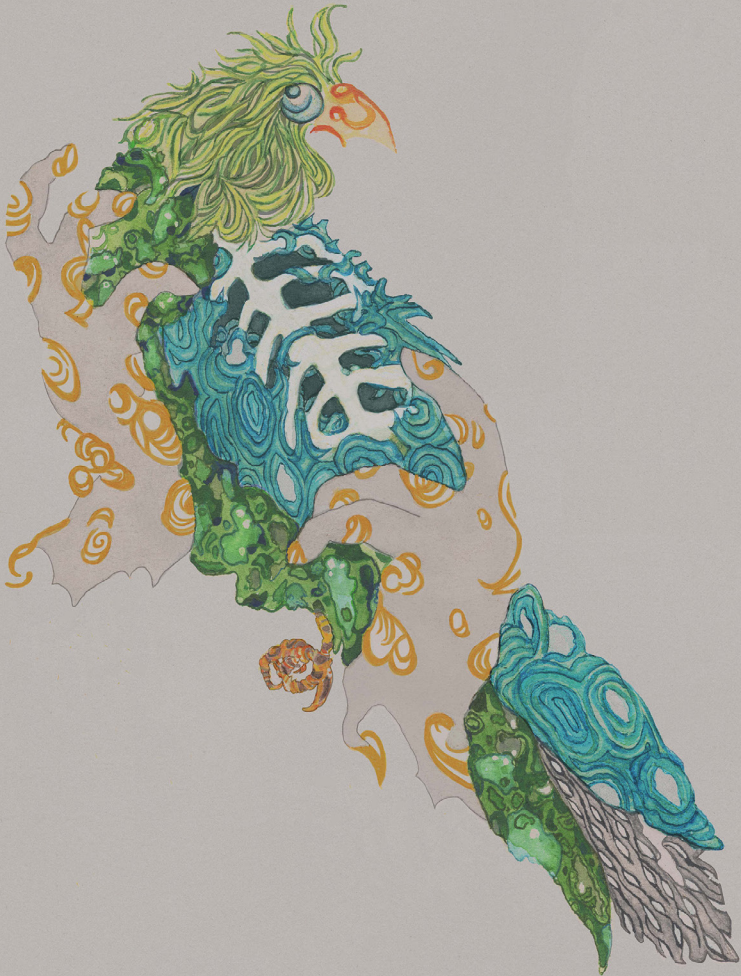


Time to Be Something Other Than Human

On Attention, Transformation, and Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy

KATE SCHAPIRA



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TIME TO BE SOMETHING OTHER THAN HUMAN

ON ATTENTION,
TRANSFORMATION,
AND JEFF VANDERMEER'S
SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY

KATE SCHAPIRA



#98

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Part 1

TURNING INTO

If you leave anything alone long enough, it turns into something else. And if you don't leave it alone, you turn it into something else, and it also turns you into something else. The world makes us, provides us with all the substance and all the pressures that give us our temporary shape and place within it. Many people's definition of humanity includes the ability to change the world—for good, for ill—as though humanity were outside the world, weren't also being changed. As if some changes weren't more drastic, uprooting, and irrevocable than others.

I don't remember how Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* first came to my attention. The Southern Reach, which gives the novel's trilogy its name, is a secret government agency, and I get no thrill from secret government agencies. But the Southern Reach's responsibility and nemesis—Area X, a coastal region closed off by a border that humans cannot cross by ordinary means—I came to care about in a deep, serious, *seeping* way, one that I'm still trying to understand long after closing the book and reading its sequels. I examine my own mind, looking for signs of tampering, or growth, or transformation.

It's not explicit from the beginning that transformation is at the center of *Annihilation*. We have a setup that we've seen before: an exploration of territory unknown to the explorers, and a combination of scientific expertise and military might that *Star Trek* on TV, and CIA-backed regimes in mineral-rich countries in real life, have trained U.S. readers to accept as a reasonable way to proceed into an uncharted land. But from the border crossing, the story changes and keeps changing, working against formula and expectation. Its narrator—an unnamed woman working as the expedition's biologist—feels no apparent obligation to share with us all she knows, and there is much she never learns or understands. Discoveries are misinterpreted, informants are misleading, neither love nor science

conquers. Life is fragile, but death may not be final. And by the end of the novel, we can't be sure what's left of the human characters' humanity.

Categories in Area X blur and shift and sicken. A bulky organism moans in the swamp at dusk. Under the microscope, the cells of a dead fox appear to be human. The course of the expedition is changed irrevocably by a creature or monster or force that the biologist calls the Crawler, with a consuming power that is sometimes deadly. The story stresses that the characters don't know for sure what these things are or how they came to be, and we readers can't draw on any knowledge of our own to understand them. No one makes an authoritative statement about the way this land works that isn't rapidly disproved; there is no key to any of the mysteries, no explanation for the horrors, that allows us to sum them up for ourselves and move on with certainty. The characters *become* people who live in this lack of certainty. "Some questions will ruin you if you are denied their answer long enough," the biologist says, toward the story's end, deep into her change. To be transformed is to allow for the ruin of your old self.

I yearn toward and flinch from transformation. I live in the world whose forces of destruction human systems summon with breathtaking abandon, whose nonhuman cohabitants the most powerful humans use and destroy with carelessness and cruelty; this world in which the category of human you are affects your safety. This world is familiar, even in its pain and unfairness. For it to be just and kind, I'm one of many who must leave familiarity behind, or actively seek to destroy much of what's familiar, with no guarantee that what I or others make in its place will be better for me or anyone.

I can't imagine it, but I have to imagine it: a world where my ordinary actions sustain, instead of damage, myself and everyone around me. I have to imagine it because in the world we know, I can't live it.

In the fall and winter of 2013, the world started to transform me into something other than what I had been. I was reading news stories about ocean acidification and the deaths of coral reefs, extinction rates and

drowning islands. I sat on the couch and cried. I cried at work. I cried at dinner.

That was the beginning of my first transformation—the gooey part, the part where I relinquished certain comforts, like the assumption that the rich living fabric of the world will keep reweaving itself as I've always known it long after I cease. I was a mess, because my part in that fabric seemed to be to eat holes in it. And I was sunk in isolation: even kind and alert people who know me well and read the news seemed baffled by my inconsolability.

I couldn't stay there; I couldn't be that. It was mainly to give my mess a new shape that I made myself into a Climate Anxiety Counselor as well as the other things I'd been and continue to be: teacher, spouse, consumer, daughter, sister, friend, invader. I set up a small booth across from the Providence city bus terminal and invited passersby to share their fears with me, and some of them did.

While my sign says "Climate Anxiety Counseling 5¢," I've never rejected conversations about other things, because I want to know what presses most on the people who talk with me. So I hear fears about food shortages in the far future and fears of not getting to the food pantry before it closes that day, fears about oceans devoid of life or parents nearing death. Worries about near-term survival live side by side with dread of the unraveling of what we counted on within our world.

The Climate Anxiety Counseling booth is a little wider than I am, made of cardboard and plywood to pack onto a hand truck and roll downtown, or to other sites within walking distance of my house. Its sign comes up to my shoulders when I sit on a high stool behind it. The structure looks gentle, weak and harmless, while at the same time making a demarcation between me and anyone who might talk to me: it marks me as a listener, a recorder. It lets me be inexpensive and easy of access in this public, heavily frequented place, while still protected—not just by the unusual setup, but by my whiteness, my class, how I seem to people. To some extent, I leverage the ways I am and have been structurally

lucky in order to become something that other people *might* be able to use. Partly because words and stories are my medium and my training, I thought talking about climate change in public in a vulnerable and soft way might help the people of my city develop a shared language, a common understanding, of what we're inducing the world to do to itself, including us.

I asked one of my first interlocutors two questions I wasn't planning until I saw his face. "Do you imagine what it'll be like?" I asked. "What do you imagine?"

He said, "That everything's melted and burnt. So hot that you can't go for a second without drinking water. Doomsday scenarios. And we know that humans made it, that it's because of our use of natural resources." It was easier by far for people to imagine devastation than it was for them to imagine changing the practices that contribute to that devastation. "I definitely feel like within my lifetime the world will be irrevocably changed and damaged by what we're doing," another person said. "Probably by the next 30 years—we won't be able to keep up this lifestyle. I like the idea that something I could do could make a difference, but I think that people who care enough about it to try to make a difference are gonna be too late."

"Does it weigh on your mind?" I asked her.

"When I think about it, yeah. I don't know that there's a value in thinking about it. Well, no, there is a value in thinking about it. I wanna change something but I don't know how to do it. I don't even know who you would talk to...I can't picture that world and I feel like I will have to soon."

Between conversations, I watched the flow and stall of human and vehicular traffic. I heard people curse out their partners, coax their children, complain to their friends. I noted pigeons and trees and wind and light. None of this is to say that I became what the world needs humans to become. But deliberately being someone or something I hadn't been before, based on the pressures of what was around me, made me feel like more was possible.

I didn't fool myself that this transformation was drastic enough. Some of the people who came to speak with me at the booth shared the feelings of isolation and helplessness that had prompted me. It was nice to have company. But I had no alleviation for them, no answers for them or myself about how to alter the world to keep it from making us feel this way. I couldn't say with confidence what we might need to let go, or what we might not have a choice about losing or becoming.

The biologist who narrates *Annihilation* is an expert in transitional ecosystems—that is, where one ecosystem is transforming into another. The attention she pays to nonhuman relationships is deep, lasting and loving: this shows in the stories she doles out about her past self and in the details she relays of texture and scent and scale, the pleasure she takes in naming. She examines the impossible elements of Area X, secretions and efflorescences and traces, with the same care she offers to more familiar organisms and their interchanges with land and water and air. On the other hand, by her own admission, she's poor at human-to-human relations, at openness and trust. To learn her story, we need to attend to her the way we might watch a member of another species making their motions and decisions, for reasons we might be wrong about, and without us in mind.

The limits of science's interrogative approach—of observation as something that produces answers humans can use—are explicit in the Southern Reach trilogy. "The beast in the marshes now seemed like an old friend.... We were confident that eventually we would photograph it, document its behavior, tag it, and assign it a place in the taxonomy of living things," the biologist writes of the unseen creature who moans at dusk. But Area X resists this classification, this separation. The samples of the organisms found there look like what they appear to be under the microscope, but give the impression that when no one's observing them they look like something else. Or else their substance looks so different from their outward seeming that no classification is possible, no information exchanged.

What Area X itself appears to be, per the reports of previous expeditions, is a “pristine landscape,” recovered from or never touched by human intervention. Cypress, foxes, thistles; the stilling of water, the sloping of land and the soaking of rain. But what happens in Area X gives the lie to this appearance. Something *more* is happening there, and as we read we learn about it the way we might learn about any horrifying change in the order of things: piecemeal, painfully, and through mistakes that have deadly consequences.

If the forces that shape Area X and the people in it were a one-to-one analogue for climate change, *Annihilation* would be a thin book, low in intensity. Its force comes from its attention to change, period. Its successive events unsettle knowledge, habituate uncertainty, repeatedly refresh strangeness. It constantly reminds both its characters and us that we are inside *and* outside the systems of life we inhabit. Inside, because they maintain and shape and coax and batter us. Outside, because our access to true knowledge of how they work is partial and limited, even when that knowledge is at its most exhaustive and worthwhile and passionate.

The kinds of things you can learn about a bee by watching it are different from the kinds of things you can learn by dissecting it, which are both different from what you learn when a bee stings you. And even if you learn in all those ways, there are things you’ll never learn about that bee, or any bee, because of the states of being you don’t share. How everything not-bee feels to a bee, how other bees seem (do they seem other?) or how a bee feels to itself (if it does at all).

How would it feel to live in a wholly other way? As I geared up for the second season of Climate Anxiety Counseling, I added an explicitly imaginative step to the process. So many of the people who spoke with me seemed unable to imagine anything but more of the same damaging practices, habits and systems, ensnared in a trap of extraction, near-term survival and long-term depletion that they could see but couldn’t see out of. I didn’t know how to do anything about the trap, but I wondered if I could do something about the seeing.

M came up to the counseling booth in the spring of 2015. We know each other’s faces—she panhandles around town in a couple of places that I also go—so I said hi and explained what I was doing, and asked what was worrying her. “Being homeless,” she said. “Needing medication, needing food. They told me I need preauthorization for my meds and they wouldn’t give it to me. The doctor gave me 15 days’ supply, that’s nothing.” We talked a little longer—I knew she’d had pneumonia in the fall, but she didn’t say what this round of medication was for—and she pointed out her sister to me, standing across the park.

The stories I write and call “alternate histories” began as an attempt to shake my own imagination loose from the trap. They take as their starting point an anxiety, climate-related or not, that someone has shared with me at the counseling booth. From there, I try to imagine a version of the world where that person wouldn’t have to worry about that thing anymore. What would have to change—what institutions, what structures, what preoccupations—for the world to take better care of them? How could their relationships transform, becoming not just endurable but sustainable? In writing their alternate histories, I don’t fictionalize the past or erase how things have been, but I try to write a path from the present we know, in which they’re suffering or fearful, to a possible future that works better for more people, including them. Often, this means placing the worrier closer to the center of the story, making them more of a priority than they are to our present systems, and creating a world that serves them.

After our conversation, I wrote an alternate history that offers comfort and safety—the housing, medication and food whose absence weigh on her mind as well as her body—to the fictional version of M, but not only to her. It wouldn’t be possible for her to have those conditions without sharing them with other people, without tremendous shifts in structures and priorities and mores and practices. Where would the materials come from for the drugs she needs? Who built and maintains the apartment building I invented for her, with its network of water and plants coating it so that from a distance it looks like a cactus, green fur and yellow spines?

The changes required for this story to come true are so large and uprooting as to seem unlikely. That said, there's nothing particularly likely about the way we do things now. Capital, culture, government, infrastructure: these things are heavy to move, impossible to move without sacrifice, and violently defended in their present forms, but they are not immutable. Our problem with changing them has to do with inertia, rather than a violation of the laws of physics.

Inertia also makes these stories hard to imagine, hard to write, from inside the borders of this world; the practices of the world curtail the habits of our minds. When I found myself saying while writing an alternate history, "But that would *never* happen," I tried to write toward that, to tear a rift in the bounds through which we might be able to sneak out, or at least see out. That's what *Annihilation* did for me. It tore through the likelihood of the world and of the stories we tell in the world. Through the rift I glimpsed something terrifying, not just because of its unfamiliarity, and thrilling, not just because of its beauty.

My knowledge of the living fabric of the world is piecemeal and tangential, and when people at the booth ask me what climate change *is* I sometimes stumble. It's the same reason I don't know quite what to say when people start talking about their energy-saving appliances, or how little they drive. The chain of cause and effect between the light I turn on and the typhoon that washes away your home stymies some of those who try to explain it because it's not a chain, it's a web of factors so complex and multifarious, so laced throughout one another that genuinely tracing them requires tracing the entire web of life and elements, as well as the entire web of money and power and influence. If you follow one thread and one thread only through that fabric—and climate change is a living system too, in the sense that it's constantly shifting and unfolding, changing and being changed—you won't understand because the fabric doesn't exist without the rest of the threads, or without the weave.

And it's difficult to trust that the weave is there, if you habitually think of things and people in isolation. Interconnectedness, relatedness, inseparability, are not among our overarching cultural strengths in the U.S., where I have always lived. Our national mythos, the mask of the rugged individualist—the ways we earn our livings, our attempts to keep ourselves healthy, the kinds of stories we tell—all reinforce the deep untruth that we are on our own. Settlers and slave owners, railway builders and oil investors, the systems they built and the paths they laid down have done their best to burn out the voices that could show the people dwelling in the present how to think about it in a different way. And these structures—which manifest both in material circumstances and in habits of mind—mean that many of the people who spoke to me, when they imagined acting, imagined acting alone: an explorer in a wilderness.

Area X is a full place: a human character entering it will see reeds and moss and velvet ants and many kinds of birds, an ecosystem apparently going about its business. They may or may not have the ability or the interest to detect the relationships they're seeing, entering, and maybe altering. They will also see, and feel, and *become* things that humans have no words for, things to which words are inadequate. Yet—being a book—*Annihilation* must use words to convey those things to us:

A ghost bird might be a hawk in one place, a crow in another, depending on the context. The sparrow that shot up into the blue sky one morning might transform mid-flight into an osprey the next. This was the way of things here. There were no reasons so mighty that they could override the desire to be in accord with the tides and the passage of seasons and the rhythms underlying everything around me.

That openness of being is impossible in the world we know—but in Area X, *physical* transformation, transformation right down to the deepest

state of being, is literal, possible and complete, and never final. Its parts are familiar to most contemporary readers: hawks and crows, tides and seasons. But its totality is strange, its nature just out of reach of those of us outside the novel. And that yearning for accord—have you felt it? Would you recognize it?

P, an anthropologist and teacher, said to me at the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth, “The indigenous concept of Mother Earth [has been] Disneyfied and trivialized, but it’s an important idea: the earth as a mother that feeds us, that gives us what we need. We need a change of consciousness that honors these ideas, these relationships. When I talk about this with my students, I can tell that they yearn for it, but they graduate and they’re in debt, they have to make compromises, and I cry for them.”

If P is right, his students expect to isolate and to amputate themselves, to have a limited and constricted array of relations with one another and with the world that makes them. They’ve learned that depleting and damaging other humans and nonhuman creatures is the price of their survival, though they might not characterize it as harm or exploitation. Challenging what you presently need to do to survive can seem like a threat to that survival—in some contexts, can *be* a threat. It can feel safer to stay on a narrow path, where your vision of everything outside the path is only sketchily filled in: a simple story, an empty land that you are making manifest.

The biologist’s story is a text within a text, a record that may soon cease to matter, whose keeper has no intention of returning to it. The biologist herself is a person—at the beginning of the book’s events, a fully human person. While she seeks to understand life in all its forms in Area X, we can also see these forms seeking to understand her and changing her through that understanding. Many of these changes are extreme, painful, violent. They invade her, they break her down:

Soon after I stood once again on the trail, the brightness usurped many more places than just my nerve centers. I crumpled to the

ground cocooned in what felt like an encroaching winter of dark ice, the brightness spreading into a corona of brilliant blue light with a white core. It felt like cigarette burns as a kind of searing snow drifted down and infiltrated my skin. Soon I became so frozen, so utterly numb, trapped there on the trail in my own body, that my eyes became fixed on the thick blades of grass in front of me, my mouth half open in the dirt.

She understands some changes but not others, chooses some but not others. It is a part of the rift that VanderMeer opens that we can see her being remade, or remaking herself, without knowing why. We encounter the mysteries with her, but we don’t solve them; we watch the story as we might watch an animal, or a bacterial colony. *Why is it doing what it’s doing?* we ask. *How can we be sure? What can we do with this, what can it show us?*

It’s tempting to “flip” Area X, to note the ways in which our books make nightmarish the opposite of the nightmares we create. A book about an ecosystem that transforms humans, taking us away from ourselves, can seem like a sick misreading of the reality in which humans are coerced into depleting the ecosystems in which we take part. We transform their substance into things that no one else can use, that some of us hoard from others of us, and that even we can’t use for very long. The loss of living complexity and the multiple relations that we label *biodiversity* is a hideous, unnecessary, farcical tragedy, a disgusting abandonment. What I’m wondering about—what I fear because of its unfamiliarity and uncertainty, but yearn for too—is the possible abandonment of other things: the ways of being human, within the web of life, that have brought us and all our neighbors here. Facing the terror of ripping them up, tearing them out, watching them go.

One thing I discovered in writing the alternate histories is that it’s hard to even get a little way beyond the bounds of what we’ve already thought,

the story we constantly renew by retelling and hearing again. It's hard to even point to the spot where the border might weaken, to indicate and follow and reconvey the *flavor* of it like two ants passing pheromonal detail to each other. Jeff VanderMeer does this in *Annihilation*: he passes us the flavor of the rift, so that we might know it again.

He does it partly with beauty: the wild relations among plants and animals and trees and water, the delicate fungal unfurling of impossible words on a tower wall, gold and intricate and green and dangerous, beckoning us deeper. He does it with horror: doppelgangers, undead selves that aren't selves, as counterfoil for the "brightness," the not-self that the self becomes under the influence of Area X. And even as I write that, I'm not confident that's how it really works—because he also does it by keeping our knowledge as partial as the characters' is, requiring us to keep thinking, guessing, being wrong. Most of all, he does it with the biologist's decision to stay, to become whatever Area X has been making of her, to throw in her lot with the place and its forces. She refers to herself as the final casualty of her expedition, but it's also possible to see her as a collaborator, a traitor to the people who sent her and to prevailing ways of being human. And we don't—at the end of *Annihilation*—know what happens to her because of this decision.

I was willing to leave the story with that lack of knowing—to stay afraid, unsettled, uncertain. In my life, I'm not like that at all. Climate Anxiety Counseling began because of how hard it felt for me to live without solutions. VanderMeer's approach keeps us, or kept me, from reading *Annihilation* as a mystery, a puzzle to solve, a case for the scientific method; it allowed me to receive its images and changes the way I might receive the sight of organisms in an ecosystem new to me. Not for me to use; for me to marvel, or to mourn, if I understood them enough to understand whether they were ill or well. For me to wonder how they belonged there, what their relations might be to each other.

For a creature to survive, the awestruck kind of attention needs to coexist with other kinds. Learning the patterns and the rules of the

places where we are, the webs in which we take part, help to keep us alive. What will poison us? What's that looming shadow? Who's our enemy? At the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth, I can give the same weight to all the information I receive: confidences about addiction or trouble in love, informed and heartfelt declarations of fear for the future, conspiracy theories, and misinformation or misapprehension. But if it came time to act on what people told me, I would need to value some more than others, to choose a meaning and an ending.

Through its choices of what to reserve and what to splash on, its insistence on observation over explanation, its deliberate dwelling in the swamp of the story, *Annihilation* denatures nature, as well as fiction. I didn't feel like I needed to know what happened next, because I was happening next. I still didn't know what I was going to become, but I was more open to the possibility of becoming it. Jeff VanderMeer did something hard to do: he wrote a book in this world that gives us a glimpse of another one, not just through what it describes but through how it *works*, within itself and on us. He got out. He led me toward the exit. And then he went back in.

Part 2

A LIKELY STORY

I invite you to picture me with my sleeves rolled up, sitting on a hospital bed in a triage room. A nurse is about to give my husband James and me three injections of immunoglobulin and one of rabies vaccine apiece, because a few nights ago a bat got into our bedroom. The CDC recommends that if this happens, you get vaccinated: after all, as our doctor said in an uncharacteristic but truthful lapse of her bedside manner, rabies is a horrible way to die.

On my knee is a copy of *Capitalism in the Web of Life* by Jason W. Moore, but I'm not reading it. It's complexly argued, densely sourced and insistently written, and I can't concentrate. Are my extremities tingling or numb? Is James experiencing insomnia, anxiety, confusion, agitation? I probably don't need to worry so much: only one-half of one percent of bats worldwide carry the virus. But then again, most rabies deaths in the U.S. come from infection by bats. The internet brings me this knowledge just as it brings me knowledge of methane bubbles in Siberia or bleached reefs off Australia; I scour it to help me worry. I read books like Moore's that show the close weave of capitalism and ecocide, hoping to understand what is happening to my world and with it, me. Every change feels like invasion, like destruction.

That's how the Southern Reach agency and its new director see the world in *Authority*. The second novel in the trilogy is largely set not in the mysterious, unruly Area X but in a government office building and the small town around it—contemporary, familiar. Throughout the book, most of the characters describe Area X as an advancing enemy, an infection, a mystery to be solved and stopped. The Southern Reach sends scientists and others into Area X as combatants: people whose findings can help them *fight* Area X. The Southern Reach thinks in terms of acceptable losses. If *Annihilation* was recounted to us by someone the nonhuman

world has already turned into a devotee, or just *turned*, like a spy, *Authority* asks us to sympathize with the defenders of the world as it is, even as it positions them as foolish.

“The world” can mean so many things. When Moore in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* refers to “the modern world,” he means the world as a present convergence of systems, the world in “that’s just the way the world works.” Sometimes people use it to mean the human world, or even “the world of humans I consider similar to me”—a limited, slippery “we” or “everyone.” Sometimes it means everyone and everything that is not the person speaking. When people at the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth ask me, “Is it true the world is ending?” (which has happened more than once) I want to know: “Which world, what aspect of the world?”

Their responses provide a key to what they note and what they miss, and the stories they tell about what those things mean. If you can’t imagine living close to where you work, or being able to live without working for wages, you may state with total certainty that people will never give up their cars. If you predict that food shortages will lead to riots, do you envision yourself as the one rioting or the one keeping rioters at bay?

These answers are also sometimes the key to what the speaker *can’t* imagine: if for you a world without wage labor, or shore birds, or disposable diapers, is not a world at all, it takes an extra effort to genuinely picture a world without these things, to treat the question as worth trying to answer. This happens even though plenty of people, throughout history, have lived without those things and live without them at this very moment. Such a world doesn’t even have to be thought up, just thought of.

The role that imagination plays in *Authority*, both for the characters and for us, is different from the role it plays in *Annihilation*. The story itself imagines less, taking the questions of who can know what, of what can be known and how, back into the intra-human realm; most of its conflicts arise from one human trying to dominate another. The factions, the power struggles, the undermining and overreaching and second-guessing of an ordinarily bad workplace permeate and refamiliarize every

interaction, even when the characters are responding to the impossible. In *Annihilation*, when mystery, unease and violence were lodged in and generated by the operations of the extra-human world, it stimulated and thrilled me. To bring the story back in felt like a comedown. *Annihilation* had showed me a way of being other than the one I’m most familiar with, a way to be shaped differently by what surrounds me, and I wanted its sequel to take me further out beyond the borders of myself, not to make a doppelganger of what I already see all around me and what I already do.

The central character in *Authority*, John Rodriguez—also called Control—has been shaped by his world, as we all have. Almost our world in its ecology and its economy, it has made him sensitive to the human components of systems and their power relations, duller to relationships between humans and “the rest of the world.” His context, his contacts, have made him an interrogator, an infiltrator, a seeker after the kind of knowledge that is power; his world has made it easiest for him to be that way, has taught him that he is a protagonist, even when he fails. His sense of what might be affecting him and what he might affect stops too early; his imagination of how the world that shaped him might be changing, thus shaping him differently, is impaired.

It’s become axiomatic—and people talk to me about this at the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth all the time—that we are all complicit, that it is impossible for a human living in an industrialized context to do so without damaging in the long term the systems that in the short term, the length of their life, enmesh them. (*Capitalism in the Web of Life* does a good job of explaining how and why this happens.) Think again of the light I turn on in my dining room, the electricity that runs under and over stolen Narragansett and Wampanoag and Pokanoket land, the power plant churning the turbines that generate it, the molecules of carbon dioxide rising into the air above it to mingle with molecules of nitrogen and oxygen and other elements, joining the others like them to make a

kind of one-way passage for light and heat—like a car on a sunny day with the windows up. Think of that air moving in big, heaped masses that slide over one another, rub against each other and against the water and the land, creating suction and pressure; think of the water leaping eagerly into the warm air as vapor; think of it drawn into a vortex as the air-masses around it sink cool or rise hot, shifting and pushing some of it into a spiral and the rest of it into a long road for that spiral to barrel along, faster and faster, slowed down or nudged sideways a little by other currents but overall gaining speed and muscle as it goes, eventually making landfall and tearing through brittle human-built structures, while the strong carry the weak on their backs through the water. The mark of my hand is on the wreckage of your house—faintly, but it's there—and I keep doing it, I don't take my hand away.

“Sustainable” has become a catchword, buzzy and hollow. But it just refers to something you can keep doing without eliminating the conditions that make it possible to do. Moore also writes about how extractive capitalism “sustains” itself through continual expansion of those conditions, putting off the evil day when there's nothing left to take. This is the version of reality that we inhabit, that makes us and that we make; it describes, too, the version of reality in which most of *Authority* is set. I picked up *Authority* because it was the continuation of a story that unfolded *me* as it unfolded. I picked up *Capitalism in the Web of Life* for a similar reason: I was looking for another way to know the world we've made, and cues for remaking ourselves or allowing ourselves to be remade.

It was particularly Moore's recognition of human activity as entwined with and dependent on all activity, biological and political and geological and economic and atmospheric, that intrigued me. This interdependence (a word that Moore also uses) has been a tenet of Climate Anxiety Counseling since early on, when one person told the story of helping herring over a dam during spawning seasons. Another person, stopping to listen and talk, said, “It weeds out the weak ones,” and began to make some kind of

analogy to the people around him in Kennedy Plaza, the ones smoking and arguing and staring into space.

“Or,” I said when I could, “you could look at it like, the herring get to survive because another species helps them.”

“But who's gonna help us?” he said. And I said, realizing it as I said it, “We're already being helped. The trees help us breathe, the water helps control our temperature, plants and animals help us eat, birds help us not get totally destroyed by insects.” I hastened to add that I didn't mean they were doing it on purpose, or *for* us. Rather, we exist in contingency and by relation. We are wholly interdependent, wholly dwelling in and integrated with ecologies, even if our integration with them is disruptive. And the ruggedest individualist, the most insistent protagonist, is wholly dependent in thousands of ways on the respiration cycles of plankton, on the reproductive organs of plants, on bacterial and fungal digestion, on the filtration systems of water and soil, and on the relationships among all of these.

But a lot works against recognizing this in ordinary life and practice. Jason Moore argues that the oppositional division of nature and society, nonhuman and human, “is directly implicated in the colossal violence, inequality and oppression of the modern world ... and that the view of nature as external is a fundamental condition of capital as accumulation.” It's in our habits of speech: “the environment,” my interlocutors say. “We're in this environment,” the split clear, one the actor and one the backdrop. “If we wanted to make the environment better,” another person said, “we could choose to, but there are these bigger forces that say, ‘You can't make that choice.’”

Area X is frightening in the death it deals out, but it frightens Central and the Southern Reach—the book's power structures—for a different reason: it's immune to their power and opaque to their exploitation, and this causes them to read it as a threat. They can't bear the idea or the reality of a place or force they can't control. Even before the border moves

and the change spreads, transforming more of “the world” into Area X, there’s a sense that the Southern Reach couldn’t stand that Area X was the end of the world in the sense of the *limits* of the world. A boundary beyond which they couldn’t pass, an extra-human ecosystem no human could exploit or appropriate, generating no value. The landscape in Area X is described throughout as “pristine,” apparently free of human influence or exploitation, but a character in *Authority* refers, toward the end, to the “contamination” that Area X spreads into the familiar world; when Control asks what kind of contamination, she responds, “The kind that cleanses everything. The kind you don’t see coming until it’s too late.” Its apparent resistance to, or erasure of, human intervention reads to her as a threat. “What are we going to do, John?” she asks. “Are we going to combat it by starting a mining operation there? Pollute those places to hell and back? Put traces of heavy metals in the water supply?”

She’s being facetious, but this is exactly how extractive capitalism transforms the systems with which it is coextensive. The generations of people drinking and bathing in contaminated water in Flint, Michigan, were “resources” for the auto industry when they worked for little money; they became “obstacles” when they began to demand more (through unionization, through protest, even through the use of social services). The people of the Navajo Nation who’ve been drinking uranium for years are the descendants of “obstacles” to European expansion and exploitation. That version of the world was frightened by them, threatened by them; through violence of the mind and of the body, it transformed them, and itself.

It’s Moore’s lens that I’m using here, and he scorns the suggestion implicit in much writing and many headlines about climate change and ecological degradation: that “capitalism drew wealth from nature and nature will extract its revenge.” We’re more entwined than that, he argues; we do more to produce each other. The sentence I quoted above, about Area X as a contamination that “cleanses everything,” seems to describe that kind of revenge. But the character who says it is known to us at this

point for her half-truths and limited vision, her adherence to the story of the world that Area X is making obsolete as it spreads, altering everything and everyone it touches. I started to read these two books by each other’s light, or in each other’s shadow, because Moore’s assertions about relations, incursions, limits, and mutual shaping seemed applicable both to the worlds (plural) of this trilogy—within the story—and to the imaginative endeavors of the trilogy and of the stories I use to write a new history out of the present one.

When I write an alternate history from a conversation at the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth, I’m imaginatively reordering the future. I’m steering it toward a version of itself in which a person fearful of the future they project, and/or damaged by the present, can thrive. The “how” of the changes these stories propose is sketchy: whatever their scale, their fulcrum often amounts to a change of heart, a change in priorities. In some of them, the biggest thing that happens is an adjustment in perception, a shift from *I* to *we*. Others imagine a convergence of changes at multiple levels, in several people and structures at once: an elderly activist becomes a public mourner for the rainforest *and* Indigenous peoples of Brazil sabotage mining equipment with the collusion of construction workers *and* other people take up the work of weeping when the first mourner dies *and* tapirs, bacteria, seedlings do their share of restoring the forest and soil. The relations among all these, rather than just one of them, make the story and the change within it. In another story, the owners of farms voluntarily share control with the people working on those farms. There, and in a more recent story about the end of the police, I deliberately included a set of choices at all levels—personal, social, institutional—that might provoke some readers to say, “Never in this world.”

The alternate histories aren’t instruction manuals for action—they’re nowhere near grounded enough in the steps it would take to make them happen, and they require not just an inner relinquishment but an outer restructuring. But it matters, I think, which *parts* of a story seem

strange or surprising or unlikely. There are things humans truly can't live without; there are things we could give up easily. There are the things in between, that we think make us ourselves, until something requires us to live without them. And many of these are actions and objects that are historically quite new, and that we can't sustain indefinitely. We think of the conditions that make our world possible—but which aspects of our world? Which conditions might we *want* to eliminate, in order to let other aspects thrive? What about us might be more mutable than we suppose?

Our narrative sense is right to distrust a change of heart, or a change in priorities, away from the practices and relations with which we're most familiar. It's only wrong in not being equally suspicious of those practices and relations as they presently operate. Every time someone says to me at the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth, "It is what it is," or, "What are you gonna do," they are susceptible to and participating in a naturalization of the present, historically contingent moment: the unimaginability of any different way of eating, working, thinking, feeling than the ones we know right now. This may be why Jason Moore's characterization of capitalism as a production of nature, as well as a way of organizing it, makes me nervous: it seems at first to conflate what *did* happen with what *had to* happen.

But he also acknowledges capitalism as historically contingent, dependent on both technologies and ideas: "At the core of the capitalist project, from its sixteenth century origins, was the scientific and symbolic creation of nature in its modern form, as something that could be mapped, abstracted, quantified, and subjected to linear control." Science here becomes a mode of knowing exactly the kinds of things about a place, system or creature that allow you to *use* it, sidelining all other forms of knowledge: it becomes an amputating tool, requiring and enabling a separation of "nature" from "humanity" that doesn't exist. In another sense, science (the kind with European roots) naturalizes that false split—makes it seem like it and the relations it implies have always been there, always been true, always been the only thing that can happen. If you don't change the *way* you tell the story—if you go on paying the same kinds of

attention to the same kinds of things—you can't change the story even though it's *about* a new idea.

Authority contains—creates—intensity and vertigo and distaste and horror and destabilization, but the story itself is not unstable. Things aren't what they seem, but there *is* (it implies) a way that they are that we could understand if we could just get past what they seem. It asks you to read it like a detective, like an interrogator, rather than the way the biologist would. And reading this way, analyzing for a possible solution to the one strange thing in a world that's mostly normal, is very different than reading a world where from the very beginning perception and reality and relationality are called into question.

Annihilation and *Authority* both probe the question of *which* details matter, which are signal and which noise. As *Authority* proceeds, it becomes clearer that almost everyone in it is answering those questions wrong, to a degree that proves their undoing. On his last day at the Southern Reach, Control misses all the signs; up to the moment before Area X inflicts itself on the world he's known, he insists on seeing it in its old light, and realizes his mistake in a visceral shock of contact whose approach he might have seen if he'd been looking for it.

The fear of asking the wrong questions trundles with me downtown every time I go to set up the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth, and sits beside me when I prepare to type up an alternate history. It's a scientific fear: if you ask the wrong question in a scientific investigation, you may miss what's there in your search for what's not there, or you may fail to recognize that stasis is data and that what's not there is what matters. It's a narrative fear, that the story of what happened may diverge drastically and destructively from what actually happened. And it's a fear for survival: in some contexts, focusing on the wrong questions to the exclusion of the right ones can kill you.

"All human activity is environment-making," Moore writes. "The 'thinking' and the 'doing' of environment-making are two moments of a single process." The environment that *Authority* makes is a kind

of rearguard action, a slightly panicked embrace of the familiar. If we reproduce in fiction the mistake, the misapprehension, that we're making in fact, we can watch ourselves die, but I would rather see us change. What else is in us—in us *already*—besides devouring and detritus, panicky greed and its calculations and its garbage, the things that humans have made of the world?

Part 3

MESS AND REVELATION

If what you're doing isn't sustainable, sooner or later you'll have to switch to doing something else. You'll have to change. But you may not be able to change on your own, or think your way out with your own head. The search for thoughts we can't think on our own is a reason to listen and read, and to read, especially, stories that don't reproduce what we already know.

For those of us who see ourselves, in fiction and in life, as figures in a landscape, what encourages us to do so? Who profits, and who loses, by this understanding? It emerges more and more powerfully throughout the Southern Reach trilogy that Area X is not a landscape or a setting, a background or a stage on which humans do important (human) things. It insists, it misrepresents, it distorts, it alters.

In the trilogy's final novel, *Acceptance*, we meet the biologist from *Annihilation* again: not human any longer, but an enormous, loud, barnacle-adorned organism with the ability to move from land to water, from dimension to dimension:

Nothing monstrous existed here—only beauty, only the glory of good design, of intricate planning from the lungs that allowed this creature to live on land or at sea, to the huge gill slits hinted at along the sides, shut tightly now, but which would open again to breathe deeply of seawater when the biologist once again headed for the ocean. All of those eyes, all of those temporary tidal pools, the pockmarks and the ridges, the thick, sturdy quality of the skin.

Acceptance is, like *Annihilation*, a story of transformation. Its three roughly intertwined timelines are full of casualties, and in each timeline

the central figure is changed beyond their possible imagining, to the point where we can't even be sure if they're living or dead at book's end—how their suffering, which we see chronicled in loving detail, has changed them. Pain is information, but it's hard information to interpret as well as to receive. And you may die in learning what it has to teach you.

The stories people tell at the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth reveal again and again the ways that people have been preyed upon and sometimes how they've preyed on others; how being isolated and used have shaped, distorted, formed them, still form them and are killing them, making them simultaneously hungry and incapable of recognizing their feelings as hunger. Potowatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in her book of essays *Braiding Sweetgrass* about the Windigo: a being, or way of being, that devours indiscriminately, that never recognizes sufficiency. What the Windigo does with cold and hunger is to try to make sure it never feels it, no matter whom else that effort destroys. Since this is impossible, it rampages forever.

Kimmerer is explicit about the connection between the Windigo and a particular devouring, profit-motivated way of being human—the practices and structures that Jason Moore delineates in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. “The footprints of the Windigo,” Kimmerer writes, “stomp in the industrial sludge of Onandaga Lake. And over a savagely clear-cut slope in the Oregon Coast Range where the earth is slumping into the river. You can see them where coal mines rip off mountaintops in West Virginia and in oil-slick footprints on the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico.” Kimmerer is adamant, too, that there are other ways of being human—ways that sustain the entirety of the web of life, rather than despoiling ourselves and each other—and that there is time for more peoples to embrace and enact them. Among my own greatest climate anxieties is that that's not true.

Throughout my reading of the Southern Reach trilogy, throughout my stints as a Climate Anxiety Counselor, I've been seeking—earnestly, I thought—a way out of the kind of being human that does damage, a way into another world that I want to inhabit. But so far, I haven't given

up anything I *really* wanted, or was *really* used to. As I type this, I am warm and dry in the first cold days of the new year, warming myself with fracked gas that adds its burnt molecules to the greenhouse effect, rips up the ecological relations in the places where it comes out of the ground and poisons the people who work to get it here. I haven't signed over my house to the Indigenous nations on whose stolen land it rests, or quit my job to stand in the cold with water protectors in North Dakota, or even opened my home to climate refugees or victims of unjust evictions. I ignore the relations that it's convenient for me to ignore. The people I'm dangerous to are people weaker than I am, not the doers of damage.

If being human in this particular, presently dominant way is causing the extinction of many species, including humans ourselves, then one response is to become less human *in that way*. But is it possible to become less human in one way while keeping the others? I don't just mean things like cars and headphones and orange juice from the store. I mean status and hierarchy and certainty and comfort. I also mean, maybe, things like ingenuity and playfulness and even language. *Fiction expresses in words what cannot be said in words*, but maybe even fiction can't help us think the thoughts we need to think now.

In another of her book's key essays, “*Mishkos Kenomawgen: The Teachings of Grass*,” Robin Wall Kimmerer writes of science as conversation rather than interrogation. “I have a question for [plants],” she writes, “but since we don't speak the same language, I can't ask them directly and they won't answer verbally. But plants can be eloquent in their physical responses and behaviors. Plants answer questions by the way they live, by their responses to change; you just need to learn how to ask.” This interspecies, intranatural conversation requires both a methodological framework (here's how we do it) and a theoretical one (here's why). Both in this case require intimacy, more intimacy than one human lifetime can contain: years of proximity to a plant, observations of the ways it grows and dies and responds to other changes. It's why Kimmerer writes of knowledge

gathered over many generations, reaffirmed through practice and adjusted through occasional failure.

Visiting my parents at the house they've lived in since I was nine, I walk out into the yard: phlox, crow, bumblebee, grass and other low plants my parents pay a man to cut with a riding mower. Blackberry flowers, phoebe yelling, woodpecker tapping, jewelweed, monster invasive wild rose. This is my turf. I don't know the name of everything that relates or operates within it, but the wet grass of it clings to my bare feet. Later in the season, I can see what's sickening the peach trees, and how the tulip tree sapling has doubled in height.

I know a little about how to take care of this place, how to give it its due. My mother knows more, some of which she learned from her father, who learned it from his mother: that generational, intimate knowledge is available to me, and I can augment it with my own observation. But the strains that climate change will place on the crow and the tulip tree and the phlox, and the relationships among them, may outpace our knowledge, or theirs. And while I can take all the care I want of this tiny patch, it won't stand up against the great forces that travel elsewhere and pass through this place like the glaciers once did. I imagine the backyard trees leafless in July, the grass dead, the dirt empty, the air scant of oxygen, because of the world, the whole world.

When our knowledge becomes insufficient, we can try to learn more: to adapt. And if our knowledge—by which I don't only mean the kind of knowledge we put into words—becomes insufficient faster than we can adapt, we will die. On a larger scale, this is what biologists and ecologists have been saying for years about climate change, evolution and extinction: that species and the relationships among them can change, but not as fast as other relationships are changing—what the water knows about the air, what the bacteria know about the ground. Back in *Authority*, a scientist introduced the concept of *terroir*, the micro-relations that differentiate a place from another place—that *make* places, causing otters or sparrows or cypresses to live here and not there. In *Acceptance*, a character clings to that

theory (in document form and idea form) as it gets wetter and crinklier, as its use fades: he wants to believe that the local, the particular, matters most, but the changes are getting beyond him.

My mother and I speak on the phone. She knows how I feel, and her love for me makes her want to comfort me. She talks about the grass and other small plants that are growing up through the asphalt of the driveway. "Nature is so resilient," she says. "They really give me hope that whatever humans do, nature can survive it."

A piece of climate-change rhetoric I encounter often, at the counseling booth and elsewhere, is that the earth will be just fine without humans, that it will recover, heal over; that we should be worrying not about saving "the world" but about the end of ourselves. The systems we think of as our background will, we're told and we repeat, become just ground. They weren't "made" for us, and when we're gone, they'll settle into relations among each other into which we don't figure at all. These two interlocutors were, I inferred from their dynamic, a couple:

Her: I'm most anxious that we will keep limping along, just barely enough that no one ever has to really give a shit, that it'll seem not quite that bad until it's just over.

What do you mean when you say "over," like total destruction of planet?

Her: Not even that. That we'll just limp along in shitty ways, destroying cities, more people living without food and water, nobody ever doing anything real about it.

Him: Not the planet, the planet doesn't give a fuck.

Her: The planet will be better after we're gone—our destruction would probably be productive for the planet.

In her last account before fully leaving her humanity behind, the biologist writes, “when I think of writing I glimpse the world I left behind...it still seems a myth, a kind of mythic tragedy, a lie, that I once lived there or that anyone lives there still. Someday the fish and the falcon, the fox and the owl, will tell tales, in their way, of this disembodied globe of light and what it contained, all the poison and all the grief that leaked out of it.”

But if we humans are continuous with nature whether we like it or not, can we partake of its resilience? What changes would allow us to *contribute* to it, and what would we have to give up? Kimmerer writes of learning from plants not just about themselves, but about ourselves: learning to take only what is necessary, adding nuance to our experience of time, modifying our presence through attention to what is. What she writes about is a kind of living to scale and in context, recognizing that relation—interdependence—is reality, rejecting all efforts to conceal or diminish or sever that reality. Once someone points this out to you, you can see it. But even when you see it, increasing the way you live it within—or against—those aforementioned efforts is harder.

As I read *Acceptance* I recognized in myself a vengefulness. I craved a story of a shift in the balance of power within the relations of the earth that came from the earth itself, and the beings it made. I wanted to see the world rise up, I wanted to see how it would happen. And even though I’m trying to believe the people who are telling me that humankind is continuous with the rest of the world, that “mankind” and “nature” is a false separation, I who was raised in the default assumption of that separation found this notion of a restored balance deeply satisfying.

Moore writes, “a species (or biospheric process) that does not have its agency outside itself does not exist.” That is, no creature, no species and no process—explicitly ecological or otherwise—operates in isolation, but is part of a multidirectional push and pull of cause and effect. He’s working toward a point about the falsity of human exceptionalism, but the Southern Reach trilogy literalizes this by creating an agent of change

that’s outside the entire Earth—extraterrestrial, extranatural. All three novels raise this as a possibility, but *Acceptance* is where it becomes explicit.

This made me angry. A story that answers, “Where does change come from?” with, “From outside the world!” is not a story that can offer me a roadmap to changing myself for the world, given only what I see around me and within me. No one promised me such a story. But in *Annihilation*, as I’ve said, I thought I’d found one, even—especially—because it answered my question with a question; in *Acceptance*, it seemed, I couldn’t use it after all. When the fear Area X generates, its power, comes definitively from outside, it gives *us* an out—it relieves us of the need to seek the germ of transformation within us. As someone looking for a way to stay in the world by changing my own nature, I can’t do it if I need an extraterrestrial agency to act upon me—if *more than the world* needs to act upon me.

No human in our world can choose to, or be forced to, literally cast off their human form and become—down to their cells, down to their thoughts—another kind of being. The drastic changes people and systems undergo in *Acceptance* (and throughout the trilogy) are much more fictional than science: it’s as if hundreds of thousands of years of evolution were taking place in one body within the space of a few days, evolution that selects for a world unfamiliar to this one’s readers. And like evolution, this process has casualties. The most overtly science-fictional presence in Area X is the Crawler, an entity who’s also a kind of coalescence of the place’s transformations. It “communicates” through pollen or spores; it “investigates” through a punishing seizure that kills some humans who undergo it and transforms others utterly. Those words are in scare quotes because it’s by no means certain that they are the right words for what the Crawler is doing, or that the Crawler uses words the way that way humans do, or that the Crawler—who used to be a human person—thinks or feels or understands. But to a human, it is monstrous.

The Windigo, once a human, is now a monster too—its heart is made of ice, it is horrible to look upon. Most tellingly of all, Kimmerer refers to it

as “it”, when a few essays back she wrote about the distancing this pronoun produces, how we would never say of our grandmother, “Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair.” She cites a fellow scientist who’ll say, “Someone’s in my hat,” shaking out a deerfly. To a human, this kind of monster is inimical to humanity: like us but different, seeming to be us but not.

There’s a Windigo character in *Acceptance*: of everyone we meet throughout the trilogy, he’s the one who most hates and fears Area X, who most fiercely loves power, who’s cruelest. He’s almost a caricature of a certain kind of masculinity, the kind the world seems to reward; there’d be no reason for him to let go of a way of being human that has served him well in the short term. But he was also part of the first expedition into Area X, and when Area X interacted with his way of being human, it seems to have made him even more monstrous, unstable and destructive. Narratively, we’re clearly supposed to learn from him about how not to be: what you bring into Area X, we gather, makes a difference in what it makes of you. Who was the Windigo before the famine? What did he bring with him to meet suffering? The Windigo is who I think of when my interlocutors’ climate anxieties feature human-to-human violence, riots for food or fights over water, or when they combine with existing stories (about “climate refugees,” for example) that prey on a mix of their fear of scarcity and their fear of difference.

Conversely, the biologist—as she was in *Annihilation* and as she is when we meet her again in *Acceptance*—seems to come through her transformation well, though not without brutal pain and loss. Possibly this is because she’s the one who pays the best attention, who’s most eager to watch and recognize the relational world, even though she misses things and makes mistakes. If the biologist and I met in our world before her transformation, I think we’d get along. She’d be impatient with my lack of method and irritated by my habit of speaking caressingly to other living creatures. But she’s the first fictional character I’ve encountered who, if she could be released from the confines of her pages or I could be translated into them, could have a good sit-down conversation with me about the

finer points of moss. I think that we could meet in noticing, in relishing, the living fabric of the world, that I could point things out to her, that we would both enjoy her telling me more about them than I already know.

And then I write myself into a corner because the biologist comes to me not only through the layers of text that make her a fiction in our factual world, and the layers of text within her fictional world, but on the brink of her transformation, which will make communication in words even less adequate or relevant. By the end of *Acceptance*, the biologist is another kind of creature. She has become science-fictional, impossible, inhuman; we can’t know each other. And the corner I’ve written myself into is my way of being human, the way I do humanity.

Ecologist and climate-science aggregator Guy McPherson gives 2030 as the year that the planet will become uninhabitable for humans. A recent study by the Scripps Institute of Oceanography states that climate change could produce an existential threat to the human species—meaning human extinction—by 2050. Sergei Petrovskii et al have shown that an increase of 6 degrees Celsius in ocean temperatures, which could occur as early as 2100, could prevent photosynthesis in the phytoplankton that produce two-thirds of the earth’s oxygen, suffocating every aerobic organism on the planet. I don’t know what to do with that knowledge. I don’t know what to do because of it. It’s one thing to accept my own death, to know fully that my consciousness as it is will end and other organisms will transform my matter into other states. But how to accept the imminent end of everything that has sustained that consciousness and brought it to joy, to know and *feel* that neither the world nor I will survive each other long?

People were talking to me about climatic tipping points in 2014, when I started doing the Climate Anxiety Counseling booth. They talk about them now. “Deforestation tipping points,” said a woman who spoke to me in April 2016. “Tipping points of rising seas, tipping points with ice melt.” Then and now, they talk about them in a conditional way, something they fear we’re about to reach, not something we’ve already

passed. I've noticed this even in the way that climate scientists talk and write for the public: it's always, "could," "may," "if," "is predicted to." I understand that this is partly because of the way science works—they *can't* say "will"—but I think it sets people afloat: it could, but it also could *not*. It might be okay. Something could save us. So far, I haven't said to anyone, at the booth or away from it, "If you knew that we had passed a tipping point, that we were already tipped, what would you do?"

The world *as we know it*, the rich and full world, is dying. We don't know which aspects of it will die, and we may have more control over that than the most resigned or frightened or greedy among us believe. It's possible that we can't imagine it, the world after the world—that we can only imagine what we would do if we were here. But we *are* here, at the moment. What will our actions be in the next moment? In what ways will they matter, if they can't matter in a human way forever?

Replicating familiar stories wholesale can't help us learn this, and even new stories may not be enough. All three of the novels in the Southern Reach trilogy are lonely: with the best will in the world, the human characters act and react at odds with one another, rarely in concert, even in the face of great violence and grotesque manipulation that affects all of them. That failure of imagination is horribly familiar. I started doing Climate Anxiety Counseling and writing alternate histories partly to keep myself from lying down in the road, but certain roads might be the best place for me to lie down: for example, the road that the trucks want to travel to build a fracked-gas liquefaction facility in an environmentally, economically and racially segregated part of my city. Maybe that would be a better use of my time and my death than telling stories. With a couple of exceptions, I don't know that anyone ever saw the alternate history I wrote for them. The Climate Anxiety Counseling booth allows people to be in relation with me, but it doesn't directly help multiple people be in relation with each other, or learn to act together or with each other in mind, to abandon the aspects of their humanity that falsely separate us from lives other than our own.

Humans are integrated and continuous with the rest of nature: that's just true. But if the definition of humanity depends on the ignorance or rejection of this integration—if the ability to dismiss the rest of the living world is what "makes us human"—that *is* something that could make our continuation, or anyone else's, impossible. And it's possible that living in nature as a collaborator with the rest of it would require the abandonment of what "makes us human," of qualities we think of as essential, "human nature" as separate from "nature." Part of me wanted a story that would show me what such a creature would do next, where it would go, how its recognition of how our relations add up to the world would cause it to act, so that maybe I could act that way too, in unison. Part of me wanted a story of despair, to teach me better how to die.

Caught between them, I turn to the mess and the revelation that the biologist is, the model and the warning of what she attends to and what she misses, her loving and imperfect awareness of living relationships, the responsibility she takes for what's happened and her own role in it. She's willing to become what she can't even imagine, in a context where her knowledge, deep and loving as it is, matters much less than she thought it would. Some of the biologist's humanity—her control, her confidence, maybe even her sense of herself as a *separate* self—is torn from her. Some of it she surrenders, and what she gains is a life of power and freedom, but not a life that's hers in the way she thought her old life was.

I can't do it the way she did. The things I will need to relinquish will be entirely different, and I don't yet know what I will need to accept. And if I'm the only one who changes, any change I make won't matter.

The work of imagining a drastically different future is not optimistic. It's necessary, if we are to change and be changed by our world in ways that allow us to live in it. Acting in unison to make that change—to align ourselves with each other so that mutual sustenance, rather than extraction and exploitation, is our default? Just show me where to go. In case what we bring with us into that zone of transformation will affect what we become, I want to keep listening to people about what they need and what they

dread; in case imagining many possible futures can help prepare us for the one we're making, I want to imagine some that favor drastic shifts toward mutuality and care. But I can't be certain of any of them, and the part of humanity I want and fear to leave behind is certainty. The exact knowledge I crave—that I'm doing the right thing—is the knowledge I have to give up, here at the edge of the story.

AUTHOR BIO



KATE SCHAPIRA is the author of six full-length books of poetry, most recently *FILL: A Collection* (Trembling Pillow), a collaboration with Erika Howsare. She lives in Providence, RI, where she writes, teaches, co-runs the Publicly Complex Reading Series, and periodically offers Climate Anxiety Counseling.



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