

there will be no justice with this system. the system is an arbiter of destruction.

it's time.

for the dams to be blown.

for smokestacks to fall.

for collective care.

for decarceration.

for rehabilitation.

for luxury apartments to alchemize into collective affordable housing.

for the swollen pockets of a few to redistribute to the many.

we are all we have.

we keep us safe.

we will not be lied to.

we are coming.

like the water that will flow to our great salt lake's body, we will not stop until balance has been restored.

lake words

this book is a queer, abolitionist love letter for the lake - a love so robust it refuses to look away. compiled in spring 2022, much was written from the shore of antelope island during a forty-seven day vigil held by the river writing community.

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the body of water

now commonly
known as
great salt lake
is also called
pi'a-pa / great water,
in the language of the goshute
whose ancestral
and unceded homelands
along with the ute, paiute,
and shoshone peoples,
comprise
the surrounding
bioregion.

dedication

to those who know they have been lied to
to those who want to see behind the veil
to those looking for others
to those for whom inaction is violence
to those who see the refineries, the landfills, the tailing
ponds, and the dams as attacks
to those who have no room for compromise with the
white supremacist capitalist class
to those human and non-human relatives who face
violence from the legislature
to those searching for where the fires are lit
to those who are done holding back



4,206
4,203
4,200
4,197
4,194
4,191
4,188 ft.

the life of this body is in peril

if i could see through the bank of smog in front of me, i would see the u.s. magnesium plant, one of the worst polluters in the country. and this in a basin already known for topping the charts of worst air quality in the world, a basin home to ecosystems and cities teeming with millions of beings. scientists tell me that magnesium is a matter of national security, that we are all complicit. that we all play a role in this.

the bear river development project is hoarding more than 70 million dollars in a slush fund waiting to be used to build more dams and divert more water.

this, while the lake is in peril. this, while the death of the lake threatens clouds of arsenic-laden dust to fall upon the city.

this, while a housing crisis rages in the city that bears the name of this great body of water. where, already, hundreds of our neighbors die every year from the effects of being unhoused. this, while

the mayor tells the police to destroy everything these people own. the same police who militarized downtown salt lake city with all manner of tanks, artillery, national guard, and riot cops in the course of an afternoon.

all that in response to a city crying out that we will not tolerate our police force shooting a 23 year old in the back 33 times. that it is unacceptable for a cop to kneel on a man's neck for eight minutes. the same cops inheriting the old toys of the military, the same military fighting for national security.

ahhh, we've come full circle. remember, we started at a magnesium plant.

they will tell you it has to be this way. they will tell you to talk to your representatives. they will tell you this gives you power. "they" are the executives of oil and gas companies on the boards of the city's clean air nonprofits. "they" are your representatives with the keys to power who choose not to open the door.

there are only three inlets to this great body of water

body: a living, breathing, changing creature, something of substance. a body needs tending. needs care. needs nourishment. needs enough.

three inlets: the jordan, the weber, the bear river. this is where the lifeblood of the lake originates, each with its own history. each used to flow unencumbered. now, not a single river in this region has been left undammed.

the jordan river flows north, meandering the 50 miles between utah lake and the great salt lake. two dams impinge the flow of water from one lake to the other. when white colonists arrived, they almost immediately started using the jordan as a floating transportation line. a primary function was carrying their trash to the great salt lake. in the years that followed, all manner of slaughterhouses, packing plants, mineral reduction mills, and

laundries were built along the shore. all using the river as their free dumping ground.

the weber river starts in the mountains, flowing through valleys and hindered by seven dams to reach the lake. it took settlers less than 50 years to construct more than 100 canals. when the u.s. bureau of reclamation got their hands in the mix, it only took them 17 years to fill the weber with more canals, power plants, irrigation and drainage systems, and six of the major dams - most devastating of which may be the largest, willard reservoir. located on the shore of the lake and separated by a 36 foot tall dike, its function is to capture as much water as possible before it reaches the lake. this dam has been useless since its inception - and we've known it the whole time. fourteen years after the dam was constructed, a paper from usu found the reservoir to be obviously

1893 - lake level: 4,198 ft above sea level
great saltair is built on the south shore with a railroad connecting it to salt lake city



redundant. despite knowing the captured water had nowhere to go, and thus went unused and contributed to lowering lake levels, the dam has remained for decades.

the headwaters of the bear river don't start all that far from the lake, but the water twists and turns for hundreds of miles in the largest watershed that feeds into the great salt lake. heedless of petty borders, the river flows through utah, idaho and wyoming. from start to finish, there are more than 60 dams choking the water in this watershed from reaching the great salt lake. bear river is the inlet with the most water that could be further diverted. already, legislators and developers have more dams proposed for bear river and keep a tight grip on

similar bodies have died a similar death

this lake is not passively in decline. this lake, this body, is being killed, murdered, smothered, strangled. it's happened before. los angeles drained owens lake in less time than it took developers to lick their lips and ask for more. get this: hardly anyone lives near owens anymore. hardly anyone can. the death gasps from the dry body fill the air with noxious dust. pandora's box was open and los angeles certainly wasn't going to do anything to put the lid back on - though it was well past too late.

i can think of dozens of reasons to tend to this ravaged body. here's one: if the great salt lake is executed, the city of its namesake will go down too in a slow, toxic, depleting death. fitting, don't you think?

imagine thousands of square miles of dusty, bare lake bed. an exposed cocktail of dried chemicals and sewage dumped into the inlets by various industrial polluters over the years. now, take a gust of wind from an incoming storm and we've got a dust cloud full of poison making its way along the wasatch front.

1959 - *lake level: 4,195 ft above sea level*

causeways begin to be constructed to allow vehicle and railroad traffic across the lake, dividing the lake into two major bays. as a result, gunnison bay becomes highly saline and the salinity tolerances are exceeded for major components of the ecosystem

the money they've secreted away to do so.

let's be clear:

the great salt lake is at the lowest level ever recorded and is on track to continue receding. consumptive water uses in the watershed - that is, water taken out of the system and never returned - have depleted inflows by over a third.

of this water, more than 60% goes towards agriculture, which is almost six times the amount consumed for municipal uses. this has lowered the lake body by more than ten feet, which has decreased both the lake area and volume by over half.

these are enormous numbers. sit with them.

have you heard of lake effect? it's a cool wind that picks up moisture from the lake body, carries it to the surrounding mountains, and delivers the "greatest snow on earth". well, we are looking down the barrel of a new mad max lake effect. time to pack up the powder skis and get out a broom because we are ushering in the next dust bowl and it isn't looking good.

salt lake city is becoming unlivable. salt lake city will be unlivable if developers, legislators, refineries, and industrial agriculture keep choking the lake for very much longer. the lake, the brine shrimp, the microbialites, the birds, and those of us inhabiting this valley can only bear so much. i wonder if the lake is crying out to their mother, lake bonneville, gasping their final breaths, wondering how it could have ended up this way. how we can throw each other's lives away so easily. how we can plunder what was never ours in the first place. that which may have invited us to the table, fed us, and given us a place to rest had we not walked through the doors bellowing "i own this" before smashing everything to bits and leaving hungry, tired and angry.



they do not - will not - go gently

i would like to discuss how completely fucking asinine it is to divert water from a dying lake to grow alfalfa to export overseas to - it doesn't really matter where - to feed cows. the way i see it, cows are money. someone is making money off stolen water growing a crop not suited to this region, because, i assume the logic goes, who the fuck cares about who's going to have to clean up this mess when my pockets are stuffed and i'm not here to look at it anymore? which begs the question, who is running away with the cash?

forty percent of farms in utah are alfalfa farms. why? because alfalfa is profitable in this region due to cheap water and cow subsidies. on the other hand, "specialty crops", which is what the usda calls fruits and vegetables, have high costs of labor and transportation to markets. growing alfalfa is how many farmers can stay afloat.

less than one percent of utahns are farmers and ranchers. let's talk about how easy it would be to spend money to subsidize farmers to grow human

the acts of a few are throwing away our future

one surefire way to create a generations-long culture of disdain and disregard? fill the place with garbage. ignore all the beings who live there and litter the shore with landfills and refineries. from wastewater to tailing ponds to prisons to hazardous waste, the lake has become the center for this region to throw things away. it's a dumping ground for the things we don't want to look at, what we don't want others to see.

let me tell you about coal ash. about a spill in tennessee 14 years ago where more than 250 cleanup workers came away chronically ill with myriads of diseases and cancers. how already more than 30 of them are dead. how after this spill, the epa decided there should probably be some rules around coal ash storage. it was clear to them that

1972 - lake level: 4,199 ft above sea level
u.s. magnesium begins extracting magnesium from the lake

1974
kennecott smelter constructed

food or to let the water run its natural course. instead the current system is to spend millions of dollars to build more dams to siphon water to grow a water-hungry crop and then ship it away.

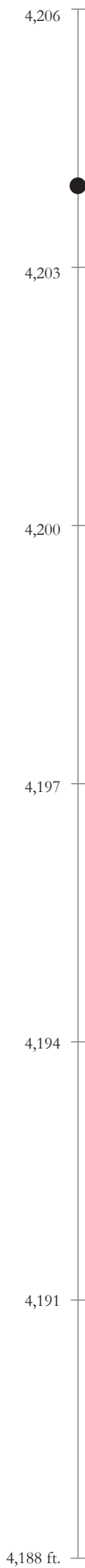
the government was capable of a multi-trillion dollar bailout for businesses and the stock market in 2020. to be clear, that's \$2,300,000,000,000. what if they were to take a teeny tiny eensy weensy fraction of wherever the fuck that money came from and put it toward a community collective? pay a robust wage to anyone impacted to pivot to the new work of restoration reestablishing the health of this watershed? incentivize the immediate phase out of unsustainable farming and development practices?

maybe we could start this project with the 70 million dollar slush fund from the bear river development project.

may the keepers of *those* keys be swept away in the great bear river dam breach, amen.

there was so much waste to take care of that a hazardous designation would make it too expensive to safely deal with. after four years of deliberation, they landed on classifying coal ash as non-hazardous. their solution was to make it "easier" to get rid of. when this classification was made, the epa delivered some rules for how it must be stored, opening a market for up-to-date landfills to house this toxic waste.

around this time, cue our very own promontory point resources llc constructing a new landfill on the shore of the lake right next to the railroad tracks. in 2017, three years after the epa classification, they file for a class v permit - the one that will let them accept coal ash. construction is finished later that year. when i say construction



what i mean is bulldozing wetland habitat mere hundreds of feet from the lake, i mean clearing 11 acres of land to line with plastic sheeting, i mean building roads where birds used to nest and rabbits used to make their dens, where the natural rise and fall of the lake used to flow.

after the land is slaughtered, the class v permit application is passed by the utah legislature but ultimately denied by the utah department of environmental quality. promontory point resources tries yet again for a class v permit, this time omitting trigger words like coal ash, yet applying for the same permit nonetheless. to date, they still have not collected a single piece of trash. the value this landfill proclaimed to contribute? jobs. money.

caging our desires

before the new rikers island build came online, utah was the proud home of the largest prison project in the country. we spent over one billion dollars building state-of-the-art cages to put our neighbors in because the system decided they deserve it. the project went more than 300 million dollars over budget.

i wonder if there are facets of your life that could have benefited from a few hundred million dollars. maybe paying your kids' teachers more? or more affordable housing? or returning land to indigenous care? more beds and resources for your unsheltered neighbors? reparations? debt relief? free public transit? health care and mental health care? universal basic income? arts education? supporting youth in foster care? maintaining existing roads and bike lanes? rehabilitating the local environment? you name it.

instead, much of that over-budget spending went toward constructing miles of roads, sewer lines, and power lines because they didn't factor in that the location was on a sinking wetland miles from any road. but don't worry! they can spin this. state lawmakers tout this as a great investment, because now they can develop the land on the former prison site into a "15-minute city". make

1991 - lake level: 4,204 ft above sea level

utah legislature passes the bear river water development act, which authorizes the utah division of water resources to build additional dams on the bear river

jobs the plant provides: 18. potential revenue for box elder county: \$2 per ton. they have seen nothing so far, only more construction dust, diesel fumes, and another scar on the body of this lake.

someone should not be able to buy acres and acres of land to build anything, let alone a landfill no one wanted and no one needed.

why can developers move so quickly?
why are they allowed to bust out the bulldozers when so many are crying out that this is not what the community wants?
why is the voice of the lake so quiet when they have so much to say and so much to give?

no mistake, if there's one thing utah needs, it's a walkable city. but if your idea of walkability and community requires freeing up "prime real estate" by spending one billion dollars to build a prison equipped with tear gas portholes surrounding the enclosed common areas, i don't want to hear it. no annual economic benefit or even walkable green spaces can pretend to excuse 3,600 new cages for humans a few miles north.

cue again the cycle: yay! new development! build build build more housing people can't afford. further entrench a failing model. trap people in a cycle of never having enough. perhaps they commit crimes to try to survive these conditions. now there's a shiny new prison to send them to.

most people are in prison because the state has made their existence essentially illegal, and they are punished and told it is their fault, and thrown away in jail. all that for "failing" to survive late stage racialized capitalism.

we see right through you.
a prison scarring the lakeshore and bulldozing a wetland cannot be a return on investment.



erupting with profit and catastrophe

remember u.s. mag, one of the worst polluters in the country? let's dive into that hellhole. several years ago the company, then named magcorp, went bankrupt due to a series of issues related to environmental contamination - think millions of pounds of toxic chlorine and more than 4,000 acres of contaminated land and lakeshore.

now they've rebranded annnnnnnnd you've guessed it! not much has changed. when the epa came in to scope the scene on their newest superfund site, they had to use a helicopter and a dip bucket to sample some of the pools at the plant because they were too toxic to be anywhere near. tell that to the birds, the adjacent land, the lake.

again: the lake is not passively dying. the lake is being killed by human beings with names and addresses who made choices. like billionaire ira rennert who funneled so much money out of u.s. mag and into his own pockets that they didn't have enough to run the plant. this man started an umbrella company to buy failing or bankrupt mines and refineries, of which every single one has been an environmental catastrophe - one so much so it was named one of the top ten most polluted areas in the world. from peru to utah, rennert played the stock market to acquire companies profiting off the destruction of the land, draining resources to pad his pockets until the plants are shut down after the environment has been thoroughly poisoned.

u.s. mag has 100 square miles of solar evaporation ponds used to reduce water from the great salt lake to magnesium chloride brine. what this means is they are intentionally evaporating away 40 billion gallons of water per year. collectively, solar ponds used for mineral extraction account for 13% of water permanently removed from the great salt lake - more than that of municipal use. and here we have legislators mandating low flow toilets.

don't get me wrong, let us all work to save more water. the key here is we all need to do it.

don't you dare spin a story about how each of us has a role to play when the extractors are behind their curtain of toxic haze, doing whatever the fuck they are doing that's filling pools with a ph in the range of battery acid. how many new showerheads and toilets would need to be installed to equate to one evaporation pond closing down?

the game is rigged. individuals are put to blame while we try to survive ever-increasing crises and climate collapse, while the few perpetuating the evils of them all proceed essentially unregulated. it's totally fucking ludicrous. we can use less magnesium. we can use less oil. we must. the lives of you and everyone you care about depend on it. they will tell you it's a matter of national security. they will tell you that it can't be another way. do not talk to me about national security until the u.s. no longer tops the list of global weaponry exports.

remember how much power the state tells you it has. remember that if they wanted you to have clean water, you would have clean water. that if they wanted you to have wholesome nutritious food, you would have nourishing food. that if they wanted you to have safe sustainable housing, everyone would have a roof over their heads. you can see they do not care about you. the state is not your friend. the system is not broken. the system is working flawlessly the way it was designed. not only will this system not be able to save us, they are fighting for the other side and lying to your face about it.

liberation is mutual aid. liberation is direct action. liberation is an oppressive system on its knees. liberation is a defunct refinery making way for something else in right relationship with life.

2008 - lake level: 4,194 ft above sea level
epa designates u.s. magnesium a superfund site

4,206
4,203
4,200
4,197
4,194
4,191
4,188 ft. ●

criminal, political negligence

going into the most recent legislative session, the city weekly gave each senator or representative several inches of copy space to tell the people what they believe is most important and what their focus for the session will be. reading responses ranging from updating small ballot concerns to regulating the sounds car mufflers can make isn't surprising, but it is embarrassing, and also a key indicator to how little these people give a shit.

if mufflers top your priority list in 2022, it is all the evidence i need to know that you are negligently evil, which is a strong word, i know. i'm using it on purpose because one open eyed look at the world today i think proves my point. good day and fuck you. i will see you on the other side of the rubble that used to be the capitol.

we don't have to keep doing it this way

follow the path of the bear river and you will round a bend to find hot springs and meadows, forests and rolling hills. a winter gathering place for the shoshone people. a place to find rest and rejuvenation after a long summer and fall. a place to reconnect, to visit with loved ones, and rejuvenate.

hundreds of years of not giving back. hundreds of years of "i own this".
hundreds of years of:
this land can be thrown away.
this land does not matter.
this life does not matter.

early one cold morning in 1863, the u.s. calvary marched in, unannounced and armed, and slaughtered over 400 people - the largest massacre of native people by the u.s. military in this country's history. the massacre nearly wiped out the tribe completely.
much healing is needed in these waters: ancestral healing, environmental healing, and cultural healing.

in fits and starts we continue to destroy, continue to evaporate away, continue to bulldoze, continue to build, continue to dump.

for the past several hundred years the descendants of white colonists have extracted more from this place than we could possibly return. human cultures have long lived in reciprocal relationship with the earth, taking only what was needed, taking only as much as could be replaced, making offerings to the earth. giving back, rather than extracting as much as possible as quickly as possible. we're living in the consequences of

in fits and starts we begin to heal. there are bird refuges nuzzled between landfills and refineries. there are poems being written and vigils being kept. the bear river massacre site, named boa ogoi, has been returned to the shoshone people. on the banks of that river, the tribe is healing a part of the watershed. they are building a cultural center and restoring the ecology to what it was like in 1863 - prior to pioneer farming practices that led to the loss of precious plant and animal life.

we must follow their lead: we must be in right relationship with what has happened and what is coming. we must be the light in the dark that says: we don't have to keep doing it this way.

2016 - *lake level: 4,188 ft above sea level*

dozens of water industry lobbyists pass a bill via the utah legislature to provide a permanent funding stream for bear river development. sales tax revenues begin to be diverted towards bear river development annually

2017
promontory point resources landfill construction completed

2018
utah legislature creates an inland port authority to develop a 16,000-acre global trade area next to the great salt lake



lake words

i walk on the shore of an ancient sea.
 my steps crackling the exposed lake bed.
 i walk across countless bodies
 dead microbialites
 bleached white, tiny beings
 they photosynthesize, provide nourishment
 then turn to rock. something about
 biology doing chemistry to become geology.
 damn.

some of the first critters to live on earth's surface.
 here they are, laid bare,
 the receding shoreline
 exposing them to air
 and sun. like fish out of water,
 they cannot last long.

may we cry our grief and praise.
 see our tears buoy this great body
 to swollen shorelines.

may this uprising sweep away
 the dams choking what we know
 this body needs.
 may we show up on purpose
 may we say i was wrong
 wash away the apathy
 let the causeways drown
 may i-15 go underwater forever.

open wide the floodgates
 wash away extractors from the shore.
 may we never again measure
 this body by economic value.
 may we count our blessings
 by the flaps of wings.
 may we be the ancestors who stepped
 in the path of destruction
 and said no more.

2019

lake level: 4,193 ft above sea level

salt lake valley community groups organize protest against the inland port. fourteen protesters are arrested

2020

northwestern band of shoshone begin restoring boa ogoi

2021

new state prison construction completed

2022

lake level predicted to hit another record low

connect the dots

scars on the body of the great salt lake

- 1 compass minerals evaporation ponds (clyman bay)
- 2 hill air force range
- 3 u.s. magnesium evaporation ponds
- 4 republic services landfill
- 5 bingham copper mine
- 6 rio tinto kennecott smelter
- 7 kennecott tailings pond
- 8 inland port
- 9 utah state prison
- 10 marathon refinery
- 11 chevron refinery
- 12 big west oil
- 13 silver eagle refining
- 14 holly refining
- 15 hill air force base
- 16 moulding & sons landfill
- 17 compass minerals evaporation ponds (bear river)
- 18 little mountain landfill
- 19 promontory point landfill



acknowledgements

to those who were here long before you or i - thank you for your stewardship and ancestral guidance. may this land once again rest in your care.

to the shoshone people and darren parry - the book *the bear river massacre: a shoshone history* is a gift to this region. thank you for your stories, for your wisdom, for not looking away.

to the scientists who have been studying the lake for decades - thank you for *biology of the great salt lake* which informed many elements of this book. jaimi butler and bonnie baxter, this piece is in conversation with *obituary for great salt lake: even lakes are not immortal*.

to those laying clear the stakes - thank you for telling it like it is. utah food coalition's piece *watering a sea of alfalfa* and the work of utah rivers council was instrumental.

to the journalists who wrote the articles from which we could read between the lines and piece together timelines - you happen to be one of the only places we can source this information. a majority of the research for this book

was found in top search results and local newspapers - none of this information is far from the beaten path.

to those tending the health of this body - thank you for your care.

to those who called for loving witness, even if it might be too late - thank you for your courage and attention.

to nan seymour who gathered a vigil and all who contributed to the poem *irreplaceable* - thank you. thousands of lines of praise, some found in this piece, are buoying this work. for all the magic they contain, they may even be buoying the level of the lake.

to those who believed in this project - thank you for your encouragement and listening.

to those who contributed to this work - thank you for your voice.

to the lake - the center. thank you for holding all this.