

Fire & Water

Stories from the Anthropocene

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Preface

Like many creative projects, this book began with a conversation in a bar. It was 2018, on one of those exquisite early autumn days in Portland, Oregon, when our discussion about the need for literary fiction writers to respond to the gravest threat humanity faces—the climate crisis—might have felt theoretical. We were still a year from seeing devastating images of Australia’s massive wildfires and two years almost to the day when wildfires raged so unusually close to Portland that we were checking our emergency bags and fearing for our friends in evacuation zones just outside the city. On that afternoon, we were aware of the scientific evidence that climate destabilization will lead to more infectious diseases, but mask wearing and stay-at-home orders to stop the spread of COVID-19 were not yet visceral experiences, to say nothing of the more complex scenarios that would come to pass, such as how humanity’s response would cause the Himalayas to be visible for the first time in decades and would expose, in a new way, the deep racial and class inequities in the global health system and economy.

Our conversation became as much, maybe more, about the topic of literature and its role in helping people comprehend the unfathomable. Climate disruption—much like world wars, the nuclear arms race, and genocide—will have profound and lasting effects on our cultures and civilization. Yet humans struggle to internalize the implications of the environmental changes we are causing incrementally, though with quickening speed. As the afternoon light began to wane, we dreamed of an anthology of short fiction by writers with diverse, international backgrounds and artistic

approaches, all addressing the question of what the climate crisis means to human civilization—not in the distant future, but now. We brainstormed potential titles, feeling drawn to the word *Anthropocene*, coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer to describe what is now widely considered a new geological epoch in which human activity is so significant it is transforming the earth's ecosystems. We liked the word for another reason too: it reflects our belief that contemporary literary fiction writers and publishers have an artistic responsibility, and a powerful tool, to explore how a crisis of our making is affecting humans and other species in our current moment.

Three years later, this vision has become a reality. *Fire & Water: Stories from the Anthropocene* is a collection of literary fiction from authors who hail from five continents, evoking the lives of people and species across the globe. With this anthology, we also consider another term, *climate fiction*, suggesting that it may be a misnomer. The climate crisis teaches us that human experiences (and those of other species) are myriad, multifaceted, and irreducible to the narrowly prescribed set of expectations that genres often impose. There can be no one Thing with a capital *T* that constitutes fiction about climate disruption, as these seventeen stories illustrate. Showing itself in different, and often inequitable, ways around the world, the climate crisis, and the stories about it, are too diverse to fit within one category.

When we began this journey, we were excited to reach readers through less common angles, but we were unaware of the many lessons the world would soon be forced to face. In hindsight, we see how timely this project is. Literary fiction, reflecting the world as it is rather than a world that is imagined, helps correct one of our society's most serious problems, our reluctance to fathom the breadth

and depth of the climate crisis as we are living through it. *Fire & Water* speaks not only to those with the desire to tell stories but to all of us who need to read them.

The climate crisis calls for a sustained, broad, and deep artistic response. We hope *Fire & Water* is but one contribution of many to come.

—Mary Fifield & Kristin Thiel

Conscription

Hellsmouth was the desolate, demolished terrain of former downtown Seattle that acted as a buffer between our camp and the Wild—the battered lands most decimated by the storms. To the leadership of the Emergency Response Department, however, Hellsmouth was no different from some bombed-out city overseas. They didn't care about nuance; they didn't have time for subtlety. In the army, I had the proper time to train and learn the terrain, but my commander never expected me to know everything overnight. Here, they needed me to be an expert. I had a history of adaptability. I'd lived too long in a world constantly collapsing around me. That was all they needed to know. I'd been to hell on earth before—in Syria against the Islamic State Reborn, in Nigeria against Boko Haram, the Natuna Islands War against the Mao Fighters funded quietly by the Chinese government. I could go again.

“Four-five?” a voice shouted into our large bunk space.

“Here, Guard Saunders!” I said.

“TOC with your team and gear in five!”

Clink and Tameer waited out on the small deck with another guard. I walked into the makeshift woodshed that was the Tactical Operations Center. It was crackling and buzzing, busy with analysts receiving reports from the field and around the world. Overlays projected the latest storm patterns. Video feeds on flat-screen televisions provided everything from pundits discussing the government's successes and losses in the Pacific Northwest and California Island to firsthand, live-action video taken from recently returned Rescuers. The scope and scale of the information being ingested and analyzed was immense.

Decker was standing in the middle of it all. He waved Saunders and me over and began immediately to speak. "New materials are finally headed our way in the next shipment. We'll have a proper operation here in a couple of months." He was Chief Guard Greg Decker, the guard-in-charge of Rescue Element 148. Decker was a former infantry colonel in the army who had spent seven years in the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, before it was dissolved in favor of the conscription structure. He wasn't God, but so far as any of us out in the Wild was concerned, he might as well have been.

I didn't respond. I let him do the talking.

"Dewy Lyle is a fan of yours. He reviewed your rescue record."

Dewy was a shorthand nickname: DEW, as in Deputy Executive Warden Tomlin Lyle. He was the head of Region One. It was Dewy Lyle's job to beat back the fires and fortify against the flooding until scientists could figure out how to control the weather. It was on him to save what life and land he could until the impossible happened. And, if a few Mids died, tragic as it might be, a few Mids died. Still, I said nothing.

He rubbed the stubble on his chin, took in a breath, and exhaled,

A Seal's Song

Act I: Plan

It was me and Balena who came up with this.

We were forced early on to accept our limitations—orcas being fully aquatic mammals on the one flipper, and seals mostly aquatic mammals on the other—if we were to get this project on the ground, so to speak. We would need help. We would need the damn bears.

We hate the polar bears because they're idiots and eat us every chance they get. It's been that way forever. Sure, everyone accepts that Circle of Life stuff, but still, it's hard to enter into negotiations when you barely escaped last week's ice-hole ambush. Out of gratitude to Balena, I sucked it up. You know, for the greater good.

And the orcas. They eat us too and bat our dead and dying bodies through the air like some sick game of water polo. Don't let their strangeness fool you, though. They're the smartest and toughest things in the Sea. If this were a water fight, those behemoths would run the table, a frothing red tide from horizon to horizon, nothing alive that they didn't say so. Those clicks and whistles and teeth... How could the Sea conjure such flawless beasts?

Sometimes it's like their purpose is to remind the rest of us of our imperfections—or maybe give us the opportunity to be better than we are. I didn't have much to lose, even before Balena found me. Ever since I could talk, the cows called me things like petulant, disrespectful, and contrary. The other yearlings called me worse things. I admit that I can be difficult, but I was able to convince Whiskers and Balls to do this. I'm trying not to feel guilty about that.

But even those two know that this isn't about me, that it's about the fish. The orcas eat the fish and us, and the bears eat us and some fish and the occasional orca that washes up, and we eat *lots* of fish. The one thing we all have in common is the fish. Without fish, the system's off, and when the system's off, we die—whale, bear, and seal alike. Men like fish too, apparently. Every day they go out in their boats and toss out their deadly, drifting clouds and scoop up more fish than my colony could eat in a year. No matter how much I've thought it over, looked at it from different angles, I can't make what the men do right in my head.

The truce started with the nets. We and the orcas tried breaking them, but too many of us were shot from the boats or caught in the nets. Too many died. The men acted as though we were trying to steal *their* fish. The Old Bull claimed it was a plot, a part of Balena's master plan to do away with us, once and for all. I tried to convince him that without us, the orcas would suffer. Go figure that's when the fat bastard faked like he was deaf and sent me packing.

The cows say I have a special talent for getting into trouble and bringing the wrong kind of attention to myself. It's not like I'm trying to cause problems. It's just that they don't try hard enough. For them, good enough is just fine. And lately, not enough will also do. I can't accept that.

My time to prove them wrong came a half-moon ago. Just my

KRISTIN THIEL

Morse Code of the Yellow Rail

Daria fully expected to die by volcano. Not by lahar, as, say, if the twenty-six glaciers on Mt. Rainier melted under that volcano's heat and helped to create a mudflow so big and thick and violent that it buried everything in its path. Not even by ash clogging the air and trapping greenhouse gases. Even though the United States was second in the world for number of volcanos, Daria didn't fear volcanos in that way. No, what she'd learned from her mother—indirectly—was that volcanos offered foolproof suicide. When the climate got bad enough, Daria would just walk right up and jump. If the fall didn't kill her, the sulfur dioxide fumes would choke her. If that didn't get her, the 1,800-plus-degree lava would, though of course Daria never spoke this plan aloud. It seemed perfectly reasonable to Daria, given the circumstances, but her parents would never understand.

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