



"ASH FLOWERS," ANSELM KIEFER

EPILOGUE

I AM NOT A PROPHET OF DOOM, nor a fatalistic voice of apocalypse. Like Stephen Jay Gould, I am a little depressed: “But the species that are dominant before a mass extinction, effectively, are almost never the dominant ones afterward. And so that’s extremely sobering. If you’re grumpy at humanity, then you can think, well, somebody else is going to get a chance. I’m fairly hopeful that life goes on, and when life goes on, it does really interesting and creative stuff. So that’s good. But as a human, I care about us, so that’s depressing.”

I’m daunted by the scale of the shit we’re in and skeptical of much of the optimism I hear about getting out of it. Our notions of “world” have operationally failed. We might as well face it. When a future has failed us, we imagine a new one. A future we will send our children into, beyond politics, diplomacy, war and our bad decisions. It’s an inquiry into alternative plausibilities of what might be.

But I do have some faith. Once life got started on Earth it handled a lot, with or without us. I think of the Atacama Desert, Earth’s oldest desert. Chilean poet Raúl Zurita called it “a cross extended over Chile.” Life on the terrestrial parts of the planet follows a gradient: less dense as heat rises and water becomes scarce. The 40,000 square miles of the Atacama is hot and exceptionally dry. In some places it is so devoid of life that the microbe-per-inch count is similar to hospital surgical suites. Yet there are remnants of the cyanobacteria that exhaled Earth’s first oxygen, which led to us.

*More and more I have come to admire resilience.
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,
mitochondria, figs — all this resinous, unretractable earth.
— Jane Hirshfield, “Optimism”*