



# Future Mountains

Molly Sturdevant

**ERIKA OSBORNE**

Hoover Gates

Oil on canvas

*Hoover Gates* references, in composition and title, a wood engraving done by Thomas Moran after participating in the second John Wesley Powell expedition down the Colorado River. The etching, titled *The Gate of Lodore*, was printed in *Scribner's Monthly* in January 1875 and depicts towering canyon walls, racking light and a grand river. *The Hoover Gates* plays with the visual language of this etching as a way to comment on the contemporary state of the river – dammed and controlled. The sublimity is found in the scale and mark of what is man-made, not in the canyon itself.

I am equally from two places, Illinois and Colorado. In 2014, my parents came to Chicago to be present for the birth of my son. On a Sunday afternoon in July, when I was about a week overdue, we walked around downtown where we were always within a short hustle to the maternity wing.

My parents are from a small town out west. They walk around skyscrapers looking up. I have to hold their hands and rush them across the street, my giant belly leading the way. My mom greets strangers on the train, strikes up a chat; they nod at her from under their earbuds and hoodies, then look back down. We walk under Lake Shore Drive. They've never seen such enormous clusters of orb-weaver webs, such intense, colourful scrawls and graffiti, and then a lake without a visible end, calm as a bath. We point up to the Sears Tower, as it used to be called. Now the Willis Tower. We talk about baseball fields – Comiskey, as it was first known. More recently, US Cellular. We make faces at the new name: Guaranteed Rate Field.

We wade into Lake Michigan at the Ohio Street Beach. We take selfies. The last selfie my dad would ever pose for is me and him, ankle deep in the water, arms around each other, my belly enormous.

That night, my mom and I are taken to a small, windowless room. To sit in a chair, I have to spread my legs a little and set my belly down, balancing by keeping one hand on the armrest as I lower myself in. A neurotrauma surgeon

introduces himself, then explains how not all death is complete, but sometimes still contains a quiver, a tremble, a last light. Not all light is that by which we live, however. This is the darkest darkness that exists on this side. That's how I hear his words. My father will never wake up, never come back. My father has had a stroke.



Once when I was about six, my dad and I picked wild asparagus out of a ditch. I sometimes watched him clean pheasant and catfish. I asked him once how fridges work. So, he took one apart and we put it back together in the garage. I asked him why we had to follow the 'high altitude recipes' on baked goods mixes after we moved to Colorado when I was nine. He got out a pad of paper, pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, and drew a model of the Earth and atmosphere, explaining how air pressure works, and what flour, baking soda and baking powder do.

He reached his hand into a freezing cold mountain river once when I was about 11, showing me a trout redd.

He always had time to turn stones over, to think about what might be hiding under them.

Mica floating in a river of snow melt. The smell of pine pitch on a hot day. Geese. The ingenuity of ants. Pie crust. Asteroids. Dogs. Sports. Comedy. Catching the bus before the clouds break. October.

The baby slithers inside me, I can feel the heels of his feet above my right hip. He's been doing this the last several days. I put my hand on the tiny heels, hold my mom's hand with the other, and we agree to let dad go.

A minute after she signs a form, she is surprised to see she is holding a pen, and unsure why.

About a day later, my mom can't remember what happened, or where she is. She is suffering from global transient amnesia. I walk in to see her, and she is delighted that I am pregnant, wondering if it's a boy or a girl, asking me to go get Dad. My dad's body, still kept on support while waiting for the arrival of my siblings so we can let him go together, is in one wing of the hospital. My mom's hospital room is on a different floor not too far from that, and I am mostly kept in the obstetrics triage unit.

It was not 72 hours ago that we three were passing butter across the table. And a week later, via a scheduled, induced labour, I deliver a baby boy, fine as oak, as rain, stone, the first snow, the first crocus, the first pea shoot, the moon, a lion's roar. The room where he is born is in the same hospital complex my father was taken to. My mom is still in her own hospital bed, recovering, her memory slowly restoring.



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In the summer of 2015, on an ordinary July morning, the Animas River suddenly turned bright orange and began to stink.

It's a historic, much-loved river that is variably fast, slow, narrow, and in some places wide. The river makes its way from the snowmelt sources in the steep 14,000-foot peaks of the San Juan Mountains down through the Animas Gorge, passing through small but popular towns and tourist destinations. The river is a being and a life; it is also a source of drinking water, a place for fishing, the riding of rapids and relaxed floats on old rubber tires.

I stand on the edge of a bike trail not far from City Market in Durango, Colorado, holding my infant son on my hip, wondering if I should cover his nose and mouth. The orange colour is thick, it isn't subtle. The smell is noxious, especially if the updraft is caught in the shifting breeze and sent directly toward your face.

A gold mine above Silverton Colorado that was started in 1887 had been pooling leached water for a century, near the 10,000-foot elevation mark. It has extremely deep tunnel systems, surrounded by peaks of up to 13,000 feet.

Mountains are beings with ingenious systems in place. Their hydrology balances snowmelt and rain and serves fast-moving rivers that are the lifeblood of millions of creatures in the west. A mine disrupts a mountain's hydrology, exposing its interior water to air (oxygen, sulfites), making that water acidic and creating a kind of natural smelter that refines other metals: arsenic, mercury, lead, zinc, aluminium.

The bulkheads that were put into the Gold King Mine by each successive departing owner were partial, reluctant concessions to equally weak demands for responsible clean-up. On that morning in 2015, the backfill and pipe that had been recently installed gave way, and the water gushed downslope through the watershed as far as New Mexico and Utah.

The Gold King is only one mine. There are hundreds of defunct, collapsed, flooded mines in Colorado. In the San Juans, water monitors before the Gold King Disaster estimated that hundreds of gallons per minute of waste water are leached into the greater watershed. It has always shown up in fish surveys, but it hadn't yet turned a river orange.

My sister and I stand there with our sons, watching the river. We stand with tourists and townspeople hovering along the edge of the bike paths and crouching low by the boat and tube put-ins, watching the water rush through, orange as orange juice.

It is bright like a Christo wrap, like his orange 'Valley Curtain' work in Rifle Gap. Christo's installation went up in 1972, the same year the Clean Water Act required mining companies to be held responsible for cleaning up after themselves. But, here we are.



When I talk to my son about mountains, I find myself describing something other than what we see.

In the fall of 2014, about four months after my dad's death, I went home for the ceremony and the spreading of his ashes. I breastfed the baby on the flight to Denver, and then again on the small, regional plane that took us to Durango. I still hadn't cried. We drove with close friends and family up a long dirt road, then hiked to one of my dad's favourite spots.

I see my father's ashes lift out from the hands of my two brothers, a grey cloud. It dissipates. Some people hug in the silence. I don't want to be touched or looked at. The wind is shifty. I am carrying my child in a wrap tied around me. Wind lifts my hair, wind lifts his hair, the breeze moves us. The mountain is bright except for the shadow of a passing cloud. The aspens radiate yellow.

I think of camping with my father, always camping. Or just putzing in the woods. Hiking the Calico Trail, cultivating a sense of contentment with the same trees, the same smell of lodgepole or scrub oak, pointing out just how thick the red willow is over and over again every year, until it was no longer really about the red willow but a way of checking in, saying hello, repeating and declaring the persistence of love over time.

*The red willow down there is bright this year.  
It sure is.*

A few weeks after the toxic water burst out of the Gold King Mine, I am driving along a familiar stretch of highway through the Weminuche Wilderness. I am with my sister, brother-in-law, my son and my nephew. I look out and see the one-year-old scars of the West Fork Fire. It is spellbinding.

My family members are all silent, sullen, they've already seen it, but I haven't. The eagle eyries are shorn, the ponderosa and fir are husks, charcoal, the entire montane landscape grey, black, and silver. This is the first time we've taken this drive. We do it in complete silence. Not even music, no radio.

Shh, child, no. This isn't how it looks, not *actually*. This is some exception. It's been bad for a couple seasons. It will be fine. I'll find you some real, original scenery, I promise I will. Sometimes I think I'll tell my son: you were born in the Anthropocene. Your grandfather and I, his daughter, were born in the Holocene. It was nice then. Spring was no tornado, winter was a thing in the wind around mid-November, a vee of geese leaving, early bright flakes falling.



Our focus on purpose and progress pervades our writing and storytelling. The story of the Gold King Mine Disaster as it's often told around town in Durango overlooks accidents even to this day. It usually begins by noting that the Gold King Mine was a 'triumph of perseverance' by one lone Swede, Olaf Arvid Nelson, even referred to as 'The Mighty Swede.' No one begins the story almost a decade earlier, when the Brunot Agreement took four million acres from the Utes, opening that land to mining in western Colorado.

What you won't often hear after the nod to the industrious Swede, is what happened in the century after. While the project didn't pay out in Nelson's life, it traded hands between various absentee owners a few times, had a heyday of production, burnt down in major ways a couple times around 1900, became the site of a deep-tunnelling project that would be alternately abandoned and revisited throughout the mid-20th century, became the site of notorious deaths by collapse, and paid out in more diverse metals for a while. In all this time, it was a source of tailing pond drainage, wastewater pollution, arsenic and lead run-off, massive fish die-off, animosity between the residents of downriver Durango and those upstream in Silverton – and eventually it became part of a vast network of Superfund sites consisting of deep, toxic pools.

After skipping all that, the story often leaps towards the common notion that the sole cause of the catastrophic breach in 2015 was the result of some 'untrained' Environmental Protection Agency guys mucking around with the backfill that morning. The century's tale of *take, kill, abandon, repeat* is largely omitted.

Another omission: we only pay attention when we can see the properties of a thing and ascribe to them value or horror. The premium placed on vision at the expense of all other ways of knowing and being has resulted in a paralysis of our ability to participate in solutions.

I think I'll tell my son: your grandfather liked to understand the insides of things, how they work. He taught air conditioning and refrigeration for a living, and he was ultimately a systems thinker and an ecologist ahead of his time. Let's not run ourselves ragged looking for a pure mountain. After all, everything in it comes out. Everything in us was in it. Everything relies on rivers of exchange. Everything shows up somewhere. I am the leached toxins, and you are of me.

The smell of pine pitch on a hot day. Geese. Chlorine, fluoride, BPA. The ingenuity of trout. Asteroids. Cats. Sports. Comedy. Catching the bus before the clouds break. April.

I am breastfeeding my son on a bench on the Lakefront one afternoon. Chicago has an all-or-nothing look. All: the collection of skyscrapers. Nothing: the lake. He and I occupy our little bench between them. Women I know are circulating familiar findings about breastmilk toxicity:

Total BPA was detected in 93% of urine samples in this healthy infant population aged 3–15 months who were without known environmental exposure to BPA.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of the Anthropocene hinges on recognising the omnipresence of the effects of pollution and industrialisation in formerly ‘untouched’ places. But this in turn reifies the idea of separating out and sparing a pure, ‘virgin’ wilderness, which is a key to permitting pollution in some places rather than others, as if they could be kept separate. Thinking beyond extraction has to do more than permit degradation by segregation.

Really, son, everything is the same stuff, there is just perpetual shifting and transformation. Got that? The key here is not to take, own, or hoard, but to tend to whatever causes mutual flourishing in your biotic community. Let me hear you repeat it so I know you heard me.

A *Yale Environment* 360 article is also circulating among my students. I am glad it is, though it is one of those ‘stunners’ that often leaves them thinking: well if it’s that bad, and we can’t even see how bad, we can’t really do anything about it. The clip doing the rounds is this:

Public awareness of plastic pollution in the ocean has largely been driven by the discovery of floating masses of plastic, such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which is roughly the size of Texas. But of the 10 million tons of plastic waste that enter the oceans each year, these floating patches account for just 1 percent. The other 99 percent is believed to reside in the deep ocean.<sup>2</sup>

It is in fact the language of production – tied to the language of extraction and industry – that paralyses us in these moments. Without an obvious path to an immediately material, visible and potentially successful action – as a response to a problem – we give up. Opposition to rapaciousness, however, cannot just rely on an individual’s actions – it must be part of the communal will for change.

We have yet to grasp a vocabulary and a grammar of non-extractivism as described by Kathryn Yusoff in her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. The opposite of ‘taking’ is not just ‘giving’, but a word for what it is hasn’t found a home in extractivist registers. Even ‘giving’ adds to the surplus of material that is already too much. Giving only feels good to the taker in an extraction culture.

There are no clean or green or sustainable extractive practices. It is a question of more or less, coupled with a reduction in the need for raw materials. This is not a new statement. But what about in an aesthetic and linguistic register: can we love/admire/leave alone/respect without 'adding value'? To evaluate, to scope out a thing and estimate its value, caters to an extractivist aesthetic. Can we experience a place without even *taking* its picture? Can we feel what is happening without needing to see it? Can we understand a river is poisoned without seeing it turn a violent shade of orange?



We can't live by desperately carving a distance between ourselves and the problem. There has to be an economy and an aesthetic that is purged of the urgency of taking, freeing us from our need to see in order to believe. I propose that it might be a register of pleasure and presence. Nothing threatens a neoliberal capitalist economy like being content – not making anything, not buying new things.

There is a passage from John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, in the chapter 'Of Property', that always rightly annoys my students. It is the claim that any land that is not used or improved for man's benefit is not just wild or in some natural state, it is *waste*. Wild is pre-wasted, wasted already in its untouched state. It becomes a duty to take.

Extraction grammar is inescapable in ecological, nature-loving registers too. The anxiety that permeates us comes in the form of knowing that every open space is vulnerable. Every gorgeous view is held together by some document, permit or legislation with its own date for review. Every good thing I show my child I hope lasts for a while. I hope it remains undeveloped. I wonder what controversies might be lingering over it while we admire it. I get caught up in a desire to acquire it and protect it. I'm caught between two anxieties, trading mourning for fear.

How do we get outside of this? It isn't news that the laptop we require for writing uses extracted metals, or that my highway drive or flight home uses fossil fuels and extracted metals. Doing fewer or none of those things, finding other ways to do them, working on greener materials for these same processes, are all worthy, essential projects. But how can we even begin to substantiate those actions without a way of being and a language that speaks beyond extraction?

We're full of plastic. The mountains we grew up with are different now. Rather than scramble to get the last 'pure' view or evaluate properties according to how they affect us, we need to develop a vocabulary that celebrates and describes a continuum. A poetics of experience with others.

My dad's flesh and bone is on the mountain, in the mountain, in the watershed. We're already caught up in the tide, swimming, drinking.

I have good news, son. We're waiting for nothing, you have nothing to show, or

prove, or do. There was always something thrilling about the idea of finding something. But be thrilled at experiencing what is already there. Understand yourself as always having been in matter, now taking this form. We need no more matter. Leave no obelisk of granite for me, or for you, but come back to the mountain as oak, as rain, stone, the first snow, the first crocus, the first pea shoot, the moon, a lion's roar.

#### REFERENCES

1. Mendonca, K., Hauser, R., Calafat, A.M. et al, 'Bisphenol A concentrations in maternal breast milk and infant urine', *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health* 87, 13-20 (2014), [link.springer.com](http://link.springer.com)
2. 'Scientists Find Plastic Hotspots in the Deep Ocean', *E360 Digest*, 5 May 2020, [e360.yale.edu](http://e360.yale.edu)

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[below] San Geronio Pass Wind Farm, Palm Springs, CA Study #32  
[overleaf] Ivanpah Thermal Solar Plant, CA, Study #32  
(from 'Into the Anthropocene') *Photographs*

*Into the Anthropocene* investigates locations where the natural ecosystem has been altered or destroyed to provide for our burgeoning world population. In the Palouse grasslands - now wheat fields - of Eastern Washington, a monocrop landscape terraformed through agricultural commerce creates a sense of bucolic perfection while disguising the underlying impact of single crop planting. Old and new energy extraction techniques in California are compared with images from the largest thermal solar plant on Earth at Ivanpah, the fracking-revived oilfields at Oildale near Bakersfield and massive windmill farms in the Palm Desert. Owens Lake in California and

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