

STEVE EMERY

Courtyard, 2016
Acrylic on hot-press watercolor paper, 20 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

LIANE GABORA The Marmot

Of all the other species that have lived on this planet, only humans (well, some humans) understood that everything someone does, everything that happens, leaves a vibrational footprint. They called the sum total of these vibrational footprints the Akashic records. It was a crude idea, but it paved the way for our current understanding of the traces left by matter and energy as they unfold through their various configurations.

I often drift into a reverie that leads me to the human vaults of these traces while gliding airborne in the megaseed phase of my cycle. But this time was different. I wasn't just tuning in to a conversation between a boy and his mother; I was in altered state, pulsating with his rage. Vital fluid coursed through my stalk and coalesced in glassy bubbles at the ends of my dilated filaments. I felt irreconcilably powerless, yet smoldering with godlike power. I temporarily became this human boy; that is, I couldn't control him, or even express myself through him, but I could feel everything he felt.

I was pulled into his world by a drawing he made of, well, me! Millennia before oxygen-breathing life died out, this boy drew me, with curvy lines to indicate the flapping of my diaphanous leaf-wings. He stared at the drawing, frowned, and then scribbled all over it. The sense that I was part of him solidified as he crumpled the drawing up and tossed it into a wastebasket. Then he was still for several minutes, except for a shudder that made me wonder if he sensed my presence.

"Mom, either something or someone's gotta kill almost all of us, or we'll continue destroying this planet and climate change will cause one disaster after another until everyone's dead."

"Sam, don't talk like that."

"You can't tell me to shut up. If I'm wrong tell me why." I could tell she was annoyed, but I was on a roll. I was electric.

My mother's voice softened. "Honey, this has been upsetting for all of us."

"Don't change the topic." I kicked my wheelchair hard. My heel throbbled. My mother winced but said nothing.

"Disabled people are useless," I commented.

She looked at me incredulously. Her tawny reddish hair and freckles made her look innocent, but she's no saint.

*“The more of us die,
the better off this
planet will be,”
I commented.*

“I’m just saying you have to, at least as a theoretical possibility, accept that we *might* be useless.”

Her jaw dropped. She looked at my mangled legs with pity. Then she turned back to her dishes and squirted sea breeze—essence dish soap from a clear plastic bottle onto a blue plastic scrub brush. The dishwasher was on, humming its mechanical hum, but she was washing the grimy, disgusting ones by hand.

“You may *feel* useless sometimes, Sammy. But you’re not.”

“You think it’s unacceptable to think we’re useless. So, you can never know for sure whether you think we’re useful because we really are, or because you’re not letting yourself accept the truth.”

“I don’t think any of God’s creatures are useless.”

“Mom, *all* humans are useless. We don’t live sustainably. We drink from plastic straws once. Once! And before you know it, millions of dead and decaying fish with straws in their swollen guts have washed up by the millions to putrefy the shoreline.”

My mother sighed, and then pursed her lips. I started drawing her, emphasizing the lines around her mouth and the billowness of her hair.

“I wish there was a way to casually work my disability into my artist statement,” I said. “These days they won’t give you a gallery showing unless you’re the queer, trans, biracial founding member of a First Nation. That’s as it should be, of course. But just saying. When the pendulum swings, it swings. He looked up from the pencil he dangled uncommittedly above a blank sheet of paper. Hey, don’t move!

I hold that position for a sec, I love the determined look on your face as you scrub that pot.”

My mother scrubbed more aggressively.

“The more of us die, the better off this planet will be,” I commented.

She rolled her eyes.

“It’s not even just how we live. It’s how we think. How we’re made.”

I was thinking of the exquisitely, flawlessly beautiful kids at my high school, with their compromised immune systems and brittle bones (overprocessed food) and fragile egos (overprocessed lives).

The dishwasher moved on to a more grating phase of its inexorable process.

“You wanna know why Logan killed Sonya and those other people and then killed himself?” I was speaking louder to be heard above the dishwasher.

She glowered but tried to suppress it with a veneer of phony concern. “Sammy, you know, he was disturbed. It happens.”

“It’s because he was walking up by the forest and a giant excavator was digging up the hillside and a little marmot stuck its head out of the dirt and stared at him in sheer fucking terror, like ‘What the fuck is going on?’ And he said the marmot’s whole underground home was probably, like, just completely torn apart, and his entire marmot family was probably missing. Or dead. And Logan felt sick to his stomach to be a member of the species that’s decimating this planet.”

My mother was staring at me like I was crazy. For a second I thought she’d cry. Anything to do with my sister (well, former sister), Sonya, upset her. But she was listening.

“He said whenever a new housing development was built he could sense the fear and sorrow of all the trees and wildflowers that were dug up and killed, and all the little ants and grasshoppers and birds that had made those trees their home.”

“Logan had a vivid imagination.”

“Mom, I’m not doing it justice. He explained it scientifically. When trees are threatened they release chemicals into the air. It’s a proven fact. They linger in the air for years. Decades. And there’s all kinds of other stuff that goes on, like even detectable changes to the geochemistry of the soil.”

“Detectable only to Logan, it seems.”

“No, *everyone* detects them! All the time. And it makes us nervous and anxious and fucked up, but we don’t know *why*.”

My mother’s face suddenly lit up. “Look!”

A hummingbird was hovering at the feeder outside the kitchen window, its iridescent wings palpitating in the sunlight like the flutter plants of my era.

My mom’s eyes were glassy. “He said that to you?”

“Yeah. Years ago, but it stuck with me.”

“So before he . . . was disturbed.”

“Mom! What if the real situation we face today is that most of the human race has to die very soon for this planet to continue to support life? Or else we all die, everyone dies, everything dies. Say that’s the case, and according to scientists, by the way, we have every reason to believe it is, so say it is. *Then* who’s ‘disturbed’? Logan? Is Logan the one who was disturbed?”

The hummingbird was gone. I felt beads of sweat on my forehead. Strands of hair, a more violent shade of red than my mom’s, obscured my view. The feeling of my fingers brushing my hair back across my head lingered in a way that was acutely, unnaturally pleasant.

“Sammy, sweetie, we all have different ways of coping, but I don’t think that kind of talk is helpful. Be optimistic.”

“Fuck optimistic. It’s helpful to *me*. Because it’s *real*!” I was shuddering. “I’ll tell you what’s not helpful. Not letting people talk. Not letting them think. Living in a world of make-believe. As if we could all keep driving cars and wasting water on golf courses that contaminate the groundwater with pesticides and drinking from plastic straws forever.”

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The dishwasher noise stopped abruptly, and the only sound was the steady undulation of my diaphanous wings. I was back in my photosynthesizing plant body, scanning pink-champagne skies with my optical stamens, looking for a spot to drop roots and grow. No longer trapped on the surface of the planet, trapped indoors, trapped in thoughts.

I don’t understand how or why I locked into the awareness of this boy. But, there’s one thing of which I am certain: in some subtle way we became entangled, and thereafter he knew—at some level—that someone (me) understood him. And that life would continue.

Liane Gabora is an associate professor of psychology and creativity studies at the University of British Columbia. Her short fiction has previously been published in *Fiction, Fiddlehead, and Metapsychosis*. She has over 175 scholarly publications in a diverse range of journals including *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review; Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts; Journal of Mathematical Psychology; Topics in Cognitive Science; World Archaeology; Journal of Theoretical Biology; and Foundations of Physics*. Current projects include a nonfiction book titled *Dawn of the Creative Mind* and a novel titled *Quilandria*.