

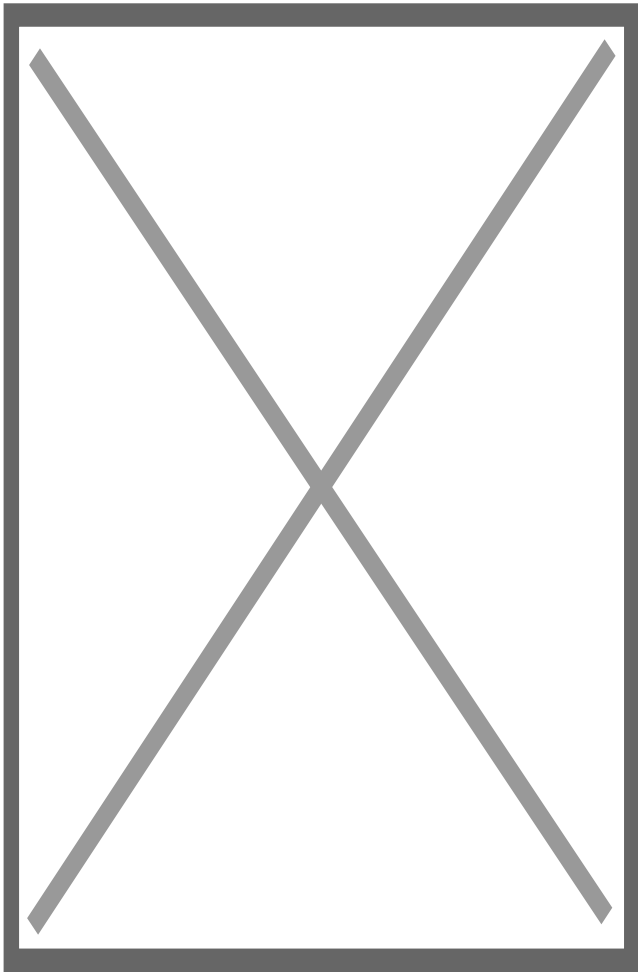
A memoir that cannot find the words

Journalist Lauren Markham finds herself searching for language adequate for grief on a planetary scale.

by [Baird Linke](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue

Published on September 1, 2026

In Review



Immemorial

By Lauren Markham

Transit

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Lauren Markham has made a life with words. Her journalistic career centers on human migration and climate change, hard-to-describe crises that move slowly to the collective and very fast to the individual. She has won

awards for her ability to capture these stories in language. In *Immemorial*, however, she is at a loss for words.

Markham's new book is a sharply focused memoir of the struggle to communicate the individual cost of civilizational problems, particularly climate change. It chronicles a writer's search for a word to capture the feeling of wanting individually to memorialize the world we are losing while also knowing that we are not collectively doing what is in our power to save it.

Markham's skill as a writer highlights the inarticulability of her subject. She displays prodigious curiosity as she stitches together inspirations ranging from the neologism-coining Bureau of Linguistical Reality, Vietnam Veterans Memorial designer Maya Lin, Slovenian artists reclaiming a WWII-era prison, and her own pregnancy in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Preachers who have spent Saturday nights staring at the ceiling and worrying that they cannot properly articulate ideas as huge as sin or justice or grace will feel a kindred spirit with Markham. There is a double measure of angst for a professional wordsmith at the limits of articulation. Markham at times sounds like Isaiah, seeking live coal to purify her lips so she can say something useful, even if only living on in the remnant.

Though *Immemorial* is not a religious book, its first chapter draws implicit parallels to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of cheap grace. Markham describes the temporary relief of admitting complicity in climate change while staring down at Greenlandic ice sheets from the window seat of a carbon-spewing transatlantic flight. The moral insufficiency of mere acknowledgment is at the core of repentance of all kinds. Markham's search for a word—a memorial from our generations—to describe the knowledge, the responsibility, and the powerlessness of normal people to fight climate change cuts to the heart of ethics and morality. Grace in the time of climate change, particularly for the church in industrialized North America and Western Europe, must be costly if we are to participate in God's incarnational love for the world.

Immemorial is a work of love for Markham's daughter and the world which she will inherit as much as it is a memorial for the world she will not know. The book is like a sign act from the prophets—a cry to contemporaries to create a different future and evidence to future generations that their ancestors tried. The challenge posed to readers is the same as to those who encounter the memorial plaque for the melted Icelandic glacier Okjökull, whose story Markham tells: "This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it."

This review was produced in partnership with the Narrative Project.