Waste Land Awakening

By Molly Hill

I stepped out from the bus into a clear and blustery day, sucking in a breath at the unexpected cold. I was last to leave the vehicle, having claimed the window seat in the very back. I joined my classmates who huddled around the door of the bus, clutching at their coats. We had parked at the end of a dirt road, for the bus could go no farther over the steep mountain. Surrounded on all sides by grass-covered peaks, we looked down onto a complex of buildings, which nestled on the level floor of a small valley. We set off down the slope, following our teacher like a line of gangly-limbed ducklings.

Unaccustomed to walking through windy mountain air and over wild, unpaved ground, we took twenty minutes to finish the quarter-mile walk. We wended our way down slowly, terrified of crushing the delicate, scrubby plants beneath our feet or slipping down the hill.

We reached the bottom, all of us panting and runny-nosed from the chilly sixty-five degree weather. Here we paused; ahead stood the buildings we had come for, tucked bunker-like between the peaks. But it was the mountains rising above us that drew our eyes. From down in the valley, the mountains looked as they must have looked two hundred years ago: golden and infinite and alive. The cloudless sky above them seemed impossibly blue. The complex, despite being the reason for our journey, looked forlorn and small against those great mountains, a desolate and gray ghost of humanity alone in the dry and grassy wild. The buildings were, in fact, the only buildings for hundreds of square miles; no one lived in all that space except for the workers at the complex. The land around it was pale and soft and utterly silent, empty of human and animal presence, entirely different from the gray, hard-edged city we had left. I admit it was strange, even a bit disconcerting, for me to be in a place so empty.

None of us, after all, had ever been in a place so devoid of human presence. We had grown up in a world of endless cities, where farms were the closest most people ever came to nature, and the only birds that flew overhead were ubiquitous feral pigeons. This land, despite its silence,

seemed impossibly foreign and wild to us, who had of course learned the word “wild” in school.

“It started with the mosquitos,” our teachers told us. “That’s when it really went downhill.” It started in 2070 (fifty years ago), when increasing global temperatures allowed mosquitos - and malaria - to rapidly spread north. Genetic scientists, flush with the newfound power of their technology, attempted to engineer malaria-resistant mosquitoes. But changing the mosquitoes’ immune systems made them resistant to other parasites, viruses, and bacteria, thus changing their microbiomes and the microbiomes of the bats that preyed on them. Plagues began to sweep across bat populations, left vulnerable without certain key bacteria necessary to their immune systems. Soon the diseases spread to other mammals while causing a surge of insects.

Our ancestors watched as the world was thrown into imbalance. They blamed it on those genetic scientists. But I think, perhaps, it started earlier when corporations and consumers disregarded scientists’ dire warnings of climate change; perhaps it started with the handy invention of disposable plastics; perhaps it started with the first, mostly-accidental

extinctions of thylacines and atlas bears and million-strong flocks of passenger pigeons.

By 2090, Earth was radically different: the only truly wild things were the hardy little creatures who could survive the new normal of hot temperatures and constant human pressures. But that was not the end of everything because our ancestors discovered, to their general surprise, that an unhealthy Earth led to unhealthy people. Climate change and sea level rise led to wars and millions of climate and political refugees, finally forcing our ancestors to act just when it might have been too late. While governments busied themselves with restoring peace and order to the people of the world, scientists and activists focused on restoring order to the world's environments. Nature, they learned, was resilient; twenty years had not destroyed it completely. Our ancestors established vast parks like this one, and in them built buildings like these, all with the hope that someday things would be better.

We approached the structures, which were surprisingly large up close. A woman, wearing shorts despite the cold, strode out to greet us. "I'm glad you could come."

I followed my classmates with some trepidation. Inside was a sight to behold. Entire ecosystems – forest and salt marsh and prairie and desert – had been constructed here, each supported by countless machines and purifiers and pumps to make them, paradoxically, as natural as possible. These mock-habitats were populated by animals, real animals, their gene pool kept healthy by a frozen gene bank which a few foresighted biologists had collected many decades earlier. Here, sheltered in their bunkers, beneath an empty mountain range, there were bald eagles; beaver and ringtail; tule elk herds and gray wolf packs; cougars and jackrabbits; waxwings and scrub-jays; rattlesnakes and ground squirrels; nests of bumble bees and colonies of black ants; newts and bullfrogs; mockingbirds and towhees; red-winged blackbirds and red-eyed vireos; grasshoppers and mourning cloak butterflies; hummingbirds and yellow jackets; wolverines and raccoons; hawks and glossy-eyed falcons who longed to soar in the open air.

I stared with avid fascination; here were the creatures I had read about and imagined for years. Each of them moved with a quality I had never seen before, an intensity that humans lacked: the quality of wildness.

Yet they were familiar, half-remembered from a time long before I was born. They were beautiful.

My class was the first to arrive that morning. Workers led us through the buildings enthusiastically, pointing out all the species and ecosystems. We passed habitats in miniature, each capped by a window-studded ceiling which could open to rain and close to the fierce summer sun; we walked through the one lifeless building, with its massive compost pile and gray water purifiers powered by solar panels lining its roof; we saw the greenhouse that grew food for the animal and human residents, its plants fed by the compost and fertilized by countless winged pollinators that hummed contentedly in the warm, moist air; we toured nursery rooms where young animals were fed through gloves, so they would remain as untamed as possible in this wild but not-wild place. When we came to the largest building, filled with the flora and fauna native to these very mountains, a man carefully handed me a small, cloth-covered box. I knew what was inside, so I cradled it as if it would crumble at the slightest jostling.

Eventually, other students joined us, as eager and windblown as we were. Each of them was also entrusted with a box like mine. Soon, adult

citizens began arriving as well, many on solar-paneled public trams from cities much farther away than ours: no one wanted to miss today.

Noon had come and gone by the time all the newcomers had arrived. At that point, everyone who was not clutching a cloth-covered box collected a plant from the greenhouses. Together, we flowed out of the buildings, as hundreds of people from all over the world were also doing on that April afternoon.

Across the world, we gathered on riverbanks and mountains, in deserts and valleys and empty fields where there were once trees. For years, these places had been untouched, letting the land be reclaimed by grass and spiders, readying it for this April, this afternoon, this moment, Earth Day 2120. At the feet of those dead and hopeful mountains, I crouched with my classmates and gently set the box on the dusty ground before opening it, releasing the five California quail inside.

The birds hesitated; the four little ones crouched behind their mother. Like all young animals, their eyes were huge with wonder at the vastness of the world. Finally, the mother stepped out onto the sand and paused, her body perfectly soft and still. A moment later, all five raced away. Beside me, the other students were releasing more; hundreds of animals

were soon flocking away to the scrubs and dry grasses and sand of their new landscape. Everyone else was planting seedlings: sycamore, oak, globe mallow, and lilac-flowered sage, which would regrow the forests and meadows. Above us wove a pair of peregrine falcons, the descendants of generations of wild and captive-bred birds, who were screaming and reveling in their new freedom. In the weeks that followed, I would stay in that little valley with the biologists and other students, carefully monitoring the released animals and steadily releasing more. As I watched the dancing peregrines, I delighted in their flight; like my fellow students, I was ready to spend weeks, months, years helping them reclaim the world. But for that afternoon, we simply remained outside.