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# Unrooted

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**THE NARROW PATH** drops a foot from the sidewalk as I follow Rosemary, head wrapped and eyebrows slim, away from the road. I had asked her how many plants she had, eliciting a chuckle and a beckoning wave. Counting greenery in Nairobi should be a Sisyphean task. Lush forest can't help but grow here. Fierce equatorial rays are tempered by altitude; rich red soils are fed by the cool waters that give the city its name.

"Thousands," she replies simply. Below us spreads her brood: row upon row of banana, fig, and rubber trees; bougainvillea, fern, and jade, covering all but a few muddy foot trails in this terraced nursery pinned between unceasing traffic and the fluctuating edge of the Nairobi River. Rosemary has been cultivating this patch, doing her best to squeeze money from verdure, for ten years. Her mother has worked the same stretch of Riverside Drive for twenty-one. But Nairobi is not home. That's Murang'a, Rosemary's town upcountry, even if she has no intent or desire to return there.

Under the sheltering arms of the newtonia trees rooted in the riverbank, a moist cool presides. Elsewhere, massive billboards, empty apartment blocks, and overpass supports have replaced the purple jacarandas and orange flames that sustain Nairobi's claim to its moniker "the Green City in the Sun." The city's growth is often blamed for this loss, but numbers cannot tell the full story. Rosemary, like many Nairobians, senses that it is a place "to stay," not to root, the place to be but not to belong. Younger generations are more likely to embrace Nairobi as home. But two decades of squatting on this riparian reserve, slipping bills to university administrators across the street for permission to occupy some parking spaces, can't give Rosemary's family any firmer tie to the place if they wanted it. Here, that takes money and influence that most do not have.

Rosemary's seedlings spend their early days outside the city, an hour and a half away in a Limuru greenhouse amid sprawling tea plantations. She crunches the browning edge of an avocado's leaf as she recounts

how their roots are bound in black plastic sheaths before their migration to the roadside. The plastic will constrain, and in some ways protect, the plants until purchase. Business is slow, though. The economy is bad, the competition stiff from many other vegetation vendors who carpet any intersection of infrastructure and water source in cuttings and grafts. Larger specimens, like the palm she urges me to inspect, might wait four years before they find a final destination—if they're lucky, proper earth like that which beckons from beneath the polyethylene barrier. With a plant stock so expansive, one wonders if most will ever broach their containers. This understory, a counterweight to a spreading concrete and steel overstory, stays unrooted.

I tell Rosemary I'm looking for something that can handle a dark corner of my apartment. We descend closer to the red-brown waters, the hint of sewage and traces of trash flushed from encroachments upstream more apparent the farther we proceed onto this forest factory floor. I regard the dust-covered leaves of a ficus, consider its lot as one embraced by, but ultimately disconnected from, a place. Here, it leans on its neighbors, whether or not it wants to. Maybe they trade some scents through the air, but no deeper exchange is permitted. That requires connection, an intertwining that stunted roots, wrapped up in themselves, can't manage.

Rosemary provides the care required to keep these beings alive. In the dry seasons, she pumps water from the river to sate them. She spreads manure across their



swiftly drying and quickly depleted soil. She says she needs to sell between fifty and eighty a month to get by. She minds her own affairs as best she can, maintaining her toehold on the life she's carved out for herself in this city, a few transplanted lives at a time.

Transience, as is frequently the charge, isn't so much the challenge in a place like Nairobi. One can track the endurance of a single, stunted snake plant across years on this riverbank, no bigger, no smaller in its little black bind. People tend to their demarcated piece of things—their section of the roadside by which *matatu* passengers and potential customers alight,

their bit of designated soil. With no roots though, a place cannot help but become unstable, its people dissociated, inexpert in tending to the collective whole. That's not our nature, we know. At the end of the row, a deep green monstera, its holey faces up to two feet wide, climbs from its grip on the earth, its tether to all, toward the canopy above. I ask Rosemary. Another chuckle. It's a part of something more, not hers to sell.

*Jonathan Tarleton is a writer and urban planner currently based in Nairobi. His first book, on stewardship and social housing, is due out in 2024.*

## CLIMATE DIARY

# The Forest Clearing

**"WHAT DOES THE LAND WANT?"** We gather in ceremony to hold this central question, trusting the forest will answer in its own time. Around the circle we introduce ourselves to our host, this magnificent nine hundred acres of unceded Kashia and Southern Pomo territory, situated above the Russian River in Sonoma County, California.

Once a church camp, the area is now lovingly stewarded by Shelterwood, a collective of queer, Black, and Indigenous organizers committed to restoring the forest and healing this ecosystem. I and three others who fundraise on behalf of Shelterwood are here this crisp May morning, which happens to be my fifty-first birthday, to connect more deeply with land and water.

We each bring something of significance for the ceremony. A song, a totem, a blessing.

I have brought my mother and infant daughter. As a drum beats, tears flow. Memory is stirred. Grief, pain, and hope enter our sacred space and are held tenderly. Across the circle, my nine-month-old, cradled in the lap of a land protector, quietly fiddles with a string of beads.

The forest wants babies, I think.

The answers are coming.

Beyond the circle, someone whispers, *Come over here.*

I feel pulled to a clearing. Now I'm distracted. I have an urgency to explore. When we break to go off wandering, I bolt in the direction that calls me. Rolling up a slope, my wheels struggle to grip the forest floor, and I panic, fearing I'll get stuck.

*Keep going.*

So I go. I reach a meadow hugged by Douglas fir, coastal live oak, and fragrant bay laurel also known as pepperwood, which is the preferred name used by many of the Indigenous communities of the area. I move across the meadow, edge to edge, making tracks. My heart could burst, I am so giddy.

The forest wants us too.

I summon my disabled kin, place them in the meadow with me, begin to dream: A modest, fully accessible home sits at the back of the meadow, near older pepperwood. Smaller accessible cabins dot the front. A contemplative garden is off to the side. A playground and picnic area in the center. Accessible trails connect to the future retreat center, an accessible sauna and hot tub, a builders' workshop, art studio, and more cabins. Footbridges sturdy enough to hold power wheelchairs crisscross streams.

We have been told a terrible, violent lie that disability is incompatible with nature, that accessibility is antithetical to preservation. This view has severed many disabled people's relationship to wilderness, rendered us marginalized in matters concerning the environment, and keeps us sidelined in liberatory movements for land rematriation and restoration.

But I hear a whisper.

It says a great forest such as this can welcome us home, help us heal, and yes, even flourish with our particular gifts of resilience, adaptation, and ingenuity.

"Do you see it?" I say breathlessly to a comrade who has joined me in the meadow.

"Yes, Yomi, I see it!" she says, crying.

*Yomi Sachiko Wrong is a Northern California-based disability justice dreamer, movement organizer, and writer. She builds spiritual and political home at Shelterwood Collective.*