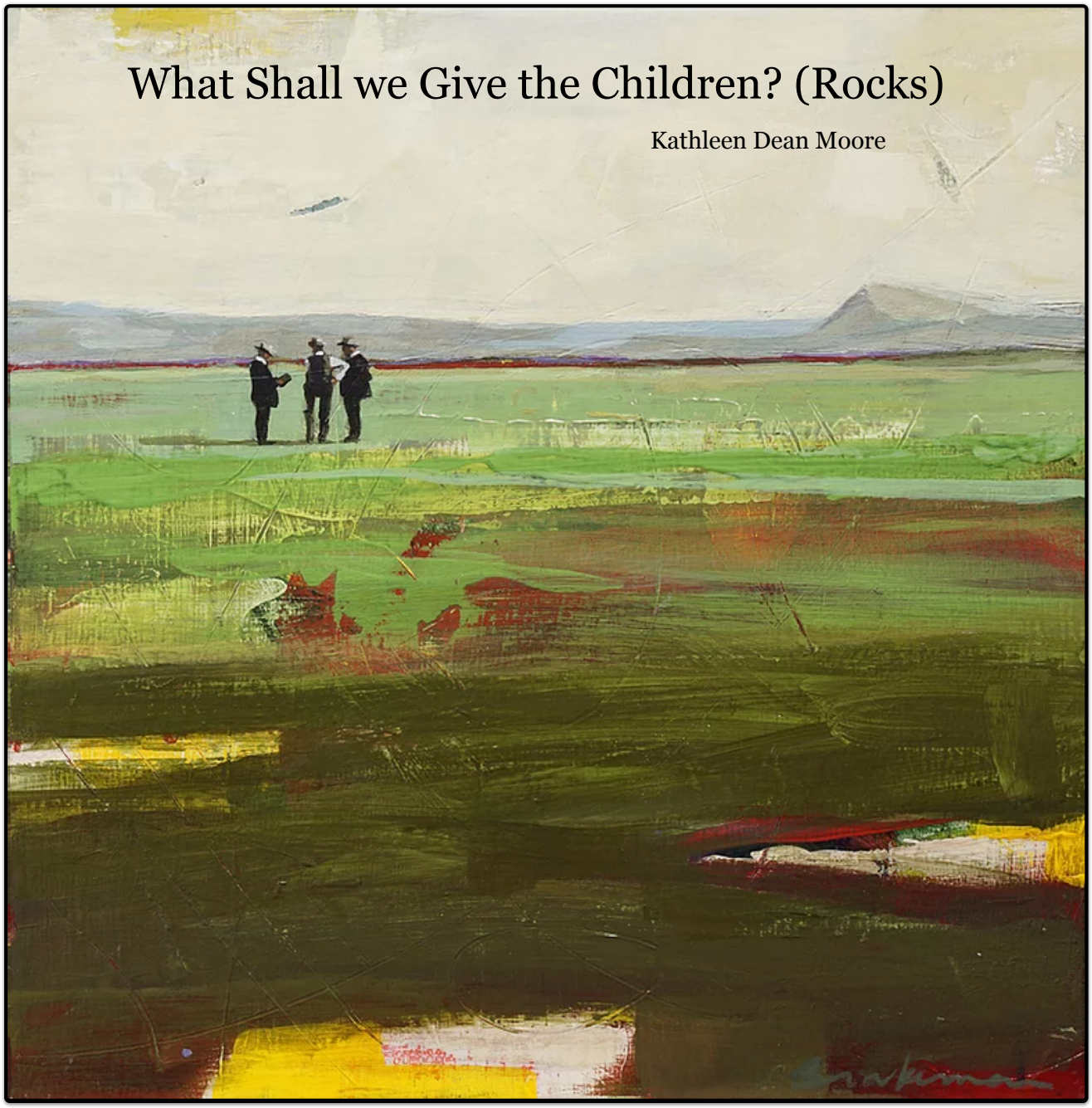

Amy Brakeman Livezey
From Here On, 12" x 12"
mixed media on panel

What Shall we Give the Children? (Rocks)

I first awoke to the southwest in the Mojave Desert. The coo of a dove I didn't know opened my eyes to a dawn such as I had never seen: behind a black mass of mountains, orange flames licked across a pool of purple light. Our son was

sitting straight up in his sleeping bag, his small back silhouetted against the flares. That day he would find the track of a snake incised like a river course across the trail and discover a chuckwalla so tightly wedged in a crack that he couldn't have pulled it out unless he'd deflated it with a pin, and he would pronounce this day the happiest day of his life. The sun charged up over hills and hit us full in the face, scattering the smell of creosote and all the sounds of the desert morning — cactus wrens clattering, quails moaning, the click and thud of people emerging from travel trailers with coffee in their hands.

We hiked that day up a sand stream between walls streaked with desert varnish. Rounding a boulder, our daughter stumbled on a lizard that stood its ground, doing pushups. Each pump of its little muscles flashed aquamarine armpits. Beetles staggered over sand pocked with rabbit tracks. I don't know how far we walked. It seemed like miles. But when night fell, as hot and black as asphalt dumped from a truck, we were back in camp, frying onions. The smell of onions and creosote bushes, the clink of dishes in the campsite next door, a scuffle in a packrat nest, the coolness of night breeze on sunburned skin: what I wouldn't give to be there today.

Our daughter and son are grown now, with children of their own. They live in damp places where ocean winds trip on the mountains and spill storms, which is why trees grow tall enough to poke the clouds and sword-ferns grow high enough to engulf even the elk. The children play inside, out of the rain, overturning buckets of Legos on the living room rug. What shall we give the grandchildren this year, my husband and I ask each other. What do they really need, deep down, really?

Let's give them rocks again this year, he says, and grins. Let's take them to public lands in the southwest and let them find mounded rocks where they can drape themselves in the sun with their tongues hanging out, tempting the vultures. Let's give them fissured rocks, so they can climb the cracks until they get stuck and call their brother for help. Let's give them sun, hot in their hair, smelling of salt and sage. Let's give them something that will make them whole and happy, exposed and embraced. Yes, and then I have to stop to think: exactly what is it about rocky desert canyons that we want to give them, what is it exactly, this gift of eternal worth, this frankincense? I thought long and hard — it's complicated, so much more than lizards, although lizards are wonderful — and then, as philosophers will do, I made a sort of list.

Let's give the children the flow of time. Here in bedded canyons, a person comes face-to-face with the deep history of the planet and the continuity of unfolding life. There is comfort in this, a bodily awareness of the immortality of substance and the constancy of change, the link to past and future, the assurance that we all came from the Earth and, when the time comes, we will be folded back into its arms.

Let's give them immensity. In a landscape of this expanse and grandeur — millions of acres of rock slabs, canyons, mesquite thickets, mesas, and rivers — our children will come into intimate contact with a reality far greater than themselves. The desert landscapes are graced by beauty they did not create, carved to depths they can scarcely fathom, and shaped by forces they cannot control. A landscape of this size invites humility and awe.

Let's give the children wonderment, radical amazement at the mysteries of the desert on this majestic scale and in this microscopic exactitude, the expanse of the stars, the polliwogs in plunge pools. In a secular world, stripped of all but material meaning, weary with worry, this encounter with the marvelous will be a blessing of great value.

Let us give the children tranquility. From perches on rock ledges, they will hear a wren's song tumble down the canyon wall. But the canyon hushes all the voices of the mundane, mechanical world. In the winds, the coyote-willows sing of the peace of a place that is protected from plunder. Here, in the soaring architecture of draped stone and silence, our children will enter into a place of gratitude and praise.

Let us give the children a landscape that will not be despoiled, an expanse of land that will never be defiled, bulldozed or burned, never taken as spoils in a war against the world or sold off in a giant going-out-of-business sale. Here, our children can follow paths worn by the footfalls of people who have walked the dusty cliffs for millennia and have chosen not to destroy them. The landscape will be proof of the possibility of human restraint. The astonishing integrity of the land will lift their spirits and flood them with relief — a joy beyond thought, a direct awareness of worth, unmediated gladness.

Good, my husband said, let's give them that. We'll pack salami and pears and hike up the canyon for a picnic under the juniper where we found that rattlesnake once. We'll take off our boots and put our steamy feet in that creek, the one with the overhanging cliff that hides ferns, of all things in the desert. We'll watch for ravens and pretend to see a distant condor, but what condor does somersaults in the sky? Yes, I say, and we will vow, really, we will hold hands and promise, that we will ferociously defend the great and worthy expanse of land from whatever wants to wreck it, whatever pumpjacks or stamp trucks, pickups or dozers and draglines. We will defend it, for the children.

Kathleen Dean Moore, Ph.D., is a philosopher and climate activist, the author or co-editor of more than a dozen books. Kathleen's first essay collections — *Riverwalking, Holdfast, Pine Island Paradox,* and *Wild*

Comfort — celebrated wet, wild places. But global warming and ecosystem collapse have deeply unsettled her, and she has turned her writing to a defense of the reeling world, first in *Moral Ground,* then in *Great Tide Rising*. Her newest book is a novel about a transformative act of resistance to the plunder of an Alaskan cove — *Piano Tide*, winner of the Willa Cather Award for Contemporary Fiction. With her husband, Moore lives in Corvallis, Oregon and in a small cabin where two creeks and a bear trail meet a tidal cove in southeast Alaska.

www.riverwalking.com; www.musicandclimateaction.com.