



## The Last Almond

As California prepares to destroy a levee and sacrifice its last remaining almond farm, its caretaker remembers the toll floodwaters have taken on his family.

By Zoe Young

Illustrations by Mikyung Lee

I knew what the paper said before I read it. They pin the evictions to the house, but the agriculture notices go on the barn.

The kid saw it first. I've been paying him to mind the irrigation lines in the orchard now that my legs are talking back. He burst through the door like a bullet train.

"There's paper," he said, "real paper on the barn door."

I'd been expecting it for years — decades — but when it finally happened it somehow didn't make sense. I was at the kitchen table, and I just stared down into my empty mug at the little salmon painted on the bottom.

"How much paper?" I asked. The kid didn't know how to answer. I tapped the cup on the table and a spray of black coffee grounds turned the salmon into a catfish covered in mud. "How many sheets of paper?"

"There's one white rectangle on the barn door and it's made out of paper."

Shit.

The kid was practically skipping as he led me to the barn. I've got a couple dozen bonus trees between it and the house and they're all in bloom, branches thick with white almond flowers like snow. Why does everything turn beautiful right before it goes to hell?

The kid couldn't stop chattering.

"I thought it was illegal. Do you think they had to kill a tree for that paper? Why didn't they send a comm?"

"Lot of farmers went dark when the evictions started," I said. "State can't serve you a notice if you don't have a screen. So they resurrected something called a printer to put the bad news on paper."

"Are you getting evicted?"

"If you'd read the goddamn thing, you'd know already." That shut the kid up.

Sure enough, there it was on the barn door. I ripped the page off the pin and the kid gasped.

-----

*Eminent Domain*

*Agricultural Modification Notice*

*February 20, 2090*

Robert Wallace,

We write to inform you that within the next 24 hours the State of California will breach the levee on your property that stands between your orchard and the Sacramento River. We will create four breaches in the levee wall at 50-meter intervals. Removed stones and earth will be placed in a convenient location for your reuse. Any attempt to block this levee breach or return it to its former state will result in the seizure of this property under Eminent Domain Statute 2815.

Thank you for your cooperation.

**Cynthia Garcia**

Cynthia Garcia  
California Secretary of Agriculture

-----

I crumpled the paper in my hands.

"What are you doing?" The kid yelled.

I let the ball fall to the ground and get lost in the carpet of white almond flowers.



It was hard to decide which was more insulting. The letter itself or the fact that the assholes didn't even say why — had to look it up on the goddamn weather service. An atmospheric river was coming from the Philippines. It would overflow the Sacramento River and the state wanted every floodplain along the river open to receive the water — that apparently included California's last almond orchard.

"Diego Rivera painted these trees," I said.

"Who's Diego Rivera?" The kid and I were back in the house, both staring at our screens.

"It doesn't matter."

"Will the orchard make it?" the kid asked.

I read down my screen: Fifty-eight centimeters of rain in 48 hours. Dams will be opened when water levels exceed winter capacities. And then in bright red letters, *ALL FARMS SOUTH OF SACRAMENTO REQUIRED TO FLOOD*.

"Depends on how much water we get," I said. "Hell, next time you see paper it could be from one of our trees."

The kid looked out the window. "I hope I never see paper again." Bless him. Then he started bargaining. "Maybe it'll be good. Almonds are a thirsty crop and we're coming out of a drought. Maybe this is what they need. Maybe you can shut off the drip lines for a whole year and just let the trees drink."

"You shut off the drip lines, didn't you?" I asked. The kid nodded.

I put down my screen and looked him square in the face. "State's been on my ass since I took over this farm. Those trees shouldn't even be here. We should be farming rice, or blueberries, something that can flood. But our trees take too much water and when the big rains come, that levee blocks the river from overflowing its banks and seeping back into the ground."

"But there are a million other farms that can flood."

I turned my screen around and showed him. "This says we're getting a two-day downpour, and that's probably the last rain we'll see until next year. If the state doesn't save that water in the ground, nobody gets to grow."

"You're talking like one of them."

"Why not? I understand it, doesn't mean I have to like it."

"But the orchard is a piece of history." It was what I told him to say to tourists. But now, he said it like he believed every word. "It's not fair."

I tried to smile at him, the little idiot. Had I ever been that young?



The bulldozer came in the afternoon. I sent the kid home and set up on my porch with a bad bottle of whisky. Might as well watch the show.

The wind was quiet in the orchard, but I could see clouds amassing in the east. The birds were squawking each other deaf. The land knew something was coming.

*BANG!*

It came from the levee. They must have taken the access road on the other side. Goddamn fusion engine, I hadn't heard a damn thing. *Bang, bang, bang!* A shovel punched through the wall like a fist. A long metal arm appeared behind it and the deed was done.

When the thing finally rolled through the hole, there was no person driving it — no cab, no steering wheel — it was just a giant shovel on tank tracks. Then I watched it clear a perfect 5-meter hole in the wall and stack all the rocks and dirt next to it with a forklift it produced out of its ass. The situation was pretty funny when you thought about it — the orchard I'd tended for 30 years taken down by a soulless machine with a pointy ass.

It drove up the levee wall another 50 meters, this time on the orchard side because it knew I knew the jig was up. Then it punched its hole and cleared its rocks, and then it did it again, and again. By the time it rolled out my front gate, there were four perfect holes in my levee and I was drunker than a fence lizard.

Soon, the rain started and I sat there staring at the hole. I couldn't take my eyes off it. A feeling — a fear I'd shunted down for decades rippled through me. What was going to come through that wall?



When the sun went down, I didn't bother with sandbags or pumps, I just got in bed. The house was elevated four feet, maybe it would be enough. On the edge of sleep, I pictured the water pouring through the windows, cold and brown, lifting the bed off its frame with me on it.

It was a fantasy. It was a memory.



Sacramento, California, 2058

The sentence always starts the same way, but he doesn't know how to finish it.

*The Folsom Dam broke and I don't know where my kids are.*

*The Folsom Dam broke and I can't reach my wife.*

*The Folsom Dam broke and my entire life will be underwater.*

The house erupted in sound when the alert came through. Every speaker he talked to throughout the day was suddenly yelling at him. Get to high ground! Sacramento would be inundated in 9 minutes and 38, now 37 seconds. It was not an evacuation order, it was an order to shelter in place.

There is a banging on his door. He opens it and a family of four charges in. They live across the street.

“We need to get upstairs!” one of the moms yells. His is the only two-story house on the block.

“Follow me,” he says.

They run up the stairs and he pulls down the ladder to the attic. The other mom takes his arm.

“We’ll cross that bridge if we need to,” she says.

They all end up in the bedroom, and the two kids huddle together in the middle of the big bed the way his own kids do when they’ve had a nightmare. These two are a little older — second or third grade — he can’t remember their names.

His kids are at a one-story daycare 2 kilometers away. Terror shoots through him. He can’t get there, he can’t get to them in time. Does the daycare have an evacuation plan? They must; he and Ayla paid enough for it.

Ayla can get them, the hospital is just blocks away. But where would they go? The thought of Ayla — of something happening to Ayla — momentarily paralyzes him.

He forces himself onto the balcony and holds his phone up to the sky in the rain trying to get a signal. There is nothing. The whole city is clogging up the servers doing exactly the same thing, and yet the clock that appeared on the screen with the municipal alert keeps counting down.

6 minutes, 42 seconds.

One of the moms is out there too, phone in the air. Her name is Kalani. He looks at her expectantly. She shakes her head.

“At least you’re all together,” he says, more jealous than he has ever been.

“Ayla’s amazing. She’ll be fine, she won’t let anything happen to your kids.” Her words are toothless, but in this moment they are all he has.

“Who are you trying to reach?” he asks.

“My dad — or my dad’s caregiver. He hasn’t been particularly mobile for a while.”

He nods and thinks of his own parents aging safely in Michigan. Kalani hits her phone against her thigh and looks at it. Nothing.

“Dammit!” she tries again. Nothing. “How did this happen?” She means the dam break, the flooding, everything.

He shakes his head. “Just two wet years.” It’s true. Last year there had been 19 atmospheric rivers between January and March, and the whole state celebrated when the drought was declared over. When it happened again, there was nowhere for the water to go.

He looks back at his phone — 4 minutes. Then the sound begins.

At first, he can hardly make it out through the rain, a low rumble that seems to come from everywhere. He and Kalani look to the hill at the east edge of the neighborhood. They know this is where the water will come from. They see nothing.

“Can they swim?” He asks, indicating her kids.

“They’re Hawaiian, of course they can swim,” she says. He nods. Can his kids swim? The oldest can, can’t he? The sound is steadily increasing, and something changes on the hill. Light crests over it, a little at first, then more and more like a second sunrise. The rumbling rises. This is it. The water is early.

Kalani runs back to her family, huddled on the bed. He stays on the balcony, and stares at the otherworldly light—could the flood be reflecting it?—he needs to stop it. He needs to will the water to wait. Ayla will need the next 3 minutes. He grips the railing. He is soaking wet.

“Stop!” he screams as though the flood can hear him. “Stop!”

It doesn’t. Angry water crashes over the hill, then buries it — a wall of brown and white carrying cars and sheds — pieces of a city that is quickly ceasing to exist.

“No!” he screams. But he can’t hear himself over the roar. He looks back into the bedroom. The family already knows. The kids are holding onto their mothers and the women are holding each other.

He looks back out and the first few houses in the subdivision have been reduced to their roofs. The water is ping-ponging through the neighborhood, downing lampposts and trees and smashing front porches into walls. It’s almost at his door.

“Hold on!” he yells back into the house. Then he hears the flood blow out his downstairs windows. The balcony shakes. He runs into the bedroom and holds onto a wall. He can feel the water tearing his house apart through the floor. A lamp crashes to the ground next to the big bed. A bookshelf drops its contents and falls over. He sees that nothing has fallen on the family, but Kalani is staring at him. They lock eyes. Her nose is in her child’s hair, her arm is around her wife, but her eyes are fixed on him.

They stare at each other for what feels like hours. They are thinking the same thing — as long as they can hold each other’s gaze, the house will stand, the sickening bumps coming through the floor will not hit a load-bearing beam. As long as they keep staring, they will live.

Slowly, the crash of water softens below them. The bumps stop coming through the floor, and at last, all that is left is the sound of rain on the roof. Only then do the kids begin to cry.



“Just shut up and take the canoe,” Kalani says. They are in what’s left of her garage.

It took the two of them about a half hour to wade through his house and across the street. His ground floor was unrecognizable. The couch had been ripped in half, and framed photos, kitchen utensils, and other bits of his and Ayla’s life bobbed around them like dead bodies.

The water was up to their waists as he and Kalani crossed the street. It looked placid on top but they could feel it had a current and they took slow, measured steps toward the gaping mouth of her garage. The door had blown off but the Hawaiian outrigger canoe was still hung up on the ceiling.

Now, he stands under it, staring at the carvings in the wood: a bird with a long beak, a man with arms outstretched, and waves — waves everywhere.

“It’s a family heirloom,” he says. “It’s a piece of history.”

“It’s a boat,” she says, “and it works.” She is loosening the ropes to lower the canoe down. “Help me out.”

He undoes the knots with her and soon the canoe splashes down into the water. It looks like it can hold four, maybe five people — his family. Another carved wooden float connects to the main canoe with long poles so it won't tip easily and there is a rope and six oars inside.

Kalani stares him down. "This is a loan. I expect you to bring this back to me in one piece with your people inside."

"I will," he says, forcing himself to believe it.

They both get in the canoe and Kalani shows him how to paddle — long strokes, one side and then the other. He drops her off at his house and doesn't leave until she waves to him from the upstairs with her wife and kids.

Then he is paddling through Sacramento, picturing his children, picturing Ayla, and letting the thought of them blot out any comprehension of what he is seeing around him: people holding each other on roofs — no one attempts to flag him down — an old man's body face down in the water, his city transfigured. All he can do is row and look for street signs which, when unbent, are miraculously the same.

Then he is at the daycare building and it's locked. The water is halfway up the door. He bangs on it from the canoe, yelling his children's names.

"Conrad! Alice!" He hears nothing on the other side and imagines them floating face down like the old man. He's about to tear the door off its hinges when he sees the writing on it.

*Evacuated to North Capitol steps, it says in black marker.*

The journey from S Street to M Street is the difference between a city and a rapid. The Sacramento River has overflowed its levees and it is spewing water in all directions. He has to paddle as hard as he can to go a few meters.

An ambulance goes by on a freeway overpass. He hears howling. He looks around and sees a pack of dogs on top of a truck. Their dog walker is holding their leashes and they're howling at the ambulance like it's the moon. He catches the dog walker's eye — a girl in her 20s with a gap in her teeth, and just for a second, the two of them smile at each other.

"I can come back for you once I get my kids," he yells to her.

She shakes her head. "I won't leave them." She means the dogs. There are too many to fit in the canoe. She salutes him.

The Tower Bridge road is completely under water when he turns onto the Capitol Mall. The water is moving fast and he rows with a strength he didn't know he had.

He sights the capitol. The steps are filled with people. Children are chasing each other and splashing water but he doesn't recognize them. He paddles as fast as he can. He hits the steps and he's about to jump out of the boat when a guy yells, "Tie it off!" He throws him the rope.

Then he is roving the steps, yelling "Conrad! Alice!" He inspects each child, but they continue to be little strangers.

"Rob!" He hears his name. He turns around but the crowd is dense. "Rob!" A brown woman in scrubs cuts through. She has never looked more beautiful. He runs to her and takes her in his arms, buries his face in her hair. Then he feels small arms grab his legs. They are together — the four of them — and they are alive.



"If we make it through this, we're moving to Vorden and taking over Dad's orchard," Ayla says. They're rowing together with the kids between them.

"Almonds are illegal," he says.

"Ours are grandfathered in. Historical Registry." She winks at him.

"What do a doctor and an engineer know about farming?"

"We'll figure it out."

"A fish!" Conrad yells and wakes Alice who had been asleep in Ayla's lap. They all look into the water. He's right, there are fish swimming around them. They're the size of his hand and they have silvery spots.

"Good eye," he says, and kisses his son's head. "Are they salmon?" he asks Ayla.

"Hell if I know."

"They are!" Conrad says. "And they're babies."

"Where did you learn that?" Ayla asks.

"In school. The baby salmon live in the river, but only if the river is healthy. They're a good sign."

"No more salmon," Alice says, and goes back to sleep.

They are not rowing home. They are rowing back to the hospital. Every doctor, including Ayla, has been called in. She directs them to the loading dock at the back of the building, which is miraculously dry.

"When will you be home?" he asks.

"They can't keep me longer than two days," she says. Then she hugs and kisses Alice and then Conrad. The kids protest but they've been trained in these partings. Then she kisses him goodbye, and her smell envelops him.

"I love you," she says, and climbs out of the boat.

This is the last time he will see her. In a few hours, half of the hospital will collapse on top of 800 people, and one of them will be Ayla.

For the rest of his life, good days and bad days will be determined by one of two thoughts: a bad day — *I should have forced her back into that canoe*; and a good day — *at least I got to say goodbye*.



Vorden, California 2090

He woke with the sun, which was out. The rain had stopped and when he put his old feet on the floor, it was dry.

His head throbbed. He went into the kitchen and saw the empty whisky bottle on the table and remembered why. His screen told him his kids were worried about him, and he sent back a comm saying he'd made it. Then he steeled himself and went to the window.



The orchard was a lake. The trees rose out of it like beams under a pier, their white flowers diminished by the rain, but still there.

He found his waders in the closet and went out onto the porch. The house was an island above 3 feet of water. He went down the porch steps one at a time, thinking there would be a current, but the water was calm and still and when he sloshed onto the ground the water level was just below his belly button.

He walked to the closest almond tree, silhouetted against the sky, running his hands along the surface of the water. It was cold and crisp, and the thought that was always near found him again. *Ayla would have loved this.*

He put his hands on the tree's trunk, fingers gliding into the ridges of its bark, and looked up into the canopy. It was a little cloud. Then something splashed him — a fish. He looked down. There were young salmon swimming all around him, and he watched white almond flowers float down and land on them as they swam between the trees.

-----

**Zoe Young** (she/her) is based in San Francisco, where she serves as head of creative content for The Nature Conservancy in California and teaches playwriting and screenwriting at Berkeley City College. You can read more of her fiction in McSweeney's Quarterly Concern and Identity Theory Magazine. She is currently at work on a novel. Find her at [ZoeYoungHere.com](http://ZoeYoungHere.com).

**Mikyung Lee** (she/her) is an illustrator and animator in Seoul, South Korea. Her poetic and emotional visual essays focus on the relationships between people and objects, situations, and space.

**Imagine 2200** is Grist's climate fiction short story contest, celebrating stories that offer vivid, hope-filled, diverse visions of climate progress. Read all the 2024 winning stories at [grist.org/imagine](http://grist.org/imagine).