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Forests of Rain

by Olivia Sprinkel

They were late.

This year. Last year. Probably next year. And the year after. And into a future where the expectations of humans have been adjusted and they are no longer late, but this is now accepted as the new normal in many tropical parts of the world.

The rains.

Being late suggests that the rains have been held up somewhere. That the rain clouds are waiting at a station, waiting for the sky line to be cleared so they can continue on their way, and unloading their precious cargo where it is needed.

If only it was so simple. If only we could reach up into the heavens, and repair those tracks and signals, and order would be restored.

Trains are a human systems metaphor. The metaphor which scientists use to describe the water system in the sky is rivers. These sky rivers are drying up as trees are being cut down.

I remember in school in biology class drawing the water cycle. Carefully colouring in the trees with their brown trunks and heads of green, the blue arrows travelling up from the soil, through the trunks and leaves, continuing up into the sky. Writing in neatly the word 'transpiration'. Drawing the clouds, heavy with rain, and the puffs of wind to move the clouds along. Finally adding in the blue streaks of rain falling onto the land and trees below.

The Amazon makes half its own rainfall from evaporation and transpiration from plants. If deforestation continues, the water cycle will be broken and the Amazon rainforest could become a savannah.

This scenario is hard to imagine as I sit in a canoe, travelling up the Aguarico river in the Ecuadorian Amazon, drenched to the skin through my waterproof jacket and trousers and rubber boots, the rain relentless as it pours from the sky these last few hours. But that's the problem. It's hard for us to imagine the consequences beyond our immediate experiences.