

Guest editorial

Monique Roffey

December 2008, Port of Spain, Trinidad, a week before Christmas. Rain came down hard in the afternoon. Not unusual. December is still rainy season in Trinidad. But that afternoon, the rain came down like a wall. Rain that hard has a sound too, a deafening roar. It churns things up quickly, gardens, drains. Brown water flows and gurgles everywhere. Often there's nowhere for this amount of quickly generated water to seep. Gardens have been paved over and Port of Spain's roads are woefully under-equipped to deal with our annual heavy rains. Roads can turn into torrents of brown water in thirty minutes of any rainy season downpour.

That afternoon, I was with my mother, visiting her best friend Antoinette. We ran from Antoinette's home to our car with our umbrellas pounded flat by the rain. We drove home, safely, just, windscreen wipers crazy and frantic. Once safe and dry, my mother and I watched the rain turn everything into a brown boiling river. It stopped, eventually, but the world felt dense and broody with moisture. At least it had stopped. We fretted about my brother, though. My brother's home had a large open drain behind it and was at the foot of a hill. He suffered with floods in the rainy season. We called him. He'd dashed home in the rain to stave off the flooding with hard wooden brooms and brushes and sandbags. He was okay.

But then the rain started again around 8pm and this time it fell hard for two solid hours. Cars were bobbing down the road in front of my mother's flat. We called my brother. No answer. We worried, we stared at the bobbing cars, paced about, called again. Again, no answer. We knew things must be

bad and yet we were stuck. Trapped. Flooded in. It got late and very dark. Finally, around 11pm, my brother called.

'We've lost everything,' he said, his voice distraught.

The flooding was so bad it had broken the perimeter walls of his home and a tsunami of floodwater had raged not just through his house but the whole neighbourhood. Walls were down, everywhere; family pets had been swept away. Small children had been scooped up and deposited on tops of cupboards; a brown wave had swept through his neighbourhood, tonnes of water, knocking almost everything flat.

When the rain finally stopped, we tried to reach my brother. Me, my mother and Antoinette, who joined us, found ourselves mired in our tiny Mini, wheels spinning in the mud. His street was a like a war zone. Mud and water and high banks of debris thrown up by the flooding. It was impossible to drive closer to his home. My mother and Antoinette were in their 70s. We came armed with puny, domestic brooms and brushes. What the street needed was a JCB digger, or two. And, indeed, they arrived later.

I found my brother the next morning, blue and shivering, outside the rubble of his home. His family had been evacuated in the night. He'd stayed to guard it, what was left of it. He was in shock and still drenched, his clothes and hair and skin sopping. We hugged.

Not long later we began digging.

We dug his home out of the mud for a week straight. In the mud I found dead goldfish, family toothbrushes, a Barbie doll, children's bicycles, shoes, clothes, kitchen utensils. The entire contents of his home were under this brown, silty mud. We dug and dug. My lower legs, from the knees down, were dyed red-brown for days. The government sent teams of men to help. The JCB diggers arrived, yes. But the shock and devastation was immense for him and his neighbours, especially the blind and autistic man across the road. My brother's family had to live elsewhere for months. The

shock triggered psoriasis in his hands and feet which he still suffers from over a decade later. No one can sell a house on a floodplain. That's just one of the long-lasting impacts of the flood, any flood. Some of his neighbours departed, rented out their homes. My brother and his family spent a Christmas camping in other people's homes. I wrote a novel, *Archipelago*, in the aftermath, about a man fleeing Trinidad in the wake of a devastating flood.

That '2008 Christmas flood' was my first direct experience of the coming climate crisis. In the aftermath, I started to become attuned to what was happening with our climate systems. Trinidad's floods have gotten worse since 2008. Today, the rainy season often overwhelms not just neighbourhoods but entire boroughs. Big sections of land become submerged. It's not a question of better drains and town planning, though that would help. It's an oncoming crisis. The planet's ecological systems are seriously out of whack after centuries of carbonised industrial global capitalism. This is what is driving our current climate emergency. It's not one thing; it's everything. Top down. Bottom up. As I write, today (February 22nd, 2021), Bill Gates has just published a book on climate change, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*, but is it printed on recycled paper? According to Penguin Random House, yes. What can we learn from a first world billionaire? I've actually ordered a copy to find out. Trinidad, and anywhere else on or near the planet's equatorial belt, will get much hotter in coming decades. But we are irrelevant, expendable to the planet's 1% who effectively own its resources. Mass migration from whole regions will happen in coming decades. The 1% will move north or far south; the rich elites of the world who will inherit what's left of the earth. Ursula Le Guin, in her 1974 novel, *The Dispossessed*, wrote a cameo character who is mentioned, in passing, as a refugee from a burnt out husk of the planet Terra (Earth). Art explored a speculative life to come in her book. Today, in imitation, life has caught up.

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In August 2019, I co-founded the group Writers Rebel with a handful of writer friends. Writers are famously armchair activists and our goal was to change that. On October 11th 2019, our small, plucky group programmed and hosted an historic event amongst the chaos of a full-blown Extinction Rebellion uprising. Forty writers, some very famous, gathered to read from their books and poems and to protest, publicly, against the dire oncoming reality of climate change. Our event in Trafalgar Square notched up 1.6 million impressions on Twitter, much national and international press coverage, and was the birth of a now very active campaigning group. Writers Rebel has since successfully staged other equally effective actions, even during the global Covid pandemic, and the group has grown in number of activists, along with its online presence. And so, it gives me great pleasure to edit this green issue of WritersMosaic. Our theme of extinction isn't an easy one to read about, much less let sink in. Better look away. But, given that my own ecological awareness and activism has been forged and driven by a family eco-catastrophe, I beg that readers and listeners don't wait until they find themselves in the same or similar situation, holding their children overhead in their arms above the flood. It's essential that we all 'wake up', collectively, as a species, as an intelligence, especially as writers, and also as writers of colour who often hail from the globally colonised South: Africa, India, Latin America, the Caribbean. Climate change and colonisation of the South by the North are inextricably linked. Ecocide and genocide are the same historical sin. Industrialisation of the North still links to the exploitation of the South. People and place, both plundered. We need to wake up to not just a global system of white patriarchal exploitation which promotes gender and racial injustices, but also our earth's crisis. They go hand in hand.

And we need to do this now, today, in the aftermath of 18 months of a global pandemic. We all know that the Covid-19 crisis, with almost two and a half million dead at the time of writing, is linked to our disruption of the ecology of our planet.

This green issue of WritersMosaic is focused around three essays, including one photo essay. Each exploration tackles an area of extinction in the natural world: animals, trees, water. In her piece, 'On Extinction', Mexican writer and fellow Writers Rebel co-founder, Chloe Aridjis writes about how she came to love and care for the animal world as a child, about the activism of her father, Homero Aridjis and his positive results in raising environmental awareness in Mexico with the pressure Group of 100, and how she later came to committed activism herself via Writers Rebel. Most recently, Aridjis was behind the action 'On the Brink' which linked writers with wildlife activists and each of these to a species going extinct.

The Guyanese Canadian writer Tessa McWatt writes about trees in 'Its Bark'. Again, the problem of habitat loss. Logging, fires, tourism. She flags up that over half of Europe's endemic trees face extinction, and with them the biodiversity of other species who live in them. Birds, for example. There will be less birdsong. There already is less birdsong. She too flags up that the current coronavirus crisis is inextricable from biodiversity collapse. Europe, California, the Amazon... we are losing our trees. She sees the loss of trees as even more profoundly affecting those in the global south.

To quote: 'For Black people, Indigenous people and people of colour, the consequences of the deliberate deafness of capital are vast and profound. Structural racism, the extinction of species, the climate crisis, bad air, the deafness: these are intimately entwined.'

Canadian writer Joanna Pocock's photo-essay 'Scattered Thoughts on

the River Lea' examines the tragedy of an urban waterway on her doorstep, the Lea River, where her daughter likes to play and congregate with friends. The Lea is choked with man-made refuse, polluted with chemicals. Her photos are sobering testimony. Where, she asks, is our old wisdom about rivers, our reverence for what is sacred – water, a life-providing natural force.

This issue also includes a poetic exchange between two Trinidadian writers as well as two single poems. For these shorter pieces I contacted Caribbean writers living either in the region or its diaspora. Forward Prize nominated poet Shivane Ramlochan and Trinidadian poet Andre Badoo have fashioned 'Torn Lace', a series of neo-gothic missives to each other in which the coming climate crisis features as a latent, yet imminent horror. In Ramlochan's account we have an almighty and ancient earth goddess offering herself for dissection. I particularly love the line, 'Cut me there and let loose the waterfall.' Her poem ends in a devastating lament,

...know I tried to keep growing things alive.

Even now, in the year of Our Fall 1001, when we are hotter
And more intemperate than any combustible hell.

Badoo responds with a triptych of poems. One about an owl found in a felled Christmas tree. Ramlochan replies:

If I go mad in our Anthropocene, dear one, then let it happen
to wingbeats. Hold on to this if ever you find yourself in a place
made unbearable as a furnace, a landscape where the temper-
ature has become your enemy.

Meanwhile, Jamaican poet and writer Geoffrey Philp's poem 'Archipelagos' reminds me of a tiny hurricane in itself with its sweeping, cluttered fury. In it he conjures the horrors of coronavirus, the holocaust, the historic crime of kidnapped Africans, and a past ecological activism – 'Save the Whales' – into a poem which barely touches down onto the page. The poem is a whirlwind of tragic insight. Jamaican Chinese British poet Hannah Lowe's poem 'Green Beetles' touches on the everydayness of living with climate change: a seven-year-old boy and thunderous rain, a big piece of the Antarctic which has broken off, a drifting iceberg half the age of the boy. Perspective is everything in these poems, and the shadow of climate change looms inside each one.

I hope you find much to mull over in this edition. There's much beauty and magic here, too. It's no longer feasible for any of us, much less writers, to do nothing. We must collectivise and speak truth to power; we must take this coming climate crisis on board, face it head on – that drifting iceberg. We must write back, write words anywhere, on walls, on buildings, on banks, think tanks, houses and places of power. The 26th UN Climate Change Conference is held in early November 2021, in Glasgow. We must pay attention and we must write down what we think about this God-awful situation, and make our presence felt.

Monique Roffey

Monique Roffey is an award winning Trinidadian-born British writer of novels, essays, literary journalism and a memoir. Her most recent novel, *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (Peepal Tree Press), won the Costa Novel Award, 2020 and was shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize, 2020 and longlisted for the Rathbones/Folio Award 2021. Her other Caribbean novels, *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* and *House of Ashes* have been nominated for major awards (Costa, Orange, Encore etc). *Archipelago* won the OCM Bocas Award for Caribbean Literature in 2013. Her work has been translated into several languages. She is a co-founder of Writers Rebel within Extinction Rebellion. She is a Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University and a tutor for the National Writers Centre.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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