

Reimagining the Impossible

I.

A young child, maybe five or six, stands beside his mother, holding her hand, panning his head as a miniature train chugs by.

Phipps Conservatory is quiet right now. It is 11am on a Monday. Most visitors are families with young children. I'm alone, and although I am the only college student here, I don't feel out of place; I feel incredibly calm.

I stand in the doorway of one of the greenhouses. The greenhouse is about the size of a classroom, forty-by-forty feet or so, with high ceilings. Sunlight falls through the glass roof, which is carved and paneled, and refracts the light upon the walls in vibrant shades. The midday light, intensified by the glass overhead, is so strong it reveals every particle floating in the air.

In the center of the greenhouse lies a diorama of the city of Pittsburgh, which occupies most of the greenhouse. It displays a version of Pittsburgh that is overwhelmingly green. Trees fill the space not occupied by buildings. Grass patches and shrubs decorate the ground. Even the buildings have a certain rustic charm to them. Running throughout the scene is a train. "Chug-a-chug-a-chug-a," it whispers.

The young boy is eye-level with the display. At one point in the path, the train tracks skirt along the edge of the diorama. Here, it sings "choo-choo!". This is where the boy stands.

His back faces me. I can't see his face, can't read his emotions, so I use my imagination: Maybe he doesn't get to spend a lot of time with his mother, and he's been looking forward to the outing all week. Maybe he turns six in a week. Maybe he loves trains, and has seen a million miniature trains in his lifetime, but he's never seen this particular one, on this particular day, in this particular place, and that's more than enough for his young heart.

While this scene brings me joy, it does not distract me from why I am here: to learn about Phipps's sustainability efforts.

Climate Change, the *Climate Crisis*, has revealed in recent years a need for urgent, drastic change. While it's easy to avoid thinking about this fact, there's no denying it. Empirical evidence shows that we are on the brink of ecological and environmental collapse.

In August of 2021, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released the 2021 AR6 climate change report. Things looked apocalyptic. It's a long, dense report, and when I found out about it through social media after someone had posted the link, I had no desire to read it. But I knew that if I didn't I would make myself crazy.

I took a deep breath, clicked the link, and started scrolling. I only needed to skim its contents to gather the most important part: we are approaching the end of humanity. I felt at once totally powerless and entirely responsible. The life I had meticulously mapped out ahead of me crumbled instantly. *Why am I in college?* I thought to myself. *What am I studying for? What good is a degree when you're a participant in a mass extinction?*

Two months later, I found myself sitting across from Sydney DuBose at a table in the quad at the University of Pittsburgh, drinking Starbucks, on an 80 degree day in October. Sydney, a fifth-year Environmental Science major at Pitt, spoke of a similar, crushing hopelessness. We talked about the UN report, how devastating it is. We talked about Fossil Free Pitt, a student-led coalition of nearly fifty registered clubs advocating for the University of Pittsburgh to divest its endowment to the fossil fuel industry. We talked about Greta Thunberg, the lid to my coffee that allows you to drink without a straw, Leonardo DiCaprio's 2016 Oscar speech in which he advocates for climate action. We talked about capitalism, Jeff Bezos, the Green New Deal, the fossil fuel industry:

"Did you know," she said, "I want to say it's 100- I'm not entirely sure, don't quote me on this- but just 100 companies are responsible for something like 70% of carbon emissions? I learned that from an article, here, I'll send it to you."

The article confirmed what I already knew to be true. That a relatively small number of corporations are the main culprits for the climate crisis was not a surprise.

In 1989, long before the environment was recognized as or even suspected to be in a state of crisis, Murray Bookchin published an essay titled "Death of a Small Planet." He cites "uncontrollable [economic] growth" as the root cause of environmental damage. In his essay, Bookchin asks: "When does a consistent pattern of inevitable disasters point to a deep-seated crisis that is not only environmental but profoundly social?"

Framing the climate crisis as a web of intersecting systems is essential to combating it. Current economic systems in the US that are built upon models of exponential growth allow

those who yield the most political and economic power to cause the most environmental destruction, while marginalized people and communities reap the consequences.

Consider two maps of the world published by Our World in Data. The first shows where people have the highest carbon footprint, and the other shows the places that will suffer the most from the effects of climate change. The images are nearly negatives of each other; the places that are most responsible for climate change are least affected, and vice versa.

When income and race are factored in, the maps reveal that those who are most affected are largely people of color from countries with low average incomes. This points to an issue of structural racism and economic inequality. Race, income, and other systems are not typically considered in discussions of climate change. This allows the dialogue around climate efforts to focus on the individual, while ignoring the large systems responsible.

This individualization of blame was something that came up quite a bit when I spoke with Sydney.

“Will I even have a family?” she asked me at one point. “Like, is that ethical?”

It’s a question I hear often from people my age, the eighteen to twenty-two range. It feels surreal. We are considering ways to drastically restructure our lives around something that is beyond our control. And it extends beyond ethics. It is also a question of what will be feasible in the future, a future that is impossible to imagine.

Climate anxiety among young people is higher than ever recorded. Youth are more likely to experience the negative psychological effects of climate change than adults (Samji et al). From a biological perspective, young people already have an enhanced vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and depression. But there is a sociological component at play here: we must reap the consequences of things we are not responsible for. We must go about our lives and our education with the knowledge that we are preparing to enter a world that may no longer exist, or will at least look very different.

When talking to one of my friends about climate change, she joked that she did not believe in it. She followed up by saying “I’m kidding. I think climate change is real, but it’s not in our power to fix it.”

This form of avoidant nihilism is common among young people. I understand why she feels this way. Many do. *I* do. But then I think of something Sydney said in response to my question about how being informed on the climate crisis affects her emotionally:

“In certain senses, ignorance would be bliss. But it also makes me kind of hopeful, in a weird way... I guess I’d rather be aware, even if it’s hard, because that’s the only way things will improve.”

II

“We need ways to imagine a future that is possible, because otherwise we don’t know what we’re fighting for, we only know what we’re fighting against. We have to lean into idealism- not to a degree that it distracts, just in a way to remind yourself that what seems impossible is actually possible.”

These are the words of Eden Summerlin. Eden, a second-year student at the University of Vermont, has been involved in climate action and other activism efforts since high school.

For Eden, working towards change does not feel like a choice or a hobby, but rather something they must do. “I need to be doing things that change the culture, and change the way people are doing things,” Eden said. “I don’t see a way that I wouldn’t incorporate this into my life in the future. Otherwise, I won’t *have* a life in the future.”

A large component of Eden’s work in activism, specifically climate action, is the importance of community. Food Not Bombs, a non-profit food relief organization, has a branch in Burlington, VT that Eden volunteers for. Working at a local level allows change to feel more achievable, Eden says. In the absence of community organizing, people often feel a responsibility to fix everything, which leads to guilt, disillusionment, and cynicism. Eden argues that this is an intentional strategy to prevent people from believing that change is possible.

But it is a strategy that can be challenged. By collaborating with others to accomplish concrete, tangible tasks, such as growing and providing food for members of the community who do not have access otherwise, or participating in mutual aid, the weight of responsibility can be turned into energy that inspires change.

Community, according to Eden, is the key to resisting the defeatist narrative, which seems to be the prevailing one in the present day.

The role of community seems to come up time and time again in conversations about climate action. Elise Yoder and Kate Fissell are members of 350 Pittsburgh, an affiliate of 350, an international climate organization.

Both women became involved in the organization around 2015 after realizing how imminent a threat the Climate Crisis poses. At the first meeting she attended, Elise thought to herself, *I'm here to save my species*.

Six years later, things have changed rapidly. Climate change, the Climate Crisis, environmental collapse, have entered the public lexicon. Government officials are now “talking the talk,” as Kate puts it. While this is a step in the right direction, she feels that it is imperative they start “walking the walk.” As daunting as everything seems sometimes, Kate feels that in some ways, “there’s no better time to be alive.” We don’t have time to be afraid, or dispirited, or unmotivated in the face of the Climate Crisis. We have to act.

Elise brought up the role of spirituality in climate work, not in a religious sense, but as a means of being connected to the cause in ways that are personally meaningful. Outside of 350, she helped run several sessions on the teachings of Joanna Macy, a Buddhist activist involved in climate work. Elise, joined with a group of people from the sessions, visited the Pennsylvania Shell ethylene cracker plant in Beaver County, PA. The cracker plant, Elise explains, is a major source of pollution in the area.

They were not there to protest- they had no signs, no speakers with microphones. They were simply there to *view* it. Located on the banks of the Ohio River, the plant is massive. It resembles a small, dystopian city, its cranes, towers, and metal-grated structures like the hollowed-out carcasses of once-finished buildings.

Standing across the river from the monstrous, daunting plant, a symbol of economic growth and ecological collapse, the creation of new jobs and the destruction of all life, Elise reflected on the group’s visit:

“Does this help anybody? Does this help ourselves? Does this help mobilize us?” she asked. “I don’t know. But it felt important while we were doing it.”

There’s no single action that’s going to save our planet. We are working instead with a collective of possible avenues, the synthesis of the profound and the “nitty gritty,” as Elise describes it: the passage of drastic policy change and a plastic bag tax, a passionate speaker

galvanizing a crowd and empirical data derived from hours of tedious research, the spiritual and the bureaucratic, trial and error and experimentation that pushes the pin little by little, every day.

When discussing recent efforts that 350 Pittsburgh has been a part of, Kate mentioned a recent climate march organized through CMU, Chatham, and Pitt.

“Oh yeah,” I told them. “I remember that.”

The day is Saturday, November 13, 2021.

Flyers have seemed to decorate the world around me for the past week or so, thumbtacked to bulletin boards in university buildings, pressed upon streetlights by a layer of clear packing tape, on Instagram and Snapchat stories, abandoned in a South Oakland gutter, crumpled, torn, soggy.

COLLEGE CLIMATE MARCH, their neon green font reads. A cartoon image of the world, the left half light-blue and green, the right half dark-blue and green, takes up the bottom half of the page.

The finer print reads: **Demand Immediate Divestment from Fossil Fuels**. It’s an effort led in part by Fossil Free Pitt, I gather.

I trace my forefinger along the black-and-white flyer that hangs on my fridge. *November 13th 1:00 PM*, I read to myself, although there’s no use checking now, as it is currently 3pm.

I frantically assemble an ensemble of warm clothing. Mask, key, phone, and I’m down the stairs and out my door. I fly down the street, almost running. I weave my way through the walkers on Forbes Ave., and come upon Pitt’s Cathedral of Learning, where the crowd gathers, just across the street. The mass spans a decent amount of the Cathedral’s front lawn, large enough to attract attention from anyone driving by. From where I stand, I cannot make out individual words, only the intense, unmistakable loudness of protest. I cross the street.

Breathless and sweating, I enter into the mass. I look around. Some people are rocking back and forth, nodding fervently, clapping, whooping; some are entirely still. Some tap their foot or nervously scan their heads, like they are searching for something. Some show no signs of coldness, while others shiver and huddle in groups with their friends.

DIVEST NOW, reads a large, neon-orange sign at the front of the crowd. Two people hold either corner and face us, while a woman stands in front and speaks into a microphone. I still cannot make out what it is she's saying. I start to make my way to the front.

Another sign reads: **Why have an education when we have no future?**

I find a relatively empty spot near the front-right, and listen to her. She speaks with a force and vigor that is reflected in her body language- she stands upright, with her shoulders rolled back and chin held high.

Unafraid to criticize the institutions, she cites unfulfilled promises made by the schools and brings to light their lack of transparency regarding fossil fuel investments. Her words are clear and precise, her voice unflinching. Her anger is tangible. I feel it too.

A while back, I talked to Daniel Bain, an associate professor of environmental science at the University of Pittsburgh.

"The thing that I'm consistently bewildered by is the human system," Bain said. "*Why* does it work that way? How can we just get it wrong again and again? What would be a good way to impart this experience so we're not doing the same thing again and again?"

We can get it wrong again and again, and again, and again, we can make the same mistakes and never learn our lesson. But sometimes, even if it is rare, you attend a climate march, organized and led by people your age, attended by people who are both horrified by the fact that we keep getting it wrong and hopeful, confident, certain, that we can get it right.

I think of those people. Eden, and their commitment to fight *for*; not against something, their remark that "humanity is ultimately good." Sydney, pursuing an education in Environmental Science, Kate and Elise, doing what they can with what they have to achieve what often feels impossible. I'm reminded of a James Baldwin quote from his 1963 novel *The Fire Next Time*, a quote I've held on to since I first read it: "The impossible is the least that one can demand."

And then I think back to the child at Phipps. He doesn't know what climate change is. Maybe he's heard the words "climate change," but he doesn't know what they mean, doesn't feel their weight. He doesn't know what the Paris Accord is, or the United Nations, or the Green New Deal. When he looks out the window of the greenhouse, and sees the bridge across the street from Phipps, and beyond the bridge, the smoke stacks from a nearby factory, and the dusty gray material billowing out and dissipating into blue sky, he does not see the damage; he sees clouds.

At the march, the crowd has transformed from a collection of individuals into a community. If only for this very moment, shivering, hands shoved in my pockets, I don't think about the future. I don't think about the collapse of society, the collapse of humanity. I simply exist within a system. And that system will not collapse.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. Modern Library, 2021.

Bookchin, Murray. "Death of a Small Planet." *The Anarchist Library*, Aug. 1989,

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-death-of-a-small-planet>.

"Climate Change and Health." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization,

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>.

"From Stockholm to Kyoto: A Brief History of Climate Change." *United Nations*, United Nations,

<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/stockholm-kyoto-brief-history-climate-change>.

"Green New Deal." *Www.gp.org*, https://www.gp.org/green_new_deal.

Haskins, Justin. "Green New Deal Would Destroy American Dream, Create American

Nightmare." *Fox News*, FOX News Network, 17 Feb. 2019,

<https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/green-new-deal-would-destroy-american-dream-create-american-nightmare> .

"Just 100 Companies Responsible for 71% of Global Emissions, Study Says." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 10 July 2017,

<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change> .

"Popular Education for a Free Society." *Institute for Social Ecology*, 13 Dec. 2021,

<https://social-ecology.org/wp/> .

Richie.turei@hsf.com. “Key UN Climate Panel Issues 2021 Report - Signalling the Way.”

Herbert Smith Freehills | Global Law Firm, 26 Oct. 2021,

<https://www.herbertsmithfreehills.com/lang-th/insight/key-un-climate-panel-issues-2021-report-signalling-the-way>.

Ritchie, Hannah. “Global Inequalities in CO₂ Emissions, Based on Consumption.” *Our World in*

Data, 30 Apr. 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/global-inequalities-co2-consumption>.

Romano, John. “James Baldwin Writing and Talking.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 23 Sept. 1979,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/09/23/archives/james-baldwin-writing-and-talking-baldwin-baldwin-authors-query.html>.

Williams, Jeremy. *Climate Change is Racist: Race, Privilege, and the Struggle for Climate Justice*, Icon Books, 2021.

Wu, J., Snell, G., & Samji, H. “Climate anxiety in young people: a call to action.” *The Lancet*, 9 Sept. 2020,

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30223-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30223-0/fulltext)