

*Spoken Word*

# TEA ROOTS



## AND THE SOUNDING SIRENS

A TEA ROOTS EXHIBITION

# Approaching Deception Pass, Thinking of The Future

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Our boat slows  
to enter the narrow pass  
between two mountains  
where wild wash of ocean  
merges with bay,

bones of Mammoth  
and isolate glacial rocks  
submerged below the rudder  
like treasure  
to die for.

# Crossing the Strait of Juan De Fuca

## On the Victoria Clipper During A Storm

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It was the longest hour of my life  
when I began to understand monsters  
arising out of the sea, swallowing ships.

The pitch of blue menace  
in its white collar  
and only a dream of land  
like a failed plan to reach  
a planet in space.

Six foot waves rushing against the boat  
from due west, bow rising and slamming down  
like a body falling from a great height,  
pushed from a cliff.

Deck hands tossed about like bowling pins,  
passengers gripping their wits,  
stomachs a flock of gulls,  
my mind bloated with sailors lost  
in water.

Sixty minutes of near-open ocean  
is enough to teach us the meaning  
of our vast nothingness.

But this was a ferry full of U.S. citizens  
so when we finally docked safely,

the ones heaving and panting the most –  
who stood to learn an immeasurable lesson –  
wanted their money back, and shouted curses  
at our only captain.

# One Drop

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Icarus coveted the golden sun  
But he was warned, too, to keep his distance from the sea  
As the wax melted and the feathers drifted down  
Icarus dove to break water's surface with wing tip  
Twirled gleefully into a gyre  
He didn't drown  
The sea did what the sea will do  
Cracked him apart:  
Pulverized marrow and burst every capillary  
Dyed itself red like a sunset

# Water is Life: Staring Climate Change in the Face on Mount Kilimanjaro

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As featured in [AFAR](#)

## 1. The Glacier Melting at Dawn

Above the clouds on [Lava Tower](#), I can see the curve of the earth rolling away before me. The sun is rising over Africa, and I have skipped breakfast to clamber up this 300-foot igneous lump in the sky with Felix Mtui, our head mountain guide, before we commence our hike for the day. We camped here last night at 15,200 feet on the rugged western slope of Mount Kilimanjaro, and we are now beginning the fifth day of our ascent. Four thousand feet above me, swaddled in mist, I can make out 19,341-foot high Uhuru Peak, the most eminent summit of Africa's tallest mountain.

We'd been hoping to make a summit bid via the Western Breach: the steepest, most direct, and most dangerous route to the top. This path is essentially a sheer and crumbling scree slope that rises 2,000 feet in two miles to the rim of the crater just below the peak. The way is dangerous because the glacier above the Western Breach is melting at unprecedented rates, and the melting dislodges the deep-frozen rocks that guard the peak. The stones warm throughout the day, and then they fall in the night. Scarcely two weeks prior to our climb, Bay Area author and entrepreneur [Scott Dinsmore](#) was killed on contact by a tumbling boulder while attempting the same route.

One of our companions, a Swiss-German man, has come down with an unfortunate bout of altitude sickness, and the way is too perilous for us to attempt given his condition. He needs time to acclimate to the elevation, and there's no turning back once the Western Breach is begun. Instead, we have decided to traverse the mountain for two more days to make our ascent from the relatively safer southeastern side.

From our breathtaking perch atop Lava Tower, Felix points out massive bare spots on the mountainside where the ice extended only five years prior. He indicates the slope of the Western Breach, and he motions for me to listen. In the frosty dawn stillness, I can hear the faint rumble of a stone coming loose.

Felix links the melting glacier to the rapid Westernization that is transforming this part of Africa: the haphazard adoption of new technologies and the cheap, disposable Chinese goods that have found an eager market in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Tanzania. From our vantage point 300 feet above Lava Tower Camp, he points out the garbage and human waste that is strewn about the outskirts of the site, and he explains that the Tanzanian National Park Service has not yet put its resources into a dedicated cleanup team. Anywhere from 25,000 to 35,000 people try to climb this mountain each year, and some of the high-elevation camps play host to hundreds of humans at a time during the busy season. Few guides enforce a "pack-it-out" rule, and the accumulated litter leaves a dramatic, disgusting mess along the trails and camps of the high country.

The melting glaciers on Mount Kilimanjaro are the slow, sporadic timekeepers of a warming world. Each loose boulder is the gasp of a glacier dying. The ice recedes further and further each year, and even the

violent storms that lash the mountain cannot suffice to replenish it. It's just too warm for the snow to stay. The glaciers feed the cold, clear streams that run off of the peak: ancient and far-spreading tongues of life that are waning, slowly, to a trickle.

Some of the [most detailed recent analysis](#) predicts that the iconic glaciers of Kilimanjaro—the eldest, at least 11,700 years old—will be completely gone by 2033. The climate of East Africa has become much hotter and drier over the past century, and the nearby Indian Ocean is also warming, which has disrupted many of the storm circulation patterns that once brought so much moisture to the dry Tanzanian highlands.

The Kilimanjaro glaciers are relatively small, and few if any local residents depend on the glacial runoff for their water security. However, this is not the case in many other parts of the world. In the Andes, for instance, a much larger cohort of tropical ice fields is also dwindling. Glaciologists estimate that within a matter of decades, the mass disappearance of glaciers in South America will leave tens of millions of people without a fresh source of drinking water. The vanishing snows of Mount Kilimanjaro are just a particularly dramatic example of what is to come. I cannot ignore them when they are slipping away before my eyes.

## **2. Kalashnikovs and Sharecroppers on the Slopes of Kilimanjaro**

Five days before I climb the Lava Tower with Felix, I am staying with a family of Dutch ranchers on the far western fringe of the mountain. They've been living on this land since the 1980s, and their noticeable affluence exists in stark contrast to the relative poverty of the locals—mostly people of Bantu and Maasai descent who have been on the land for many centuries longer than the Europeans.

On the night before we start up the mountain, there is an unexpected flurry of activity on the farm. A small convoy of jeeps descends upon the property in the gathering darkness. The vehicles contain several powerful African men in business attire, one of whom has brought along his retinue of personal bodyguards—and before I know it, there are soldiers in fatigues with Kalashnikovs waiting around outside my bedroom. There is a national election coming up in two weeks, and these men have commandeered the farm for an urgent political meeting.

I find out through hearsay that the politicians are discussing a group of rebellious sharecroppers that has been setting fire to the forests that blanket the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro and nearby Mount Meru. The mountain slopes are being systematically deforested, replanted, and logged again in order to mass-harvest a rapid-growing variety of pine tree. There is a government program that allows local families to live temporarily on five-acre swaths of reforested land in return for their stewardship over the trees-to-be-logged. Our guides tell us that when some of these local stewards were booted from the land by government operatives, they opted for a scorched earth policy rather than go quietly.

Above and beyond the political intricacies, this relentless cycle of deforestation and regrowth is [another major trend](#) that is significantly altering the climate patterns around Mount Kilimanjaro. Clouds form less often in the deforested regions, as the shrinking rainforest canopy cannot transport moisture across the lower reaches of the mountain. This means less rain, less moisture in the air, and less water available overall.

More than a million people in the Kilimanjaro region depend on this frequent rainfall and the lush vegetation that it makes possible. It is hard to predict the exact implications for local water security—but many climatologists fear that they are dire. The melting glaciers in the mountain’s crater may provide an aesthetic clarion call, but the impact of deforestation will reach further.

### **3. Water is Life in the Great Rift Valley**

In the center of Moshi town, the regional capital at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, there is a large iron monument: African soldiers brandishing automatic rifles atop a pedestal marked with three simple words: *maji ni uhai*. In Swahili, *maji ni uhai* means “water is life.” The ancestors of the people in this part of the Great Rift Valley have been drinking the runoff water from the slopes of Kilimanjaro for at least two million years. The landscape here is lush, but dusty, and one gets the sense that the sun would bake this land into a desert if there weren’t so many streams running off of the surrounding mountains.

Outside of town, the local Maasai people live and die by the grass of the savannah – and the grass would not exist without sufficient rainfall. These tribes of nomadic herdsman still graze cattle across much of Tanzania and Kenya with little regard for local and national boundaries. According to tradition, they believe in a supreme deity, Engai, who presides over the land with a dualistic nature. Engai Narok, the black god, is the benevolent bringer of rain, thunder, and life. Engai Na-nyokie, the avenging red god, is the embodiment of holy anger: death, violent lightning, and the extreme dry season that cracks the earth into a hard shell when the rains don’t come.

Water flows down through lush rainforest from the glacial summit to the flat valley floor. The glaciers and the forests are disappearing more quickly than we ever could have imagined, and there is a definitive scientific consensus that human industrial activity lies behind it all. The deforestation is politically complex, but its causes and consequences are fairly clear. The glacial recession is a murkier story, tied as it is to far-ranging climate patterns, but it is no less urgent and no less real.

When the mountain is too wet and cold to climb, Felix, the guide, takes wildlife management courses at the [College of African Wildlife Management](#) (CAWM), one of Africa’s preeminent ecological training institutions. He speaks passionately about the need to become more intentional about waste and consumption. He is one of many people from Tanzania and greater Africa who are reclaiming the stewardship of their ancestral land in the wake of bloody, devastating European colonialism. Scientists, mountain guides, and local policymakers are melding Western conservation principles like Leave No Trace with an endemic knowledge of the land. Here, in the so-called cradle of humanity, with glaciers melting in the sky and forests vanishing below, climate change is as pressing as it is anywhere else—and while the situation is dire, the locals are beginning to take a stand.

# Drought

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What we didn't do  
was feel small  
flecks of mist

veiling from the sea.  
What we didn't drink  
were droplets trembled

from glistening trees.  
Inhaling burned our lungs  
with a desert dream —

camels walking a lake  
of fish bones and feathers,  
Ra nonchalantly

picking his teeth  
with our ribs,  
hissing Remember

who's god now?  
On molten sheets  
we whisper primal songs

unweave knotted dew,  
sprinkle the wind  
that stings the earth,

its arid streambed  
of disconnected  
puzzle pieces

making room for  
what will come.

What will come

to the ruins  
of water, silent  
beneath the need

of knob cone pines,  
white skeletons of snow,  
the whole earth tipping

where?

# Climate as Changing Air

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*Cattle-ranching requires excessive amount of water — beef cattle use 12 gallons per day per cow, and dairy cattle use 35 gallons per day per cow. — Center for Biological Diversity (April 16, 2015)*

It's an early spring morning  
and I'm waiting for no one  
The clock, accustomed to nipping at my heels,  
lags behind feeling useless

We see you there, say the trails  
leading to the forest of birds,  
whispers the blank paper waiting  
for the first drops of blood

I should feel embarrassed  
in front of my dogs, in front of my shoes  
lined up with eager tongues,  
but the newspaper sits with

two-hundred-fifty dead native elk  
fenced in for the preservation  
of cows. There was nothing they could do  
as they watched their wild kin wander off,

eat and drink freely,  
or as they watched the cows graze  
their subsidized acres. So they perished  
of hunger and thirst on the altars

of milk and meat. Now the ranchers

want the remaining wild elk fenced in

or shot dead. Some things I would rather  
not know. Just a break, a subterranean day

where there is no need to think of the sun  
or the world we've left ourselves,

its door of creation  
creaking shut.

# Water Comes Upon Us

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We wander the blossom filled meadow  
of a newly birthed common  
spring in our blood, the taste of spring

on our skin, in our hair. Spring is in  
the songs of the wending words  
floating between us, words taken

from the latest film, the latest book, the news.  
We give each other the music of our mouths,  
hard land crunching beneath our heels,

note the young trees with their first blooms.  
For decades I have watched you — young girl  
in a frilly dress belted by guns and holsters —

leap from the blue bridge into the Niagara.  
Your determination was a lovely dive,  
a dare, your platinum hair an unwilling

accessory to grace. As you flew off  
between paper mill and docks, I climbed hills  
backwards to face the bay, the Golden Gate.

We hadn't met, of course, but I thought  
I heard you say, Lean into me like a wave.  
We rode the water as the water wanted —

smooth at times, then rough. Stars landed their light

on the smooth deep blue of it  
or turned us their black backs.

We walk and I say The apple blossoms of young trees  
fade so soon, but you are in the middle of a story  
pulling a girl to shore, pulling me, those falls

roaring in the distance, and I know,  
as that water always knew, something about  
electricity, how we'd go over together.

# Advice to Water

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Seep in at foundation cracks and out  
at gutters and drains. Ram up against  
dams and laugh at dry wall. Observe  
with pleasure how you adjust to one-inch  
pipes, faucets and crystal goblets. Bear

the indignity of being poured over your  
cousin, crushed ice, and forced to share  
a glass with distilled spirits; it makes many  
people happy. Condone frogs. Know that along  
with earth, wind and fire you are the frequent

embodiment of myth and hope. Accept this  
graciously. As our damage to the planet catches  
up with us, teach us to respect and conserve you,  
love and revere you – something we've failed  
at, badly. Accept being sucked skyward,

warehoused in dark clouds and pitched down  
without notice. Forgive those who call this  
“bad weather” -- perhaps too late, we know  
that it's anything but. Look after us, if you've  
a mind to. Not that we deserve it.

# Khaali Nallah (Dry canal)

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Strangers drank from bottled water.  
They drew a line in the dust  
Vowed that water  
would travel for miles  
until it reached us.  
I watched the ants  
and dreamed of moist soil  
between my toes,  
fields of gold wheat.

That night I said to her  
Grip the end of your saree  
With both hands  
And I will fill it:  
A basket of wedding jewels.  
Don't look  
The best ones must go.

I bought dust. Acres of it.

Canal construction shimmered  
In the distance. It came  
Uphill and downhill.  
It came across dune  
And earthcrack  
It came across my line in the dust  
It came with empty hands.

I watched the ants,  
The salt-dry dust.

*From the award-winning film: Village of Dust, City of Water*