

EARTH IS OUR FIRST TEACHER

On the first day of school, Earth rolls down the hall and rotates into her classroom. She hitches up her continents and faces her new students. To Earth, they look younger each year: girls, whose low-slung jeans and tight tops separate like tectonic plates to reveal shifting midribs; boys, sloppy in loose T-shirts, baggy shorts, and flip-flops.

“Welcome to my class,” Earth says, “to my world, as it were.” A couple of students pull iPod earpieces out and cease nodding their heads.

“Is it warm in here, or is it just me?” Earth asks. The students shrug. Earth trundles over to the window and swings it open, though the sultry air brings little relief.

Earth stands again in front of her students. She tightens her equatorial belt, then points at herself with both hands. “Do you see how much of me is ocean?” She revolves slowly, feeling another day slip by. “Do you see what happens when my temperatures rise?” Earth switches on her warm-display function. The students watch her glaciers recede and her oceans lap over the edges of her continents.

“Hey, look at Florida,” one boy says. “Miami’s completely under water.” Students giggle and click quick words into their laptops.

Earth switches off the display, but remains flushed and bloated. “What happens to the cold-water salmon when my waters warm?” She looks around the room.

“They swim further north,” one girl posits.

“Or maybe they die?” a boy asks.

Earth nods at them and feels water drip from Antarctica onto the classroom floor. “Please open another window,” she says. A boy does her bidding; yet, she still feels overheated.

“Now, what about my mountain forests?” she asks, “the Douglas firs, red cedar and maidenhair ferns?” She runs her arms down the green of her coastal mountain chains. “And what about the animals who live here?”

A couple of students stare out the windows where Frisbees fly across the campus under bright sunlight.

“They adapt,” a boy says.

“They move higher up the mountains,” says a girl. “Or north.”

Earth wheels forward to reveal the receding ice at the top of her, her shrinking north. Dense glacier water drips onto her students.

Earth wipes her brow. “Is the heat on in here?” she asks. A boy goes over to the thermostat. He studies it, then nods. “Turn it down, please,” Earth says. The boy tries, but it won’t budge. Earth sees her students slump sleepily in their seats; even they are too warm to think clearly. She shakes her head. Salt water spatters the first two rows.

Dizzy with fever, Earth tilts. She leans on her desk and fans herself. Finally, she tugs her poles back into alignment and addresses her class. “Thank

you for your attention.” Earth sees bemused stares and a few looks of concern. “That is the end of our first lesson.” She gives them a moist nod, then sloshes out the door.

The students wipe down their laptops and sling bright packs over their backs. They head to their second class, trailing through the puddles of Earth’s wet path.

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