

# The White Deer

Jennifer Kabat

## PART I Silo Dreams

The deer stares at me desultory and bored. It's framed by two bulldozers running to rust, and the animal is stark white – like a ghost, like a vision. It is neither ghost nor vision but a genetic mutation. The buck's eyes are black and direct, and it looks at me as if I do not matter, as if the bulldozers do not matter, as if it is not of this place, this moment, this time.

We stand in a canyon of concrete. It is late in the day. Hulking grain elevators rise around us and cast tall shadows on the grass and scrub. White deer are inbred. They occur on islands. And, this place is an island of sorts, a bend in a river cut off by fences and rail lines and a six-lane highway. Snow is on the ground, though it is summer and all is green, and the snow is not snow. It is the seeds of cottonwood trees blowing in drifts.

This place, this island that is not an island with the snow that is not the snow with the deer that stares as if it is not of this place asks questions of similes, of language. Of what I see and what has been.

The grain elevators with their concrete cylinders make me think of fortresses and castles. To write about these buildings is inevitably to enter a land of simile, of “akin.” But, “akin” is not kinship. Akin is to say they are like something but not actually that thing. It is to open a gap in meaning.

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René Daumal, the renegade surrealist, wrote about ghosts and holes. He tells a nearly cosmic joke where one clown asks another what a ghost is and declares, “A ghost is a hole to which are attributed intentions, sensibility, morals... that is, an absence... surrounded by presence.” Daumal adds, “These attributes reside not in the absent beings but in the present one that surrounds the ghost.” That is, they reside in us, and here we are: ghosts, holes, snow, deer, akin.

These “elevators” are massive storage sheds and silos for wheat and oats, for shipping and processing. Writers often revert to similes to describe them. The British architecture critic Reyner Banham used Roman ruins with “ravaged antique grandeur,” and then “an avenue of mighty tombs” as if it were ancient Egypt. He sounds more like some 19th-century man on his grand tour than someone writing in the 1970s. Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, those greats of modernism, read form follows function in them – only minus the function. The architects didn't understand how they worked. They'd only seen pictures and liked the shape, the silos' sleekness, which went on to influence what came to be called the International Style.

The International Style was itself a style of no place, that could be imposed anywhere in the world. Hence the name; but its adherents had ambitious beliefs that this architecture could improve the world and engineer better lives.



The snowing trees are eastern cottonwoods, and they sprout from the smallest chinks in the cement, in an inch of soil and dust blown in on the wind. Look up and they're silhouetted against the darkening sky, growing from the roof of the grain elevators.

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More truly those grain elevators are capitalism.

Capitalism is surplus, the gap between what something is worth and what it sells for, between what something costs and what it can fetch. These were built to make more of that surplus, of that gap, between labor and value. Think of them as tools to screw over farmers. A shipping merchant could buy grain cheaply and store it here until it was worth enough to send on or process.

Now they are also ruins.

The wealth of Buffalo was built on them. For decades the city was the busiest grain port in the world. Wheat came East from the prairies traveling on Lake Erie and the Erie Canal and the railroads.

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Karl Marx gets stuck on the gaps too. He finds them inexplicable and confounding. In *Das Kapital* he wrote of a table's mystical, transcendent qualities. “At first sight a commodity is a very trivial thing... in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” He says the table is just wood but goes through this process where it becomes a commodity. Its value is no longer simply wood or wood-turned-into-table but something more. A gap has opened up, and in that space some magic transformation has taken place. It's the

only way he has to describe what's happened.

Le Corbusier called those grain elevators “beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms.” He also saw buildings as machines, that architecture could shape actions, that it could stop social unrest. These storage silos were, he said, “the first fruits of the New Age.”

In 1913, before he headed the Bauhaus, and before he escaped Germany for the US, before he had ever stepped foot in the US, Walter Gropius published images of the silos in Europe, and little more than a decade later, another architect, Erich Mendelsohn, came in person to see them for himself. It was 1924, and he wrote to his wife about “the sharp evening light” like tonight's, as the sun grows long and the angles bold. He described “mountainous silos, incredibly space conscious, but creating space... Everything else so far now seemed... interim to my silo dreams. Everything else was merely a beginning.”

All of this at a bend in Buffalo Creek, though it is not called a “creek” anymore, but a river. This is a place where language breaks apart, where history is a palimpsest. It is a place of mistranslations. I grew up in modernism, raised in its precepts in a glass house in a community of glass houses, where we believed in a better world, that a meritocracy could be built, engineered, in part through architecture. This dream was top-down and utopic. And, it didn't work. My subdivision was also an island surrounded by normal suburban homes, center-hall colonials, and I grew up on a cul-de-sac, which is also, no doubt, a metaphor. Yet, I long for those big dreams of a better world. I wonder too if they always fail, if maybe in this place of mistranslations I will understand that failure.

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# The Great Law doesn't set out one sex versus the other, or men having authority over women, or even how I experience life and law today as this constant campaign to claw back parity.

There are all sorts of origin stories for the name “Buffalo.” One is a mistranslation of *beau fleuve*, beautiful river. It is, indeed, beautiful tonight. Kayakers and geese glide past, and the moon is rising. Other stories say “Buffalo” comes from the bison which maybe once roamed here, though that is unlikely. No bison bones have been found in the region. Another legend has Buffalo Creek named for an Onöndowa’ga:’ (Seneca) fisherman, De-gi-yah-goh. He had a humpback. His name meant “like a buffalo,” and this was supposedly his creek, his fishing spot, but that would have turned this place into his place, into something someone owned rather than communal landholding. The idea would have been an anathema to the Haudenosaunee.<sup>(1)</sup> In all the Haudenosaunee languages there is a name for this place, this area along the river. It is between the basswoods. *Dó:šo:wsf:h* is the word in the Onöndowa’ga:’ language. In Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) it is *Tsi Teyohohoserò:ron*.

Buffalo itself, though, was the Buffalo Creek Reservation, essentially a refugee camp where the Onöndowa’ga:’ and other Haudenosaunee citizens settled after bloody campaigns against the Haudenosaunee during the Revolutionary War.

The city was first called New Amsterdam, but no one wanted to use that name. Joseph Ellicott bestowed it. He was a surveyor for the Holland Land Corporation, which was trying to scam the Onöndowa’ga:’ out of their territories, and the city was originally a tiny village on Lake Erie, land owned, controlled and sold by the Holland Land Corporation. I say “originally,” but that origin is not so original. It has a 10,000-year history as indigenous land, and by the time Ellicott was on the scene in the late 18th century, it was the Onöndowa’ga:’ nation’s, part of the Haudenosaunee confederacy, a league of nations uniting the Onq:da’gega’ (Onondaga), OnAyote’a-ká (Oneida), Onöndowa’ga:’, Kanien’kehá:ka, Gayogohó:nq (Cayuga) and Skarù-re? (Tuscarora).

Where names and words are concerned, “Seneca” was, I’ve heard, used by the Algonkians to refer to all the Haudenosaunee people west of the Hudson. Instead Onöndowa’ga:’ means “people of the great hills.” Colonizers called the Kanien’kehá:ka “Mohawk,” but that is not their name. It’s an Anglicization that sounds nothing like what they call themselves. The Kanien’kehá:ka are the easternmost of the Haudenosaunee, and the word means “people of flint place.” The OnAyote’a-ká are “people of the standing stones”; the Onq:da’gega’, “those of the hills.” The Gayogohó:nq are “the people of the great swamp,” and the Skarù-re?, “the hemp gatherers.”<sup>(2)</sup>

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(1) I am grateful to the Kanien’kehá:ka artist and scholar Jodi Lynn Maracle for her comments on the name De-gi-yah-goh and the notion of a person’s property becoming a place name.

(2) Again, thanks to Jodi Lynn Maracle for her translations of national names. Language is important to me, and representing people in their languages vs. an Anglicization in an essay that focuses on

The Haudenosaunee have been known by other names too. The French used the derogatory Iroquois, which meant “black snakes” I read one place, and “killer people,” another. The English called them the Five Nations, then after the Tuscarora joined in the 1720s, the Six Nations, which at least sounds like it respects their sovereignty.

And, this place with the deer and grain elevators was doubly stolen. It’s just outside what had been the Buffalo Creek Reservation, and it is outside that boundary because of Joseph Ellicott. He made sure his New Amsterdam included the mouth of Buffalo Creek, something various histories have called “foresight,” “important” and “careful guardianship.” What it was: illegal. He also bought this peninsula with his brother Benjamin. That was indeed foresight. Ellicott, though, died alone, miserable, rich and truculent in Bellevue Hospital, where he hung himself. I call that poetic justice.

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The Haudenosaunee confederation was formed under the Great Law of Peace in 1142 when the Five Nations joined together to end war. It was the first participatory democracy, and it still functions today. The very idea of “United” + “States” comes from them.<sup>(3)</sup> The Great Law of Peace enshrined equality for all. Men and women had balanced powers. I say “balanced” because this goes beyond mere equality. Women had key roles. As clan mothers, they chose the clan chiefs who represented each nation and could impeach them. Clan mothers also decided on diplomacy and whether to go to war, and everything passed through women – chiefdoms, family ties, property, home.

This worldview is so different from the one that produced me that I can only contextualize it with what I understand, in the language I have. Which is to say I fail. I come from battles between the sexes and struggles for equality. The Great Law doesn’t set out one sex versus the other, or men having authority over women, or even how I experience life and law today as this constant campaign to claw back parity. So, I’m left trying to compare it to what I do know, to the US or the US Constitution, both of which borrow from the Great Law, even though the Founding Fathers forgot all about mothers and clan mothers and women.

Clan mothers were older, post-menopausal, those who in the US are overlooked, ignored and discarded, and I’m near that age with its invisibility. These

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language and mistranslation is likewise important.

(3) Western historians have argued about the date, saying oral history makes it impossible to pin down. It is easy to link the foundation to an eclipse in New York in 1142, making the date pretty accurate. Some of these historians are sure that the ideas for a democracy came with European contact, though all those European countries were led by kings and queens who ruled by divine right.

women didn’t just decide on war, they could become warriors themselves as happened in times of duress like the American Revolution.<sup>(4)</sup> Haudenosaunee women controlled their lives, including when and how to give birth. European cultures have so long-denigrated women that still our prime purpose seems to be sex: sexual value, having babies, looking sexy. Thus, come middle age, our value is gone.

The Great Law of Peace was created expressly for peace. It’s in the name, and included within is a mourning ceremony, the condolence ceremony that clears the eyes and ears and mouth of the bereaved so they can perceive and speak without being clouded by grief or rage. Instead of going to war to avenge losses, the basic principle of government acknowledges loss, so peace can ensue. That, to me, seems profound. Peace.

The US took much from the Great Law of Peace, including symbols like the eagle and a group of clutched arrows – five for the Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee, thirteen for the US colonies. What we didn’t see as crucial (maybe those Founding Fathers ignored it or just didn’t have the means to understand) was racial equality and the non-hierarchical, distributed power at the heart of the Great Law of Peace. Haudenosaunee government is by consensus, not majority. Majority rule means many are left out, and all we have to do is look at the US today to see how undemocratic and unequal a democracy can be.

Haudenosaunee culture wasn’t organized around the nuclear family, that is, a father, mother and kids living in one house. Land and resources and family relationships were shared, collective. Gifting was used to redistribute wealth to everyone. It was the group over the individual and how the self relates to the group.

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Seven hundred years, 1142 to 1842. In 1842 the first mechanized grain elevator was created. It was in Buffalo, built by Joseph Dart, a merchant who first had traded with the Haudenosaunee. The elevator was the tool of capitalism. 1842 was the year the land that is now Buffalo was taken from the Onöndowa’ga:’. The Buffalo Creek Reservation was nearly 135 square miles. It extended across the city past the University of Buffalo and West Seneca, Lackawanna and east to Elma and Marilla, all the way to the Wyoming County Line.

In 1842 rivals taunted Joseph Dart. They were sure his grain elevator would fail. One declared: “Dart, I am sorry for you... that mill, it won’t do; remember what I say; Irishmen’s backs are the cheapest elevators ever built.” Before Dart, Irishmen transferred grain from ships. The labor was, literally, backbreaking.

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(4) Donald Grinde, a professor in transnational studies at the University of Buffalo, told me of the women warriors and the story of Queen Esther, who fought against the colonial army in the Revolution during the Sullivan Campaign.

# The plant can induce abortions, regulate hormones and ease menopause. It also produces lucid dreams and visions.

In the 1840s the US was in a recession – the whole world was. The Panic of 1837 was one of the first global financial crises. Cheap money had led to a land boom and bust with banks tightening credit. There were anti-immigrant riots; a nativist party was formed, the Know-Nothing Party. This followed the 1830s with its wave of mass industrialization and democratization (“democracy” also in quotes). The right to vote was given to all white men regardless of property. Before, the only people who could vote were white men with land, like the Founding Fathers. The 1830s was also the beginning of the Indian Removal Policy, the Trail of Tears and, in upstate New York, attempts to get the Onöndowa’ga:’ off Buffalo Creek.

It was a time that seems to mirror this one. Technology contributed to inequality as factories sprang up in cities. And, as the vote expanded, so did cheap newspapers. Every partisan point of view had a press behind it, and there was little ethos of impartiality. It was more like social media.

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I’m here at the bend in the river thinking of all of this. Over the last few years, in the wake of US politics I’ve been writing about history and place, our democracy and various utopian experiments, as if the past might hold some way forward today. I don’t have words to describe the spectacular failures I see around me. Putting them into sentences translates these rolling disasters into something too clean and easy, but Marlene McCarty, an artist whose work I love, has been making mural-sized drawings that contain all the mess and ugliness of this moment. She weaves together toxic capitalism and modernism, patriarchy and the white Western canon with plants and growths, tumors and decay. The drawings are claustrophobic and enthralling.

She knots these ideas together, and thinking about her work is important to me as a writer because it’s non-linear and non-hierarchical. Writing has an implicit forward motion – like progress, like time. Narrative moves in one single, inexorable direction, sentence by sentence, left to right, even in an essay like this. But, I don’t believe in narrative, with its beginning, middle and end. It’s a construction. Grappling with Marlene’s art and ideas gives me a way out of that, and a new way to consider my own questions.

I’m not doing this thinking and grappling in any place, however, but in this place, this bend in the river. She’s seeding a garden here with the plants that have appeared in her work. They’re ones that can give women power, that can block hormones and bring on menstruation or work as the pill or the morning-after pill or stifle men’s erections – all at a time when rights to control our bodies are ever more constricted, when capitalism is ever more entwined in medicine, when states want ever more say about what we can do and when we can do it, when our rights to abortion are ever more fragile.

All around this site mugwort grows.

I’ve started to see it as a talisman. It’s a weed, a rhizome, brought here by white colonizers. The plant can induce abortions, regulate hormones and ease menopause. It also produces lucid dreams and visions. It was once the witches’ herb, and it grows plentifully in “waste” lands across this city.<sup>(5)</sup> So I am here with my modernism and feminism and socialism, all the isms that have formed me, that have led Marlene and me both to this bend in the river.<sup>(6)</sup>

I drink a beer. The sky is still bright. The air, damp and humid, brushes my skin. A drop of condensation falls from my bottle. I grab a stalk of mugwort, and it smells of pine and sage.

## PART II In Good Health

The next day I visit a sovereign land. It smells of smoke – it is legal to smoke here – and the carpet looks like rippling water. The lights overhead come in crystallized patterns, and slot machines call out with jingles that translate to *play-play-play*. Each game is this or that “wild”: Wonder Woman Wild, Jumbo Wilds and Extra Bonus Wilds, which is graced by a leprechaun. I forget that “wild” does not mean free or loose or unbridled nature. Instead it is a symbol that can take on the meaning of another symbol. If the wild sign appears, and you have three diamonds but need four, that “wild” becomes a diamond.

And, this casino is not a casino – well it is, but it is also the Buffalo Creek Reservation, nine acres owned by the Seneca Nation. It is a mile from the grain elevators. Once nearly half of all eastern North America had been Haudenosaunee land, and I am thrilled that I get to be on Onöndowa’ga:’ land in a place that had been Onöndowa’ga:’ land. Words roll before me on

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(5) Mugwort first appeared in Old English, in a spell from the 10th century that straddled paganism and Christianity and took in Odin and Jesus. *The Nine Herbs Charm* begins with an incantation to mugwort: *Remember, Mugwort, what you revealed, // what you established at the mighty proclamation // ‘Una’ you are called, oldest of herbs. // You may avail against 3 and against 30, // you may avail against poison and against contagion, // you may avail against the loathsome one who travels through the land.* I read that last line and think about Trump. Please, I exhort.

(6) Marlene’s very choice to make drawings grows from these isms too. In art school she was taught by modernists – those who believed art reached an endpoint in abstraction, those who saw modernism as a teleology. They also saw drawings as “illustration,” that is, as a poor and degraded form, not what a “serious” artist should do.

a slot machine’s screen:

*Nya weh sgeno*. Ten letters whose very translation is impossible to convey with nuance. It is a phrase that in one sense means “I wish you good health and I’m thankful you’re well.” *Sgeno* is also the word for peace, and at the heart of the greeting is a reference to the Great Law of Peace. Its deeper roots tie to the collective commitment to ensure peace and well-being as the basis of the Haudenosaunee confederacy.<sup>(7)</sup>

I’m here with my friend B. She pushes dollars into the machine. It rejects them, and we try and try again. We smooth them out, try George Washington face up and face down, every possible way.

The odds are pre-programmed at a legally sanctioned 8% which gives the house a return of 92%. I would prefer the odds to be 4% or 2. That would seem fair. After all the taking, the killing, the smallpox that white people thought was “providence,” and the treaties, a word which should also be in quotes, because the treaties weren’t ratified or weren’t fair, or were full of lies, or were broken – like with the building of the Kinzua Dam in the early 1960s. That took 10,000 acres from the Seneca Alleghany Reservation and violated a treaty George Washington signed in 1794. Or, there’s 550 acres taken from the Tuscarora



Reservation by Robert Moses for the Niagara Power Project. The Skarù-re? were offered \$1,000 an acre, while a neighboring school was given \$50,000 per acre. Or, there’s the St. Lawrence Seaway that ate into 1,200 acres of Kanien’kehá:ka land in Canada and the US, or the promises that came with land cessions including the interstate I drove on to get here.

Once this place had been a grain elevator too, and there is something about losing money in the face of capitalism that I appreciate. Over the door hangs a string of geometric shapes – four rectangles

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(7) I’m indebted to Jodi Lynn Maracle for her explanation of the rich meanings in *nya weh sgeno* and how it ties to the Great Law of Peace, as well as to, as she puts it, “larger wishes for peace, well-being and good health for individuals, families, clans, nations and a confederacy now and into future generations.” I wish my “have a nice day” could have such depth and history tied to its words.

linked by a line to an abstract tree, like a triangle. The pattern comes from a wampum belt made at the beginning of the Haudenosaunee confederation to signify its unity. The tree is the Great Tree of Peace, planted at Onq:da'gega', the last nation to lay down its arms and join the league. They buried them under the tree, so it is, in a sense, the place central to the Great Law of Peace, though no one knows exactly where it is today. The rectangles represent the other original four nations, and I'm thrilled to see it over the door. I feel as if wherever the Hiawatha unity belt is represents the place where the arms are buried.

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Despite all we borrowed from the Haudenosaunee in the early years of our republic, come the Revolution, we get a campaign that looks like ethnic cleansing. Under pressure most of the Haudenosaunee nations sided with the British. In retaliation George Washington ordered the Sullivan Expedition calling for:

The total destruction and devastation of their settlements, and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops... Parties should... lay waste all the settlements around [so]... that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed. But you will not by any means listen to any overture of peace before the total ruinment of their settlements is effected.

#### *Ruinment, waste and capture.*

Thousands died, starved in forced migrations. Escapees settled along Buffalo Creek. After the war, New York and Massachusetts conspired to sell off the pre-emptive rights to Haudenosaunee lands. Soon Joseph Ellicott's employer, the Holland Land Corporation, owned the rights to all of Western New York. Being a foreign entity, they were not even legally allowed to have land or a company in the US. They did until the 1820s, when they sold to the Ogden Land Company.

In 1838 as the Trail of Tears forced thousands of Native Americans off their lands in the Southeast, Ogden's representatives tried to get rid of the Onöndowa'ga:' and the other refugees and push them further west. The company wanted all the nation's reservations, hundreds of square miles. The company's negotiators (another word to put in quotes) used bribes and lies to get a treaty. When this "treaty" came to Congress to be ratified, even the president, Martin van Buren, who'd been vice president at the start of the Trail of Tears, didn't believe the document was legal. The Onöndowa'ga:' wrote eloquent pleas to Congress, "memorials" they were called, protesting the deal; so did the Quakers.(8)

(8) One young chief, Maris Pierce, a Dartmouth student, in an 1838 speech commented on the treaty and how it was supposed to be "liberal": *In the first place the white man wants our land; in the next place it is said that the offer for it is liberal... and is the offer liberal?... If we do not deem one or two dollars an acre liberal... which will, to the white*

That 1838 treaty was renegotiated with Quaker "help," another word that is not the word. The Quakers wanted to civilize, colonize, Europeanize people. The deal meant the Onöndowa'ga:' had to give up Buffalo Creek as well as another reservation and adopt an electoral constitution like the US, all for the right to keep the rest of their land. There is an irony in the constitution's being based on the US one, basically as a copy of a copy. But, the irony is cruel. That new written constitution meant no more women as electors and clan leaders, and only men could vote.(9)

One of the racist claims made about the Haudenosaunee was that men were lazy. Women carried such great responsibility that their position was unfathomable to white colonizers. The only way they could frame it was that the men were indolent. The Europeans wanted women like Christian women: indoors, delicate and protected, the weaker sex, which just makes women weaker. The Quakers advocated for the nuclear family, for single-family homes and farming as men's domain, land as property, property passing through the male line. For patriarchy and capitalism, essentially. Actually there was no "essentially" about it. This was patriarchy and capitalism.

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B returns with money our slot machine will take. Apparently penny slots don't take dollar bills. They don't take pennies either. The cash machine gives her a hundred-dollar bill, nothing smaller. The cashier changes it for twenties, and the slot machine eats Andrew Jackson. (Which also seems apt for the man who instituted the Indian Removal Policy.) Neither of us knows what to do at this machine. There is one large green button, and the dragon lifts. It rises overhead. Bells ring, and onscreen gold coins fall. B has won. Seven minutes, 94 dollars.

This place that is a sovereign nation, that had been a grain elevator, was sold by Carl Paladino to the Seneca Nation. He is a property developer, and when I learned of the sale, I thought that after all the real estate deals and land scams, that this was turnabout, reparations, repatriation... I thought that this was the slow arc of history coming around. I didn't have a clue. Paladino's company is called Ellicott Development Corporation.

*man's pocket bring fifteen to fifty, I don't know that we can be held heinously criminal for our opinion.*

(9) In an early act of civil disobedience, the Onöndowa'ga:' living on the Tonawanda Reservation (one that had to be surrendered with the "treaty") refused to allow the Ogden surveyors on their land. No assessment of the lands' size or value could be made. And, they refused to leave. They broke away from the other Onöndowa'ga:', now the Seneca Nation, and became the Tonawanda Band of Seneca and kept traditional government with clan mothers. Because of treaty issues with the Ogden Land Company they managed to buy some land back.



Outside heat shimmers off the pavement, and the sky is an oppressive, angry blue. Downtown Buffalo, laid out by Joseph Ellicott, feels like a place of no place – all cars and highway overpasses, cyclone fences in which grows mugwort and Queen Anne's lace.(10)

Ellicott Square is not a square but an office building. Inside is cool with mosaic-tiled floors. Built in 1896, it was the world's biggest office building – for a time. In the foyer banks of elevators have paneled brass doors. One is jammed open for repairs. The panels tell a narrative running left to right and top to bottom:

1. Barely dressed Native American man crawls clutching a bow.
2. A buffalo.
3. Settler's log cabin.
4. A surveyor, Ellicott himself, before he became fat and truculent with "monomania" as an 1849 history put it. Ellicott has one hand up gesturing to a colleague just out of sight.
5. Industry. A shirtless man pours molten steel.
6. Power lines and factories, one of which looks like a grain elevator.
7. A speeding locomotive.
8. A speeding ship, smoke pouring from its funnels.

The point is clear: "history" and "progress" are laid out. But, big ships rarely come to Buffalo anymore. They bypass it for the St. Lawrence Seaway, which cut a hole through Kanien'ke-

(10) The seeds of Queen Anne's lace function as a progesterone inhibitor, essentially a birth control pill. Just a teaspoon a day. I wonder at the women who carried it with them as they came to the US, at their hopes, at stowing it away, knowing the root is edible and the seeds could protect them.



Marlene McCarty  
Devil's Snare, Male Pattern Baldness, Sag, Modern Mastery,  
Tumor or Goiter or Mammilla, Hell's Bells (detail).

2019  
ca. 94 x 70.5 inches

And, you, Plantain, mother of herbs,  
open to the east, mighty within;  
carts rolled over you, women rode over you,  
over you brides cried out, bulls snorted over you.  
All you withstood then, and were crushed;



há:ka land and, in a sense, Buffalo too, gutting the city's economy so the grain silos sit abandoned.

Carl Paladino's company is based in this building. By now I know more about Paladino. One way he's trying to make money is charter schools. He believes there's an 11% annual return in them, far more than a bank, more than the stock market. Money from education, money from the public good, money from buying buildings and leasing them to schools or donating them for the tax write-off. Money from construction, from building extensions to these charter schools. Publicly funded, they act like private companies all while draining money from public education.

That afternoon I stand before one. Made of brick, it has a bald, municipal look. Once a public school, a sign over the front entrance announces, "Maritime Charter School." A side door labeled "girls" is boarded over. Out back plantains grow in the cracked tarmac, and "snow" from the trees above collects.<sup>(11)</sup> And, beneath this? Bodies, Native American bodies. Paladino – the new Ellicott – wants to dig them up and displace them, to expand the school, to make money.

Protests erupted last year over Paladino's plans. Bodies were moved from here before, and that past is present. Across the street a boulder with a brass

(11) Brought by Puritan colonizers, plantain is also called white man's foot. It too is part of the *Nine Herbs Charm*. It is the second herb: *And, you, Plantain, mother of herbs, // open to the east, mighty within; // carts rolled over you, women rode over you, // over you brides cried out, bulls snorted over you. // All you withstood then, and were crushed; // So you withstand poison and contagion // and the loathsome one who travels through the land.* Which seems apt for a weed that grows in roads and paths, that can hide low to the ground. It works as an antibiotic on cuts and wounds and fights coughs and bronchitis as well as cancer.

plaque names some of the people who were moved. Others were added in the 1950s as graves were dug up to build the Mount Morris Dam on what had been Onöndowa'ga:' land.

Four miles away, a bronze man holds his right arm aloft. Beneath him I have to crane my neck. He's a statue, and his foot edges over his pedestal and into our world, as if to get closer to us. He wears three feathers and a grim expression. His clothes collect around him like Roman drapery. The man is Red Jacket, Sa-Go-Ye-Wat-Ha – He Who Keeps Them Awake, his name means. He is a famous Onöndowa'ga:' speaker who white people have loved to quote, and his bones were moved twice for him to be here. They were dug up from near the boulder and moved to a bank vault for a couple years, then in 1884 laid here in this cemetery, this "Forest Lawn." There is no forest here, though, and the lawn is strung through with bindweed.

He's here so other dead men might feel honored, as if he stands in benediction at the cemetery's entrance. A quote is carved into his base:

*When I am gone and my warnings are no longer heeded, the graft and avarice of the white man will prevail. My heart fails me when I think of my people, so soon to be scattered and forgotten.*

Erected to "honor" him, the statue seems like a monument to being lost and scattered, as if what the quote means is how prescient he was, how prophetic. But, we've been to the casino, and that 92% house return goes to healthcare, college educations, housing, keeping the Onöndowa'ga:' language alive and traditions going.... Not defeat. And, the Great Law of Peace is still in effect.

The night his body was reburied, Red Jacket's great grandson, Ely S. Parker, gave a speech at the Buffalo Historical Society. He'd opposed the move, and that night talked of his great grandfather's "hostility to the white man... that one of his last requests is said to have been that white men should not dig his grave and that white men should not bury him." Before this audience of the city's great and good, Parker recounted watching the events that day:

*The words of the blessed Saviour forcibly presented themselves to my mind, 'the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.' I applied this saying to the Indian race. They have been buffeted from pillar to post. They once owned much, but now have hardly anything they can call their own. While living they are not let alone – when dead they are not left unmolested.*

*I thank you for your kind attention, and I now bid you all, and each of you, a fair good-night; may you retire to sweet slumbers and pleasant dreams.*

I get stuck on that "fair good-night." I can't believe he meant it.

1884: Bodies moved, sweet slumbers, fair goodnight. This is the year too that Friedrich Engels, still no doubt mourning Marx's death the year before, writes about marriage. He opposes the Christian notion of marriage. He'd loved his partner Mary Burns. They met in 1842 and never married because they both saw marriage as a form of class oppression. But, he was also formed of his time; he believed in "progress" – well, teleology, which is nearly the same thing, an endpoint in history. His endpoint was revolution, which would bring a new age of communal living, and he had also been reading a book by Lewis H. Morgan.

In 1851 Morgan wrote one of the first books of anthropology, and it was on the Haudenosaunee. He researched it with Ely Parker's help. Many think he was Morgan's ghostwriter, which is why the book is as accurate as it is. A quarter century later, though, came Morgan's *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*. And, therein lies the problem, the very name with its loaded Savagery to Civilization.

Engels used those ideas too, particularly the ones on the Haudenosaunee, for his essay on marriage, "Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State." The essay has many flaws, like seeing history in stages. Then, there's the language – that savagery and barbarism and civilization – he adopts even if Engels doesn't think much of Western "civilization."

When I first read it, I couldn't get beyond the language. On the other side was an argument about Christianity, patriarchy, marriage, male power and the nuclear family. He records a drawn-out tale of "civilization" being built upon men's usurping women's power, so that property could be passed down and inherited as farming and agriculture became land-based – that is, property-based. That, I get.

Outside on the road, I brush my hand on the fence encircling "Forest Lawn." A jogger runs into the cemetery talking on her phone. Bittersweet nightshade grows into the iron bars.<sup>(12)</sup> A bee hovers on the bobbing purple flowers, and I think of all the uses to which the Haudenosaunee have been put. The "Founding Fathers" (who left out women) took what they wanted: Lewis Morgan, who before meeting Parker, played dress-up as an Iroquois, dreamed of joining what he saw as a mightier race. There were the Seneca Falls suffragists who saw feminism, and Engels. And here I am too, searching for a better democracy, for socialism.

(12) John Gerard's 16th-century *Herball* reports, "The juice is good for those that have fallen from high places, and have been thereby bruised or beaten."

# Now in this place of no place little remains of their three villages. There is a graveyard with no graves, just a fence enclosing nettles, touch-me-nots and burdock growing chest high.



Leroy Little Bear began Harvard's Native America Program and advised the Canadian government on First Nations' rights. He's written about how when the Protestants came to America, they saw a country open and empty and ready for the taking. Conquering and conquest were inherent in Christian beliefs. It also bears noting that, as these same Europeans were prosecuting the Crusades, the Haudenosaunee established the Great Law of Peace. The Protestants, as he puts it, came with a notion of "unrestrained freedom."

Little Bear also writes of Western notions of time, that is, linear time. It too holds the possibility of conquest and shapes ideas of progress, forward motion, that the future is always better than the past. If progress is inherent, the present must be preordained and unavoidable. Our actions correct. We all know these ideas of time are a construction, but our very use of calendar time, of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years, suggests forward motion. They inevitably shape how we experience time and place and our roles in a place, and I find it nearly impossible to imagine a world outside those notions. I want to though. I want to see it as circular and repeating, not past events leading inevitably to the present.

Coming to North America, Protestants – Christians – brought that sense of time with its teleology inscribed in it. And, these Europeans thought they were right – which by a corollary meant others were wrong.

By the 1840s Western New York had become the Burned-over District, a place of Protestant fervor and utopian uprisings. In the wake of the financial crisis, people didn't think capitalism a done deal yet in these nascent United States. They also believed the land was empty and they could build a new world here – all sorts of new worlds.

Across Haudenosaunee homelands Fourierist Phalanxes were built following the dictates of the French utopian socialist; two Shaker communities practiced abstinent socialism, and the Oneida Community moved to what had been the Onoyote'a-ká / Oneida nation, espousing Christian perfectionism, joint ownership and free love. Another Christian group moved to Buffalo.(13)

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At Union Road and Seneca Street, Google Maps tells me is a place called Ebenezer. There's a Kay Jewelers and a Quest Diagnostics, a Bank of America and a strip mall. Another place of no place, but there's no sign, nothing that says "Ebenezer" here, at least not at the intersection. A group of German Christians bestowed the name, and it means "the stone of help." In the Bible it promised divine assistance. The Germans arrived in 1842, the same year as the treaty and the grain elevator.

Those Germans, the Inspirationists, believed their leader had a direct line to God. It's amazing what you can do with divine right like kings and queens and the Inspirationists had.

Now in this place of no place little remains of their three villages. There is a graveyard with no graves, just a fence enclosing nettles, touch-me-nots and burdock growing chest high. The Ebenzers living in the stone-of-help did not believe in headstones. Across the road is a mill house. It became their leader Christian Metz's home. Soon as they arrived, he decided they should hold property collectively. Metz said in a moment of inspiration, that is, of God speaking through him:

*The simple, frank, stated and revealed Will of God asking for total renunciation is the right way. Hang no clauses onto it. It is yours and you are giving it to the Lord and will take no profit from the Community. If you no longer want to belong to the Lord then take what is yours and care for yourselves. But woe unto the soul that does this after having acknowledged the summons that it was indeed the pure Will of God.*

That house and its sawmill had been owned by the Onöndowa'ga'. They relocated here in 1804 after the original mill was lost to Joseph Ellicott's land grab. The Ebenzers took Onöndowa'ga' property – homes and barns and more. One member wrote back to Germany, "There are still some Indians living near us. They are friendly toward us.... Most of them have left already and have left among other things, an excellent fruit orchard, with 25 apple trees loaded with fruit. Picking and harvesting them has been my first work assignment here."

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on the family about Fourier: *I originally intended to place the brilliant criticism of civilization which is found scattered through the work of Charles Fourier beside that of Morgan and my own. Unfortunately, I have not the time. I will only observe that Fourier already regards monogamy and private property in land as the chief characteristics of civilization, and that he calls civilization a war of the rich against the poor. We also find already in his work the profound recognition that in all societies which are imperfect and split into antagonisms single families (les familles incohérentes) are the economic units. It is worth noting too that Fourier first coined the word "feminism" and believed in free love, not marriage.*

The Onöndowa'ga' sued, and the white German Christians won. In the court ruling, the words "individual" and "individual rights" repeat throughout. The judge's decision was about protecting these "individual rights." Both the Onöndowa'ga' and Ebenzers believed in joint property. Their constitution talked of living "in communion of love." "None shall seek his own."

They'd left Germany because of the Panic of 1837, and they left here in the early 1850s. The world was encroaching. They went to Iowa, creating the Amana Colonies and lived communally until the 1930s, another global depression, when they set up a company, Amana, that manufactures refrigerators and ranges.

A street sign now says "West Seneca: Proud Past, Unlimited Future, 1852." The year the Ebenzers leave.

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Here is my question: Are all attempts at socialism doomed? Is there something about a dream of a better world that is bound to fail? The Ebenzers saw a new way of living together and managed to uphold their Christian socialism for nearly 100 years. Then they formed a company – capitalism. The Oneidas of the communal ownership and free love did too. They started making silverware and cutlery after their stab at socialism failed. All from this land that had been Haudenosaunee, whose way of living communally and collectively seems a model.

I stand outside Metz's house and stare at the plaque with his name. A few feet away the river runs over flat rocks. The grass is clipped short, and still bindweed grows. The Haudenosaunee way of collectivity is not just about people, I think, but everything – the earth, the rocks, the water, the sky. They are all animate and alive and equal, so everything is considered. It's mutual respect for all things, all beings.

For the Inspirationists you were either in or out, saved or not, just like Metz said in his testimony: *Woe unto the soul*, meaning stop living communally like us and suffer God's wrath. The binary nature of Euro-Christian thinking sees right and wrong, saved and damned.

On the highway next to the mill house, cars whoosh past in waves. I'm on School Street, yet there is no school. These dichotomies – men vs. women, black and white – allow settlers to believe they are right and have the right to impose their values.

In the 17th century the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch formed a treaty marked by the Two Row Wampum. It literally represents two rows of purple beads: one for the Haudenosaunee in canoes; the other, Europeans in ships. Three rows of white beads run between them, representing

(13) Engels adds a line at the very end of his essay

peace, friend and forever.<sup>(14)</sup> The belt inscribes the principle of respecting each other's way of living and not interfering in another's culture, politics, beliefs or faith. The Two Row Wampum's responsibilities were to be carried by both sides. The treaty was later joined by the other European nations. The principle endures. The belt is still used: We can live together, can coexist. It is not one or the other, winners or losers, right or wrong. Or, it doesn't have to be.

## PART III The White Deer

That night at the bend in the river, the white deer ambled off. Josh, an ecologist who works with the land here, gestured to the ground. He said slag from the Bethlehem Steel Mill made up most of the soil. It was also heaped with broken dishes, and he explained that it had served as an ad hoc dump. He'd found shoe leather and patent medicine bottles. Now mugwort and Japanese knotweed have taken over with their rhizomatic roots. Josh said he was just grateful anything grows here.

He touched the soil gently, like he was stroking it, and moved a piece of china. He'd dug a hole in the slag to see how deep it went. I thought that this place was part of the steel works and also part of the people's lives who'd thrown their trash here more than a century ago. The pit had filled with water, and the water reflected the sky. There were Daumal's ghosts and holes, with their morals. Robin Hood Flour had been made here too: steal from the rich. One Lenape legend I read online said that seeing two white deer together is a sign for the people to come together.<sup>(15)</sup>

Now, though, the deer was gone, and the shadows deepened. It was the same time of day that Mendelsohn had visited, but that activity he'd seen had long since ceased. After his visit, he went on to build a factory in the new Soviet Union, excited by their experiments in socialism.

The grain elevators did have one key influence on modernism. They revolutionized reinforced concrete with a slip-form method of pouring cement. It became the technique used for Brutalism, modernism's late last phase constructed all in concrete.

The word "Brutalism" was coined by Reynier Banham – Banham who later moved to Buffalo and wrote about the silos as Roman ruins. Brutalism too was a mistranslation. It was derived from *béton brut*, or "raw concrete" in French. It was 1955, and he conflated the terms hoping Brutalism would be true to its materials. When he came up with the name, only a couple buildings fit his definition, one by Le Corbusier. Yet, Banham conjured an entire movement by will of the written word, and Brutalism was married to buildings that embodied social progress: public housing, courts, government services and schools – even parking garages when people still believed cars were the future. "Brutalism" damned those buildings and their goals. It made them easier to ridicule and dismiss. In Buffalo people work to protect the old grain elevators, but are losing the city's Brutalist monuments with their expansive social aims.

Banham moved here in the 1970s when Brutalist buildings were erected across the city. Their moment waned by the decade's end, done in by rising gas prices and the start of the neoliberal era. One drove up the cost of cement; the other brought Reagan's and Thatcher's elections, ending Brutalism's dreams with the reclaiming of the "individual."

the walls. It makes its own cement from its roots, as if to keep this structure standing. English ivy is alien. Quilts dangled from shattered windows and dead houseplants sat in pots on the balconies. People had left in a hurry, not even that long ago, in 2018.

Head of Yale's architecture school, Rudolph had planned an entire neighborhood here with a community center, shops, school and housing stretching to the river. It was going to be economically diverse, but only the low-income apartments were built. They were stunning with large windows, so everyone had natural light and a view.

Orange construction netting blocked off holes in the structure but wouldn't really keep anyone out. The buildings were porous. Into this abyss go the dreams of a better world. I kicked at the dirt and took photos. My breath caught. Mugwort with its silvery undersides grew into a cyclone fence surrounding the site.

The hopes that led to Shoreline lasted not even fifty years. Now it was being replaced by quasi-colonial condos. There won't be as many units, and some will be market rate, which translates into far less affordable housing. What did Daumal say about intentions, sensibility and morals?

Just before he was evicted last year, the final resident John Schmidt said, "They're getting rid of perfectly sturdy, well-designed Paul Rudolph structures and replacing them with plywood firetraps." He refused to leave until the marshals took him out.

A housing advocate who stood by his side added: "This could have been here forever, you could shoot a missile at it and it would still be standing."

Instead of achieving Rudolph's dream, a 3D kiosk, a sculpture, will be made from some of the last ribbed concrete. It will contain an etched image of his original plans. A small-scale simulation will be all that's left of Rudolph's vision.

"I have no idea where I'm going," Schmidt said just before he was forced out.<sup>(16)</sup>

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(14) Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, "Debating Missionary Presence at Buffalo Creek: Haudenosaunee Perspectives on Land Cessions, Government Relations, and Christianity," *Ethnographies and Exchanges: Native Americans, Moravians and Catholics in Early North America*, ed A.G. Roeber, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. p 177.

(15) In another myth recorded in Charles M. Skinner's 1896 *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land*, an English hunter goes to shoot a white doe. His dog howls; the deer flees, and the hunter beats the dog, convinced it was possessed by a witch. (This is supposedly in Western Massachusetts seventy years after the Salem Witch Trials). He goes to her home; she's called a "hag." ("Witch" is synonymous with "hag," with an older woman). He was sure that in hitting the dog, he'd beaten her. There's a strange conflation of the two, witch and dog, where one stands in for the other. She grabbed her broom, "the implement that served for her horse at night." She attacked the man with the broomstick, and he was unsure if the beating was "prompted by indigna-

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In the age of the socialist utopias during the 1840s, "individualism" had been a pejorative that meant "selfish."

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That night with mugwort under my pillow, I dreamt of forced migrations. Red Jacket's foot edged into my world, and I packed a blue backpack to cross a border.

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The next day under an unrelenting sun, I stood downtown and stared at jagged chasms torn into ribbed concrete. The ground glittered with broken glass. This was all that remained of the Brutalist Shoreline Apartments. They were designed by Paul Rudolph. English ivy climbed

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tion or vengeance." Instead, I'll take the idea of people coming together with the white deer.

Later that day I visited the steel mill to see where the soil came from and to connect it to the grain elevators. A truck dumped concrete chunks of waste, and I couldn't help but think it was from the Shoreline Apartments.

A woman in a red sedan stopped me. She wore a reflective safety vest. I was trespassing. "You can't just be here. This is the airport," she told me. She meant it was now the Port of Buffalo, and like the airport, the same TSA rules applied, but she skipped that. I told her I liked the analogy. What I liked was that the port was the airport and the ways her words had slipped to transform them into equivalents.

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(16) Mark Byrnes, "The Last Man Standing in a Doomed Buffalo Housing Complex," CityLab, accessed, Jan 12, 2018, accessed 8/13/19 <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/01/the-last-man-standing-in-a-doomed-buffalo-housing-complex/550343/>



English ivy climbed the walls. It makes its own cement from its roots, as if to keep this structure standing. English ivy is alien. Quilts dangled from shattered windows and dead houseplants sat in pots on the balconies.

She gave me a look that was a question about the word “analogy,” but instead asked what I was doing. I said working on an essay, that I was interested in the city’s industrial history. She suggested someone who might let me onto the site.(17)

On the phone he said, “I wish you good luck,” which was no luck. The airport was a port, the luck was no luck. The grain elevators were storage but they were also tools of capitalism that had pioneered the futures market.

Throughout the city, language fails. There was Brutalism that was meant to build a better world and built of mistranslations. Downtown Buffalo is a city with no center; the center has been lost to highway overpasses. The casino is sovereign land. Paul Rudolph’s work to build a better world will be reduced to a plaque and kiosk.

In his essay on marriage and the family and the state, Engels quoted Marx talking about names.

*Man’s innate casuistry! To change things by changing their names! And to find loopholes for violating tradition while maintaining tradition, when direct interest supplied sufficient impulse.*

He was confused by people’s changing names to try and change what those names represented. I don’t fully get the quote. It’s in the context of Native American peoples moving from matrilineal descent to patrilineal and having children take their fathers’ surnames. Somehow the quote doesn’t fit. I see in it instead that confusion Marx had over language in *Das Kapital* with the wood and its transformation to something else. In his writing here too the words slip and something opens up.

The Kanien’kehá:ka scholar Taiaiake Alfred writes about language, names and nouns in his book *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*,

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(17) Viper’s bugloss grows on the Bethlehem-Steel-Plant-as-Port-of Buffalo. In his 1597 treatise *Herball*, John Gerard records that bugloss is “of force and vertue to drive away sorrow and pensiveness of the minde, and to comfort and strengthen the heart.” A century later another doctor writes “It is a most gallant herb of the Sun; it is a pity it is no more in use than it is. ... The root ... is most effectual to comfort the heart, and expel sadness, or causeless melancholy.” And, King James I’s apothecary suggests bugloss for “swoonings, sadness and melancholy.” More recently in Iran in 2007 medical authorities have found that it works as an antidepressant.



where he considers places of resistance to colonial settler culture today. He’s paraphrasing Leroy Little Bear and says, “European languages centre on nouns and are concerned with naming things.” Essentially nouns express ownership and possession, and, he adds, “making judgments. Onkwehonwe [that is, First People’s] languages are structured on verbs [...] through description of movement and activity.”

Language shapes how we frame the world, and our worldview shapes how we make language. I’m limited in what I can say about the Haudenosaunee because of the language that forms me, and the ideas that language can express. I want to slow down on the things I can’t explain, instead of making them easier to understand. I value the places where language fails, where sentences don’t unspool easily into the future, and we stumble and fall into holes. I see possibility if we can step into the unknown, the dissimilar and sit with the questions that open up.

In his introduction to Alfred’s book, Leroy Little Bear writes about how Native Americans believe that place holds history and that time is not progress. Place is not empty, not abstract, not waiting for whoever moves onto it next. It holds its past; it holds events; the land contains the memory and its power. If time is not linear, then the past is not over. It can instead be present and alive.

Here at this bend in the river, tall grasses wave and invasive species grow. One form of toxic capitalism is component in another, married together in the soil. Modernism was teleological and found its antecedents here. Capitalism was inscribed with “progress” and requires ongoing systemic inequality. Here too is a “prehistory” of greater equality and democracy

and collectivism. Any way you examine it, that prehistory is not over, not past, not gone. All of that exists here, so too does Marlene’s garden with its plants and power and the white deer.