HOPE FOR THE SISYPHEAN TASK

a review by Naisa Beaumont

Nora Shalaway Carpenter, Editor. *Onward: 16 Climate Fiction Stories to Inspire Hope*. Penguin Random House, 2026.

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NORA SHALAWAY CARPENTER's novel, *Edge of Anything* (Running Press Kids, 2020), was named Best Book of the Year by *Kirkus Reviews* and was North Carolina Humanities' selection for the Library of Congress's Discover Great Places Through Reading list. Her novel *Fault Lines* (Running Press Kids, 2023) won the Green Earth Book Award for YA fiction and was named to the prestigious Texas Library Association TAYSHAS State Reading List. NPR named her anthology *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Time America* (Candlewick Press, 2020) to its Best of the Year list. Other accolades include the Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection and the Nautilus Award championing "better books for a better world." Her book *Spinning Toward the Sun: Essays on Writing, Resilience, & the Creative Life* (Burlwood Books, 2025), was reviewed in *NCLR Online* Spring 2026. Carpenter holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and teaches writing at the Whole Novel Workshop at Boyds Mills (formerly the Highlights Foundation). She lives in Asheville, NC.

I finished my second reading of *Onward: 16 Climate Fiction Short Stories to Inspire Hope* just as the first snowfall of the season began here in Virginia. An anthology that is as moving as it is disquieting, this collection, targeted at "aspiring teen activists," is a beautiful example of how stories build resilience, activate hope, and unstick us from our complacency in the climate crisis. But the most meaningful personal takeaway is that it makes me, and all my emotions about climate change, feel seen and validated.

Outside of my window, the houses, cars, and sycamore trees are slowly dusted with white. It seems the entire landscape is falling under a sleepy winter spell. But this serene scene is in stark contrast to an undeniable truth: the world is on fire. 2025 was the hottest year on record to date, with each new year surpassing the previous as the hottest year (2020 was an exception). In October 2025, Hurricane Melissa devastated Jamaica, causing roughly seven billion dollars in damage to an already vulnerable island nation. And while the continental US remained unscathed from hurricanes in 2025, we had our share of wildfires and floods. The deadly July 4th floods in Texas seem to have already dissipated from our collective short-term memory. While some areas suffered drought, water overtook wind as the major threat in Asia. Across Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam over two thousand people are confirmed dead, over eight hundred missing, and millions have fled their homes from landslides, and storms.

I know these facts are bleak, and many of us have become desensitized to the headlines. Where and how do we find the energy to battle the devastation from human-made climate change? We volunteer. We vote. We compost. We purchase sustainable items or decrease our meat intake as small yet meaningful actions that align with our concerns. But we do not see the immediate results or tangible progress, at least not yet. We are Sisyphus, pushing the boulder up only to feel the most powerful and influential human forces pushing the boulder back down on us, seemingly canceling our

RIGHT Hurricane Helene damage in Buncombe County, NC, 13 Oct. 2023; courtesy of NCDOTcommunications

efforts. The people who wield the most influence continue to outright deny or obfuscate the issue. In November 2025, the largest global summit on climate change occurred: the United Nations 30th Conference of the Parties (UN COP30). The summit's outcomes fell short on the global transition from fossil fuels, failing to create a roadmap that shifts away from the cause. Instead, some of the most influential people in the world have resigned to limited voluntary initiatives.

Reading *Onward*, though, demanded I reflect on where the real power comes from. I can't help but question my own assumption that power is only in the hands of tech giants, lobbyists, politicians, and other "masters of the universe." In *Onward*, hope, in all its manifestations, is the source that fuels power, whether literal or symbolic.

In Erin Entrada Kelly's speculative fiction "The Care and Feeding of Mother," hope comes in the form of a simple plant. In Kelly's post-famine world, elements of nature like sunlight and water are artificially produced by a corporation. Orphan Shayta believes optimism is useless, while her friend Coco believes it's all they have.

After a destructive dust storm decimates Coco's home, Shayta shares her secret: a real plant she's named Mother, which she grew from a packet of seeds that a previus storm blew in. Sometimes the same force that brings destruction also brings the possibility of regeneration. In this world of scarce resources, optimism is one resource that is accessible – renewable even – if the characters are willing: "She wanted to bring Mother back to the land. She wanted to see her grow and multiply. She wanted to know what the world looked like, before" (13). Hope is not something to be cradled close to one's chest, it's meant to be shared and propagated.

Jeff Zenter's verse story "Tellico Lake" takes place in 1970s Tennessee. William and his family have lived on their land for five generations, their names like "embers we passed in a clay vessel to keep a fire alive," a beautiful reference to a Cherokee tradition using "fire pots" to transport small fires across long distances. When the Tennessee Valley Authority's dam project threatens to flood their land, William, his father, and their community organize to save their homes. The author leaves us with a message that feels both universal and crafted for the specific challenge before us:

> The hope is not that you will always win
> the fight for your world.
> Sometimes you will lose.
> The hope is that you will never lose
> your love of your world enough
> to stop fighting. (61)

In Nora Shalaway Carpenter's "Armadillo by Morning," hope comes in the form of an animal. When a group of kids encounter an armadillo at their bus stop, some are mystified by its appearance while others feel threatened. Armadillos are moving north, displaced by climate change. Emaline and Zeke secretly set off to protect it before it is harmed. Lance, however, feels compelled to eliminate it since his grandfather sees the armadillo as an invader and threat to their sustenance garden. For Zeke, the armadillo is a sentimental connection to his loved ones who were killed by weather disasters. For Lance, it is an eminent threat to his goals and livelihood. For Emaline, the armadillo is just as much a victim of climate change as Zeke and Lance. An innocent armadillo is threatened by climate change, and an innocent garden is threatened by an armadillo. Like naturalist John Muir says in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."*

Armadillos symbolize resilience and survival in many indigenous cultures. They are a kind of ecological engineer, a harbinger of restoration considered important for the recovery of burned soil. Drawn by the abundance of insects that arrive to the scorched earth, armadillos are usually the first animal to return to an area after a forest fire. Their digging creates natural cavities for organic matter to gather, which helps build essential soil nutrients needed to nurture new saplings. Carpenter leaves us on a hopeful note: "Loss was a devastating, life-changing thing. But it wasn't everything. And who knew what might be just a dirtroad-bend away? What might be the next armadillo?" (87)

Sometimes, hope is in the last place we look for it: inward. Sarah Aronson's "A Trashy Love Story" is a refreshing and humorous perspective of someone who doesn't start out caring all that much about the environment. That is, until she is voluntold for a trash cleanup with a hunk from her past. It is this unexpected interaction that thrusts sassy Rona to look internally for the will

* John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Houghton Mifflin, 1911) 211.

to change: "I was a person who thought I could be anything. / I want that person back. I want that hope back. / I want to be more than a thief, more than a bad girl, more than an unhappy, unsuccessful daughter who shuts down her own dreams – who lets nobody in." I can't but help hear Aronson's words as a call for humanity to turn inward: "I can't go back and take the roads I didn't take. I can't undo my / mistakes. But I can think about why I turned away from myself – / why I settled for something less than I was – why I chose armor / over honesty. I can look for a better path now" (263).

What strikes me about *Onward* is the agency the characters possess, and sometimes the lack thereof. This agency is not always obvious or a given. Often it is a dormant power that is earned or realized, usually in the face of danger. In Aleese Lin's "Graveyard for the Sky," protagonist Amy's agency comes in the form of holding up a mirror, or rather a screen, to the monsters that society has created and would otherwise never see. In "Blue Glass," Anuradha D. Rajurkar's story of loss and grief, we see the power of transforming "garbage" into something mesmerizing and memorializing, and how that creates room for the possibility of loving again. In "Critobis" by Aya de Leon, Yuisa's sight power enables her to see the stories behind objects she touches. In "The Stealth Arborist" by Rachel Hylton, Rosalie learns to literally step into her power, a power she doesn't necessarily want at first, one that's disturbing or inconvenient for her. It isn't until she meets someone else with a similar power that she learns that the future is unwritten. Instead of a tunnel, the future is a tree branching out before us with infinite possibilities. And in Padma Venkatraman's verse story "One Piece at a Time," Riddhi, a South Asian immigrant, finds a channel for her activism through writing:

> Writing isn't that different
> from fighting climate change,
> If you think about the whole huge picture
> you might just give up.
> Instead, you have to think about just one piece,
> one beach to clean up rather than a whole coast,
> one more ear that might hear a marcher's chants. (129)

Gloria Muñoz's "The Manatee Is Not a Meme" centers around Esperanza's path to finding her agency, her voice. In this semi-dystopian society, teachers can be reported for "stepping out of line" and the anti-immigrant president issues border bans. The last manatee known to exist, Matilda, has died. Esperanza can't ignore the performative mourning of Matilda and the commercialization of her persona, the emphasis on the marketability of the manatee rather than on her species' survival. She also can't ignore what she saw last July: a wild manatee with a name carved into its back. The hope represented by a wild manatee and the fear of what humans are capable of doing to an innocent creature coexist "like a dance," not cancel each other out.

Her classmate Chad, (a name that has become synonymous for entitled and domineering toxic males), is running uncontested for class president. "Why do we listen to the loudest person with the microphone?" Esperanza asks (22). But in her last act of the story, Esperanza subverts the complacency that has taken hold of her peers and gives us something to hope for. What this story brought up for me is that complacency, whether intentional or not, collective or individual, makes us complicit in the problem. Complacency often means we are complicit.

Karina Iceberg's "Worldfall" takes place after ecological devastation, where each member of Chena's tribe has the power to wield a natural force. Chena does not know her power yet, unlike her friends who can manipulate the elements. Chena's aunt and closest guardian assures her that "the power – it's there, but it's waiting." Chena's power is dormant, but that doesn't mean it is nonexistent. "The power, it's there, but it's waiting. . . . It'll come when you're not looking for it" (103).

There are many more captivating stories, and one essay, spanning the genres of magical surrealism, contemporary, speculative, and science fiction. While the book is written for young and new adult audiences, adult readers of all ages will find these stories eye-opening. As I found myself moving through these stories, sometimes chuckling, sometimes angry, sometimes tearful, I realized that these characters and voices reflect the diversity and the complexity of the climate crisis itself. The crisis feels nebulous, abstract, and ubiquitous. The challenge we are facing is large. Monstrous, even. Standing against this monster is an equally matched strength and resilience as shown through these stories. Our power, like Chena's, may come when and from where we least expect it. ■