{182} Yet, the early indicators for the incoming administration suggest that the carbon economy will likely accelerate in the coming years, thus breaching the Paris Agreement and setting the climate on course towards crisis.

The link between the rural labor force and resistance to climate regulation demonstrates, for these communities, an attack on their way of life without being provided with tangible alternatives. This is most viscerally experienced in the coal mining regions of Appalachia, in which mechanization of mining and the recent surge of natural gas have slowed coal production, yet resentment has been directed at Democrat policies for a clean energy transition.\textsuperscript{183}

In Timothy Mitchell’s Carbon Democracy, he indicates that the environmental movement is weak in part as a result of their role as consumers rather than laborers within the carbon economy.\textsuperscript{184} This has both individualized the environmental politics to center on our own consumption while also wielding little power in challenging the carbon-based industries. This argument, along with evidence that the rural-urban link is defined by the urban demand and rural supply for extracted resources and cheap food, demonstrates the power that rural communities may be able to wield in politicizing the Anthropocene.\textsuperscript{185} However, this will take a substantial shift in the narrative being deployed in “the great paradox” and through the electric cooperative’s “straight talk” campaigns. These narratives have been deployed to heighten a climate of fear by impressing the financial and economic impact that climate regulation will have on rural economies.

\textsuperscript{180} Brownstein, “How Carbon Emissions Explain Trump’s Win.”
\textsuperscript{181} Schwartz, “Pressure on Exxon Over Climate Change Intensifies with New Documents.”
\textsuperscript{182} Muttitt, “The Sky’s Limit: Why the Paris Climate Goals Require A Managed Decline of Fossil Fuel Production.”
\textsuperscript{183} Gurley, “West Virginia, ‘Identity Decline’ and Why Democrats Must Not Look Away From the Rural Poor.”
\textsuperscript{184} Mitchell, \textit{Carbon Democracy}.
Speculative fiction, thus, must develop themes that reveal the concerns about climate change and its future impacts, challenge the myth of the separation of man and nature, and offer alternative possibilities for rural economies that will inspire the political demands necessary to slow, or prepare and adapt to, the impending climate crisis that is largely a result of our carbon consumption here in America and, even more disproportionately, in rural America.

**Re-Imagining Culture: Reckoning with White Supremacy**

“If Mississippi ever repents, you’ve gotten to the root of America’s greatest issue. America’s greatest issue is racism. It is hate. And when Mississippi repents and acknowledges what it has given birth to in America and throughout the world. When Mississippi repents you will begin to see transformation all over the world, not just in America but all over the world. If it started with us, it has to end with us.” – Pastor Curtis West, Lynch Street CME, Jackson, MS

In The Righteous Mind, Haidt demonstrates that people’s voting decisions are often based on their cultural values rather than their political interests. Hochschild observes this dynamic within the community of Lake Charles, Louisiana, suggesting that the “Tea Party is a culture,” a way of seeing and feeling about place and its people, rather than an ideology. Similarly, Robert P. Jones illuminates the role that white Christianity has played historically as the “civic and moral glue” and, as white Christian America loses its grip on the majority worldview, this tension that has become the root of many of the most contentious battles over identity and cultural politics of our times.

America is changing quickly and dramatically, both in urban centers and in rural communities. Hochschild describes the feeling of rural resentment as white rural people feeling as if they are being passed over despite doing the best they can, while opportunities for recognition and success are being elevated for people of color, urban residents, and LGBTQ people. The internal frontier of the populist movement has put this tension front and center, revealing just how contentious the political conflict between the belief system of white Christian America and the belief system of “progressive fundamentalism” is, and will continue to be for the years to come.

There is much within the culture of rural America that speculative fiction can grapple with, including the role of faith and the lifestyle values that rural communities hold within the context of a rapidly changing world. But, as discussed

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186 Haidt, *The Righteous Mind.*
187 Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land.* pg. 18
188 Jones, *The End of White Christian America.*
189 Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land.*
190 VanDer Werff, “Progressive Fundamentalism: How Hollywood and the Media Fortify the Bubbles We All Live in.”
in detail in Section 2 the role of white supremacy in this cultural history is of particularly grave concern to the future of the nation and the realm of possibilities for alternative futures. On November 9th, white people, across the class spectrum, voted in a majority for Trump by a 21-point margin, leading Damon Young to write afterwards that, "retaining the value of whiteness... superseded everything else. Including their own livelihoods".

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes that working class whites in rural America, "are evidence of the failure of the American Dream. The mythology that they have some rights, some prominence in the national story buys the population's loyalty to the state, even though they have no say in its affairs." A mentality of white supremacy has been thoroughly ingrained into American society since its foundation and we have yet to reckon with this legacy of exploitation, which has, in turn, led to the acceptance of their (white Americans') own exploitation in order to uphold the symbolic value of whiteness and, by extension, American capitalism.

A left politics of the 21st century must find a way to build class-based alliances in order to challenge and upend neoliberal capitalism. Core to this effort must be a process of reckoning with the legacy of white supremacy that has long divided working and middle class Americans. White supremacy is embedded in American culture and, in particular, the cultural legacy of the rural American south. While organizing work and campaigns can begin to challenge white supremacy, central to this work is to move culture in a new direction ('culture eats strategy'). It is important for cultural works, fiction being one of many, to take the issue of race and white supremacy head-on in order to reveal the damage it does to both people of color and white people in order to develop class consciousness and liberate ourselves from the confines of our history.

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191 Tyson and Maniam, “Behind Trump’s Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education.”
192 Young, “This Is What White Supremacy Looks Like.”
193 Sonnie and Tracy, Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power. pg. xix
194 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time.
Hope & Despair: Speculative Fiction Short Stories

The following set of stories is one portion of the larger “Hope and Despair” fiction project. The larger project is a dual effort to pose a range of speculative futures, comprised of the eight short stories provided here, as well as a longer novella piece that describes a process of electric cooperative organizing across communities of difference, in the imagined setting of Clarence County, which ties the pieces together. In the novella, a young black woman, Della, from the town of Clarendale in Clarence County, finds a mysterious book that has been written in the future and describes a set of alternative futures related to her community. Della then discovers that two other young people from her town, a poor white man, Chuck, and a Latina woman, Maria, have also found copies of the very same book.

This mysterious book includes the short stories provided here, along with a few other unfinished stories, and helps the group to recognize the opportunity to change their community through organizing in their electric cooperative. They utilize the mysterious book as a refreshing lens to interpret their situation, identify issues and opportunities within their community, and to strengthen their resolve to work together, across racial lines, in times of trial and tribulation. The novella helps to put these stories in dialogue with one another and with the context of rural America. It also aims to provide a bit of an analysis guide, through the dialogue and reflections of the three characters that are grappling with the meaning of these short stories to their lives. This piece, however, has been left unfinished at the time of submission and has not been included.
Distress, The World Over

They came in the middle of the night, stretching and settling their wings, coming to rest on the long lawns of the homes of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Nobody knew where they had come from. Or what they were. Or how long they’d stay or really anything about them at all.

When morning broke, the men peeled themselves from the comfort of their soft mattresses and fluffy pillows and their sleeping lovers’ arms and the dreams that were a lot like their days, full of white paneled cubicles and impending deadlines and small talk in the break rooms. They peeled themselves from those beds and those dreams and stretched their arms and fixed themselves their coffee and put on their ties. They got in their cars in their garages and pulled off to go sit in traffic on the highway without so much as noticing the strange arrival on the long lawns of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

It was only later in the day, when a mother or a nanny would take a stroller out for a walk, or when the restless, fidgeting children would escape into the yards, did they start to notice. And the mothers and the children would watch from afar with disbelief and a timid curiosity. And the winged, settled beings would look back at the mothers and the children with what seemed to be a similar expression of confounding interest.

On the first day they didn’t do much of anything at all. They just stood around in the long lawns of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and watched the people watching them. Sometimes they would stretch a wing wide, and watch it with wonder, as if the wings were as new to them as they were to the people watching them.

When the men came home, they parked their cars in their garages and went into the houses, still not noticing the winged beings in the long lawns. In some cases, it was the excited children that exploded the news as soon as the men came in the door. In other cases, the mothers waited until they had put the kids to bed before consulting the men in low whispers in the hallway. And the men poked their heads out of the front doors and saw the winged beings for the first time and were shocked that they hadn’t seen them before. They wondered how they possibly could have gotten in here, and whether a larger gate need be built. But they told the excited children and the concerned mothers that they had nothing to worry about. Everything would be fine.

After the second day, the winged beings began singing their songs. They started in slow murmurs, looking at one another and seeming to stir from their wonder of this strange world they had arrived in. For the better part of the evening, the slow murmurs were sporadic and broken, like a group of back stage singers finding their voices before a choir performance. It was only once the singers found their voices, and found one another, across the dark long lawns of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, that they began to align their hymns into a single choir.

The song, in its pulsating rhythmic anthem, rose like smoke in the warm, humid, summer night. It choked out all other sounds of normalcy with its persistent
chants. The winged beings were delighted with themselves, for their songs were beautiful. But the people didn’t understand the songs. To them, it sounded like a loud, intrusive buzz that invaded their simple dreams of deadlines and cubicles and coffee breaks. Most of the people, on that second night, groaned and cursed the winged beings from their soft mattresses and pulled the fluffy pillows over their heads to blot out the pulsing songs. One man, particularly distressed, for he had to present to a boardroom at 8 a.m. in Scranton, rose in fury and ran into his lawn with a baseball bat, swinging wildly. It wasn’t the first time the man had erupted in wild swings. And the mother of the household could have predicted the eruption to the minute by the quickening pace of the bulging, pulsing vein in the man’s thick neck.

The event resulted in two casualties – the bat breaking the winged bodies with an unsatisfying squish. Then, they stirred into action. The bat kept swinging, but the winged beings were too quick, now, and evaded the man and his bat easily with quick flutters of their newly discovered wings. And they kept singing their song all the while.

Soon, the man was exhausted from the wild swinging and loud cursing, as the mother of the household knew he would be after a few minutes of blind rage, and he collapsed into the recently-mowed blades of grass in the long lawn.

On the next day, the men, grumbling about their lack of sleep, peeled themselves from their beds and stretched and made their coffee stronger and got into their garaged cars and went off to sit in traffic on the highway. And they tried to forget the winged beings that were coming to be a fixture in The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

That day, the winged beings took to the trees. Some climbed, but many had now become accustomed to their wings and flew to the higher branches of the grand oaks and maples and eastern white pines that adorned the long lawns of The Willows Gated Community of Bethesda, Pennsylvania. These trees were much, much older than the development was and, while the contractor had requested that the trees be removed, the winged beings could be thankful for the developer’s steadfast vision for environmental preservation and sustainability.

On Saturday, after four nights of persistent songs and wings drumming on their tymbals, the mothers of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania arranged a convening for the people, to sort out just what to do. “It’s time to break the silence,” one mother offered up, and the rest organized.

The mothers had organized the convening to ask questions and voice their concerns, but the convening quickly turned into a chaotic scene as the men shouted over one another.

“They’re angels! We ought to try to hear them out for what they have come for. For our own salvation,” one man announced.

“They’re aliens!” Another man had exclaimed. “I don’t know if they’re here on friendly grounds or on a mission to exterminate us, but we ought to get the scientists down in Roswell involved.”

“They’re demons,” A third man declared. “And we must purge these devils for the sake of our livelihoods! For everything that we’ve worked for! For this Gated Community!”
They hadn’t agreed on anything at that convening that had been organized by the mothers and debated between the men. But, one thing was for sure. They didn’t belong here. And they’d have to go.

And the winged beings, fluttering from tree branch to tree branch and growing accustomed to their newly discovered wings, kept singing their songs and drumming their pulsing rhythms and dancing in the night while the people of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania feigned sleep.

The next week, a distinguished entomologist from the Pennsylvania State University made a visit to investigate the scene, after a student mentioned the irritating buzzing winged beings in one of her Social Insect classes.

“They’re cicadas,” the distinguished entomologist concluded, after a detailed study, which included recording the songs, walking around the long lawns and staring up into the trees, and flipping through several pages of a very heavy, thick book on Entomology that surely held all the answers of the insect world.

This greatly disappointed the men that had declared the winged beings to be angels, aliens, and demons, as well as the other men that had quickly taken sides between these three offered conclusions.

“What does she know?” One of the men murmured, softly and out of earshot of the distinguished entomologist.

And the mothers, who had taken no side at all in the initial convening, said, “hmmmm... Cicadas...” And they nodded with understanding. Or perhaps it was the nod of feigned agreement. The two were difficult to discern from one another.

“These cicadas are further north than their broods usual breeding grounds. I’ll have to do some research,” said the distinguished entomologist, “but there is nothing to worry about. I suspect these are seventeen-year broods, so they will only be here for the summer. Then it will be another seventeen years before they surface again. Everything will be just fine.”

And the crowd of the men and mothers of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, brooded over this for a minute.

“Well they oughta be eradicated!” Declared one man.

“Yea,” agreed another man, “I’ve got a cousin in the pesticide business. I’ll have him out here first thing in the morning to take care of these southern invaders!”

“We ought to cut these trees down!” Declared another man.

“Yea,” agreed another man, “I’ve got an uncle who’s in the timber business. I’ll have him out here first thing in the morning to take care of these dumb, rotten devils!”

That night, the mothers of the household listened to the men, and nodded in feigned agreement, as the men called for the eradication by pesticide and tree-clearing as the solution to the invasion of cicadas in The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The men wore themselves out in their fear and their rage and their hate for the so-called cicadas, and the pulsing rhythms that droned in their ears. And, once the men were good and wore out from their fear and their rage and their hate for the so-called cicadas, the mothers asked them a series of questions.
"But, if we use pesticides on the long lawn, where are the children to go and play?" They inquired.

"But, if we clear the trees on the long lawn, what do we lose in the shade of summer and the colors of fall and the blossoms of spring?" They asked.

The next day, no action was taken against the winged beings. And so they carried on with their songs and the pulsating rhythms of their drums. And daily life continued, except with extra stretching and stronger coffee and the buying of thicker fluffy pillows to blot out the sounds of the songs and drumming.

The entomologist returned to her office at the Pennsylvania State University and began making her own inquiries. The findings quickly became alarming. There were broods emerging far beyond their usual southern breeding grounds. Reports came in from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, New York State, Maine, Nebraska, South and North Dakota and even as far as Quebec and central Ontario.

And, even more alarming, she discovered that her audio recording of the cicadas song demonstrated similar patterns to the song of distress that was common across broods. It was not the song of mating, which she had expected. She called her entomologist friends in other parts of the country and they had reported similar songs of distress in the cicadas, even in the areas where broods had historically resided in Flyover Country – across the Midwest and the Great Plains and the South.

And, so, if they hadn’t arrived here to mate, why had they come?

"These broods," she told the journalist, "have expanded into communities of distress. Places that suffer from the stress of daily life and the pressures of a competitive workplace. It still is unclear as to whether the cicadas have picked up the song of distress from the community. Or if they have chosen the community in distress, so as to be at home to sing their songs of distress. One thing is for certain, though. The cicadas are an unexpected change in these communities, an unwanted change that may create even more distress. And, as the communities become more distressed by the sudden change, so too do the cicadas become more distressed."

"What does she know?" A man from The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania asked, reading the news article and the entomologist’s interview in The Post (The Washington Post, that is, rather than The New York Post). "She can come up with the theories in that lab of hers. But she’s not out here living it! Those are devils in the flesh if I ever saw one!"

The mother of the household did not respond. She either pretended not to hear him or, on account of the cacophony of sound outside the kitchen window, actually hadn’t heard him. Either way, there was nothing to be done for the distressed man. Nobody liked to be told that they were in distress. And especially not the men of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

"We should have gone with the pesticides!" He declared, thinking of his cousin’s failing business and with a slight tinge of concern that he may be providing all of the grocery costs for this year’s 4th of July family barbeque.

"Should have gone with the pesticides," the man agreed with himself, since the mother of the household had failed to even feign an agreeing nod.

The men of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania decided it was in their best interests to send a letter to the state house and another letter to the White House. In those letters, they detailed their grievances in regards
to the invaders and proposed a list of recommended actions for the eradication, containment, or at the very least, displacement to the southern regions that the broods had somehow migrated from.

But the state house didn’t reply. And neither did the White House. And so they went back to their daily lives, slightly more distressed, and with more stretching and making stronger coffee in the morning and sitting in traffic on the highway and covering their heads with fluffy pillows at night.

Several weeks later, after receiving letters from hundreds of communities across Flyover Country about the alien pests, the president went on to live television and declared that, “everything is just fine.”

He nodded, reassuringly and patted Flyover Country on its little head. He continued, saying, “we’re working on the matter of the cicadas and we will be moving swiftly to deal with any problems. While we are still conducting our initial analysis, at this time we can assure you that everyone is perfectly safe. There is nothing to worry about.”

But Flyover Country was not comforted. They did not feel safe, or that everything was fine, or ensured that the government was “on the matter”.

“What does he know?” One man asked himself, aloud. “He ain’t living it!” He replied.

That Sunday, the men and the mothers and the children of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania got dressed in their Sunday’s best and went down to the little white church house to hear the word of God.

After the children’s choir got through with their rendition of “I Know I’ve Been Changed” and “This Little Light of Mine”, the preacher took the stand and everyone sat up straighter on their cushioned bench seats. After going on about a few biblical passages that no one would recall afterwards, the preacher got down to the business of the cicadas.

“I know there’s a feeling of affliction in this community today.” He held the podium with both hands, crouching over it, his shoulders shrugged and his neck on a swivel, scanning the crowd.

“Hear, hear,” a man in the back hollered.

“Yes, I know there’s a feeling of affliction. But we have to sort out the difference the ‘feeling of’ and the affliction itself. We’ve got to sort out just what that feeling and what that affliction really is. Beeeeelooow the surface,” he lowered an arm so low to the ground that a few in the front row wondered if they would need to assist the elderly man in raising himself back up. But, he did raise himself back up. And then he returned to that slouching stance and that scanning gaze, swiveling from one corner of the room to the next.

“This may seem like a mania right now. But, I am here to tell you that many of life’s greatest blessings start from some kind of mania.”

“Think of love. The love we give to God, does that not start with a stirring in our bones and a leap in our hearts? Think of the love we have for our wives and children! Does that not start from some kind of mania?” And the men nodded vigorously, and the mothers of the households nodded in feigned agreement, though all were wondering what good could come of some mania. For they had been comfortable with the concept of ‘love,’ as it had been packaged to them by their
parents and by “Everybody Loves Raymond” and “Friends”. But, what the preacher spoke of now, this mania of love, was unfamiliar territory. Never, in their adult lives at least, had they felt anything so close as to call a mania. And so they nodded.

“Well,” the preacher continued, “maybe these little winged beings ain’t the devils that we’ve called them. And ain’t the aliens we’ve called them. Maybe they are an act of God! Calling us to awake! And to let the mania of love take ahold of our hearts so that we may love God all the more vigorously!” There was sweat dripping down the preacher’s forehead, despite the air conditioning.

And so, with more stretching and stronger coffee and thicker, fluffier pillows the matter was settled on the cicadas. It was some mania of love to be accepted and dealt with.

“Everything’s fine,” the men reassured the children at the dinner table.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” they would say, muffled in their fluffy pillows.

“After all, it’s a seventeen-year brood,” they would conclude after pouring themselves stronger coffee and getting in their cars and going to sit in traffic on the highway. “They’ll be gone in no time at all and we’ll be back to normalcy for another seventeen years.”

The entomologist, however, believed very much that there was something to worry about. The more and more research she conducted, the stranger the ongoing occurrence became.

“It didn’t make sense,” she said to herself, staring at diagrams of cicada tymbals in the darkened basement storage room, where she kept her life’s work in file cabinets. “How could all of these cicadas move all the way from little Clarence County to The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania?”

Had they dug tunnels across that great stretch of America? Had they flown north in their last brood and dug their burrows before anyone could notice? Or had people forgotten in the last seventeen years that they had existed there before?

The entomologist published studies in the Entomology Review and presented at the Entomology Annual Conference on the matter of the spreading cicadas. And, when those efforts had failed to gain any particular urgency, she tried to gain the attention of the media. The news hour ran one short section of her hour-long interview, and then moved on to recapping the weeks injuries of pre-season NFL football.

“These broods are a long way from home,” she had said, during that interview, with desperation in her voice. “These cicadas are in severe distress. The songs they are singing are off of the charts of anything we’ve heard before! We’ve never seen anything like this! The communities and these cicadas are building increasing distress from one another. It could cause a severe tipping point!”

“What does she know?” One man had asked to the mother of the household as he watched the evening news with his feet propped up on the coffee table. “She ain’t out here livin’ it!” And the mother nodded in feigned agreement as she arranged the forks and knives and plates on the dining room table.

But it wasn’t fine. The cicadas didn’t die off in August as the president and the entomologist had said they would. And they didn’t die off in September, or October, November, or December either. They just kept on, buzzing in their songs and in
their drumming and in their dancing. And the communities all across Flyover Country, distressed in the persistent buzzing, called for investigative journalists to come and bring their concerns back to the East and West Coast cities where the decision-makers lived. They called on the state governments and the federal government to “do something, for crissake.”

The journalists came and took notes with a sort of anthropologists’ passive interest in the stories of the communities and the men and the mothers of Flyover Country. They nodded in agreement as the men and the mothers detailed the distress they were feeling and, in the moment they felt a sense of relief from being heard. But, when the men and mothers of Flyover Country read the stories in the East and West Coast publications, the story was mainly about the cicadas, rather than the concerns in their communities. The spreading of the cicada is a result of a warming globe, and we ought to act now for greater environmental regulation, those East and West coast publications had concluded.

“What do they know?” The men of Flyover Country asked aloud. “They ain’t out here livin’ it!”

The state and federal governments hadn’t been much help, either. Sure, they had sent a few teams of bureaucrats from the environmental agencies to look into the matter of the cicadas spreading as a result of a warming globe. And they reassured the communities that some other government agency would come soon to evaluate the communities’ distress. But they never did show up.

As the grey winter dragged on, the hundreds of communities across Flyover Country were overtaken with a frantic energy. The people were anxious, buzzing in their daily lives in much the same way that the cicadas were buzzing. They stopped being able to sleep and scurried around their living rooms, weaving patterns that were not unlike the dance of the cicadas outside. They pounded their fists on the kitchen counters and on the mothers of the households and on their fluffy pillows in much the same way that the cicadas drummed on their tymbals with their wings.

“There’s nothing to worry about. Everything is fine,” the president reassured Flyover Country in the State of the Union address, and then he moved on to the more important matters of crime and economic growth in the East and West Coast cities and the successes of delivering democracy to poor, oppressed countries across the globe.

But the people of The Willows Gated Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and the hundreds of communities afflicted with the distressed cicadas across Flyover Country knew that nothing was fine.

And so did the entomologist.

She had taken to working around the clock. She recorded and evaluated the cicada songs across the country. She wrote grants requesting additional funding from the federal government to study the problem, but the feds didn’t respond. Then, she wrote grants to the large philanthropy groups on the East and West Coasts, but the philanthropists didn’t respond, either.

As the spring turned into summer, the entomologist kept track of the spreading cicadas on a large map on the wall of her office. She pressed red pins on the communities reporting new arrivals of the distressed broods of cicadas. She watched as the red pins spread like a wildfire in regions further West and further
North. She watched as entire counties were swallowed by the red pins, and then entire states. Soon, she could no longer make out the boundaries of the states, as the fiery red pins consumed the entirety of Flyover Country. For all of May, she sat in her office, receiving calls and placing new pins on the map and drinking stronger coffee.

By mid-June, there were new flares of red pins on the map, inching their way into the metropolitan suburbs of East Coast and West Coast cities. And the frantic calls kept coming. They came in from Canada and Germany and England and France. They came in from Poland and Holland and Finland. They came in from Brazil and India and Turkey. The entomologist took down the map of the country and put up a map of the world and filled it in with the red pins. And, still the cicadas spread.

“How did this happen?” The news anchors asked, dazed and incredulous on the nighttime news hour.

“Nobody saw this coming!” They declared, shouting into the microphones as the broods buzzed louder and louder in the background. “All of a sudden, without any warning, everything is a chaotic frenzy all around us!”

And the men and the mothers in Flyover Country watched the news hour and wondered whether they lived in some kind of time warp, for they had been living in chaotic frenzy for over a year.

“I thought we were supposed to be the slow ones!” Remarked one of the men, shaking his head.

And the phone kept ringing, and the entomologist kept recording the data and all across the globe the cicadas kept singing and drumming and dancing. And no one knew what to do next, except to buy fluffier pillows and make stronger coffee and go off to sit in traffic on the highway, all the same.
The Time Bomb

It happened when Duane was at the check-out counter of Jim’s Package Store. Every Saturday, at 1:00 pm, on the dot, Duane would drive to town to run his errands. Jim’s was always his first stop, and the owner would have set aside his routine order. A half-gallon of Evan Williams Green Label, two packs of Marlboro reds, and a $6 bottle of Chardonnay for the lucky chance that his lover might swing by after her shift waiting tables at The Last Chance Diner. Duane stepped up to the counter and shuffled through the thick wad of receipts, scratched lotto tickets, and crumpled bills in his wallet.

Jim had his back turned to Duane, distracted by the Alabama – Ole Miss game, playing on the small TV set that was mounted above the cigarette stand. The teams were ranked #1 and #4, it was the last game of regular season and whoever lost today would likely drop out of the championship bracket. Duane glanced at the screen, which always had its colors all mixed up - the green field was an aqua blue and all the players were various hues of green, blue, purple, and red, depending on where they stood on the field. There were 12 minutes left in the fourth quarter. It was 14-10 Ole Miss, but Alabama had the ball and was driving. It was 3rd and 4, and the players were lined up at the ball. The Alabama quarterback fell back into shotgun formation and called an audible to the players.

The crowd, which had been hooping and hollering, making a racket in the Ole Miss stadium, all of a sudden went silent. Slowly, the right tackle rose from his three-point stance and stood, looking towards the south stands. Then, the wide receivers relaxed their stance. Then, the quarterback. Slowly, one by one, all of the players rose from their stance.

"Is it a time out?" Duane asked, half interested and half trying to get Jim’s attention to check out. Jim didn’t seem to hear him.

The announcers had gone silent also. All 22 players on the field were now standing, turned to the south stands. The camera panned the crowd and everyone, in their blood-red dresses and polos, looked paler than usual, even somber, Duane though. They were all staring at the same thing. When the camera zoomed in on the south stands, he recognized the ticker that covered the big screen. It was the doom ticker. The time bomb. In large, block letters, the screen read: 599.

When Duane was a young man, he worked six days a week as a pipefitter at the Invista petrochemical plant, which made Polyshield Resins, used for plastic packaging in the food industry. Exposure to a number of toxins, when he would be called in to fix a leak, had taken their toll on his lungs and he filed for disability. Since then, he would collect his $1,000 check in the mail and spent a whole lot more time watching television, which had led him to watch a 60 Minutes episode on Greenland’s melting ice fields. One of the scientists on the show had said 350 was the magic number, to halt “irreversible global warming”. Duane, and everyone else he knew had scoffed at the speculation. There was some hulabaloo at that time. Conspiracy videos and documentaries popped up, Hollywood saw the opportunity to cash in on a series of apocalypse movies that gripped and terrified audiences across the nation. He remembered seeing a few massive protests in New York City, Washington D.C., London on the evening broadcast of Fox News.
All of the supposed crises came through the news, though. It hadn’t ever been real to his life. Life had gone on as usual, for the most part. Sure there were tornadoes and torrential downpours. There always had been. He recalled his grandmother telling him stories of sharecrop farming and losing whole crops to hail or drought or flood. Climate, as it were, just changed. Seven days a week.

It was the one thing you could be sure you’d have to talk about when everything else in life was just slow and unmoving. But nobody he knew ever talked about weather happening in some larger, grander sense. It hadn’t been mentioned in the town hall meetings or the local newspapers or the electric cooperative’s meetings – though they had recently been pushing for people to buy into their new small solar field at $700 a pop, as if anyone had that kind of money.

The only time he had even seen mention of the climate in his everyday life was when some rabble-rouser college kids from the environment club at the State University locked themselves together across County Road 7 when construction started on a new coal power plant in the county. He remembered standing there on the highway, along with about twenty other people from Clearwater, who had been halted on their way to work or errands or on their way home.

Gary, an older man known for his temper, had lost it on the kids, screaming at them, spitting on the ground and even wrenching a “350 or bust” sign from the grips of a freckled, skinny red-headed boy who seemed to have barely hit puberty. Gary had just gotten hired as a prison guard, after a long dry-spell of unemployment on account of a drunk driving ticket. “My second week of work”, he had said, “and these damn kids are gonna cost me my job! What do they teach in these schools these days?” Most of them in the crowd had just shaken their heads at the spectacle of kids chanting *Keep it in the ground*.

*Cheap energy*, was how the cooperative had explained it. Their duty was lowest cost possible, the general manager had said, when Duane mentioned the kids and their stunt the following month. And, each time Duane’s light bill was more expensive than the last, that had made good sense to him. Plus, there were the jobs to consider. Men across the county were hoping to get work as the project ramped up construction.

It wasn’t until 500 ppm that the issue had become a part of their daily lives, making its way into local newspapers and broadcasts. Arizona, California, and New Mexico had burned down several times over by then – and wildfires had even swept across Appalachia, too. Tornadoes kept ripping through Missouri and Oklahoma and the weatherman had said that tornado alley was now tornado highway, as twisters touched down in a wider band of the Midwest, the plains, and the south and stayed down on the ground for longer periods of time than before.

The trails of wreckage from the tornadoes weaved bizarre cursive etches into the earth. A series of satellite images of the tornadoes had brought a set of conspiracy theorists out – talking about encrypted messages in the paths. Communications from aliens, some had said on youtube explanations that Duane had watched. Messages from Mother Earth, the tree-huggers had said. Even Duane’s own pastor had suggested that they might be the work of the holy spirit in his latest fire and brimstone sermon about ‘the end times’. 
At 500, the ticker showed up in the lower corner of every TV broadcast, then on Google’s homepage about a year ago. It just sat there, in the lower right corner of the screen. On game day and day-time soap operas and comedy skits and presidential debates and internet searches for funny cat videos. Ticking up. Four months later, the sign in front of Pentecostal church, down the road from Duane’s house, started posting the updated ticker “565. Repent.” And life just went on as usual.

And now, on the TV screen above the liquor store check-out counter, the ticker ticked.

Duane, Jim, and the two customers waiting in line behind him, whom he had not even realized were there, all collectively exhaled. The screen cut to a commercial of sunny beaches and sweating glasses of ice, fruit, and bright blue liquid. Delta was offering cheap flights to a private resort in Jamaica. Get this deal while it lasts! The honey voice of a female narrator exclaimed. The ticker was never present during commercials. Duane figured they had gotten an exemption from whatever entity had designed and implemented the ticker.

Jim turned to take Duane’s cash and handed him the paper bag with his items. Duane turned to nod at the two men behind him in line, but both were distracted by their shoelaces.

He stepped out on to the sidewalk, squinting in the bright sun. He looked down Main Street. Not a soul was to be seen. It wasn’t a bustling town anyways, but on Saturdays there were at least a few families eating lunch on the covered sidewalk tables in front of the Country Steakhouse and a couple lushes shuffling into Cowboy Troy’s by early afternoon. He loaded up in his battered Honda Civic and sputtered towards the Wal-Mart at the edge of town, pausing at the only stop light in town, as it blinked red.

The Wal-Mart parking lot was less crowded than usual and Duane was able to find an open space in the third row. As he stepped out of the car, it seemed unusually quiet here, too. And Duane didn’t mind that one bit.

Typically there were at least two cars of teenagers blasting their rumbling bass without any concern for the rest of the world around them. Kids didn’t have much to do around here, Duane knew, and they’d congregate in the parking lot, laughing and taunting one another or ogling the woman passing in and out of the lot. He scanned the parking lot. Several of the cars were idling. Most of the drivers were slumped over their steering wheels or sitting straight and stiff, staring at nothing in particular.

On the sidewalk in front of the Wal-Mart, several people were sitting on the curb, their groceries spilling out of their bags beside them. Others were standing, clutching their bags in white knuckles or across their chests and looking at the sky. Duane watched each of them as he passed them. But nobody turned to him.

They seemed almost frozen, except for the occasional sniffle or shift in their stance. In the frozen foods aisle, he passed a large woman, leaning on her buggy with her head lowered. There were tears streaming down her face. Next to her, sitting on the ground, a young girl with pigtails played with a stuffed doll. She was talking to the doll in low whispers and giggling as she waved the doll’s arms in the air.
An overwhelming feeling of loneliness passed over Duane as he listened to the hollow echoes of his footsteps on the linoleum. And the place felt suddenly suffocating. He cut his shopping list down to the bare essentials for the weekend, self-checked out, and rushed out of the store. The crowd on the sidewalk had dissipated some. Two loiterers remained sitting on the curb, next to each other, both staring out across the parking lot with blank expressions. Several cars still idled in their parking spaces.

Duane unloaded his groceries into the trunk of his car, shuffling the empty glass bottles, fast food wrappers, and oil cans to make room for the bags.

As he shut the trunk, he noticed the woman in black. She was standing in the far corner of the parking lot, waving broad black-feathered wings that were stitched to the sleeves of her black sweatshirt. She was weaving figure-eights in a parking space in slow, long strides. Her arms stretched out to each side, rising and falling. She wore a hood that covered her eyes and a long, curved, ebony beak protruded out from the hood, sticking out a foot from where her nose should have been.

Duane blinked twice, thinking he had imagined it. He hadn’t. He watched her for a minute as she turned back and forth across the parking space in steady, long strides and slowly flapping her wings. He looked back at the loiterers on the curb, wondering if they had noticed. They were still staring at the horizon, expressionless. Duane got in his car, turned the key and made his way out of the parking lot, and onto County Road 4 towards home.

He didn’t look back.
He didn’t dare to.

She had noticed the old man gawking. To be honest, she had been surprised that no one else had even looked her way over the last hour. They were all stuck in their own worlds. They looked so lonely to her. Each staring at their feet or the sky or nothing at all. She wondered if they had always been that way, underneath the surface. Underneath the masks they wore out in public. Perhaps she had never noticed because people were always rushing around, nodding to one another with thin smiles. Putting on a front to cover up a hollowed-out interior world.

She had felt that way herself for most of her life and she felt for folks now staring off into the void in the Wal-Mart parking lot. While all the other girls in school had seemed preoccupied with lipstick and boys and dresses, she had her nose in a science fiction book or scribbling fantasy scenes of dragons and distant worlds in her drawing pad. Her mother had always been worried about her in those times. Her being the freak and all.

But that loneliness had all changed when she was 15. That was the year that the co-op connected her house to the broadband network. She spent that entire year scrolling through pages and pages of on-line comics, watching animated videos, and messaging with a whole world of freaks and geeks in fantasy fan-club chat rooms. She connected to people from Laurel, Mississippi to Burundi to Helsinki and the whole world opened up for her. She had started taking on-line classes in graphic art and neglected her math assignments and history textbooks, which had almost cost her a high-school degree.
It was last year, at 22, that she had happened across the Dark Mountain Project, while browsing web pages for a Transylvania backdrop for an animated storyboard she had been working on. The tag-line in the link had immediately caught her eye. *The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world.* She had read the words twice over, then once out loud, just to see how they sounded. The hair on her neck had stood on end. The words sounded just right. In the lower right corner of the screen, the ticker read ‘561’.

She followed their every update since – pagan ceremonies around fires in the Scottish uplands, hordes of people dressed in black cloaks holding blank signs in downtown Manhattan, portraits of men and women in crude home-made deer-hide clothing, brandishing home-made clubs and spears, posing beneath waterfalls and mountains across 30 different countries. And each month it seemed to be building, expanding, growing. They were moving into the unknown. They were moving to re-create the world and so, from her place in the middle of nowhere, USA, The Raven was spinning infinities in her parking space. Playing her part in disrupting the normalcy.

She stopped in the middle of the figure eight and re-applied a coat of black paint to the soles of her converse shoes. Then, she returned to weaving her infinity signs into the empty parking space. The Raven, the name she had taken on in her internet communities and now was embracing in her physical image, wasn’t sure just how long the paint would hold on the pavement before being washed away. *Forever,* she hoped.

She watched the last distracted bystander stand up from the curb in front of the Wal-Mart entrance and slowly make his way to a black Chevy Charger. She wanted to reach out to him. To wave her wings and yell “You’re not alone!” But he didn’t look her way, and she wasn’t sure she’d have the courage to call out to him, anyways. She kept weaving her infinities.

*It is time to build a new world,* she said to herself, each time she finished one of the infinity loops.

She didn’t know what that meant, or what it would look like. It started with defying the rules and norms she had abided by her whole life. The rules she had resented her whole life. It started with each one of them, living out their fantasies to re-shape reality. This world would crumble away and, in its place, would emerge a new one. And *that* world would be of their making.

When Loretta arrived, Duane was waiting on the porch. He had set out a deck of cards, Ritz crackers and slices of American cheese, and a glass of wine. He didn’t rise from his folding chair to greet her, worried that he might loose his balance if he stood up. He had already made a significant dent in the whiskey bottle and had smoked a proportional amount of the pack of cigarettes. She lowered herself into the chair next to his, took a sip of wine and shuffled the deck of cards.

They played three games of Rummy. They always played best of five rounds, but Loretta usually whipped him in three or four. She poured herself a glass of wine for each game, then a fourth as she sat the cards down on the table and leaned back into her chair.
The sun was setting over Clarence County and this was her favorite spot to watch from. Duane’s home sat on a small hill and the view of lush, green forests and freshly tilled fields stretched out before them. There were no buildings in sight. Duane claimed that this spot on the porch was his little piece of paradise. She couldn’t disagree with him on that.

Above the tops of the pines, the thin bands of clouds were glowing with a deep, royal red. The thicker, puffy clouds to the east took on shades of pink, like painted cotton balls and thick piles of cotton candy, and the rest of the clear sky had taken on a purple hue.

“Sure don’t look like the end of the world to me,” Duane said. She realized it was the first words they had spoken to each other all evening. Neither of them minded silence. In fact, they cherished it. It may well have been the key to their comfort with one another. Still, they usually made some small talk in the evening, or at least complimented one another’s best Rummy hands.

The red and pink colors in the west gave way to a thick band of bright yellows and oranges. It was as if the horizon was ablaze, with thin tongues of flames stretching deep into the sky. The white porch, the pines, and Loretta’s yellow sedan were suddenly lit up in an other-worldly reddish glow.

“It ain’t the world I’m worried ‘bout,” Loretta said, softly. “It’s our way of life.”

Within a few minutes, the world had settled into dusk. The bright headlights of a car in the distance lit up a grove of pines and they watched as the spotlight scanned across a stand of trees along the wide curve of the road as it came up against the Tenn-Tom Waterway. It was time for Loretta to return to the nursing home to feed her husband. This was her weekend ritual. Play rummy with Duane, watch the sunset, and then help her husband move the fork between the plate and his mouth. It had been that way for years now, with his long, steady slip into dementia.

“Good night, Duane.” Loretta kissed Duane’s bearded cheek, then turned to lower herself down the steep stairs of his wooden, rotting porch. Duane watched her taillights as she eased the sedan down his gravel path and onto the road. He watched the thin beam of her headlights weave along the winding road until they were out of sight.

The Raven could hear the low booms of the drums half a mile before she saw the glow of the bonfire. By the time she arrived, the gathering was already in full swing. There were twenty people dancing wildly around the leaping flames, and a ring of fifty more surrounding them. Half were watching with fascination, with anticipation, their bodies pulsing to the beat in the subtle bobs of their heads and sway of their shoulders. The other half were thumping the palms of their hands on drums of every size. The eerie tones and the low wobbles of a synth keyboard was blasting through two four-foot tall speakers. The speakers were plugged into a truck’s battery that was hitched to a flat bed. The flat bed was covered in a large cloth canvas, on top of which five people, wielding paintbrushes and sticks or just their fingers, were deeply focused on the task of some giant mural they planned to present at the stroke of midnight.
Many of the people she recognized, despite their elaborate costumes, masks, face paint, and cloaks. There were the group of poets and MCs from the HBCU huddled in a circle on the far side of the fire, pounding the palms of their hands on five wide drums set on the ground and throwing their heads back and forth in wild jerks. There were a few members of the intentional eco-village over near Norris, dancing in the inner circle, she identified them by their dreadlocked hair, their green, loose clothing and the tattoos on their hands. Two of them had zebra head masks on and were, she realized, galloping circles around the fire.

There were three professors from the Clarendale Community College, sipping wine from a couple of mason jars and watching with thin grins. The metalheads from Jasper County were always recognizable in their black leather jackets and thick-soled military boots. Half were standing tall and poised, almost frozen, taking in the scene in its entirety. The other half were jumping around wildly and bumping into one another, moshing with hard thuds and grunts.

The motley group also had several newcomers, easily marked by their stunned expressions of awe or their retreating position, sheepishly standing in the very back of the outer ring, shifting nervously from foot to foot. She went to greet them, to welcome them to gathering. She smiled and nodded to a group of teenage boys in white beaters and jean shorts that were passing around a mason jar of clear liquid and chain-smoking cigarettes. One had a confederate flag patch pinned to the front of a black ball cap. She recognized him from the trailer park behind her home, though they had never spoken before.

She shook the hand of a middle-aged man in denim overalls with an utterly dazed expression. She embraced his frail wife, who smiled sweetly, but was quickly overcome with the underlying expression of panic that lay underneath.

She made her way to the very back, to a group of men and women standing beneath a tall cedar tree. She stuck her hand out to the nearest of them. The tall man had skin as dark as the forested night behind him and his eyes shone bright and fiercely in the glow of the flames. He took one cautious step backwards, his eyes gauging her up and down. The Raven lifted her long, carved beak so they could see her eyes and see her mouth. She smiled wide and reached her hand out again.

*Welcome,* she said to each of them. *Welcome to the Darkness. There is nothing to fear, we are all here for the same reason.*

*We are here to peer into the darkness. To sit with it, and as your eyes adjust, to see what you can see. Welcome to the building of a new era.*

After another few tracks from the up-and-coming dubstep DJ, the metalheads were given the stage. They played three trashy yet melodic songs. To begin with, it wasn't apparent what the frontman's role was. He didn't sing into the microphone, or do anything else but stand stoically for the first song and a half. After the music slowed to a low growl, he started swaying back and forth with his entire body, using the mic stand to keep him from toppling over. Then, without any notice, he let out a blood-curdling screech into the microphone. It was like a gust of strong wind to the audience, who were thrown back and had to find their footing. The rest of their set was a mix of low growls, high-pitches screeches and other
animalistic howls over the slow, steady rage of the double-bass drumming patterns and grinding guitar riffs.

The crowd looked ravaged. It was like nothing that any of them had experienced before. But, that was the point. It was to make something anew. And some of that would be beautiful and some of that would be hideous. And all was welcome. All the same, The Raven was grateful when the HBCU poets took the stage, mainly for the sake of the newcomers who might not know what to think at this point in the night. And she needed them to stay, to see this through.

As the poets began to do a series of call-and-responses in between quick, witty and rhythmic verses, which got the crowd engaged again, Raven had the idea to take a few pictures of the gathering from the ridge. She retreated from the crowd and into the black gravel behind the fire.

The Raven had chosen this site in particular for the festival of 600. It was the perfect landmark for the event. The first reclaimed site of the New World.

The bonfire was at the dead center of an abandoned strip-mine. A gaping black crater, 100 feet deep, three football fields wide, and six football fields long in the middle of the lush, green forests of Clarence County. Although the pit was only a quarter mile from County Road 7, a main throughway for Clarence County, she didn't know anyone who realized it was back here. She had only learned herself last month, as she combed through the google earth images of her neck of the woods, wondering what her life might look like to an alien, several galaxies away.

To her dismay, there seemed to be nothing extraordinary to Clarence County from above. She worried that an alien would look over it and conclude that it was no different than all the country around it. There was the industrial park, the clusters of homes and trailers, all surrounded by green – forests and fields – with gray tentacular roads weaving across it. But, after a closer inspection, she noticed the perfectly rectangular tar-black patch of stripped earth. That, she decided, was where we should send our signals from.

The Raven reached the top of the ridge breathing heavily. She looked back across the pit. The ground below her looked like it was raked with a fine comb. The bonfire was raging larger than it had been when she left the circle, and the flares emitting from the pile of pallets and oak branches lit up the entire pit with flashes of silvery light. She hoped, if there was life out there in deep space, that they were watching in this moment. That they had noticed something different in this long-forgotten patch on this little blue marble of Earth.

The Raven took several photos from her perch atop a rusted, abandoned Caterpillar back-hoe. It was hard to capture the essence of the moment, but she figured a few of the photos would turn out ok. As long as she captured the little silhouettes frozen in the middle of their frantic dancing, the bonfire raging, the vacant coal mine aglow in the light of a new era. It would do. It certainly would.

As The Raven scanned the pit one last time before making her descent, she saw three silhouettes huddled together, far away from the celebration. She couldn’t make them out from this distance, so she hopped down from the bucket on the Caterpillar and made her way towards them.

Once she was fifty yard off from them, she recognized them to be The Wastepickers, one of the figures stood up tall, her long black hair falling down below
her waist. Her long, slender legs leading up to wide hips would be hard to mistake in these parts, where women built like her were few and far between. Jewel, the long-legged beauty, saw The Raven approaching and waved warmly. Another of the crouching silhouettes raised his hooded head.

"Heya, Raven!" He shouted out to her.

The Raven waved back to them and picked up her pace, crunching across the jet-black gravel of the coal mine. The Wastepickers were two brothers - Terrence was the tall, lanky one and Lawrence was the short, elfish one - and their sister, Jewel. The trio was from the Leland neighborhood and they bore the mark of the contaminated site. It was the orange-hued skin that came with growing up all their lives in that cluster of shotgun houses, single-wides, and canvas tents at the far-southeastern corner of town, next to the toxic waste dump.

The Leland neighborhood had cropped up, suddenly, The Raven’s aunt had explained to her. It started with the wave of oil spills in the Gulf and the preceding outbreak of food-borne illnesses across the nation. The sickness had been traced back to the shrimp, oysters, and red snappers harvested in the oil-drenched Gulf, particularly along the Texas, Louisianan and Mississippi sections of coastline. The loss of that industry had left thousands of fisherman and shrimpers out in the cold. Slowly, they made their way inland to other towns across the south and tried to find work there.

In Clearwater, the big industry was the petrochemical plant, Invista. There wasn’t any promise of jobs there, but the Gulf migrants dreamed it to be the torch of opportunity, and they came in droves. Clearwater didn’t have the infrastructure to take in the new arrivals within the town limits, so they funneled them into the Leland landfill site. The Leland landfill had been closed at that time and, since it had been determined as sealed by the environmental regulators, nobody concerned about what had been there.

Nobody had known for sure just what the root cause of the orange tint in the Leland residents’ skin, or the fact that nobody in the neighborhood seemed to make it past fifty without contracting skin, lung, or spleen cancer. But they had reasoned out quite logically that it must have something to do with the landfill. It was only several years later when they would discover the truth about Invista’s continued role in polluting the soil and the water with their illegal waste dumping.

The Wastepickers had found the silver lining in the situation, though. Yes, they were afflicted with the mysterious marking of toxicity as the rest of the neighborhood, but they had, at an early age, discovered the landfill to be a kind of gold mine. They had been digging holes on the hill behind their homes since they were kids, having nothing better to do with their time and so as not to disturb their drugged and drowsy mother in the living room. They had hit trash pretty quickly, only a few inches below the topsoil, and had started sorting the items they found by material.

In those early years, when they were simply kids playing and sorting things in the dump, the materials they came across didn’t have any value except the pleasure of playing and sorting things. But, after a storm had cut Clearwater off from the surrounding towns, everyone quickly became in desperate need of the copper wire, the bits of scrap metal, and the sheets of plastic to use for tarping. They
had been a huge supplier during that cause. And from there, they had developed their own black market for resource recycling. After that was off the ground and running, they ramped up their production and started their own smelting and welding facilities to get people exactly what they needed.

And that is how they came to call themselves The Waste Pickers.

The Raven had met The Waste Pickers through an on-line design contest. The challenge was to develop a symbol to indicate a site of nuclear waste and radioactivity to a distant future generation of explorers and/or aliens. The Raven had submitted a design of a pyramid, much like the Egyptian pyramid.

When the judges had pressed her, she explained, “if there is intelligent life or future generations walking the earth, the best way to tell them to steer clear is to show them where humans most definitely were. They’ll know, by then, that humans in the past had destroyed everything. So, any symbol that still exists in those future millennia, which a pyramid will outlast other markers. It will indicate ‘humans were here’, which would be interpreted as ‘caution – stay away – humans were here’.”

She hadn’t gotten particularly high marks for the design or the argument, but The Waste Pickers had appreciated it and had gotten in contact with her not long after.

“Check this out!” Terrence motioned for her to come closer.

On the ground at their feet was a large poster board that Jewel was scribbling on with an orange marker. In the middle of the poster was a massive drawing of a stick-woman.

“Is it a transformer?” The Raven asked, raising her beak to get a better look at the drawing.

“No! It’s a witch!” Lawrence said laughing. The picture came into clearer view for Raven. It was a witch, made out of sticks and rods, it looked like. The figure had a black hood on, her arms were spread wide and long black hair fell down her back in long, braided strands.

“She’s scary-looking,” The Raven said, with delight.

“Yea! That’s the point! The magic derived from the bond between woman and mother earth is a powerful, scary thing!” Jewel said. She knelt next to Raven, “this is the world today, see,” she pointed to the plated waves at the witches feet. “Our is the torch that scorched the world. They tried to burn the magic out of the world. But here the witch stands, prevailing and unleashing all her curses and healing powers upon us, all at once.”

“What’s this on her shoulder?” The Raven pointed to a bump on the witch.

“That’s a raven, Raven!” Lawrence was delighted, then pointed further down the witches arm. “And these scales on her cloak are gonna be dead fish from the Tenn-Tom! Real fish!”

“Wait, what’s this all for?”

“The Fourth of July ceremony.” Lawrence was giggling, uncontrollably. He rolled back on to the black gravel in a fit of giggles. “We’re gonna build this and place it in the middle of the River, right behind where the governor is gonna give his big speech and right where the firework show is gonna be!”

“The whole network is gonna be dropping installations that day,” Jewel explained, “all across South and Central America, a couple places out west, New York
City, and a bunch of European countries too. All dropping art installations in a political protest on the same day on mine sites, deforested regions, and toxic swamps."

“We’re gonna net up a bunch of fish and tack them to the witches body, its gonna be awesome!” Lawrence squealed, hysterically.

The Raven loved the idea and worked through some of the logistics with The Wastepickers. She offered herself up as a volunteer to help the building project and the installation, if necessary.

The governor wasn’t welcome in her town, in her opinion, not after what he pulled lately. The governor in question, a certain Ross Tarnett, had been the one to authorize the landfill siting in Clearwater four terms ago. There had been a number of better options for the landfill site, as the scientists had determined. But, the weight of a couple senators in areas with a particularly strong “Not In My Backyard” sentiment, and the cash to back it up with, had threatened to kill the Governor’s legacy bill to provide expanded public funding for charter schools. And so, Gov. Ross Tarnett had placed the landfill in Leland, where the political sway wasn’t particularly threatening to his legacy.

The Raven didn’t hate him for the landfill, though. After all, it had only been open for a handful of years before being closed and turned into a settlement site for migrant Gulf Coasters. What she couldn’t stand about him was that he had given Invista a truck-load of tax credits, her tax money, for moving there. That had been the beginning of the end for Clearwater, too. Since Invista had moved in, all the fish had gone belly up and she couldn’t swim in the Tenn-Tom like she had as a kid. Then, it had been the deer and the rodents and, later, the dogs that had died from unknown causes. And, a few years later, the people of Leland had developed that strange orange-hue in their skin.

The second reason why she couldn’t stand the governor was his most recent proposal to convert the landfill into a nuclear waste site. All the journals she had read had a thousand warnings from scientists, environmentalists, and geologists about the impact that a nuclear waste site would have in this part of the country. The clay would shift over time, the geologists had said. The Tenn-Tom would be at risk, and therefore the entire Gulf would be at risk as well, the environmentalists had said. And Congress pushed on all the same. After all, they had several thousand gallons of nuclear waste that were just sitting there. They needed a home and nowhere else was willing to offer itself up.

“A human relic for the ages,” The Raven said, marveling over the idea. “The nuclear waste dump. It’s perfect!”

The Raven and The Wastepickers planned out a schedule for the building of The Witch and they returned as a group to the fire, which was dying down. Several of the attendants were asleep in a ring around the fire and The Raven placed blankets on each of them.

As she drove home, she watched the sky turn to the blue steel of dawn. The horizon began to purple and she drove into it. Into the new day. The first day of the word post-600. It was a new dawn, and a new era, and one that she was preparing for, with every fiber of her being.
On the radio, a talk host began speaking about the end of the world. He
didn't know just what could be done at this point. Was there anything to do?

"Yes," The Raven answered the radio. "There is so much to be done. We must
break down the myths that upheld the world of yesterday. And build new ones in
their place." Saying it loud made it all the more real to her. And she would keep
saying it aloud any chance she got. For, speaking it is to bring it into being. We must
break down the myths that upheld the world of yesterday. And build new ones in their
place.
A Pile of Bones

"Hey! Over here!" The boy hollered in the forest, cupping his dirt-covered hands over his mouth and calling to the top of the trees.

"We're comin'!" He heard from some direction, he couldn't tell where, and soon kids began spilling out of the forest, slashing through the thick undergrowth with rusted machetes. They stopped at the edge of the clearing.

Janelle, the oldest of the group and, therefore, the undisputed leader of the motley band, stepped into the clearing and circled the perimeter slowly, grazing the grass with the tip of her machete and scanning the ground for any trace of footprints, landmines, and trip wires. She spiraled into the center and stood next to the boy who had hollered, whose name was Rodney.

"Lehigh," she called another boy from the crowd, “is this the right dig site?”

Lehigh was the band’s navigator and he approached the two, fumbling through the folds of his oversized jacket to pull out a folded map. When he reached Janelle and the other boy, he unfolded the map, tugged on the compass around his neck, and spun a slow 360, watching the needles in the compass twitch a few times before settling into a single direction. “Yeah, this is it.”

Janelle nodded to the band of kids, kicking at the grass at the edge of the clearing and they cheered and came running towards her. Two of the larger boys pulled horse carts behind them that were stacked with a large pile of shovels.

“Ok, grab your shovels and divide yourselves into groups of three. Start at these three markers,” she pointed to corner of the clearing, “and then work your way across. Me, and these two,” she shrugged to Lehigh and Rodney, “will start here.”

The kids were excited. They dropped their packs on the ground, along with their machetes, bows, twine lines, hanging heavy with squirrels and lizards from their morning hunt, and scrambled over to the carts to select their shovels. Then, they were off to their markers and digging furiously. Janelle watched to make sure they were all at work before picking the last three shovels from the cart. She tossed one to Lehigh and one to Rodney and the two set to digging. They cut through thick turf of grass with the blade of the shovel and peeled it away until they had a 4'x6' patch of black dirt.

Janelle took the first plunge into the open earth and the soil was still soft. She was thankful it hadn’t set to freeze with the last few nights of frost. She stepped back and let the other two boys dig in. She scanned the band and was pleased to see everyone on task.

“We got something!” Two kids on the far edge of the clearing shouted, excitedly. One girl jumped into the hole with a hatchet and began swinging wildly. She was so deep in the hole, that Janelle could only see the head of the hatchet flash in the sunlight at the top of her swing. She tossed a few soggy boards out of the hole and shrieked in delight.

“What is it?” Another group looked over, laughing, and plunging shovels into their own hole.

“Oh nothing!” Said one of the kids standing above the girl, who was still hacking away in the hole. “Just a pile of bones!”
The crews at all the dig sites doubled over laughing.
This was their little joke. And they played it again, over and over, and it
seemed that it would never get old. They would find the day’s dig site, and the first
crew to peel away a coffin and find the remains underneath would call out. And the
rehearsed parts would play out, ending with “Just a pile of bones!” to everyone’s
delight.

The girl in the hole started handing the bones out and the boy above her laid
them out on a blanket, placing them meticulously back into anatomical order. Then,
the second crew hit their wooden coffin with a hollow thud, giggled uncontrollably,
and then repeated the process of the first crew, dragging the bones out and placing
them into full skeletons in the sunshine.

“Jeremy,” Janelle said to the tall, skinny boy in the thick spectacles who was
still standing around with his hands in his pocket. He stood at stiff attention with
her call. “You know what to do.”

He nodded and pulled a thick three-ring binder from his pack. After flipping
through a few of the tabbed pages, he stopped on one. He looked up at the
tombstone at the front of the open patch of earth before Janelle’s crew.

“This here is the Foster Family graveyard, it looks like.” Jeremy nodded to
himself, then flipped through several other pages. “Originally of British descent.
Register shows they owned almost one third of the land in Clarence County at the
time of the last census we have record of. Which was, uh,” he stopped on a page and
scanned the text. “1982.”

Jeremy set the binder down and picked up a notebook. He stepped towards
the open patch of dirt, squinted at the headstone and scribbled. Then, when he had
scribbled for a while he took three steps to the left, in front of the next grave over
and began scribbling again.

Jeremy was the only one in the group that could read, which was part of why
he was in charge of genealogy. He had come to Han’s Bone Farm later than all of the
other kids, and wherever he had come from, they were still teaching kids to read
and write. Though he said he didn’t recall that place or how he had learned to read.
But he was also in charge of genealogy because he had been recording the family
names and dates since before Janelle had made the formal position of “in charge of
genealogy.” The first few years of digging, the crew had gone about it without
spending much time concerned with the tombstones, except using them as markers
as to where to dig, and where not to dig. And, once they were done for the day, the
kids would sit or lie down and nibble on the sandwiches they had packed.

While they were picnicking, Jeremy would go around the yard, recording the
names and the birth dates and death dates in a small notebook, scribbling with a
piece of charcoal. He would make little trees of the family lineage and then he would
quietly tuck the notebook back into this pocket and return to the other kids on the
lawn. Janelle had noticed this only a few months into the work of digging and
collecting bones and stacking them up nicely and carting them back to Han’s Bone
Farm, where they all lived together. But, she hadn’t said anything for two years.

It was only once she was in charge, on account of the two eldest boys getting
sent to a place called ‘elsewhere’ as Han had put it, that she had even thought to ask
him about it.
“I’m keepin’ a genealogy,” Jeremy had said, opening the notebook for her to see. “These trees here are the family histories of the people that used to live here. Our people.”

Jeremy had walked her through one of the family trees, the Rodericks, which was Janelle’s last name.

“So, I don’t know who your mommy and daddy are. But I think this here is your granddaddy and nana. Macon and Rhonda Roderick. They both died in 2014. Maybe they died together.”

*That was a nice way to die*, Janelle thought. *Together.* Janelle leaned closer and traced the lines, as Jeremy told her the names and the dates of her grandparents’ and sisters’ and her great-great parents. From there it got fuzzy, Jeremy had said.

“A lot of the earlier gravestones are hard to read,” he had said. “They changed the lettering, which I can’t read as good, and they also kinda run together ‘cause of the years and years of rain, I think. I found all these Roderick’s over by the ‘5’ marker on the road east of Norris.” Janelle, nodded, recalling the dig site.

“But if that ‘i’ in your great-great-grandma’s last name, ‘Rawlins’, was actually an ‘e’ and you dropped the ‘s’, which would be ‘Rawlen’. Then,” he flipped to another page, “I’ve got a Rawlen that dates back to 1903 over here in the dig site a month ago by Clearwater.”

“Cool,” Janelle had said, not knowing what to say, having learned for the first time where she came from and who, at least in name, those people were. She didn’t have any memories from before Han’s Bone Farm and she was grateful for Jeremy’s record-keeping.

“Figure, if we’re takin’ all their bones out of their homes,” Jeremy shrugged, “at least we can keep a record of who they were.”

In the coming months, Janelle had started to look at those places all the different. On the way out to one dig or another, they would pass Norris or Clearwater and Janelle would think, *this is where my people are from. This is where my family lived.*

She’d look at the great big trees and wonder if they’d seen her mom and her nana and her great-grandma and all the rest of them walk that road before. And she wondered which of those streets they had lived on before. And where they had hunted, or whether they had hunted at all in those days when you could just go down the store and get your meat from a cooler where they just had it sitting out, as Han had told her. And so, when they did go through the town, she wondered which of those buildings had been that store that they had gone to, with the meat just sitting there in coolers.

Jeremy kept taking his records, which Janelle had made as part of his job of ‘in charge of genealogy’, despite the protests from the other kids who would have to work a little longer and a little harder on account of Jeremy walking around scribbling on papers. And they kept digging up bones, all the same.

A few weeks before this particular day, they found a library in their explorations of a big home that had been abandoned behind the dig site. The kids had sat on the ground in a circle as Jeremy pulled the books off the shelf, called out the titles to the books and then passed them down.
“All the King’s Men by Robert Penn Warren,” he had read out to them.

“All the King’s Men by Robert Penn Warren,” the kids had recited in unison, and then passed the book around, flipping through its pages and running their fingers along the lines of ink. A few of the ornery boys took to ripping pages out of the books and tossing them into the air, which made everyone giggle, until Janelle made them sit in the corner.

Jeremy had taken seven or eight of the books with him, carrying them under his arms on the long walk home. He had come up to her in the front of the band, and showed her one of the thickest books. “Tables of Genealogy,” he had said with a grin. “And this one here, this is a bible.”

After Jeremy got his bible, Janelle also made him the unspoken position of minister. Since then, on each dig, they would lay the bones and skulls out in their anatomical placements on blankets. And, after all the bones were out of all the holes, they would collect as a group to account for each one. Jeremy would stand before them, his chest puffed out and his nose up with the book lifted in one hand and his other hand across his chest.

On that first day, he had started, “Jeffery McElroy. 1846 – 1863.”

And the other kids bowed their hands, with their fingers laced behind their backs and said, “may he rest in peace.”

And they’d go down the line until all the skeletons had been accounted for. Then, Jeremy read a passage at random from his Bible and they all said, ‘Amen’.

“You’re telling me that all these people died in 1863?” One kid said with wonder, after they had wrapped up the funeral on that first day.

“Yea,” said another kid, shaking his head. “Man, it musta been a tough year! You think it was drought or something? Or plague?”

“Or meteor!” Another kid shouted.

There had been quite a bit of discussion on that, which included the proposals of aliens, plague, drought, and tetanus. Aliens and meteors had emerged as the clear major contenders and the group had nearly broken out in a brawl between the two groups. Janelle had quelled the skirmish quickly and recommended they vote on the matter. And so, by a three-kid margin, the group had concluded that it would have been a meteor.


And Jeremy had written that down.

They had pieced a lot of their history together this way. Between the notebook that Jeremy kept, the Tables of Genealogy, and their own democratically-determined historic events, they had taken the puzzle of what had come before them and made a clear picture of the history of this place, of their place.

Then, they’d pile up the bones in the carts, and drop the skulls in the bags and toss them on top of the carts, too. And they’d hoist their packs on and head off towards home, marching in step, waving their shovels like marching band batons.

They were still digging away on this particular day, when Lehigh stood for a second and asked. “Say, ain’t Scotty a Foster?”
Jeremy turned to the second crew, who had moved to their second dig site, "Scotty, you a Foster?"
"Yea," said a boy, waving to Jeremy. "Scotty Foster."
"Well, these here are your people!" Jeremy shouted to him.
"Cool!" Scotty Foster, said, tossing a pile of dirt onto the lawn.
"Yea, that is cool!" Said a boy next to Scotty Foster.
"Dang, Scotty," one kid said, resting on the handle of his shovel, "you must a had a whole lotta family, this is gonna take all day!"
"Yea," another kid agreed. "Tight-knit folks."
"Yea," a third kid agreed. "And rich too! Look a' that headstone!" The kid pointed to the headstone at the top of the grave that Janelle, Lehigh, and Rodney are digging in.
"Yea, I think it’s marble!" Lehigh shouted back.
"Cool!" Scotty said, even more excited than he had been before, and digging furiously.
A few minutes later, Janelle heard Lehigh’s shovel whack a hard rock, which reverberated back at him. Surprised, he took another stab at the dirt to the right of where he had whacked the rock, but it hit rock too. Lehigh cursed, “damn yankee!” and raised his shovel to plunge it into the dirt a third time.
"Wait!" Janelle grabbed the handle from him, then stepped into the hole next to him and dug into the dirt with her fingernails. She felt the cold, smooth stone beneath her fingers and scraped the dirt away from the stone.
"Whoa! A marble coffin!" Lehigh exclaimed. Several of the kids had dropped their shovels and rushed over to get a good look.
"Whoa!" Scotty Foster said. “My family really was rich!"
They had to dig the hole twice as wide to get around the marble coffin. It took three separate crews, all working for an hour and a half before they were able to grasp around the corners of the coffin lid. Five of them hoisted the marble slab off of the coffin.
As they set the lid on its side, against the dirt wall of the hole, they heard the other kids, peering over the edge of the hole, gasp. One younger girl let out a bloodcurdling shriek that send shivers down the backs of the kids in the hole. And, once they had turned and looked into the coffin, they shrieked too, and scrambled out of the hole to hide behind their comrades.
Janelle took a second look into the hole from behind Lehigh’s shoulder. “It’s ok,” she said with relief. “He’s not alive.”
“It’s a body!” One of the youngest boys screamed out, his eyes springing fountains.
“Well, duh!” Lehigh said. “Where you think bones come from!”
It was the first time they had come across a whole body, fully preserved. Several times, in those first couple months, they had come across a number of bodies that were mostly decomposed, but none of those had any flesh left on them. They would only have some of the muscles on their legs and some of the stomach and chest innards left, full of mud and worms and maggots and other grubs.
But, this man, this elderly gentlemen lying in the coffin, was truly and remarkably untouched. He had on a clean, three-piece suit with a silver bowtie. His
hands were crossed over his chest. And his moustaches were thick, silver, and spindly.

“Can I have his shoes?” One of the boys asked.

“They’re too big for you, but they might fit Lehigh,” Janelle said.

Lehigh smiled and jumped into the hole and unlaced the knots in the man’s wing-tipped leather shoes. He flipped them over to check the soles. “These are no good for walkin’, but they sure look nice!” He said. He climbed back out of the hole and shoved the shoes into his pack before anyone else could protest their new ownership.

“This man here, his name was John Foster S.R.” Jeremy said aloud, in his preacher voice. “Died in 1938.”

“May he rest in peace,” the kids said, without missing a beat.

They sat there for a minute, looking down at the old man in the marble coffin.

*He looked so peaceful,* Janelle thought. *He’s the most peaceful looking man I ever saw.*

“Hey that can’t be Scotty’s family! That guys lighter than Scotty is.” Rodney noticed.

Scotty looked at his arm, and looked at the man’s hands and shrugged, sheepishly. And then they all looked down at their arms and the arms around them.

“That looks like it could be your family,” Rodney continued, pointing at another small girl, Lauren, who was shy and shrank back when he pointed at her.

“Yea,” Lehigh teased the girl, playfully, “you’re as pale as that dead guy!”

And the group laughed. Even Janelle let out a chuckle before she noticed that Lauren’s face was scrunching up like she was about to bawl. “Hey,” Janelle said, offering up the only thing that came to mind, “don’t worry. I dunno if this is your family, but if it was, you mighta been a rich, rich little girl!”

Lauren smiled at this and swayed back and forth, proudly.

And just like that, the wealth of Scotty Foster and his family, whoever they might have been in whatever history they might have lived, was taken away from him. Scotty didn’t like this, and he stabbed his shovel into the dirt a few time, trying to think up any objections.

“Well, maybe you can have babies with different skins,” offered up Jeremy.

“True,” Janelle agreed. “Member that lady Veronica that got sent to elsewhere? She had that baby that was darker than Han and she was pale like this guy.”

This comforted Scotty, though he still didn’t really know what to think about all of it in the first place. He hadn’t really considered much that he had a family, or about where he came from at all. None of them had, except Jeremy. After a second, he asked, “Do we keep him?”

“Well, he’s got bones in him don’t he?” Lehigh asked, looking at Janelle.

“Yea,” Janelle agreed. “I guess we keep him.”

“Yea, just a pile of bones in a skin costume!” Lehigh nudged Scotty, playfully and Scotty grinned.

“Alright!” The kids exclaimed. And a couple rushed into the hole and heaved at the man, in his three-piece suit. Two of the boys tied ropes around the man’s ankles and tossed them up to the other kids. With four kids on each rope they hoisted the man out of the hole and onto the lawn.
Then, they set back to work at their own posts for the rest of the day. It took them all day to clear out all the bones from all the holes in the Foster family graveyard. And when the sun began to edge towards the horizon, Jeremy held up his book and called out the names of the skeletons that had been laid out in perfect anatomical order on the blankets. Scotty edged himself a little closer to each skeleton than the others and they all bowed their heads and recited, "may he rest in peace."

And they went down the row like that and Scotty mouthed each of the name’s after Jeremy said them, so as to try to memorize them. Rachel Foster. Samuel Foster. Bonnie Foster. Charles Foster. Dolores Foster. John Foster III. John Foster J.R. John Foster S.R. Edna Foster.

After the ceremony had been concluded, they rolled the man in his three-piece suit on to the cart and stacked the bones neatly on top of him.

“I just can’t wait to see what Han’s cooking tonight!” One of the girls said.

“Yea, I’m hungry!” Said another.

And they picked up their packs, and their machetes and bows and the twine-lines of squirrels and lizards they had caught. They stood at attention, in four lines of three-wide, with their shovels in their right hand.

“Alpha Foxtrot, out!” Said the boy of about ten, who had been endowed with the position of ‘general of procession’ because he was able to muster the bark of a military general best of all of them. “Ya left! Ya left! Ya left, right, left!” And the kids marched out of the graveyard and on to the overgrown two-track road and off towards home.

“Bye, bye, family,” Scotty said touching the top of the big, marble headstone and waving at the rest of them as he walked backwards out of the graveyard, trailing behind the marching procession. When he had waved to all of the headstones, he turned and hurried to catch up with the band. He slipped into his position in the middle of the third line, and set his feet on pace with the general of procession’s bark.

“Ya left! Ya left! Ya left, right, left!” Barked

And, with his stride in pace with the marching band of kids, Scotty recited the names to himself. He said them over and over again, until he was certain that he would never forget.
The Moonshiner

Roscoe was a moonshiner. He peddled White Lightning. Bootlegged Mountain Dew. Distributed Firewater. Hustled Hooch.

For as long as Roscoe could remember, his granddaddy had had a still in the woodshed behind the ring of double-wide trailers on their family land. And probably long before that, too. And Roscoe got himself into the work since the first time, which hadn’t been the last, that he had been kicked out of school at the age of thirteen on account of him consistently finding himself in fights with the other boys. After smacking him upside the head, the principal had told him not to come back that week. At the bell, Roscoe walked the mile from the end of the pavement, where the school bus dropped him off, to find his granddaddy sitting on the wood chopping block, fiddling with a piece of copper wire and a pair of pliers.

He had three days of suspension and, on account of granddaddy’s arthritic hands from a long-life of low-skill carpentry work, became the old man’s assistant for the new batch. Roscoe hadn’t thought much of it at the time, his granddaddy wasn’t particularly pleasant company. Except that it was a good alternative to playing by himself in the woods or sitting around the house and bearing the brunt of his own daddy’s fury and hard knuckles.

A month later, though, when granddaddy returned from his drop offs across their dry county and waved the wad of twenty dollar bills with a wide toothless smile and a sparkle in his eye, Roscoe was struck with a sudden sense of purpose and drive that he hadn’t felt for anything else in his backwoods world. As granddaddy had put it, “opportunity comes a’knocking.”

But what had been something of a quick-cash hobby for his granddaddy in the weeks between carpentry contracts, Roscoe foresaw a real empire. And like any real business empire, Roscoe worked his way up. It hadn’t taken much to convince granddaddy to let Roscoe run the drop-off circuit instead, and take 10% of the proceeds for doing so. In fact, granddaddy had jumped at the proposal. After all, it left him a whole lot more time to get drunker than a skunk, without the burdensome responsibility of operating a motorized vehicle. Forget the fact that a thirteen year-old was behind the wheel of the massive Ford F-350 and had to sit on a stack of books to peer over the dashboard.

What granddaddy didn’t know is that Roscoe had expanded their sales by watering the shine down a bit, keeping the extra proceeds for his own distillery expansion plans. At 14, he struck out fully on his own, tripling the previous capacity and streaming off enough extra shine to maintain granddaddy’s delusional reality, who was busy preparing himself for a nuclear apocalypse and discussing tactics with the Elvis and Hulk Hogan bobble heads on his kitchen windowsill.

Each year after that, it seemed opportunity went from knocking politely to trying to blow the whole damned house down. By the time he was twenty, Roscoe had expanded their production capacity ten-fold for moonshine, talked his cousin into sectioning off a third of his farm for marijuana cultivation, found a genius chemist tweaker that cooked his batches of meth in a Norris motel, and had bribed a Jasper County doctor to fill 24 monthly prescriptions of oxycontin for every member of Roscoe’s trailer-ring family.
The boy had vision. And, except two run-ins with the law that cost him a total of seven months of his life, he only went up from there. By the age of 31, Roscoe considered himself to be the most reliable pharmacist across Clarence County, as well as the six surrounding counties. Anyone who had a hankering or an illness, he was their man. The demand side was the easy part.

He charged sky-high prices, in the form of cash or gasoline or cigarettes or auto parts or cockroach paste, since he was the only one in the business. That was on account of Roscoe’s mobility. At this point in the nation’s development, the state, and the federal government had de-funded the budget for roads and highways. It was no longer in the interests of economic growth, they had said. Fiber optic broadband is the infrastructure of the future, they had said. We have entered the era of the ‘internet economy,’ they had said. The Google will erase space and time and the whole globe will be interconnected just like next-door neighborhoods, they had said.

And so, in Roscoe’s remote part of the country, with its shifting clay soil and flood-induced washouts, the roads were nearly impassable. The once-maintained paved roads had huge craters from sinkholes, gaping potholes from the shifting clay soil, and bumps and cracks of every size and design from over-stress and endless heating and cooling cycles.

It hadn’t happened all of a sudden, of course. It had happened slowly, over time. So slow that people had hardly noticed. They had grumbled about the condition of roads, or the rising cost of gas and had driven less and less. They would Facetime their families on holidays more and more and order what they needed via Wal-Mart and Amazon drones instead of driving out to the country store.

Then, one day, they woke up and realized they were on their own little island, surrounded by the creeping kudzu vine without a way in or a way out. For the most part, they didn’t mind – they stayed in touch with the world and current events through the broadband connection and went about their daily business the same as ever, very nearly.

Any more, except for Roscoe and the vagabond criminal troupes, nearly no one ventured through the string of dying towns of Clarence County. Or through much of the deeper reaches of the south, for that matter. Roscoe couldn’t even remember a time when they had ever had much visitation. The nearest they got to outside Americans was the 30,000 feet of altitude between the planes that still buzzed across the sky. They’d look up, longingly, and watch the hunk of metal pass over them like some hovering, observing, but not meddling, passive god. And then the buzz would dissipate into the eastern horizon and the world would resume its own buzz of earthly sounds.

After watching the daily morning flight from Houston to Raleigh pass passively across a cold, drizzly December day, Roscoe loaded up The Land Commander with the day’s supplies for his patients of Clarence County. The Land Commander was a behemoth of a vehicle. A regular tank. Roscoe and two of his cousins had built the vehicle nearly from scratch. They had pinched axles and belts and seats from the junkyard. They had wrenched apart an idle traincar for the chassis and had taken the rails too. They had nabbed a semi-truck cab from a driver who had gotten lost and somehow ended up on County Road 7, leaving him with a
day’s worth of food and some decent shoes to walk to Clearwater. The vehicle had monster truck tires, a 6” suspension lift kit, and three axles that helped it cross most of the surrounding roads. To cross the several ravines and creeks, The Land Commander was equipped with train wheels and 4 x 12’ sections of rail for the series of crumbled bridges between Roscoe’s home and Highway 73.

Roscoe was damn proud of The Land Commander.

But it wasn’t his only source of mobility. He had a whole fleet of vehicles for his business enterprise. Each was specifically designed for a set of destinations. He’d take the horse and rubber-tired buggy if he was only going to Clearwater. A 16’ fishing boat he had stolen from a stammering tourist, if he was going down the Tenn-Tom to Florence or London or Kosiuzko. For Lee and Jefferson Counties, he would use the small prop-plane that they had fabricated from parts ripped off a plane at the county airport hangar over in Clarendale and a drag-race car body that a drunk in Florence had given him for a gallon mason jar of shine.

The morning got off to a rocky start for Roscoe the Moonshiner. At the fourth stream crossing, he nearly lost the vehicle and its precious cargo when a bridge pier came loose from its footing and the post swayed under the weight of The Land Commander. After fastening the rails to the side of the truck, Roscoe climbed the four steep steps and squeezed his large frame through the roll cage and into the modified semi-truck cab. He turned the key and watched the plume of black smoke fill the driver-side mirror. He smiled to himself, grateful for coming out of that last ravine alive, ashed his cigarette, the third of the day, on the floor, and cranked into first gear. From there, it was all open, choppy road ahead towards Glendoe.

The first sign of Glendoe was the old Pilot gas station. Roscoe noticed that the Kudzu vines had made considerable progress in their efforts to swallow the station whole. There were only heaping mounds of green leafy vines, still holding their color despite the recent bout of cold weather, where each of the gas ports had been. The walls of the gas station were nearly covered, except for a small window where a Camel Light neon sign still flickered night and day. The roof of the building was sunken in the middle and had a blue tarp pinned across it. In the doorway of the gas station, a thick, double-chinned man in overalls was standing, his hands stuffed in his pockets. He had a red trucker cap on that read “Make America Great Again”. Roscoe took in the whole scene, the slithering vines, the uneven pavement, the crumbling building, the obese gentlemen. Ain’t that the truth, Roscoe thought to himself.

By the time Roscoe reached the town square, with its boarded up storefronts and well-kept city hall, a crowd of people were already waiting for him. They watched his truck pull into the middle of the square with a wolfish hunger in their eyes.

“Howdybeensir?” The town’s mayor, Jessup, was the first to step forward, shaking Roscoe’s hand firmly and vigorously.

“Beengood,” Roscoe responded.

“Beengood,” Mayor Jessup agreed. After a moment’s thought, added, “colder than my ole lady, though.”

“Ain’t it, though?” Roscoe responded, careful to draw out the first syllable and holding his tongue to the roof of this mouth to get the nasally ‘a’ sound just right.
Ever since the collapse, collapse of the county bridges, the local economy, the weather patterns, the isolated string of towns that Roscoe serviced had each begun to develop their own nuanced dialects. The greeting in Glendoe, Franklin, and most of Lee County, was *Howdybeensir* with a firm handshake. In Mount Ida, it was *Alrightnow* with a nod and a slap on the shoulder. The folks in Norris greeted one another with a silent, slow, knowing nod and a wide smile.

Roscoe learned all the nuances of each town so as not to raise any suspicion as an outsider. He was the only person that could enter most of these towns without being met with the barrel of a shotgun. Two census surveyors had been killed over in Clearwater only a month before. And he did all he could to keep it that way by telling the towns about all the madness and chaos he could fabricate for them.

"That freeze coming for us all." Roscoe said in a grave manner.

Weather was a key element of each town’s dialect. If it had been summer, or even spring and fall lately, Glendoe’s residents would have said *hotter ‘n the Devil’s harem*. He wasn’t sure whether that was simply about the heat of hell or whether it was a suggestion that pretty women were bound to be sinners. He reckoned there was truth to both of those logics, from his limited experience in those realms. Over in Mount Ida, the summer greeting would be *sweating harder than a he-ro slave*. In the winter it was *cold as that ole massah*. It had taken Roscoe a while to get comfortable with several phrases in Mount Ida. In the early days, he had been worried he might get beat up for saying such, as a white man in a black town. But that was just the local term and no one had thought much of it.

Roscoe unlatched the door to the cargo holds and the anxious crowd took two steps forward. He pulled out his list and picked through the inventory, scratching names off with the stub of a pencil.

For Mayor Jessup - a fifth of shine, a quarter ounce of weed and his back pain prescription.

Norah Patterson – diabetes medicine, 30 mg of oxycontin
Leon Feif – 5 grams of methamphetamines, a fifth of shine, two asthma inhalers for his nephews
Sheriff Perkins – 5 grams of cocaine, a fifth of shine, and a whole spectrum of pills to keep his immune-deficient body running.s
Randall Roberts – Claritin allergy medicine, Mucinex, and _ grams of heroine, an asthma inhaler
Deborah Ventry – 5 grams of cocaine, eighth of weed, 20 mg of oxycontin, 50 mg of Tylenol, and amoxicillin for her sick daughter.

The list went on and on. Roscoe finished distributing the last items, but the crowd only diminished slightly – the most addicted residents slinking away to get their fix in the peace and quiet of their dark, musty homes. The rest still waited, eager for the other service that Roscoe provided.

That was the local news, of which Roscoe was the anchorman. The townspeople were kept abreast of the current events across the nation and world through the three online media conglomerates and heard a whole assortment of other local rumors through their Twitter and Facebook feeds. But they relied on Roscoe to give them the truth about what was happening in the surrounding towns and counties.
"Roscoe, you got any news for us?" Randall pressed, eagerly. Roscoe nodded slowly with a grave and stoic expression and tossed the cigarette butt that had been dangling from the corner of his mouth. Roscoe loved storytelling more than anything. He loved it more than making money. He could craft the most outlandish tales, spinning characters and scenes of betrayal and cons out of thin air. They would just pour out of him.

He would size up the listener, knowing their vices and, therefore, aspects of their weaknesses and the quality of their desires and the textures of their characters. He would find their soft spots or their loathings, their vulnerabilities and their aspirations. And he would build his myths into the cracks in their masks of calm and normal.

"We-ellll," Roscoe started, scanning the crowd of listeners. It was mostly men, older in age, with a few widowed women, single mothers and a couple teenage kids. "You hear how bad things have got down in Mount Ida?" Mount Ida tales of tribulation and violence were the favorites of Glendoe residents. On account of Mount Ida being all black and Glendoe being all white, the two towns thrived off of the despair of the other. It made the folks in Glendoe feel better about their sorry state of affairs and made the folks in Mount Ida residents feel vindicated for the long history of violence that Glendoe residents had inflicted upon them.

In truth, Mount Ida was thriving better than any town in the entire region. It was a little Memphis, and it was growing quickly. That was a result of the recent series of church burnings and vigilante killings across the region, which had brought droves of black families to the gates of the sanctuary haven. The booming town was also along the freshly paved CH-17, the only passable artery left in the region, rebuilt by a Chinese firm and connected the region's cotton gins, defense industry manufacturers, and growing biotech plants to the port of New Orleans. From New Orleans, the products would cross through the Nicaragua Canal and make their way off to China, Malaysia, and Korea for distribution. Mount Ida had several doctors now, a pharmacy, and a thriving main street that included a distillery and a brewery. Ever since the rebuilding of CH-17, Roscoe's business in the town had diminished to the most illicit of drugs that were too risky for black folks to transport along CH-17 on account of the heightened surveillance.

So, Roscoe spun the Glendoe crowd a tale. It was a tale about a recent spate of killings in Mount Ida spurred by the multiple men vying for the opportunity of marriage to a thick, dark-skinned woman who made the best candied yams and collard greens in the country. The only part of the story that had been true was the woman’s cooking, which had been on Roscoe’s mind for the last three days since he had suppered at her soul food kitchen. Roscoe had joked with her that he would kill a man for her cooking, and the seed was planted for a story. The crowd seemed pleased, laughing at the funny parts and nudging one another as Roscoe recounted the smells and flavors of the thick woman's cooking.

"Tell us about that prophet over in Clarendale," piped up a pudgy, pale teenage boy from the back of the crowd. "I hear the prophet's got a hundred followers and they've got magical powers! I hear they can shift shapes into animals and that they're luring young people out of town and turning them into animals,
too!" The crowd, which had still been snickering with one another over the details of Roscoe’s tragic love story, hushed and leaned in, staring at Roscoe eagerly.

Roscoe frowned, spitting in the dirt and grinding the spot with the toe of his boot. This was a new rumor that Roscoe hadn’t started, though to begin with, he wished he had. It had caught on like wildfire and spread across the region. Each town he had visited in the last two weeks had asked him about the so-called prophet. But the story of the prophet and the prophet’s intentions was different every time. In Lee County, they had said the prophet was over in Jefferson County, had a thousand followers, and was sacrificing goats to some strange rain god. In Jefferson County, they had said the prophet was the anti-christ with twenty thousand followers and was burning down Baptist churches across Clarence County. Across Clarence County, they had caught wind of the prophet’s presence down in Mount Ida, and that the prophet was inciting an impending race war. In Mount Ida, the prophet was a woman out in Norris that was practicing Haitian voodoo and had a gaggle of large Amazonian snakes she sent as messengers to do her bidding.

Roscoe hadn’t sorted out just who was spreading the rumors, but he cursed that person to high heavens.

The first several times Roscoe had been asked about the prophet, he had happily weaved a set of stories - taking the proposed account from the inquirer and expounding on the prophet’s back story, practices, and often would excite the crowd with apocalyptic stories of the prophet’s meaning.

Roscoe had never been a religious man. The only time he had come in contact with a Bible was the two times that his aunt had dragged him to church and the several times that his father had cracked the thick book across his head in a drunken outbursts. But, in the last week, Roscoe had developed a superstitious sensibility.

On his way home from telling an elaborate tale of the prophet’s use of chicken heads as part of their baptism ceremony, he stopped the Land Commander in front of a row of slaughtered chickens, headless and placed carefully in a row across the road. The next day, after mentioning an event of snake charming in Lee County, he had climbed in The Land Commander after his last drop-off and drove three miles before noticing the copperhead snake curled up on the passenger’s seat.

Roscoe waved his hand to quiet the crowd. “That’s just a load of bullshit,” Roscoe dismissed the matter. He turned to close the latch on the rest of the cargo. The crowd was disappointed. Several left the town square, but many others stayed, murmuring to one another and eyeing Roscoe, hoping he might say more or change his mind and spin them the news story they were itching to hear.

“That ain’t true,” the pudgy boy said, wild-eyed, spinning circles to catch the eyes of the other’s amassed around the Town Hall. “It ain’t. I’ve seen her. Out in the woods, two nights ago on the full moon. I swear it. She was a red fox with a black bushy tail but she had human eyes. Swear it on my life, I say. And she seemed to say, that she’s coming to save us. I swear it.”

The crowd turned back to Roscoe.

Roscoe scanned them, hating them at that moment. All these addicts with their blinking eyes, and blank minds, he thought. Good for nothing but filling my
pockets with easy money. They stood there watching him, eager as a young maid on prom night. And just as in need of a whole mouthful of lies to seal the deal. He felt anxious for the first time in a long time. He moved his lips back and forth, searching for a response but, the words just wouldn’t spill out of him. Then, he tipped his hat and hauled himself into the cab.

As he left the town square, he watched the crowd disperse in the rear-view mirror. He didn’t understand how these towns kept on in this new world this way. There was hardly any industry left in them and the local businesses had all dried up back when the Wal-Mart’s were in the county, before you could buy everything you needed on The Google. The whole world had transformed around them, technology, popular culture, drone taxis in New York City, hologram movie screenings in Atlanta. But folks here kept on just the same as always.

Twice he had considered making a break for the big cities. He had the money for it, stashed away under the floorboards of his trailer and sealed in buried coffins in the family graveyard. He had gone to Miami twice on vacation. But, in the end, he knew his place was here. He was just grateful to have a tract of land out in the country, where he could keep to himself, grow tomatoes, brew shine, and hoop and holler in a drunken frenzy with his cousins around the fire at night. A helluva lot better than being trapped in one of these god-awful towns, he thought.

Twelve miles out of Glendoe, Roscoe heaved on the brakes after turning a corner to find a massive cow in the middle of the road. When the cow turned its head towards the windshield, he saw the wide, curved horns sticking out nearly 18 inches from the side of its head.

Roscoe yanked the truck into park and jumped down from the truck, landing with a squish. He looked down to find his boots sank up to the ankle in a dark, muddy mound in the road.

Bullshit, Roscoe spit a thick wad of mucus onto the road. He shook his leg, sending splatters of bullshit in every direction, then climbed back into the cab, blasted the horn until the bull moved out of the way, and headed off.

Another mile down the road, Roscoe got a flat tire. “Just my luck today,” he groaned to the cigarette butt that was hanging on for dear life from his lower lip. He pulled over outside of a beautifully-kept lavender colored ranch home nestled into the curtains of kudzu vines that draped the tall pines that had once thrived there. Behind the white picket fence, a woman was pulling weeds in the rose garden. He smiled at her and said “Howdybeenma’am?”

On the picket fence was a hand-painted green sign that read “Tina’s Kudzu Krafts.” Tina, the woman behind the white picket fence, who was now standing, arms crossed and eyeing the stranger with suspicion, was a world renown Kudzu crafter and Roscoe recognized the brand immediately.

“Can I he’p you, suh?” Tina inquired.

“Well, sure, thank ya. Can I get two jars of your jelly and a vine whicker basket?”

“You coulda ordered it on-line. No need to come all the way out here for two jars of jelly and a basket.”

“We-ell I was on my way over to Norris to visit an ill uncle already.”
Tina took a long look at Roscoe, then at his vehicle, then back to Roscoe. "I seen you come by several times before. Seems like you don't stay long in Norris."

"No, I don't stay long. Just long enough to drop off his medicine and check his condition." Roscoe grinned. "I'm a doctor, see," he said, extending his calloused hands for her examination, as if there was some sign or tattoo or code in his palms that verified his medical expertise.

"I see," she said, in the manner of someone unconvinced, not looking at his hands and watching his eyes instead. "I don't get many folks stopping by for jelly these days." There was a hint of nostalgia, and loneliness in her voice, though she didn't show any emotion on her face.

Before the smooth, long tentacles of pavement stretching across the county had splintered into a thousand separate chunks, Tina had been a superstar. Her brand still had a waning superstar-dom in certain pockets of the globe. Tina had started with a local following with her kudzu products for years. Back then, she would set up her card table at the farmers market and pile her kudzu crafts, soaps and vine baskets and kudzu cakes and kudzu root teas on top.

It was her kudzu blossom jelly that was Tina's claim to fame. And that fate was hand-delivered to Tina through the wild excitement and tastebuds of a young Korean entrepreneur, Hyun. Hyun had been on a 'tour de la south', a trip he had planned in the fragile and financially irresponsible days after his girlfriend had left him to follow her dreams in the big city of Seoul. He had been digging through the heaps of junk in his closet to collect the last of her things that she had asked him to send. There, among the folds of his girlfriends, or rather ex-girlfriends, dresses was a long-lost treasure from his childhood - a Dukes of Hazzard compilation set he had fished out of a recycling bin at ten and had watched over and over again in the awkward and introverted years of his youth, trying to drown out the shouts and crashes of his parents arguments in the kitchen.

And so, with not much stable ground to hold steady in the time of crisis, Hyun fastened on to his old childhood dream of cruising along the backroads of the American South with a bottle of whiskey between his legs and Waylon Jennings on the radio. It hadn't turned out to be quite the exotic experience that he had been imagining for most of his thirty-three years. One of the more 'authentic' experiences he did have, though, was happening across Tina's place. He had gotten quite lost in the second week of his trip. In those parts of Clarence County, directions were given through landmarks of abandoned barns, contorted dead oak trees, and number of cattle guards rather than mile markers and road signs.

After making a few long loops that brought him right back where he started, and after being chased away from one trailer by a rabid pit bull, he had mustered the courage to knock on Tina's door.

Hyun took one taste of the Kudzu Blossom Jelly smudged across a saltine cracker and knew there was a market back home for the product. He and Tina worked out a verbal business agreement and, within a month, Tina had closed up her little farmer market stand and was working around the clock to meet the demands of Korean grocery stores and artisan markets. Things got even busier from there. Koreans sent the jelly as gifts to their family members that had migrated to other countries for job opportunities and a wide spectrum of other
freedoms. As the Korean diaspora developed a taste for the product, Tina had to expand her production for the needs of new grocers in LA and Tokyo and Beijing and London and Lagos and Mexico City. She had hired a team of Kudzu harvesters, migrant workers from across the world, and built an industrial-scale food processing facility that provided twenty-four needed jobs for Clarence County residents.

Smuckers and several south-east Asian food production industries had been keeping an eye on Hyun and Tina's Kudzu craft since their initial launch in the Korean markets. But, they had waited until the product had developed a loyal consumer base across four continents before making their move. Tina had never patented the recipe and hadn't even considered that she might need legal advising. By the time she and Hyun realized what was happening, Smuckers had drained their profits through a set of patent lawsuits and was edging Tina and Hyun out of every grocer in the world, one at a time.

Tina and Hyun kept on for a bit. They slashed wages to employees and increased working hours to try to meet the lower prices that Smuckers had set for their new product. But it was no use. Smuckers had twelve canning facilities in seven countries to their one, had the lowest wages and longest hours, and had been basically given hundreds of acres of kudzu-covered land in southern Georgia, through state tax credits for 'industry development'.

And so, when Smuckers offered Tina four hundred thousand dollars for the rights to her brand, she couldn't refuse. The sale had barely covered her debts for the food processing facility and the lawyer fees for the three years of lawsuit battles with Smuckers in the courts.

The Kudzu had taken over the land in Clarence County, which had once been a fertile and productive agricultural region. And nobody had known what to do next. But Tina had found a way, and she had taken over the Kudzu. Then the Korean markets had taken over Tina. And, in the end, the big dogs won and the local folks were left high and dry. And, as they say, such is life in America.

So, to make a long story short, Tina stood before Roscoe, but she had lapsed into a time warp, reliving the last twenty years of riding the rollercoaster of enterprise. The buzzing of a mad deerfly nibbling at her ear had vaulted her back into the current reality of being a failed businesswoman and she went to fetch two jars of jelly and a basket for the moonshiner as he replaced the flat tire on the Land Commander.

When he had finished, he stood, leaning against his vehicle and studying. Soon she returned with the jelly and the basket. He though a story might cheer him up and rid him of the strange feeling of impending doom that had been circling him all morning. Two cats, teetotaler, ambitious entrepreneur, keeps up appearances despite nobody for miles around.

After he paid her and thanked her kindly, he said, "You hear what's happening over in Norris, these days?" Then, without waiting for her to respond, he answered himself, "yea, that Mayor over in Norris, he's a real handful. They've got-"

"I've already been informed as to what's happening with the Mayor in Norris," Tina interrupted.
Surprised, and a bit resentful of being cut short, Roscoe asked her sharply, "now who did you hear from all the way out here? You hear it on The Google?"

"Last week a man came through here and told me all about it."

"He drive this road? Did he have some kinda jeep?" Roscoe was shocked.

"No, he was riding a beautiful jet-black horse. Same color as his skin. They looked majestic riding down this road, and I had thought it a dream." Roscoe watched Tina's eyes well up. "He looked like some type of monk or hermit or something. Dressed in all black robes even with the sun bearing down on him," she said, wiping at the corners of her eyes. "He was headed over to Jasper County. I guess he had a job over there."

"Ain't no jobs over in Jasper County."

"I didn't think so either. How'd he put it?" she asked herself. "Said he'd been called on to make some profit."

The words cut through Roscoe like a bolt of lightning, knocking him back a step or two.

Tina continued, looking a bit bleary-eyed. "He stayed for biscuits and talked all morning with my son," she pointed to the shaded gazebo in the far corner of the fenced property. "Must be some good profits to be had in Jasper County. Cause at noon, after all that talking, my son went off with him, too."

Tina dabbed at her cheeks with a handkerchief, now trickling with tears despite her level, calm voice.

"I didn't want him to go but he said he ought to. I sure hope the man's good on his promise, though. We could use the extra cash out here. Roof needs repair."

Roscoe's blood was starting to boil. He felt nauseated and so he bid her good day and climbed back into the cab of the Land Commander and headed off down the road, chain smoking cigarettes and cursing the superstitions that were slithering up and down his spine.

By the time he made it to the next drop-off, he was feeling a little bit better. He may have to give up the storytelling for a bit, he decided, to stay quiet until he finds out more. And not to stir anymore strange events like the snake or the chickenheads or the bullshit. But, nothing else was likely to change. And business would be fine, he assured himself.

His next stop was the Stelford Snake Farm. When he arrived, Mr. Stelford was inside one of his netted groves, covered from head to toe in a thick beekeepers suit and spilling cicada carcasses and frantic mice across the ground. Upon seeing Roscoe, Mr. Stelford came out of the netted grove through the zipper-door and removed his yellow suit, going from astronaut snake charmer to pajama-ed and arthritic elderly man. He stumbled towards Roscoe as though he had just woken up from a long, deep sleep and was searching for his eye glasses.

"How's bidness?" Roscoe asked the man, once he was sure Mr. Stelford had fully regained his grasp of the waking world.

"Oh, its coming along," Mr. Stelford said with a long, sly smile.

Roscoe knew that Mr. Stelford's snake farming business had 'come along' several years ago and was, in fact, booming at this point. For the many people across the southeast that could no longer afford the sky-high prices of beef and pork, and had been instructed to stay away from chicken as a result of a recent virus in the
poultry industry, Stelford’s Snake Paste offered a great alternative protein source. Beef and pork production had plummeted as a result of new environmental standards that limited water and land usage for the agriculture industries and essentially cut out most meat production across the country.

The standards had, the economists and environmentalists touted, extended the supply of water in many areas of the country by a number of years and were declared a grand success by the experts. But, in Roscoe’s conversations with people across the region, the regulations were yet another huge infringement on their rights and on their culture.

“Are we supposed to just eat beans and tofu?” One incredulous mother of four skinny boys with glazed eyes had asked him, after they had transacted oxycontin for sexual favors of the kind that ought not leave the secrecy of the bedroom. Or, in this case, ought not to leave the secrecy of the cab of a jacked-up moonshine-toting semi-truck. “Damn government taking away all our freedoms,” she had followed up with, as she opened the door of the truck and strode, with the stoic gait of a goddess, back to the front porch of her double-wide trailer.

Mr. Stelford had found his niche in the meat-starved world, as fate would have it, through a dare he had been endowed with by his younger cousin, Ernest. Ernest had been about fifteen at the time, and suffered from a severe case of eczema. Mr. Stelford, who was simply Ron at that time, had been out deer hunting with Ernest when they saw the ten-foot (Ron claimed it was sixteen feet) Burmese python sunning itself in a clearing.

Ron had been a proud boy, as many boys were, and when Ernest had dared him to catch the snake with his bare hands, he couldn’t back down from the challenge on account of his reputation. It had been easier than he had expected, though likely because the python was sun drunk and considered itself the king of its little universe, not knowing a threat or a predator in all its long life.

The grilled meat had been chewy, but it was no match for Sweet Baby Ray’s barbeque sauce and they pronounced their newfound food to be a innovation of the times. Throughout the next two years, the two boys became regular hunters, catching snakes for the thrill of it, and sneaking the unsuspecting meat onto the table for family barbeques, and snickering to one another as they watched their grandmother wolf it down without concern. Ernest’s scaly skin improved and they decided the snake was a miracle drug.

By the time the environmental regulations were passed, imposing yet another unwanted and unwarranted overreach of government into the daily lives of Clarence County residents, Ron was well-prepared to fill a small gap in the local market. It had taken people some getting used to the idea of eating snake meat. But, after a few holiday barbeques that left the patriarchs of families grumbling about not being full enough, he found an in-road with the hurt mothers and grandmothers rather quickly.

Since then, Mr. Stelford, who had been transformed from Ron to Mr. Stelford on account of the thickness of his billfold, had taken his heir claim to family land to the courts and won 150 acres for his endeavors. Half of those acres had been long-neglected timber and covered in Kudzu and Mr. Stelford converted them to netted snake breeding grounds. He grew his other staples on the other half.
Roscoe figured Mr. Stelford’s enterprise was likely to sustain itself in a way that Tina’s hadn’t. For one, his product had only reached the southeast region, which the larger meat industry hounds had long left to their own devices. And for two, Mr. Stelford had developed a sort of cooperative enterprise that could rely on one product or the other if the market changed. In the surrounding areas, he had convinced other landowners, once timber producers themselves, to clear their land for the breeding of other animals. And so the southeastern section of Clarence County had taken up the call and was in the process of ramping up operations of breeding deer, possum, mice, and frogs.

The local supply of feed for Mr. Stelford’s snakes had saved him a truck-load of money and was filling their pockets, too. The snake industry was the primary export, but they all shared a portion of the profits for their supply. The arrangement did cut into Mr. Stelford’s revenues, but he had a long-view of the enterprise. And, should the snake industry be captured by an entrepreneur in Florida or in the Amazon or somewhere else far far away from Clarence County, they could shift their focus to the export of one of the other meats, particularly deer and bullfrog, that would be sought after in the regional markets.

Each week, a bush pilot from Lee County would pick up the cartons of snake pastes, snake meat ground into a crumbly meal, and lift them out to the larger Wal-Mart and Amazon distribution centers in Mount Ida and Tuscaloosa and Jackson. From there, the paste would hit the shelves across seven-state range in their varieties, which included Burmese Python Multi-Use Paste, Water Moccasin Curry Paste, Rattlesnake Chili Powder, and, his new product, Worm Snake Gravy Packet.

“Well, I sure hope you keep coming along,” Roscoe replied. Then, he started for the truck saying, “and I come along to get you your prescription.”

“No, I don’t need it anymore, doc.” Mr. Stelford was grinning the type of grin that welcomes the other party to grin, too. But Roscoe was not grinning.

“I’ve been healed,” Mr. Stelford said, stretching his arms wide and turning his head towards the thick, grey sky as if the sun was shining on him and him alone.

“Healed, you say?”

“Yessir,” replied Mr. Stelford, his arms still stretched out and his face was still glowing in the sunshine that wasn’t of this earthly world. “By the hands of god.”

“Have you been re-acquainting yourself with the good book?” Roscoe pressed cautiously, with a sense of dread in his chest.

“Nope.” Mr. Stelford lowered his arms and gazed at Roscoe. There was a pale fire in his eyes that blazed into Roscoe’s core. “I have given myself over to the New Faith. The new faith that is fit for the world of a brighter tomorrow. I have given myself over to the prophet of hope. And I have been made whole in the salvation of this living world.”

Roscoe dug a hole in the dirt with the toe of his boot. His jaw clenched and his hands curled into tight fists. He breathed in and out, slow and deep, before finding his words. “Say,” his face had gone dark, but he managed to keep his tone light and cheery. “If I was looking to get my soul saved by this...prophet of hope... Where might I find him?”
Mr. Stelford’s eyes were still ablaze as he shook his head solemnly. “There is no him, there is only an us. The New Faith is all around us.” He waved his hand across the landscape, and Roscoe half expected that a ring of followers would reveal themselves on Mr. Stelford’s prompt. But the dreary sky and the wooded horizon and the curtains of Kudzu remained unchanged.

“The New Faith is in all of us,” he continued, pointing an accusatory finger at Roscoe’s chest. “You need only to hear the call.”

Roscoe didn’t hear nothing but the buzzing of the flies around his bullshit-covered boot.

“But how can I learn to hear the call,” he pressed. “Where can I find a priest or someone to bring me forward?”

They stood for a long minute, silent and watching each other’s eyes. Mr. Stelford’s, ablaze with the fire of a renewed soul, and Roscoe’s, searching for answers.

“When you are ready, the New Faith will come to find you.”

Mr. Stelford stood strong on his conviction that he no longer needed Roscoe’s services and so, bidding him good day and cursing him under his breath, Roscoe went on his way. And against Mr. Stelford’s recommendation, Roscoe did not wait for the call, for he did not need salvation. He needed only his two hands for working and his sharp mind for business sense, thank you very much. He needed his Land Commander to keep lurching down the shattered roads. And he needed his patients.

As Roscoe moved from town to town to make his drop-offs, he was a bundle of worries and they sat in contorted knots in the muscles of his neck and back. He worried that other patients would drop their prescriptions and pick up the mysterious religion. He worried that the changes that had thrown much of the world into chaos would creep into the time-frozen archipelago of small town islands in the sea of Kudzu that stretched across Clarence County. He worried that, should this mysterious religious fervor overtake the countryside, well, then the beloved Moonshiner would be made obsolete.

Roscoe knew that his business was built on an unmoving, unchanging world. That his patients came to him knowing full well that yesterday had been better than today or tomorrow could possibly be. That he, and he alone, could offer them a sanctuary in the memories of those earlier times. Or, at the very least, a numbed detachment from their immediate concerns.

Roscoe’s business was built on despair. And so, for Roscoe and his empire, a prophet of hope was a revolution that need be suppressed. And the best way to suppress a revolution, he reasoned, was to understand its core tenets. And then to undermine it.

So, Roscoe did not wait for the call. Instead, he went searching for the people and places that had been called or had been witness to that call. Over the coming months, Roscoe inquired and listened and pressed his patients for details all across his service area.

And everywhere he went, the New Faith had been ahead of him.

But, while the New Faith had been to all the towns and all the trailers and all the large estates from a time long gone, it hadn’t been met with the same welcoming
that Mr. Stelford had met it with. Rather, to his pleasant surprise, it had been met mostly with resentment and distrust. After all, these were god-fearing people in the Christian traditions. The good book was ingrained in their dialect and in the way they thought and came to see the world. Jesus had been at the helm of many a journey since the passage to the New World and far before then, too. And the others had taken to it on this soil, finding respite and reason in song and parable, and strengthened their will to keep on living and struggling and waiting on glory.

For this, he was grateful. And so, Roscoe’s assortment of medicines were still as needed as ever. And so were his stories. He kept telling his stories. But the stories had changed considerably, to meet the changes that had come with the New Faith’s arrival in the area.

Time and time again, people would ask for stories of the prophet of hope. Roscoe understood the need for these stories; the people were stirred by the taste of fear and hate. It was some of the few emotions they understood. It was the same reasons that Glendoe had needed horror stories about Mount Ida and it was the same reasons that all of Clarence County needed stories of crime and violence of the outside world. They had been educated in the feelings of alarm and anxiety for the unknown and the unfamiliar.

For many that had grown up after the era of public education, it was a large part of the little education they received. Six days a week, they had been taught to fear thy neighbor and hold their guns closer than their women. And on the seventh they were taught to love thy neighbor. And if Roscoe had been a betting man, which he wasn’t, he would have taken those 6-1 odds to the Choctaw Casino and placed all his chips on the table.

But, Roscoe wouldn’t give them stories of the New Faith. *Let them fabricate their own stories of horror and bloody sacrifices and the kidnapping of their children,* he decided. They would bring these stories forth themselves, he was sure. In addition, there was the superstition to consider. After seeing his stories of the prophet play out three times, he decided he was not to be made a fool again. *Yes, the people were all the better to stir their own rage and fear,* he had decided. What Roscoe could provide them was stories of the yester-world that they so desperately clung to.

Roscoe told beautiful stories of the glory days. He recounted stories of the factories that had once provided good paying jobs. He weaved stories of two-stepping to the country string band and bar fights that had arisen over one or another man’s pride called into question. He filled the town squares and front porches with stories of the schoolhouse that once could be trusted with the duty of teaching their children prayer and arithmetic and good manners. He told stories recounting the scents and flavors of smoked brisket and how the tender juices of barbecued meats would fill your mouth and dribble down your chin. And he watched the people’s faces melt into those memories.

Roscoe also told more religious stories than ever before—parables and passages from the Bible. He told stories of the blind being healed by the hands of Jesus and he told stories of the details of the salvation that was awaiting each and everyone of us in the paradise beyond this earthly world. He told his stories with
such riveting details that even he began to believe that that old world had once existed, and had been glorious.

It was in keeping with the safety of the old world, he decided, the world that had worked the people to the bone and gave them salvation on Sundays, that Roscoe could be sure that nothing would change in little old Clarence County.

Roscoe grew strong and confident in his new direction of story-telling and, after a few months of testing them out on the peoples of the smallest towns and the deepest hollers, he decided it was time to take it to the main stage. Roscoe’s main stage was Mount Ida. Mount Ida had so much buzzing of activity and thrill and entertainment that they wouldn’t just stand around and listen to Roscoe telling any ole story. No, they had places to go and things to do and, after all, there was this or that show to attend tonight if they needed entertainment. So, they would bow their heads politely and slip out the door if Roscoe launched into one story or another that didn’t captivate their attention in the first few lines.

Roscoe loaded up the illicit drugs in the Land Commander and made his way down to Mount Ida, reciting his story all the way and amending certain parts of it to fit the context of Mount Ida. When he got to town, he stopped by the thick women’s soul food kitchen, greeting the room of breakfasting patrons with a few ‘alrightnow’s and ordered a hearty meal. When he had finished, he made his way over to the old YMCA building, which was his drop off point. There was a crowd of people of all ages waiting for him in the large lobby of the building. They smiled and shook hands and talked about the weather and updated one another on family matters as they made transactions. Several people took off after business, but others stayed and mingled with one another in the hall. Roscoe stepped to the center of the room and cleared his throat.

“Now, friends,” he started, and then waited for the conversations to die down before starting again. “Now, friends, I’ve got a story to tell you. It ain’t a story of what’s happening in Glendo or Norris or Lee or Jasper Counties. The truth is that ain’t nothing happening in Glendo and Norris and Lee and Jasper Counties. So instead of telling you about al the details of what ain’t happening in those places, I’m gonna tell you a story of those days of glory we once had, long before now.”

They crowd stirred slightly, and looked at one another with amusement, and then they turned their attention back to Roscoe.

“Friends, I am going to tell you about those glory days we once had back before all this chaos started happening. Back when we, as a country, were one big ‘we’ and there were jobs aplenty and the kids learned the right things in the school house and all the people knew that the lord was their savior. And, so, they did right by one another.”

“Alrightnow,” one younger man nodded to Roscoe encouragingly.

“Now I know there are only a handful of you all in this room that were alive back in 1959 and I wasn’t neither, but I was told stories about those days from my pa and my granddaddy and I want to recount them to you all here. And I’m gonna tell you about how beautiful those days were, when there wasn’t nothing to fear but fear itself, and the people were good and didn’t care so much about fancy things.”
And Roscoe went on like this for several minutes, reciting his memorized story and even closing his eyes to conjure those days into the living. But, the crowd was not as captivated as the audience he had shared the story with in the furthest stretches of the region. Several slowly stepped back from the group and politely nodded to their neighbors and left through the front door. As he recounted the days before the federal government had begun to overreach the local authority on matters of education and economy, one older gentlemen with a walking cane stepped into the circle with Roscoe.

The man waved the cane in Roscoe’s face until Roscoe faltered from his story and the two stood there, staring at one another.

“With all due respect, suh,” the man started. “But that story you tell is a lie. I was nine years old in 1959. And let me tell you something about that year.”

The man tapped his cane on the ground several times and stood as straight as he could manage, with the hump on his back as it were. “In 1959, my father bagged one hundred pounds of cotton a day during harvest. And he got five dollars that year for all his sweat and pricked thumbs and aching back. Tell me, Mr. Roscoe, does that sound like a good year to you? How much you make in this here hallway just today?”

And Roscoe opened his mouth, but before he could start, the old man tapped his cane and continued, “In 1959, my grandfather got beat to a pulp for not stepping off the sidewalk to let a white man by. He had a limp all the rest of his life and couldn’t hardly work as well afterwards.”

The man tapped his cane a third time and looked at Roscoe. “In 1959, I didn’t get no books in my schoolhouse, but the white schoolhouse had books stacked up to the ceiling!”

The crowd murmured in agreement and one woman shouted, “tell it, brother!” And Roscoe hung his head and watched the linoleum at his feet.

“No,” the old man continued. “There were no glory days before. And there ain’t never been a time better for us than right here right now. That much I do know.”

And the crowd murmured in agreement and several people shouted, “tell it, brother!”

Roscoe left town with his tail between his legs and in a hot fury. He was cursing himself for being so confident, and so stupid. He pulled a jar of shine from underneath the passenger seat and took two long, deep swigs. It didn’t help. He lit a cigarette, smoked it to the filter, then lit another one, and then another one. And none of those cigarettes helped much either.

When he turned onto County Road 7, he should have noticed that something was different. But he had been too lost in his embarrassment to pay much attention to his surroundings. By the time he did notice the band of men, wearing army fatigues and black bandanas over their faces, it was too late. He slammed on the brakes just before crashing into the large tree trunks that lay across the road. He whirled around in his seat and grasped on the floorboard behind him, searching around for his hunting rifle.

But it was too late. By the time he had touched the cold metal of the barrel, one of the men had flung the driver-side door open and ripped Roscoe from the cab.
Roscoe tumbled into the grass on the shoulder of the road and several men advanced on him. They pinned his shoulder to the ground and sat on his legs. Roscoe flailed wildly and the men pinning him down punched him in the kidneys as two others grabbed his wrists and zip-tied them together.

Roscoe squirmed under the ground, groaning from the blows. He watched the bandana-ed man who had tore him from the cab come over and stand above him. His eyes smiled at Roscoe. “Thanks for the medicine, doc.” The man raised his rifle, clutching the barrel like a baseball bat and swung. The butt of the gun made a soft thud against Roscoe’s temple.

When Roscoe woke it was dark out. The Land Commander was gone and the world was quiet around him. Roscoe spit a mouthful of dark blood into the grass and tried to raise himself up from the ground. The first time he stood up, a searing headache overtook him and he lost consciousness again, melting back onto the shoulder of County Road 7. After a minute, he sat up again, his temples throbbing and looked around. It was about twenty miles back to Mount Ida, he predicted, which meant it was thirty miles home.

Roscoe reached down to untie the laces of his dress shoes with his hands still zip-tied together. He cursed himself for being so foolish as to wear the swanky wing-tip dress shoes, which were good for making an impression with his customers, but they hurt his feet with every step. He tossed the shoes into the grass and, slowly raised himself up to standing, with his head stooped low to keep the searing headache at bay.

Roscoe turned to the east and, slowly, began hobbling down County Road 7 towards home. He walked like this for some time, grinding his teeth and keeping his head down, shuffling one bare foot after another. He was breathing in short gasps, for his chest throbbed each time he filled his lungs. After a few miles, he noticed that his feet were bleeding. He ripped the sleeves off his shirt, which required some difficult contortions on account of his hands being lashed together. He tied the sleeves around his bloody feet and kept shuffling.

He was dehydrated and his vision became bleary. He lost his stride, stumbled and fell. He raised himself up, took several more paces and stumbled again, landing on the pavement on his right side, where the searing pain from his bruised kidneys spread all over him.

He screamed out loud in the agony. He rolled over onto his back and looked up at the glittering sky and screamed, “Help!” But he knew there was no one for miles around. He was alone on this stretch of road, and the realization that nobody would ever be coming, since the road was impassable, sunk in with the weight of a boulder on his chest.

“Help!” He whispered again and he lay there breathing in short, rapid gasps on the pavement. It was all over, he realized, suddenly. All of the bonfire parties with his cousins and all of the stories and all of the long days of driving around the counties with not a care in the world. All of the money that was tucked under the floorboards and sealed in coffins in the family graveyard, too. It would all whither away there, for he had told no one where it was. He had no heir to his legacy, and it would die with him.
And the world would go on all the same without him. His customers would mourn for a time, but only for the loss of his business and his entertainment, not for the man himself. And they would find another young entrepreneur who would step in to fill the market gap. Or, there would be no more pharmacist and his customers would be forced to stop abusing drugs, cold turkey. And they'd be all the better for it, they would decide, after emerging from their addictions with new eyes and renewed hearts.

Roscoe closed his eyes and saw his body, lying there, from above. He watched as the crows and buzzards and ravens descended, perching on his chest and ripping at the flesh on his neck and face. He watched as coyotes and wolves came in the night and tore his limbs from his body and slunk back into the forest to feast in their dens. He watched the sun bake his remains until there was nothing left of him, but dust. And, still, no one would come to find him.

Then, in the stillness between gusts of wind, Roscoe heard a soft hum. It started low, then rhythmically rose to a higher pitch and settled back into the low hum. He heard a faint thud of a drum that he had thought was in his temple but, now he could tell that it was in rhythm with the humming, which rose in pitch again, and settled back into the low hum. He opened his eyes and he was still lying there, his body still in tact, and the darkness of the night all around him. He saw that the moon, bloated and silvery in its fullness, had crept above the tree-line and was glowing down upon him.

He sat up and his ears strained for the sound. A gust washed it away for a second and, then, he could hear it even clearer now. It was a song, he realized. A chorus. There were people out there! He quickly got to his feet, then crouched down when the throbbing headache returned.

He followed the direction of the sound until he stood before the thick forest wall, several hundred yards from where he had been lying. The forest was pitch black but, as he peered through it, he could see a flicker of a flame beyond it.

Roscoe picked his way through the trees, stepping with care in his wrapped and bloody feet, and the song became louder with every step. When he reached the clearing, he gasped. There were hundreds of people there, singing a hymn and swaying with their arms around one another. Before them, a large brass band was singing with them, too, their instruments hanging at their sides. One woman, in the center of the group, was thumping on a large bass drum in slow, steady swings. There were people of all ethnicities and of all ages there, and Roscoe wondered if they were local or had come from far far away. Roscoe couldn't make out the words of their hymn, but the sound itself warmed his body in the crisp night.

Roscoe stepped into the field, quietly, and the crowd turned to him as if they had been waiting for his arrival. He stepped back, surprised, but they drew closer, with smiles and open arms and kept singing their hymn. When they were before him, he fell to his knees and wept. He could not explain what had taken over him, for he did not know such was within him. The people kept singing and he sobbed and sobbed, his chest heaving and falling. The tears sprung from his eyes and poured down his face and fell onto the dry earth before him.

After several choruses of the hymn, with Roscoe weeping and surrounded by the congregation, a man in a black hood stepped into the circle and stood before
him. Roscoe wiped his eyes and looked up at the man. He was a dark-skinned man and, in the shadow of his hood, Roscoe could only see the dazzling whites of his eyes and his teeth as the man smiled down at him.

The man extended an arm. “Welcome,” he said in a deep bass voice. Roscoe grasped for his arm and clung to him, like a scared child clings to his mother’s leg. And the man supported his weight without sagging a bit. Two other women came forward and helped Roscoe to his feet. One held a jar to Roscoe’s lips and he drank deeply. The water was chilled and pure, and Roscoe felt it rejuvenate his weary limbs as he swallowed it down. The woman took a knife from her belt and cut the zip-tie from his hands. They wrapped his arms around them and began walking into the crowd, supporting his weight on their shoulders.

The people in the crowd stretched their hands out as he limped through the throng, with the women’s help. He let them touch his shoulders and his face and his head. He felt little static snaps of electricity from their touch and he let his head roll back on his neck and looked up at the bright moon above.

The group started up in song once again, and Roscoe joined them, though he did not know how he knew the hymn. He simply felt it stir in his bones, and let it slip out between his lips. The congregation’s voices rose to the treetops as a single, unified harmony. It rose over the fields and took the wind and floated on the breeze, which carried their song on its journey eastward, to kiss the faces of the weary and the broken elsewhere. And the drums shook the earth beneath their feet, and the ground seemed to stir awake in response. And the horns warbled to the moon, and the moon glowed upon them, brighter than before.

*This was the New Faith,* he realized with surprise. *A New Faith for a New World.* He looked around him with new eyes, and the people and the land were alive and singing together, as one voice. He saw the congregation sway and saw the trees sway in the wind, and he saw that they were dancing together, as one body. Roscoe arched his back let out a howl, and he heard the others join him, and they were one howl in the darkness of the night. And, as they called to the sky, Roscoe felt the pain in his temples, in his side, and in the soles of his feet melt away. The muscles in his back untangled from their knots of worry. And the weight of all his troubles was released from his shoulders.
“It ain’t nothin’ but a body to me.”

I had heard him say it a hundred times, maybe more. But this time it was different. This time it was one of our bodies. And to hear those same words, that broken record with the needle scratching and screeching in the rocky grooves, was like fingernails on a chalk board to my ears. It sent chills down my spine.

Mr. Les Langley had always been a son-of-a-bitch. That much I knew from the very first interview I had out here at the Langley Property, when the grouchy old man, leaning on his cane and peering at me through beady eyes that hid behind fat, swollen cheeks said, “Boy. If I see you so much as look at my wife while you are here. I’ll take that there pistol,” he pointed at a beautiful shiny revolver that sat on the massive cherry desk behind him. The revolver had an ivory handle and a gold-plated barrel. I doubted it had ever fired a shot, though. It looked to be more of a decorative piece. It really brought the room together. “I’ll take that there and knock the living day lights out of you.”

I’m sure that Mrs. Langley had been a beautiful woman in her day. Maybe she had, at one point or another, become bored with Les’ ugly mug and protruding belly. Maybe she had drifted into ballrooms or movie theaters or hotel bars with other men when this old home had become suffocating. Maybe he had reason to concern from her past. But Mrs. Langley was an old, frail women, by the time I was interviewing to be of service at the Langley Property. I had thought to myself, that I couldn’t imagine having some secret desire for the bitter old wench, not even if the two of us were the last on earth.

What a foreshadowing thought that had been, I realized. For, that was very nearly the situation. Well, there were three of us now, on account of Mr. Langley’s persistent asthmatic wheezing and his erratically pumping cholesterol-clogged heart that defied all medical knowledge. And my position on the matter of Mrs. Langley, or the ivory butt of the revolver, hadn’t changed.

When I had first imagined the situation of myself and Mrs. Langley being the last two people on earth, in that morning in the dusty drawing room of the Langley home, I had imagined an empty earth with just me and Mrs. Langley left, plus a handful of cockroaches that could survive everything. I hadn’t accounted for the bodies that such a situation would result in. These days, it seemed that my lack of analysis of cause and effect in my imagined situation had come back to bite me in the butt. These days, bodies were as bountiful as the Langley Property cotton harvest of yester-year. Sorry, bountiful ain’t the right word for it.

There were two kind of bodies I hadn’t accounted for in my imagined scenario of me and Mrs. Langley being the last on earth and still not wanting to touch her with a ten foot pole. There were the bloated and green bodies. The bloated and green bodies would float, face down, in the water-logged forest at the property edge. Those bodies, which had become the most frequent type of bodies in the last few months, those bodies weren’t too much trouble for me. I could just drape their bodies in the sand-filled life jackets I made from tarps and the clothes of
earlier bodies and buckets of sand and mud I had dug up, and push them back into
the swamp with a long stick.

It was a funny thing to call the vests ‘life jackets’ when they had exactly the
opposite effect. Sometimes the old words just stick. Or maybe the meaning of them
just change to meet the times. After all, I suppose, life had been basically boiled
down to death, anyhow. So, why not ‘life jackets’ for the vests filled with sand that
sunk bodies to the bottom of the swamp?

Those bodies, the floating ones, were my preferred type of bodies. Usually I
wouldn’t have to even look at their faces. Though, sometimes I would anyways. Just
to see what color their eyes had been. I always regretted it. But sometimes
curiosity gets the best of us.

The other bodies, the ones with the still lively, frantic eyes and pleading lips
that spilled out hoarse moans and groans and long, whispered monologues about
the distance they’d come or the families they had to support. Those bodies were the
real problem. Those bodies would grip the 10-ft chain-link fence at the land’s edge
with yellow fingers and blackened fingernails and press their entire body up against
the fence to get as far away from that other, swampy world as possible. Those bodies
came to the property’s edge on rickety rafts and in bathtubs and used plywood
planks for paddles. They came wading through the swamp, up to their waists in
murky water, using the trail of sunken, life-jacketed bodies as a sort of winding,
underwater boardwalk to keep from sinking, themselves, into the thick mercury-
laden gelatinous mud beneath.

Those were the ones that gave me trouble. Not in the moment, of course. I
had gotten used to making living bodies into floating bodies into life jacket-wearing,
sinking bodies. But those bodies were the ones that would keep nagging at me, as I
lay still in my bed and watched the shadows in the room inch their way across the
room with the moon’s passage through the sky. Month after month, night after
night, those bodies wouldn’t let me sleep hardly a wink.

“Ain’t nothing but a body to me,” I had told the ceiling, again and again, in
those steel-blue hours of the early morning. But, as soon as I closed my eyes, there
were a thousand eyes looking back at me, frantic and pleading and terrified and
wondering why.

And I didn’t have an answer for why. Except that that was the work I was told
to do. At one point I had had the option of working elsewhere. And I hadn’t taken it.
Now, there wasn’t any option at all. So, I just kept at whatever tasks Mr. Langley had
in mind – farming, cleaning, cooking, and sinking bodies in the swamp that stretched
from the Langley hill to the horizon. And, in my free time, I kept saving my nickels
and dimes and decorated my own sand-filled life jacket with trinkets and coins and
colorful patches of cloth that I had found in digging through one of the chests I had
found in the attic several years ago. And I waited.

I waited for life to boil down to death and I made my life jacket the most
colorful of all the life jackets in the swamp. I waited and I prayed that it would boil
down to death for the Langley’s first. But, I knew they would likely outlive me. After
all, I had been doing the hard labor in the hot sun and eating scraps while they
lounged around in the shade, reading old magazines and getting fat on the produce
of our harvests and our daily catch in the swamp.
But, just maybe, I’d get to sink them first.

Back before the water had dissolved the church house and the homes and the fields, and the towns and the cities that surrounded our little patch of hilltop splendor, the Langley’s had been the wealthiest family any of us had ever known. They still were, I suppose. Though it wasn’t saying much in these times.

The Langley’s had old, old money. Like, Old England money. They had come to the states in the early 1700s and had made a bucket load more money investing in property in Manhattan. At that time, my great-great-great-great-grandfather, fresh from the Scottish Highlands, was spending his time fighting the Choctaw and Chickasaw savages. Repaying his freedom on the Mississippi frontier. As soon as he had the Choctaw and Chickasaw pretty much whooped, losing most of his brothers and several fingers and an eye in the process, the Langley’s saw fit to come down to that brand new frontier and make a nice little home for themselves.

Well, a nice big home, rather. Plus, buying up all the fertile land in the whole valley. And they had needed good, hard-working folks to work that fertile land. And that was what our folks had done. For years and years, it had been two families of good, hard-working folks that worked that land. It had been my family, with no land of their own to work and little choice in what to do in this New World. And, it had been Moses’ family, who had come in chains from Africa and had no choice in the matter, whatsoever.

Later on, Mr. Langley turned the farm into a factory and my family and Moses’ family worked there, too. My granddad and Moses’ granddad built two homes on two corners of the Langley Property. And they saved a little bit of money. Moses and I grew up listening to our dads and our granddads talking about all the things they was gonna do with that money. But every time it looked like they were getting ahead, a pipe would break or the roof would leak or the truck wouldn’t start and so they kept on saving and fixing things and saving some more and talking about all they things they was gonna do with that money.

Moses and I got along real well. We had grown up together, fishing in the Tenn-Tom and building forts in the woods. We had worked next to one another. And in recent years, with nobody else around, we had spent nearly all our free time together, too. Moses was twice as strong as I was and worked nearly twice as fast, and he whistled the whole time while I was panting and groaning. I cursed him for all that, but then he would crack some joke or a break into a wide, gap-tooth smile and I just couldn’t stop from laughing and smiling too.

Mr. Langley shut the factory down when Moses and I were 17, which was a year after we had started talking about what we were gonna do with the money we would save up. But after the factory went under, there wasn’t hardly much work to do anywhere around anymore. All the people left to go to places with ‘opportunities’. Moses and I had swore we would go to the place of ‘opportunities’, too, but we never got around to it. And the other folks sat in their homes watching reality play out on the silver screen and drank too much and went to church house to get themselves saved from time to time. And then the swamp had taken it all away, save this last piece of high ground.

So, Moses and I kept on working at whatever Mr. Langley needed done. Mr. Langley always had some scheme or some job he would pull out of thin air. There
wasn’t a slow minute at the Langley Property. As Moses said, he was “slicker than deer guts on a door knob.” And I supposed it was true. After all, how’d he make all this money and keep hold of it all this time?

We had debated for a couple months just how to consider our current employment. The proposition that ignited this discussion was Moses’ idea, one day while we were picking weeds in the tomato garden. If aliens were to abduct us and we needed a resume to get work on a spaceship, Moses wondered aloud, what would we put down as a job description for this work? Moses declared our new job as being in the “service economy.” But, after the swamp had crept up and swallowed the whole world around us, I had taken to calling it the “body economy”. Moses said it wasn’t that, because there was no money in them bodies.

“True,” I had said, sorting it out in my head. “But we still making money off ’em, ain’t we? We still getting paid by the day and part of that day is usually bodies.”

Moses agreed, and we decided that we worked part-time for the body economy and part-time for the service economy. And so we’d have two job descriptions to put on our resume if aliens were to abduct us. After all, sewing life jackets and digging up the sand and filling them and prodding bodies around and sinking them was time intensive. And it was the ‘service economy’, Mr. Langley’s odd-job tasks around the home, harvesting jellyfish and algae from the swamp, and growing a few crops on the acre of dry land left, that accounted for the other half of our time. And Moses and I went on, doing our business, joking and laughing about which one of us was to be the executive director of the body economy and which would be the executive director of the service economy. Then, after work, we went home in the evenings and feigned sleep for a number of hours, and then got up at sunrise and did it all over again.

Until yesterday, that is.

Yesterday, I woke up at five in the morning and made my first perimeter sweep of the day. When I got to the front gate, I saw Moses was lying on the ground. Dead as a doornail. I searched his body and I couldn’t figure what had afflicted him. I had hoped it was natural cause.

When I told Mr. Langley, I had suggested that we take a day of work off to pay our respects and have a regular service. Maybe even read a few verses from the Bible and recall some memories and have a feast. But, that son-of-a-bitch Mr. Langley had only said “it ain’t nothing but a body to me.” And then he told me to go get Moses’ sand-filled life jacket all the same.

_Was I gonna be nothing but a body to him?_ I wondered. Even though I had worked for Langley all my life, I was white. Just like him. Would he see me as a body, too? Moses worked his entire life out here on the Langley Property, just like I had. We had grown up together and listened to one another’s granddads tell their stories and had shared the dinner table with one another. And in these later years, we had been all we had in the whole world, save the damn Langley’s lounging on their porch and reading magazines. We had practically been brothers. Now, Moses was gone and I’d probably be next. And that would leave Mr. Langley to sit up here on his porch, alone in the world and peering out under those mean eyes, with his finger itching at the gold-plated trigger on the ivory-handled revolver? _No_, I told myself,
spitting a wad of tobacco leaves into the dirt. *I'm gonna out-live the son of a bitch, that's what I'm gonna do.*

The next day, on my third perimeter check for the day, I came across a strange woman gripping on to the chain-link fence so hard that her knuckles had gone white. Her eyes were wide open, showing a whole lot more of the white part of her eyeball than was natural. Her jet-black hair was sticking straight up in the air in all directions. I watched her mutter to herself and make twitchy movements, looking back over her shoulder and then to the house and then back over her shoulder. I diagnosed her as straight crazy.

When I approached her, calmly with my hands behind my back, she said “Please, don't shoot me.”

They all say that, the lively, wild-eyed bodies. The ones that still remember how to speak anything coherent, that is. The others just wail. But there was something different about the way she said it. She wasn’t pleading. There was no fear in her voice.

Then, as I got another step closer, she said, with a deep growling bark. “Shoot your mastah, not me.”

*I ain’t got no mastah,* I told myself. *Moses’ family had had a mastah, at one time and, yes, it was the same Langley’s she was referring to now. But I had never had one.* This was the conversation that was going on in the front of my forehead. But in the back of my skull, there was an army of raving voices shouting *yea! Shoot the son-of-a-bitch!*

“Shoot your mastah, not me,” she said again. And, again it was an order. As my forehead told itself a cautionary, reasonable story of my economic relationship with Mr. Langley and the back of my skull licked its lips and thirsted for bloody revenge, somewhere in between came another thought: *Was this woman an angel?* But, I didn’t let her see any of the three conversations going on inside my head.

Instead, I bowed slightly, grinned at her and said, “Ma’am my only master is god hisself. Mr. Langley’s just the boss man.”

“Uh-huh, I see. And which of those two do you take your orders from?” She hissed through the fence.

I braided a special blue ribbon on her life jacket and tied a fishing bobber to the other end of the ribbon. In the case that she actually had been an angel and not just another body, I wanted to see if the bobber stayed where it was or if it would disappear. Which would mean, I presumed, that she had flown back to heaven.

I let her sink in my favorite part of the swamp, where the beautiful grove of bald cypress trees stretched all the way to the sky. I sank all of my favorite bodies there because it was the place that gave me the greatest sense of calm in my whole world. I hoped it gave them a sense of calm, too. There, in the cypress grove were the beautiful women and the younger-looking children and anyone who I wanted to remember something pleasant about during my treks through the swamp. The people who I feel like I could have talked to, you know, if we had met in the general store or over a beer at the Rockin’ R, back in the good days.
On the slowest days, I would sit and chat with them, here in the swamp, in the same manner as if I had met them in the general store or at the Rockin’ R bar. We talked about the weather and wondered about how the Braves would fair this year. We talked about the damn county commissioner who didn’t do any of us any good, but we reckoned we were gonna vote for him, anyway. And we’d complain about the hard days work and the son-of-a-bitch bosses that kept us working past dark again.

Today, I didn’t have much to say to them. Instead, I prayed that the bobber would be gone by the next time I visited the cypress grove. Lord please send this angel someplace elsewhere, I prayed, with my head bowed and my arms across my heart. We needed some angels out there. And maybe if an angel had come here this time, maybe there were other places still out there – other places that had a need for an angel more than we did.

Then, I turned the raft around and started paddling back to the hill. There was still a lot of work to do and the sun was inching its way towards the horizon already.
The Crossing

I sat silently. As motionless as I could be. I breathed thru pursed lips, a straw of air filling and deflating my rib cage. I was dead quiet - except for my heart pounding as loud as a marching band bass drum. I wondered if the whole world could hear it knocking, I opened my eyes and scanned through the blackened forest night. No moving shadows. The hoot of an owl broke the stillness of the deadened, empty stand of dying pine trees.

Where is she? Jade, my older sister, would be standing stiller than I could manage. It was like she could slip out of her body and transform herself into merely a shadow in the dark forest. We had come over several hills and crossed four passes the last week. And each night, when it got to this hour of the night, when the patrols, those packs of wolves, were roving the deadened and still land, Jade would become a shadow. And I would try, too. I would do as she told me, to focus my entire mind on one single, unmoving rock, or patch on a tree. She said if you thought hard and long on it, you could become that rock or tree. Then, you wouldn’t move a muscle for as long as you need.

I had been trying for the last three nights, but my mind always wandered elsewhere – to fishing with my dad on the Tenn-Tom River or to Marv, my floppy-eared foxhound, or to Russell, the boy down the street who had kissed me on the cheek three weeks ago. Then it was back to the blackened eye on the trunk of the tree in front of me, unmoving and unthinking.

When the coast was clear, she would let out a whistle that matched the whippoorwill’s in rhythm and tenor. Then, I would know it was all safe. That there would be no accidental encounters with the metro troopers combing the pine groves at this witching hour. We had had a few close calls in the last few days, and I was starting to get worried that Brooklyn’s superstition about us being cursed might turn out to be true.

Last night I swear that two guards had walked through Jade as they meandered through the thick underbrush and the clutter of felled pines. I was lucky that they had been too caught up in discussing who was gonna win the championship fight to hear my audible gasp as they brushed the side of the tree that Jade had blended into.

Whip-poor-whiiiiii

I whipped my head left, peering into the brush. The call felt like it was right behind me. Slowly, a moonshadow squatted in the brush and I could see her. Thank the lord. I rushed towards her, too quickly, snapping two branches in succession before slowing to pick through the underbrush on the balls of my feet.

She placed an assuring hand on the small of my back, then turned to pick her way up the hill. And I followed her. As we neared the crest of the saddle between two steep hills, the trees thinned out. As we reached the clearing, the canopy opened up and I could see that the clouds had thickened above the misty-fog that hung like a blanket across the valleys and gentle slopes of the hills. In the northern sky, those clouds were soaked in a warm amber glow. Radiating light from the life of a far away city.
We were getting closer.

Jade found a rock outcropping on the edge of the small knoll, on the ridge above the saddle of the mountain pass, and hopped onto the rim of a granite boulder. She unwrapped the backpack straps from her shoulders and rummaged through our belongings to dig out the coffee thermos from the campfire we had put out just before sun down.

As she unscrewed the tin thermos and filled two tin cups, I was captivated by the glowing blanket of clouds that hung above the valley ahead. *It must be a huge city! There's gonna be so many people and restaurants and jobs* I thought, excitedly. I raised a steaming mug, blew on the boiling surface and lifted the rim to my lips. Once the scalding coffee touched my tongue, I rushed the liquid to the back of my throat and swallowed. The fiery sensation of warmth spread across my chest. *Ahhhh,* I exhaled a thick cloud of warm breath that hung in the air.

“Shit, it's cold,” I whispered, then pressed all ten fingers to the warm mug.

I sat next to Jade and unfolded the map I had tucked into the breast zip-pocket of my wool-lined fleece jacket. We spread the map out on the rock between us, followed the track of 'x's marking our path to the hilly gap we found ourselves in (find a landmark outside of Chattanooga). I traced our coming path, circling the two border fences we had yet to cross, highlighted in red marker cutting at a sharp angle across the topographic lines. I stared out across the valley below us and tried to envision where those electric fence lines might be hidden in the forest.

After gulping down two packets of Quaker Oats - Apples and Cinnamon soaked in hot coffee instead of water, we tucked our food and cups back into the packs, and hoisted them onto our backs. We headed down into the valley below. There was a sizable lake on the last bench of forest below us and I estimated we would reach it by sunrise. I hoped Jade would let us take a dip in it, to wash ourselves. Though, I doubted it. It may be too risky still. *Maybe if we slip in quietly and don't make any splash.* I followed Jade's weaving path across downed timber and around scrabbly rocks.

*After all,* I checked my watch – 12:30 am, *it's my birthday.* I had hoped we would make it to the city on my birthday. But it still looked to be about one night away. That's what I had thought last night. As if Jade was reading my thoughts, she turned toward me and asked, playfully "Hey you know what dance they do in the big city?"

She was smiling wide and smacking each tree with a branch she had picked up. I guess she was confident that the coast was clear. She glanced back, then howled softly, "The Chattanooga-Choo-Choo."

* * * * * *

The waiting room had a coldness to it – blank, off-white plastered walls, two red chairs, and a green velvet-topped card table. I sat down, got up, paced the room, sat again. I fumbled with my script, shuffling through the pages, absent-mindedly gazing across the lines without reading any of the words. *My handwriting has gotten worse,* I noticed.

The door behind me opened and Gregory, the short, pudgy man with soft hands and gentle eyes nodded in greeting. Gregory was the events coordinator at
the Lyndhurst Foundation, which had spear-headed the evening gala, which included a number of presentations from people working in rural America, herself included, and then a reception and dance for the wealthy of Chattanooga to mingle, make small talk, and fund projects.

"They're ready for you," he said with a weak smile.

I turned with a look of sheer panic, which he recognized, his smile turning into a concerned frown. I stood, wringing my hands and said feebly, "I don't know if I can do this."

Gregory responded with a snap. "You have to do this." After seeing his words cut through me, he calmed himself. "Look, everyone came just to see you. To hear your story. This is how you start making a change."

I knew there was no way out now. Gregory guarded the only door, now with a bit of concern that I may try to make a run for it. And even then, what would it get me? Didn't I come here on my own accord?

I took a deep breath, and mustered a feeble, "OK."

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I met Gregory at the door. He touched my arm, reassuringly, then turned to lead me down the corridor. With every step towards that stage, my hands seemed to shake even more violently. I crossed my arms to still the tremors.

When we reached the curtain, Gregory gave me a muted 'shush'. He pulled the curtain back slightly and I strained to see into the darkness. When my eyes adjusted, I realized with horror that the auditorium was full. The audience, dressed well in suits and ball gowns, were laughing lightly in response to the speaker's joke. On the stage before me, a beautiful woman in a tight-fitting black dress was standing with an air of ease in the spotlight in the middle of the stage. I didn't hear her words but the way she shifted casually, waving her right hand in rhythm with the story she was telling, she looked like she belonged there.

There was no way I was getting on that stage.

I took two steps back, overcome with anxiety, thinking of catching myself frozen in that blinding spotlight. In the corner of the back-stage closet, a mirror caught my eye. Remember why you're doing this, I said to the terrified, awkward 24 year-old country kid attempting to look refined in a black blazer, black pants and new shoes. I glanced at Gregory, swiping his thumbs across his glowing phone screen.

Looking back at the mirror, the young adult turned back into the young girl of twelve, staring back at me eagerly with large, brown eyes.

"It's go time," Gregory whispered from across the room.

I took a deep breath, my eyes fixed to that little girl in the mirror. She smiled faintly, giving me a reassuring nod.

Remember why you're doing this.

* * * * *

When I was twelve, I would stand atop the embankment and watch the semi-trucks and trains pass by me. With each rushing vehicle, I would wave emphatically
and holler out. Every so often, I would get a blast of the horn in return and I would howl with satisfaction.

My father's small vegetable farm sat directly on Highway 87, which was the main throughway for all shipping and transport in our area. The empty trucks and trains would plug away, moving west, and full ones would return, headed east – loaded up chock-full with raw materials and headed for the big cities, where the goods would be processed and used up or shipped across the Atlantic.

On Sundays, the crest of the bank was the last stop on the walking tour that my dad and I completed around the farm, ritualistically checking on the different crops, taking inventory of the coming weeks tasks. We would get to the bank around ten in the morning, and I think we each would drag out those short moments to prolong the days chores that awaited us at home.

My dad had pointed out the different trucks and train types and what they were carrying. He would say that we had a lot to be proud of, providing all these goods to the people in the cities that needed them so. I couldn’t imagine what they needed all that for. There were the long, timber trucks stacked high with naked trees from Lehigh’s property. There were the coal trains, open cars, creaking under the heavy weight of coal from the mountaintops west of Norris, where my uncle worked the massive mining vehicles. There were the yellow trains that hauled lithium from the mine in Dover.

There were water tankers, semi-trucks with round long cylinder bodies that sucked water from the Tenn-Tom Waterway. They had closed my favorite fishing dock for truck access when the city’s source for water had dried up. And there were the oil tankers, which looked similar but were painted black, moving petroleum from the acres and acres of miniature, bobbing oil wells outside of Clearwater. There were flat-bed trucks stacked high with bales of fluffy cotton from the Foster Farm. I loved those especially because the truck would emit wisps of cotton as it passed by, and the little white balls would float in pulsing circles in the wake of the truck.

Everything that passed me, I could spot and source it. I knew the people and places the goods came from. And that made me proud of each passing cab and train car. But I only imagined the places they were going and what uses they would have there.

The summer of my twelfth birthday was the best time I could remember. The weather had been good, sunny and temperate that year and the veggies had been huge. We had plump, fat tomatoes that made the vines droopy under their weight, the greens had broader leaves than ever, and the peppers were thick and crisp.

Things had fallen apart that fall like never before. Everything hit in succession and left our lives splintered into shards of broken glass and heavy hearts. I knew that my folks had picked themselves up out of the dirt a hundred times before, and I had prayed to god that they could bounce back again. That time, though, it had been different – and the whole economic recession felt like it compounded on our lives.

As the sunset, and the last train of coal faded into the darkened eastern horizon, I clambered down from the hill and skipped over to our cedar-shake-
paneled home. My father and his farm partner, Lucas, my godfather, had built every structure on the forty-acre plot. Piece by piece, dollar by dollar, they had built their dream out of a fallow field and a van-load of used construction equipment.

Our home, Lucas’ home, the barn, the shop, the industrial kitchen, the farm-hand housing, the walk-in coolers, the greenhouse buildings. From the ground up. My dad would point out the different inventions, tools they had crafted, engines they had rebuilt, and most importantly, the food they grew. You couldn’t find a person prouder of anything in the whole world.

“We’ve got to feed our community,” dad would say, in a serious but thoughtful voice to me. “That’s our job. It’s what the Great Spirit has called upon us to do.”

I came around the corner of the house to find my dad and Lucas sitting in the dirt, leaning against the wall of the barn. They each had a beer can in one hand and there were six mangled, twisted cans scattered in the patch of overgrown grass next to them. I could tell from the silence that the two men were more than just exhausted, which was their usual state on a Friday evening. But there was something else - something grave and looming. I tried to catch my dad’s eye as I passed them, acting like I had some task at hand, but he didn’t look up at me.

The things my dad wouldn’t tell me were the things that I fretted over the most. For a twelve-year-old girl with a vivid imagination, my dad’s worries - about the weather, the bills, customer complaints about veggies gone bad in their pantry, issues with workers - he would voice out loud with Lucas or other employees, mingling over beers after dark. I had come to take them on as my own worries, too.

But what worried me most were the things that nobody would talk about - like the reasons that my mother had moved off of the farm the year before, or why dad couldn’t drive anymore, why my favorite friend on the farm, Betsy, had disappeared. And a million other boiling catastrophes that aimed to stop the farm dead in its tracks.

“The Great Spirit never gives a man more than he can handle,” my father used to say. Lately, though, I wasn’t sure whether that was true. And I don’t think he was sure either.

All the same, things kept moving along as ever, my dad was his usual playful, funny, and energetic self. He’d get me up at sunrise, singing while he cooked eggs and brewed coffee. He’d walk me out to the school bus, kiss me on the forehead and I’d watch from the back window as he headed to the tractors, the harvest carts, or the greenhouses. Preparing for the day’s work. On Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings, he would take me to market with him. Our community members would come by, one a time, to pick up their crate of veggies for the week. When the market was over, we would trade with the other producers. We would trade a basket stuffed with spinach, garlic, onions, squash and carrots for the Dunsten’s milk, thick blocks of home-made cheeses, and butter. Carrots, swiss chard, cabbage, and potatoes to the Lufskitz’s for their salami logs and slab bacon. A bushel of collards for the Jones’ honey. Spinach and tomatoes for Lionel’s eggs.

Jessie Turner brought us an art piece she had been working on at the Saturday market. It was a beautifully-carved wooden bee surrounded by a white
web and a compass ring with the four directions painted in their traditional colors: NESW – White, Black, Yellow and Red. The piece had a five-foot diameter and I could barely carry it over to the food van. On the way home, we stopped by Corey’s home and picked up a stack of lumber - freshly milled oak 2”x 8” for the expansion of worker housing.

Sometime in mid-October, my older sister came down with a cold. We took her over to Lauren’s small cabin and traded a week’s crate of vegetables for a small box of herbal ointments and tinctures. Illness worried my father greatly – we didn’t have health insurance, the state hadn’t approved the federal expansion of Medicaid, and we had barely enough income on the farm for the rest of our bills. So dad would do his best to nip any illnesses in the bud to avoid visiting the costly doctor over in Norris.

The fall colors had begun to paint the hillsides in blots of orange, red, and golden yellows. I was enjoying school this year and had found a passion for science class. On the surface, everything was great. But I could feel the dark cloud hanging over our heads. And I think everyone else could feel it too.

Dad spent the evenings quiet and alone, more and more. People talked less and were dead-tired beat in the evenings. The Thursday parties ceased, which had always been what I looked forward to all week - when dad would blast hip-hop and dubstep-pow-wow songs of A Tribe Called Red and we could stomp around in the barn, shedding the week away.

He spent more time at his altar, running his hands over the small totems – clay statues and skulls, jeweled cups, eagle feathers, and other trinkets, lost in thought or muttering under his breath. One night, after two of the food vans had broken down and two employees hadn’t showed up for three days, on account of a alcohol and drunk binge, it seemed to be at a breaking point. I asked Brooklyn what she thought was happening.

“It’s a strange time. Venus is rising and the moon is waxing to full. Neptune is in the seventh house. The tides of change are moving through the stars. It looks to get worse yet, before the new year.”

Claudia had snapped at Brooklyn, rising from her slouched position, rinsing onions in the deep tubs. “That’s a load of bollocks. Moonbeams will be moonbeams, but sometimes, things are just a shit show.”

Claudia turned to me and pointed at my chest. With a commanding tone, she said, “You hear me, girl? Ain’t nothing promised but the sun coming up in the morning. We make our own way in this world.” Claudia returned her attention to the tub, scrubbing hard at the bulbs in the basin. “All the stars are saying is that we gotta work hard today. That’s all there is to it.”

On a Thursday in late October, I found a note my dad had written and tucked into a Sierra Trading Post catalogue. I read it while he was wrapping up the day’s work in the barn.

Everyday of the week, I wake up at 5 a.m. to begin preparing the farm for the day’s work. I break for lunch at noon for one hour, then we call it a day around 8 p.m. The farm-hands go home, and have their dinner, take their rest. But, even though I’ve worked 14 hours in the day, there is still a lot to do. I have gotten in the habit of drinking, starting at 8 p.m. and I continue working and drinking until midnight or later.
By 8 pm, my back is so sore that I can hardly bend over. My hands are stiff and ache with every movement. But there is work to be done. When my body can’t work any longer, whiskey helps me to keep working. I know that ain’t right. And I know that I can’t go on like that any longer.

It is not an excuse, I am fully in charge of my behavior and I have been abusing alcohol for years. This is exactly the wake up call I need and I will change my ways. I only try to explain this to give you a small glimpse into my world. I am not a town drunk. I am a hard working man and I hope you will see it in your hearts to see me as such. A working man rather than a aimless drunk.

Every week, we sell 450 crates of veggies, in addition to whatever we sell at market by the pound. But I don’t make a dime, it all goes back into the farm. I live there rent-free, I built the home and the infrastructure for the farm that I use, I bought the tools and tractors, and I eat my own food.

I’m not asking you to give me my license back, but I am asking to be able to drive my tractor the quarter mile of country road to my furthest fields. I am asking you to consider a re-evaluation in May. I am asking you to do whatever you need to - blood tests for alcohol, probation, county service, whatever it takes, to gain your confidence that I am a changed man. In the spring, I would ask that you consider the possibility of placing a breathalyzer in my two market trucks so that I can drive to market twice a week when the season starts up again.

You can take me out of this world I have tried to build – take the farm, take my license – but thing is – I was born to work, I was raised to work and I’m gonna keep working harder and I’m gonna build it up once again.

This business is everything to me, I have no income or wealth to show for it, but it is my life. It is the backbone that I am raising my little girls on. And it is my goal to feed the city of Keeseville. My life is my daughters and my fields. Taking away my ability to grow food, taking away my ability to drive my tractors, it may be the last straw to break my little farm. I hope it isn’t so, and I hope to continue fighting to work another day. Thank you for hearing me out. And god bless.

It was too much for me to take. I closed my door and cried into my pillow that night, unable to sleep for fretting over my dad’s predicament.

On Friday, I kissed him goodbye as I headed off to the school bus and whispered “good luck, daddy” under my breath. I didn’t want him to hear me say it, so I said it very quietly. But I hoped that the Great Spirit would hear it. All day I couldn’t stop thinking about him. When I returned home in the afternoon, I cautiously tip-toed to the door of the barn and listened for his voice. There was a lot of loud commotion from inside. It sounded like he was throwing things or splitting wood.

“What’d you tell them?” Lucas asked, quietly, in a pause between blows.

“Nothing,” dad said, then swung again, splitting a log cleanly. “They didn’t even let me speak. Judge was cold as ice, man.”

My heart sunk in my chest for my dad. I wanted to run to him, to have him wrap his arms around me and tell me it was all going to be OK. But I knew it would crush him, and shame him, if I knew what he had kept from me. And so, with Jade too distracted by her phone, reality TV shows of Atlanta, and her sketchpad of anime ninjas and shadowy monsters, I tried to go on all the same. As if nothing had changed.

It seemed that our little piece of the world wasn’t the only place with a dark cloud hanging above us. To hear the news tell it, the whole world was covered with a dark cloud and nobody knew which way was the path worth walking. The man on the radio was talking of the end times and revelations, Brooklyn was talking about the planets, dad was silent, and Claudia kept saying we gotta work harder. None of them, though, could have predicted what was to come. Even as it was happening, it creeped up on us, slowly and over time, and so we didn’t know what to make of it until it we were swept away in it.

The storm beyond the farm started with the presidential election. We were all gathered down at the Rocking R’s Bar watching the results come in on the flatscreen TV, mounted next to the Buffalo head and a huge metal sign that read “We Don’t Call 911” and had two etched revolvers hanging on each side. The buffalo and
the sign were coated in dust, but the flatscreen was a fairly new addition. The barkeep had explained, proudly, that he had nabbed it from his in-laws, or ex-in-laws, on his last holiday visit to their home and after a drunken brawl with his father-in-law over something neither of them could remember.

Everybody I knew, all the kids at school and the bartender and the farm hands, were voting for Lionel Stark. As Claudia had said the week before, a lot of the sentiment in our community was that “the hundreds of things that Stark ain’t afraid to say out loud but we’re all thinking”. That DC was corrupt and so was the media. That all the bankers and the internet-savvy entrepreneurs were making buckets of money without working an honest day in their lives. That the country was going to the dogs, and leaving hard-working people behind. That the government hadn’t done none of us any good and we ought to get rid of all the excesses that lined politicians pockets with our measly tax dollars. Lionel Stark made a lot of sense. He used the same phrase that Lucas would use every April - “Born Free. Taxed to Death.” He spoke simple and plain English.

I had asked my Dad several times what he thought. Most of the time he wouldn’t respond. Once, he had said “you can’t trust none of them, baby girl. Everyone is out here for themselves. Don’t trust a word of that nonsense.” Another time, when Claudia had been applauding a speech Stark had given on the radio about his jobs program, Dad had told her to shut the radio off. After a few moments of awkward silence, as he chopped onions and garlic, he had said in the gravest manner I’d ever heard from him.

“Stark don’t offer us nothing but the noose. A quick death.”
Claudia had shot back, “I’ll take the noose over bleeding out slowly.”

Down at the Rocking R, there was a buzz of excitement. As each state’s results came in, the crowd pounded their fists on the bar and clanked their glasses together in celebration. I hadn’t seen people so excited in the dreary cold of November in all my life. Charles, an army vet who leaned heavy on a cane to shuffle around after a piece of shrapnel had lodged into his thigh in Iraq, was line-dancing without his cane. Dale, a middle-aged construction worker with a grizzled beard, who I had never seen even crack a grin was laughing to some joke the barkeep had launched at him. Freida had done up her makeup and was wearing pink lipstick, her best outfit, and had been plugging quarter after quarter into the jukebox and kept the old-time country music rolling through the crackling speakers. Dickey and Jean, parents of my best friend at school, Julie, had their arms wrapped around one another and were swaying to the nasally twang of Waylon Jennings’ “Are You Ready for the Country?” I’d never seen them look at each other so lovingly in all the nights I’d stayed at their house.

The only person who wasn't in good cheer was my father, who had a clenched jaw and white knuckles gripping his pint glass and staring off into oblivion. When the bleach-blonde, prim and proper news anchor, looking somber and paler than a ghost, declared that Stark was projected to be the winner. The three anchors, in their tailored suits and air-brushed faces lowered their hands, shaking their heads and the newscast suddenly cut to commercials. But the folks at the Rocking R, in their muddy sweatshirts, grease-stained jeans and steel-toed boots, erupted with
cheers, Dad quickly grabbed my hand and ushered me out of the building. Dale attempted to hug Dad on our way out, but Dad brushed past him without looking up from the floor.

The drive home was dead silent. And I knew better than to break the silence. There were flashes of lightning across the night and I watched the bolts light up the fields and forests from the passenger side window. And I knew that the dark cloud was brewing a storm for the ages.

* * * * *

I stood atop that same hill, watching the cars and trucks go by, on the morning of my 13th birthday. I had jumped out of bed early, I never could stay in bed on holidays – always wanting to make the day last as long as possible. I had expected to go for a Saturday stroll around the property with Dad, but I found him still asleep on the couch. A half-empty fifth of whiskey, uncorked, on the table in front of him.

Dad hadn't been drinking any more than usual, but the effect had been different ever since the beginning of fall. In the summer, it seemed to keep him moving, working or dancing or laughing and playing with me. My favorite times with Dad, in mid-summer, would be late at night, when he had drank his fill and the worries that itched at him all day would melt away and he would just be fun as could be. Lately, though, it had seemed that his drinking had slowed him down. He was sitting, or laying around more, distracted from me and the things that needed to get done. In the last few weeks, I had taken to clapping in front of him to remind him of some little task that needed attending to in the evening.

I filled a mason jar up with water and placed it in on the table next to his snoring face. I went out myself, to check a few of the fence posts he had thought might have rotted, though I didn't really know what I was doing like my father did. After walking the perimeter, I planted myself on the top of the embankment to let the rising sun warm my face with its glow.

With my eyes closed, feeling the first rays of light on my cheeks, I heard a train rumbling in the distance. I watched it edging closer, from the west and, I assumed loaded down with goods headed to the east coast. The blazing red color of the front engine marked it as a Peabody Coal train – probably headed to the Southern Power plant that kept the lights on in Atlanta. As the train passed by, I noticed something strange. There were four men that seemed to be guarding the outside of the train. Soldiers, by the look of them, in black uniforms with flak jackets and assault rifles in their hands. One was standing on a sheltered platform, every twenty cars or so. One by one they passed me, watching me directly but not making any motion or movement. I waved to one of them, but he only watched me – his head slowly turning on his neck, like an owl, as I passed him by.

It was the first guarded train I had seen, but over the next several months I would come to be used to the armed men on trains, semi-trucks, and even in some passenger vans crossing behind my home. After about three months of the Stark presidency, this was the first mark of a changed world in my eyes. Sure, there had been a lot that had seemed to change elsewhere, and subtle hints of it locally. While
the men down at the Blue Hill Diner and the Rocking R still hadn’t moved from their perches, as if they had been planted there and taken root, their manner had change. In all of her years those men had always been kind-hearted, but at the same time seemed a sort of vacant and hollowed out. They would say something about how she was growing up so quick, then turn their eyes back to the window, or to the cup of coffee. They seemed to be like the gargoyles that Jade drew in her sketchbook of Parisian themed adventures – frozen in place, eyes glued to a world that an onlooker couldn’t see.

The men at the Blue Hill Diner and Rocking R had changed slightly in the last couple months. They had gone from passive to fidgety. She watched them and they weren’t the gargoyles they had always been. They were still planted, rooted, in their booths but they tapped their toes as if they were waiting for their meal, though it had been laid out in front of them. They would shift in their seat more often, wring their hands, drum rhythms with their fingers. Their eyes no longer fixed on some distant thing, but were in motion, scanning the parking lot or the customers or the passing cars.

It seemed they were waiting for something. Something that was bound to come, but nobody could say just when.

A week before my 13th birthday, I had heard the middle-aged and mascara-ed waitress joke with one of the men lightly as she refilled his mug. “Say, the way you knock back those cups of coffee, they oughta make it your job.”

He had smiled at her. “Shoot? You think Stark’d get me paid for that kinda job? Well, I’d be there in a heartbeat!”

Another man at the lunch counter swiveled on his bar stool to join the conversation. “Say, if they give you a coffee-drinking job, I reckon I’ll go inquire about getting me one of them beer-drinking job.”

“Oh, that’s gonna be a competitive job market,” the first joshed with the man at the counter. “What’s your credentials. You got a law degree you been hiding from us all these years?”

“Well, no,” the man at the lunch counter pondered for a pause. “But I’ll tell you what. You put me on that beer-drinking assembly line, and I’d give everyone of those bumpkins a run for their money. I’ll tell you what.” He chuckled heartily, then changed his tone. “Just gimme a chance, coach!”

I had watched the two men as they collected themselves, returning to their previous positions before the first said to the second. “What other type of job you lookin’ for?”

The man at the lunch counter didn’t turn around this time, but responded like he was talking to the wall. “We-ell. I’m good with my hands. I don’t got a lot of brains in this bucket but I know a thing or two about engines and such. Maybe a diesel mechanic or somethin’.”

“Well that’d be swell.” The first responded, also staring out the window, scanning the parking lot. “I got my electrician certification. I’m just waiting to be called up. Maybe run wires on the factory floor or something.”

“Yea,” the man at the corner let an audible sigh out. “I guess I’m just impatient.”
“Yea.”

And the two men went back to their regularly scheduled routine of fidgeting and scanning and sitting and drinking cups of coffee.

The second thing that had changed in my home was that the blue-eyed, blonde-haired, air-brushed news anchor, who had so solemnly confirmed the election results last November, had moved from his monotonous delivery of statistics and current events to an impassioned, ranting soapbox preacher. Since the election, which had clearly been an unfavorable outcome for the air-brushed soft-faced man, he had taken to calling us rural people ‘racists’, ‘in-breds’, ‘ignorant’, ‘dumb and vile’.

A series of events had seemed to make this claim undeniable in the eyes of the world, even though it still didn’t make sense to me how he could lump us all into one category like that. There had been a series of violent attacks on black communities and Latinos, in Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and Arizona in the past few weeks that had spurred the most recent spewing venom of the news anchors against us country folks. Then, there had been the two mall shootings, perpetuated by ‘rural racists,’ the label that the news anchor declared as the mugshots of two young men, 17 and 19 with patchy tufts of facial hair on their chins, upper lip, and cheeks. The men had grown up in the country backwoods of North Carolina.

I still saw us as just... us. I knew all the people in town and all the people that got their vegetable baskets from us on Wednesdays. And all of them were really nice and sweet and mostly just wanted to work hard, while the lazy ones would still smile and say howdy-doo and just wanted to stay planted on their front porches or their bar-stools at the Rocking R or in their dark, musty living rooms.

But Jade was outwardly calling the people in our community the same names as the news anchor did. I knew that it was more personal for Jade than it was for me, her liking other women and all of the anti-gay things that Stark had been saying, but I still couldn’t understand how she could see the people we had grown up knowing and being friends with, almost family with, with such disgust. They hadn’t done anything to us, whatsoever.

I had tried to ignore Jade’s comments, but even Dad had muttered ‘rednecks’ and ‘white trash’ with bile in his throat, even though I had heard him proudly call us both those words with his friends just this past summer. I began to wonder whether there was something wrong with us after all.

The train sunk into the horizon and the world was quiet for several minutes, before a speeding semi-truck broke the stillness with a whoosh and a growl. Then, I watched as four vehicles, two jeeps and two trucks, turned off the highway onto our gravel road, then pulled in front of our home and came to a stop.

I barreled down the embankment and pressed myself against the side of our house as I peered around the corner. There was Dale standing there, in front of my father, both of them were standing tensely and taking in low, stern voices which I couldn’t discern from my angle. Behind Dale were five other men, standing about 10 feet back and behind them, the four vehicles were filled with men, packed so tight that I couldn’t imagine how the five men standing had fit in with them.

A few of the men I recognized from Clearwater and Norris and around the county, but most were strangers. Three had black ski-masks on, so I couldn’t see their faces, but they looked terrible and menacing, with pale hollow cut-outs where
their eyes and mouth ought to be. The men were all dressed in camouflaged fatigues, which looked to either be their deer-hunting outfits or second-hand army supply. One of the men had gone so far as to paint black stripes under his eyes and down each cheek so that they made two black crosses on each side of his face. The five men standing and Dale were all openly armed. I imagined the men inside the trucks were too.

For a minute, I was terrified that they had come for us. I couldn’t imagine why, Dale and Dad had always been friendly to one another. But, in watching my Dad’s stance, standing tall and in a wide stance, exchanging low words with Dale, it was clear that they hadn’t come in bad faith.

After several minutes, Dale backed up several steps, falling in line with the five men who stood at attention, soldier-like.

“One last chance. You can come with us and knock this whole thing over,” Dale lets the world roll out of his mouth and fall to the ground before Dad’s feet. “Or you can keep on here. No future except digging up turnips and potatoes and scratching by. Now, you know I got no problem with that. Not one bit. I’m just saying its drying up all the same, ain’t it?

“And what about them girls, huh? Your daughters gon’ eat the leftovers while the crops dry up? What about for their futures, huh?”

At the mention of us, Dad’s shoulders tensed. He pointed Dale right in the mouth, and said “y’all get off of my property. Move along, you hear? And don’t be coming back out here again less you coming to get farm work. You hear me?”

Dale spit in the dirt, rocked on his heels and grinned at Dad. “Yea, ok. Next time you see us we’ll be sitting on a mountain of cash, though. Would that you could see that, but,” he turned back to his men, who had begun to turn towards their vehicles, kicking at the gravel and flicking cigarettes on to the ground, “I guess that just means more for us, eh?”

My dad placed his hands on his hips and didn’t say a word. For being a rather short man, in comparison to Dale and his lot, I thought Dad looked as big and strong as the rest of them in that moment.

As the cars circled around the barn and turned back onto the county road, the masked eyes fixed on us with a chilling intensity. After they were gone, and Dad was standing there in the same spot, staring at the same spot that Dale had stood, I came around the edge of the house to meet him.

I stepped up behind him nervously, and said, nervously, “Daddy.”

As if he had been frozen in motion and someone had turned him back on, Dad turned with a start. I caught the wrinkles of worry across his broad forehead and furrowed eyebrow, and a wildness in his eyes. But, before, I could ask anything, that all melted away. He smiled wide and swooped down to pick me up in his arms.

“Hey, you lovebug.” I went limp in dad’s arms, all my worry melting away too, though I knew there was far more behind what wasn’t said. I let dad carry me to the door, where he kissed me on my forehead, set me down and said, “happy birthday.”

I got a four-wheeler for my birthday. It had been our neighbors’, a boy a few years older than I was and had gotten bored with it, choosing to spend his time
indoors playing video games instead. I had been driving four-wheelers since I was six but had never owned my own. I spent the afternoon with Dad cleaning the machine parts from top to bottom, changing the fluids, and then, finally, kicking the two-stroke motor into gear and zooming off through the barren fields.

The air was crisp and stung my face, made my eyes tear up, as I speeded up. When I got to the edge of the field, I turned onto the faint two-track trail in the forests. The trail winds and cuts sharply back on itself as the switchbacks climb the steep hillside. On the last switchback, I hit a thick branch that had been half-hidden beneath a blanket of soggy, browned leaves. I had been leaning heavily to one side to cut the turn and the abrupt stalling threw my body heavily against the right handlebar, veering the four-wheeler off the trail and into the thick trunk of an oak tree.

The impact hurled me into the thicket. I wasn’t injured, except a sore elbow and a bit dazed. I collected myself and, as I picked the brambles from my sweatshirt, I noticed a small clearing where the thicket had been cut back. In it, there was a rock ring that contained a bunch of ash and a charcoaled, half-burnt branch. Turning my attention to the strange campsite, I noticed three other things. On the tree behind the rock-ring, there was a white poster paper stapled to the tree with the outline of a person, like the target posters that Lucas had given me to practice with the .22 rifle. The paper was riddled with the puncture holes of bullets. A wooden hatchet was sunk deep, almost all the way up to the handle, square in the middle of the head of the outlined body.

The skin on my neck bristled and backed away from the campsite quietly. When I turned around towards the four-wheeler, I was face-to-face with a large, raggedy doll. It was hanging by its neck. The face of the home-made doll had googly eyes glued to the brown cloth and cotton ball tufts were oozing out of a gaping hole at its temple. The black beads of the clear-plastic eyes were looking directly at me, rather than hanging down by the pull of gravity.

I got out of there as quick as I could. I yanked the right handlebar of the four-wheeler, heaving the nose of the vehicle back onto the road in a series of small, weak budges that took all of my weight and left me short of breath. Without looking back at the campsite, for fear that the doll’s eyes would be following me, I started back down the path I had come, carefully. All the way down the hillside, I felt a bristling on my neck, as if someone, or something, was watching me. It was not until I burst back out from the forest and into the field that I felt released from the grip of a strange presence.

I didn’t tell my dad or Jade about the campsite. When I got home, they had already set out candles on a cake and I came into the hallway to find them, as well as Claudia, Brooklyn, Lucas, and Maravilla and they erupted into singing happy birthday. I was home and they, my family, were here to take care of me. They would do everything they could to protect me, I knew. But what if that wasn’t enough? My mind was preoccupied by the armed men this morning and the ghostly squat. But it was that night, of my 13th birthday, that I would come to understand that things were a lot safer here, on the farm, than they seemed to be beyond us.

The news hour started with Dale’s ambitious, and failed, plot. They had split into two parties. One, led by Dale, who looked ragged and tired and possibly insane
in the mugshot picture they took of him, tried to take over the industrial park over in Norris. As the news anchor described it, they secured the premise and claimed that they would own and operate the three factories and collect rents from the two office buildings on site. After a two-hour stand-off with local authorities, in which Dale had listed a set of demands, which included $15/hr wage jobs at the industrial park for each of the militants and their closest unemployed kin, the men had been taken into custody and now faced felony charges.

The second group was still on the loose and may have left the state in possession of two water tankers and a Wal-Mart semi-truck, all of which had been bound for Memphis. A bleary-eyed and shaky elderly truck driver recounted his story of being pulled over, then thrown out of the driver seat and left on the side of the road several miles outside of Clarendale.

The man kept stammering about how he hoped that he wouldn’t get fired for losing the truck. He declared that he would start wearing a pistol when he drove if they’d give him another chance. I wasn’t sure whether he thought they company was watching or if he was pleading with the general public for another chance.

Dad had only shook his head and said “that son of a bitch Dale”.

The video then cut to a speech from the Mayor of Memphis. He was a tall, dark-skinned man in a trim grey suit and his mannerisms and speech reminded me of the reverends that Claudia would listen to on the radio on Sundays.

“Today is a dark, dark day for the city of Memphis. And for this country. At 7:00 a.m. Memphis Police Department found seven bodies on the bank of the Wolf River, north of Midtown. The bodies have not yet been identified, but the initial investigation believes them to be members of our Latino community. May we keep all of our Latino brothers and sisters in our hearts and prayers as the investigation continues.

“The perpetrators have been identified, however, as a result of phone location data as one Harold Macgregor and Jessup Lefesen. These men have been brought into custody and I assure you that justice will be swift and unforgiving. These men are from rural Eastern Arkansas and, it appears, came to Memphis on the sole purpose of inflicting violence in our community.

“Unfortunately, this is not the end of our tragedies today. At 4:00 p.m. in a strip mall parking lot in Southaven, a young man from Henderson, Tennessee unloaded 33 rounds from an automatic assault rifle, killing four women and three children and injuring three additional victims. One of those victims remains in critical condition at _ Hospital.

“Finally, at some point after 1 p.m., two water tankers and a food truck that were in route to Memphis were pirated by a hate group out of Clarence County. Their status is unknown but authorities have ensured us that they are in hot pursuit of the criminals.

“As you all know, in our current state of drought and strict water rationing in the city, our water allotments are a matter of life and death. The hi-jacking of our water is an act of terrorism against the city of Memphis and a perpetuation of racist violence from the surrounding rural areas that has been plaguing our city for years.

“President Stark will not condemn these racially-charged violent crimes, but the City of Memphis will. At this time, I am declaring Memphis to be in a state of
metropolitan emergency and will be taking every step to ensure the security of our city.

“Memphis has joined the ranks of Sanctuary Cities and safe havens for minority residents, immigrants, queer peoples, and trans people. But this haven is not safe, this city is not a sanctuary, if it cannot secure itself from outside terrorism.

“We will be establishing checkpoints along all main highways into the city and closing some other alternative routes into the city. Cars coming into the city will be checked for weapons and inquiries will be made about passengers’ whereabouts during their stay. These measures go into effect immediately.

“In the coming weeks, we will also be establishing a metropolitan-wide unique license plate different from the state of Tennessee in order to better identify our residents. And we will be looking into a special resident identification card for all Sanctuary City residents across the country to move freely between these cities without additional hassle and unnecessary security measures.”

The camera panned the crowd and they were cheering – thousands of hands in the air clapping and pumping their fists. Some of those hands were holding signs up that read “Keep Em Out”, “Protect the People”, and “Memphis = Love”.

I hadn’t fully understood what all this would mean at the time, though I could tell that those folks cheering in the city square weren’t cheering for us. But, Jade and Dad did see what it meant. At least they saw one small part of what it meant, the rest couldn’t have been known ahead of time. And it was written across both of their postures. Dad’s face was in his hands, his nails digging into his scalp through his thick, curly brown mop of hair. Jade was sitting absolutely still like she was at attention. Her hands were folded in her lap and her back was straight as an arrow. But the blood had drained from her face.

We sat like that for a minute or two. Me watching them and them watching the ground and the TV as commercials for dandruff shampoos for women and yogurts and yellow sundresses splashed across the stage. If it hadn’t been for the commercials, I would have thought that some divine force had pressed pause on the room.

Without any notice, Jade erupted. She bolted straight up. “Fucking racist white trash red neck pieces of shit!” She rushed out of the room and slammed her bedroom door behind her. I hadn’t heard her curse before and the words seemed to sit in the air like a hovering fog. Dad hadn’t moved an inch.

“Dale aint a racist. Is he dad?”

Dad was silent for so long I didn’t think he was gonna answer me. As I moved to leave, he raised his head from his hands and slumped back into the couch. “I don’t know baby girl. I don’t know.”

There didn’t seem to be any consensus as to what had just happened. Lucas was of the opinion that we didn’t them, neither. “What do they got for us there, huh? A street where we can get wasted and listen to washed-up blues artists? Nothing. They can keep it.”

Claudia, on the other hand was terribly worried. She had family in Memphis and they were saying that it was all too real, and that nobody could come into the
city for longer than a two-week visit. Dad didn’t seem to have any opinion; he was silent and just shook his head when it would come up.

Jade on the other hand had taken her spite for our small town to the next level. Before, she had been saying all those nasty things about our town, but hadn’t acted that way when we would go out in town. She would smile sweetly and endure long monologues from folks about how this or that was going to the dogs. Then, we’d get into the car and her smile would turn to a snarl. Now, she was out in the open about it and wasn’t giving any pleasantries to nobody.

I thought that she had taken it too far when she and some girl from Norris, Leslie, who Jade had apparently been visiting on Thursday nights for some time now, walked through the Dollar King with their fingers laced together. I had gone with them to town because it was too cold to have much fun driving the four wheeler and I had gotten bored of sitting around all day. But, when I saw the jaws drop on neighbors and church members as we walked through the aisles, I got so embarrassed that I hid from them, pretending to be looking at some plastic doll toys until they checked out and I joined them at the door – not looking behind me so as not to see the looks of bewilderment on the faces of our neighbors.

On our way back from the store, Jade and Leslie couldn’t stop giggling from their small feat and I, still red with embarrassment in the back seat, could have thrown myself from the car in that moment. We were turning onto our gravel drive as Claudia was pulling out in her blue sedan. The car was stuffed to the gills and I knew it was bad, bad news. Claudia rolled down her window and smiled the kinda smile that isn’t really a smile at all. The kinda smile that usually comes with a funeral notice or a pink slip or an atom bomb.

Four other cities, three designated Sanctuary Cities and Indianapolis, had joined Memphis in the state of Metropolitan emergency and had established checkpoints and tracking systems for all out of town visitors. While only Memphis had made the explicit call to keeping out rural people, it was clear that this was the main ‘outside’ threat to these cities, as well. For Indianapolis, though, the call for closing itself off was explicitly on account of the national drought and the rising costs of energy – that they didn’t need any “burdensome outsiders that didn’t pay their way”, as their mayor had told it.

Several other cities, while not closing themselves off entirely, had joined Memphis in calling for a special Sanctuary City ID for their residents. Claudia wasn’t going to wait for the whole world to close their doors on us. Plus she had a son and a grandson in Memphis and there might well be work there, if she could get in. We bid her safe travels as if she was only heading off for a weekend visit and would be back in the greenhouse by Monday. Maybe we thought she would be turned around. But I think we still didn’t believe that the world around us had changed so much so quickly.

The night that Claudia left, Jade began to push the subject of leaving too. She argued from wanting to go to college one day. That if they didn’t go now, they might never be able to get in if things got worse. Dad had countered that there’d be plenty of schools, community colleges and branches of the state school system, that weren’t
going to shut them out. Jade had protested, but Dad had barked “That’s enough” and that was enough. It was the end of that conversation.

The next several weeks were the loneliest of my life. Jade spent all her time in her room and was moody and brooding in the few times that she joined Dad and I for dinner. Dad was drinking – he switched to Twisted Teas from bourbon, which had a slightly more favorable outcome for his moods – and spending his days reviewing budget sheets, writing grants to keep the farm alive, and digging in to a thick hard-bound book on Water Rights in the Southeast that he had picked up at a flea market. Each day we would watch the news to find out which city had declared themselves in a ‘state of metropolitan emergency’, or which city was debating making that move.

And with each city closure, it seemed that the shootings and bombings spread even quicker in another city, which would close its doors and then the next one, and the next. Doctors and PhDs and chemical engineers from countries across the world were being welcomed with open arms into the cities. But my community – full of folks that had very few skills except diesel engines, strong backs, and a stubborn work ethic - had been closed off to the hubs of culture and music and art and economy and life in a matter of days.

I spent a lot of time on the hill. The trains and trucks still came by at the same frequency as always, hauling whatever they came out to Clarence County to get and to bring back to their protected, guarded cities. But more and more of them came with well-armed security details. The pride I had felt from all those resources being hauled of for those that needed them started to wane. All that water and coal and cotton and corn and timber, all of the bounty that our home had been blessed with. And it was all going out to be made into money in a faraway city by faraway people who didn’t want nothing to do with us. Didn’t want nothing to do with us except for the land and its bounty that came from beneath our feet.

Just before the sun had set, I watched the last pink glow reflect off the side of a brand new, shiny metal train car. In the reflection off the car, I could see my whole world as it looked from that box, what it might look like for those soldiers and guards passing by. It was beautiful, I knew, but seeing the trees and the pink sky and the purple bands of clouds and even my own self, knees tucked into my chest on a stump on the bank. There was nowhere else in the world I’d rather be. When the shiny train cars passed, there was a flatbed car with two security guards standing and smoking cigarettes. They each turned to look at me, with blank expressions. One of them raised his hand, pointing his first finger at me with his thumb sticking up. He was pointing an invisible gun at me. He smirked, then pulled the trigger, and his hand jolted back from the imaginary force of the invisible bullet exploding form the barrel of his pointer finger and ripping right through my chest.

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Standing at the podium, feeling flushed and overheated under the blinding stage lights, I took a sip of water. My throat had gone quite hoarse. I had been talking for the last fifteen minutes and, while I had stammered and stuttered in the first few minutes, I was shocked at how easily things were flowing out of me. I
realized I hadn’t told my story to anyone, not my closest friends, not the guy I had been dating, not my professors or anyone else. And here, in front of a room full the wealthiest charity donors of Chattanooga, a room full of strangers, I was spilling it all out. The fear overcame me again, but I continued on.

“I had heard the blast that night. I could feel it in my chest cavity on my way back down the embankment. I didn’t need to climb back up the hill to know what had happened. As the story would have it later on, four train punks had snuck onto the coal train rear engine in Norris with fifty pounds of ammonium nitrate. Four guards died in that explosion. All of the coal was recovered. It had been set off only a quarter mile away from my house and I kept thinking...” I choked up all of a sudden. I hadn’t seen it coming. I had but the memory still burned.

Wiping my eyes, I continued, “I kept thinking about how I had been saved from death. That if those boys had decided to blow it all to smithereens three minutes earlier, I would have been turned into dust. And that was when I knew...I knew that I couldn’t stay there. That I’d have to go.

“My Dad is still working hard out there and I miss that place everyday of my life. I miss the birds that would sing in the morning and the vultures that would float circles around the sky all day. I miss the smell of a bonfire stained into my clothes. I miss all of that.” I stopped for a second and gazed over the crowd.

The blank, expressionless faces stared back at me. It was the same blank face that I saw city folks don when a struggling person without a home would ask for change, or when a lost foreign tourist would ask for directions. And that was, I realized in that moment, what I missed most about home. And hated most about this city. My emotions turned to rage as I watched all of those perfect and blank faces stare at me.

“And I know this all started when we elected Mr. Stark. I watched from my bedroom as people said that it would ruin their lives and ruin their country. Now, we are seven years into that presidency and I ask you – is this turmoil for you? Has everything gone to ruin for you?

Because, from where we stand, the world was already in an apocalypse. We knew the water wasn’t potable and the electricity was shaky and the roads were bumpy and the two-room library was the only place to get on the internet. But that apocalypse that you spoke of, that drove you to close your cities to me and my family, that never came to your doorstep did it?

I didn’t care for the man’s racism. I didn’t care for his sexual predator history. I didn’t care for a lot of the lies and hate he spewed from his stages. I don’t care about no goddamn wall. That wasn’t the point. The point was that everybody out there knew that the game was all over. And it ain’t never coming back. We voted for the noose.

“When I was a kid, the skeletons of houses and businesses were everywhere, lying along the main street like a pile of bones. Hollowed and rotting from the inside out. I saw the skeletons of people, wandering the aisles of the Dollar King with vacant eyes and fidgeting fingers. Hollowed and rotting from the inside out. There were ghosts everywhere. And they haunted us everywhere we went.

“And then we see you.” I pointed a shaky finger at the crowd and scanned them one by one across the middle row. I was seething now, but I couldn’t stop.
"You, in your suits and ties and laughs and dance parties and martinis. You in your new car and endless cups of coffee and your exotic cuisines from countries we couldn’t place on a map. You with your two masters degrees and your command of three languages.

"You, in your utopia. And we get to watch it on TV. From our home in our apocalypse. And so the man, President Stark, in his lies and hate and finger-pointing and name-calling, is the last spark of fight that we’ve got left in us. If this don’t buck it all to high heavens, then we don’t know what will. And we’ll prolly just lie down and die."

This hadn’t been part of the script and all of a sudden the terror was re-instilled in me. Was that it? Should I keep going? Finish on a light note? No, I decided. It was best to leave it there. And I walked off stage. The final act of the night was a country musician, who was going to play some old time country and folks songs. I had met the musician backstage before the event. He was from Atlanta, not the county, but he had “been there a time or two,” he had added with conviction. “Working on the water trucks.”

After I had consumed the better part of a bottle of Merlot, in the waiting room that I had been so nervous in only an hour before, Gregory entered. “You did it!” He exclaimed. “Your fantastic presentation really hit the mark! People were moved!”

“And...” Gregory shuffled through his suit pockets to withdraw an envelope. “And, they were moved to donate. There’s $10,000 of personal donations that were made tonight towards a rural community health center in Clarence County!”

“What?” I shook my head, confused. “But...I didn’t say anything about a health center....”

“Yeah, well the funders got together and sorted that out. There’s a yuge need for health work out there. The diabetes rate and the obesity is just off the charts!”

“But, I was talking about the need for jobs. For economic growth. For the cities to open up the borders again!”

Gregory stared at me in disbelief. “Look, this is $10,000.” He waved the envelope in my face. “And there’s more that will likely come in the next few weeks. Especially if these donors get the word out. I mean there were some big guns here tonight – Peabody, Exxon, Bayer, Nestle Water, Coca-Cola! This could really go somewhere.”

When Gregory realized that I still had a confused look on my face, he grabbed me by the arms and, smiling wide, he said, “You should be ecstatic!” And that’s when I knew. When I knew that there was nothing anyone was going to be willing to do for us. That we would have to do it ourselves.

* * * * * * *

Dear Jade,

I have written to you several times over the last few months and I hope you have received my letters. I don’t know if you are still living at the same apartment in Queens. I don’t know whether you are out there at all, for that matter. I hope to God
that you are, and that you are well and happy, even in these crazy times. But, if you
don’t write back this time, it will be the last time I write. Please write me back.

I’m not sure how much information is getting out to you, and how much of it is the
truth. I’m sure you know that your news is warped and you just can’t trust it, anymore.
Not since Stark closed down all the papers and website outlets that had cried out
against his fourth term in the White House. I’m sure you know all of this already, but
just in case.

This time I am writing to you with all the truth. Not only of the dreams and the stories
of my sons and little memories that I had written you before. I realized that I was
writing to you more for my own selfish reasons that for you. And for that, I’m sorry.
Please, please write me back.

Things are OK here, compared to how they are in a lot of other places. I’m working
harder than ever, I took a position as Community Director for the Cuyahoga-Holmes
Electric Cooperative – remember the news pamphlets they used to send in the mail,
with recipes and silly little stories of fishing trips and where to get the best apple pie in
the state? The co-op is playing a lot bigger role now, and I’m proud to be a part of it.

There was a tornado that came through three years ago and wrecked a lot of homes
and the transmission lines and so forth. It was a real mess and the state and the feds
didn’t do nothing but come through to assess the damage and write up a few fines for
unsafe structures that people were living in.

Nobody had known what to do, and that mayor, Russell still ain’t good for nothing, but
the co-op opened its doors and that’s when I realized what could be done there. It’s a
regular meeting place now, just like the church used to be, but with more action and
less talk. That’s when I started working with them. We set up a contractors academy
to help people rebuild their own homes. And once that work was underway, we started
using the training to help people seal up their homes better and save on their bills. A
lot of people have told me that it helped them to pay for other things they couldn’t
afford before. Even food! And I had no idea they were struggling so much before then!

There’s a big stand-off right now, and I’m not sure what is going to happen. The waters
dried up worse and worse every year and still those water tankers have been coming to
suck up the last drops of the reservoir. Lucas was the one to try and stop them first.
He, and Dale, who’s been back from the Pen for a year now. Lucas said that if the cities
were gonna have their checkpoints, then we were too. He and Dale went and blew a
big hole in the highway. I mean a massive hole. I had told him not to do it, but they
wouldn’t listen to me. Then they blew a hole in the rail line, too.
Some construction company came out here and fixed it all up. And then they blew it to
smithereens again. And then construction company came out again and its been going
back and forth like that for a while. It stopped the water tankers, though, and the coal
trains and the timber trucks and all the rest of it. Lucas is working to keep those
industries going and has a proposal that the co-op take them over and we can all share the profits of them.

That was the last straw for the companies that own all the rights to the timber and the mines and such. And now they’ve got the national guard in here trying to ‘restore order’, which is probably the story you’re hearing in New York City. But nobody here wants them around. And there’s been a lot of violence. Dale got hit in the head by two rounds of rubber bullets and Lucas got bit by an attack dog and several others have been bruised and battered trying to keep the National Guard out. Claudia has been the medic and she’s working around the clock, with a little help from Jessie. Do you remember Jessie, she was really young when we left but she’s grown into a strong woman, now. Claudia’s been back from Memphis for two years now, thank God for her sweet soul.

The power company cut us off on account of our cutting off the water tankers and trains. I don’t know what they have to do with all that, but they did it all the same. Politics, I guess. So, right now, I’m working with the co-op to get our own solar and wind plants here local. People been running generators, but that just won’t last – and what if the gas tankers decide to cut us off too? I think if we can build our own energy system, we’re gonna make it just fine. Got two solar plants up already in the last few months. Looks like it could be some good jobs in it for people here too, so that’s a good sign.

Dad’s Ok, though he’s getting too old to be working as hard as he does, I think. He started a program five years ago, before I came back, to help feed the community. Anyone who wants to can come work at the farm, part time as volunteers and part time getting paid. They get the same basket of veggies as all those that can pay for it. Dad makes some of his money back at the end of the year through tax breaks. Its been a huge success and I think everyone will be healthier for it.

Do you remember that last night we went out in Chattanooga? Before you moved to New York City? I was so nervous to go to that drag queen show but you took me along, dragging my feet and all. I remember, when all those boys were dancing information like the dancers in one of those old black and white movies. And you asked me what I thought. I had said it was weirdly normal. And you looked at me with that fierce intense look of yours and said, what is normal?

I remember, after the show, we were dancing and you kissed that girl on the lips. And I had blushed for you, just like I had been so embarrassed all those years before when we were in the Dollar King and you held Leslie’s hand (Leslie’s got two kids now, by the way). But, then I saw how happy you were. There on the dance floor, you were glowing and smiling and your eyes were shining brighter than the flashing lights all around you. And I was happy for you, too.
When I dream of you, you still have that same wide grin and your eyes are all lit up and you are waving your head back and forth with the rhythm of some music that only you can hear. And you don’t have a care in the world. I’m glad to remember you like that.

I pray to God that you are still smiling and shining like that, wherever you are.

Please write me back.

Love,

Brit
The Bonfire

"Fire, like pain, like love, is a power we do not know. Yet from the ashes of each, something will grow. No one knows if it will be something beautiful and strong. But in our lives it is sometimes the broken vessel, as writer Andre Dubus calls it, that spills the light." – Linda Hogan, The Woman Who Watches Over The World

The wood spit and crackled as the tongues of flame lapped the splinters and rusted nails. They watched in silence, transfixed by the amber glow in its rhythmic weaves and curls, lighting up the forest in flickers and flashes of orange.

It looked like a belly dancer, swaying and swirling to the music of the humming chorus of insects that surrounded them in the woods.

It looked like an entranced serpent, licking the air, reaching for the glittering sky.

In the last year, the two had made a thousand propositions as to what this or that fire looked like and represented. It was the one source of poetry in their weary journey. Each night, they carved out new ways to connect the bonfire to an ever-growing set of similes, events, and illusions. Sometimes, one or the other would fail in their metaphors and imageries, and the sounds of the night would return until they would try again.

The poets of yester-year had taken inspiration from all the world around them. From the cotton-filled clouds and the purple horizon at sunrise. From the rushing rivers and the glass-mirror lakes. From a giant maple tree that had watched the generations of a family grow and love and die in the coolness of its shade. From slinking foxes and galloping mares, and the hovering flights of the eagles and buzzards.

It wasn't that those elements of the natural world had ceased to exist. They were, perhaps, flourishing more than ever now, without the rush of traffic or buzz of planes to choke them out.

It was just that all of that was dead in their eyes, even as it was so alive. And, so, their inspiration came from the flames.

The fire lasted all night long, and they fell asleep in one another's arms in the grass, listening to the sizzling of the wood being slowly consumed and transformed into dust and ash. In the morning, they picked through the remaining embers and charcoaled remains with a brass fire poker. They collected the scraps of twisted metal from a few mangled picture frames, several pots and pans and half-melted silverware, and some sections of lead piping. A large cast-iron stove sat in the middle of the ring of the charcoaled remains and they were sorry to leave it behind, but they could not possibly carry it along the road.

Their cart was nearly filled to the brim already, and it would be three days time until they reached the blacksmith's workshop, in what had once been Clarence County, where they could trade in their scrap metal and collect their rewards, provisions for the next leg of their journey and goods they could trade at market.

The lovers hoisted their stuffed packs onto their backs and pulled the straps tight across their shoulders and chests. The man checked the tire pressure on the
cart, then gripped the handles and turned back onto the trail. He dragged the cart over the thick roots on the trail and twice they had to collect bits and pieces that had fallen off when the cart bounced sharply.

They made it back onto Highway 20 within an hour and were grateful to be on smooth pavement once again. They walked down the center of the highway for several hours, silent and staring at the stretch of pavement before them.

When the sun reached high-noon, and their shirts were soaked through with sweat, they rested in the shade of a covered, abandoned gas station. They dropped their backs next to one of the old, aluminum pumps. The pump’s red paint was peeling off around the edges and the old-style meter, with its numerical reel, read 6.66. They sat on the curb, leaning against the fill station and chewed on dry, stringy jerky strips that she had made from a fat red squirrel that had crawled into one of their walnut butter baited steel traps. They choked the strips down with a few swallows of murky-green water from a mason jar.

The man stripped the tubing hose from each of the fill stations, which yielded about a quart of gasoline that he carefully funneled into his five-gallon barrel. Then, he disassembled the check valve from the fill station and sucked on the opening. Fifteen seconds later, a surge of fluid filled his mouth. He spit the gasoline into the barrel and sucked another mouthful and spit it into the barrel, too. After several mouthfuls, he began to fill dizzy. She handed him a rag and the jar of murky water, and he scrubbed at his tongue, teeth, and the roof of his mouth.

After a short nap, they collected their things and headed back onto the highway. The sun was behind them now, and they covered their necks with damp rags as they followed the long stretch of pavement before them. Twice, they startled a herd of deer as they emerged around a corner and they watched the animals bound across the road and into the forest beyond, where they were quickly swallowed from sight by the dense thicket and the dark shadows. At sunset, they walked up on a crow, perched atop a raccoon and ravenously ripping at the tendons of its shoulder. The crow eyed them once and returned to its feast, cocking its head to give them a full view of its pitch-black eye. They skirted around the bird and kept going.

Four hours after dark, they reached the turn-off to the small cluster of homes that was their stop for the night. The first home was a mile from Highway 20. They stood in front of the home for several long moments.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. And he nodded in agreement.

The home was a large two-story building, with a wrap-around covered porch. It had a large bay window on each side of the door on both levels. The blue paint was still in good shape, as was the white trim and white shutters. It looked remarkably lived in, though they knew it was not. It was one of the more pristine homes they had come across in several months. There was no sign of ransacking, there were no vines crawling up its walls, and the roof had not yet caved in from the months of torrential down-pour of the winter before.

“Can we keep this one?” She asked, scanning the cushioned chairs and benches on the porch.

“You know we can’t.” She turned to look at him and he saw the loss return to her emerald-green eyes. He hadn’t seen it, or rather, she hadn’t shown it for several
months, now. He had only shown the loss once it their travels. It had been a hard winter the year before. The rations had run dry and the rain was falling in buckets for weeks on end. They were passing through what had once been home for him, though he hadn’t recognized it until they stood before the school building and the memories returned in flashes of agony. Right there on the pavement, he had collapsed into a heaving, sobbing fit; the years of building a hard shell to protect the loss all crumbled away. She had been there for him, then. Sitting in the middle of the street, she had taken his head into her lap, rubbed at his knotted shoulders and sang the few hymns she could remember on repeat until long after the sun had set.

They knew that it lived deep within each of their core, the loss of the world they had grown up in. It was one thing to be born into this mess, and it was quite another to have seen both sides – to see the pinnacle of America, laughing and smiling, and to have witnessed the fall out. It was in the night when the loss seemed to set heaviest in their hearts and so they turned all their attention to the flames until sleep would take them.

He set the cart handles down, removed his pack and went to her. He took her shivering hands into his, and kissed her smooth cheek. They searched one another’s eyes for some answer. I love you, his eyes said to her. I love you too, hers said back. He watched the loss subside from her face, her eyes, her forehead, her lips returning to peace.

When they were sure, he spoke softly to her. “It’s the only way. How are we to go forward if we haven’t let go of our past?”

Her bottom lip trembled for a moment. Then, she turned from him and began digging through the cart.

They set to work. She tipped the five-gallon barrel and poured the gasoline into four separate quart jars. They entered the home by the front door and gathered all of the furniture into the middle of the hardwood-floored living room. She emptied two jars of gasoline onto the stack of furniture, and sprinkled the other two jars along the floor in the hallway, the kitchen, and the wooden stairs. As they worked, she mumbled prayers underneath her breath.

Then, they stood on the front porch with the door wide open. He lit a match and held it to the frayed end of a bundle of newspapers he had found on the kitchen counter. They watched the torch creep along the end of the newspapers, the black ink turning purple and running along the pages. He tossed the bundle into the living room and they backpedaled down the front porch steps and into the overgrown yard.

They could not see the fire yet, but they could hear the crackling and spitting wood within the home. They walked back out to the edge of the road, spread a blanket in the weeds and sat, watching the quiet, dark house all the while. She gripped his hand tightly and they shared a long, passionate kiss.

The blaze inside had spread into the hallway, and they could see it now, through the open door. They watched it grow. It took the front porch quickly, as the lacquer gave the flames new life. Then, they could see the flicker of light in the windows of an upstairs room. This whole process took almost an hour. But, once it had reached the second floor and had engulfed the porch, the fire flared quickly and enveloped the home within a matter of minutes.
It looked like a war, waged between air and earth, and here is the clash between shield and spear on the front lines of battle.

It looked like a phantom spirit, desperately grasping for the heavens, yet stuck in the purgatory that was this life.

As the house burned, he stroked his fingers through her hair as she rested her head in his lap. He heard her breathe steady and knew she was asleep. He watched the fire, which settled back from the massive blaze. It was a low, steady, burn now. A sustained, smouldering. And it would eat slowly away at the timbers and trusses for several hours yet.

Softly, so as not to wake her, he recited the words that he had heard from his mother all those years ago. She had seen the terror in his face as the wildfire leapt across the river and into the pine trees behind their home. She had clutched his hand as they watched it edge towards the back porch.

“Bring your burdens to the bonfire,” he said, as she had then. “To the baptism. Turn them to ashes. When all the embers of yesterday have floated out to sea with the gusts, we rise from the dust. We will taste the fresh air and go forth, to build the world that our hearts ache for.”
The Coalition

Buster had made all of the arrangements ahead of time. The barkeep would clear out the storage room in the back of Phil’s Place. He would put a card table up, with four folding chairs, a bottle of Crown Royal, four plastic cups, and a deck of cards. He’d have four posters tacked up to each of the walls, a 3.5’ x 5’ map of the country, pens, pencils, highlighters, and an extension cord. While Phil hadn’t joined the movement, or even had any interest in politics whatsoever, he had been incredibly accommodating for them over the course of the last four years. Buster wasn’t sure if his support was on account of his clientele’s approval for their platform. Or if he had watched too many movies and was simply fascinated with playing a small, safe, part in a revolution.

Whenever the group convened west of the Mississippi, they would hold a meeting at Phil’s Place, the bar that had served blue-collar workers in the once-industrialized, then hipsterized, and now nearly deserted warehouse district just north of the Five Points neighborhood in Denver, Colorado. In the early days, they would simply meet at the bar, free to have their conversations in the open, while the rest of the clientele was glued to the sports games on the television. Then, J Tree’s paranoia about turncoats turned out to be true - the police had met them with riot gear and armed to the teeth, foiling their plans to take a New Mexico coal plant offline in the middle of the night. So, now they held all of their meetings out of sight and out of earshot wherever they went.

Buster arrived early to ensure everything was in order, bought two beers from the bar and flipped open the historical novel he had been reading – From the Dust Bowl to The New Deal. The customers came and went over the next two hours, and had nearly emptied by the time the Avalanche lost, 5-1, to the Red Wings. Buster checked his watch - should be any minute now - then followed a customer outside and bummed a cigarette off him. He surveyed the empty streetscape. This place had bottomed out hard. The warehouses along each side of the street sat empty, surrounded by padlocked chain-link fences with rusting barbed wire coils lining the tops. Not a car went by.

Down the street, a crew of kids were skateboarding, trying the same trick over and over. They would kick their skateboard up to speed, jump up on to the shipping platform, grind the railing on the off-ramp, and turn a 180 or kick-flip the board off of the rail to land onto the pavement. Buster watched the kids for several minutes, not a single one accomplished the combination trick. Damn, if they weren’t persistent, though.

They needed persistence like that in their efforts, he thought. It was amazing how fickle and distracted the supposed members of the movement were. They’d show up to a meeting and talk and talk about how they were ‘all in’, then he’d either never see them again. Or, they’d show up for one or two demonstrations and melt away. After all the education they had done. It was amazing how often people wouldn’t own up to act in their own interests when push came to shove. He had given his soul to the effort for most of the last 6 years, but a country farmer, who had everything at stake, couldn’t even find his way to a Wednesday evening meeting.
After his eerie encounter last month, Buster had become more and more cynical about the movement. He didn't know whether that event had revealed the fruitlessness of their efforts to him. Or whether he was building up arguments to convince himself, in order to justify his next steps. Buster checked his phone, then nervously shoved it back into his pocket.

Buster was on the last chapter of his book when J Tree slid down the bench next to him and flipped his book out of his hands. “Shit,” Buster said, “I didn’t even hear you come in.”

“Well that’s cause I’m a ghost,” J Tree smiled, swiping the flat brim of his fitted Braves hat with dramatic slyness. “Whenever you think you’re alone, I’m right around the next corner.” Buster laughed, concealing the chill that ran down his spine. Did he know? Buster wondered to himself. “C’mon,” J Tree slapped him on the back, “I’ll buy you a drink. You want rum? I want rum.”

Buster watched J Tree amble over to the bar, shaking Phil’s hand on the way and blowing a kiss to a cute blonde girl that had been watching him since he came in. J Tree was a black-nationalist revolutionary. He had a t-shirt of every color with a black power fist on it and he kept them in rotation, if he wasn’t wearing a flamboyant dashiki like he was straight out of 1971. As he shouted his drink order to the waitress, he stroked the thick, coarse fumanchu, which had been toeing the line of unruly in the past few months. He tipped his head to see the rum selection, looking out from the top of the aviator glasses that he wore, day and night, inside or out.

J Tree’s grandmother had been a Black Panther in Chicago for years before returning to her original small town in Clarence County to settle down and have her own family. Then, after her daughter had disappeared for three years, she took over as mother for another generation of Baumwell kids. Despite her old age and arthritic limbs and hard-hear, she raised J Tree and his younger brother on sweet yams, Brazilian music, and Malcolm X speeches. She raised them to be good men.

J Tree had entered the movement for real at 26, when he dropped out of the North Carolina Central law school after one of his classmates had gotten shot by an off-duty junior police officer on his way home from the law library late one night. J Tree had spent the next two years making the rounds in student organizing across the SEC and HBCU schools, holding workshops and actions on police brutality, mass incarceration, state violence, and prison abolition. Then, he had gotten on with the service workers’ union and spent another year on their efforts to get paid maternity leave, which had been granted to most other industries by that time. Then, it was on to the UAW.

Red entered the bar as he usually did, with as much dramatic effect as possible. It would be hard to miss the 6’4”, broad-chested man anywhere, but his polished Tony Llama cowboy boots and his broad Stetson hat made him stick out like a sore thumb in the middle of the city. Buster figured he still dressed like that just for the attention. But Red said otherwise. Redford Bundy was a true western ranch kid.

Yes, those Bundy’s.

Though he was only a baby and too young to recall the ‘heroic’ stands of his grandfather, Cliven and uncle, Ammon, he grew up in the middle of the Patriot
Movement and its growing strength in the communities that Red was raised between. Their ideology and hate for government had a powerful influence on the kid.

Red tipped his hat at J Tree, who threw up a peace sign in greeting back to him.

J Tree and Red had built the movement from its start, despite J Tree's initial skepticism in working with a known Oath Keeper that had ties to the Aryan Brotherhood. Red was sharp as a tack, but had run into the law a handful of times while moving guns for the Oath Keeper's efforts to stockpile arms as the government moved to tighten gun regulation. During a 4-year stint in Shutter Creek Correctional, he fell in with the Aryan Brotherhood, out of self-preservation more than principles. His Oath Keeper history had made him a clear ally in the Brotherhood's eyes and he figured their protection in the tumultuous environment of race relations at Shutter Creek would be a huge advantage.

He still had the swastika tattoo on his ribs, a painful reminder of his darkest times. He was less embarrassed of the “Don't Tread on Me” inscription inked into his rib cage on the other side.

After release from Shutter Creek, and three years cycling in and out of prisons in Northern Idaho, Red had gotten back to his legacy's political work. He jumped feet first into that work, leading a standoff at the Tesla Battery Plant in Western Nevada. Red had seen the opportunity as the greatest intersection of his family's rebellions. From the Cliven-side, it was a fight against the state's revocation of several ranches water rights in order to meet the needs of the battery plant and the BLM's deal to allow several acres of the battery plant on historic grazing lands. On the Ammon-side, it was a fight against changes in the automobile industry that risked putting diesel mechanic and semi-truck repair shops like Ammon's out of business.

Red met J Tree on a trip to Hardin, Montana, where he had been trying to recruit truck drivers for his open-carry confrontation in Western Nevada. The UAW and several Teamsters locals had convened a meeting at one of the casino's on Crow Nation. Red had been losing money on the Craps table and had drunk himself stupid in the middle of the day. Of course, there was no day or night in the casino. The only marker to gauge time by was the digital coin count on your slot machine or the height of the stack of chips before you at the blackjack table.

Red's stack was thin, and so he figured time was running thin, too. So, he took the three green chips he had left, pocketed them and, led by the faltering lean of his body in the backwards direction, his feet followed until they were solidly underneath him, several paces back from the blackjack table. He had needed to relieve himself and, staggering drunk down the hallway, picked the wrong door to find himself in the midst of one of J Tree's southern-baptist-style sermons.

With the world spinning around him, Red had found his way into a chair and sunk down to recover his vision. He closed his eyes to stop the spinning, leaving his ears as his primary sensuous connection to the living world. The speech he heard, with his eyes closed and his ears open, had sounded familiar to him. J Tree didn't trust the government anymore than the Bundys did and had a similar hatred for corporate America.
“You go over to Youngstown, and ask those folks how it feels to be in a world that don’t care about you or your profession. Except over there, the companies had pulled out and moved to Mexico, or automated the assembly line slowly, over the course of 50 years. It was so slow that they didn’t see it hit them until they were jobless and looking around dazed, with empty pockets.

“But what we got here, with automated e-lectric vehicles, we know what’s coming, don’t we? And its coming down in one full swoop, bruh. If Congress passes that bill their sitting on, you’re only one signature away from dropping onto the unemployment rolls, ain’t ya? Yea, you know it as well as I do."

There was a buzz of excitement in the crowd. They took to his rhetorical questions with a sort of call-and-response, hooping and hollering in the pauses that J Tree left hanging in the room. After a few minutes of listening to the simmering energy of the room, Red opened his eyes and his vision slowly converged from three world into one, stable picture of the room. He was surprised to see a black man in a blue button-up shirt, baggy shorts and a flat brimmed sports cap with a microphone at the front of the room. Here in lily white Montana, of all places.

“Now Im not saying its gonna be easy. I’m not even telling you that we can win. But what I am telling you is that if yall just stay put in your seats, you’re gonna wake up in November on a monday morning, planning to go work, and there ain’t gonna be a truck waiting for you. It’s gonna be whizzing by on its own, with a robot for a driver and an e-lectic engine whirring away under the seats.

“What you gonna do, then? Go get a computer-programming job with one of them tech companies? Show of hands, who wants to go program the robots driving your truck around the country?”

Red looked around the room. The group of truck drivers, mostly white and a few native men, were laughing and shaking their heads. The speaker held the room captive with his words and Red watched as the man’s tones and tempos moved the crowd rhythmically, like a snake charmer and a basket of cobras.

“Now some of yall say ‘well its about the bottom line of the comp’ny. Aint nothing we can do about that’.

“I ask you, when are we gonna stop putting their profits in front of our own needs, bruh? When are we gonna stop handing our pensions over to Wall Street just to let them put us out of a job, bruh?”

Red introduced himself to J Tree after the speech and asked for his contact information. J Tree didn’t pay him much mind at the time. After all, Red’s standoff in western Nevada was filled with gun-toting white supremacists that J Tree didn’t want to touch with a ten-foot pole.

But, after Red’s standoff died down with no event, he joined J Tree’s efforts for a series of demonstrations and strikes against the federal bill to approve automated electric trucks in the transportation industry. The UAW, Teamsters, diesel mechanics, and several of the large gas station chains (Pilot, Flying J, Love’s, Marathon, Kwik Trip, and Sinclair) made up the muscle and the money behind the nation-wide protests.

But it was Red and J Tree that had found the key to unlock the backbone of the effort.
One night, at a truck stop diner outside of Little Rock, Arkansas, J Tree showed the map to Red. It was the map of electric cooperative service areas, spread out across the country, covering the furthest corners of every empty space in the nation.

“Shoot,” Red traced the edges of the shaded sections of the western states, thinking of the places where he had fly fished, bars he had fought in, and stretches of the open plains that he had driven across a thousand times in his life. “This must be three quarters of the country!”

“Bout right. 42 million people.” J Tree sat back and grinned wide. “Those co-ops make over $45 billion in revenue every year, which is gonna probably double if the electric semi-trucks take over. And all that money is owned by all them families in that area. Co-operative ownership.”

J Tree leaned forward and held Red’s gaze fast. “Red, they got their own grassroots PAC, owned and funded by those members. They got their own lobbying arm in DC; a serious player in any of the Farm Bills and energy bills. Shoot, they shut down the Clean Power Plan back in 2015! And, they’ve got the money.”

“And they got a whole load of our drivers, mechanics, and gas station clerks,” Red observed. “Tree, if we put this network into play we might really be on to something.”

It turns out, the co-ops had been split on the issue. Half were against the bill on account of losing jobs to automation and a general aversion to change. Half were for the bill because of the projected revenue spikes for electric truck fill stations across the co-op service areas. Nevertheless, the cooperative members that joined the fight increased the ranks by several thousand. The co-ops had also helped to influence several congressmen representing rural districts to walk out of the Capitol the day before the bill was to be signed.

In the end, the bill passed without so much as a few minutes of air-time for J Tree and Red’s national day of demonstrations – sit-ins and marches in 750 towns across America. But, for the duo, it had proved their theory. They had put the co-ops in play and it had moved the needle. And that experiment set in motion the grander plans they had been scheming ever since that night in the Little Rock diner.

7 years later, the pieces were finally coming together.

The three of them were halfway into their second pint at Phil’s Place when Moon showed up. Moon was the youngest of the group, by far. She was a Lakota Sioux born at Standing Rock and raised at Pine Ridge Reservation. She was a thick, short woman with lively, dark round eyes and thick black hair, which she always wore in a braid. She had the energy and silliness that lightened the mood when crisis hit their plans. That kinda energy that made the group of men feel a decade younger. But Moon was also as serious, bold, and sharp as any one of them when it came down to business.

She looked exhausted, Buster observed, seeing the bags under her eyes and the thin smile she greeted them with.

The group moved into the back room. Red shuffled the deck and dealt. They tried to start every meeting with a game of Spades. It helped them relax, make small talk about whatever was on their mind, and provide updates on their progress over
the last few months. Buster was paired with J Tree, who was far more competitive, and far more skilled, at Spades than he.

“Busta, how was your trip back home?” Moon asked him. Buster watched J Tree eye him from under his aviators.

“Fairly uneventful. East Kentucky ain’t changed a bit, despite all the media hype about that stimulus package.” Buster played the first spade of the game, a three, to take the trick from Red’s ace of hearts. Red cursed. “Yea, just like I remember it. Fought with my daddy the whole time and went fishing with my younger sister to get out of the house.”

“Any movement business to account for?” J Tree re-arranged the hand he had been dealt, then selected a low diamond to give Buster the trick.

“Not really.” Buster had spent most of his time off at his mother’s bedside as she went through her second chemo treatment at the Harlan Hospital. “Made three visits to co-op board meetings. But, still some work to do to convince any of them to split their revenues to support our cause. We got five board members on our side in Jackson County, four in Cumberland, five in Big Sandy. But we need six in each.”

“They oughta be making three-fold more profit since the electric charging stations,” Red shook his head. “What they got to lose?”

“They been Republicans for a decade now,” J Tree replied. “Gonna take a couple underdog wins and a shift in sentiment to sway those folks over to our side.” J Tree turned back to Buster. “Anything else you wanna fill us in on?”

Buster was grateful that his hands didn’t tremble when every fiber in his body was shaking. *What did J Tree know?* Buster glanced at Moon, then to Red. Neither of them seemed concerned with anything but the cards on the table. Red closed another trick. “Got piss drunk in Harlan and nearly lost my car off the side of a mountain.”

Red snorted at that. “Y’all southern boys drink and drive as much as we do out west. Was it on a dirt road?” Buster nodded. “Well, then, you’re legal.”

Red and Moon won, 502-350, as the group swapped stories and musings about the political and cultural climate of the country. Red had spent the last three months traveling back and forth across the southwest, attending and speaking at every electric co-op annual meeting that would let him in the door. He had received financial commitments from twelve local co-ops, one generation co-op and the state associations of Texas, Arizona, and Colorado. J Tree had been making the rounds in DC on the electoral side of their strategy – fraternizing with the lobbyists at the NRECA, employees at the USDA Rural Development and strategizing with the folks at ACRE PAC.

Moon had spent the first half of the summer canvassing across reservations in Montana, Oregon and Washington, then the latter half, back in South Dakota visiting family and preparing her cousins for the Sun Dance.

In each of their stories, there were clear indications of a shift in sentiment in the counties and cooperatives they had covered. People who had come out time and time again against regulation and in favor of corporate tax cuts had suffered the brunt of the most recent economic recession. They had had no one to turn to for years. Not since the last scoundrel they put into office played them for a fool and left them high and dry and made himself a truck-load of money in the process. Many
The Coalition – that was what Moon, J Tree, Red, and Buster called themselves, internally – had been holding meetings at the various electric cooperatives across the country. They had zigzagged the US interstates, breaking off to meet each of the communities along the two-road state highways and county roads. At the cooperatives’ headquarters, they spoke to the needs of those communities – the needs for education, for good jobs, for broadband access and better roads and opportunity without having to move to one of the big cities.

They hadn’t been met with open-arms everywhere, or even with civility in many places. A lot of communities were not accustomed to sit and listen to a black man or a Native American woman tell them how it was, even if it was how they felt it was, and even if they had come with two white men. They had switched to a divide and conquer strategy after a series of meetings had gone awry and, on one occasion, they had been driven out of town in eastern Nebraska.

If it was the Coalition’s first time to a cooperative area, it only made sense to put forth a representative that the community was comfortable with. Then, over time, as they developed local trust, they would bring in the full Coalition team for follow-up conversations or to support local rallies and to push the message that they were all in this together. That had started to hit home, lately. Across a good portion of the county, after Red or Buster had given their own stories of their communities’ struggles, the crowd would listen to J Tree and Moon explain their communities’ struggles. And they’d let the crowd put the pieces together.

“Wow,” they had heard time and time again. “We really are dealing with the same issues!”

It all started with just simply talking with people. Then, after people had been heard and had listened, they could start moving the ball forward. This year, after developing support across 345 cooperatives in 22 states, the Coalition officially launched the Country People’s Party in preparation for a third party contention in three senate seats, forty three state representative seats, and 134 local and county elected official positions. These campaigns were fairly well spread across the cooperative service areas, with strongholds in the Black Belt and in the Rocky Mountain West region. Several of these were going to be tough battles, and the team was working with the NRECA, the ACRE PAC, and a number of regional non-profit networks to send a powerful message to politically-entrenched, mainly long-standing conservative, communities to come aboard for their own interests.

It had helped that the leadership of the Country People’s Party was truly that – people that had been born and raised in rural America. And so, despite the challenges of operating as an intentionally multi-racial alliance, they were trusted more than the politicians that whisked through their towns and held a rally and used big words and facts and figures and then were gone with the wind until the next campaign brought them back through town.

The Country People’s Party (CPP) stood on three pillars: Rural Sovereignty, Land Reform, and Economic Democracy. The pillars had been developed over that
J Tree laid out those most recent list of demands on the card table in the backroom of Phil’s Place and they commenced debating which points would resonate most, and which points would need follow-up conversations in one region or another. The platform was a rough draft, at this time, but it included the following key points:

- A local tax of 1% of total worth on all resources extracted or transported through rural areas to benefit those communities directly affected.
- Cooperative control and representation in all water rights disputes and energy source generation decisions.
- Cooperative ownership of all revenues generated in new development of manufacturing, agriculture, and timber industries.
- Priority access to federal grants and loans for industry and commercial development, to be provided to cooperatives representing underserved and persistent-poverty areas.
- Establish community benefit agreement terms for all business development in rural areas in which the company is not locally owned. Community benefit standards will require 50% local hiring for construction and business operations. Residents must have access to all associated training programming to achieve these standards.
  - All business development must provide wages at the locally-determined living wage standard and allow employees the opportunity and option to organize into unions.
- Federal and state funding to fill gaps in broadband, road, and water infrastructure for rural cooperative service areas.
- Local oversight for all projects involving the distribution of water, energy, timber, and food that is produced, generated, or sourced within a cooperative service area.
- Democratic voting and inclusion on all decisions involving tax credits provided for outside industries re-locating or expanding into cooperative service areas.
- Land redistribution of all lands that have been fallow for the last three successive years.
  - Redistribution will prioritize the productive use of these lands by historically underserved populations and peoples currently living in poverty conditions within rural areas.
  - Top priority for redistribution will go to productive land uses of Native American people.
  - Secondary priority for redistribution will go to productive land uses of African-American peoples.
  - Tertiary priority for redistribution will go to productive land uses of peoples of the bottom two tax brackets.
All other lands will be redistributed by the determination of local cooperative, which must take into account the prospect for local wealth regeneration of respective lands.

"They're not gonna go for the reparations," Red said.
"Who's not gonna go for it?" J Tree asked, eyeing Red from underneath his glasses.
"You know," Red stood up straight. "White folks."
"Well," J Tree said, "that's your and Buster's business. Cuz the Black Belt ain't gonna vote CPP unless that's in there. And you got fifty-four local elected officials ready to run on this here platform in those states. And a seven of those is white folks."
"Yea," Red agreed, nodding to Buster. "We're working on it. But moving that forward is slow, brother."

It had been a slow procession, indeed. Buster and Red had been going back and forth across the whitest rural communities and they were all on-board with the platform until they got to the race parts.

They had tried, time and time again, to explain how they were all facing the same thing. And, across the southwest and the whitest parts of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain West, they had made progress.

But, in many other regions and, particularly in Red's native Idaho and in Buster's native Kentucky and across many sections of the South, and the Midwest, they had made little in-roads.

Some communities had gone forth with supporting the Country People's Party, anyways. The platform still offered them more than either of the dominant parties would, even with its 'racial preferences'. But, in other sections of the country it was a non-starter.

"How are they so blind?" Buster had fumed to Red as they drove off from a meeting in Iowa, after the board had unanimously voted against funding support for the Country People's Party. Red had nodded in agreement, but they had both known where that blindness came from. For, Red and Buster remembered just how long it had taken each of them to get there for themselves. And that was while working, day in and day out, with people of color who helped them to see.

They couldn't imagine what it would take to get a predominantly white community in isolation to come to terms with their own racism. But, they continued to try all the same. They had tried the local elite big-ag farmer and plantation argument, to no avail. They had tried the 'blame the well-educated coastal elites', and that worked pretty well in some places. And, when all else failed, they reminded the people of what they had got with their last big win.

"Yea," Buster would say, with disgust in his upper lip. "Y'all pulled all your weight for Trump."

Whether it was in West Virginia or Virginia or his own East Kentucky. That's what'd he say.

And he'd say the same in Nebraska, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, New York, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, the Carolinas, Florida, Tennessee, New Mexico, Montana, Washington, Oregon, and Arizona, too.
And the crowd would hang their heads and watch the ground at their feet. “Yea,” Buster would start again, after everyone had had the chance to hang their heads and watch the ground at their feet. “And look where that got you.”

And, after everyone had had the chance to hang their heads again, and kick their boots in the dirt a time or two, Buster would say, “He was hanging out in his big ole tower in the center of Manhattan. Building gahddang golf courses around the world. Never spent a day in his life working with his hands. How did we not see that?” Buster would be fuming at this point, and nearly purple in the face.

“So how you gonna tell me... that those folks out there, black, brown, latino, and native... that have lived the same lives that y’all have... digging ditches and bucking hay bales and working all day... and going to the church house on Sunday... and, yes, going down to the county building and collecting their disability... the same as you and me.”

And he’d scan the room, watching the people hanging their heads. “How you gonna tell me ... that those folks ain’t on our side?”

“They’ll get there in time,” Buster reassured J Tree. “They just got to see that this here party is for real.”

“Oh, it’s for real, alright.” J Tree said, nodding several times. And the room sat for a minute, with the air stagnating around them.

Moon stepped in to the stillness. “Great. So what’s our next move?”

She turned to the map on the wall, which was smattered with green, pink, and blue dots that marked the Coalition’s work in each cooperative service area. Green was for the education programming – which included energy education on electricity generation sources and grid basics, co-operative by-law literacy programs, freedom schools, literacy programs, financial literacy programs, and computer literacy programs. This was the thickest band of blots across the map, stretching across Flyover Country.

Pink marked on-going campaigns at the local and regional level. The thickest band of pink pins were along the Ogallala Aquifer, where there were actions against the fracking industry and a set of pipeline construction projects, after the aquifer had been contaminated by a series of oil leaks. Across the Sun Belt, the farmworkers and minimum-wage Wal-Mart workers were on strike. Across the Rust Belt there were the efforts to reclaim abandoned mills for cooperative-owned enterprises.

Blue marked the counties and districts that were running candidates on the CPP ticket.

Moon pointed to the Alamosa Valley in southern Colorado. “Buster and I are headed down here tomorrow for a meeting of five co-op directors. They haven’t committed to funding the CPP, but they have been splitting the energy revenues to build out a community development center. They’ve got a training program up and running for skilled trades, literacy and computer literacy, and a computer programming center that’s been a pipeline for youth into Google and Amazon jobs. I wanna get to know their work better ’cause folks in the Dakotas want to replicate that model.”

“And they’ve got four candidates up on the CPP ticket,” Buster shrugged towards the blue markers. “Plus, they’ve started up a co-op-owned grocery store,
community bank, a feed supply store, mechanic shop, and have been reinvesting in main street business districts. They’re selling solar to Excel Energy now, too, so they’ve got money coming in."

J Tree nodded. “Great. Get ’em to put something into the CPP. Even if its small, symbolic commitments are important.” J Tree rapped on the table. “Red and I will be headed back south.”

“What?” This was news to Buster, and he caught his anxiety before saying, calmly, “I thought y’all were staying local for a bit?”

“Plans changed,” J Tree shrugged. “Folks down along the Tenn-Tom woke up yesterday and decided to take over a couple plantations. So we gotta get down there.”

Red grinned wide and cracked his knuckles. “Game time!”

An hour later, after sorting through the finances and the legal cases against the CPP that had popped up all over the map, the four spilled out of the back room. Phil’s Place was dark. He was drying glass mugs with a stained rag and an old Chicano man was slumped over his half-empty pint at the bar. Lucinda Williams was growling low and raspy over the speakers:

“If you were from here you would defend me to the death, along with the ghosts of highway twenty.”

Phil nodded to them as they left.

On the street, Red fished out three cigarettes and handed one to Buster and one to Moon. They stood on the corner, silent and brooding.

Buster watched a black cat slinking along the fence that lined the hollowed-out warehouse across the street. The cat froze, crouching low with one paw hovering above the ground. Then, it leapt into a thick patch of grass. It disappeared for several seconds. When it re-emerged, its head was drooping low, clutching a dark object in its jaws. The cat turned to look at Buster. A bright blue wing stretched out from the side of the cat’s mouth, fluttered twice and then went limp. Buster shivered as the cat crept away and out of the glow the streetlight.

The crew finished their cigarettes, prayed for safe travels for one another, and dispersed into the night. Buster walked north, along the broken sidewalk and listened to the whishing sounds of the cars flying by on the overpass. When he was three blocks away from Phil’s Place, his cellphone phone buzzed. He pulled the phone from his pocket. He waited for a second, letting the phone ring three times, then placed it back into his pocket.

He knew it was all over. The thought had been itching in the back of his mind for the last two years but, he had tried to silence it by working all the harder. But, after his last visit to Harlan, he had been sure. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes. His mind was taken back to that pitch-black cell he had spend two nights in only two weeks before.

* * * * * * * * *

The door cracked open and the light from the hallway flooded into the concrete cell in a thick band of fluorescence. Buster sat up slowly on his cot, rubbing
his eyes. Buster had been swallowed in darkness for two days and his eyes hadn’t been ready to be useful to him once again. He could see only the outline of the man in doorway – a black silhouette of a broad-shouldered man wearing a cowboy hat. Red? Was the first thought that came through his mind and his heart leapt in that moment, thinking that Red had come to bail him out.

But that couldn’t be right, he knew. Because Red was 2,000 miles away in the Arizona dust, sweating like a pig and digging irrigation ditches with the Navajo.

“Buster Judd?” The man barked at him.

Buster, nodded.

The door opened wide and the man with the hat stepped into the room, followed by another man who placed two folding chair on the slab across from Buster’s cot. The two men sat down and the first man took a folder from the inside of his jacket.

“Do you know why we’re here?” The man asked him, as he flipped through the pages in his folder.

Buster stretched his arms over his head. “On account of my drinking and driving.”

The second man chuckled.

“Buster, we came down here from Washington D.C. this morning. Drove seven hours to get here through pounding rain.” He kept thumbing through the pages. “We did not come here on account of your drunk driving.”

“But,” the man continued, “we do think we can help you out with that. If you can help us out.” He pulled a file out from his folder and tossed it into Buster’s lap.

“Buster, what do you know about the Country People’s Party?”

“Well, I reckon I’ll vote for ‘em.” Without looking down, Buster picked the pile up and placed in next to him on the cot.

“We reckon you will. And we reckon you’ll do more than just go out to vote for ‘em.” The second man said.

“Buster, the Country People’s Party is a concern of national security.” The man with the cowboy hat pulled several more files from the folder. “Black nationalists. Oath keepers. Aryan Brotherhood. Stealing land from property owners in Louisiana, trespassing with intent to do damage at a coal plant in New Mexico, open-carrying blacks and rednecks at the state house in North Carolina, blocking construction projects considered in the national interest of energy security.” He turned to the second man, asking, “That sound like a terrorist organization to you?”

“Yea,” the man nodded. “I reckon it could be spun that way.”

Buster scoffed out loud and both men stared straight at him. The man with the cowboy hat brushed his hip and Buster noticed the holster on his belt.

“We work very hard, Buster Judd. We work very hard to keep this country on the rails.”

“And this little group you’ve got going. We’re not going to let that happen, do you understand? We can’t have blacks and rednecks and Mexicans and Indians getting together and stirring up trouble. So, you can help us...now. Or, you can lose your license over this little drunken cruise and, once we got our ducks in a row, you can stand trial for treason later. That’s your decision.”
Buster sat there, staring at the man. He took a deep breath in and exhaled through pursed lips. He gave a single sharp nod.

The two men stood up from their folding chairs and turned to leave. The man with the cowboy hat stopped in the doorway, then turned back into the room. He walked over to stand directly in front of Buster. As he stood above Buster, he was able to make out the features of his face. He was a clean-shaven man, with thick bags under his dark eyes and sagging cheeks. His nostrils flared as his upper lip curled into a disgusted snarl. The man's broad nose had a thick bump in the middle and was crooked off to the left side. It looked like it had been broken several times.

The man opened his lips and he breathed out through stained teeth. His breath smelled like rotten meat. A blackened tongue licked his lower lip.

"We are always watching."

He tossed a phone on the cot beside Buster, turned and left through the door. It closed behind him and Buster was enveloped into pitch-black darkness, once again.

* * * * * *

Buster stopped at a corner store and bought a six-pack of beer and a pack of Camel Lights, and kept walking until he found a bus stop bench on a quiet street. He cracked open one of the beers and light a cigarette. On his second cigarette he pulled the phone from his pocket and dialed the number. It rang once and then there was silence on the other end. He could hear the man breathing softly.

"Yea. We're all headed to Alamosa tomorrow. Together, just like we had planned," Buster said. There was silence for a few seconds, and then he heard the phone disconnect. Buster exhaled a long sigh, shoved the phone back into his pocket, flicked the cigarette butt into the gutter and walked north along the empty street.

* * * * * *

Red woke up to blazing sun bearing down upon him. He reached down to un-snap the top two pearl buttons of his cotton collared shirt. He touched a damp spot on his shoulder and realized he had been drooling on himself for quite some time. He sat up and watched the flat road before them, blazing through golden straw fields. He poked his head out the window and took in the grand expanse of the light-blue sky, stretching like a dome above him, without a cloud in sight.

When he lowered himself back into the seat, J Tree looked over at him from the driver's seat and smiled, saying "you get your beauty sleep? Welcome to the panhandle of Oklahoma!"

"Yea, I seen it before." Red replied, searching his pockets for the can of Copenhagen, then plugged a dip into his bottom lip, which made his words lisp slightly. "Looks to me like we're in the Kiowa Grasslands - look at that purple shading in the straw! Be-au-utiful!"

They drove for a few miles in silence, taking in the grandeur of the scene, before Red asked, "So. You think its Moon or Buster?"

"Gotta be Buster," J Tree nodded. "Moon wouldn't sell for nothing. She got nothing to lose."

"Yeah," Red agreed, and then shook his head. "But I just can't imagine Buster sellin' out either. That boy been working hard as hell out on the stump. I mean, he really has power when he speaks. Folks listen to him. And he believes in it."
J Tree shrugged. “Well, pressure will do a lot to a man. Maybe he got some skeleton in his closet they dug up."

“Or,” Red said cautiously, “maybe it ain’t either one of ’em. Maybe they got someone else and they’ve been hacking our emails for a bit.”

J Tree looked at Red from underneath his glasses, eyeing him with skepticism.

Red waved his hands in the air before him and said, “hey, just cause you got it right last time don’t mean you’re a goddamn prophet.”

They sat for a moment, watching the road, and then J Tree turned the radio dial to a station playing southern trap music, and Red groaned and J Tree bobbed in his seat and they headed off across the panhandle of Oklahoma.

They switched drivers in Amarillo, and then again in Shreveport, Louisiana the next morning. On that last stretch, they passed through Monroe and Red watched J Tree rub the thick, zipper scar on his temple distractedly. Red slouched down in his seat at he watched the Sunoco gas station pass them, and the nightmare they had lived out in that parking lot.

Two years before, Red had been sitting passenger seat in the very same car that J Tree was driving, except there were two additional organizers, both black young men, in the back seat. They had been driving back to Clarence County from an environmental justice organizing event in Dallas when, just outside of Monroe, they were cut-off on Highway 20 by a massive truck. The truck swerved in front of them so close that J Tree had to swerve off the shoulder of the road and into the grass beyond. As they jerked to a stop, Red had watched two white teenagers wave their middle fingers out of the windows of the truck as it zoomed off. The truck had a confederate flag pinned across the tailgate.

Despite the protests of the two organizers in the back seat, J Tree had pulled off at the Sunoco, because the empty tank indicator had been on for about twenty miles. The truck was parked at the pump across from them and Red watched two of the boys smile and laugh as he and J Tree exited their vehicle. Red’s blood was boiling and he curled his thick hands into fists, standing next to the car.

“Hey,” one of the guys in the back seat of J Tree’s car called out to him. “Stay cool, man.”

Red had nodded distractedly, then watched as the driver of the truck, a skinny kid in a loose t-shirt stood in the doorway of the gas station, blocking J Tree’s way into the station. After a few jukes, J Tree stood there, staring at the ground defeated. The kid laughed, slapped J Tree on the shoulder and walked back to where his truck was parked.

Red, swiped his debit card and plugged the nozzle into the tank, then returned his attention to the boys in truck. “Stay cool,” the guy in the back seat reminded him. Red watched the guys hanging around their truck. After the tank was full, Red returned the nozzle to the pump and then walked over to the truck. The kids looked at him with smirks on their faces.

“Howdy,” Red tipped his wide-brimmed hat and smiled at the teenagers. The boys moved from lounging against the truck and stood in a row before Red, with their arms crossed. “I dunno if you noticed,” Red continued, “but y’all ran us off the road back there. Could’a been a dangerous situation.”
"Yea, we did notice," said the kid out in front, spitting on the ground before Red. "Now, you and your porch monkeys better go and get on outta here and you won’t have nothin’ to worry about."

Red rushed the kid and got several solid blows in before J Tree and one of the guys ran up and pulled Red away from the four boys, who were swinging wildly at him, and then at the other two. Red turned and heard them call out several profanities at his back. He tried to fight J Tree off of him, but J Tree’s grip was firm and he nearly dragged Red to the car.

With his arms around Red’s broad chest, J Tree had lowered him into the passenger’s seat and closed the door. J Tree was circling the front of the car when Red saw one of the boys take a bottle from the bed of the truck and huck it at J Tree. Before he could shout out a warning, the bottle splintered on the side of his face and he stumbled, and then fell on the pavement. Red and the other two guys lunged from the car and went to J Tree. Red held his head in his lap and checked his vitals.

He was still breathing, but he had gone unconscious. Red and one of the guys lifted J Tree into the back seat, and then Red had jumped into the driver’s seat. As he peeled away, he watched the boys laughing in the rearview mirror. Fucking white kids, he thought to himself suddenly, before remembering just who he was and who he had been in his own past.

Red was driving with complete abandon, zoning out the rest of the world and searching for the exit to the hospital. After several minutes, he realized that one of the guys in the back seat was screaming at him. Over the pounding of his heart and the buzzing in his head, he heard the guy saying, “you ain’t safe anymore, Red! You’re with us now! And if you gon’ be with us, you gotta play by the rules or else you put us all in danger!”

Red nodded apologetically, and took a left turn.

“When you stir shit up, we get the brunt of it,” the organizer continued. “That’s how it’s always been. You best get used to backing down, cuz. We been having to back down our whole lives. Shit!”

“I got it!” Red had yelled back, a little too loud, and the car went silent.

J Tree had needed six stitches from the broken bottle, and the scar made a wide arc from his eyebrow to just above his temple. Red had paced along the waiting room, back and forth and back again. He had been spending so much time with black organizers across the south that he had come to understand certain things about race dynamics that he had never believed could be real. He had learned a lot about those other white people and all the bad things they do.

But he hadn’t spent a ton of time considering his own position it all of it. He figured that white folks would treat him as they always had, and black folks would regard him with caution to begin with, as they always had. And, when they discovered he truly meant well for them, that he would be surrounded by the love that he had come to find comfort in.

It took this moment for him to realize, and reckon, with his own role in the tensions that played themselves out everyday. And that, when push came to shove, he could be a liability as much as an ally if he didn’t realize his place.

When J Tree had came out into the waiting room, he had sat down next to the large glass windows and had motioned for Red to sit, too.
“Red...” J Tree said slowly, not looking at Red, but scanning the room instead. “When I was a little boy, I came home one night and my granddad was sitting on the porch talking to a white businessman who had been selling one thing or another. I sat with them for a bit and I was nervous, ’cause not often did anyone white come and sit on the porch at my granddad’s home. But my granddad didn’t look nervous, so I went inside to fix a sandwich.

“When I stepped into the house, I saw my grandma sitting in a chair, leaning up against the wall just behind the spot where the white man was sitting. She had a pistol in a paper bag in her lap. Later that night, after the man had gone, I asked her about it and she said, you just never can tell what a white man is gonna do and what he’s not gonna do.”

The two sat there for a long moment, staring straight ahead. A baby cried and Red watched its mother try to comfort it.

“Down here, you either with us... or you with them. There is no gray area here. And, if you with us, you gotta let us lead, brother. ’Cause you don’t yet know what you’re up against by switching sides in this battle. You haven’t lived it yet, but you will. And you starting to.” J Tree turned to look Red in the eyes. “So what will it be, Red?”

And here they were, cruising through Monroe, Louisiana two years later, with J Tree still at the helm, rubbing the scar from Red’s dumb foolishness, and Red by his side, feeling all the weight of guilt on his chest as he had felt in the waiting room all those years before.

They pulled into Clearwater, Clarence County around noon. The cooperative director, a young woman, who looked to be in her thirties named Della, met them in the parking lot. J Tree gave Della a bear hug and kissed her on the cheek. they were second cousins and had spent a good portion of their lives going to the same family reunions, barbeques, and holiday dinners. Red shook Della’s hand with his too-firm grip.

“Ok, sis, what’s the situation?” J Tree asked, watching Della from under his aviator glasses. Della’s smile quickly faded to a focused and serious stare. She cleared her throat and ushered them into her office, closed the door and shut the shades. There was a map of the cooperative service area on the table.

“You remember the Foster Plantation?” She asked J Tree.

“Yes, I went out to the county fair there several times. Even won me a blue ribbon for youth bull-riding one year.” J Tree flexed his biceps with a teasing smile on his face. Della was not amused. She pointed to the shaded section of the map.

“This here is one section of the Foster Plantation land, but it accounts for about a quarter of the land in the county. Its been setting there, empty and fallow for the last two years. But, when Foster heard about the CPP’s platform about land redistribution, he started looking for ways to make sure he got the benefit. He’s trying to sell all that shaded section of land off to two companies. The first is a 90,000 square foot data center facility. There would be huge energy needs, so the co-op board is split, half in favor, half opposed. The other is a drone manufacturing plant, Aerojet Rocketdyne.
“This all went up for public comment and our last annual meeting. Both companies claimed they would be huge job creators and a state representative even came down to pitch it, proposing that the development would get some tax credits for their investment.

“But, when we did our own research, it doesn’t look like a lot of jobs are gonna be created, after all. At least not local ones. Except for construction and a few security officers, both plants are going to be mostly automated, a few low-skilled jobs, and need workers for IT operations. Which our folks aren’t prepared for. Aerojet Rocketdyne. This would have several more jobs, but will be mostly automated systems and the company has refused to allow for collective bargaining.”

“And the state is willing to essentially fund the whole thing with tax breaks,” added J Tree, looking up from a document sitting on the table. Della nodded.

“So, we hit them with a response, requesting local training for the IT operations. But, a lot of folks know that section of the plantation, which butts up against the Tenn-Tom,” Della traced the shaded section along the river, “has the best soil in the county. ‘Cause its part of the floodplain. And, with harvests going dry all across the west in these last years, some of the folks want to turn this area back into farming country. If we develop here, we lose that resource.”

Red and J Tree both nodded and leaned back in their chairs. “And then, what happened?” J Tree asked.

“Our membership is very strong proponents of the CPP. They like the platform and the idea of redistributing the land in these parts is attractive. Particularly to those who grew up when there was still farming going on here. But, they know the platform doesn’t hold weight yet, in the state or the federal government. So they sat on their hands and wrote letters to the state about the development tax breaks and so forth. Nothing came from any of that.

“But, remember, we also got two candidates running for county seats on the CPP. One of them has been in jail for the last four days on trumped-up charges. The other had a brick thrown through her window on Monday. So, on Wednesday, I came in and a lineman called and told me there was a huge crowd of people out at the Fosters. By the time I got there, it was already over. They showed up with guns and axes and scrap rebar and told him they were taking it. They ran him out, dumped a bunch of his major equipment into the river and they been tilling the land with a few of his tractors this morning.”

“That’s what I’m talking ‘bout!” Red clapped his hands together and pumped his fist in the air with a grin wider than his mouth could contain. “Free the land!”

But Della, and J Tree weren’t amused. “Hold your horses, Red.”

“But this is what we’ve been waiting for!”

“Red,” she said slowly, “they’re calling in the National Guard. Foster’s got deep connections at the state house and they are on their way out this afternoon. Plus, Aerojet Rocketdyne is sending a private security team out to protect their development prospects. This could get ugly quick”

Red was still brimming with excitement. “All of the CPP folks are gonna be watching this. This is the first stand taken on the platform principles. They’re gonna see if we’ll make it or break it.”
“Yeah, but everyone else is watching, too. If we make this move too quickly and, even if we win, we’ll have started the war with the two parties officially,” J Tree said slowly, putting the pieces together for Red, one at a time. “And they’ve got the resources and the media.”

“There’s no easy way,” Della agreed. And they all sat brooding. Then J Tree seemed to come to a resolution. He pulled out a notebook and began scribbling furiously.

“We’re gonna have to control the narrative from the get-go. Red, call our media folks in. We’re gonna need video cameras rolling as soon as the National Guard arrives. We’re gonna need interviews with the people out there, and photos of the broken window of the CPP candidate. If we could get a statement from the lawyer of the candidate in jail, that would be useful, too. We need to get all that footage and news out to the local media, send it to Fox News, Electric Cooperatives Today, and also to our allies in Latin America. Our people need to hear the news first and they need to hear it from us. Call back to Moon and Buster, have them process through some of these materials,” J Tree pointed to the documents on the table. “How big the tax breaks are, what that money could have supported for education and infrastructure, how much land we’re talking about here, how many jobs a cooperative farm can support compared to the development alternatives. We need to make sure we have all our data right before the bigger news sources steal the show from us.”

The three hopped back into J Tree’s vehicle and drove out to the Foster Plantation. When they reached the driveway, which was adorned with a thick bronze gate and two life-size brass lions, there were three guards standing there, gripping 30.6 hunting rifles. The men were in army fatigues, as if they were truly prepared for a war. The waved the car through, after seeing Della and J Tree in the front seats.

When they pulled up into the old rodeo arena, the people had already congregated in the stands. There was a nervous excitement in the air and most of the people waiting in the stands were pacing on their feet. They had too much energy to be able to sit. J Tree and Della stood before them, in the center of the bare, earthen floor of the arena. Several people waved when they saw J Tree, and he waved back to them, now without a smile and looking very serious. Red watched all of the from his position, leaning against the hood of the car and scanning the people for any signs of trouble. His had his arms crossed and his shooting hand was only a half inch away from the grip. It stayed there, steady and alert.

“Good afternoon!” J Tree shouted to the crowd, and they echoed his greeting and simmered down their conversations.

“Well look what you got yourself into here! Gahddang! I leave for two minutes and y’all decide to have yourself a little revolution here!” The crowd laughed and a few men hooped out lout and pumped their fists in the air. “I wish y’all would have waited for me, ’cause I would like to have seen Mr. Foster’s face! How’d he look?”

“He looked like he was gonna soil his britches!” Said a man in the front row of the stands and the stands erupted in laughter.
After the crowd had settled down again, J Tree moved into his preacher stance, which Red could see was coming by how he was shuffling his feet and settling his hands in the air in front of him.

"I've got a lot of memories of this place, yes I do. I got good memories of this place and I got bad memories of this place. I got my first job here, at fourteen, getting paid in cash for bucking hay bales and hefting cotton bales on to trucks and sacks of grain into the elevator. How many of y'all had a job out here at one time or another?" Several hands went up. "And how does it feel to be working out here for yourself instead for putting stacks of money in Mr. Foster's pockets?"

"It feels good!" Several people responded to the call.

"That's good. Things are gonna get tough here and I want you all to remember just how good this feels when they do get tough. Because only if we stand our ground are we gonna keep feeling good and keep being able to work out here for ourselves and our community instead of for some old man who's putting stacks of money in his pockets."

"Yea, I've got some memories of this place," J Tree continued after a minute. "I remember winning the blue ribbon in the youth bull-riding contest what I was twelve! Though, I don't think my bucket of brains has been the same ever since those 4.4 seconds!

"I remember when I was six, Foster still had these stands segregated by white and black. You all remember that? Even fifty years after the high school was white and black, except of course Foster's kids and the other kids who went over to Clarence Academy, even fifty years after, Foster was still getting away with that right here in this arena. And, yet, we all came all the same and paid our admission and watched the rodeo and the monster truck show and visit the fair rides."

J Tree stepped closer to the stands, then planted his feet down in that wide, preacher's stance and leaned towards the stands and said, "and look at yourselves now. You all came out here as one group, black and white together and took this over. But look at yourselves now."

The people in the stands looked around themselves, wondering just what J Tree was getting at. "You all segregated yourselves in these stands here. Foster used to make us to do that, but you took over his land and you called yourselves free. But y'all ain't free yet. 'Cause Foster's system to divide you is ingrained in your minds and so y'all divided yourselves!"

It was true, the people realized, looking around themselves. The lower stands was filled with the white folks and the upper stands was filled with the black folks, just as it had been all those years before.

"Brothers and sisters," J Tree started with his arms wide and his head thrown back, "if we stand divided here, on this soil where we know the long history of wrong-doing has affected every one of us. Here on the Foster Plantation where they once had hundreds of our black ancestors in chains and, later, hundreds of both our black and white ancestors working as sharecroppers with nothing to call their own...If we stand divided here. How are we going to come together to build something real?

"What about once we got our people in the statehouse? Or on Capitol Hill? Cuz if we stand divided when it comes to making the tough decisions and in our
politics, you can be sure some schmoozer is gonna come along and try to play us for fools!”

The crowd nodded vigorously. One older women hollered, “tell it, brother!”

“So what’ll it be folks? Are we gonna come together and fight for what all of us need or are we gonna let Foster keep controlling us, even when he ain’t even here! Are we going to build a real Country People’s Party and tear this whole façade down?”

The crowd was on their feet again, and they were clapping and whistling and hollering.

“’Cause I got to tell you,” J Tree continued, “we got a long, rocky road ahead of us. And you all are the very start of a revolution. You all have led the charge! All the world is going to be watching you all, now. The other rural folks in other counties and other states are watching you all, now. The Country People’s Party is watching you all, now. And I can tell you, that despite what those National Guard are gonna say, and what the statehouse is gonna say. All those people out there are rooting for you! They wanna see a change and they are gonna see you all as leading a movement against elite rule and unfair development everywhere!”

Red watched the crowd respond to J Tree’s words. They were all on their feet, clapping and slapping on another on the shoulders and whistling and hollering. He saw that they knew this to be true, and were empowered by it.

They were not timid. They were not the cautious, embarrassed people he had worked with over the last three years. Time and time again, he had heard these same people hesitate in making their own choices and he knew that they had seen themselves as inadequate in the literacy programs and in the early cooperative education programs. But, now they were stirred and they were strong and they were getting strong with every minute. And Red thought to himself, for the first time since J Tree had showed him the map of electric cooperatives in the Little Rock truck stop, that they might actually win this thing.
Analysis

Focus Group Evaluation

An important element of this media project was to ‘ground-truth’ the pieces with a group of writers and organizers that have a deep connection to the context of the American south and, in particular the rural south. For this element of the project, I sent the eight short stories to eight reviewers across the American South – Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas. I requested that each of them read and review four of the short stories based on a set of guidelines and prompts that I provided them, which can be found in the Appendix C. I received responses from five of the reviewers and their evaluations are provided in Appendix D.

The respondents had a far-ranging set of evaluations. In general, however, it seemed that the shortest stories (“Pile of Bones”, “The Bonfire”, “Ain’t Nothin’ But A Body To Me”), all of which are dystopic in nature, seemed to draw the most interest from readers, in part, I imagine, as a result of length. This type of response has made me consider how the longer pieces could be revised into shorter stories in the next iteration, to be most accessible to a broader audience. Reviewers also identified several potential shortcomings of the stories, particularly in the stereotyping of the south in utilizing a set of common tropes and developing stories that enact traditional gender roles. These issues have been particularly identified with the too-powerful role of the narrator in these stories that may have weakened the opportunities for the characters to come to life and resonate with the reader.

Of the eight stories provided, the five reviewers specifically discussed the following set of stories: “The Moonshiner”, “Pile of Bones”, “The Bonfire”, “Ain’t Nothin’ But A Body To Me”, “The Time Bomb”, and “Distress, The World Over.” It is worthwhile to briefly address their comments individually to highlight general themes and reflections across them.

The Moonshiner
Reviews of The Moonshiner were mixed. One reviewer, with deep roots in Appalachia, felt the story to be quite trope-ish, falling into common stereotypes about the region that may isolate local readers. Additionally, the reviewer felt that the narrator’s voice and power over the story made the story feel inauthentic to her personal experience. Another reviewer felt similarly about the discrediting of the southern reality by an outsider, yet also agreed with the themes of isolation, behaviors and beliefs that resonated with their experience in Mississippi. The sense of black vs. white, town vs. town, family vs. family felt real to the reviewers, which made the idea of Roscoe’s extraction from these communities viscerally real, yet left the reader discouraged by the circumstance, rather than enlightened by it. At the same time the reviewer was left wondering what could have been possible to go a different route, and provoked a number of ‘what if?’ alternatives in the detailed review (see detailed comments from respondent 3). The reviewers also recognized
the theme of faith constructions, yet only one seemed to take away the possibility of faith in unity at the end of the story, rather than the larger tensions between faith groups that I aimed to illuminate, which suggests this element of the story was underdeveloped.

**Pile of Bones**
The reviewers felt that the normalcy of a dystopian world in which children are digging up bones for work was effectively employed through the fun and dynamics that the children have throughout the story. They also felt that the curiosities of the children to re-create their histories were insightful and spoke to a very real sense in the south of the importance of knowing our history. The reviewers were left wanting to know more about why the children are digging up bones and what the world looks like beyond the daily task.

**The Bonfire**
Reviewers felt that the mystery of this story, and its slow unfolding was an effective way to draw the reader in, yet they felt that much was left unexplained at the end. In particular, several reviewers wondered whether the couple was creating the bonfires simply for the satisfaction of destruction or for some greater purpose they are serving, while a few identified or suggested, correctly, of the importance of cleansing, re-birth, and removing the possessions we once clung to in order to start anew. Additionally, they were left wanting more about the world circumstances and just what exactly happened to leave the couple in this predicament. One reviewer in particular, identified the connection between the gasoline, the man's health, and the destruction of their world. Finally, several reviewers identified the gender roles as being very traditional.

**Ain't Nothin’ But A Body To Me**
The reviewers felt that this story effectively navigated the questions of class, race, and the ties between history and future that has and will continue to maintain this system. They felt that such a story may effectively reveal the evils of white supremacy to poor white people and poor black people, alike. One reviewer commented that the narrator’s considerations of homicide resonated at the point in the story, as the reviewer felt similarly enraged. Another reviewer commented that the master is depicted as far too evil, following the common mistake in identifying racism in its overt mean-ness, rather than in the dual role it plays, acted upon behind the veil of ‘southern hospitality’ and kindness.

**The Time Bomb**
One reviewer felt encouraged by this piece and its ability to raise the voices often gone unheard, particularly from a group of people that are affected by environmental justice based on general unconcern. The concept of a climate change ticker seemed to be an effective device for both reviewers. One reviewer mentioned an appreciation for the range of action against the system offered, as well as the hope infused within the gathering of people of all kinds, who would not come together otherwise was powerful for one reviewer, while another reviewer felt that
the gathering felt cliché by the very narrow depiction of the groups that are represented there.

Distress, The World Over
This piece led one reviewer to consider the modes in which our society gives voice to their concerns or are silenced, as well as where we place our expectations for answers – in government assistance and in “the Gospel”. Another reviewer identified the irritatingly traditional gender roles depicted and the tension between nature and humans as key threads to the story. Additionally, this reviewer highlighted the role of media in constructing, constraining, driving, and holding a particular narrative.

This set of stories leaves out “The Crossing” and “The Coalition”, likely left unread for their lengthiness. These stories are two of the attempts towards more hopeful imaginaries for alternative futures. In recognizing that succinctness and brevity is important to the short story reader, it may behoove my efforts to effectively relay these narratives in a shorter form that may make them more accessible in the next steps.

Personal Evaluation

The process of writing the speculative fiction pieces took a long and circuitous route to the current drafts presented in this paper. In the beginning, the goal of the media project was to develop a near-future story of electric cooperative organizing that connected to three to four rural futures of a utopian nature that demonstrated the specific roles that the electric cooperative could play in rural futures. After several attempts, I abandoned this approach and transitioned from the prescriptive nature of utopian futures to the speculative and exploratory realm of multiple futures. Stephen Duncombe highlights the role of utopian construction as imagining something that could be, but not a place that will be.

Rather than prescribing a future for an audience, coercing them to swap the truths they hold for another version of the truth, the speculative framework of multiple futures pushes the reader to do work by posing the questions “What if?, “Why Not?”, “How Come?” By setting up a context, and invoking questions that speak directly to the challenges of our time and of rural America, the goal of speculative fiction is not to impose an agenda, but to provide a context for a facilitated process of critical consciousness building. The work is not complete at the end of the story. It is instead only a beginning, a launching point towards democratic discourse. It is in the reader’s hands to make meaning of the stories and, if the stories produce a questioning, it may help to guide the visioning process for developing rural futures themselves. With this framing as the intention, I will provide my own reflection on the process of developing the stories, while the review and evaluation of their effectiveness for a reader will be detailed in the following discussion based on the responses of the selected southern focus group.
Through my process, I have discovered a tension in my attempts to develop creative work – the tension between posing a set of political questions and developing a piece of fiction. While this project has an explicitly left-leaning political interest in imagining alternative futures beyond the current condition, it also is an attempt to create a set of fiction stories that can provoke empathy, captivate a reader and inspire the political imaginary. Yet, the balancing of these aspirations has been difficult to manage and, across the set of stories produced, they achieved varying levels of success. While a few of the stories I do feel have successfully achieved this goal, I also believe that several of the stories have only begun to scratch the surface by developing the framework of the world, rather than producing a full story narrative, as was the goal of the work. In others, the political goals of the story seem to distract from the plot rather than enhance it. In the next iteration of revisions and writing, I will aim to more effectively marry these goals, and to expand upon the short vignettes in order fully flush out the story plot.

Additionally, I set out to balance the project between hopeful possible futures of empowered rural people and places and, in contrast, stories that navigate despairing futures. In reflecting upon these efforts, I found a far stronger creative inspiration within the works of dystopian possibility, while the efforts at hopeful futures seemed flailing and lacking the same vigor. As I laid out in the section on imagination, the challenges we are up against are colossal. Alternative futures will require a dramatic shift in our lifestyle and culture that is difficult to envision. As Milkoreitt describes about climate fiction, and Rankine about the Racial Imaginary, our imaginations are bound to the constraints of the world we now exist within and the myths that have shaped our perception of reality.

This was demonstrated through my attempts at future projections and the dark stories they produced, making it clear for me that it is, for me, “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (and similarly, finding worthwhile lifestyles within the Anthropocene). This leads China Mieville to declare that, rather than falling for dystopia, we must “utopia with teeth.” It is unclear to me, as of yet, whether dystopian stories and the themes they aim to address are a useful and constructive approach to engaging rural communities. While utopian stories may speak to the dreams and desires of a community, dystopian stories can illuminate the consequences of our actions (such as the election of Trump, or the unanswered calls for reigning in carbon emissions to mitigate the impacts of climate change). Both can offer speculative frameworks that inspire “what if” questions, but I am skeptical about the effectiveness of despairing stories, in comparison to hopeful stories, in inspiring collective action. At the same time, reckoning with white supremacy, climate change, and populism requires taking these issues head-on and

195 Wapner and Elver, Reimagining Climate Change.
196 Rankine, Claudia and Loffreda, Beth, The Racial Imaginary.
197 Jameson, “Future City.”
198 Mieville, “The Limits of Utopia.”
anticipates a certain level of discomfort in the reader. A more effective rural futurism, perhaps, might create a better balance between the hopeful and the discomfort of reckoning with our actions and inactions. Additionally, these dystopian futures may be more palatable within the hopeful novella of the larger project, in which the characters utilize these short stories to avoid pitfalls in their own thinking and organizing in their community.

This balance, and the goals I had for my writing, has shifted considerably throughout the project. At the onset, my intentions were set out with an expectation that Hillary Clinton would win the presidency and, thus, the resentment and cries for help reverberating through rural America would go unheard and lead to greater disempowerment and resentment. Thus, my goals at the onset focused on constructing hopeful futures that may lead to inspiration and empowerment, and thus gave a perhaps too comfortable validation of the emotions, experiences, and lifestyles of rural people. One example of this is the portrayal of common gender roles in several of the stories that perhaps speaks to the traditional values of many rural places but does a disservice to the feminist sensibilities that need to be uplifted in futures that we wish to see realized. In the wake of the election, my interests and creative inspiration changed, centering on the need for directly confronting the deeply entrenched and empowered belief in the status of white supremacy, conservatism, neoliberal capitalism, and a disregard for, and often denial of, our role in climate change.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I want to briefly discuss questions of identity, experience, and writing. Throughout the entire process of developing the speculative stories, I have been skeptical and concerned with my role as a white progressive writer with financial stability and graduate education attempting to develop characters, themes, and futures that are not as strongly connected to my direct lived experience. While I have spent a portion of my adult life working with and living in communities in the south and in rural America, I recognize that my experience is severely limited and is far removed from the experience of people from and residing in the American south or in rural America, more broadly. At times these concerns have paralyzed my writing and plagued me with questions of whether the project was mine to pursue at all. Both concerns of authenticity and cultural appropriation will and should be raised by the stories, and have been by a few of the focus group evaluators, depicting characters of other race, gender, and class experiences. In this section, I do not offer a defense of my position in writing these stories, only a set of further inquiries that may welcome and guide discussion on these matters going forward.

For a large portion of the project, I deliberated on the permissibility or 'right' that I have or do not have to pursue such a project outside of my personal experience. In The Racial Imaginary, Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda write that this framing is incorrect.\(^{199}\) Rather, the more pertinent questions of self-reflection are of my drive

\(^{199}\) Rankine, Claudia and Loffreda, Beth, *The Racial Imaginary.*
and desire to write beyond my context and experience. Instead of deliberating on the ‘right’ of an outsider, they have pushed me to ask what drives some to want to write characters and/or stories beyond their experience? Who is the best person to tell a certain story? And, if an outsider did not take up the task, would the story be told otherwise? Further, they suggest that outsider writers can center such efforts on the exploration of their own imaginary boundaries and constraints; to write with the intent to recognize how and where our own experiences are able and unable to capture the authentic depiction of another. I have thus attempted to develop the stories and characters in the speculative stories with a sense of humility to my position in them, and to develop my practice of self-reflection in navigating this space. Further, I want to note that this tension has left me with a series of conflicts. On the one hand, by writing stories from my personal experience led towards an over-emphasis on white and male characters and, on the other, I felt conflicted about my attempts to write from another identity that would do justice to such experiences.

**Next Steps**

This project has been a rewarding exploration and has greatly improved my understanding of the role of imagination, both through the theory-building and creative writing approaches of this thesis. In addition to the set of challenges I have identified for future iterations of the creative works presented, I would like to provide a few additional tasks for furthering this project. Firstly, I will aim to take the reviewers comments into consideration for future iterations of the short stories.

Additionally, there is a long tradition of imagining alternative futures within the left and in the planning discipline that has been, to the detriment of this project, largely left under-explored. A deeper dive into these works and their theoretical underpinnings would greatly enhance this project.

The role of technology in shaping today’s society and the world of tomorrow had been lightly touched upon in both the theory of imagination and in the fiction pieces. However, this element of the project must be greatly developed going forward and has been largely unexplored in this project. There is a growing discussion on echo chamber effects of social media, concerns of cybersecurity for an information economy, the demonstrated power of politically-influenced hacking in the 2016 election, and the process of automation that threatens to further replace labor. Additionally, the increasing conflation of virtual and lived reality is having greater and greater influences on how we understand ourselves and shape our perceptions of the world. While these disturbances have far-reaching impact on urban futures, they are also greatly influencing the lives and experiences of rural America. There is much work to be done to explore these dynamics, both in theory and through fictions.
We live in an increasingly globalized world that begs for further exploration in the question of potential futures. The neoliberal consensus, and its predecessor colonialism, has given rise to multi-national corporations that dictate our social, economic, and political experiences in ways that confound the nation-state. Movement-building in this context will require transnational efforts that recognize the disparities in wealth and opportunity created by a colonial history and the prevailing neoliberal global economy. Stories that speak to the context of rural America must account for these larger systems in order to connect the struggles of rural American communities with those of other global peoples and to reckon with the impact that our (American) consumption has on communities across the world. This is particularly pertinent in addressing the uneven effects of our economic order, white supremacy, and a warming climate.

These fiction works have been limited in their attempts to grapple with white supremacy through a binary black-white lens, rather than accounting for the impacts of racialization on other ethnic groups, such as Latino, Asian, and Muslim immigrants living in the rural South and Native Americans that have historic roots to this region.

Further, these works and the theory-building sections lack a deep exploration of the need for re-imagining the misogynistic and patriarchal order that prevails in American society and, particularly, in rural America. These stories, rather than taking this issue head-on, in fact tended towards traditional gender roles and patriarchal structure in several of the stories. While this was utilized to highlight this issue in some cases, the question becomes whether writing as such works more to validate the status-quo or effectively raises concerning questions about the status-quo. The effects of toxic masculinity on women and on the emotional intelligence of men in our society play no small part in the election of Donald Trump and the belief in authoritarian rule that made this possible. Futuristic fictions should more effectively address this concern than I have in this set of stories.

Moving Towards Communicating with a Broader Audience

The medium selected for this project has been creative writing and speculative fiction. This was intentionally selected as a means to explore a multitude of futures and develop the stories, characters, and plots to inhabit these futures. However, I recognize the challenges for prose and creative writing in reaching a broad audience and, in particular, the communities across rural America. In the next steps, I would like to explore how these stories can be transferred to other mediums, such as film, performance, and graphic novel, that may provide for their distribution to a wider audience. Additionally, I have written about speculative fiction as one of many tools for a facilitated process of community empowerment and critical consciousness building. I recognize that the short stories alone will not achieve these goals and must be coupled with a strategic, grounded, and resourced approach to engaging communities across rural America through a process of popular education and organizing. This is the bulk of the work to be done in the implementation of this project.
Finally, I have only briefly touched on the role of the planning discipline in this thesis. While I hope I have effectively argued for an expanded role of planning in imagining alternative futures and provided some insightful context around the challenges in rural America and the nation as a whole, I would like to leave the planner audience with a framework for thinking about the speculative fiction pieces and how they might provoke reflection in the work of planners.

- What are the possibilities for rural planning and development? What would it take to successfully address these aggrieved populations?
- How would you imagine your role in community engagement, policy interventions and development in the following circumstances:
  - The erosion of infrastructure and the health conditions described in “The Moonshiner”
  - The land reform efforts in Clarence County in “The Coalition”
  - The cicada swarm of the Northern US in “Distress, The World Over”
  - The move towards Sanctuary City as secure cities in “The Crossing”
  - Brit’s efforts to develop local self-determination
- In reading these stories, did you identify anything that you could see your work in supporting and assisting? Did you find anything that your work might serve to impact in a negative way?
- What reflections have these stories provoked about the concerns of urban v. rural tensions? What are ways that your work can assist in alleviating these tensions?
- How would you think about a planning meeting if these three characters are at the table? What opportunities are there to align their needs? What grounds are there for negotiating and compromising?
  - Roscoe, Red, The Raven
  - Duane, J Tree, Mr. Langley
  - The men of The Willows, Jade,
  - Dale, The entomologist, The arsonist
- What opportunity is there for planners to engage in the following events? How would you handle these situations?
  - Hitting 600 ppm of carbon in “The Time Bomb”
  - The land reform efforts in Clarence County in “The Coalition”
  - The Raven and the Wastepicker’s political art intervention in “The Time Bomb”
  - The Langley’s hill in “Ain’t Nothin’ But A Body”
  - The Sanctuary Cities and Brit’s self-determination efforts in “The Crossing”
  - The Country People’s Platform in “The Coalition”
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Appendix

Appendix A: Community Power: Fighting to Remain in Rural America
Part I, Ouachita Electric Cooperative

The sun is setting over the lush forests of south-central Arkansas on another scorching hot, humid summer day. As lights begin to flicker on in the homes of East Camden, the all-volunteer city council and a handful of community members are trickling in to a metal-sided building. Most cars that pass by hardly glance over, country and gospel music leaking through the stillness in their wake. At twenty miles per hour, it would be easy to dismiss the small modular warehouse that serves as the East Camden City Hall. What the passersby may not know, however, is that tonight, the makeshift City Hall is at the center of a plan for the revitalization of this distressed rural area and a revolution for the utility sector.

The volunteer mayor of East Camden invites the crowd of twenty people to join her, opening the meeting with a prayer and the pledge of allegiance, before settling in to business. Then, Mark Cayce, CEO of Ouachita Electric Cooperative, takes the floor to present on their new set of initiatives. There is the HELP PAYS energy efficiency program - saving Ouachita’s members 40-50% in energy usage with no upfront customer cost. He details the fiber optic program that will bring broadband service into every East Camden home by the end of 2016. And he wraps up with a status update for the 1-megawatt community solar project being deployed this fall. The small group is stirred by Mr. Cayce’s presentation, marking a distinct difference from their expectations of a business-as-usual meeting. Several community members probe further, asking for clarification and requesting follow-up to receive these services in their own homes.

It is hard to convey just how ground-breaking these opportunities are in the larger national landscape of electric cooperatives - the utility formation that serves 42 million Americans and 93% of all persistent-poverty counties across rural America. For decades, electric cooperatives have clung to the status quo: standing behind coal-power generation, maintaining their virtually unregulated status, low member participation, and limited involvement in community and economic development. Some of the most concerning accounts of electric cooperative’s poor practices occur in this very region of the Southeast, particularly across Black Belt Counties with a long legacy of exclusion.

But, Ouachita Electric has worked for years to ensure their members are educated and engaged in the cooperatives’ activities. Ms. Angela Moore, a Ouachita member, recalls knowing what it meant to be in an electric cooperative “ever since (she) was a little girl. We would get the books every month and all the information was there... We are owners of our own power company.” This long history of
member education has allowed Ouachita Electric Cooperative to build trust with their members.

Trust has translated into excellent response rates for the cooperative's energy efficiency program - one of the highest opt-in rates in the nation, including 100% opt-in for multi-family housing tenants. In this hardscrabble region, Mr. Cayce recognizes the impact that energy savings would have on his members' pocketbooks. "Sometimes, people just need a little bit of help."

You might not pick out Mark Cayce as the local visionary in the Save-A-Lot check-out line or at the local Tin Top Diner. He is a soft-spoken, humble, and hard-working man from Lubbock, Texas. He speaks about his role at the cooperative as simply serving the cooperative's members as best he can. His employees have taken these values to heart as well, as Mr. Cayce constantly reminds them to "serve your members. If they're walking in the door, they have your paycheck in their hand. Nobody pays for any of this except the co-op member."

Mark Cayce is not unlike the millions of smart and humble rural folks that have been largely written off in post-recession America by today's economy, by declining school systems, and by fast-moving urbanites who have long come to establish our country's definition of success. While rural folks are being left behind in today's world, Mr. Cayce has seen an opportunity to build a new future for the 9,400 households that Ouachita Electric Cooperative serves across Ouachita, Calhoun and Dallas counties, with an average household income of $33,000.

The area has a long history of blue-collar job opportunities in manufacturing, dating back to the early 1940s, when East Camden was hastily established to accelerate defense industry manufacturing to support the war-time efforts. For many years other industries were attracted to the area based on this infrastructure. "Oh, they got everything over there," Mr. Eddie Disnute, a Ouachita member who

But, the East Camden industrial park is no longer the bustling place that makes just about everything. While it still has defense industries - Aerojet Rocketdyne has committed to staying, recently partnering with Ouachita Electric to implement the largest solar farm in Arkansas - many other industries have pulled out of south Arkansas over the last twenty years. A factory closure in the ‘90s laid off 1,500 employees. The paper mill closed in 2000, leaving nearly 1,000 previously well-paid, unionized employees jobless. In 2011, the diaper factory moved to Mexico, taking 500 jobs with it.

While many have left the region, seeking work elsewhere, those that have kept on in south-central Arkansas have their reasons for staying. They like being close to family and having a piece of land to call their own. “I don’t envy these people that live in these places [where there’s] rapid growth where you kind of lose sense of community,” Mr. Freeland remarks. They prize their yards, with chickens or okra or peach trees. When they turn the lights out at night, they find peace in the silence beneath a clear, star-studded sky. But at the same time, they’d like to see jobs come back home.

“Little Rock ain’t going to save us out here,” Mr. Cayce confides, “Washington sure ain’t going to save us. So we’ve got to do this ourselves.”

So, what is to be done for the down-and-out country town? After being written off for years and promised jobs that never materialized, the folks here are taking things into their own hands. And they are doing it an often over-looked local democratic institution- the rural electric cooperative. “We need to offer our [members] something to give them hope,” says Ouachita employee, Geraldine Pace. “A lot of people don’t have hope, they think it’s just gonna get worse and worse and worse.”

Ouachita Electric has long been an essential service provider for their members. But, now there are going further than utility provision – They are building the infrastructure and community capacity to create a brighter future. Their HELP PAYS energy efficiency program allows any Ouachita member to access home upgrades that can save up to 50% of their energy usage, with no upfront cost “We have members who have been paying out the roof,” says Mrs. Norma Beaver. “They knew they needed work done, but they couldn’t afford to finance it.”

For the many households on a fixed income, who may have to choose between paying their electricity bill and buying groceries, this can make a world of difference. “Dollars saved are dollars put back into the local economy,” says Mr. Cayce. Ouachita expects to expand this program in the coming years, and is looking to a number of financing options to make it possible.

The HELP PAYS program has knock-on effects across the local economy. On the front-end, Ouachita’s programs require contractors, energy auditors, construction workers, solar installers, and maintenance jobs. Ouachita is actively working to ensure that those jobs are created locally. In the longer-term, as other
cooperatives and utilities catch on, Ouachita hopes to become the hub for training, supplying and even manufacturing in the clean energy industry.

Ouachita has also recently partnered with a local telephone company to bring broadband into every home in their service area. This opens up a world of new opportunities for Ouachita members. "It would help my insurance business. I could work from home," says Ms. Angela Moore. "Or continue education online."

Just as electrification was the 20th century feat for modernizing rural America, broadband service is the 21st century challenge. Lack of broadband access "puts people that live in rural areas at an extreme disadvantage," says Mr. Cayce. And that is why the Ouachita team is launching the fiber optic program "to give rural areas the same opportunities that people in larger cities have."

"I don't want dial-up," Ms Angela Moore says about the primary option for rural residents, "It's slow as Christmas." Kids and adults can both use broadband to further their education, for homework and for distance-learning programs. Remote-working can help residents to stay in their home communities while having a good job. Internet access can improve the viability of rural small businesses for attracting business and ordering materials. And it can give Ouachita the necessary edge with industries interested in expanding in the region.

While Mark Cayce is the man leading the charge for Ouachita, the key to success for Ouachita Electric has been a long-standing culture of member engagement. Ouachita Electric members stay informed and involved with their cooperative. They take seriously their rights and responsibilities as member-owners of the cooperative. In 2001, they put these rights to the test.

After a series of disagreeable decisions by the former CEO, members and employees confronted the board of the cooperative. When the board wouldn’t budge, the members organized themselves and nominated a set of board candidates that would represent their interests. In only two years, the member-driven rebellion replaced 100% of the board representatives. The new board, taking up the
message of change, hired Mr. Cayce as CEO and has been pushing a new agenda ever since.

While this new direction has benefitted all Ouachita members, there is much more the cooperative can do to meet its community’s needs. The service area is 60% African-American, yet Angela Moore can only recall 7 African-American employees in the last 40 years. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. Even in the cooperative,” says Angela. “We don’t get the jobs. I hate to say it, but it’s the truth.” Over that same time, the cooperative has never had an African-American board representative.

Despite these present challenges, several Ouachita members feel that the co-op is doing its job. “Without having an African-American on the board, we’ve been treated right,” Angela Moore mentioned. “I don’t have a problem with who’s on the board, because they’ve always taken care of us.” For other members, local representation can be a sticking point. Mrs. Kristine Disnute votes every year, so that the board has “somebody that we know, not just all strangers...to make sure that we get the benefits.” “There’s always been someone in the area that serves on the board,” says Mr. Eddie Disnute.

Ouachita Electric has demonstrated the power of the members to determine their own path. Mr. Cayce and the employees at Ouachita Electric have taken up the call put out by their members, and are laying the infrastructure for a hopeful and renewed future. This has empowered Ouachita’s members to dream big about their future, too. “I have a vision,” says Ms. Angela Moore, “I just need the provisions.” With a local and supportive cooperative, those visions have a chance to become reality.

Appendix B: Community Power: Fighting to Remain in Rural America
Part II, Roanoke Electric Cooperative

Fourtee Acres is a 195-acre family farm managed by Tyrone Williams in rural east North Carolina. Tyrone’s grandfather acquired the first tract of land in 1916 and became the first in his lineage of sharecroppers and enslaved farmers to own their own property. For the last 100 years, the farm has been a key source of wealth for the Williams family, producing cotton, tobacco, soybeans, peanuts, and timber. But, in 2012, Tyrone began asking himself some key questions about the future: “What kind of legacy do we want to leave here? Our family left us the sustenance, the land, and we want to leave a roadmap for our children and grandchildren.”

Tyrone is one of many families concerned for the future of family-owned small farms and land. In this impoverished region of the Black Belt, where agriculture and timber industries dominate the economy, preserving the 1 million acres of at-risk family land is a critical strategy for local economic development and local wealth. Land loss and out-migration has plagued ancestral land across the south, with African-American-owned land decreasing from 15 million acres to 2 million acres over the last 100 years. Tyrone considers himself as one of the lucky ones: “By the grace of God, we have been able to keep the land, and it dawned on us that, the long tenure of family land wasn’t looked at as a real income-generating entity.”
The Roanoke Electric Cooperative is playing a key role in land preservation through the Sustainable Forestry and African-American Land Retention Program. This program builds a support system for landowners and provides resources for landowners to develop strategies for sustained wealth. As director Alton Perry, describes, the program allows “those who own property to demonstrate to the next generation about the capacity that this land has - whether its income, social benefits, and environmental benefits.”

So far, 117 land-owners and 7,500 acres have benefited from the program and the resources it offers, including $200,000 in financial assistance for timber planning and management. Growing the Roanoke region’s locally-owned timber supply can have much deeper impacts on the region’s economy. “It really empowers everybody down the chain,” Alton Perry suggests, “from private contractors to foresters and timber company jobs to the mill yard. Even down to the local country stores where people are buying fuel and food. But it all starts from the land.”

After two years enrolled in the Sustainable Forestry Program, Tyrone is teaching his children to recognize those deeper forms of wealth, not just money, that the land can offer them and their community. “When I look at the crops, I’ve always thought where will that food end up?” Tyrone reflects, “now, when I see a table in a restaurant, I think, did my trees end up here? Being a contributor to that whole system. To me, that’s wealth.”

The Sustainable Forestry and African-American Land Retention Program is one of many initiatives that have emerged from the Roanoke Electric Cooperative in the past twenty years. Roanoke Electric’s CEO, Curtis Wynn, describes the cooperative’s approach as *grassroots economic development*. “We bring like-minded partners together that have similar interests and goals, to work as hard as they can to collaborate with each other.” The electric cooperative has cemented the opportunity for collaboration through quarterly convenings of the Roanoke-Chowan Partners for Progress (RCPP2), open to all cooperative members, non-profits, businesses, and elected officials. “We are a feedback loop to inform and guide Roanoke Electric’s strategic agenda,” says RCPP2 Director, Reba Green-Holley. This group’s purpose, as Mr. Wynn describes, “is for folks to come together, explore the needs of our community, ... and look at ways we can selectively have economic development activities around the means that we all realize are there.”
The largest effort to date is launching this fall to address the lack of internet access for 65% of the service area. For Mr. Wynn, the cooperative's broadband infrastructure program is a landmark opportunity, since "most of the economy is basically dependent on having broadband service. It can open up doors for quality of life and [attract] potential industry in our area."

Figure 2: The Roanoke Center is a non-profit subsidiary to the Roanoke Electric Cooperative and hosts many of the cooperative's community programs

It may seem strange to have an electric utility leading the charge for community development. But this role was actually one of the original mandates of electric cooperatives under the Rural Electrification Act. Electric cooperatives are one of the few institutions with designated access to millions of dollars through the USDA's Rural Economic Development Land and Grant Program. In rural and impoverished areas, electric cooperatives often have the most resources and capacity of any local-based institution. Those resources are intended to be collectively-owned and managed by each and every household that receives electricity from the cooperative. Member-driven solutions is core to the Roanoke Electric Cooperative, where, as Mr. Wynn explains, "members must be at the center of every activity we do on a daily basis."

Member driven solutions didn't happen over night for Roanoke Electric. It started in the 1960's, when Matthew Grant, a leader in the community, began organizing black cooperative members to become actively engaged in the cooperative. At that time, Roanoke Electric had an all-white board and nearly all-white staff despite serving a majority African-American area. The cooperative was run strictly as a technical operation; its goal was to provide electricity at the lowest cost possible. But Mr. Grant understood that, as an owner and member in the cooperative, he had a right to have a say in its operations. After years of educating and organizing the community, Mr. Grant became the first African-American elected to an electric cooperative board in 1969.
Under Mr. Grant's leadership, Roanoke's members became deeply engaged in the cooperative's activities. Marshall Cherry, Roanoke Electric's COO, recalls Mr. Grant as taking an active role in ensuring equality and fairness in the cooperative, but also in the business activities of the cooperative's partners. "He would ask (the vendor) a question like, What percentage of your employee makeup is African-American?" Mr. Cherry recalls. Over the last fifty years, black representation on the Roanoke Electric board grew to a two-thirds majority, reflecting the demographics of the area. Employment diversity increased across all staff positions, and Roanoke Electric hired the first African-American electric cooperative CEO in 1997 - Curtis Wynn.

Mr. Wynn and his team has been building off of Mr. Grant's deliberate leadership approach by deeply engaging and empowering cooperative members' in all of its activities. At the heart of member empowerment are Roanoke's Straight Talk Forums, town hall meetings held in each county to inform the members of their efforts and receive input. As Curtis Wynn explains, "most of the things we do are a direct result of input they've given us. Over a six month period, we're out in the community having these meetings... we provide them with information, with a fellowship meal...and [get] feedback of their perception of what we do."

![Figure 2: Curtis Wynn, CEO of Roanoke Electric, presents at a Straight Talk Forum](image)

About 400 members attend the Straight Talk forums each year and their input has become a breeding ground for new ideas, now driving Roanoke Electric's efforts. One of the key efforts developed through member concerns is Roanoke's "Upgrade to Save" energy efficiency program. Through "Upgrade to Save," cooperative members can access weatherization, HVAC upgrades, and efficiency education with no upfront cost and immediate savings. A key "pocketbook issue," lowering members' utility bill can be essential to community economic development. It creates new opportunities for local contractors, energy auditors, and producers of high-quality building materials. Additionally, when members save...
money on their bills, they can spend that money in their community and support local businesses.

Mr. Wynn believes that the democratic forums and the Roanoke-Chowan Partners for Progress put the power back into the people’s hands. “We can’t do it without them,” Mr. Wynn declares. “The questions being asked by the membership are pushing our own thinking. They are asking thought-provoking questions.” The engagement of Roanoke Electric’s members and the responsive strategies of the leadership team has become “a catalyst to improve the quality of lives, homes, and place in the Roanoke Electric Cooperative service area,” says Sondra Dickens, Executive Director of the Roanoke Center – a non-profit subsidiary of Roanoke Electric.

Across the country, rural communities suffer from economic disinvestment and persistent-poverty. Few solutions are being offered by state agencies, national policies, or an increasingly urban-centric economy. But, Roanoke Electric is demonstrating that when empowered community members take over their local institutions, they can begin to turn a community’s dreams into reality. Watching these dreams come true has convinced Mr. Cherry that “the possibilities for this organization are endless. I am very optimistic about the legacy that we are building here at Roanoke.”

Appendix C: Focus Group Evaluation Form

Guide for Rural Futures Short Stories Evaluation

Thank you all for your participation in this project! I am very much looking forward to this collaboration to further develop these pieces with your contributions and to include your feedback and evaluation in the Analysis section of my Master’s thesis.

You can access the 8 short story drafts with this link to the dropbox folder. I am asking that you read and review at least four of the stories, submitting your reviews and reflections to me by Tuesday, December 20th:

Readings:
• Read The Moonshiner
• Read at least two of the following pieces on near futures:
  o The Coalition
  o The Crossing
  o The Time Bomb
  o Distress, The World Over
• Read at least one of the following pieces on distant futures:
  o The Bonfire
  o Pile of Bones
  o Ain’t Nothing But A Body To Me
Please write a review/reflection for each piece that you read and one general review/evaluation of the overall experience. Take as much or as little space as necessary in your reviews.

Please take your responses as free-form, but consider drawing from the following set of prompts:

- What themes jumped out to you in reading the story? How effective were the stories in communicating those themes?

- One of the goals of this effort is to establish the reader’s empathetic connection to future scenarios. What felt real or contrived about the future scenario in this story?
  - Did you connect the future scenario to our present moment? Explain.
  - What questions did the scenario leave unanswered for you?

- Which elements of the story, characters, and plot felt real and authentic to you and why?
  - Which elements felt inauthentic, or contrived, to your personal experience with the south and/or with rural communities?

- Did you have any emotional reaction to the story, certain characters, or plot elements? What sparked them?
  - Do these reactions connect to concerns/aspirations for potential futures?
  - Do they connect to your lived experience?

- How does the story portray gender, race, power, class, sexuality?
  - What were your reactions to these elements in the story?
  - What concerns did they bring up for you?
  - What opportunities (or missed opportunities) do you see in dealing with gender, race, power, class, sexuality in creative writing?

Please feel free to call or email me with any questions that you might have.

Grant Williams | 303-475-4524 | grantwil@mit.edu
Appendix D: Evaluation Responses

Respondent 1.  

Pile of Bones

Themes: connection to family histories, loyalty, curiosity of children/youth, militarization

My college students have access to ancestry.com databases through our library. I make a point to introduce them to the source and let them explore. They love it. They are completely captivated and interested in researching their “bones” in a way that other research feels disconnected and forced. Thus, the desires and curiosities of these young adults and kids seem realistic.

The story is effective as it inserts the reader in media res. The action and dialogue most effectively convey the themes. The narration sometimes distracts or interrupts the reader’s curiosity (i.e. “Janelle, the oldest of the group and, therefore, the undisputed leader of the motley band.” and “Lehigh was the band’s navigator” and “The kids were excited” (1))-- would it be more effective to only show (rather than tell) the reader who Janelle is, letting the reader discover her and the group dynamics through their actions and dialogue, much like the kids discover their bones and histories? I wanted less narration, more action and dialogue.

Contrived: The moment when Janelle starts to think differently with the knowledge of her past (4). It jumps quickly and seems unrealistic. The narrative shifts a lot between passive and shifts to active voice, past and present tense (“would look”), which is difficult to envision.

“Hey that can’t be Scotty’s family! That guys lighter than Scotty is”— An attempt to insert race?
Lehigh cursed “Damn Yankee”—?

The meteor conclusion. It’s interesting to think about how we re-write our own histories based on what we want them to be. This story walks a line between the kids wanting/needling the truth about their past, but also just having fun and imagining things the way they want to. I sense there would be more conflict over the writing of these histories--not so easily reached conclusions between drought/plague/meteor for all of the kids.

Possibly irrelevant, but I’m worried about the chemicals on the preserved body!

Powerful female central character.

Is something missing in the ending?

The Time Bomb

Themes: climate change, effect of carbon pollution, activism vs. inaction
“Before the toxic chemicals had taken a toll on him” is vague. Specificity = believability. Be specific about the chemicals, the plant, the product and the effects. Vagueness does not resonate with people. Stain-resistant carpet and under armour do. Cancer, asthma, skin issues do. You get there later in the story, but Duane is underdeveloped in his intro.

The football scene is very specific though! Almost too specific-- in that it lost me, the non-baller, for a second. As the opening to the story, it feels real though--that folks are more focused on details in football than the world around them. You don’t ever explain carbon ppm. Do you mean to do that? The topic is so important, and I like the idea of a countdown. Who is in power right now? Who mandated the countdown?

The narrator has a voice in this piece. They call the protestors “rabble rousers” and their act a “stunt” and regarding the governor “what he pulled lately”-- Do you mean for the narrator to take this tone? Or is this Duane’s tone? The Raven’s tone? Consider the choice of permitting the narrator vs. letting only the characters editorialize.

The scene around the fire where you describe the attendees (9) feels cliche (trailer parks, confederate flags, chain smoking) depictions of all of groups feel too narrow, too black and white.

The ending drops off-- spent a lot of time developing Duane but he’s gone now. The Raven--who is this? Still don’t feel like I know them. Looks like you have plans to continue. Hard to evaluate without the ending.

I know we’re focusing on content, but I’m an editor, and I feel like in all of these stories, content is losing to a particular writing construction: passive voice, and a narrative tendency: telling instead of showing. I encourage you to do a word search for your use of “had” to flag places. Here I’ve edited a short passage for your consideration:

When Duane was a young man, working six days a week as a pipefitter at the Invista petrochemical plant he made [insert chemical names here] which is used to make [nylon, lycra, etc] that went into [shirts, carpet, etc.]. Exposure to [insert toxic chemicals] caused [insert specific diseases/ailments] that had taken their toll on him and he filed for disability. He received a [insert realistic check amount] from the government and it was sitting at home on disability where, he watched a 60 Minutes episode on Greenland’s melting ice fields. One of the scientists on the show had said 350 was the magic number, to halt “irreversible global warming”. Duane, and everyone else he knew, had scoffed at the speculation. There washad been some hulabaloo at that time. Conspiracy videos and documentaries had popped up. Hollywood tookhad taken the opportunity to cash in on a series of apocalypse movies that gripped and excited audiences across the nation. He rememberedhad seen a few massive protests in New York City, Washington D.C., London on the evening broadcast of Fox News.

He had seen all of the supposed crises on the news for years, but it hadn’t ever been real to his life. Life had gone on as usual, for the most part. Sure there were tornadoes and torrential downpours. There always had been. HHe recalled his
grandmother toldtelling him stories of sharecrop farming and losing whole crops to hail or drought or flood. Climate, as it were, just changed. Seven days a week.

_The Bonfire_

Themes: dystopian Cleansing/ re-birth, possession vs. connection, human relationships to others and world

This story reads like a progeny of Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” and McCarthy’s _The Road_. Are these two the poets of this time? I don’t understand what is dead to them. Do they just want to see non-natural possessions burn? Is that the only medicine for the pain?

Poets of yesteryear paragraph: The first bit is narrow--poets aren’t all that romantic/pastoral. Do you really think there will be a point when the poets are not taking inspiration from the natural world around them? Aren’t there already, and have been for a while, poets who made that shift?

The gasoline scene is vivid and memorable imagery, especially given how oil-driven we are today. I see a symbol in that he is consuming the fuel and it’s making him sick, also in the using the fuel to destroy, probably things the very fuel helped create, rather than produce or travel.

This is interesting reading after the Gatlinburg fires here this month. It was tragic, yes. The loss of life and destruction--but something felt destined about it. A professor at UT professor predicted the fires, and his words resonated with me, but my concurrent thoughts that the fire was that it would be the great cleansing/awakening to the area...aren’t/weren’t “ok” to share in the beginning stages of grief and loss of life.

Your story leaves the reason for destruction a mystery. Why? The mystery creates a mournful tone. It’s a sad story to me.

Gender roles are pretty traditional in this one. Woman as helper, man as leader.

_Moonshiner_

Themes: globalization, rural isolation, healthcare, race/segregation, revisionist histories, storytelling, faith constructions, small business

The first truck I drove was an F350, and I was somewhere around 12/13 years old and didn’t need a stack of books to drive it. I do not connect with Roscoe and his grandfather at all. The narrative feels trope-ish and forced quickly on the reader. The narrator’s voice--I’m puzzled by it. I find it hard to hear and connect with. The narrator seems sympathetic to the characters, cynical of the powers-that-be (“they”) and partial/biased (“unwarranted environmental regs”). The narrator’s repetition of the phrase “on account of,” and uses of phrases like “The Google” feel inauthentic. Where is the location? Why not be more specific than a county, when you are giving details about the kudzu, clay
roads and washouts in “this part of the country”? Does the generic setting make the narrative more transferrable or less? For me, it’s less.

Tina and the kudzu jelly is an unexpected stop on the journey. This part of the story is interesting and imaginable until the Dukes of Hazard and Hyun come into play. I’d like to read a whole story about Tina and the Kudzu, one that shows the story of her business rather than pushes the reader through the telling of her story quickly.

Snakes—very unexpected. I have no sense for how realistic this is. Why not rabbits? That’s what my family ate during the depression.

I’m imagining my Straw Plains students and their families reading these stories. These are rural, white, many 1st gen college students, mostly working class families. My guess is that they would think that this is how outsiders see them, but that it’s not realistic at all. Credibility would be lost because they would feel stereotyped. I have some amazingly well-read and knowledgeable students. Where are they in this narrative? Broadband is passed by very quickly, yet, many people don’t know what that is. Tina’s whole story could be expanded to be about broadband and globalization, even without mentioning those two words.

I’m imagining my family and extended family (Kentucky, rural working class) reading these and wondering what the point is. They will have trouble imagining the future through the narrator. The narrator has the strongest voice and the most power in these stories. Yet, the narrator is unknown. If the characters themselves were given power and voice, I think that would offer more possibilities for reader connection.

**Distress, The World Over**

Themes: nature vs. humans, suburban/urban/rural conflict, power of media, group-think, distrust of science

Gender portrayals:
The mothers silenced and taking no side
The men being loud and argumentative, overwhelming
Female scientist, not being heard

The story shows the power of the media’s ability to construct, constrain, drive and hold the narrative.

Notable Absence: wisdom from non-scientific wisdom-holders. Where are the old-timers who know about the cicadas? Also, there would probably be some tribal/folk wisdom still lingering and being shared. I still see that a lot in rural communities. Maybe they are all gone in the near future? I don’t think so though—so much wisdom is still being shared, perhaps even more so than the urban and suburban areas. It seems unrealistic that communities would want eradication so early on—rural folks are more resilient than that. Maybe later in the story, but not first thing.
What is the function of repeating the name of the neighborhood?

**Respondent 2.**

**Ain’t Nothin’ But A Body**

What themes jumped out to you in reading the story?
The theme of overwhelming suffering jumped out to me.

Did you connect the future scenario to our present moment? Explain.
Yes and No. It felt rather that this was a story that is an echo of life under the oppression of racial enslavement. I can only imagine that the lives of those enslaved were similar to those who were “lively” bodies floating down the swamp. The all-encompassing terror of this future scenario gave me some insight into what life may have been like in my Mississippi just a few decades back.

What questions did the scenario leave unanswered for you?
How could anybody, including the “Massah” remain healthy when surrounded but a swamp of bodies? But perhaps this is because the story could show us how we live in this bubble as we dump our garbage into the oceans and into the cities that are outside of our bubble. Is our relative healthy atmosphere in the US is aberration, is Shanghai closer to the earth of the near future?

Which elements of the story, characters and plot felt real and authentic to you and why?
The main character felt real because of the way that he saw his whiteness. He saw himself as different from the “savages” and as other than those who came from Africa. His attitude is similar to others who as Ta-nehisi Coates says “need to be white.” He understands the suffering of his family as parallel to the suffering of Moses and of his ancestors. He is deluded into thinking that because he played with Moses as a child and because he worked alongside him as an adult, that they were somehow equal. The disequilibrium that the main character felt when he was told to “kill his massah” was the only point in which he touched authenticity. He started to become aware of the fact that he was wrong to fall for the lie of whiteness and for the false promises of the ‘brotherhood:”

Which elements felt inauthentic or contrived to your personal experience with the south and/or with rural communities?
I found that the master was too evil. My biggest struggle in combatting the systematic racism that sustains the massive inequalities is that the people who are guilty of these micro-aggressions on a daily basis are actually nice and kind people. It is their woundedness that causes them to make sharp comments but the comments are very small compared to the other loving things that they do and say to people of color each day. The complexity of southern white racism is found in the fact that it is incorporating in southern hospitality. The host, or the body of people are generally healthy, the parasite of hatred moves in and through warm, caring bodies. Few people are so completely dark and so totally depraved. The problem with this characterization is that it makes it so hard to call out microaggressions in nice, white people because we tell ourselves that it is the truly wicked plantation Big Daddies and the KKK leaders who are the real bad guys.
But white complicity is so much more insidious that these blatant haters. (Well, at least before the demons were release from Hades on November 8th, 2016).

Respondent 3.
Moonshiner
As I read about Roscoe and Moonshiners, I couldn’t help but think of this idea of small-town Mississippi – the people, the attitudes, the behaviors the beliefs. It struck me that could it be that in a small, rural area, that the people could be so in tune, yet so far behind. Thinking about the uneven paved roads, the kudzu, small town stores that clearly are void of repair and the notion to begin repair, but yet, smart phones and the internet are all the buzz. At some point, I felt offended – oh, this is how the world sees Mississippi, the South, but some parts of me wondered if this could truly be what the South really is – pockets of areas whose people only know what they read on the internet and what is shared by word of mouth, looking to the skies to see planes flying over, but have never seen what exists beyond the kudzu covered dirt roads.

I also begin to think of the narrative of the white savior – Roscoe coming into town to save the people with his drugs and medicines, but the townspeople are unaware that he is slowly killing them. Each visit they wait for him to arrive when they have so much at their fingertips to begin their own “revival” but instead they waited for tales of despair in the neighboring cities just to feel better about their own existence. I also think of Roscoe, however, who I initially thought was black. Upon reading, I was hoping for some tale of a young, black man who had a troubled past, and the story would end with him being a great entrepreneur who would return home and encourage other young, black men to be innovators and to think and to grow the place from which they were born.

Reading of Tina made me angry, sad and disappointed, yet I had an “aha moment.” I thought about the small towns whose boards of alderman and county supervisors fight big business from entering the cities and counties because they want to keep the family-owned business in town or don’t want to buy into the corporate monopolies. Within this same thought, I wondered, well why not learn the business of business and help your small town family get family recipes into the stores or help your small town inventor get a patent. Then I thought back to the beginning of the story – black and white, town against town, family against family. Where is the education? Where is the training? What if we all worked together? What, then, could we accomplish?

Distress, The World Over
For this one, I felt overwhelmed, much like the people of Pennsylvania, much like the entomologist. I remember reading a book, Why We Can’t Wait – and that’s what I thought of while reading this story – the title alone, the concept. The people returned to normalcy day after day, with “the men” making noise and rumblings of the “invasion,” while the women nodded in agereeance and the children played, but it was because the children and women first saw the occurrences. Those voices with the answers – the government – did not respond, but those voices with answers – the women – did not speak. Turning to government and “the Gospel” was the answer.

As I think about the state of our country and our world – the voices that have led us for years and years, our support and our strength has lied in many of individuals who have
been shut out and silenced. Interesting to me that the men of the house talked and talked, although the women organized the convening and had thought questions and inquiries by which action could have resulted.

How often have we let those in power and authority silence those with the answers we need to move forward? In our economy, criminal justice system, education system...what voices have feignly agreed. The War on Drugs, School to Prison Pipeline, global warming, etc....years later, we ask...how did this happen, but for years there were those warning of the phenomenon.

**The Time Bomb**

Similar to Moonshiners and Distress, The World Over, there are themes of voices unheard in this piece. A sense of the authority and power structures making decisions not for the greater good of those involved, but for the sake and greater good of their own interests. It is very evident to me, through this reading, that much like the communities I am familiar with in Mississippi, the Raven and the Wastepickers are victims of a growing system of unconcern. Like Flint, Michigan; Jackson, MS; and South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, and others where the Dakota Access Pipeline is being placed, there are communities of people being abused and taken advantage of leading to the production and exposure to harmful chemicals. Particularly, traditionally marginalized peoples, people of color, and those of disadvantaged, socially-economic backgrounds are those who are victims.

Like the Raven and the Wastepickers, there are communities and individual groups that are very aware of these circumstances and, although others may not agree, believe in the power of protests whether extreme (fish scales) or not (chants in the Wal-Mart parking lot).

What stood out is the gathering of people from all backgrounds, HBCU, the trailer park, etc. who may not have gathered together before or for any other cause, or who simply showed up just to on-look, but even in on-looking, a diverse group whose issues could impact change.

**The Bonfire**

I am not quite sure what to think of this particular story. Parts of me are confused about what is happening. It seems as though the couple may be homeless and seeking to find any means by which to retrieve monies and these homes are being burned and taken for their own for the sake of trading “finds.” In whatever way the story unfolds, it reminds me of a mother and son from my hometown who were both homeless. Though the mother was able to find housing because of government assistance, the son suffered from some sort of mental health disorder and was banned from her home because of violence. They both traversed the streets of our town, searching for cans and other scrap pieces to sell to the town junk yard. By whatever means necessary, they found ways to support themselves. Clothes from the dump, pennies on the ground, sleeping on the porch of loved ones or on the steps on abandoned homes.

Even if not that, the words “can we keep this one” and “bring your burdens to the bonfire” strike me. Whatever it may be, a fire, the burning of an old such as a forest fire or land may represent death and ending but the newness that comes afterward is refreshing.
“Can we keep this one” also reminds me of the days in my childhood that my family would drive around town and view homes, homes that we dreamt of, homes that we said “that’s the kind of house we need,” “momma, can we get a house like that.” I am interested more in the story of these two but the reading makes me think they having so many desires; the representation of the bonfire, tears, and kisses and sleep. Has their “world” been destroyed and are they searching for something new, a new start.

**General Comments**

Reading each of the pieces definitely caused me to think and reflect on my own experiences, particularly in regard to culture, socio-economic status, race, gender and age. For instance, all of those came into play when reading Moonshiners and Distress, The World Over. Whereas, The Timebomb made me think of my role in protecting the environment and ensuring that I am aware of those things happening around me, and Bonfire caused me to think about the future.

It was hard to write about these experiences, harder than I thought. After reading and having to write immediately after or wishing I could have written while I read may have prompted more feelings or expressions. I even wonder should I have verbalized while someone else wrote.

The experience as a whole, especially with so many references to the South, county roads, etc. made me wonder often about how the South is viewed and where we are as a region. I wondered why it seems that people I know what to escape the South, but also why some people find harbor here. As mentioned in Moonshiners, some places here are like islands – off, alone and remote with only the “worries” of the county lines.

Overall I did enjoy reading the pieces and reflecting. Though, I think the ladder group of pieces were the harder of the groups to get through for me. Not exactly sure why that was but, each were good and I did appreciate the ability to take from these readings what I wanted based on my own experiences.

**Respondent 4.**

{Highlights taken from Audio Clip reflection}

General comment – the four pieces read (does not specify, but Moonshiner and The Bonfire are clearly two) are all centered on the male character, with woman playing background and primarily conforming roles. Reader identifies that this very much applies to the case of rural America, but that may be difficult to reach female readers and perhaps is not the vision we wish to see for rural America.

**The Bonfire**

All of the behavior is goal-oriented, purpose driven. The act of burning seems to be very intentional.

The woman is made to seem docile and a support system for the man, who is the leader and the center of attention in the story.
There is no clarity about why they have the cart, why they are collecting scraps and who the blacksmith is, what this society looks like.

The reader is still unsure about the role of the burning and destruction in the piece and is unsure how to feel about it. Wonders if it is simply to see things burn, to enjoy the beauty of destruction or if it as about destroying the things that previously gave them shelter but no longer can?

Themes highlighted about the fire:
The fire seems so active, but everything else that is living is very inactive. The animals are reflexive, the characters are reflexive. The fire is free, is not predetermined. They believe it is truly beautiful. Its very meditative.
It seems to tie the characters to a greater – fire being the first technology of man, central to society and how we connect to one another up to the electricity era.
The cycle of decay and life.
Burning of old concepts to bring new ones – the baptism

**Respondent 5.**

**Ain't Nothing But a Body To Me**
- this one is very vivid in setting, time frame, character's and roles, and situation.
I immediately connect to narrator and Moses's life & plight - the connection with the history and wealth gap struck a serious chord, especially the rut their father's and grand father's experienced with "always talking about what they want to do with the money" and then getting hit with REAL financial pitfalls over and over again; who CAN'T relate to car problems clipping that weekend trip or investment in half or in most cases "oblivion"?!

the parallel reality of BOTH of their families working for The Langley's seems like a message to all the poor-middle class people who don't realize that the "elite" have had their foot on all of our necks for a very long time. well played. well written.

The Langley's really represented the long standing imbalance of privilege to me. the living "on the highest hill" while others suffered in great peril is tragically reflective of how things have been in this world we live in, for far far too long; which is stamped further into the reader's (i.e. me) psyche by the references to HOW they came across that land, and how easy wealth has made it for them to survive, even during an apocalypse.

The mental anguish that the narrator's going through (the seeing all the live bodies eyes in his sleep; the talking to the dead in the swamp) was very surreal and gripping. It really brought me closer to his rounds on the hill and the swamp. It made me say "yeah...you'd HAVE to do that to stay sane". The homicidal thoughts towards the Langley's was quite understandable; i felt the way he felt by time Mr. Langely said "ain't nothing but a body to me" toward Moses' passing -- THAT kind of mindset and attitude is WHY I get why we call it "the Dirty South"

**Moonshiner**
this is a very gripping tale. At first, i couldn't place the time frame and assumed it was early 1940's or Mid 30's -- however the transition into the future setting was seamless and VERY telling of how little has or will change about people, despite technological advancements. Rosco's journey from rural mountain kid who fought too much at school to self-made greedy opportunist,
really helps one understand how he got the point of going from town to town and playing off of people's desperation, ignorance, and lack of first-hand knowledge of their neighbors. That aspect of this story speaks volumes to how discrimination and 'doom' spreads from generation to generation --- keeps people divided and unable to achieve what Rosoe's journey eventually lead him to anyway; a new hope through unity.

**Bonfire**
This certainly felt like the poetry of fire, of love, and the purpose in the face of despair. I feel how the fall of civilization has left them truly alone in this world, but how it also builds the bond between the two characters; they have a great understanding of each other; it's evident in their coping mechanism and bonfire ritual of describing the flames. I like how the story slowly unfolds into what they're doing, but still leaves you wondering how they came to the conclusion that burning these houses was the way to letting go of the past and moving forward. There's really a series of questions that this story has left me with; questions about 'what would I do in that situation?' and 'where are they heading to next'?

**Pile of Bones**
This story connected me well with the mindset of children going through something I would never imagine having to literally do; it speaks to me on the importance of knowing our roots and where we come from, and to experience it through the eyes of children is more effective than it would through adults, imo. The process of digging up bones and logging it for records is something that I logically get, but the stacking the bones on a cart and hauling it off 'home' left me wondering what happens next? The casual manner that these characters use when carrying out these routines does a great job of helping me, as a reader, understand HOW much these things are really "a way of life" for these characters; truly helps to draw me into the scenarios more and more.

Scotty's immediate connection to the man in the marble coffin (and the family) pulled at a few heart strings, for I grew up in a house that always emphasized the importance of knowing your lineage and your family name -- that translated into my brief involvement with the restoring the Odd Fellow cemetery here in Knoxville with a burning desire to get the community to connect with how great their own story and history is; I related to Scotty's immediate ownership of being connected to greatness -- how quickly he got upset when it was about to be passed off to someone else -- we find who could be in who our ancestors were.