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Jane Braxton Little: A Tour Guide to Hell on Earth, Small Town-Style

Buildings burn as the Dixie Fire tears through downtown Greenville, California on August 4, 2021. (Photo: phys.org)

Climate Change, Up Close and Personal

Half a mile south of what's left of the old Gold Rush-era town of Greenville, California, Highway 89 climbs steeply in a series of S-turns as familiar to me as my own backyard. From the top of that grade, I've sometimes seen bald eagles soaring over the valley that stretches to the base of Keddie Peak, the northernmost mountain in California's Sierra Nevada range.

Today, stuck at the bottom thanks to endless road work, I try to remember what these hillsides looked like before the Dixie fire torched them in a furious 104-day climate-change-charged rampage across nearly one million acres, an area larger than the state of Delaware. They were so green then, pines, cedars, and graceful Douglas firs mixed with oaks pushing through the thick conifer foliage in a quest for light and life. Today, I see only slopes studded with charred stumps and burnt trees jackstrawed across the land like so many giant pick-up-sticks.

Dixie did far more than take out entire forests. It razed Greenville, my hometown since 1975. It reduced house after house to rubble, leaving only chimneys where children once had hung Christmas stockings, and dead century-old oaks where families, spanning four generations, had not so long ago built tree forts. The fire left our downtown with scorched, bent-over lampposts touching debris-strewn sidewalks. The historic sheriff's office is just a series of naked half-round windows eerily showcasing devastation. Like natural disasters everywhere, this fire has upended entire communities.

Sadly, I have plenty of time to contemplate these devastating changes. I'm the first in a long line of vehicles halted by a burly man clad in neon yellow and wielding a stop sign on a six-foot pole. We motorists are all headed toward Quincy, the seat of Plumas County and its largest town. My mission is to retrieve the household mail, a task that would ordinarily have required a five-minute walk from my second-floor office to the Greenville Post Office. Now, it's a 50-mile round trip drive that sometimes takes four hours due to the constant removal of hazardous trees. I'm idling here impatiently.

Greenville still has a zip code, but the fire gutted the concrete-block building that was our post office. The box where I once received magazines, bills, and hand-decorated cards from my grandkids lies on its back, collecting ashes. Whoever promised that "neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night" would impede postal deliveries never anticipated the ferocity of the Dixie fire.

Few did. That blaze erupted in forests primed for a runaway inferno by a climate that's changing before our eyes. Temperatures worldwide are up 2.04 degrees Fahrenheit since 1901 and 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit in the United States since 1970. This year is California's driest in a century. Only 11.87 inches of rain or snow fell, less than half what experts deem average. Combine that with a century of forest management that suppressed natural fires and promoted the logging of large, more fire-resistant trees and these forests needed only a spark to erupt into a barrage of flames that swept from the Feather River Canyon to north of Lassen Volcanic National Park, the equivalent of traveling from Philadelphia to New York City.
Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) almost certainly provided that spark, as company officials told the California Public Utilities Commission. Earlier, they had accepted responsibility for the deadly 2018 Camp

fire, which destroyed the sadly named town of Paradise, and three other blazes. Those fires are the outsized products of corporate greed and a gross failure to maintain the company's electrical infrastructure. PG&E's negligence comes at a time when a dramatically changing climate is wreaking havoc worldwide. For every victim of the Dixie fire, there are thousands who were hit last November by massive hurricanes in North and Central America, and hundreds of thousands who find themselves escaping rising seas in places like Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Global South. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported in April, the number of people displaced by climate-change-related disasters since 2010 has risen to 21.5 million, most of them in poor countries and small island states.
Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe calls all of this "global weirding," adding, "No matter where we live or what we care about, we are all vulnerable to the devastating impacts of a warming planet."

Ten minutes pass.

The bored man with the stop sign pounds it onto the pavement like a squirrel defending its nuts. Waiting here in a quest to retrieve my mail is the least of the indignities of living in the scar of the Dixie burn. In fact, I'm among the fortunate. Although the fire did destroy my office in downtown Greenville, the erratic winds that bamboozled firefighters for months inexplicably shifted flames away from my house and the surrounding forestland.

Two neighboring communities had already gone up in a firestorm of torched trees and burning embers after a pyro-cumulous cloud collapsed above them on July 24th. Ten days later, it took less than 45 minutes for fire to reduce Greenville's tarnished Gold Rush charm to smoldering ash.

The town has now lain comatose for more than four months. Those of us whose houses were spared drive through it white-knuckled, stomachs churning, compulsively reciting the names of our neighbors whose ruined homes we pass. Like the victims of climate disasters everywhere, such former residents have scattered to the — I'm sorry to even use the word — winds in a diaspora that's shattered our community and left those of us who remain wondering how we can possibly rebuild our town.

Greenville has always been the stepsister of Plumas County, the least affluent of its four major communities, the least politically significant, and the first to be threatened with school closures. It lacks even one rich philanthropic resident. In fact, its median income declined 15% in 2019 to $26,875. Try supporting a family on that even without a major wildfire. It's no surprise, then, that this neediest of Plumas County communities is suffering the most. As Solomon Hsiang reported in 2017 in *Science* magazine, climate change inflicts its heaviest economic impacts on the poorest 5% of the population, reducing average incomes post-disaster by as much 27%.

When California Governor Gavin Newsom visited Greenville shortly after it was devastated, he mentioned getting calls from friends at Lake Almanor, a wealthy, well-connected enclave 15 miles to the north — but not from our town, of course. The state authorized an immediate $5 million for disaster relief. But the response of county officials has been anemic at best. County supervisors have done little more proactive than declare a

disaster. The county school district, responsible for the virtually undamaged Greenville elementary and high school campus (talk about survival miracles!), took no initiatives to turn its abundant facilities into safe, warm, functioning spaces for Dixie victims. Only recently has it agreed to house a resource center providing them with everything from blankets and jackets to soup and cat food.

At the most local level, the Indian Valley Community Services District, with bankruptcy looming, is struggling with how to collect the usual fees for water and sewer use from a town with almost no residents. The local chamber of commerce is in complete disarray.

Those of us who still have our houses live with reduced services. Frontier Communications, the only telephone and primary Internet provider, has always been known for its piss-poor service in this backwoods region of California. Four months after Greenville burned, we still have no landlines, no Frontier Internet, and no promise of either one for months to come. PG&E provided immediate electricity through diesel-belching generators, a service we accepted with gratitude, but gasoline, pharmaceuticals, and the mail I'm trying to retrieve remain a 50-mile round trip on distinctly clogged roads.

The anguish of living in a burn scar takes a toll. My dreams are littered with drifting pages of burned books bearing faces I no longer see here: a blue-eyed woman with a voice like a code-red alert, a clerk with straight black hair cascading down his back. We lock eyes before they sink into the dark.

Twenty minutes pass.

The stop-sign guy no longer needs to wave his sign to alert approaching vehicles. The line is now a quarter-mile long — too far for the drivers just pulling up to see him. He turns his back on us, releasing a puff of vaporous steam. Who could blame him for an occasional toke on a day when his most exciting activity is likely to involve turning his sign from "stop" to "slow"?

In October, heavy equipment began moving into Greenville: backhoes, bulldozers, dump trucks, stump grinders, and PG&E's unmarked fleet of white extra-cab pickup trucks. The whine of chainsaws began to pierce the deadly quiet, while androgynous figures in white hazmat suits swarmed through the rubble. By early December, more than 150 of the town's 800 destroyed structures had been cleared of debris, leaving lots as smooth as cemetery lawns awaiting possible rebuilding. Many of their former occupants, however, are gone, some having used instant insurance cash to buy houses in the neighboring, unburnt towns of Quincy and Chester. Others have moved farther away: Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, Utah. Some are still here, sleeping in tents despite 20-degree nights.

Hopelessly haunted by the devastation all around me, I find myself revisiting the rubble. On one compulsive trip, I met a sweet-faced, curly-haired young man changing the tire of an aging, mud-spattered SUV. Its battery was dead, he told me with a wan smile. Since his house burned down, this has been his home. He looks weary but is amazed when I tell him about the resource center 10 miles down the road where he can pick up clothing, a sleeping bag, and food.

I wander off to the burned-out shell of the sheriff's substation, once a copper-roofed bank owned by a woman who managed to nurture it through the Great Depression of the 1930s. No more. The hulking remains of a vault is perched awkwardly in the open amid the ashes of a sergeant's wooden desk. My office was next door. No longer. I turn my back on Main Street and weep – for the history lost, the curly-headed youth with a charred future, all of us touched by this fire and the horrific costs climate change levies.

Thirty-two minutes.

The stop-sign guy has suddenly come to life. Strutting to his post in the center of the highway, he gives me a nod, turns the sign to "slow," and directs me to follow the pilot car up the highway and over the grade. It's a short-lived reprieve. Ten miles further on, we're stopped again, this time next to piles of woodchips four stories high. The grief of witnessing entire mountainsides denuded of every tree, living or dead, is deepened by seeing potential timber and firewood ground up and hauled off. How many hundreds of houses could have been built or warmed by those piles of dead wood?

In spite of the devastation and in defiance of approaching winter, clusters of green shoots have nonetheless emerged from the charred soil beside the road, bearing leaves that wave in the breeze as we wait. We, too, are slowly emerging from the bleak, post-fire desolation. It was an all-out celebration when Evergreen Market, Greenville's only grocery story, reopened on October 1st. I again shed tears in the check-out line as the owner overcame his shyness and greeted me with a handshake. The fellow who owns Riley's Jerky, Greenville's only locally made product — a dried-meat snack — has announced that he'll rebuild at triple the former size. A realtor's trailer occupies a cleared space near the grocery store, while in a food trailer next to the ruins of a former gas station, Mary's German Grill is serving bratwurst and potato pancakes spiced with Mary's cheery greeting: "So how's the apocalypse treating you?"

Fifty-seven minutes.

A neon-clad clone of the first stop-sign guy turns his sign to "slow" and once again we creep down the road. I'm now nearly halfway to Quincy. No one died in the Dixie fire, a credit to the aggressive evacuation strategy quickly put in place by Plumas County Sheriff Todd Johns. But the shock of losing a home and the stress of moving multiple times as smoke and flames advanced have been devastating. Teachers who formed their identities around generations of Greenville students have lost them. Business owners who held forth behind well-worn wooden counters are broken. And now, the trauma of it all is beginning to pick us off one at a time in unheralded deaths that will never be counted among the costs of the Dixie fire.

Like people wracked by climate-disaster recovery everywhere, we're facing a boot-strap recovery and a generational challenge. People in high places with money to share are not riding over the ridge to our rescue. Instead, we've been turning to one another, relying on our mutual commitment to the place we've long called, and continue to call, home. There's a buzz of enthusiasm about the possibility of rebuilding an all-solar town and kissing PG&E goodbye. Others are researching how to use the locally made bricks that survived the fire in

new construction to honor the town we lost. A group called the Dixie Fire Collaborative is working to coordinate a host of independent initiatives.

Strengthening us is the resilience of Native American Maidu tribal leaders and the experiences that kept them on this land. They stood up again and again after the destruction of their communities and they remain standing today. “This is a time of renewal, a time of immense opportunity,” says Trina Cunningham, executive director of the Maidu Summit Consortium.

One hour and 45 minutes.

After one more tree-removal stop, I finally arrive in Quincy to find a postal box crammed with slick flyers from attorneys promising to recover my monetary losses. Call it cruelty or irony, but among the envelopes is a bill from PG&E. I fill up with gas, still not available in Greenville, and face what could be another two-hour drive back through that same scarred landscape.

It’s dark by the time I arrive in Greenville. The lights still on in Evergreen Market are welcoming, but most of the town has no electricity or even poles to mount street lights. The only true intersection, at Highway 89 and what’s left of Main Street, is illuminated by a generator when it’s working. It’s a little chancy, but I take a shortcut on a side street past burned-out residential debris looming in the dark. And there, suddenly, are tiny lights spiraling improbably into the night on a 10-foot Christmas tree. Just beyond it, multicolored lights outline a set of stairs to a house that’s no longer there. Who knows where those lights will lead us?

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