

Singing in Grant Town

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Prompt:

Climate Change Writing Competition 2022



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I stood in the street in an orange mesh vest, directing traffic, as sixteen protesters were arrested. The day before, at the campsite, they had all volunteered for the Red risk level: leaving only in handcuffs. The rest of us shielded them while they got in position and pipe-locked their arms across the gate of the Grant Town coal plant. Soon, they were taken away to the police cars which had descended like crows.

As one, we sang to them: *We're! So! Proud of you! We're-so-proud-of-you!*

I'd ridden in a shared van for hours to reach the small Appalachian town, the site of a power plant run on "gob," dirty waste coal. The surrounding community is exposed to highly polluted air and water, in a state that already has one of the worst respiratory death tolls in the nation. And all the while, millions of dollars from the plant's supplier go directly to a Senator blocking climate legislation.

Freezing rain fell on the hundreds of us arriving at HQ camp in the forest nearby. I could feel a frenetic excitement in the air, as we reviewed maps and painted banners; practiced de-escalation exercises for counter-protesters, plant workers, cops; rehearsed rally songs over and over. This was unlike any demonstration I'd experienced. Arrests were the stated goal, in order to draw press attention to the danger of gob pollution, and even in my Green risk-level, I felt out of my depth. This was real, direct, and electric. Watching the Red teams prepare, witnessing that dedication and joy, I was struck by their profound compassion for this world and each other.

The day of action brought police and news cameras. Civil disobedience has a storied place in the American tradition, and the “Coal Baron Blockade” proved no less effective in capturing the public’s attention. Within hours, full-length pieces were running across major media—Democracy Now, Fox News, The Washington Post. People all over the country were watching us. Drivers crept past, shouting or waving in anger as often as support. A banquet of pizzas arrived. An enormous banner was laid across the pavement and everyone began singing again, as the sun dried us and I tried to take it all in, preserve every passing moment. I still couldn’t believe I was here.

Two years earlier, when I was fourteen, I helped start a hub of the Sunrise Movement in my hometown. As a local part of a national, youth-led climate justice organization, we ran rallies in front of city hall, canvassed for candidates, spoke at public hearings. For students and youth, it’s especially easy to disconnect from politics. There’s no space for us ready-made. That’s why it is so important to build communities centered on advocacy and the liberating joy of action. Creative spaces grounded in what we all have to lose. For me, growing up close to the land on my family’s eco-farm made the destruction of climate change intimate and terrifying. Through organizing, however, I practiced hope. A deliberate belief that even if the future seemed bleak, I could make a difference by breaking from the passive social script and speaking up.

But that understanding was abstract, before I went to Grant Town.

The morning was long and cold, and I was focused on my role as an Action Marshal, monitoring the road, directing cars and people, so I only realized afterward that something had changed for me. Seeing the courage of those arrested had forced me to ask what I, too, might give to shift our national climate conversation. For my friends and my sister and our home. It’s stuck with me since, like a refrain: *What else does this moment demand?*

When a call to action comes and I want to ignore it, I see the driver of our van returning to camp late that night after getting bailed out of jail. I see a Senator making more money than his constituents will ever have, from an industry that is killing them. No longer can I step away from a movement that builds community against that injustice, turns fear into the radiance of action, and takes risks for the land

and streams and all the wild beautiful places I have grown up belonging to.

Four months after the Coal Baron action, I took a Red role in another peaceful blockade, in D.C. this time. Excited and scared in equal measure. Then, the night before, the Senate announced sudden legislation meeting many of our movement's demands. Instead of preparing for handcuffs, I celebrated the victory. But there is still much more to be done for our gorgeous, tortured, confused country. How can youth use our voices to lead and to build? What is demanded of our generation?

In Grant Town, we sang: *Solid as a rock, rooted as a tree | I am here, standing tall | In my rightful place.*

I will keep singing.

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