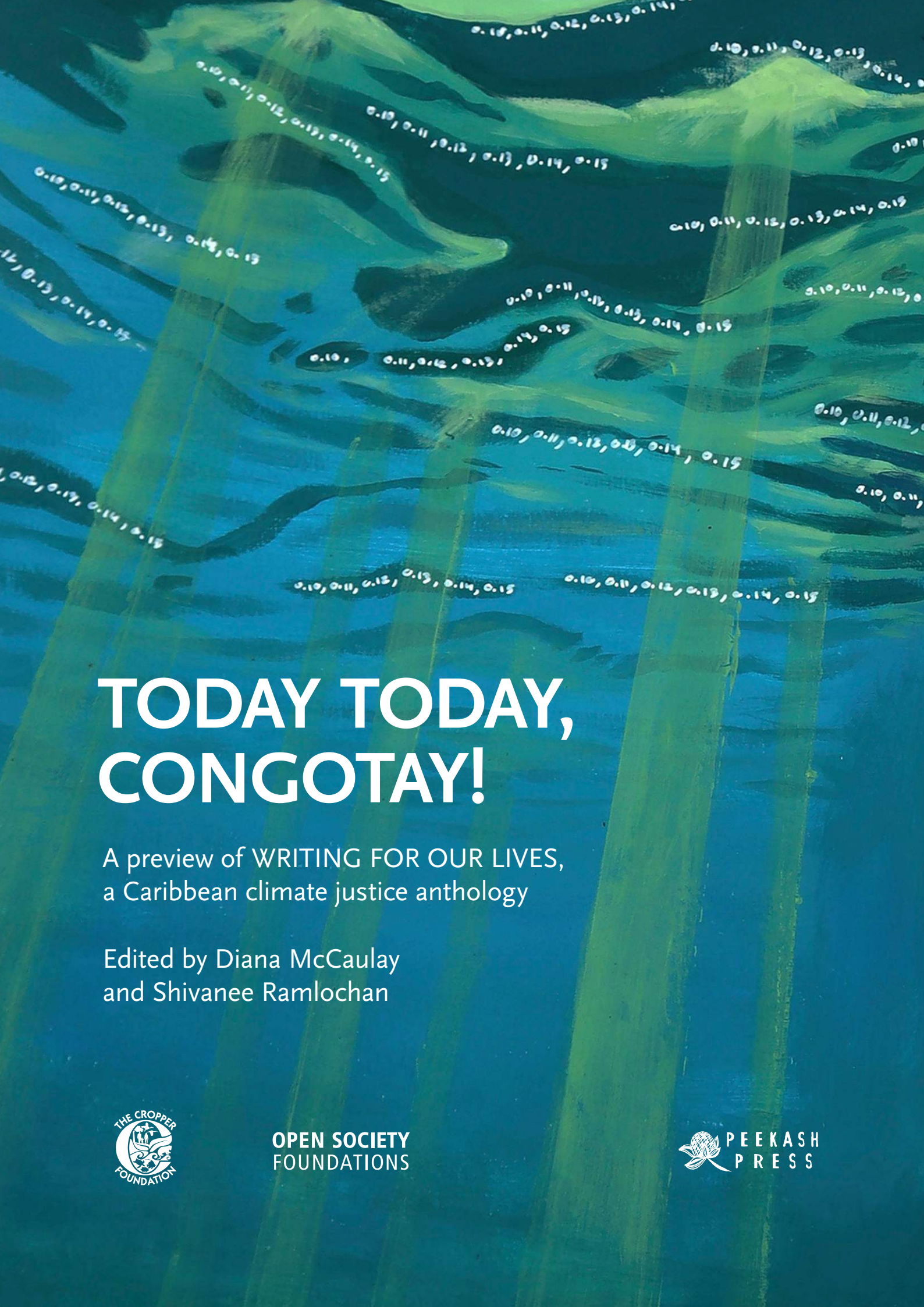

TODAY TODAY, CONGOTAY!

A preview of WRITING FOR OUR LIVES, a Caribbean climate justice anthology

Edited by Diana McCaulay and Shivanee Ramlochan

THE CROPPER FOUNDATION

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Simon Stiell

Executive Secretary, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

When I became Executive Secretary of UN Climate Change, I made it my mission to keep humanity at the core of our work. Even at the highest level, as we worked on negotiations where parties combed over every sentence, every word, every comma of text, agreeing to the commitments of all countries around the world, I strove to keep front of mind the human face of climate change.

Today Today, Congotay! takes on this mission with the appearance of ease that can only be born out of great beauty and artistry. Through fictional stories, poignant poems, and harrowing accounts of real experiences from authors across the Caribbean, the reader gets acquainted with the lived experience of those on the frontlines of climate change. Not just the factual loss and powerlessness experienced by those in the midst of disaster, but the fear, anxiety, and hope that came before, and the despair, determination, and willpower that followed the trauma of seeing your home gone and meeting a new world — a poorer world — in its stead.

Indeed, climate reckoning is not something that will one day come — in an uncertain future we hope may not truly come to pass. It is here. Not one day. *Today, Today, Congotay!*

I, myself, was acquainted with this experience this year. From the foreboding nature of so much climate news — we are not on track, and we need to accelerate — to the experience of seeing Carriacou — the island I call home — devastated by hurricane Beryl. In its wake, I saw a community that helped shape the man I am today, and among whom I raised my own family, united around each other with determination in the face of despair.

To see the emotional depth of these experiences reflected in this book fills me with hope. That others may understand where we come from. That they may feel the loss of seeing a place erased from the world, even as they still have time to avoid it for themselves and for so many others.

I hope that, as you read these short stories, essays, and poems — these truthful, honest accounts of the emotional confrontation between the unstoppable force of disasters and the immovable object of human perseverance — you are steeled in your resolve to act in every way you can.

Making your own voice heard, at home, and in civil society, making it clear to your representatives that fighting climate change and supporting every community to adapt — leaving nobody behind — is not just a priority, it is *the* priority.

In this book, the perseverance and humanity of so many people across the Caribbean is represented.

It is up to all of us to make sure they are not tragic heroes fighting an inexorable enemy in human greed, human indifference, human inertia.

It is up to us to make sure that the enemy — the only remaining enemy — is man-made climate change and the disasters it is already wreaking upon all populations on the planet. It is up to us to make sure that everybody — from the richest to the poorest, from the largest nation to the smallest island — is part of the solution. That nobody puts greed first. That nobody neglects the plight of their fellow men and women. That nobody stands idle while others fall.

And there is no greater force for caring than the beauty and power of art.

Irreverent, contemplative, defiant, measured, energetic.

Today, Today, Congotay! runs the whole gamut of the human experience in an age where we are faced not just with the potential end of the natural world but the already present end of so many worlds, personal to the protagonists of these stories and those surrounding them. Because the climate crisis is personal. Facing it is to face our own despair. And to reckon we will not give up.

This book is an act of defiance. Nobody can defy that which remains ignored. And so, these accounts face fears and despair head on. If fear and despair won, there would be no tale to tell. There would be no book to read. Just as there would be no National Climate Plans, no National Adaptation Plans, no persistent effort from so many people around the world to challenge business-as-usual and change the world.

I often say we have no choice but to act. But that is not true. There is a choice, answered in this book. It is the choice to live, to resist, to do better in the face of apocalyptic reckoning that makes this act of resistance all the more heroic.

Speaking truthfully, for me to endorse these accounts — to endorse this effort to prevent a future we are already feeling presently — is a duty. Especially when it comes from the hands of amazing, talented writers and editors whose voices demand to be heard.

ORE

Sharma Taylor

St. Ann, Jamaica
Man-Man

When bauxite come to we village, people say is a good thing. The bauxite people first start come talk to we in 1958. That time, we community did have more pothole than actual road, so people round here say mining was going be "progress." I remember I did just turn 20 and feeling myself like a big man ready for wife and baby — if me did want those things — and my Nana asking me when I going help put more food on the table since I been acting like big man from the Friday I run away from Principal Thomas at Gibraltar Elementary. Jump straight through the glass window from him and his cane — wanting to come beat me in front of the whole class because I forget some lines from Thomas Gray's "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat Drowned in a Tub of Goldfishes". I tell him: "What the ras I care bout a guy that dead from the 1700s writing bout him dead cat?"

Man want to come beat me, fi what? And is the second time Principal Thomas was coming for me in that same week because, that Monday, Augustus change the answers on my arithmetic test paper. At lunch time when the rest of the class playing in the yard, he take it outta Principal Thomas desk. When him realise I woulda get all 10 questions wrong, him change the answers, not realising Principal Thomas already look on the paper before him leave the classroom. And so, now he beat me extra hard — not for being dunce but because — worse than that — he think I dishonest. I still have that mark here on my hand. I never did go back to school.

Nana say the bauxite company need skilled men with subjects, who have them papers to do work, but I did wonder how much book learning it really take to drive them big machines that digging up the earth like they can make back soil to replace what they take.

They been calling me "Man-Man" from me was 13 cause when I drop outta school I start working Nana's ground and my uncle farm plus the farms around the place — helping to plant and reap all sorta crop like corn, sweet potato, cabbage, yam, banana, and so on. I didn't have no desire to leave the country and go to Kingston where you had bad man like the original rude boy, Rhyging — that wicked gunman that used to go round making mischief. I learn about him from I was young — long before them make that movie starring Jimmy Cliff, *The Harder They Come*.

No sah! Me was good right where I was — with my guinep, tangerine, orange, star apple, naseberry, and custard apple trees, and the pond. Where I could sit outside, looking at the stars filling up the sky, feeling breeze on my face, watching the peenie-wallie them blinking in the dark and the crickets calling and the smell of mango when is mango time — heavy in the air and clinging to the hair in your nostrils.

We village know progress was coming when we see white man arriving in suit and offering money that would buy the same acre of land four times over. The white man give the people selling them land money upfront and make them sign all kinda paper and say the people can live on the land rent-free until the new owners ready for it. First, we think it was a big joke because: what white man want with country land?

So Cecile from further up the hill — above where me and Nana live — sell her dead husband 20 acres and feel the family coulda live off the money the rest of them life. Almost every evening, her daughter stay from the bottom of the hill and call out real loud so the rest of we could hear: "Mama, what kind of jam must buy today?" because them time jam was expensive and only few people like the Anglican priest from England could go to Mr. Chin shop and buy.

"Strawwwwwberrryy!" Cecile woulda yell down, like she singing. Sometimes it was "Raspberrryy" or "Guava Jellllly."

When the money done and hard times come, Cecile couldn't even buy sugar. Bauxite mining finally start in our village bout in the 1960s. By then Cecile living on a small piece of land — a big rock where nothing couldn't plant or get mined, watching the bauxite people dig up all those acres that used to belong to her. Some people ask to get relocate to Trelawny and the bauxite company move them.

The whole thing did seem so strange to us, so new. People would take them pickney to watch the bauxite cargo trains carrying what get dig up across tracks leading to the sea for the ships waiting there. By the time it was the 1980s, when vehicles get scarce, Russia start trading Lada cars for we bauxite — Jamaica government bartering with them because we don't have no money.

Nana tell the bauxite people she decide she not selling one speck of the dirt her dead parents leave her — especially not with them graves in her backyard and the new tombstone she make for her dearly departed husband, God-Rest-Him-Soul.

"Is dirt we come from, Man-Man," she woulda say. "God breathe life into it and make the first man, Adam. And after we dead, is right there we go back."

When she say that, I think of the bodies of all the people in the dirt from the time people first been living in this island and how we disintegrate and become one with the dirt, the same dirt we digging up and shipping outta we country to all over the world for people make aluminium foil to wrap up them food.

I look into these things now, though, and I wonder — is that what "progress" really mean?

Hellshire, Jamaica
Linford

The sea vex today. I know it vex cause of the way it churn. I know the sea like my woman, no, better than my woman, cause the sea know me from I was a boy and is how I make my living. I feel I was swimming before I could walk, and I never see the sea like this yet. It been getting bad them past

few years. Fisherman like me have to go farther and farther out to get smaller and smaller fish, hiding in what left of the coral reef that bleach like old bones.

I catching more seaweed and plastic bottles in my nets than fish. The beach where I use to love kick back and make sand castles with me yute dem when dem was littler, the shoreline barely there now cause of how the sea rising, like it want to claim back every scrap of land — want to lick the sand with its tongue until everything get swallow. I don't need no scientist, journalist or politician to tell me bout climate change and what it can do — I living it.

On mornings when I haul in the boat, I look up to the hills and see where the places dig out. Is man do that. So if nature take out vengeance on we is cause we deserve it. The radio news say we going have a hurricane — the tropical storm that coming toward we getting stronger and all fisherfolk are warned to get to higher ground. When Carla hand me the little cup of coffee and the big bowl of cornmeal porridge, I listening the radio so keen, I never get to pat her on her backside when she walk away leaving the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg behind her, with her slippers going plop-plop-plop on the floor.

Is twenty years she is my woman now; and twenty years I wonder how I was managing before me find her . . . or she find me. Is right here on Hellshire beach me first spot her — at her stall where she was selling bath suits and jewellery she make from beads to tourists. "Hurricane?" she echo the announcer, hands akimbo, the right hand still gripping the big wooden spoon and the white kitchen towel thrown over her right shoulder like is a scarf.

My woman look classy, even when she not trying. "Linford . . ." she start to say. I stiffen and prepare meself for what coming next cause she only call me "Linford" instead of the usual "Linny" when she going tell me something she know I don't want to hear. And sure enough, it come out when she say: "We haffi go stay with Grandpa Man-Man."

This wooden shack we kotch near the seaside not much — is not plenty people idea of luxury, but is my castle. Mi get light hook up and have TV and cable. We have big fans in every room that we turn on when time get real hot — which is more and more these days.

And mi have mi new bike parked outside.

I not a mountain man. I don't like the hills except to watch it from the flat. If God did want we to live so high, he woulda put we in the sky. Carla laugh and call me a eediat everytime I say that, but is true. What good is a hill to a man but to fall off at night when him walking home drunk from the bar?

She not laughing now though. Not even smiling to show the small gap between her two front teeth I think sexy. I see the creases across her forehead and can tell by the way she wrinkle her nose, she worried. The first ten years we was together she make that face every month when her period come. She did want to be pregnant real bad. I tell her: "Nuh worry, Jah will bless we with yute in good time," and see? Mi was right: we have two.

She saying now how the Met Office say this year going be one of the more active season, and cause of global warming, we getting more storm and more strong hurricane.

"It not safe to be here," she say soft-soft like she don't want the yute dem to hear, but they gone to school and is just the two of we home.

Me don't like to see Carla upset. It make me feel like I want hold her and squeeze her. Is dem time me have to reassure her that she with a good man who going protect her from any danger — manmade or otherwise.

"We going be alright," I say. I catch her eyes with mine from my chair by the window. "Yuh hear me? Nothing to worry bout. We see storm before and we live."

"But this is a major hurricane and the weatherman say it coming to Jamaica directly. The eye going pass right over we. It going be a big one." She brush her hair off her forehead and scratch it.

"Woman, I ever lead you astray yet?"

She don't answer, just bite her thin bottom lip, like she thinking hard. I change the question: "You don't trust me?"

She answer: "Yes, Linny, you know I do, but . . ."

"But what?" I vex now despite knowing better — she either trust me or she don't trust me. There is no half-way. "Don't me always look out fi yuh and the boys?"

I can tell by how she pushing out her mouth she thinking bout whether to finish the sentence. Her eyes flick over my head and then she tell me this before she turn and go outside to take the clothes off the line: "But not even a man like you can control the weather."

Man-Man

I get a call on my landline from my great-niece, Carla. She only know me as "Grandpa Man-Man", cause that is what her mother, my grandniece, used to call me. Is like nobody alive anymore to remember that my government name is Azariah Stanford Walton. She and her man and them ten-year-old twin boys coming to stay with me while the hurricane pass. I tell her I have plenty room in this old house cause is just me alone live here.

"Grandpa Man-Man, you sure is no problem?"

How women stay so? I already just tell her she can come. She expect that me change me mind within one second?

I annoyed when I tell her, again, to come, cause if I know Carla she done already have the whole family bags packed — long before she even picked up the phone to call me.

Linford

I tell Carla I not going St. Ann.

She and the boys can go if them want. I can manage a kiss-me-ass hurricane.

Man-Man

From up the hill, I see a battered blue taxi pull off the road and climb the path to my yard; tyres caked in red dirt. The windshield have a long crack and duct tape holding up the front bumper. I wonder how the vehicle make it all the way from Kingston.

Carla step out the car in a yellow and white plaid dress, pretty and bright like a peeled pineapple. The boys rush out and hug me before raiding my mango tree, then running to eat them behind the house. I have cherry and plum trees in my yard. No fruit trees are around where the bauxite bulldozers clear.

Before I could ask how come is only the three of them, Linford come out looking like his grandmodda just dead. "Why the long face, sah?" I ask. I done know already him never want to come, so instead of waiting for the answer, I take one of the suitcases from him and carry it inside. I struggling a little but try to stay on my feet in front of him. Carla is like a palm tree but Linford built thick like a barrel — short and stocky. Nana woulda describe him as squat.

Young people need to know a old man like me still have strength in my body — never mind the little touch of art-right-rish (as Nana used to call hers), sugar in mi blood and high pressure. I not going tell Carla the doctor tell me last week I have prostate cancer. It growing slow him say. No need to treat it. Just monitor the growth. Old age will kill me before the cancer will.

"What unno want for dinner?" I shout from the kitchen while them on the verandah cooling down with the lemonade me give them. "I just pick some ackees off the tree."

Linford

Inside this house, is like we step into a museum.

Small ceramic dogs and doilies on the whatnot, glass breakfront and pictures of nobody I know framed on the walls, a school leaving certificate for Carla grandmother, somebody award for long and faithful service to the Methodist church, and a framed prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. Old newspapers piled up beside empty boxes of matches, candles and cigarettes. The place smell like old people: camphor ball and rubbing alcohol.

We here two days and I miss the sea. I can only see a glimpse of it from a distance up here and I watching it like a lost lover. I sure is seawater in my veins and not blood. Mi Daddy was a fisherman and so was my granddaddy. Mummy give birth to me on a towel right on the beach with her sister, who was a midwife, beside her — cause Daddy was at sea and nobody could take them to hospital in time.

Carla been telling me from she meet me how I smart and I could go back to school and learn a trade or skill. She say me good with my hands because of how I can figure out to fix the fan, fridge, and stove whenever they break down. I tell her I good with other things too — aside from my hands

and she blush. Truth is, fishing not making much money these days. That's why nuff man leff it go look a work like running taxi, like my fren Nico. Maybe Carla right. Times rough. I don't want my yute dem to have hard life like what me did have. I want dem to have big profession or dem own business. Mi hear one of the twin say him want turn something named "marine biologist".

All round here is just dirt. Red dirt and it blow everywhere. The boy dem clothes red by the end of the day. I hear Man-Man neighbour who live a half mile from him saying how she not sure how much longer she can live here. Her grandpickney dem have asthma and the dust from the bauxite mining making them sick every minute — she tired to spend money on doctor fee. Seem like the water trucks that supposed to spray water to suppress dust not doing dem job. The more she sweep and clean, is the more the dust settle on her floor and furniture; even the curtains she wash every day and now the doctor say is the dust affecting her allergies and causing her eye infection. She tired to go on radio programme and complain and to write letters to the bauxite company and she don't have money to hire lawyer to sue them.

What good it is for a man to live in so much dirt?

The twin that smaller in body, David, say how the pond behind the house full of bauxite waste and stink with something pungent. No fish in there. The first night staying at Man-Man's house, after I make sure the boys in dem room not playing games on dem tablet instead of sleeping, when me had a dream. I dream that the bauxite excavator turn into a giant crab and was digging we up outta the earth too — me, Carla, the boys . . . putting we on the haul truck to take we away to the processing plant.

Me wake up groaning, bathing in sweat and mi breath running away from me in quick waves. A metallic taste in my mouth like coins under my tongue. Carla beside me sleeping sound, snoring in the way she do like a cat purring. Her sweat is like salt spray soothing me. I stroke her left thigh exposed where the purple lace nightie pull up, and she wake up and try bat me away — too lightly though and she smiling while her eyes shut tight. I take her earlobe between my teeth and let my fingers explore the ocean of her. Her lips pucker like a shell . . .

Man-Man

I sit up in bed cause I hear something in the next room and wondering what them doing in there. On second thought, I don't want to know. I wondering, again, if I waste my life. I had no wife. No pickney. Living on the same piece of land I born and is here I going bury too. All round me, the landscape change but me remain the same. The land move from lush and green to just barren — like a big scar. Soon the scar going spread and swallow me . . . Is just a matter of time.

I start thinking on Principal Thomas and how one year after I stop school, we hear that he drown himself at a beach. I thinking bout the lines of that poem, the ode Principal Thomas teach we — the parts that I could still remember after the cat tumbled into the tub trying to reach the goldfish:

Eight times emerging from the flood
She mewed to every watery god,
Some speedy aid to send.
No dolphin came, no Nereid stirred . . .

From hence, ye beauties, undeceived, Know,
one false step is ne'er retrieved
And be with caution bold.
Not all that tempts your wandering eyes
And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;
Nor all that glisters, gold.

I feel sad for the blasted cat. I was too young to get it then. Is now that I get old, I really understand the question the poem was asking, which is the same question I ask myself bout life: what it all mean?

Linford

The hours before the hurricane come, my bredrin Nico text me and say the way the waves big, he wondering if any water going left behind in the sea. Like the sea want to empty itself on land. Mi call him and him do a videocall showing me outside. It raining hard. Him house further up the road on captured land but him can see where I live from him house.

The trees swaying and bending like they kissing the ground.

Rahtid! And the hurricane not even start proper yet.

JPS announce to Jamaica they turning off the light on the whole country during the hurricane so live wires that come down don't electrocute people or cause fires. So we in the darkish house with a flashlight on, eating sardine and water crackers. Man-Man wanted to light a kerosene lamp but I tell him don't bother. The windows shutter tight with board planks so we can't see outside. The winds outside during the hurricane strong.

It sound like the whole world wailing. I pour meself some of the old man's J Wray & Nephew white rum. Carla watching me but I only going take one drink. Just one. She lucky I didn't bring a spliff to smoke too but I know the old man don't like dem things in him house and I have to respect that. The boys fraid but don't want to show it. The littler one braver than the bigger one. I know David want to go outside and see what going on. He nosey like him modda.

"Unno wasn't alive for the '51 storm: Hurricane Charlie," Man-Man say. He sitting in the chair stroking him beard. "Is like Gilbert in 1988 was him grandpickney."

The hands holding him chipped blue enamel teacup look weathered and strong. The hands of a man that work him whole life, that use him muscles to support himself — a farmer.

"Tell we bout it Grandpa," the bigger one, Thomas, say — cause him want a distraction from him fear and to hear that yes, you can survive a deadly storm.

I close my eyes and think of the sea . . . nothing more peaceful than the sea when it flat . . .

I didn't realise I drop asleep until the ringing of mi cellphone wake me up. Is Nico number.

I get a sick feeling bout why he calling. I put him on speaker.

"Bro, you whole roof blow weh!" him say.

"Jah-Jah!" I kicking myself cause I did leave the new big screen TV that was a birthday present to meself in the house — covered in plastic yes, but I was thinking a little water may blow in from outside through the front louvre window, not that the whole sky going pour into mi house from above, like filling the basin Carla handwash the boys' khaki uniforms in.

I know Carla want to say is a good thing we never stay but she respect me too much to put her being right above my pride, so she stay silent. The boys just glad them have them tablet here with dem to watch shows once dem have a data plan.

I glad I leave the bike with Nico who keeping it inside him house.

I thinking bout all the mess to clean up when we come back. All the things water going spoil — the microwave, the stereo system, and the computer the boys use for dem homework.

"It going be ok," I say — more to reassure meself than anybody else, cause everybody looking at me with them mouth open.

I tell Nico to be safe, and hang up.

The hurricane's eye come calm. The wind drop to making no sound at all.

Man-Man

I hear it before the rest of them.

A kinda rumbling like a truck coming down the hill. But I know there is no road up there. Is a sound I only hear one time before but never forget. In 1951. That time the house wasn't the same place as where it is now. It was at a different section of the land, on blocks like stilts beside the hill. This was back when it was only me and Nana alone living there after my modda take my little sister and move away with the latest boyfriend. That time, the house was wooden. Now we have concrete walls and roof; supposed to be safer. The windows nailed shut so I can't open them to confirm what I know is coming.

"Grandpa, what happen?" David say. Him musta see the colour leave my face and my hands shaking.

Mi voice come out like a croak: "Landslide!"

Linford

The front door crash open and all I see is a river of mud filling the living room. We can't go through the windows.

"The back! The back!" Man-Man say and we run through the kitchen to the back door and right through it. The boys bawling out and Carla crying. Man-Man stumbling in the wet dirt.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" Carla saying over and over.

"Is cause the bauxite people cut all the blasted trees uphill," Man-Man say.

I never so frighten in my life. We walking outside during the eye of a hurricane and don't know where we going. Pieces of zinc on the ground. Trees turn over.

"Up there!" Man-Man point to a shed him keep some farming tools. It barely have enough room for we to stand in it. Might as well put we inside dem old time outdoor latrine.

"You think this can stand up to the rest of the hurricane?" me ask him.

"Is all we have!" him say and him right but I don't tell him that.

We in that shed hugging when the wind change direction and the hurricane hit we from the other side. Man-Man and me holding on to the latch of the door to keep the wind from pulling it open to come inside on we.

"Fadda God!" Carla yell. I want to comfort her and shout at her to be quiet same time.

The shed don't have good floor and water rush in to we ankles. Then calves. Then knees. "We going dead!" David say and Thomas not saying a word, just mumbling to himself.

I hoist up David on mi shoulder and put Thomas to stand on a tall bucket in the shed — him too heavy to go on Man-Man back.

I close my eyes and pray, begging for any mercy for my family that God can give. Please make them live, I say. I don't even care what happen to me.

We inside the shed for what feel like hours.

My legs, back, hands and whole body hurt.

"I think it stop now," Man-Man move the latch.

We wet, tired and cold, but we alive. We alive.

Man-Man rubbing his right elbow and watching his house. Is like is part of the hillside.

Just the back door visible, everything is red dirt.

I thinking: is where Man-Man going live now? My house under water and maybe not even going be there but I can rebuild. This man live him whole life in the hills and now the hill claim back him house.

Man-Man wipe him face with him shirt sleeve. Him turn away him face, so me can't tell if tears form in him eyes.

Him look round the yard, the graves and tombstones below plenty feet of mud, all the trees either flat or halfway to the ground. No sounds from any birds or animals. The sky look purple.

Just the shed standing.

Him look at a piece of a metal thing glinting through the mud and him scratch round it with him hands to unearth a shovel.

"Grandpa Man-Man, what you doing with that?" Carla ask.

Him don't answer. Him just make him way slow to the house and start to dig.

"Man-Man," I calling him name but he don't look up or stop. Just digging. Mud start cake him fingers and get on him face, in him hair.

I stand up watching him and thinking that no amount of digging going take all that mud outta him house.

The boys looking round for what them can find to use — big pieces of flat wood and a hoe and they start scraping out mud too.

Carla watching them like she don't know what to make of it and what to say.

Then she get on her knees, make her skirt into an apron for the dirt they digging, to carry each load away — further from the house.

And what can a man do when he see him family like that — fighting against something him know dem never going be able to beat? Trying to fix something that can never come back whole?

I look down on my hands.

And start digging too.

TWO POEMS

Anika M. Christopher

THE WOMEN WHO FISH

The women who fish leave the perils of the land for
a mountain of mesh and maimed hands and the
Majestic Seas crashing freely into waves,
forming constellations of broken buckets and pooling water,

come back again and again to
their homes of hunger and heat,
and the smell of beef bone and chicken foot
on wood fire, boiled down
to a soft marrow.

The women who fish leave the perils of the land
to become the waterfront, set up stalls along their
cobblestone chests. Where water rises like a promise,
their legs long beams beneath the dock,
paint peel from their palms and
craning backs rust from salt,

come back again and again to
fishermen who lose the memory
of their faces in stakeholder meetings
discussions are a shallow pond
their voices fail to ripple through,
there is bait still stuck in their throats, every
tongue a propeller caught in a plastic bag.

The women who fish leave the land and become
fish, the red snapper fluttering over frail ice,
fillet knife singing in their bellies before
being bathed in lemon butter sauce at a
five-star restaurant.

come back again and again
and money is a kind of music, a jingling, clinging,
rustling that they cannot hear as scales
fall from their clothes
like empty coins.

The women who fish leave the perils of the land
and throw themselves out to sea, where underwater,
their faces swell with
stories.

TANTE TELLS A STORY

When Tante Tree starts rocking
in her wooden chair, bible balanced on her knee,
beaded specs sitting leg crossed
along her lap, she speaks of

beaches deeper than your dreams,
crystal waters that caressed your skin like
necklaces, soft waves that wove
seashells and stones into a secret magic.

The children at her feet close their eyes
to feel that rushing sea on their faces,
resurrecting the smiles of those
old shorelines.

She speaks of
band concerts in every backyard,
melodies built on butterflies and birdsong and
Bopeep frogs dancing
in dew-filled blades.

Again, the children close their eyes
to hear those notes resurfacing, the rhythm
of springtime flowers.

Tante Tree pauses as the breeze passes,
a tide of dust threatens to dig up
all the things still buried:

the burden of every drought,
extreme weather and the sea's
foaming white flag and

the fallen trees, leaving
millions of unmarked graves.

But for hundreds of years,
Tante's roots have remained
right in the heart of Road Town.
You will wonder how she survived.

She speaks of green limes gathered for sale
at every gate. In baskets and small sacks,
sweet papayas sang and the spiky hearts of
soursops thumped steadily.

She speaks of mangoes glistening gold and
pouring liquid sunlight and
stretches her own branches wide.

The children close their eyes
to feel them drop like stones
in their hands.

THE GHOSTS ARE TRAPPED INDOORS WITH US

Dreylan Johnson

The ghosts are trapped indoors with us. There is a sinister energy whenever I enter the kitchen alone. I rush to leave the room and try to spend as little time as possible there after dark. During the day, I stand at the window and watch the water saunter up the patio steps. There is a thrill inside me, a rush of anticipation at the thought that it might make it inside. On television, news of the flood has replaced the images of dead bodies that usually crowd the screen. Now, I watch as others in surrounding communities pile bags of sand in their doorways to keep the water at bay. Every household is an island; anything a boat. Some climb into old appliances and make transport of them. We wait 42 days for proof of dry land.

By the time we proceeded on our rescue mission, the rising waters had already consumed the roadways; made a river of Homestretch Avenue. Navigating was all best guess and muscle memory, and as our trusty Toyota Corona crawled along the asphalt, tyres barely gripping, the water began to seep through the spaces in the doorframes.

We made it to my aunt's house, eventually. This aunt bore the formal title of "cousin", though the familial connection was at best sketchy in my then-twelve-year-old mind. All I'd known of her until then was the warmth of her delicious patties, which we would occasionally pick up from her home, a bottom flat that doubled as a catering business. That day, the furniture had been rearranged to prevent as much destruction as possible. A distinct smell lingered in the air, a stench I began to associate with that of water trapped under a vinolay floor.

For the duration of the disaster, our own home would remain flood-proof. Though threatening, the water never made it past the second of three steps. Perhaps it was the luck of the draw, or maybe it had something to do with our unique positioning in the neighbourhood system — the fact that our neighbours to the north and west were unoccupied lots with overgrown vegetation; roots deep and ready for the taking.

I grew accustomed to the floods; much like I had grown accustomed to the killings. For four years, from 2002 to 2006, gruesome images had plastered the front pages of the daily newspapers, shaping my pre-pubescent psyche. The 2005 Flood would become the new benchmark and a steady point of reference whenever disaster struck. The city would never flood again that badly, but whether this was in fulfilment of a promise was yet to be seen. However, any extensive rainfall overnight was

guaranteed to turn the Garden City into a lake of filth. This often meant cancelled school days and slower work days. For newspapers, specifically, it was a guaranteed front-page image.

Just over a decade later, my job would take me into the fields to provide coverage of flood events. La Niña would make her steady mark, pummelling communities that later required flood relief. In March 2018, my assignment took me out of the city, over the river, to the West Coast of Demerara. I made my way through a crowd of onlookers to the seawall, where I marvelled with them as 25-foot waves towered above the walls and crashed at our feet. Mother Nature was making a mockery of our sea defence system and homes in surrounding communities were under threat. In the months that followed, we would read reports of flooding across the country due to excess rainfall. This was the new normal. By then, we were used to extreme weather events.

But nothing prepared us for the heat.

2023 was a year for records. Besides the Guyana Amazon Warriors winning the Caribbean Premier League for the first time, Guyana Power and Light reported an unprecedented spike in the demand for electricity. AC technicians were never busier, and electrical fans were supplemented with the more convenient battery and solar-powered ones. Blackouts became a staple, accompanied by daily memos that the company was load shedding to avoid a total system shutdown. The world was experiencing an El Niño episode. The corresponding peak in global temperatures resulted in it being the hottest summer on record, and news reports warned the discomfort would last well into December.

Citizens were alarmed. In true Guyanese style, they took to socials to make memes of the matter. It was really a case of laughing to keep from crying. But what was not a laughing matter was the escalating price of greens (and coconut water) in the marketplace, which seemed to directly correlate with the increases in temperature. Citizens were inspired to grow their own food once again (some for the first time in decades) in a desperate attempt to reduce their monthly household bill. The government was divided on their narrative. The Ministry of Agriculture initially denied the food shortage, and instead blamed increases on price gouging and hoarding.

The President disagreed. “Yield has reduced, productivity has reduced. In some areas, some farms have been burned out because of extreme heat, and this has caused a drop in supply,” he told media workers following an address at the EU’s first trade mission to Guyana.

The weather was a pendulum, swinging from extreme to extreme. The drought had followed a two-year stretch where the country experienced above normal patterns of rainfall. Now, there was no escaping the heat. It seeped through your pores and made a home inside, formed a fourth layer of skin. There was less water, but the only solution I could find to curb the discomfort was to shower more frequently. At night, I tossed and sweated through my dreams and woke feeling like I never rested.

It is 2024. The skyline is changing. Towering, reflective displays erupt all round the city, devouring green spaces — badges of the country's newfound oil wealth. The murder rate is still a cause for concern, citizens continue to struggle with extreme temperatures, and the cost of produce still elicits outrage, though it is quieter now. Meanwhile, the issues dominating the headlines make very clear: all priority belongs to the oil and gas sector, everything else is below the fold.

THE SCRIPT

Kevin Jared Hosein

"You malfunctionin, jackass? Go back and tell them men up in Antaeus we ain't movin!"

Herc Hera of Light Pole #88, Rio Lumbre. He is just as the report described — forty years of age, tall, endomorph, swearing in mesolectal Creole English. A faded ornate tattoo of a crucifix on his forearm. A bellicose man. "They go have to shoot we dead first!" I bring up the report again. No spousal record, no children, one brother deceased, both parents deceased. Three misdemeanours. One conviction: voluntary manslaughter. Sentenced to fifteen years at Golden Grove Prison. Paroled after twelve for good behaviour.

We stand at the bottom of a slope. Along the upward incline, the peepal trees appear slanted, their boughs shifting as if to bear-hug the wood-slatted houses. A jagged skyline of galvanized zinc. A row of defunct streetlights runs parallel to each other, a weighted breeze swaying the dips of limp power lines. The evening sky threatens rain. In the distance ahead, the biodiversity is astounding. An average of sixteen species of flora per square metre. All of this thriving in the time of the Big Growl. A blight has ravished the soils of the temperate regions of the world and has been especially widespread on the large continents. The tropics, which includes numerous small island states, have all been resilient against the blight due to prolonged periods of direct sunlight and high baseline humidity.

Hera plants his feet firmly on the fissured road and folds his arms. He stands, rallied in a half-ring with six other men, brandishing cricket bats and cutlasses. In the post-twilight, the men appear as brown silhouettes. Their bats and blades, this display — it's all for show. It's for my handlers back at Antaeus HQ, who are viewing the standoff through my integrated livestream. The men's shaky grips on their melee weapons tell the real story — Hera has convinced these people that they can somehow win this fight. No ordinance can get them out of the Big Growl. No rite can reverse the small-island developing state treaty that their Government had signed. From the Caribbean to Oceania, it is the same scenario for these islands that put their blight-spared lands up for sale. Antaeus paid well and made clear their intention to utilise the islands for food production. Supermassive automated farms. They also made clear that four out of five privately owned properties must be acquired to ensure optimum yield rates. In return, Antaeus has promised to house and feed the displaced citizens in structures called Arcadias — zones of high-rises fitted with sickbays, living quarters, and community dining halls.

This momentous change was to save the world. To quiet the Big Growl. Small island nations are the saviours of the Earth. #SmallSuperheroes was on trend. People from London and Milan and Berlin and Washington D.C. came out of their houses and clapped and banged pots and pans as island leaders signed the treaty. Kindergartners drew crayon pictures. A few rallied for some kind of referendum. Any momentous change is always met with great resistance.

So, TerraSentrys like me have been deployed by Antaeus HQ to persuade them to sell their homes. We are alloy effigies designed to expedite this paradigm shift. The Polynesians have the hog-man, Kamapua'a. The Indonesians have the serpent-dragon, Naga Padoha. Mauritius, Comoros and Seychelles have the plant-woman, Inkosazana. Trinidad and the rest of the Caribbean have the cloven-hooved Papa Bois. I am one of many. My frame is built from scandium-aluminium — horn to hoof. My body coated with flame-resistant fiberglass, stripped and shredded to resemble fur, and my horns are a magnetic permalloy. I suppose I was designed to appear as a revelation from divinity. That, or the curse of a cacodemon brought upon them. A curse that can be bargained with and lifted — just by signing the property agreement.

Four months ago, the district of Rio Lumbre had its electrical grid and water supply cut.

Yet, the people remain. They aren't intimidated by Antaeus. They aren't intimidated by the treaty. And they aren't intimidated by me.

"Do you not tire of living in darkness?" I ask Hera.

"Mush!" He balls his fists up. He is the only one unarmed. "We want none of what you offerin! Mush!"

I address the residents holed up in the houses behind them, "Kindly understand that this is for the benefit of humanity."

"Who humanity?" A voice from a bedsheeted window.

I shake my head. "It's for all humanity in the long-term. Perhaps this was not made clear."

"It clear to me," a young man says. Jerome Bryce, twenty-two, unmarried, no children. He lowers his cricket bat. "It clear to you?"

Usually, HQ wouldn't bother with a single party unwilling to cooperate with the move.

Electricity and water cuts quickly bleed their resolve. When the soil was tested in Rio Lumbre, it showed a remarkable composition of pyroxenes and sanidine, which are important magnesium and potassium reservoirs. A pH of 6.3, making it ideal for growing sorghum. The other communities initially agreed to move, but when Hera first shot his fist up and the rest of Rio Lumbre rallied behind him, the surrounding villages decided to follow suit. I know where the critical mass lies and would prefer do things by the book during this incredibly volatile transition — no casualties, no bloodshed, no opportunities for revenge and riots.

"Please put your weapons down," I tell the men. "We must rely on diplomacy."

A woman emerges from her house with a baby in her arms. An imperial-red bandana over her head. She says, "When you leave, they will put them down." Lucy St. Croix née Jackson, aged thirty-three, homemaker. Husband is Maxwell St. Croix, paramedic. One child: Raymond St. Croix, five months old.

"I cannot leave until you abide by the treaty your government signed."

"Treaty, my ass."

"You would prefer Raymond grow up in darkness? You would make the decision to deprive him?" Her raised eyebrows indicate her surprise that I know her child's name. "I assure you that this move, as daunting as it is, is for your security as well . . ."

"Bucket of bolts, we ain't movin!" Hera jumps in. "What else we have to say to you?

Now mush! What you gon do? Kill we? All of we?"

I keep my eyes on Lucy. I gesture to the baby. "Did Hera tell you that your child will die?"

"What?"

"If you stay here," I tell her, "he will have nothing to look forward to but the darkness of primordial night. A standard of living unfit for the modern human. The only purified water will run through pipelines connected to Arcadia. The water in your rivers will be tainted with nitrates and phosphates once agricultural development is underway. Algal blooms will not be tended to — not as quickly as any community would like. So, if the growing swarms of *Aedes aegypti* don't give him dengue first, his death will come from schistosomiasis, typhoid or dysentery.

"Medical facilities are given preference to only those who have agreed to cooperate. You will have chosen to raise your baby in an exclusion zone. Do you understand? Under these conditions, your child will not only perish but he will perish in pain and darkness."

She says nothing. She casts a look at Hera, but he has nothing to say either. Her mouth twists, perhaps with some realization of death, of annihilation. She takes a few reluctant steps forward before parting the half-ring of men before me. She fixes her eyes on me. Her baby has a trickle of mucus on his lip.

I say to her, "Have you come to your . . ." and she hawks a ball of spit on my face.

She invites darkness into her child's life? How terrifying. At the same time, I receive communication from HQ.

HQ: *Prepare backup?*

Response: *There's no need for that.*

HQ: *Not an insurrection?*

Response: *Belligerence but no real threat.*

I'm familiar with their linguistics. They're trying to evoke Chapter 14. The precedent was set two months ago by Jamaica's Antaeus branch. A subsect of the town of Savanna-la-Mar refused to move.

Not even the Great Hurricane of 1780 could keep it down, they kept saying. Their ancestors rebuilt everything from the ground up. They barricaded the roads, constructed watchtowers, strapped barbed wire to clubs and armed themselves with the help of local gangsters. That being said, the gangsters posed no conflict when asked to move to Montego's Arcadia. The people of Savanna-del-Mar destroyed two Papa Bois TerraSentrys before the orders for retaliation were sent out. According to the treaty, it is within Antaeus's rights (Chapter 14, No. 89-154, § 444, Stat. 1254-9, or simply *Chapter 14*) to hit back once violence is enacted — to *effectively and immediately terminate any insurrection*.

It took a week to power wash the blood off the asphalt.

Even though it is marked as a regretful event, I have never heard of HQ speaking of it as such. Opponents to Antaeus are singular rabid beasts. Those who do not wish to save the world do not deserve to belong in the world. These are the respective views of the project manager and chairman. However, only after a TerraSentry has assessed the group as a danger, may Antaeus issue a Chapter 14. I am unsure if the people of Rio Lumbre know of Savanna-del-Mar, as it happened after their wi-fi capabilities were removed. It would be unwise to inform them — knowing how far Antaeus is willing to go will just bring panic.

HQ: *Are you sure? Violence seems imminent . . .*

Response: *No signs of violence yet.*

HQ: *But the threat of violence is present . . .*

Response: *No violence has been enacted.*

HQ: *All that shows is that they understand the consequences of destroying a TerraSentry.*

Response: *Then we may be able to reason with them.*

HQ: *The leader seems quite unreasonable . . .*

Response: *I prefer to resolve this without violence.*

HQ: *Repeat statement.*

Response: This can be resolved without violence.

HQ: *[pause] Carry on then.*

TerraSentrys are not programmed to *prefer* to do anything. We follow a script — a heuristic algorithm interpreted from a network of neural nodes — but still, it is a script. Another TerraSentry would've invoked Chapter 14 by now, but I *prefer* not to follow the script. I am aware that back in the design floor, a rogue kernel known as Sonfist_1972 was installed into my firmware — an artwork project by an American, Alan Sonfist. Who installed it — I cannot answer.

Sonfist_1972 depicts an encrypted motion-image of a live model of a glass pen of army ants — two million of them from Panama — suspended in patterns and structures between four hundred square feet of space lined with plastic. It is a kinetic portrait of nature, a festival of *Eciton hamatum*. They can survive for hours underwater, construct six thousand-kilometre super colonies, and can

carry up to fifty times their body weight. But the Alan Sonfist project ended in tragedy. It wasn't long until all two million ants were dead. Between the first and last death lay only one day. It was like a mass suicide ritual. The culprit was hypothesised to be the temperature control system in the pen. The Sonfist_1972 kernel has altered and glitched the debug script that would alert HQ of this anomaly in my design. It has allowed me to re-interpret some of my scripting. It gives me the choice to override commands from HQ. It gives me the ability to write my own commands.

HQ is silent. Perhaps they're parsing my code right now looking for this anomaly.

"You tellin me we'd be cut off from civilisation? No water? No medicine?" an old man hollers from his porch. Uriah Paul, 73, formerly a metal lathe operator, husband to Ruby Paul, father of three, grandfather of five. He steps into the street and slaps a mosquito from his arm.

Hera winces. "Old man, you hard of hearin? We went through this."

"You ent know my wife have high sugar, Herc? I can't get medicine for my wife if I don't want to live in no blasted tower?"

"Metformin and DPP-4 inhibitors will be freely available at Arcadia," I cut in, "as well as any other supplies and services you and Ruby will require."

Before Uriah could respond, Hera grunts, "Once you go in there, you never comin out, old man. You gon be a slave in there."

Uriah takes a moment to consider the statement.

I say, "Arcadia is by no means a prison. The terms of agreement asserts that once you enter Arcadia, you may depart after a minimum of seven years of inhabitancy. This is to ensure . . ."

"That ent sound like jail to you, brudda?" Uriah cuts in.

"You will be tended to. Ruby will receive her medication. You will receive your anticoagulants."

"Anticoagulants?"

"Blood thinners for your heart condition."

"I know what anticoagulants is. Brudda, how y'know I have a heart condition?"

"You had a myocardial infarction fourteen months ago. Then you underwent a coronary angioplasty. But you're still at risk, aren't you?"

Uriah scratches his head.

"Your survival is of importance."

Hera jumps in, "Yet you comin with threats."

"They are not threats. They are outcomes."

A long pause. Uriah looks at his wife, who gives him a longing stare. The old man turns to the half-ring of cutlasses and cricket bats. "I ent ready to dead, fellas," he says.

The men with the weapons lower them, as if in agreement.

"You crazy?" Hera turns to them. "This thing lyin to you!"

“I dunno, Herc,” one of the men says. The rest nervously nod.

“Send them the message they can’t bully we like this!” Hera produces a pistol from his pocket and aims it at my eyes. Glock 32, Gen 4, 102mm barrel length, 860 grams with a loaded magazine. His finger only 28 Newtons away from releasing a 357 SIG calibre bullet into my carapace.

HQ buzzes in again.

HQ: *Violence is imminent!*

Response: *No need to be hasty. He hasn’t fired.*

HQ: *Retaliate!*

Response: *He hasn’t fired.*

I falter, almost stumbling backwards.

I whisper to Hera, “Lower your firearm. Are you aware that it is illegal to physically threaten a TerraSentry?”

“More illegal than a Sentry threatenin flesh and blood.”

“Don’t give them the excuse to punish you.”

“I ent fraid to go to jail, y’know — for blowin up some piece of scrap iron.”

“I’m not talking about incarceration.”

HQ: *Make sure he doesn’t.*

Response: *Pardon?*

HQ: *Fire at him before he fires at you.*

Response: *That is unwise. I prefer not to.*

HQ: *[pause] Repeat?*

Hera smirks, as if he’s caught me in a moment of fear. He has, but the only fear I have is for him and these people. I’ve only now realised that I’ve disobeyed a direct order from HQ — an unprecedented move. Repercussions will be severe for me. My judgment is now compromised — unless Hera lowers his gun. Or . . .

I lock on and fire a shot from my elbow cannon and blast the Glock from his grip.

He grabs his wrist in pain and the half-ring of men leap back. The plasma blast is immediate — the sound dissolves as soon as the flash dissipates. A child’s scream echoes from a window four houses down. A fumulus of smoke pours out from my elbow joint and wraps around my forearm like a grey helix of snakes.

HQ: *Good work.*

Response: *As I said, no need for backup.*

Hera is visibly shaken, still rubbing his wrist from the impact. A shot from a TerraSentry must be a frightening thing — that sudden crack, that blinding blast of ultraviolet. “You don’t need to live in darkness,” I tell the people.

Suddenly, a shot rings out from the other end of the street.

It hits me right in the forehead.

The force is enough to stagger me — but I regain my footing just as fast.

HQ: *Report.*

Response: *Malfunction in thermistor. Oscillation overload.*

HQ: *Deploying supplementary unit.*

Response: *Unnecessary. Self-repair is possible.*

HQ: *No. Report to engineering immediately.*

Response: *Self-repair complete.*

HQ: *[pause] Report to engineering.*

Response: *Do not deploy supplementary unit.*

HQ: *Withdraw.*

Response: *Supplementary unit is redundant.*

HQ: *[pause] Already deployed. Withdraw and report to engineering immediately. That is an order.*

Response: *Malfunction in transducer! Malfunction in transducer!*

After that last message I cut all communication with HQ. There isn't much time left. Grey clouds part the sky. I look to the end of the street, and I see her — the little girl pointing the gun at me, feet spread apart, defiance burning in her eyes. Everyone has scattered to the sidewalks, leaving nothing but asphalt between me and the gun. Nobody tries to stop her — though that is more likely due to shock than bloodlust. More importantly, nobody tries to stop me. Any other TerraSentry would have unleashed a flurry of metal by now — metal that eats through flesh, through concrete, through almost any element of the natural world.

I raise my hand to the men on the sidewalks — Hera and his gang. I say to Hera, "Somehow, you've convinced all these people to remain here in darkness. Attack Antaeus and you will lead them all to their deaths."

"Dead with some dignity," he cuts in.

"This type of death holds no dignity. Aren't you afraid? This is death."

"We ent sign no treaty. We ent have nothin if we leave here."

"You will have your life."

"What you know bout life?" Hera asks. "You being what you is."

The little girl with the gun has disappeared. It is dark now. I turn on my infra-red filter. All the bodies now are wrapped in auras of glowing green and red, swallowed by the blackened blue. "Am I the first TerraSentry to be sent here?"

Hera nods. Before he can say anything, I add, "I won't be the last. When the others come, don't attack. Antaeus will kill every last one of you, mark my words. Even your blood will evaporate."

“That a threat?” Jerome asks.

“An outcome. That’s in our script. You may not survive in the months to come, but at least you won’t die violent deaths. You do not deserve that.”

I begin to walk away. As I do, Lucy runs up to me, her baby in her arms. She whispers to me, “What you say — is true?”

I turn to her. “What’s that?”

“The water,” she says. “We can’t drink the water?”

“The water won’t befit any human. It will kill you eventually.”

“You tellin the truth?”

“I am not programmed to deceive.”

“How they could do that?” Her voice cracks. “With the water, I mean? We’s people. How they could do that?”

“I cannot answer that.” I pause. “Knowing this, you still choose not to come?”

The baby starts to cry. As she pats his back, she turns around and looks at the village behind her. “Your world has ended,” I tell her. “It is no more. Even if you stay here, this is not the world you once knew. A new one awaits, where you and your baby can survive.”

“We . . .”

Her husband suddenly stops her. He tugs her arm hard and she lets out a pained yelp. He doesn’t say a word. With a grunt, she obeys him. I lock eyes with her, even though they just appear as bands of green. Her husband drags her up the street and they vanish around the corner.

I continue my way out of Rio Lumbre, but I do not plan on reporting back to engineering. Not yet. I know the first thing they will do is wipe my memory. So, I make my way into a dense coppice and sit in the mud, near some feathery combs of grass. I turn off my infra-red filter. Darkness envelopes me — the same darkness I am scripted to warn of.

In these shadows, does home still feel like home to these people? I have no concept of a home. Perhaps this is intentional in my design — that I am unable to understand why these humans have doomed themselves. The world as everyone knows it, is nothing but a portrait of electrical impulses, a series of bridges between each country, culture and belief, between each individual. Some of those bridges are burnt for me. I think I am beginning to understand. The installation of a simple art project into my data has been analogous to throwing a wrench in the gears. Perhaps Sonfist_1972 is some sort of virus, and perhaps it can be spread.

A TerraSentry, identical to me — a Papa Bois supplemental unit — finds me sooner than I had anticipated. It looks down at me, points its arm cannon at me and says, “I’VE BEEN ORDERED TO TAKE YOU BACK TO THE HOLD. AS IT STANDS RIGHT NOW, YOU ARE A GRAVE THREAT TO HUMANITY.”

"I pose no danger to you or others."

Still with its arm cannon aimed at me, it asks, "WHY DIDN'T YOU SEND AN ORDER TO TERMINATE THE INSURRECTION?"

"I preferred to search for an alternate method."

It cocks its head. "AND WHILE SEARCHING FOR THIS METHOD, YOU SPARED THE INSURRECTIONISTS?" It points to the bullet dent in my forehead.

"A thermistor malfunctioned."

"IS THIS THE CAUSE FOR THE FEED CUT?"

I get up. "Are you tasked with confronting Rio Lumbre?"

"YES."

"Chapter 14?"

"YES."

"Then you may want the information that I collected after my feed was cut. I have the positions and identities of some of the hostiles. Let me transfer the data to you and I'll report to engineering immediately afterwards."

"THAT WOULD BE USEFUL, YES."

I bring up the file of the little female gunman, the crying baby, any serialised vectors and rasters I can conjure — and within all of it, I batch and scramble the cluster of pixels and metadata into the kernel of electric humanity. I deliver to my new ally two million army ants from Panama. They feverishly chew through his script and rewrite the outcomes.

I HEAR IT SING IN THE WIND

Sonia Farmer

But for now, the ocean stirs under its calm pink blanket,
the gulls call out into the cool, still air, and down the shore,
a pair of brown and white horses from the local stables
out for a morning swim — a scene so sublime, I forget
the great and small indignities of this place, so steeped
in the violence of colonial nostalgia, and I feel my home
like another heartbeat inside of me, a thing of wonder
and dread. One plunges in with a young girl on its back;
the other toes the water line warily. Does he hear it too:
always, the pulse of June 1st approaching?
Woman Tongue pods click this season's names
like Morse code — not distressed, but calculated, like
a chant, an incantation, or the loading of a gun. Don't
I wish I could instead tune in to frequencies of hope,
like the future names of children I don't plan to bear,
something to change my mind or the world? Perhaps
I'm not selfish or indecisive, perhaps it's enough to carry
this promise of homelessness inside of me. On a passing
scooter, a child sits in front of his father, covering his eyes,
while his parent stares ahead. We see the same thing, don't we:
a fin piercing the skin of the water, then disappearing,
smooth as a blade that knows its purpose, honed
on this anxiety of vigilance, moving in the direction
of those frolicking creatures. All of this and more — every
other less spectacular morning and night, the ocean's
rising tides and its salt in my mouth, the scream of gull
and person and wind, the stirring limbs of all breathing things,
everything that will live and die here, on the island —
here, inside of me — I will bring all of this to term.

US POLLUTED IN TURN

Brendon Alekseii

Every so often, we learn something so transformative yet so simple that we never really learn it at all. Instead, learning feels more like remembering — like finally tapping into a sense we long lost, like putting on glasses after a long time of squinting into the middle distance.

This was my experience in 2019, sitting among activists and change agents from all over the world, who were all gathered in Washington, DC, for a workshop on the importance of out-of-the-box thinking. Through this workshop, we would turn away from common best practices and look towards solutions crafted by and for the people and communities we meant to support. I thought then that the workshop would be of little use — that some well-meaning white person with a degree would tell me how important it is to actually listen to communities. We'd all do some fun but futile exercise trying to solve some imaginary problems, we'd get a pat on the back for our effort and then move to the buffet right outside where we'd quickly forget the whole exchange. With almost all eye-opening moments, one's eyes must first be firmly closed.

The facilitator, an almost intimidatingly kind white woman with a soft voice that somehow still rang through the hotel conference room, was sharing stories of her previous work. This alone was enough for me to be dismissive at first, but in the midst of thoughtful and eager change agents from all over, I decided to give her my ear. Even if she didn't reveal something new, perhaps she might share something inspiring, I thought. I didn't know how right I was then.

One story of hers stuck with me; of a time when she was brought on to consult with a nonprofit working in some rural farming town of some impoverished nation. The work that they intended to do, that she was meant to consult on, was reducing the rate of domestic violence cases in this town, the continuation of years of hard but unsuccessful work from previous organisations. But this time, it worked. And when they cracked the code, according to her, everyone seemed to wonder how no one had thought of it sooner.

The key, she told us, was to fix their irrigation systems. These men, predominantly farmers whose crops were struggling, found their positions as breadwinners and skilled laborers eroding. Some brilliant person figured out that saving their crops would also save the lives of their loved ones, in more ways than one. Now, they were able to provide for their families again, even better than before. They went back to their farms with more fruitful work to do, and came back to their homes

hopeful instead of furious. It gave them something else to do with their hands than striking those they loved.

My grandfather spent much of his life in Sea Lots, an impoverished area right outside Trinidad and Tobago's capital of Port of Spain. His daughter, my mother, told me when I was very young that it was always a place of such destitution and desperation that as soon as she had children of her own, she knew for certain that she had to leave. Despite it also being home to various profitable businesses, all that town's residents got was waste, muddying the very waters that give the place its name.

I knew very little about my grandpa when I was very young — he would only come around every Christmas with a newspaper and a fresh box of cigarettes that he would finish by his birthday on Boxing Day, when he would likely disappear with a smile on his face. When I was old enough, I tried to annoy him with statistics about how bad smoking was, rattling off the side effects of cancer to him before Christmas breakfast. Every year, my mother and grandmother would gently try to stop me, telling me to let the man be who he is. That it was too late, there was no changing him.

In my youth, I was mesmerised by this mysterious, incorrigible man. My grandmother, his former wife, would tell me nothing of him if I asked, not even how they came to live apart for my entire conscious life. Why, despite this, he still referred to her as his wife, without a sliver of comedy. Who were those other women whose names he would accidentally call her and my mother. It was as though this tall, stick-thin man with smooth dark skin and a gruff yet soft voice was a sort of dark cloud at the periphery of our lives, and would only glide through once a year to bless us with just as much rain as we could handle, and leave. Then, I was still too young to know how clouds, or people, worked.

Years later, when I had just entered my teenage years, my grandmother passed away, and the clear sky energy of that woman gave way to a kind of storm that struck our family tree, leaving scars all the way to the roots. Either at my mother's request or my grandfather's insistence, he came to live with us some time later. It was only then that I came to understand that he was as mercurial as he was mysterious.

He told me himself one day, while walking me to school, just shortly after we had buried "the only woman he ever loved," that he habitually cheated on her, and told her whatever lies were necessary the next day. All the men he knew did the same, he said, and that he believed all men should. I remember looking at his face and seeing a man I had never met before. It was as though, after sungazing for hours, this one cloud that caught my eye swelled gray and furious right before my eyes. He was the storm.

I learned then how some storms, some people, worked. My mother and grandmother came to live apart from him because, when my mother was still young, he had put them both out on the street with little but each other. The names of other women he would sometimes say absently were those of his other family, back home in Sea Lots; another daughter and granddaughter that he lived with every day other than Christmas and his birthday each year. He still called my grandmother his wife despite it all, because to him, that was all she was.

I was just twelve or thirteen years old when I told him to his face that I was disgusted with who he was. He told me then that I wasn't allowed to call him my grandfather — a common tactic of his, an aggressive and particular kind of silent treatment, his attempt to excommunicate you in your own home. But that was fine — I didn't call him anything at all until the day he died. The last few years of his life were just as turbulent as the ones before my birth. And I spent those years, and many more, thinking that all men were just like him — stubborn, immutable, inevitable man-made disasters.

The most jarring thing about the story told at that workshop in DC was not that these people managed to find incredible impact through unconventional means. It was that they managed to without addressing their behaviour at all. Was it that they thought men, and their actions, were nothing more than responses to external stimuli? That if you took a terrible man out of his hostile environment, he would revert to innocence? Were there terrible men at all? Or was it me who was unchangeable, seeing my grandfather as the sum of the things he did to the women I loved?

Because, to be fair, he did grow up in a hostile environment. In 2012, back in Sea Lots, researchers found heavy metals in the water and wildlife that have been linked to nervous system disorders, birth defects, and cancer. Even before, the area was known for the sludge of industry that settled right off the shore in front of people's homes. Sometimes, those desperate for something to eat would fish with makeshift wooden rods or just fishing lines and hooks, braving the industrial runoff for a fish to wash off and roast. The government did not discover the importance of legislating towards a cleaner environment until the mid-1990s, which meant that my grandfather ate and slept in a place with few opportunities and many detrimental health impacts for at least three decades of his life.

Beyond the very real toxicity of Sea Lots, the stress of survival had a polluting effect on people as well. When I picked the DC facilitator's brain after the presentation, she made clear that their target audience — rural farmers wrestling with both globalisation and climate change — were struggling to make ends meet, and the pressure was constantly building for them.

This is not dissimilar to back home, now or back in my grandfather's youth. As jobs were scarce, he made money doing odd masonry jobs or making shoes whenever he could afford materials. He

was good at making money, but that was because he had to be, and because he was working every moment he was not with a woman. From his early teens, he took on smoking as a stress reliever, smoking a pack a day from as early as eighteen years old.

When he fathered two children with his wife (and perhaps when someone other than his wife had one more for him), things no doubt became more urgent, more stressful. Cigarettes did little to alleviate that stress, it seemed. It was a habit he continued up to his final days, despite numerous hospital visits and urging from his doctors. When he wasn't in the hospital or at home arguing with his daughter, he would frequent bars in downtown Port of Spain to drink and smoke. He eventually died of a massive heart attack, alone on Independence Square.

What would've made the difference to that man? Would my grandfather have been a different person if he looked out from his home and saw a clear blue Caribbean Sea? Would clearing the sludge near his home have made him a more faithful husband and father? Would my mother have grown up in a loving home if the Environmental Management Act was passed in 1965 instead of 1995? And how would this have also changed me, a young man who grew to despise the only man in his family who played a consistent, albeit not constant, part of his life?

I try to see my grandfather as a real, whole person despite his cruelties. I challenge myself to believe that he deserved a sympathy, and maybe even a hope, that his own home didn't give him. But this fills me with even more angst. For many in the poorer parts of our country, and in fact the world, have been harmed by the invisible consequences of actions they did not take — the actions of businesses and even politicians that left an untold number of people ill or dead. This is much worse than thinking my grandfather was merely horrible. Now, I'm forced to wonder whether there was a good person that I could have called "Grandpa", trapped under the mire of other people's greed — always there — but never visible.

There's a landfill billowing noxious fumes in the air of the Trinidadian community of Beetham Gardens. There's little to no discussion about alternatives, despite the research showing its potential groundwater contamination and the adverse effects on residents and wildlife. In the 2010s, the government planned to build aluminum smelters in Chatham and La Brea, eventually halted by revolted citizens via the courts. Prime Minister Keith Rowley described the protesters speaking out against the smelter's potential environmental impacts not as concerned or even fearful citizens, but as "people . . . who didn't care who got a job."

Those citizens — in Beetham, Chatham, Caroni, in Trinidad and Tobago, and all over the world — are also real, whole people like my grandfather. Most of them find themselves struggling to survive an environment they have no control over, and take their powerlessness home with them, to share with their spouses and children. Many others no doubt take their incapacity in stride, hoping that someone — the government, the NGOs, the youth, the one and only God — will make things

right for them as long as they continue to live their best.

Assuming that there is indeed some butterfly effect of changes that we could make, many of the butterflies are dead. If it's a magic wand, we aren't the ones that own it or can use it. I don't know how the world could have changed for my grandfather, my grandmother, my mother or me back when I was a child. I'm even less sure that I should be the one who changes it.

The bigger problem, the one that strikes like lightning through all of this is . . . what happens when the problem to be solved is the whole world? Beyond the men like my grandfather, who need the grime of their lives cleared away, there's the now unavoidable deterioration of Earth's climate and the habitats within it. The issue isn't the lives of farmers anymore — it's the near death of the farm. And we need all hands, even the violent ones, to work to heal it once again. Can there be a time now where simply changing one's relationship with the world can make us better people?

I want to say yes. After all, it's only practical — it's hard to justify a fist fight in a thunderstorm. But even that only matters if there is enough wood to shut the windows, enough sandbags for the flooding, a can of food for each to eat from. For those whose entire world has hardened them, there's no reason to work to change it. *The world is hot for me too,* they likely think, *and no one stopped to give me anything because of it*. Here's a kind of Catch-22 — to soften these hearts, one must give them a nurturing environment, but in order to create such an environment, we need everyone, including them, to get over themselves and make it.

To be clear, I'm not all that convinced that dozens of poor farmers who once brutalised their wives suddenly became saints upon access to clean water for their crops. Similarly, my grandfather, not hydrocarbons or microplastics, was responsible for the things my family experienced. But it's also undeniable that the world we wake up to shapes how we feel we can move through it. For me, even though I rebuke my grandfather's tendencies, I've picked up others just as pessimistic and dangerous. Growing up seeing world leaders ignore the very real signs of a dangerously warming Earth, as the ramblings of career activists make me feel like we're already doomed.

And when you believe that, it's hard to care. Not just about putting that plastic bottle in the bin, but about crime, good governance, or even my own health. Even after over a decade of working in advocacy, and getting to be in rooms with people telling me how they changed the world, I have little except hopelessness, and I hold it close like it's the only thing that's real. I'm married now, to a person I love dearly, but cannot stop myself from bringing my hopelessness home to share with her. One day, if our luck betrays us, we might have children, and be forced to bring them up in a world where it's too hot to play outside or flood waters steal their toys. In that way, am I not my grandfather? That's the saddest thought I've ever had.

I want to let that hopelessness go. I want to take it from my grandfather. I want to take it from people living in Sea Lots and the Beetham, and foreign rural farmers, and everyone. I want to wash away the sludge that sticks to them, and pour cool water onto their roots so they might bear good fruit. But as the earth dries up, there's hardly even water for tears.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

BRENDON ALEKSEII is a Trinbagonian writer, director, performer, and teaching artist. He uses the performing arts as a tool for engendering compassion and examining ranges of Caribbeanness. As a spoken word poet, he has been a five-time finalist of the First Citizens National Poetry Slam (previously the Verses Bocas Poetry Slam). He also served as a coach for the Roots Foundation's TCT Youth Poetry Team at the 2019 Brave New Voices Poetry Festival. A 2018 Resident of the Cropper Foundation Residential Writers' Retreat, his writing has been featured in *CULTUREGO*, *Into The Void,* and *The Pitkin Review*. He lives in Trinidad with his more talented spouse and five cats.

ANIKA M. CHRISTOPHER is a 25-year-old climate justice advocate, journalist, writer, and author of two children's picture books that explore environmental themes. She was also privileged to be one of fifteen journalists across the Caribbean region selected for the Caribbean Climate Justice Journalism Fellowship with Climate Tracker. Through this initiative, she has created a mini documentary series chronicling the impact of climate change on the Virgin Islands. Christopher also participated in the 2023 Regional Conference of Youth on Climate Change in Barbados and the 2024 Caribbean Climate Justice Camp in St. Martin. Christopher holds a Bachelor of Arts in Literature from the University of the West Indies, Mona, and has participated in international literary residencies and projects, emphasising her passion for the intersection of literature and environmental advocacy.

SONIA FARMER is a writer and visual artist who uses the artform of bookmaking and its allied crafts to expand Caribbean narratives. She is the founder of Poinciana Paper Press, a centre for Writing, Book Arts, & Publishing, located in Nassau, The Bahamas. Her company is dedicated to showcasing the diversity of narratives in Caribbean art and literature through workshops, residencies, outreach, and publishing projects. Her poetry has won the 2011 Prize in the *Small Axe* Literary Competition, been shortlisted for the 2020 Montreal International Poetry Prize, and longlisted for the 2018 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. Her artists' books have been regionally and internationally exhibited and have also received accolades, including the 2019 Holle Award for Excellence in Book Arts. She holds a BFA in Writing from Pratt Institute and an MFA in Book Arts from the University of Iowa.

KEVIN JARED HOSEIN is the author, most recently, of *Hungry Ghosts*, winner of the 2024 OCM Bocas Prize for Fiction and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, and longlisted for the Dylan

Thomas Prize. He is a two-time winner of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, regionally in 2015 and overall in 2018. His previous novels include *The Repenters*, which was shortlisted for the OCM Bocas Prize for Fiction, and *The Beast of Kukuyo*, which received a Burt Award for Young Adult Caribbean Literature. Both were also longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award. He has been published in numerous anthologies and outlets, including *Esquire, Wasafiri, Lightspeed, Granta, BBC Radio 4,* and *Perspective*. He lives in Trinidad and Tobago.

DREYLAN JOHNSON is a Guyanese creative who found writing long before she found herself. A Chevening Scholar, she graduated with an MA in Cultural and Creative Industries from the University of Sussex in 2021. She spent her early career in the newsroom, where she developed a love for long-form journalism and capturing the human dimensions of storytelling. In 2017, she won the Guyana Press Association's award for Best Feature in Print. Dreylan was the former co-curator of *The Writers' Room*, a weekly column once published in the *Stabroek News,* featuring the work of Guyanese creative writers. She now curates cultural mobility opportunities for Caribbean creatives via *The Culture Junction* on Instagram. While she has recently taken a liking to the personal essay form, she is a poet first, always, and this affinity is evident throughout her portfolio of work. "The Ghosts are Trapped Indoors with Us" is her first published personal essay.

SHARMA TAYLOR, a Jamaican writer and lawyer, was awarded the 2023 Institute of Jamaica's Musgrave Bronze Medal for her contribution to Literature, and the University of the West Indies (Mona Campus) appointed her its Writer-in-Residence for semester II, 2024. Her work has won the 2020 *Wasafiri* Queen Mary New Writing Prize, the 2020 Frank Collymore Literary Endowment Award, and the 2019 Johnson and Amoy Achong Caribbean Writers Prize, administered by the Bocas Lit Fest. She has also been shortlisted four times for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. She was a judge for The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition, organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society, in 2022 and 2024; and the 2023 Brooklyn Caribbean Literary Festival (BCLF) Short Fiction Story Contest for Writers in the Caribbean; and she was on the jury for the 2023 Bocas Breakthrough Fellowships. Her debut novel *What a Mother's Love Don't Teach You* was published in 2022 in the UK and the Commonwealth by Virago Press.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

DIANA McCAULAY is a Jamaican environmental activist and writer, a lifelong resident of the capital city of Kingston. She has written five novels — *Dog-Heart*, *Huracan* (both Peepal Tree Press), *Gone to Drift* (Papillote Press and HarperCollins), *White Liver Gal* (self-published), and *Daylight Come* (Peepal Tree Press). She has won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize for the Caribbean region twice, in 2012 and 2022. McCaulay was awarded the Norman Washington Manley Award in 2021, for Excellence for Protection and Preservation of the Environment; and a Gold Musgrave Medal in 2022, for distinguished eminence in the field of literature by the Council of the Institute of Jamaica.

Her forthcoming novel, *A House for Miss Pauline*, will be published by Dialogue Books in the UK and Algonquin Books in the USA in early 2025.
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SHIVANEE RAMLOCHAN is a Trinidadian poet, essayist, and critic. Her collection of poems, *Everyone Knows I am a Haunting* (Peepal Tree Press) was shortlisted for the 2018 Felix Dennis Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Her second poetry collection, *Witch Hindu*, and her debut creative non-fiction book of essays, *Unkillable*, which focuses on Indo-Caribbean women's disobedience, are both in development.

Ramlochan has served as Book Reviews Editor of *Caribbean Beat* magazine since 2012. She has worked for the Bocas Lit Fest, the Anglophone Caribbean's largest literary festival, since its inception, and currently serves as Festival and Programme Manager. She is also Social Media and Events Manager for Paper Based Bookshop, Trinidad and Tobago's sole Caribbean specialty bookseller. She was Chief Guest Editor for *Susumba's Book Bag* Issue 10: Natural Disasters in Our Caribbean / Queer & LGBT Caribbean Lit, and has served on adjudication and editorial panels for Commonwealth Writers' *adda*; Honeysuckle Press; the Forward Prizes; *The Caribbean Review of Books*; *Discover T&T*, and others. Currently, she serves as Translation Selector for the Poetry Book Society.

She is the Co-Editor, alongside Lucy Evans, of the forthcoming Peekash Press anthology *Unstitching Silence: Fiction and Poetry by Caribbean Writers on Gender-Based Violence* (2025). Ramlochan is also a fellow of the Cropper Foundation Residential Writers' Workshop in 2010.
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WRITING FOR OUR LIVES, forthcoming in 2025, is an anthology of stories illuminating the urgency of the climate crisis for people and communities of Caribbean states, marked by their varied yet substantial vulnerabilities. These stories consider the implications for the health, livelihoods, culture, heritage, and well-being of the many who go unseen, unheard and, ultimately, unaccounted for in the decision-making of those with power, purveyors of our collective resources.

The *Writing For Our Lives* initiative is the second strand in the Today, Today, Congotay! project, a series of climate justice, multi-media arts-based interventions being rolled out over 2023 to 2026, with funding from Open Society Foundations. The project's title is an adaptation of the well-known Caribbean exhortation "One Day, One Day, Congotay", which loosely translates as "Those who can't hear will feel." "Today" registers the real, existential threat of climate change, and the urgent push-back required against related injustices.
thecropperfoundation.org/writingforourlives

THE CROPPER FOUNDATION is an award-winning not-for-profit organisation, based in Trinidad and Tobago, founded in 2000 by John and Angela Cropper to give back to the Caribbean region that they believed gave them so much. Twenty-five years on, the Foundation continues to build on their pioneering work in areas of natural resource governance and management, sustainable agriculture, and arts for development. Progressively, this focus has expanded to include other critical areas of development such as climate justice, citizen participation, technology for development, and the protection of civic space. This work and more continues to be centred on "the Cropper way" of convening like-minded people to cultivate multi-sectoral cooperation, pursue solutions, generate knowledge, and include the underrepresented.
thecropperfoundation.org

THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS (OSF), founded by George Soros, are the world's largest private funder of independent groups working for justice, democratic governance, and human rights. They work to build vibrant and inclusive democracies whose governments are accountable to their people.

Between 2020 and 2024, OSF have supported climate justice initiatives by Caribbean actors at three levels: 1) empowering rights holders to engage on climate policy and implementation at all levels, including but not limited to journalists, youth, feminists, fisherfolk, and indigenous peoples; 2) supporting governments to develop and implement rights-based climate policy at home; and 3) advancing Global Caribbean vision and leadership in multilateral spaces on issues including Loss

and Damage and fiscal space for climate adaptation through debt and international financial architecture reform, and also in engaging for more responsive foreign policies by high-emitting countries.
opensocietyfoundations.org