PETER SCHAIBLE

Scargo Tower little planet, 2011
Multiple photographic images blended
and stitched together, 12 x 12 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

JOLIE KAYTES

Planting

Reflections about plants and values in a changing landscape

In an abandoned serpentine quarry, I once constructed habitat for an endangered species, a plant called *Dudleya setchellii*. *Dudleya setchellii* is endemic to the Santa Clara Valley in California and thrives in and requires the heavy metals found in serpentine soils. A dense gray-green rosette of pointed succulent leaves, *Dudleya setchellii* emerges from rock crevices. Its base might grow to be six inches wide and high, however its stalk of yellow flowers can be three times larger and its lacy network of roots can extend indefinite lengths for water. *Dudleya setchellii* is extravagant and restrained.

The *Dudleya setchelliis* I tended, were salvaged from the quarry because it was slated to become a development with houses, a golf course, and a country club. I planted the specimens in the enclosed "conservation area," one by one, in rows, on the south faces of squat mounds, as specified by the developer's mitigation plan. Nestled in the ground, all lined up, surrounded by fortresses of mud and rock, the *Dudleyas* looked like trodden warriors defending, but equally defeated by, this site. I hoped the transplants could endure the gush of winter rains and the dry of summer. I wondered if their new configuration—a rectilinear patch of endangered plants adjacent to fairways or water hazards—would elicit awe or engender care. The scene at the quarry saddened and stirred me. It spoke of the tensions of growth and decline, and our attempts to reconcile humans' role in both.

Dudleya setchellii, also known as Santa Clara Valley liveforever, reproduces through seeds and by forming rosettes that become new plants. Thus, *Dudleya setchellii* can extend its life again and again and again. Periodically, I thought the planting endeavor might enable the species to sustain its namesake amid seemingly unstoppable development. I knew, however, that this optimistic logic was illogical, as the planned residential neighborhoods and golf courses covering the valley's serpentine grasslands reduced *Dudleya setchellii's* limited habitat and furthered its imperiled status. Even so, I reasoned that any planting was better than none, and the fact that there was a conservation planting suggested that on some level, the developer acknowledged the vitality of existing conditions.

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The quarry itself was an expanse of cleaved earth strewn with disheveled sagebrush and a tawny fuzz of senesced vegetation. Defunct open pits revealed ancient zigzags of olive, amber, ocher, and sienna strata. Soap green serpentine chunks pried from the pits sat haphazardly all over, their shiny smooth surfaces winking light throughout the site. Had the quarry still operated, the serpentine would have been hauled away, then hacked apart to obtain the asbestos ribbons embedded within it.

Like a puddle oil-slicked with rainbows, the damaged landscape captivated me: the tainted tantalized and commanded seeing vistas and histories anew. My direct participation in this landscape, though, troubled me. Kneeling on disturbed soil, trowel in one hand, *Dudleya* cradled in the other, I understood that the results of my daily efforts legally permitted further disturbance.

I understood, too, that I was to plant only *Dudleya setchellii* and grappled with the implications of making a monoculture. How would the specimens fare alone? Where were the other species of the serpentine grasslands? What of the interconnected relationships that support whole systems? Would planting one species nullify the power of community?

I knew when I took the job that I was uncomfortable with its patent contradictions. But paradox seemed like part of the protocol in some environmental work. My previous field seasons with various government agencies showed me that institutional plans to preserve plants, protect birds, and restore rivers could entail driving gas-guzzling vehicles or slicing into trees or trapping the species we actually sought to help. With this awareness, I tolerated the hour-long commute to the quarry site, the use of heavy equipment to build the conservation area.

It was harder for me to accept the tidy structures and spaces that could soon neutralize the landscape's unruly narratives. With the industrial scars erased, the plants as passive backdrop, the cul-de-sacs engineered just so, the coming development would likely project an orderly story. I longed for a design that could beautifully reveal the messy evidence of past activities and our connections to them. Sometimes, I yearned for the development's failure and envisioned the quarry reclaimed by the dynamic life adapted to the harsh serpentine soil. What could be learned by staying still and witnessing plants' and animals' capacity to transform poisoned earth. What could be recognized about resilience and how humans inhabit the region. Ultimately, I tried to remain open to what I could discover by working on ground that supported an endangered species and a mineral lode with a toxic legacy.

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After long hours in the field, I painted. I saturated the canvas, brushed on pigment, and watched it bleed across the sheet or pool in the paper's pockets or sit in pinpricks atop the washed surface. I then made marks in response to the paint as it commingled with my memories of the *Dudleya*, along with the harrier, hummingbird, backhoe, and tractor. Unexpected juxtapositions became abstract habitats of watercolor: the quarry's cool hues against a golden grassland in the distance, drifts of diaphanous mist momentarily framed by the rigid mesh of a chain-link fence, a *Dudleya* refuge amid rubble. I seldom held a preconceived vision for the final picture. Rather, I moved between engaging and observing, and let the image happen. Eventually, I viewed the scene less in terms of contrasts and more in terms of complexity.

Acknowledging the site's intricacies allowed me to respond more empathically to this wounded ground gone feral and the various lives that occupied it. So I persisted at the quarry, carefully situating the *Dudleyas* in the plot designated for their future, honoring their fragile tenacity. Though I felt disheartened by the site's imminent change and it was unclear if the *Dudleya* would flourish, I remained intrigued by my task. It compelled me to regularly immerse myself in and assess a shifting landscape, to feel soil, stems, and roots, and to anticipate possibilities. It required me to continually find balance between exercising caution and cultivating potential. It invited me to contemplate the tangible and invisible marks we make on the land, and imagine anew.

I continued planting.

Jolie Kaytes lives in Moscow, Idaho and is an associate professor of landscape architecture at Washington State University. Her work has appeared in the *Fourth River*, *Terrain.org*, *Camas* and elsewhere. She holds degrees from the University of California at Berkeley and University of Oregon.

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