

# Rain Like Cotton

## by Jennifer Kabat

"Architecture, fashion—yes, even the weather—are in the interior of the collective.... They stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges."

—Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*



### PART I: SAND

Picture an area the size of Manhattan covered in sand. It rises and falls and disappears.

It begins twenty thousand years ago in an age beyond imagination. To talk of it is to speak in approximations. Ice two miles thick licks down in lobes across New York State. *Lick* is too gentle a verb for its progress. The earth's mantle bows and breaks under the burden. Lakebeds are carved; layers of rock sheered off, ground down into sand and debris. Then a few thousand years of warming. The debris, boulders, and gravel held by the ice are picked up and moved hundreds of miles. The ice leaves a chain of frozen lakes—glacial lakes Iroquois, Vermont, and Albany—their names a bit of hubris, as if to help us picture these places. The largest, Lake Iroquois, melts; its far end rebounds as the ice lifts and tilts the lake east. Near present-day Rome, New York, one hundred miles from the Canadian border, an ice dam contains the water. Two hundred seventy miles south, glacial debris forms another dam at the base of what will one day be Staten Island. The weight of water is overbearing, and it rushes out at twenty-four million gallons a second, almost forty times the pressure of Niagara's greatest falls. Fresh water spills into the ocean. Desalinization. The currents shut down;

the Gulf Stream stops circulating; another ice age begins. Lake Iroquois becomes Lake Ontario; Lake Vermont disappears into Lake Champlain, and Lake Albany drains entirely, leaving sand where its shores had been.

It blows from west to east and settles in dunes. They stabilize, held in place by pitch pine and scrub oak. Animals move in. Blueberries grow. It is 8,000 years ago, 6,000, then the centuries we call the "common era," but people don't live in this inland sand sea. They venture in and out, crisscrossing on footpaths. The trees burn periodically. Species that depend on fire live here. The pines will only release their seeds with heat. The Lenni-Lenape and Iroquois now cross these sandy planes and do the burning. The blueberries need the clearings. Hunting here is easy.

It will come to be called a "barren," a pine barren, the barrenness itself of this place leading it to be called in geographic descriptions a "waste" and "wasteland," because nothing seems to grow here, nothing of value, no crops. This is why it will become a dump, a trailer park, sold off in schemes and scams. People who are overlooked, or want to be, settle here. The Shakers in 1776; Loyalists to the crown hide in the dunes during the Revolutionary War. Thieves take cover in the woods, and, later, African Americans arrive running from slavery, then hanging trees and Jim Crow laws. The Shakers first live crowded in a single log cabin. They are led by a woman whose followers believe she is the second coming of Christ, and they hope no one will bother them as they straighten the streams and haul in arable soil to build a new society where men and women are equal. The footpaths become roads. Stagecoaches charge five cents per mile and armed guards accompany travelers.

By 1830 there is a railroad, and not even 150 years later: two interstates, a landfill, six-lane roads called "extensions," slip roads, on-ramps, and off-ramps. Cars blow by and the steady roar of tandem trailers passes in waves. Now it's one of the rarest landscapes in the United States, and it's just on the outskirts of Albany.





## PART II: ROADS

I also arrive by car, lost, to go to the mall. Next time: it's driving to the Albany airport off the poetically named "Northway," as I-87 stretches to Canada. I turn onto a six-lane road of intermittent stoplights, strip malls, and gas stations. It's the nowhere of anywhere, no different than the six-lane roads where I grew up outside Washington, DC: the Tile Shop, nail salon, gas stations, Trader Joe's, and Whole Foods. They will eventually become my Tile Shop, nail salon, Trader Joe's, and Whole Foods. The first time I visit, neither exist here yet, and now when I'm there I think about what soon won't exist—the small extinctions of Sears and Regal Cinemas. I pull out from the Colonie Center Whole Foods with an expensive bottle of probiotics, and across the street is an empty beige building. A shadow of its past adorns the front: Barnes & Noble.

This land of strip malls and sand is technically in Colonie, New York, which itself didn't always exist, at least not in name. The town was first called "Niskayuna"—"vast corn fields" in a bastardization of the Mohawk word. (*Mohawk* itself is Europeanized and bastardized and not how the Iroquois named themselves. That was Kanienkehaka, meaning the "people of the Flint Place.") Niskayuna disappeared to become the town of Watervliet (water-flood) in the early nineteenth century, and now it's Colonie with that strange

-ie ending and an etymology stretching back to a Dutch patrolman, the land here belonging originally to the Van Rensselaer family. I say "originally," but you should know that means "originally" for European colonists.

Small splintered scraps are all that is left of the sand. They're "relics" or a "relict," and I love the word if not the fragmentation it describes. It means an ecosystem that has been confined, constricted, and cut off, or, where geomorphology is concerned, a place formed by forces no longer active. The sands hint, too, at an earlier era in the word's broader definition: some lost survivor. Or, there's its anachronistic meaning: a widow. Separated by death. Meanwhile *relict* first arose in the Scottish Acts of Parliament in the 1580s, where it meant land left by water's retreat.

Water retreats, husbands die, land is isolated and confined, floods and glaciers disappear. No doubt as James VI ruled Scotland in the late sixteenth century, no one considered glacial retreat, or the idea of what might lie across the seas in a place yet to be called "Albany."

In 1895 Colonie superseded the place that had been called "water-flood," and Watervliet decided to form a new town. Surveyors collected all the vacant strips of land they could find—less than three acres in total. The town would use them to collect debts. The state supreme court said no; ghosts can't file cases. Relicts have no protection under the law.



The first time I go to the airport, a decade ago, I know nothing of sand. I see no extinctions, no relicts or fragments. A sign with a silhouette of a plane points left, so does another that says "Shaker Site." I follow the Shakers and the plane. I turn onto Albany Shaker Road. This is before liquids are banned, and people in bold Yves Klein-blue uniforms inspect bags, passports, shoes, and belts. I drop my husband at departures and decide to find the Shakers, thrilled that the celibate socialists could be nearby.

After the airport the Shaker signs disappear. I keep going. I get disoriented. Time and space spread out. Marsh grasses wave at an angry sky hazed with heat. A sign says I am driving to Schenectady. A blue sign implores drivers looking for "Old Albany Shaker Road Businesses" to turn right. I turn right. Trash billows on the verge. On all these roads, trash billows.

There are no Shakers here, no history, no sites, nothing picturesque, just Hertz, the Comfort Inn, and rusting chain-link fences. The road dead-ends at the county jail, another fence, and the runway. I have no idea this is all the Shaker site. It will take me years to discover that.

In 1959 Nabokov says of the sand: "People go there on Sundays to picnic, shedding papers and beer cans." In a letter he writes, "Nothing else of popular or scientific interest is to be found in that neighborhood." Except butterflies. That's why he comes. He discovers a species here and returns to see it each June. The butterfly lives a few days and dies. His novel *Pnin* describes how they rose from "a damp patch of sand" and, "revealing the celestial hue of their upper surface, they fluttered around like blue snowflakes before settling again."

The butterfly depends on one specific flower that depends on the sand and fire to survive. The butterfly is the Karner blue; Karner is a place that no longer exists, created by a man, Theodore Karner, who ran a land scheme in the nineteenth century. The village he designed and its train station are gone. All that is left is a road named for him: New Karner Road. The butterflies *fluttered around like blue snowflakes*. Karner was first called "Center." The Center is gone. Karner is gone, the butterfly nearly extinct. It is on the endangered species list.

A few years after Nabokov's visits, Governor Nelson Rockefeller stands in the sand breaking ground for a state university campus. It is 1962. He heaves a shovel over his shoulder. He dreams of universal education. It will level inequalities and create a meritocracy; all we need is access for all. Nabokov writes *Pnin* in the late fifties. Like Nabokov, Pnin fled first the Communists, then the Nazis, to land in America. Despite World War II and the rise of totalitarianism, it's an era that believes the world is improving, that we control the land, that our possibilities are endless. A

cloud of sand rises like smoke as Rockefeller grimaces, and I know this is the sand of history and hope.

I return to the sand, though, for a ghost: a woman whose bones were broken, born on leap year's day. She was the illiterate daughter of a blacksmith. She called herself "Ann the word"; others called her "mother" though all her children died. She is Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, Christ incarnate as a woman. By now, like Nabokov, I have come countless times to this place. It is a rainy day in January. The weather is wrong, too warm, everything sodden and heavy—puddles, tarmac, and sky. One of the last three surviving Shakers has just died in Maine, and I have finally found the Shaker site. I walk into the Meeting House through one of three doors. Originally, this one was for the ministry; another was for women, and the third for men, but none for me. No outsiders could enter.

Inside, the floor gleams and ladder-back chairs line the walls. The mystic monk Thomas Merton wrote before he died, "The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it." If you were a true believer, you could see the spirit world clear as day. This is what the Shakers called the "gift," and even Shaker scholars have talked of experiencing it. I want the spirits to talk to me; I study the room and its chairs, and I don't see angels.

Instead I find a single car parked by a pond that bears Ann Lee's name. Rain careens off the gray ice. Overhead, jets take off. Signs warn of Lyme disease. I turn back. I don't have a gift. I'm cold and wet and worried about what that lone car is doing on an isolated road in the rain.

Here, the Shakers believed they would build the world anew, heaven on Earth. All would be equal, men and women, black and white. They were collective and utopian; their communities were the most successful experiment in socialism, outlasting that of the Soviets. In trying to find these spirits, I've combed documents and diaries, even urban planning schemes. One hand-drawn Shaker map includes a note by the cemetery: "Mother Ann Lee was buried but the land did not belong to the believers & she was removed to land belonging to the society in the spring of 1835. C." She was buried and reburied. Now all that survives her are four torn scraps of fabric.

According to the map, the county jail where I pull up next to a chain-link fence was "PASTURE." The airport: "FIELD." The letters for each of these places, for "FIELD" and "PASTURE," are elegant capitals with scrolled lines snaking up them. "SWAMP" swerves across the page in a sidelong S. The map says "FIELD" was "originally a low muddy swamp, but is now (as Mother Ann prophesied it would be) a light, dry soil." These notes are included in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Albany County commissioned in 1999 when it wanted to widen the road.



My gift, I realize, is in the roads. This is where I find my spirits: Albany Shaker Road, Watervliet Shaker Road. South Family Drive is all that remains of the Shaker “family” that took in new converts, *family* in quotes because the sect didn’t believe in the nuclear family, only a spiritual one. They banned marriage and raised children communally.

A shiver passes over me as I arrive from the west. I cross Sand Creek Road, but there’s no sand, no creek, not anymore. Subdivisions have been built on High Dune Drive and Pitch Pine Road, as if this endangered area will be preserved in name alone, as if after thousands of years these are the relicts.

To reach them, I drive by squat office buildings and Lasting Memories Taxidermy. The EIS reports on “inconsequential” sites. “Stained soil where a post for a hut wall once stood . . . a cluster of fire-reddened rock which was once a fireplace or less than a thumb-nail-sized chert flake.” These prehistoric details are so “inconsequential,” they’re hidden in parentheses. Meanwhile, the county needs wider roads.

On that January day too warm for winter, instead of Ann Lee I find two cop cars and three men outside a crumbling building, the Ann Lee Nursing Home. There’s no one left to nurse here. It closed nine years ago.

The Shakers sold off their land to the county in the 1920s for a TB sanatorium, the airport, and a “preventorium” for children at risk of tuberculosis. A handful of Shaker sisters remained. Relicts? Widows? In 1929 Sister Lucy Bowers writes in her diary of the airport:

*Jan. 27: Wonderful day, cloudless and still. The fliers are often in the sky....*

*March 20: Truckloads of furniture get taken away. Feb 8, Feb 13, April 13: boys from the Pre come for candy. March 14 Lady comes in a car.... More furniture gets shipped off.... Two sisters go to the airport; 10 busloads of children come to see the airplanes.... June 22: Rest a while and go over to the airport. Pay \$10 of*

*my own money to go up in the airship.... July 4: Go to airport to see the highest flier come down—19,900 feet high. Aug. 29: Two men come to talk about buying 200 acres for a golf course.... Thanksgiving: A fine chicken dinner. Eldress Anna, Caroline, Ella and myself go to see The Goldiggers at the Madison Theater in Albany.*

Utopian dreams, socialist values, sand. The stock market crashes. The kids from the Pre collect pennies. *Gold Diggers*. The celibate sisters see a movie about sex.

The film is a play within a play where showgirls search for men and money, neither of which tally with Shaker values. There’s drinking and dancing on tables. Girls sleep with married men. The story hinges on one dancer’s failure to say: “I am the spirit of the ages and the progress of civilization.”

Sister Lucy’s diary ends on Thanksgiving. She never says if she likes the movie. Its hit song is “Painting the Clouds with Sunshine.”

*When I hold back a tear / To make a smile appear / I’m only painting the clouds with sunshine.... When I pretend I’m gay / I never feel that way....*

The Shakers and their socialist dreams are nearly extinct, and all that remains of the movie are the last twenty minutes. The rest has disappeared.

### PART III. CLOUDS

I stand in the shadow of a mountain. It’s early autumn; asters and goldenrod bob their heads. The mountain is fenced in, and the top is flat. On it a tanker spews water. The truck is so high and distant it looks like a toy. The mountain, though, is not a mountain; it is the Albany landfill, nearly 200 acres of trash, 360,000 tons deposited a year. I’m here with a biologist. He first came twenty years ago to volunteer on the controlled fires set each summer that preserve the sand and butterflies, scrub oak and pines.

We cross a sandy track so fine and golden we could be at the beach. A few feet away, the ground turns gray. A tire tread is hardened into it. The biologist tells me it’s clay like glaciers deposit today. They melt, leaving areas that pond and pool where the clay filters out. Same here, he says, just millennia ago. He’s showing me a glacier in this shadow of the dump, a shadow of trash filled with what we’ve discarded. The dump is a shadow, too, or will be soon. It will close in 2020 to be returned to sand and scrub and Nabokov’s butterflies, those blue clouds of snow.

The biologist waves across this meadow. Five years ago, he says, there were streets, sidewalks, and septic systems here. The stream, the pond, and nodding flowers are all new. Even the sand has been brought in. In the background, the incessant beeping of reversing trucks blends with waves of cars on the interstate.

At home, I zoom in on this spot with Google

Earth. Shadowy lines appear onscreen over the sand and scrub. These shadows were roads. Hovering over them with a mouse, their names appear: Fox Run Lane, Brier Fox Boulevard, Tally Ho Drive, Fox Hound Avenue, Hunters Glen Avenue.... They conjure British landed gentry, the sort who'd wear red tailcoats and jodhpurs, and ride to hounds, as if that could ever exist behind the landfill. What did were a hundred trailer homes. Google Street View shows images of them from 2007: a paneled home with an SUV outside, next door a sedan, and yellow siding on the house. Some lots just appear as grass and foundation. The street is already crumbling into tarmac. The county bought it up to transform it back into pine sands, which will burn regularly.

I do find a ghost at the Shaker site: Rebecca Cox Jackson. She dreamt of clouds and the atmosphere. She was African American, became celibate, left her husband, and traveled the East Coast preaching a vision of salvation before joining the Shakers. She'd been illiterate but discovered she could read. It was a blessing. It was God. She picked up a Bible and the words were alive. "Eldress," she became a leader, and in 1843, just after her first visit to Watervliet, she dreamed of rain and flowers.

*Sunday, 12th of March, after midnight, I laid down,*

*fell asleep and ... looked up into the air, saw wonderful strange colored clouds coming from the east.... It began to rain, as if it were cotton, until the earth was covered.... All the house, trees, and everything else disappeared. And then the rain changed from cotton to sweet-smelling flowers.... I stepped to the door, picked some up, tasted them. Their taste was sweet just like the smell. I then put some in my bosom, but I am not able to tell what they smelt like. The whole air was perfumed with their odor, yea, with their heavenly smell.... In that storm came streams of light. And they came in the form of hoops, white as snow, bright as silver, passing through the shower of flowers. They went like the lightning."*

At the end of her vision she began ministering to people. "I comforted them with the words that was given to me for them. They were all colored people, and they heard me gladly.... I, Rebecca Jackson, was two-score and eight years and twenty-six days old, when in 1843, I dreamed about my people...."

In her dreams there are strange clouds and cotton rain. "Sparks of light shower down like silver." She also writes about how the Shakers are too self-absorbed in their isolation. "How will the world be saved if the Shakers are the only people of God on earth, and they seemed so busy in their own concerns?"



I think of her in the shadow of the dump. How do we stop being so busy in our own concerns?

She cries. She loves a woman, Rebecca Perot. Together they join the community at Watervliet. "The two Rebeccas," the Shakers call them. Their relationship is hard to understand from our distance of 175 years. The Rebeccas don't fit into our time, maybe not even into theirs. Were they mother and surrogate daughter? Friends? Lovers? Companions? The two Rebeccas: inseparable, inscrutable.

I don't find either of their graves. The other Rebecca, Rebecca Perot, took Jackson's name when she died in 1871. She became the second Eldress Rebecca Cox Jackson. Together they established an urban ministry, mostly for women, mostly African American women. Most of them worked as domestic help in Philadelphia.

*"I'm painting the blue, beautiful hues," the song goes in Gold Diggers of Broadway, "Colored with gold and old rose.... Trying to drown all of my woes.... If I keep painting the clouds with sunshine.... Hold back a tear / To make a smile appear."*

I find a single drawing of Eldress Rebecca Jackson online. Her head juts out, as if she's trying to fix on something in the distance. She wears a white Shaker cap and shawl, and holds a pen in one hand. Her two fingers are raised like Christ giving a benediction in some ancient icon. Two books are by her side, but I can read nothing into her. I see no rain, no hoops white as snow. I want to see her and the other Rebecca. I walk across the Shaker site past the two cop cars. The three men watch me warily. Or I am wary. I feel their watching. I try not to drift into their gaze. I try to look as if I know where I am going.

The picture turns out not to be Jackson at all but another woman, as if any black woman in modest garb might be her.

Jackson wakes up on January 14, 1848, dreaming that she was in Philadelphia in bed with the other Rebecca. "I thought someone might come in while we slept. And I said, 'Rebecca, go and get three forks, and fasten the doors.' ... Rebecca rose immediately, and as she put the fork over the latch, a man rushed against the door...."

Soon a Shaker brethren appeared outside, so did a well and a tub, and intimations of violence. He threw watermelons. The earth shook. She "saw a river of ice ... and three ice rocks in it, and three men upon the rocks.... The shaking of the earth caused the river, the rocks and the men to move up and down, and the men moved their hands like a person shooting." They transformed into "one transparent brightness—white as snow and bright as silver... rays of light... a brilliant



circle. And in my heart the sight was magnificent."

*In my heart the site was magnificent.* But I stand in the rain, sodden.

That afternoon in the shadow of the mountain when the goldenrod bloomed and nodded, I ask the biologist why the tanker is spraying water.

"Water?" he says puzzled.

"Up there," I point, "for the grasses, right?"

I assume native grasses have been planted on the dump's plateau.

He laughs. "It's not water. It's air freshener ... Febreze." Indeed, the smell wafts over us. It has a green chemical scent like drier sheets. He and I stand on these spectral streets, the air filled with clouds of water, of rain—and of chemicals sprayed to mask the smell of trash. Jackson's flowers fell in bunches after the rain. *I put some in my bosom, but I am not able to tell what they smelt like. The whole air was perfumed with their odor, yea, with their heavenly smell....*

I've come to the dump to find the future and the past. Both haunt me in this place once named for a dream of England that must have seemed distant living here in a doublewide, near roads that memorialize a disappearing wilderness.

The biologist tells me Nabokov's endangered butterflies probably won't survive. They can't even fly across a four-lane road let alone a highway, and the issue, he explains, isn't protecting one species but all species and their habitat. It is not one thing but all things. They're interdependent. *How will the world be saved?* Jackson wrote.

The butterflies rise like snowflakes. Rockefeller throws sand. It lifts like a cloud. Rain falls like cotton. Hoops white as snow, bright as silver, pass like lightning. I'm painting the clouds....

Online, looking at the landfill and lost streets and lanes, I think about relicts and widows, Eldress Rebecca Jackson and Rebecca Perot. I think too about the Internet and our lives. Google's data centers use nearly 300 million watts of energy a year. The Internet consumes around five percent of all energy usage. Stream

music, TV, movies, shop online, subscribe online, pay bills online—or read this essay online. All of this life—our lives—happens online—in clouds, in the cloud, the cloud that is run by farms, server farms. All of this needs energy. The quaintly named cloud, which can seem as ethereal as the air and the sky, uses thirty billion watts of energy worldwide. A third of this is eaten up by data centers in the US—and that statistic is out of date, that was in 2012. One data center takes more power than most towns in the US, and our energy usage has only increased despite attempts to stave off global warming. By 2020 the number of connected devices drawing on data and energy will more than triple, and by 2030, information technologies in the Internet of things could account for as much as twenty percent of total energy use.

This is what haunts me. The Gulf Stream is weakening; the climate will warm or cool precipitously, maybe even both in turn. The catastrophic changes that brought the sand to Albany happened in a timescale inscrutable to us, taking place over millennia instead of decades. In a human timeframe the dump will close. It will be planted with prairie grasses. Every year is the warmest on record, and glaciers melt. The Karner blue lives less than a week.

The butterfly depends on fire and smoke to survive. The Shakers got their start here in smoke and clouds. It was the Dark Day. At noon in mid-May 1780 the depth of night spread from Maine to New Jersey. The Revolutionary War languished. Many saw it as the end times. The Shakers decided it was time to proselytize. The darkness wasn't God, though, or the end—just a forest fire. The smoke had drifted east. As the ranks of Shakers grew, they cleared the land. An airport followed. They lent their tools to build it and the sisters fed the workers. Then a golf course, a dump, a university, the interstate, and climate change. That's the prophecy I find.

Lucy Bowers dies in 1935. The last three Shaker sisters leave Albany in 1938. In a newspaper interview, they say what they miss most are the airport's planes and floodlights.

*When I'm blue, all I have to do is paint the clouds...* Shopping, self-creation, reinvention, reincarnation, faith... Longing has shaped this landscape. Or maybe this place has shaped them. They've all taken root here in the sand—airport, strip mall, suburbs. I find them in the wake of our dreams of progress. Throw something out and start over. Trash, sand, and highways, flight, clouds, silver orbs, and socialism's most successful experiment.

In a letter as Marx was dying, Friedrich Engels wrote, "Remember the Shakers!" He wanted to remind Marx that it had taken the Shakers years to build their community. This was the last thing Engels said to him, *Remember...*

Ann Lee died on September 8, 1784. She was forty-eight. During her life, she was forced to strip to prove she was a woman, dragged behind a horse, imprisoned for treason because as a pacifist she couldn't support a war. She didn't believe in the legitimacy of the state or even Christmas. She was exhumed in 1835, and it was clear her skull had been fractured before she died. I find her grave. The stone is new and white like bone.



The day feels like spring. It is February. At the edge of the cemetery, a tree hides broken markers. So many shattered graves, the violence is inescapable.

Christ's second coming, she preached that celibacy would create equality and the community of believers destroyed the traditional family structure. One hundred years after her death, Engels wrote in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* that the family was a tool of capitalism and women's oppression. Rebecca Jackson saw herself as a second Ann Lee. Illiterate, they both left their husbands for faith and wanted to rebuild society.

By the time you read this, an ice shelf the size of Delaware will have broken off from Antarctica. As glaciers melt, fresh water is released into the oceans, slowing currents. The flood 13,000 years ago looks like prologue or prophecy. Touch the sand, drive the roads, go to the mall. Cotton rain falls in the shadow of the dump.