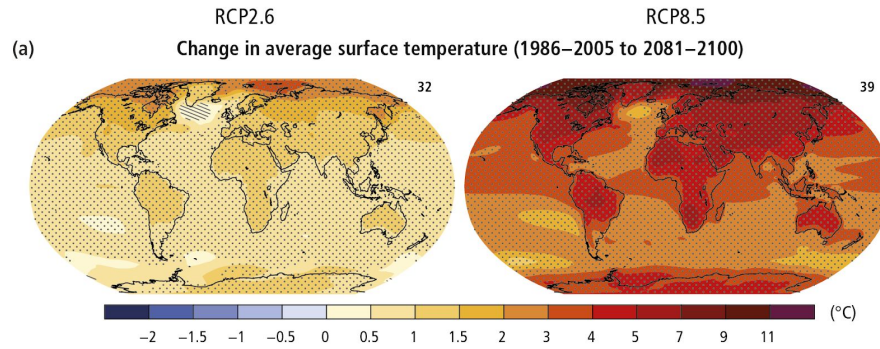


Notes From the Age of Retrospect

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*To the student climate activists that continue to fight for the planet and its future in the face of adversity.*



### *Foreword*

These short stories are told from the perspective of a young woman born and raised in suburban Seattle. Both stories take place during the summer of 2081 and are rooted in the projected changes in average surface temperature for both high and low emissions scenarios as published in the IPCC 2015 synthesis report.

The first story, “A Note on Living Blindly,” explores the future under the low emissions scenario. Though the increase in the Pacific Northwest’s average surface temperature at between 1.5-2°C is substantially less than what is projected under a low mitigation scenario, it still has vast effects on the regional community. Such effects manifest themselves through impacting ecosystems and exacerbating inequality — concepts the narrator had been largely shielded from growing up in an affluent neighborhood. This story explores her reflection of decisions made by previous generations, as well as her endeavours to help her community fight the effects of climate change. The second story, “A Note on Cracking the Universe,” is reflective of the projected 5-7°C increase in the Pacific Northwest’s average surface temperature under the high emissions scenario. In this future, extreme weather events spike dramatically and as such, this story is set in the midst of a heat wave by which the narrator must cope not only with the event itself but with the societal response to it as well.

### A Note on Living Blindly

*Seattle, summer of 2081, Reality I*

They told us it was a feat of humanity; a seemingly inconceivable accomplishment that has made the joint efforts of Generation Y and Z an era to marvel. They taught this at an early age, standing before us in our spacious classrooms while flipping through images from the 2020s. Student climate groups missing school to take part in strikes flash across the screen, followed by young activists marching through our famous cities with signs broadcasting sentiments like “There is no planet B!,” and then images of politicians — the kind who care — talking about a Green Revolution and treaties and what to do when the president chose not to believe the ice caps were melting because of us, the seas were rising because of us, the planet was getting hotter because of us.

They taught it to us like they were trying to sell us dystopian novels, and I gobbled it up like I was at the school book fair. There was intention in this: they wanted us to understand the cruelest “what could have been,” how our planet’s fate once rested on the decisions to be made over the span of just a few years, and how we should feel fortunate all of these decisions had ultimately been made by someone else.

The subject of history, I recall one of my primary school teachers once saying, allows us to learn from our past and know where we are going in the future. I noted even then how his lessons of the climate crisis always ended with a solely rosy ending. To this day I’m not quite sure if that was just because we were young children or because our alternative reality that exists in some not-so-distant parallel universe is so grim we should just be endlessly grateful that our former generations shielded us, the upper middle-class suburban population that is, from what could have been.

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To be sure, the effects of climate change have not been eradicated. The vast shift to renewable energy and the massive drop in carbon emissions was monumental, though not some sort of vaccine that made the world invincible to rising surface temperatures as I had assumed as a child. It took me a number of years to realize that though it was touted as such, the planet was not inevitably granted eternal pause in rising temperatures when the generations before us made their famous changes. Though, I must admit, it speaks volumes that so many within my former community are convinced by this conventional wisdom.

For context, I was raised in a wealthy neighborhood on the outskirts of Seattle. It was a place that could be seen as one where the business pioneers escape the city hustle, where the young and wealthy go to retire after making their millions, where people go who wish to craft an existence of conspicuous consumption as a shield for the occasional dose of reality that slips into their worlds.

We never sat at the upper strata of the neighborhood's wealth or prestige, though at face value simply sharing the same postal code with those who are tends group the whole population together in the same fixed spectrum of societal awareness.

So somewhere inside this spectrum I was raised, learning vaguely about the issues that existed just beyond my neighborhood's welcome sign, though only the sorts of issues that would inadvertently affect the lives of the wealthy. In fact, when topics such as social rights or ongoing poverty were raised, I was always anticipating the connection they held for the parents of my fellow peers, as though they were relevant to our education because so-and-so's mother and father had just begun donating to charities and wanted to be sure we caught the latest headline. Was I growing jaded? Likely so. Was I growing more aware of the world I was living in? Absolutely.

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I walk through the bustling streets, the air around me hot and sticky as it has been for the past several months. Countless self-driving automobiles whiz past me, their coordination between one another and the road a seeming act of technological connection by which each seems to know the precise next move of the others.

As conversations swirl on either side of me, mostly through the virtual medium, I glance skywards and take in the massive skyscrapers that dwarf the space I view them from, untethered to the problems below as the people who paid to build them likely were.

These buildings were constructed out of what I can only assume was a desire for glitz, a way to give Seattle an edge when stacked against the other cities stretching down the southern coast. At least they made them able to withstand high levels of heat.

It wasn't long after I finished school that I moved away from my former neighborhood and into an apartment in the city where I continue to reside today, working as a community organizer in spite of what I am sure my parents had been white boarding out for my future before I could even walk. Of course, going against their intentions never much bothered me, I was just ready to see the world, help those around me, live with more purpose than I felt I had in the past.

Truthfully, I wasn't thrilled about living in the city which had become increasingly overpopulated in recent decades. The explosion of tech giant after tech giant managed to grow the city in ways I don't think anyone could have expected. It was as though with a flip of a switch, the skyscrapers went up, nearly all neighborhoods were gentrified, and there became the pervasive feeling that the only thing that differentiated Seattle from New York and Miami were simply their names. Of course, the history of Seattle is still very much here, as are the varying stories of its people.

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I am now working on community involvement surrounding rising regional surface temperatures in and around the city. Frankly, when I began working on this a while back, I was surprised when I began tucking into the literature, as back in school it seemed any insights we gained about climate change were established on the basis that we had simply suppressed the problem at large, that a warming planet was no longer a matter to lose sleep over.

In reality, when the generations before began making the much-needed changes, we had already pumped too much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and had already surpassed the point where we could simply put an end to warming in spite of the drastic changes in our governments, businesses, and communities. Though it could have been considerably worse, the warming that the Pacific Northwest has seen since the early part of the century has had substantial effects on the people who call it home, even if the most elite and influential members of society don't experience it as part of their everyday lives.

So I make it my mission to speak with as many people as I possibly can whose livelihoods are impacted by this regional warming. Today I venture to meet an older fisherman named John at his home in West Seattle, just outside of Me-Kwa-Mooks Park.

The first question I ask him as we settle into the chairs inhabiting his screened porch is what he feels has been the most noticeable change over time since he began his career.

"The populations of many fish species, especially salmon, have of course decreased quite a lot and will continue to," he tells me with notes of mild exasperation in his voice. "The waters get warmer here in the Puget Sound and it's not long before entire ecosystems are affected, though I should note that I'm sure my family business has been living with that since long before I was around."

I feel for John's experience, not by way of pity but rather through compassion for his situation and the desire to bring it into greater light for others to see.

Following our meeting, I find a nearby coffee shop and prepare for my second meeting of the day, this one with Dr. Demings, a local professor of environmental sociology from Seattle University. After speaking with John, I am eager to get their thoughts on why so many people are increasingly choosing not to address contemporary climate change.

"It seems that much of society is simply content with the shifts we made decades back and are therefore less inclined to address some of the problems that resulted even with these shifts," they explain to me. "Wildfires, heatwaves, droughts, and flooding, they all run parallel to the continued warming we have been facing in recent decades but because they occur far less than they otherwise would have, I believe people now just view them as consequential inevitables and do not see the need for much further exploration."

Dr. Demings' words strangely influence the way I feel about my own family's outlook and about those within my former neighborhood. In many ways they actively chose to ignore societal and climate problems until they stared at them in the face, though perhaps part of this was due to a sense of acceptance and hopelessness that the world was bound to face anthropogenic effects for as long as we are on this earth. Perhaps that's a reality that's easier to ignore than confront until you truly have to. I wouldn't say those words inspired my forgiveness of the ignorance I grew up assuming was correct and appropriate, though they did make me appreciate that everyone experiences the world's climate story differently.

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Since my conversation with the professor, I have been thinking about my own approach to my climate story. For me, being a community organizer in Seattle has been powerful and transformative. It has allowed me to focus on specific people and industries in the local community and on uniting people experiencing the effects of warming temperatures.

My work has also influenced my engagement with the world at large. Each day, I tune into stories around the world to hear about the effects of the warming planet in different regions. I do so not out of feelings of obligation but out of the desire to learn about the realities of those who have had to learn how to cope rather than how to ignore.

I reflect on this as I sit in a local park upon my return from the coffee shop, the blazing summer heat masked overhead by a shady tree. I take in a deep breath, smelling the summer air, listening to the muffled conversations of people talking in the distance, and feel grateful. I will forever dedicate my life's work to learning from others and helping those around me in the ways I can. Their stories remind me that though the tremendous efforts of the past did not miraculously save the planet we had already pushed past the turning point, the will of the previous generations to have made those changes and that of the current generations to fight what those changes couldn't capture is something to marvel.

I tell you, reader, that today's world is one in which we continue to have similar choices to those we had in the past. We may choose to ignore and to forget that the earth is still warming because we think it will bring us peace of mind; however, I assure you that joining hands in recognition of the rising surface temperature will bring us a far greater and more united future.

## A Note on Cracking the Universe

### *Seattle, summer 2081, Reality II*

The heat wave began a few days ago, crashing over the city I call home with about as much care as to whom it swept over as you could probably guess.

I had been busy flipping through television channels, caught somewhere between wanting a program that would distract me from the now and one that would do just the opposite.

“It may be three years away, but folks the 2084 presidential election will come much sooner than we expect,” the news pundit bot said as bright lights flashed across the screen and the age-old Hail to the Chief blasted through the stereo.

I flipped channels and found myself enveloped in news of more wildfires in South America. Each second fed into my desire for knowledge and hopelessness and doom and awareness and - my thoughts were interrupted by the bots reporting the anticipated heat wave. Their voices sound even more metallic, more stagnant when they report what likely will be a death sentence for many.

“It appears the city of *Seattle* will be experiencing yet another major heatwave in just a few days’ time,” one of them said through feigned concern it was crafted to deliver, not covering up for the misplaced emphasis on *Seattle* because there is already no mistaking that this is a pre-recorded message with the name of an entire population’s home simply inserted into it.

“That is correct,” the other machine retorted. “City officials say all who are able to must stay inside their homes starting Monday. Those who want to leave *Seattle* for the duration of the heat wave should do so immediately.”

I mulled over the words “all who are able” and thought about what I would have given to hear them delivered by someone who cared.

I suppose the news could have been mildly shocking if it was a different time, though I can’t say all too many people on this planet today know such a reality. As with anything that plays on a 24/7 news loop, seemingly interrupted only by forced public envy of the world’s most fortunate, extreme heat events in your own backyard caused by increased worldwide surface temperatures start feeling more like they’re par for the course than anything else.

The lack of shock, however, doesn’t signify that the matter will be well managed, though there have been many times I have tried to convince myself and others that we are nearing adaptation. I remember shortly after a previous heat wave a couple years back, I defended the city and state leadership in a conversation with a friend, building my righteous argument on the benefit of the doubt and assuring him that things would improve with the more inevitable experience we gain. He responded as though trying to protect my naivety as you would for that of a young child.



“I certainly hope you’re right about that,” he said, seemingly trying to muster up notes of empty encouragement. “It’s good for you to have faith in our institutions even when they haven’t been giving us much reason.”

His words stung with condescending undertones but before I could allow myself to grow more upset I realized he simply didn’t understand that if I am to lose all my trust in institutional response, then I fear I may also lose my trust in humanity’s ability to cope with our intensely warming planet. I chalk it up to us all getting by in different ways.

I still don’t believe I am running from the truth of the situation when I’m merely holding onto a system like it’s a buoy grounding me in a sea of permanent foreshadowing of the dangers to come. I’m not running, I am clinging to my remaining hope.

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I know it’s nothing to be proud of, but I grew up bitter towards the generations before me. My parents were always keen to say that this was the reality for every generation, that it was natural for everyone to feel that those who came before them were responsible for at least some missteps or missed opportunities but that it should never be something to dwell on. They called my feeling a product of my own retrospect, something that people back in the 2020s and before simply couldn’t have had.

I don’t even blame my parents for having this sort of outlook. They were born into wealth, chose to raise us in an equally affluent neighborhood outside the city that perpetuated its residents' worldviews that if at least they were safe, there wasn’t much sense in harping on what has led others not to be. I moved away from this neighborhood, away from my parents’ perspectives not long after I realized it was blinding me, all of us in fact, from the real world.

Still, the feelings I have toward the former generations and my own family haven’t worn me down, not to a concerning degree at least. In fact, in many ways I credit them for my lasting hope; that those before us didn’t protect us when they could has meant all that much more for us to do it now. I wear this sentiment as my life philosophy, fitting as it would be for my role as an active community organizer, for while I know that we are well beyond the point of return when it comes to the heating of the earth, I choose to focus on the sentiment that we will never pass the point of joining hands and fighting for those who this reality affects the most.

I recall this as I step outside of my apartment building, feeling the blasting air conditioning give way to a sea of blistering heat. Of course, we’re really not supposed to be leaving our homes for the duration of the heat wave due to health concerns, though as I start on my way to the library, a place now known as a “cooling center” more than as a place of books, I ponder whether the city officials also want us to stay home so as not to expose its own shortcomings in caring for people during this time. Disparities

in access would stain a city's reputation, perhaps even force confrontation about the issues, and that would surpass the commitment officials are willing to put into their residents. I suppose my trust in institutional response *is* waning.

I have only to walk the short way to the communal car system in the nearby garage complex, but the air weighs down each step I take, almost as though it's trying to convince me to stay fixed in place, to give into what I can only describe as the sense of enhanced gravity that comes with intense heat. I glance around the vacant streets on either side of me, not looking for anyone in particular but perhaps just a glimpse of movement to make me feel less like a dystopian prop in the universe's latest novel. Alas, no sign of a fellow soul and I am a fugitive in this tale's chapter.

I settle into the first car I see when I reach the shade of the complex, the vehicle flashy red in color as though trying to call attention to itself. I climb in and plug the library-turned-cooling center into the navigation. Feeling the sudden reprieve of resumed air conditioning, I stare out of the window as the car begins to seamlessly navigate the open streets.

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The cooling center is filled with people, and because I had volunteered here before, I recognize several faces as I enter the building. Like everyone else, the people here are trying to stay safe during this time. Unlike the more privileged members of our society, however, they lack the option of shutting themselves in for several days or else fleeing our urban heat island entirely while trying to pretend the issue is farther away from them than it is.

Between tasks I converse with a few of the people gathered near the building's entrance.

"We've never had our own air conditioning," an elderly man said, sitting shoulder to shoulder with his wife. "Of course, many moons ago there wasn't too much of a need for it here in Washington. That'll tell you how much times have changed."

He and his wife exchange nods and forced smiles of the subdued nature. This is something I would later detail in my journal entry; their unspoken state of reflection on a world most have never met but that they used to call home. They had to watch the steady decline, no longer a projected trend but a reality that has turned this library into their place of security.

"Times may have changed in the weather outside but not so much in other ways," added a woman sitting nearby. "The government and most people, they have only ever really cared about how they're going to make it through the day, not so much about how people like me or really any of us here manage to."

It's not a new concept to me, but her words make me question why I should trust institutional response at all when it has done so little to serve the people. I am reminded of the importance of

personally fighting alongside the individuals in this building; us against the climate and us against the people who choose not to care.

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I stayed at the cooling center for the whole day, hearing people's stories and helping in even the small ways I could. I find it to be an escape, not one of fabricated paradise as you would see boasted by the elite, but rather one by which the community is my retreat from longing for a different world.

I step outside the front doors at the day's end and the sweltering air greets me like a familiar symphony of the inescapable. The sky is dark, save for a foggy layer of light pollution overhead that strangeley brings me a sense of comfort, a reminder that everyday life persists even when everything seems to indicate it should be put on pause.

I stand in place for a brief moment, feeling the air surrounding me morph from its otherwise nebulous space into a defined state of being in which I am one with the air but it's never felt so unharmonious. My consciousness drifts to the eerie silence that envelops me. Without anyone else out on the streets around me, I feel as though the drop of a pin could crack the hot pavement, even the whole universe, right in half. I run the image through my mind like I am actually expecting it, then shake my head at my dramatic musings as I start back to the vehicle.

I tell you, reader, that it's not just the heat, not just the prospect of it lasting several more days or weeks. It's not even that it's all become so commonplace that my city is just one title in a list of automated messages warning us of the world we've inherited like it's something we should run from if only we're able. It's the reality it instigates; the quiet chaos that makes me feel empty and empathetic and nostalgic for an actuality I don't know. I yearn for a world that we chose to protect, a world we prioritized above our own perceived needs. I know if I just let go, if I just accepted the situation for what it is, I could at least try to live blindly against the state of the world. I could ignore the news of hotter temperatures, destruction, and inequality, but to do that would be to run from the truth and I remain clinging to my hope that we will never pass the point of fighting for those who this reality affects the most.