



From the Darkness

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THE first time I travelled to the island I made sure to arrive early. I had been warned it would take a long time. From Manhattan, it took over an hour to get to the bus stop at the edge of Queens. And then there was the wait for the Q100 which runs on time just often enough to make you hopeful, but not so often that I bothered to check the schedule. It came when it came. ¶ The first time, I was terrified. Standing on the edge of my life up to that moment, waiting for the bus, I called in all the names of the Divine that I could think of: *Gracious One, Dear One. Lord. Friend. Protector. Defender. Rock. Jesus, Yeshua. Goddess. Gaia. Kali Ma.* ¶ I came to the island as a prison chaplain in training. My supervisor is a devout Christian and she was raised to hate some of the faces of the Divine to which I relate most closely, so I am quiet about which names I utter when. (I don't blame anyone for their upbringing; I used to hate fundamentalist Christians, too.) My supervisor is black and I am white, in a world that created these categories long before either of us was born, and through these categories our lives have been irrevocably shaped. Here, I learn from her. Here, on this island in the middle of a river, at the edge of a continent: Rikers Island, one of America's most notorious jails. ¶ 'Welcome to hell,' said one Correction Officer to another as we got off the bus. The two men grimaced at each other. No-one denies the darkness

of this place. Inmates arrive with battle scars and leave with worse, open gaping wounds from all sorts of illegal things, razors and the like, and from hurtful words, and too little time with people who love them. In his love letter from prison, *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde wrote: 'The most terrible thing about it is not that it breaks one's heart – hearts are made to be broken – but that it turns one's heart to stone.' There are a lot of stones on the island. ¶ I threw out the notion that God was only in the light years ago, long before I came to seminary. Here, in the City of New York, my formal entry into the study of ministry has been entrenched in the local politics of race and place, the dark underbellies of America, and the colonisation that has never left this country. ¶ I spent a year working as a chaplain on the island. It was among the best, the hardest and the most draining work I've ever done. If God can be killed by human cruelty, then He is killed here, too. Killed – and, amazingly, reborn. If God is a force untouchable by human violence, She is here also, a golden thread weaving in between the stones, cold metal bars and flaking paint on the cinderblocks. She shows up in gestures of kindness, compassion – even love.

The Fish on the Asphalt

¶ It would not be entirely accurate to say that the first peoples of America, what many called Turtle Island, had no prisons. Some people were captured and



It is the same old force I have known since the day Aeneas came to our shore and to my caves, asking me to take him to see his dead father; asking me of the destinies of his unborn sons. What we saw together in the fields of the underworld was a future empire whose hunger I could not then fathom. It was a blood-river of sons we saw, begun a year and some later by Aeneas and a Latin woman, Lavinia; her sons the Silvii, who kept the old and forested ways until Romulus killed Remus, twin sons of rape and war, and founded the city that would begin the undoing of the world. I was only a young woman then, seer to a peaceful people who had lived simply in earth huts in the marshes and mountains near the sea forever, since the beginning of the world, since the volcano's first eruption. It was unfamiliar to me, that hunger I saw, a hunger that turned marshes to sea walls and horse pasture, earth to hard roads, distant lands to colonies, the dead to broken ghosts; all of it straight and sharp-edged as a sword. I saw that metal, that stone, those fences, in the eyes of Aeneas and his unborn sons. The hunger for a hard glory that has yet to burn itself out, though it is eating up the world.

put away in small places. There may be human societies whose members have never bound each other up without permission, but I don't know of any here. Yet none of them had prisons or jails like the United States does today, at the beginning of the Anthropocene age, when the rising seas are already filling the streets of Miami with water on a regular basis and some days you can see ocean fish swimming silver on top of cracked asphalt. No nation has a prison system like the United States. The 'land of the free' keeps 2.2 million of its people behind bars. Most of these people have never committed a violent crime. By some estimates, half of all inmates have a mental health problem; most are poor and uneducated, and 60% are people of colour. One in ten black men in their thirties are in jail or prison at any given time. As many as 6.1 million Americans are listed as felons, meaning they have lost their right to vote. That makes 8.3 million people whose lives are twisted out of shape by the prison system. That's before you count the children, partners, friends, colleagues, neighbours and communities impacted by the prison system. Between the fish on the asphalt and the men and women behind bars, there is a sense of a strange force moving in the United States that has no interest in supporting life – and a particular fondness for turning humans into stones by surrounding them with metal, concrete and fences.

When Your Ancestors Are the Problem

The fences came to Turtle Island with my ancestors, the English, sailing west with their heads full of paradise. In her great work, *Ceremonies of Possession*, Patricia

Seed traces the rituals by which each of the colonial powers would declare ownership of the lands that they sought to possess, none of which included fair and well-informed conversations with the existing caretakers of the land. The Spanish pierced the ground with their swords and planted the flag – so much testosterone. The English, however, had a fondness for fences, hedges and gardens. 'No-one owns land like the English', writes Seed. It was the English who wove the first chapter of the Book of Genesis into their ancient practices of blessing the land during seeding time in the middle ages. It was English landlords (and their priests and vicars, seeing a good profit for the church coffers) who began 'fencing in' the commons in the 1500s, leading to a new kind of poverty as peasants were deprived of the use of forests, fields and fens which they had worked for generations. It was the English who brought with them their burgeoning notion of private property, that land must be improved and progress made by the seemingly simple task of building fences. This is mine. That is yours. Develop it: seek profit. This is good; this is godly: divide day from night, sea from land, man from animals, man from woman. Be fruitful and multiply. Seek profit. To define good and evil is to define the shape of a society: what it does, what it does not do, what it punishes. Whom it punishes. Whom, and how, and for what duration of time. Because that's all we've got in this life – time. In our time, the seas are rising, and we should have all hands on deck, but at least 8 million Americans are so crushed by the prison-industrial complex that they can barely take care of themselves, much less join in the work of creating a different society.

Apples & Peaches

My grandfather used to make apple butter and my grandmother used to bake fresh apple pies. And we would all make peach jam together. Oh, that peach jam was soooooo good! I don't recall how we got to talking about apples and peaches, but the inmate's face lit up as she remembered, the brightness of her smile at odds with our grey surroundings. In the day room of her building, the only natural light was dimmed by the grey dust and bird squat on the poorly washed skylights above us. Behind her was her cell door. Fourteen doors of individual cells made a horseshoe around the day room; on the fourth side was the control centre where the officers sit watching. Who knew how long she would stay here? A few weeks – or a few years? Rikers Island is a holding place until you get tried and sentenced. No-one should be here for longer than six months. Many of the women I pray with have been here twice as long. If the inmates were fit for society before they came to this dark grey place, they rarely are when they leave. This is not the sweet moist darkness of the earth, the underground home where seeds take root and green shoots grow, where I most gladly find the Divine. In this grey darkness, only anxiety grows: how long will I be here? When will I see my children again? When can I go home? Why am I here? Why does God hate me? What's wrong with me? Yet that afternoon, the memory of apples and peaches led our conversation to the woods: how nice it is to take a long walk among trees. Another inmate spoke of her fear of bears. We talked about the smell of the meadows in the springtime and the snow in the winter. These were East Coast women who grew up with snow in the winter, not

like me. In California, I said, 'the summers are brown and the winters are green.' The women shook their heads. 'That's all messed up,' one of them said. We laughed, remembering a promise of wholeness. ('Nature, Wilde wrote from the depths of prison, 'will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.') When we prayed, we prayed that God would bring down the prison walls and that all of our children would be able to eat apples together.



The Doctrine of Discovery

I had entered Union Theological Seminary, the oldest seminary in New York City, to study eco-theology. I spent as much time as possible with the Centre for Earth Ethics, a newly-formed initiative within Union working on the intersections of indigenous rights, climate justice and faith. That's how I came to be standing in one of the seminary's swankier rooms, wood-panelled, with a great view of the green quad, when I discovered that the story about climate change which I had spent most of my life learning and repeating

was inaccurate. ¶ I was one of a handful of white women there that day. I spent most of my time making sure the water containers were kept full, the elders cared for and the compost bins clearly marked and used. In a down moment, I struck up a conversation with a young man named Roger Drew who worked with the American Indian Law Alliance, based in the Onondaga nation in upstate New York. ¶ 'What can we do to help you guys?' I asked. ¶ 'Well,' he said, 'what we need is to rescind the Doctrine of Discovery. That's what we have always asked for the past 500 years, and that is what has been needed.' ¶ By then, I had heard of the Doctrine of Discovery – a series of Papal Bulls, written in the late 1400s, which gave the moral, legal and political authority for the colonisation of Africa and the Americas – but this was hundreds of years before the Industrial Revolution. How did it connect to climate change? ¶ It has taken a long time to remember, to *re-member*, stitching together pieces of history, bit by bit. Timelines help us tell stories, but some of the best storytellers I know don't put much weight on linear time. ¶ It starts with the Empire that killed the indigenous dark-skinned man we commonly know as Jesus. It starts with the history I always knew but somehow never knew, growing up as a white child in the shadow of Mt. Diablo, the devil's mountain, where the Indians went for refuge – and for war – when the Spanish came. ¶ In retracing the history, I became obsessed with timelines, because we live in a society that says the order of things matters and yet our society gets the order all wrong. Nevertheless, my non-Western teachers talk of time in a different way. They talk of the past as if it is in the

present and the future as if it had already happened. ¶ In the world of the Spirits, time is still time, but the past and the present and the future live together differently than they do for us, bound as we are to our bodies, these beating clocks of time and matter, never knowing which beat will be our last.

A Bull Arrives

¶ The year is 1452 and King Alfonso of Portugal is staring at a map. For years now, Uncle Henry has been sending him maps, each one different to the last. Portugal stays the same, but the lands to the south keep shifting. The coastline of west Africa has grown longer than it was in the maps that Alfonso studied as a boy, and more detailed. ¶ Not everyone appreciates Henry the Navigator's efforts. We should focus on things happening here in Portugal, they mutter, not spend so much of our energy overseas. But Alfonso shares his uncle's restlessness: the young king rarely says it, but this is part of why he fought the crusades in Morocco against those bloody Saracens who dare to continually ignore the message of Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World. ¶ With Uncle Henry's maps come letters, descriptions of the trading ports – ivory, mahogany, the Arab-influenced slave trade – and the king's mouth twitches into a smile as he reads. Morocco taught him to see opportunities, and not just dangers, in Africa. If Portugal could obtain sole trading rights along that expanding coastline, the possibilities for wealth would be immeasurable. ¶ They call it a Papal Bull on account of the seal attached to the bottom of the parchment. Alfonso knows what it is before he has read it: an answer to the

request he sent to Pope Nicholas V. Here are the words he was waiting for:

We grant you by these present documents, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms, duchies, counties, principalities, and other property...and to reduce their persons into perpetual servitude.

¶ Yes, he can have it. Africa. ¶ He praises the greatness of God who has granted him this opportunity – and wonders just how profitable the slave trade will turn out to be. Surely, now, the keys to the kingdom of wealth, power and the glory of God are his.

Cuffs & Keys

¶ The first time I saw them, I gulped. Row upon row of shiny silver metal, flashing in the jail's fluorescent light. Most of the time, the officers carried around plastic handcuffs, but these were the metal ones, like in the movies. Right next to the guns. I didn't grow up around guns. Or handcuffs. My family had no friends who were police. At some point in high school, I had been taken to a museum and seen the old slave handcuffs: great iron things, rusted with age, but still nearly impossible to open once shut. Unless, of course, you had a key. ¶ Keys surrounded me on the island. They clanged against officers' hips as they wandered down the hall. There were keys as long as my arm. Every officer had a set, and captains had them, and so did chaplains. ¶ *And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven:*

and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¶ My boss would pin the keys to the hem of her skirt: she had to use three-inch pins because the keys were so big. Besides the Muslim sister and a few of the social workers, everyone else wore pants with a belt. But my boss came from a tradition where women wore skirts to church and she wanted to remind the inmates that they could still be women. She wanted them to feel that there was still hope for them to go home and wear whatever they wanted. That the world was beautiful; that their lives could have purpose. For was not the world made, also, for them?

Displacement

¶ Their wrists were bound, first with rope – usually jute – and then, as they got closer to the shore, with the heavy metal cuffs. A chain linked them together. Many had never seen the ocean before, they came from so deep inside the continent. ¶ Up in the mountains, where the people knew their forests and their streams, the places where their sacred groves were located, the best place to draw water, the coolest place to sit on a hot afternoon, the healing properties of local flowers – there, the slavers came. Whole families were stolen and traded. In one move, their identity was transformed from being tied to a particular place, with its rivers and forests, to being tied to the colour of their skin. Had they even noticed their skin colour before? ¶ The theologian Willie James Jennings has traced the emergence of race, nationality and ethnicity as a substitute for earlier relationships between people and place, during the centuries in which colonialism was nurtured by a Christianity of empire. With the Pope's



16 reply to Alfonso V, Jennings writes, the royal rulers of Europe were granted 'the right to reshape the discovered landscapes, their peoples and their places as they wished.' ¶ At the roots of the story of race is the forced separation from place.

Thirty Pounds of Silver

¶ His name is Henry Wolcott. The ship's name is the *Mary and John*. The year is 1630. He carries a Bible, some rumpled clothes, a journal and a few other odds and ends across the Atlantic. Unlike the handcuffed human cargo of the slave ships already making the dreaded Middle Passage, Henry and his family walk above the hull of the ship. The *Mary and John* is one of the first English ships to venture into these waters. ¶ Nearly all of the 140 passengers aboard have been recruited by the Puritan preacher, Reverend John White of Dorchester, Dorset; together they go on to found Dorchester, MA. As if they were not so far from home. ¶ This act of naming their new town after the one that they had come from is more than just a replication of the old world in the 'New World', or a desire for the familiar; it is also an expression of the limitedness of their imagination. ¶ These are the things my father's family never told me:

- the names of the people on whose land Henry lived;
- that, during their first winter in Connecticut, Indians saved my ancestors from starvation;
- that the 'great' Henry Wolcott's son (another Henry) bought the first slave in the state of Connecticut.

¶ His name was Cyrus. At Henry Jr's death, he was valued at 30 pounds of silver. As

yet, I have been unable to establish what happened to Cyrus. ¶ This is what my father's family never told me because they didn't think it was worth mentioning: my ancestors built fences around their 'property'. Why would you mention something as obvious as a fence?



Inside

¶ On Rikers Island, three fences surround the women's facility. Officers, staff and chaplains like me enter the main gate and go through the security check point. And then there is another gate. And then a third. ¶ Down a long a corridor and past at least two more gates, there is a nursery. Babies are born there. Mothers with infants stay there. It is the most normal place on the island: that is to say, the place that looks least like you are inside a prison. There are cribs, a kitchen, toys, children's books, teddy bears. My boss, who has no children of her own and loves the women she serves, especially loves coming to the nursery. ¶ We chatted with an inmate as she held her baby son. He was resting, his face soft against the light blue blanket she had wrapped around him. She was explaining a difficulty with

some officers on a recent outing to court. The officers didn't understand what her baby needed and wouldn't listen to what she said. As if just because she was an inmate, she didn't know what was best for her child. ¶ 'The thing is,' she said, 'all of us who are inside are still inside. It doesn't matter if you are an officer or an inmate, you are still in jail. They forget that. They act like we are so separate, that we aren't human.' ¶ The officers and inmates come from the same communities, with the same racial profile, often the same taste in music, sometimes going to the same churches and bars. Given the number of signs warning officers against breaking prison rules, I wouldn't say one group is always 'good' and the other is not. In both groups, there are those who make art, poetry and music. What divides them is that one group has the keys.

Dividing the Land

¶ How did people use land in a culture that knew no fences? The ecological historian William Cronon has compared the ways of the New England settlers to those of the people who were already there. For the indigenous peoples of the north-east coast, the end of winter was a lean time and it was not unusual to go days without food. This was a predictable part of the annual cycle, but the colonists saw the acceptance of hunger as a sign of foolishness; even though, as Cronon points out, 'Indians died from starvation much less frequently than [did] the early colonists.' ¶ Indigenous settlements rarely lasted more than a decade and were not passed on to future generations. They followed the best foods that their land had to offer, according to the season; a lifestyle that required mobility and prioritised few material possessions. To the eyes of

17 propertied Europeans, these mobile people must have been a reminder of the 'vagrants' of the societies they had left behind. Yet the intense social estrangement, inequality, unplanned hunger and homelessness known by those forced off their homelands in Europe was alien to the experience of people whose ethical framework had no concept of dividing the land into property. ¶ The Europeans were outraged by practices such as the controlled burning of woodlands, unable to recognise that this supported the open forests, large game, tall trees and easy hunting which made these new territories so desirable to them. To recognise that the indigenous way of life enabled this environment which the Europeans likened to Paradise would have been to acknowledge the ethical framework on which that way of life was based. And with that, the Doctrine of Discovery and all that followed from it would begin to unravel.

Creation

¶ Let's just re-read Genesis as a love poem. ¶ Humans are created, we are told, in the image of God. What do we know of the image of God? We are given no description of hands or face or knees or rib cage. Only that God took earth and moulded it as a potter would, into a vessel. We are creatures of the earth: *Adam* from *Adama*. Then God breathes life into us. To be made in the image of such a God is thus to create as you were created; to breath life into another. ¶ We do create: we shape one another, we shape our planet. We do breath life into one another: words, dreams, love. ¶ Before God creates man, there is the orderly sequence of creation: God splits day from night, sky from Earth, land from sea. (Did the Pope think of this when he



divided the world in two, giving half to Portugal and half to Spain, on Columbus's return from the islands off the coast of Mexico?) (On the third day, having divided land from sea, God creates the plants. The storytellers of Genesis go into detail with the plants: they knew their importance. Likewise with the animals. For Mesopotamian myths of the time, this was highly unusual. Most of the region's creation stories focus on warfare. This one highlights seeds: the source of all life. 'Seed' is mentioned four times, yet we focus instead on the word that translates as 'dominion', which only gets one mention. (Even the most progressive biblical scholars I know sigh over how to translate that word appropriately in the midst of climate change. It's ugly, no matter what you do with it.) (But the story does not revolve around 'dominion'. Genesis is a celebration of life – of a knowledge that lies within. Each creature able to reproduce itself, with its own agency, its own capacity for self-generation. *Alive*. (To be godly: to enable the regeneration, the reproduction of life itself, of wholeness, of sacredness, of beauty. (And it was good.

The Thin Golden Thread

(What surprised me on the island was not the officers joking together, nor the handcuffs and the guns, nor the beauty of some of the inmates, even in their ugly uniforms, the way they held their dignity around themselves: a cloak against the darkness. (What surprised me was the sense of that thin golden thread. I've done enough spiritual work to recognise the feeling of the Divine. The thread wove itself along the hallways and through the locker rooms and the cells and the dormitories and the con-

trol boxes and the bathrooms. Sometimes I could almost feel it wrapping itself around an inmate, when she was alone, at night, far from home, not sure if she would ever walk in the woods again. The thread would come and wrap itself around her, gently, like a hundred tiny kisses: you are not alone. Even here, even now. (I knew – or at least I hoped to find – the Presence here. This is why I was here: to meet God in the darkness. Even so, it caught me by surprise.

From Stories to Songs

(The story I'd learned about climate change was a white story, a European story: a story about the Industrial Revolution and the burning of fossil fuels, a story of the unintended consequences of the brilliance and ingenuity of white folks. It's taken years to get back behind that story, to see the patterns made by fences, chains and walls, and the displacement that we keep pretending doesn't matter. (In Africa, the Europeans wanted bodies for their labour. In the Americas, the Europeans wanted land: from the beginning, they forced the people off the land. Reservations began in the 1630s; during the western expansion of the American empire in the 1800s, the forcible displacement of people became official policy. Of course, the people did not want to go. Massacres followed. The Earth opened her mouth and drank the blood of her children. (Seven generations later, the Great Mother pours out the consequences of the separation of people from place, and the misuse of creation for human profit: sea levels rise, thunderstorms don't drop rain when they should; it is unclear when to plant. Right order is going awry. (My ancestors built prisons: reservations, slave dwellings, *barrios*, ghettos. The separation

(When I was a girl my grandmother told me of a wild quince tree on the mountain at the beginning of the world where a fine green serpent lived, like the grass-snakes who came flooding down the hills in the spring. Only this snake was bigger, as big as a woman. It knew the language of all things, and taught it to an old woman who came to gather the furred and golden fruits in autumn. My grandmother made a rose-pink jam from quince, translucent as seawater. We ate it with venison roasted on the fire. My grandmother danced barefoot, swaying her old hips like the snake in the quince on the mountain at the beginning of the world. The men whistled, old ones and young. My grandmother laughed.

of people from place happened long before the Industrial Revolution. It was enacted on the body of black and brown people the world over. (As a chaplain, I do a lot of praying. I pray as I cross the bridge, on the white bus that takes people to the middle of the island in the middle of the river on the edge of a continent: hell on earth for too many people. I sit with the inmates and I pray: for families, estranged ones, victims, abusers, abused; for healing; to go home. (And then I go home. I pour Epsom salts in the bath and soak in them. I let the images and the feelings drain into the water. And I pray for healing. Not for them. For myself. For the generations of crimes done by people who never thought they were in prison, but who tore other people from place in the name of profit and progress. The prison of the mind is as hard to escape as any set of walls. (Sometimes I sit in the dark and sing. Singing is one of my favourite forms of prayer.

Grandfather

Grandfather I
keep trying to
Reach you –
Stretch back the invisible curtain between
our worlds
Asking questions –
What were you thinking?
Did it really seem like a good idea?
How could you possibly be so arrogant?

Grandfather I know I owe my life to you
But I've still
got these questions
Rattling like dead bones every time
I show my white face to
Mother Earth I want to say
Lo siento

Apologise.
Not that she wants my apology
she loves me you love me I am your
Descendant Grandfather
Did you have to take their land
Rename it after Old England
Was it too difficult to learn
Something from these people
About how to care for the land itself?
How to live
Without
ownership
fences
endless mindless numbing destroying
consuming growth

All of us
Hungry ghosts
Never learning
How to live in Paradise
How to live on an island
To live on the Great Turtle's back
To become healers not destroyers –
Grandfather I
Am trying to understand you I know you
Were probably good
Whatever that meant
Grandfather I know you
Love me
Grandfather I need
a different way of living
A new politics a new set of relationships
Grandfather please I need a new
Song

A Long Time Before Moses Was Born

(Thank you,' an inmate said to me. We had been sitting for a while on cold steel benches, talking, praying together. Outside the window we could see the river that led to the sea. (Her therapist had



(It is long I have been listening, long I have been watching, and I tell you something must be broken in a man before he sails west with paradise and fences in him where his heart should be. I tell you it is a wound old as Rome that sent the English overseas; a desolation big as a crater where a home once sat, burned by a thousand invaders for a thousand years until what was left was loss, and not the smell of Earth.

suggested she see the psychiatrist because she was depressed. She didn't want drugs. She wanted to go home. ¶ I looked at her a little startled. Why was she thanking me? ¶ 'Well, most people don't listen,' she said. ¶ 'I can't do much,' I said. ¶ 'I know,' she replied. ¶ I wanted to touch her hand. She was young – about 23 – and always looked like she wanted to please everyone around her. She was in here for murder. 'Wrong time, wrong place,' she said once. We never talked much about her crime, except to say that it all happened so fast, too fast. Why would we focus on that one moment? Life is bigger than any one moment. I am her chaplain, not her judge. ¶ 'I guess the Israelites prayed to God a long time before Moses was born,' she said. ¶ 'Yeah,' I said. 'They sure did.' ¶ Later, in church, she sang. She had never sung before. Her voice was soft at first, perhaps shy. Then it swelled. It rose, and I almost gasped, rising with it, caught up in the current of it – not the words, I don't even remember the words, just the feeling, soaring, up, like a dove following the golden thread. Another inmate cried: a stone pouring forth water in the desert.

The Greatest Chance We've Ever Had

¶ 'Talking to you has got me thinking,' he said. We were at a friend's party. It was hot. He was on his second beer. I'd been talking about the relationship between climate change and colonisation. ¶ 'Hmmm,' I said. ¶ 'Do people ever get depressed talking to you?' ¶ 'Well, I guess sometimes. But this is my take on the whole situation: this is amazing. Climate change is the greatest chance we've ever had to form the beloved community. Because now we have to come

together. Or else.' ¶ 'Or else. Yeah. Well, my family still can't handle the phrase "climate change". But at least you have the right attitude. I don't know if I could do what you are doing.' ¶ 'I don't know either. No-one knows if we can do what needs to be done.

Re-membering

¶ 'Creator wants us to take care of one another,' said one of my elders. He was on his way to a five-day harvest ceremony in the northern part of Maine, and I was walking down the street in New York City. 'Anything towards that greater good is good.' ¶ 'Creator can't guarantee our survival, can he?' I asked. It was a terrifying thought. Not that God didn't exist, but how limited even the divine hand may be. ¶ 'Today, people are beginning to speak the languages that my father and his father and his father were forced to forget and to not speak,' he reminded me. *Re-member*. Re-member the languages. Re-member the parts of the body severed. Land from person. Person from person. All of us from Creator. 'It is not for us to question the power of the Creator.' ¶ I had met him in Canada, at the Truth and Reconciliation gathering concerning the residential schools. He was one of the keynote speakers. Not only was indigenous land standing in the way of the life-threatening oil pipelines, he said, but this land was supposed to be sovereign. ¶ 'Could I switch my citizenship to an indigenous nation? No, not really. But we could increase the size of the territories. I loved the subversiveness of the idea. After all that had been done, we could re-member the land.' ¶ As our conversation continued, the rest of the participants left the room. There we were, him in his

black jeans and button down shirt with his hair spiked and his face tattooed, and me in jeans and t-shirt. Two people born and raised on the North American continent, worried about the changing climate, looking for a solution outside of a society built through creating prisons – prisons on the land, prisons in the mind. We looked back in time and we looked forward in time. Surely, both are present in the present. ¶ 'Where are your people from?' I asked him. ¶ 'You know where the pilgrims landed?' ¶ I was suddenly nauseous. ¶ 'Yes,' I replied. ¶ 'That's where my people are from.' ¶ I didn't think. Darkness surrounded me. I just acted. I began to kneel in front of him, the way I had seen people do when they meet a great Master. Or when they just need to surrender, utterly and completely. I held his hand. ¶ He looked at me, startled. ¶ 'What the hell are you doing?' he asked me. ¶ 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Those were my ancestors. I'm sorry.' ¶ 'Stop it,' he said. 'Get up.' ¶ I got up, eyes down. ¶ 'Listen,' he sighed. I looked up. His brown eyes were soft. A small smile gentled his lips. Little dots were tattooed above his upper lip. I wondered what it meant. I wondered how old the tattoo pattern was and where it came from. ¶ 'Some settlers were good people. Some were not. Most thought they were doing the right thing, the moral thing. And the same is true with my people. There have always been good people on both sides. Some even fell in love, and the love was honest.' He paused. He put his hand on my shoulder. His touch was both light and heavy. ¶ 'The thing that matters now,' he said, 'is that we are here. And we can learn to work together. Now, you stay in touch.' ¶ I nodded. And thus, a new relationship was created – and with it, I myself was re-created. Re-membered

into a body of love, not just one of hate. Much less one of amnesia. ¶ He gave me his email. In his mails, he always writes 'you' with a capital 'Y': 'You'. The way one would address a Queen. Or the Divine Within. That Presence which is beyond past and future. Beyond borders and differences of race and class and religion. I smile every time I see the small gesture, the continual way of welcoming me to our common home on this continent, gently nudging me to honour our Earth and one another. Sometimes, when we talk, I imagine the ancestors nodding. Yes, they seem to say. Yes: break down the barriers. Tear down the walls. Sing the old-new song. On an island, in the middle of the river, on the edge of a continent that is still wild if you know where to look, at the beginning of the Anthropocene age: let there be healing. The healing of coming home.

