

Stories of Climate Change and Inequality in a Divided World

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PENGUIN BOOKS

DUSK

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UNITED STATES

PERHAPS IT WAS BECAUSE THE WORLD felt tissue thin at the moment, as though if I moved too quickly I could poke my thumb right through it, perhaps because I had felt unable to leave my house for two weeks, but when I glanced out my window that afternoon and saw the girl thrashing on her back on the opposite sidewalk I understood in a dark and wordless part of me that she was having a seizure and that it was up to me to save her life.

I ran out the door. There was no time to worry about being seen in pajamas I hadn't changed out of for three days, or to marvel at just how artfully the girl's shirt had lifted in her twitching, to just under the bottoms of her breasts, revealing a golden sweep of abdomen so whittled I could see hip bones, rib cage, a diamond in the navel winking. I bent over her. When she felt my hands on her shoulders, she startled and her eyes opened, and she stopped thrashing and reached up to take out her earbuds. No, no: she said laughing when I asked if she was epileptic, I'm sunbathing. Here, she said, and put an earbud in my ear, and I winced at the intimacy of this thing so warm from the inside of her body suddenly inside my own. I heard the kind of pale techno that hasn't changed much in twenty years, since my own dissipated youth, when I routinely bought baby aspirin from men in

clubs and waited, always in vain, for the world to dissolve and recompose itself into something better.

This was how I met Dusk. I knew the moment she told me her name that it was not something that a loving parent would bestow on a child, that she had carefully selected it for herself when she reached the age of rebellion. Her real name was Moira, which I would later see on the packages that came for her. She was very distinctly South Florida, which means, in our more puritanical northern part of the state, of a breathtaking wealth and materialism that showed itself to be highly advanced in Dusk. She was a college student but had a gray Mercedes so new there were still stickers on the windows. She had a tattoo running from the outside of her right knee to just beside her breast that was one of the truest works of art I had ever seen, and which had surely cost many thousands of dollars: a medieval sword so delicate and ferocious that its bearer could only feel invincible wearing it at all times under her clothing.

I handed back the carbud and didn't know what to say, so I warned her that the median strip was so overgrown that people just let their dogs' poop sit there without picking it up, and that her long and glossy black hair was threatening to entangle itself in all that mess. Thanks! she said and lazily reached up and tied it into a bun, and held her carbuds near her ears, smiling at me, waiting for me to go. It felt gross to stare at her—she was exquisite, it was hard not to—so I said, Welcome to the neighborhood! and returned to the safety of my house. All morning, I wondered at how someone like Dusk could have rented the house of slow disaster opposite our own, until later, when I remembered that after the most recent calamity, the owner in desperation had brought in a whole team of men with paint and cabinets and tiles and granite countertops, leaving behind the skim of perfection under which the termites still teemed and the windowpanes still

rattled on a windy night. Dusk would only have seen the newness, her ilk was not trained in disintegration.

I, too, had once been young, and I had never believed that houses could hold disease in them until we moved into our own and saw the way the house opposite spread its disaster into its inhabitants. It had been built by the sister of the woman who had built our place in 1904, but her sister had simply stolen her carefully thought-out plans, and after that, the sisters never spoke again, although their houses were breathing in each other's faces. The tenant who had lived there when we first moved in left his drugs out on the coffee table, which his girlfriend's cat ate and that night died a particularly terrible death, after which the girlfriend took a tire iron to his stereo and car. When he moved out he was catless, girlless, carless, songless, weeping. The next tenant was a beekeeper who went one day to the hives in a field he had rented right outside of Alachua, and found that the bees had either died en masse, or swarmed elsewhere, leaving him both poor and bereft. The couple who had lived there before Dusk had stayed for seven years, somehow bearing the weight of the house's disease, but they were almost as desperate as the house itself, two bizarre creatures of the night who had miraculously found love in each other. They woke after noon and began drinking beer and smoking endless cigarettes soon thereafter on the porch, which they'd turned into a kind of haven of thrift-store statuettes and plants others had given up on and set out on the curb, which they nursed back to life. They played their dollar-bin records with increasing volume until, most nights, I was released to get up as the clock hit midnight, after having simmered in my resentment for hours, and ask them to turn their goddamn music down, please. They pretended they couldn't hear me until I took a step toward them up the porch, and the man would stand up bellowing in his yellowed singlet and smeary glasses and shout, Don't you fucking

come up onto our property! He was mostly paunch; I wasn't scared. But the girl would theatrically interpose herself between her man and me, saying, Honey, chill, the *homeowners* have to go to *work* tomorrow, making it clear that she thought the words *homeowners* and *work* were sneers. Eventually, he'd reach out a bare and hairy toe and turn the volume down. Thanks so much! I'd say cheerfully and go back across the street, flipping them off in the pockets of my robe. I feel pretty sure that they made their money by buying things in thrift stores, taking artful photos of them, and reselling them at a giant markup on the internet. In any event, one day the man's abused heart gave out and he died, and it was somehow shocking to find out that he was almost exactly our age, not yet forty, because he looked at least sixty. Over the next four weeks, his bereaved paramour slowly moved out, filling the back of a borrowed pickup truck and driving it away, heaping and driving, over and over again. No matter how many times she did this, she never seemed to have less stuff; there were the same piles the next day, then the next. I began to wait up for her at night in the darkness of my own porch, thinking that I would find her taking back inside the trash bags and bits of furniture that she'd packed that afternoon, a Goodwill Penelope unweaving the forward momentum of that day. My heart hurt for her then, because I could easily imagine her desperate hunger not to have to get rid of the life that she and her lost love had built together, to break it all by going to a new place, to allow the things they held to lose some of the ineffable spirit of the man that had bled into them during their stay in that house of disaster. Because if the seepage can go one way, from the material world into the human, from house to inhabitants, from the made thing to the makers, surely it could go the opposite way, human to material, from maker to the made. As proof, I submit that the sadness of

God at beholding her human creation has become our own sadness, our downfall.

Yet even hoarders, which is what I slowly understood these people had been, can eventually come to the end of their material possessions, and the girl was at last finished with her move. The landlord came in and out of the house swiftly with a stricken look on his face, and soon brought his troop of handymen, as though the successive disasters the house infected the tenants with were a grisly bloodstain he could just paint over. And into this refreshed version of the house came blithe Dusk.

I watched Dusk; she was endlessly entertaining. I waited to see what new wild outfit she would wear to the bars on the weekends, strips of metallic silk barely tied on. If I was still awake in the middle of the night, I'd peer eagerly into the dim porch light to see the person she came home with, and they were almost always the handsomest boys I'd ever seen. I cheered her on: anyone who was able to snare that kind of beauty with her body should delight in said body's wizardry. A month after she moved in, Dusk took off the porch swing and tipped it over the railing so it fell into the bamboo, where it stayed upended for months, then put in its place a hanging bed so that, if she was too drunk to walk herself into her house, the Uber driver could deposit her on the bed and not have to come in and inevitably get creepy with her. Some nights her outdoor bed would be so irresistible to weary passing homeless people that they'd climb up and sleep there, and in the morning, she'd bring out a Styrofoam cup of coffee and a microwaved egg muffin, and rouse them, and before they were even off the porch, she'd empty out an entire can of Lysol on the bed and call it a day. Sometimes, if she didn't especially like the boy she came home with, she wouldn't want him in her house and would seduce him *al fresco*, and because it was

a swinging bed, often the attempts were hilarious, and from my own porch before I would flee inside out of decency, I'd have to muffle my laughter with a pillow.

I knew it wasn't right to spy on my neighbor, but I had little else to do. I would like to think of myself as a bohemian, a refugee, an underminer of capitalism, a soldier in the war against the hegemonic superficiality and materialism of this current death rattle of the American dream, but I didn't have a job. Even a few months earlier, I'd fill my time with free Zumba at the senior citizens' center down the block, or with waylaying my children's teachers with ever-more-refined pedagogical questions, or with bird-watching. But a few weeks before Dusk moved in, I had gone out to the prairie every day to catch sight of my favorite natural phenomenon in Florida, the migration of sandhill cranes, with their vivid red necks and their rubbery honks and metallic whirrs. God, I loved them, all the raucous mob of them that spoke of plenitude and beauty for the sake of beauty. But day after day passed, the window of the cranes' season slowly closed, and I'd only seen a few of the birds at all. At last, a week past their migration season, it dawned on me that they wouldn't be coming this year. Maybe they wouldn't be coming ever again. Something terrible must have happened to them. And then I remembered one of the many hurricanes-of-the-century we'd been having with increasing frequency, two or three a year, and thought that perhaps the storm had found the birds in their nests, had blown them up and into the air above the Gulf, deposited them in the buffeting high winds where they flapped, disoriented, trying to find land, until one by one they dropped exhausted into the dark sea below.

It was this imagining that drove me into my house, and kept me there. It wasn't the thought of all the death that bothered me; I am from a morbid people who keep the certificates for their grave

plots framed upon their walls and believe the afterlife is an idiocy that a four-year-old could poke philosophical holes into. It wasn't the fact that soon human life will cease to exist on the planet; we likely deserve it, after all. No, it was all the great suffering I could smell on the wind, not simply human suffering for which we are culpable as a species, though there will be a great amount of it and the idea of children suffering was particularly acute; but there was also the animal suffering, innocent suffering, a tsunami of horrific pain rushing toward us, and I was powerless to stop it. I was powerless to make anyone sense it and understand.

My husband urged me to clean myself up and leave the house, he entreated, eventually became quietly disappointed in me, the all-time extremity of his censure; my children asked me to take them to the park but with such faux innocence, I knew they'd been set up. But I wouldn't, because I couldn't. I was laid out flat by future mourning.

I had the time to watch my neighbor, in short. As the days cooled, Dusk's behavior grew more erratic. I began to be worried about her. She didn't seem to be eating and grew even thinner; she started to go out not just on Friday and Saturday, but sometimes even Thursday and Wednesday. Once, she must have driven home drunk from a very particular kind of party, because in the morning her car was parked half up on the curb, and the back door was open and out of it spilled such a huge pile of Mardi Gras beads in purples and yellows and blues that my children, seeing it, ran out urgently and swam in the mass of beads on the street like seals, and I found strings of plastic in their pockets for a week. Once, three sleek boys drove up in a convertible, and Dusk came out with her roller bag and sunglasses, and when she returned a few days later, she was much tanner and still wearing her bikini top but no shoes, and staggering.

I noticed a pattern; after Dusk's worst nights, when she wasn't

mobile or speaking, and the driver dumped her already passed out on her outdoor bed, two days later, there would be a massive pile of boxes delivered to her house, probably from drunken binge-shopping after she'd woken in the early morning cold and dragged herself inside. I watched with horror as she'd rip open the boxes one after the other, and make a pile of stuff on the porch, then toss all the cardboard into the big black garbage container without breaking them down or putting them in the recycling.

Even though the end is nigh, I wanted to shout from my perch across the street, we don't have to hasten it! I couldn't stop thinking of the boxes, the trees slaughtered to make them, the trucks filling the highway carrying mostly paper and air and shit people didn't need, that caravan of death, that burning of dead dinosaurs releasing carbon into the atmosphere, heating us up, how the marketplace that conservatives beheld in slavish adoration somehow came up with the most profound inefficiency known to mankind.

The second time Dusk did this wild, greedy internet shopping, I was so agitated that I couldn't sleep, and at last rose, put on my slippers and went outside in the night with a kitchen knife, and broke down all her cardboard and stacked it neatly in the recycling bins. I also found a few unopened things that she'd ordered and decided she didn't want, still wrapped in plastic: a clock in the shape of a cat, a twenty-pack of protein bars, a purple dress still with its tags, that would have looked ludicrous even on Dusk's perfection, but that she'd spent two hundred dollars on. I didn't want any of it, but someone might, and so I stored her castaway things in my garage. I would donate it all, I thought, one day when my courage returned to me and I rejoined the world. Soon the pile was the size of my younger son.

By the fifth or sixth wild shopping binge, I began to long for the rude hoarders to come back; at least they understood the value in unwanted things. It was cold when I crept out to break down

the boxes, and I shivered as I pulled them out of the garbage, and then I saw myself as though with the eyes of anyone who might happen by, and knew that I looked like a bag lady with my unwashed hair and holey pajamas and angry mutterings in the shadows. In one box, under a careless mess of plastic bubbles and still wrapped in tissue paper, I found a large necklace with a fist-sized dangling skull on it in a glowing rose-gold color, a thing Dusk hadn't even seen before discarding. Instead of adding it to the growing donation pile in the garage, I put it around my neck and felt, very briefly, both young and wildly sexy. It was so heavy, so ridiculous, it made me laugh. I kept the necklace on through my fitful sleep in the night, and in the morning, when I went into my children's rooms to wake them up for school, they both opened their eyes sleepily and grabbed at the skull in wonder. Downstairs, my husband was cooking eggs, and he said, Wow, that sure is a big old thing around your neck!

Dusk threw it out, I said. I love it almost too much.

He stopped cooking and went still, and looked at me, then said carefully, You're going through her garbage now?

Oh, I said, no no no, she never breaks down the boxes of shit that she buys and it agitates me so much that I have to go over there and do it for her. I'm just being responsible.

He carefully put the spatula down. So you pull her boxes out of her garbage? You wait until everyone's asleep and go to the neighbor's and pull things out of her garbage? I wonder if it's possible that you're a little obsessed with this girl? Like, you may be scaring me a little? Do you think this is normal behavior? Should I be worried about you?

No! I'm doing it for the environment! I said, and fled.

I felt stung, but after the boys left and the house was all mine again, a plan began to form in my head. I took the necklace off, and bathed, carefully washing my hair, and put on one of my nicer

dresses, a long, white minimalist sheath, and hung the necklace on myself again, thinking that this way my body would be a gallery wall and she couldn't *not* see it. I would force the issue with Dusk; we would gently talk it out. I envisioned tears, me calling a therapist for her, because for the past few months, many of my friends had quietly sent me the numbers of their therapists.

So I sat on the porch with a book until midmorning, when Dusk came out with a cup of coffee, in her slippers, and I nonchalantly came out the porch door with my dog, who had been leashed and trembling in delayed anticipation for hours. Hey, I called out, and she squinted at me, and said, Wow! You look hot, sister. I didn't even know your hair was blond.

Yep, I washed it, I said. My dog, to whom all humans are a source of adoration, pulled us across the street, and Dusk kneeled and fondled my dog's head, and when she looked up at me, she said, That is like the most killer necklace I've ever seen.

I was nonplussed; I couldn't speak. I was prepared for anger, for shame, but in none of my projections did Dusk not even recognize the thing she'd spent a good deal of her parents' money on and tossed out without opening. My brain went into a loop, and I hardly clocked her when she said to my dog in a baby voice, You're gonna have a neighbor! Yes you are. Yes you are. My little puppy is coming today! And then, looking up at me, she said solemnly, I've adopted one of the dogs who had been orphaned by Hurricane Michael, it's like so sad. Their owners just let them wander out into the storm. And then they were like homeless. People can be so terrible.

And then she stood, and stretched her lean body like a terrific jungle cat, and poured the dregs of her coffee on the ground, and said, See you! and went inside.

When her words finally struck me on my way to the dog park, my agitation peaked, because a dog was not a necklace, not an

ugly dress, a dog could not be tossed into the landfill if it displeased. Dusk could not possibly care for an animal, I thought; an animal didn't fit into the life of a hedonist. As soon as you own an animal, you enter an honorary middle age. You have to take care of the body of something else, not just your own beauty.

The dog arrived that afternoon in Dusk's arms, some kind of Jack Russell mix that snapped at my dog when she ran over and said hello. If a dog can wear an expression, this one's was constantly sour. It pissed all over Dusk's house so that she threw out her rugs, which in the night I pulled out and treated and rolled up and put a FREE sign on them, and they were snatched up by dawn. When Dusk went out at night, the poor dog barked for hours until I thought surely it would go hoarse or I would go mad. That first night when she returned at three in the morning, after six hours of the dog's shrill barking, Dusk must have done the wildest shopping binge of all, because a few days later, the pile of boxes in front of her door was the size of a small car.

And this was it; this was the breaking point. I waited until Dusk appeared in the morning light to practice her yoga on the porch. She gasped with pleasure at the wall of junk that the postman had built and said to her dog, It's Christmas! That is when I walked across the street, grim and sure.

Dusk, I said. We really need to talk.

Uh-oh, she said. You sound like my mom. What's up?

I am worried about you, I began, but she interrupted, saying, Oh. If this is about the partying, it's okay, I have a 4.2 GPA, it's all under control.

No, I began again, and she said, No, I see, I get it, I didn't think you were the puitanical kind but if you're scandalized by all the guys I bring back, whatever, like, I'm body positive and I love sex and like it's none of your business. My body, my choice! Also, I use the rhythm method, it's fine.

This made me pause for a long moment, but I started again, No, Dusk, it's not the sex, it's not the drinking. It's what the drinking leads to. It looks like you get drunk then buy a bunch of shit that you later just throw out.

Oh, she said. That's all? I mean, it's my money. I can buy what I want. Right?

But your actions have consequences for the world, I said. Every box that comes here puts a tax on the environment—

I was about to launch into a long and carefully prepared speech when she said, Ugh. She stood up very tall and put her hands on her waist. You're one of those climate change people. I should have guessed, I mean, you dress like one for sure. You do you, whatever, free country, but just so you know I don't really believe in climate change.

What? I said. It's not like Santa. Or God. It's not something you don't believe in. It's empirical.

Yeah, but, we'll be dead before it matters, she said. Like in a hundred years.

Wait, but, I began, no, the U.N. put the timeline shockingly soon, the scientists—

Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah, she said. I mean, I'm not dumb, obviously I know what science is, but this is the way I look at it? Okay, so I'm sure that in my lifetime things are going to be impacted but like there are already too many people on the earth and the people who are going to be hurt are the ones who aren't really contributing anyway.

And she smiled at me, and there was something victorious about her smile, and I turned away because I had no words. I came into my house. I sat in silence for a very long time; I lay sleepless in silence when everyone slept around me, still stunned.

And, for the past week, Dusk has ignored me or made a face as she sees mine in the window. Far worse than contempt, her

expression is one of profound pity. I have, in asserting my moral position, somehow lost my moral authority. I am now just another pathetic Old.

There is one small bright spot, though, and it is that since the moment when I failed with Dusk, I have become frantic with the need to leave the house, and I have begun to take my long walks down into the prairie again. I bring a bag with me, to pick up litter. It is stupid, but it is something; I am not doing nothing. The imperative for leaving is because that poor, small adopted dog of Dusk's barks and barks all day as soon as she leaves for her classes. He barks in a screaming pitch, without ceasing, in furious urgent need. I don't know how he finds the oxygen, how such constant barking doesn't make him pass out. But he continues; he is adamant; he will make us hear him; he insists upon it. In fact, there have been times when I've felt myself leaning forward, listening, and I feel in those moments that I am very nearly hearing what it is that he's trying so hard to tell us; there are times when I feel certain that he's telegraphing beyond language the things that he knows intimately, lessons his very flesh learned, and if I only listened hard enough and cared enough, I'd understand the story.

Perhaps he's telling us of that lost first life of his, so easy and beautiful and good in the little apartment over the sea, with his old, slow humans and his daily food from a can and his walks on the beach with the long-legged birds and the balcony where he could keep an eye on it all and smell the wind. And then one day the birds became raucous and fled, the beasts of the water went deeper or ran on their strange and stubby legs inland, the bugs found deeper places to stow themselves, the skies grew black and furious, and the terrible vast thing came ever nearer and ever darker from over the distant horizon. And the little dog barked, increasingly loudly, telling his humans to get out, to take him with them, but they did not listen to him, they did not want to

leave their place, the careful accumulation of their things, their so carefully crafted life. And then the winds rose even higher and louder and the water gnashed and bit and drew up over the sand in its surge, then over the road, and against the building, and it was so loud none of the shouts of the humans could be heard, and he could feel the very structure below him weakening in all the water and the wind, slowly disintegrating, and with a smash the glass blew out of the sliding windows, and the wind was now a great bad beast in the apartment, and with its buffeting and roar it picked him up and threw him through the air, out into the storm, and this was the last of that life that he knew. His terror was so extreme he was frozen in the pile of rubble where the wind had blown him, and there the wildest blackest wettest loudest wind blew at him for endless time. And when he woke his whole world was gone, his people were gone, his apartment had been blown off the face of the earth and in its place was a snarl of rubble and death. This is what the dog would have told me, I feel sure, if he had the language, and if I had the ears to hear him, to heed the prophecy the god of dogs had chosen him to tell.