

Twelve years ago we bought this little old house, with its big sunny yard bordering the Santa Rosa Creek, and decided never to move again. In the twelve years prior I'd had fourteen different addresses spread out across four far-flung states. Now, giddy with the certainty of staying forever, we allowed ourselves to plant fruit trees, thinking forward to years of canning and pies. And as the roots of those new trees pushed outwards into the quiet, teeming earth, we grew more and more grounded in our community. Something about buying a home felt like we'd accomplished a true sense of security, like we'd staked a claim on territory and now it was ours, inalienably.

It was ours, and we'd never be forced to leave, we thought. Our dirt that we tenderly amended each season, that we pulled crabgrass and mallows from to make space to sow beets and kale and runner beans; ours, that we would surely harvest from again and again.

Today I wash ashes from my greens, sure of nothing. It's barely fall, but already in this fire season several friends have lost their homes; already our eight-year-old knows to check the air quality online before going outside. When the Tubbs fire kept Kamal out of kindergarten, he'd play "evacuation" with his friends, rapidly packing bags full of imaginary essentials. The following year the Camp Fire's smoke closed schools again, and Kamal worried at our tightly-shut windows, watching the red sun. Last October we woke him up as late as we possibly could before we bundled him into the car and joined the slow procession of cars leaving Santa Rosa ahead of the Kincadee Fire. I said it as gently as possible, but he still cried when I told him we needed to evacuate.

Along with all of our neighbors, we are reluctantly learning that our certainty was an illusion. We are learning what generations of humans have already learned and tried to teach us--no one ever owns their home, not really. Someone gave us the idea that we could exchange money and debt for the guarantee that we would never be forced to leave this place--but that guarantee isn't real, no matter how regularly we send in our mortgage payments, no matter how many hours we've sweated over this soil. Fire does not respect our title to this property. Fire, given the opportunity, will seize it from us and digest it in ravenous minutes.

Human existence has no more constant companion than uncertainty. And we're so good at ignoring it, this weird grey shape always walking beside us; we think we've warded it off with degrees conferred and savings banked. But uncertainty is sweeping through our county now, hungry and loud, demanding we include it at our tables.

I don't know, when I plant angular radish seeds, what will happen over the 21 days it takes radish seeds to become radishes. I don't know if fire or earthquake will take my garden from me, or illness or accident take me from it. I don't know if the system of home ownership we've taken for granted all our lives will continue to exist as our country strives to confront its shadowy origins, and I don't know that it should: in the decades before this house was built, Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo people were forced from this land by unchecked white supremacy and calculated greed. Quietly, complacently, we occupy their land and call it our own.

It has never been ours. We were always just passing through.

Astounding and dismaying ourselves, we've started thinking about what life would be like in places outside of California--places that are less temperate, less scenic, but where you can go outdoors and breathe 365 days per year. The United States is dizzyingly big. We talk in circles about climate change and job prospects and shoveling snow--and then we cry and ask the unclouded sky for enough rain to drench the earth and let us stay.

Today I'm still here, squatting in dirt so dry it puffs into little clouds when I shift my feet. After I cover and water the radish seeds, they'll swell in the underground dark, entering a transition that looks like absolute destruction to anyone not familiar with the magic of plants: a slow-motion explosion into leaves and ruby-red roots. Most of this the seeds will do all by themselves, now, whether I am here or not.

But I am here. Today, I am still here. And every seed I plant is a leap of faith, a wager that I will be here again tomorrow.