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FRONT COVER IMAGE: Kevin Matthew Wong in Chemical Valley Project at SummerWorks, photograph by Dahlia Katz.

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New Earth 17 (Canada and the Andes)
by Daniela Molnar, 2020



*Mourning Climate Loss:
Ritual and Collective
Grief in the Age of Crisis*

by Jennifer Atkinson

Most discussions of our climate crisis begin with the science or the consequences of warming – both of which look increasingly grim: historic wildfires and back-to-back hurricanes, rapidly melting ice sheets, record-shattering temperatures, rising oceans and immense damage to our atmosphere, landscapes and physical health.

But exclusively focusing on this external damage overlooks the landscape of damage we carry inside of us. Living through an age defined by so much destruction of life is bound to mark us by invisible traumas¹. Indeed, “eco-anxiety” and “climate grief”² have become so pervasive that in 2019 the leaders of more than 40 psychological associations from around the world signed a resolution acknowledging the mental health risks of climate disruption³.

Not surprisingly, the most visible psychological impacts are experienced by survivors of extreme weather events. Studies from the American Psychological Association have linked climate disasters to chronic anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, suicide or suicidal thoughts, sleep disorders and more⁴. As always, people of color and marginalized communities on the frontlines are suffering the heaviest impacts from climate breakdown and therefore the most dramatic emotional toll⁵ ⁶.

But one doesn’t have to live through a full-blown climate disaster to experience climate grief.

At the University of Washington where I teach, my students increasingly tell me they don’t want to have children because the future seems so grim. Some have trouble sleeping as their minds play out scenes of social breakdown and mass extinction. And every year, I counsel someone who wants to switch to another major because the prospect of an environmental career seems “too depressing”⁷.

Likewise, scientists talk about falling into depression from documenting so much loss in the natural world⁸ ⁹. And even the general public is reporting significantly increased levels of alarm over climate change¹⁰.

Yet by and large, this emotional toll remains woefully unacknowledged in the way we talk about climate change¹¹ ¹². One reason for that lack of attention is that our Western culture doesn’t really have any established social norms for recognizing – let alone mourning – the loss of nonhuman lives or natural features. When a fellow human dies, we turn to rituals like funerals, memorials and vigils to process that loss. Eulogies are written, sympathy cards sent, and support groups joined. People seek help from books or therapists specializing in bereavement. Together, these customs create pathways for us to reorient our lives in the altered reality following a loss, while offering structure for interacting with community when we are bewildered and disoriented in our grief¹³.

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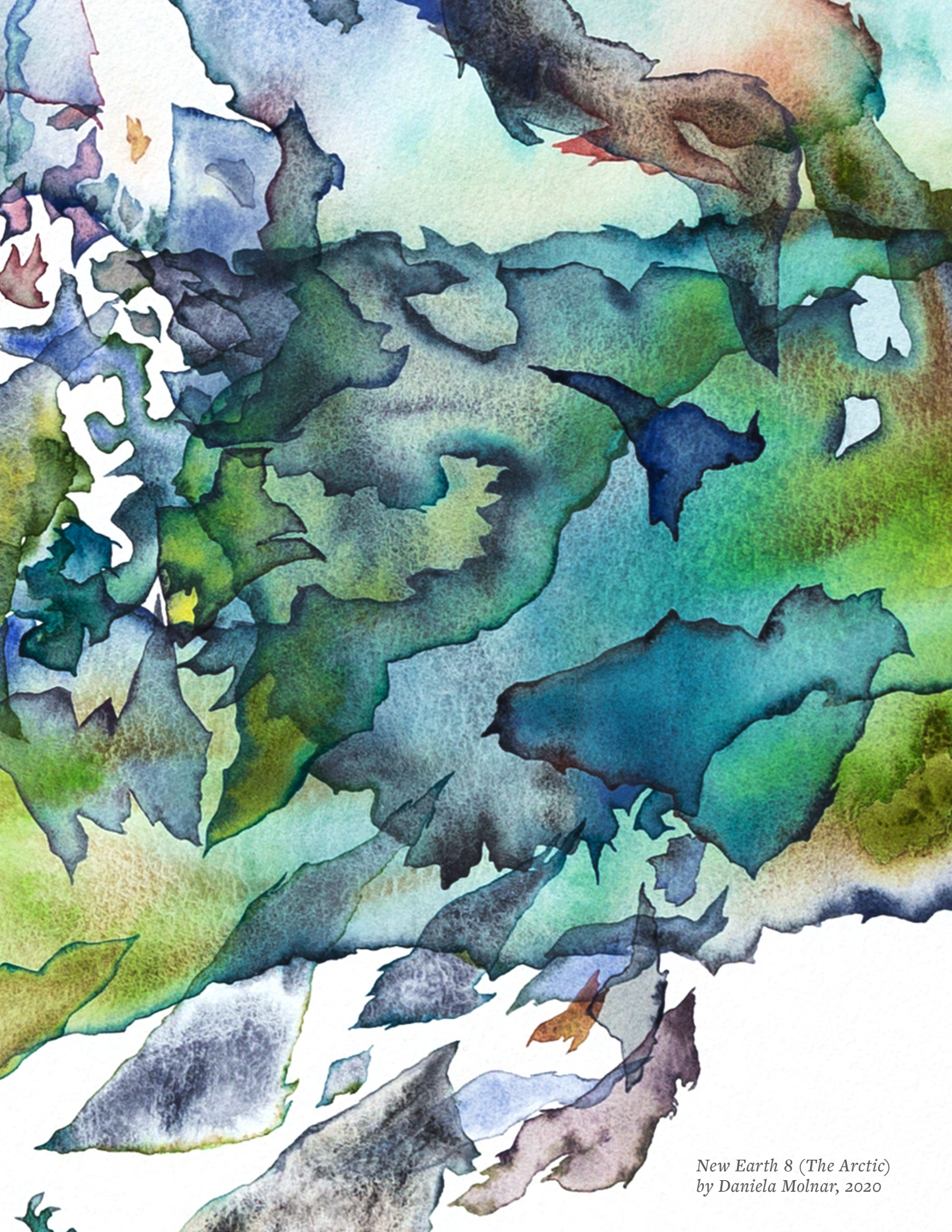
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New Earth 8 (The Arctic)
by Daniela Molnar, 2020



Albatross Mandala
by Chris Jordan, 2010



When someone feels grief for the death of billions of animals in recent wildfires, or despair in the face of our biodiversity crisis or another lost glacier, there are few social structures to support them in that pain. This gives rise to what researchers call “disenfranchised grief” – a loss that’s personally experienced but cannot be publicly acknowledged or openly mourned¹⁴. And that invisibility and lack of legitimacy compound the pain we experience.

Dwelling with Loss

After twelve years as an environmental educator, it became clear that I couldn’t adequately prepare my own students to be effective climate leaders without addressing the emotional impact of the losses we were studying. All the technical expertise in the world seemed useless if students finished our program immobilized by despair, burned out, or in a state of apathy and nihilism. And so, in 2017 I launched a seminar to help students at the University of Washington build the emotional stamina to stay engaged in climate work over the long run.

Initially, there is always great interest in strategies for cultivating personal resilience among those who attend my seminars. And yet time and again, students grow impatient, demanding that we stop “wasting time” talking and thinking and feeling, and just “do” something. Those responses echo a widespread sentiment in the broader environmental movement as well. To be clear, I understand why people fighting climate breakdown and mass extinction want to sidestep emotional issues and rush straight to solutions¹⁵.

14 Norgaard, Kari, and Ron Reed. “Emotional impacts of environmental decline: What can Native cosmologies teach sociology about emotions and environmental justice?” *Theory and Society* 46, Nov. 2017, pp. 463–495

15 Pagnamenta, Robin. “James Lovelock at 100: ‘The new generation of eco-warriors are too emotional.’” *The Telegraph*. 18 February 2020. [telegraph.co.uk/technology/2020/02/18/james-lovelock-100-new-generation-eco-warriors-emotional/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2020/02/18/james-lovelock-100-new-generation-eco-warriors-emotional/)

The situation is urgent, and dwelling on our feelings can seem like an extravagance as the fires close in. But the problem is that when we try to jump straight to the final step without first processing the grief or anger of all this lost beauty and life, we're bypassing the very insights that motivate us to fight for what we love.

Moreover, the rush to action is often a way to avoid the discomfort of dwelling with the deeper implications of climate injustice and mass extinction. Our culture's fixation on solutions and practical action often comes at the expense of reflection, feeling, and empathetic investment – all of which are essential to the inner work needed for culture shift. Ecological grief involves a specific kind of pain precisely because it requires us to come to terms with what it means to be human in an age of unprecedented assault on life. As such, collective and individual mourning are not opposed to practical action; they are the very basis of any sustained and meaningful response.

Thom van Dooren and Deborah Rose have written powerfully about this perceived tension between action and reflection, particularly in relation to the extinction crisis¹⁶. They see the growing scientific movement for “de-extinction” (the effort to bring back lost species in a Jurassic Park fashion) as a means to sidestep the very moral reckoning needed to confront our destructive way of life. In a popular TED Talk on de-extinction, for example, environmentalist Stewart Brand opens with a dramatic roll-call of the iconic species driven into oblivion by human activity, and then asks his audience what those losses elicit for them: “Sorrow, anger, mourning? Don't mourn, organize,” he implores¹⁷.

Brand's call to action is not problematic in itself, van Dooren and Rose argue; “but when it is presented as an alternative to a meaningful and empathetic engagement, something is wrong,” they write¹⁸. Indeed, Brand's remarks misunderstand the very nature of grief, suggesting that it somehow delays or impairs effective response. Yet as countless psychologists and wisdom traditions remind us, sitting with grief is a necessary part of recognizing and internalizing the new reality we inhabit in the wake of a loss. In time, that process helps us come to terms with everything we will have to let go of, and all the ways our lives will be reorganized by a loss. In short, mourning is a process of “relearning the world,” as van Dooren and Rose put it. And in the context of our biodiversity crisis, they regard the commitment to “dwelling” with extinction – “taking it seriously, not rushing to overcome it”— as perhaps “the more important political and ethical work for our time,” because it compels us to face how “we must ourselves change and renew our relationships if we are to move forward from here”¹⁹.

Such forms of “action” are qualitatively different from those privileged in a culture characterized by constant activity and the urge to do something – especially when such actions are immediate and involve visible results (like the creation of new technologies). Yet that culture of “false motion”²⁰ undermines the deep reflection and self-reckoning needed “to get somewhere better – not just different”²¹.

The climate crisis is, at its core, a crisis of justice, value, political will, and moral imagination. As such, it will take much more than science and technology to effectively address it.

16 van Dooren, Thom and Deborah Rose. “Keeping Faith with the Dead: Mourning and De-extinction.” *Australian Zoologist*, vol. 38, no 3, 2017, pp. 375-378.

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*Woman with black curly hair at Extinction Rebellion September 2020
Protests for the launch of the Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill (CEE Bill)
Across The City of London, Photo by Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona.*



EMILY LAURENS Remembrance for Lost Species Day 2014
– Memorial to the Passenger Pigeon
Llangrannog beach, Wales.

We need to find new ways to commemorating the passing of places, ecosystems and species. 100 years ago and 4,000 miles away the pigeon became extinct. From billions to none in a blink of an eye. With that in mind I went to where the civilised, farmed, human dominated land meets the wild untamable ocean to draw passenger pigeons with my friends in that liminal space. Within those fragments of rock that sea and time has crumbled to near dust I trace their shapes with my garden rake. In the blond brown sands I draw a small flock of pigeons, like shadows passing overhead. And then I watch them disappear.

Rituals of Collective Mourning

As so many social justice movements have reminded us, systems of oppression and destruction are reinforced when we push their painful legacies into the shadows. That's why mourning rituals – which bring visibility to unacknowledged injustice through public expression of outrage or grief – can act as a powerful antidote. When we name and collectively recognize the tragedy of ecological loss, we engage in an ethical protest against modes of thought that trivialize this annihilation. Meanwhile, on the individual level, these customs help us stay present with grief instead of repressing it. Finally, collective ritual promotes solidarity, since grieving as a community removes our isolation from others experiencing loss, providing a corrective to apathy or mass denial.

Such practices are growing around the world. “Remembrance Day for Lost Species,” which a group of artists and educators launched in 2011, has grown into a worldwide movement of community memorials and events for extinct species to promote “the remembering of what has been lost, celebrations of and commitments to what remains, and the development of creative and practical solutions”²². Climate activists have also increasingly adopted ritualistic elements to express pain and outrage over the state of our planet. Extinction Rebellion, in particular, uses overt funeral symbolism like coffins, mourning processions, and black veils to highlight its participants’ “unflinching relationship with grief”²³.

Artists and filmmakers who foreground the pain of ecological loss also characterize their artistic practice as a form of ritualized mourning in its own right. Chris Jordan has spoken publicly about falling into depression from documenting albatross deaths from plastic pollution, and ultimately creating a healing ritual by shaping that ingested plastic into mandalas and other tributes to those birds – essentially transforming the same material that killed these creatures into an inter-species memorial and a visual protest against mass consumption and waste²⁴.

Daniela Molnar, whose recent painting series gives shape to absences in the landscape, similarly describes her practice as “a way to confront grief.” Using images from geological surveys of melting glaciers, she traces the outlines of missing chunks of ice and exposed land that hasn’t seen sunlight for centuries or more. This “New Earth,” she explains, “is like a wound, or new, delicate skin that has formed over a wound and is now . . . exposed to the world”²⁵. The painful process of mapping this uncovered land allowed Molnar to recognize “what it feels like to try to hold the enormous losses brought about by climate change”²⁶. Indeed, painting the jagged and chaotic outlines of glacier loss gave shape to Molnar’s own pain in confronting climate disruptions, and ultimately helped her map a path for processing it.

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Grief as a Political Act

We commonly think of mourning as a private experience, but these rituals remind us of its power as a political act as well. In a culture built on a hierarchy of lives that matter and lives that don't, some deaths receive elaborate mourning rituals and public tributes, while others are trivialized or ignored²⁷. Marginalized groups know how this absence of public grief dehumanizes them, which is why Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ activists, and people seeking justice for murdered indigenous women all use public protests and vigils to demand that those deaths aren't made invisible²⁸.

In similar ways, when we openly grieve for the loss of other species or forests or rivers, we're asserting that nonhuman lives and natural elements are also worthy of mourning. We refuse to accept their exclusion from human circles of compassion. And ultimately, these individual and collective rituals can inspire us to transform our grief into political anger and meaningful social change²⁹.

This is precisely the goal behind a recent funeral for Iceland's first glacier lost entirely to climate change. In 2019, in the space formerly occupied by Okjökull glacier, mourners installed a plaque acknowledging that "In the next 200 years, all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path." Then in the concluding lines, the people of Iceland directly address their descendants, and issue a call to action to those alive today by invoking the still-unwritten future beyond our past and present losses. In so doing, the plaque's words hold all of us accountable for the world those future readers will inherit: "This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it"³⁰.

In explicitly linking this ritual of collective mourning with a call to action, the Okjökull memorial reminds us that the work of personal and social transformation lies at the core of "what needs to be done" as we face the threats ahead. Surely, we will be better equipped to create meaningful solutions, policies and technologies having first reckoned with ourselves as the agents of climate destruction, and having dwelt with the consequences of the world we are ushering in.

Jennifer Atkinson is an Associate Professor in environmental studies at the University of Washington and the host of Facing It, a podcast about climate grief and eco-anxiety. Working with a global team of climate researchers, she facilitates the Existential Toolkit for Climate Educators to address the mental health impacts of climate disruption. Dr. Atkinson is also the author of Gardenland: Nature, Fantasy and Everyday Practice.

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