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HENRY'S PROMISE

Modernity promised us the world.

You can see from pole to pole and across oceans and continents and you can watch it turn and there's no strings holding it up, and it's moving in a blackness that is almost beyond conception.

— Eugene Cernan, Apollo 17 astronaut seeing Earth from space

YOU PROBABLY KNOW SOMEONE like my friend, Henry. He is old enough to be from a time when fathers named sons Henry, and he has arrived at his final views on most matters. With the Age of the Human on the block for investigation in a world gone wrong, Henry doesn't accept the narrative of a global warming certain to run away uncontrollably and drag us behind it toward even greater catastrophes. Oh, it has warmed up alright, he concedes, and we might not have seen the crisis coming as clearly as we should have, but he has no patience for those he calls "the catastrophists." We can still wake up, take hold of the reins and pull back hard. "We know more about the problems now, we know what to do. We are, I promise you, not doomed," Henry tells me.

Henry doesn't care for the archaic stories from times when the natural and supernatural were on better speaking terms, or when origin stories explained how the world came to be, which was often through some dramatic action sequence (not be confused, of course, with a Big Bang followed by a cosmic inflation faster than the speed of light for three minutes). What might have traveled through root systems of trees and mycelial webs before rising from the soil to inhabit us as well does not interest him. These things will not guide us when natural scientists are the only authoritative guides for the unprecedented scale and pace of global change.

“My father was an engineer,” says Henry, who is not an engineer but reads a lot, “so I learned early on to look at the infrastructure of things, and for how to solve the problems. Engineers solve problems.” In Henry’s case, there seems to be a tireless romance of science and technology that hovers between the Machine Age promise of beautiful technologies and the Computer Age promise of limitless information and modeling of any problem.

This is how he places himself between past and future, with everything prior to our modern trajectory of progress across stage of our own construction as a lesser *before*. He sees a sturdy and resilient modern world, and he has confidence in our capacity to shape the future for the better. “We can have a good Anthropocene,” Henry promises.

HENRY COMES TO THE CAFÉ where I go most mornings. He regards it as a conversational opportunity to neatly cleave the world into halves, one is exceptionally good and the other exceptionally bad. There are the believers in science and the deniers (“the flat-earthers,” he likes to call them), the people who vote against their best interests (almost exclusively Republicans) and those who know better, and those ready to celebrate a modern world always getting better (“we’ve improved more lives than ever before,” he insists) and those who cling to narratives of humans as co-creators of our own existential doom. The unspecified “we” who improve the world will provide more food-producing power with high-tech agriculture, potential carbon-capture technologies, “next-generation solar” and so on as reported in the daily narrative of the crisis. For Henry, technology is a nexus for cleaving the cultural world into “old” and “new.” When it comes to the material world, which is largely available for our use, efficiencies of globalized resource sharing can offer new ways to de-couple economic growth from the ecological degradation it is accused of.

Henry has scripts for all of this, which means I am likely to be drawn into a familiar conversation, as if he doesn’t remember that we’ve already had the conversation. It’s a little like going to one of those old movies when the audience can say the next line out loud from their theater seats.

Since we no longer talk about the weather in the old ways, with climate change being the grand narrative of the Anthropocene, any mention of an unprecedented flood in the Midwest or a super cyclone barreling into southeast Asia is Henry's chance to condemn "science deniers" and "climate deniers," along with anyone else who "won't listen to the science." He rolls his disapproval into figurative spitballs and throws them. His fondness for *schandenfreude* condemns them to terrible fates, like sinking cities. Miami seems to be a favorite city to sink.

"Henry," I might say, "who cares about Miami. It is already happening in the Bengal Delta. A single cyclone forced 250,000 people, all of them terribly poor, to leave their communities. They can't go back. Saltwater has crept over a million acres of agriculture land. Partial inundation of a single island of the delta will displace a half a million more people, who also won't go back. Do the numbers of victims and their options after a disaster matter?"

Henry will remind me that enlightened humans must acknowledge their role and resolve to make the best of what has been wrought. "Things are not static. I promise you, we can fix this" he'll declare, determined to not succumb to what he calls "defeatism." He will remind me of ecological resiliency and our adaptive capacity, and our many means of engineering solutions. There will be citations about carbon sinks and captures, cheaper electric cars and, if all else fails, solar radiation management via atmospheric aerosols.

"Henry," I might say, "for centuries Western engineers have deployed ideals of nature as a justification for conquest and dispossession. Claims of superior scientific knowledge dismissed local knowledge and experience. It reordered hydrology and floodplains, and constructed new enclosures of landscape and called it efficient agriculture. Engineers are implicated in catastrophes that have already taken place. Their technologies are tragic mounuments to a failed time. Do you seriously think they will preside over remedies?"

I say things like this in a hope that Henry will recognize the wobbly knees of his triumphal narrative of human capacity. As much as he likes to believe it is grounded in the Enlightenment, when Science and Reason began to see the *more*

than meets the eye, it is just as arguably the power and affluence conferred by Eurocentric industrial civilization. Its roots are the traditions of empire Ghandi tried to persuade postcolonial India to reject. He ultimately failed. It's rooted in the civilization U Thant, the Burmese secretary-general of the United Nations during the 1960s, warned all of us about: "As we watch the sun go down, evening after evening, through the smog across the poisoned waters of our native earth, we must ask ourselves seriously whether we really wish some future universal historian on another planet to say about us: 'With all their genius and with all their skill, they ran out of foresight and air and food and water and ideas,' or 'They went on playing politics until their world collapsed around them.'"

All the while, Asia slowly gave up resisting and succumbed to a capitalist modernity. Then, according the Western narrative, they broke a postcolonial agreement we thought we had: they wouldn't desire all of what we have. Now we blame them for not obeying the natural limits of capitalism, for not sacrificing more of their desires, and so precipitating a climate crisis. Yet there will likely be 75 million climate refugees in Bangladesh, tens of millions more in India, and maybe a tenth of Vietnam's population. China feeds 20 percent of the world with 7 percent of its arable land, and they're running out of water.

On other occasions at the café, following a different script, Henry rolls a spitball and hurls it against "Trump and the Republican toadies" who withdrew the US from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Henry imagines a world where a body politic will order public affairs. The order should be based on the fundamentals of modernity, at least as it's conceived of in the West, and the never-ending capacity of humans to shape their future. This is the way the "we" resolved to do better can transform a global crisis into the political solutions.

"Henry," I might say to him, "Paris wasn't much of an agreement. It turned out to be thousands of words separated with colons, semicolons and commas that never once admits anything is seriously wrong with a paradigm of endless growth, never once blames anyone for an ecological catastrophe. It hopes we will support unnamed champions of the climate. Presumably they are the champions of

governmentality, bureaucrats mostly, happy to have signed a document affirming their faith in human sovereignty over Earth's future.”

Indonesia, for example, is one of the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitters and a signatory to the Paris Agreement. It won't agree to even deeper emissions cuts because it also wants to pursue economic growth. The minister for environment insists the onus should be on developed countries to commit to more ambitious climate targets. If those countries are failing to meet their targets why expect poor countries to make useless sacrifices?

The politics of nature are not neutral. Like all politics, it's ultimately about who is entitled to what, who owes what to whom, how such rights and entitlements are to be enforced, and who gets to decide. Whether the decisions are made through carelessness or through competition for economic advantages already beyond most of the world's population is irrelevant to the outcomes. Yes, millions of people derive material comforts and conveniences from carbon-intensive capitalism, and many more desire the same having no other model. But our notion of scarcity and the limits of tolerable consumption is a political concoction that masks obscene concentrations of wealth, and the first come, best served pursuit of endless growth.

SO WHO IS TO BLAME for the catastrophes of the Anthropocene? When the predictions of climate scientists are ringing like prophecies, we want to know under what circumstances, and at whose hands, humans acquired the epoch-creating power to change the climate and the seas. Was it my friend, Henry, a champion of engineering and a human trajectory of success, who repeats himself in conversation, and who simply acted as one of the collective lot of us? Is human action even possible at a species level, or is it inevitably a social and political process where agency is wielded through actions by particular groups of people rather than our species acting as a geological force?

What if I argued that it was capitalists in a small corner of the Western world, or a clique of white British men who felt empowered by their position in a particular social order, who laid the foundation stones for the modern carbon economy while no one listened to the archaic rumblings of earth and atmosphere? So why blame

swidden cultivation, fuelwood collection, and subsistence hunting as much as copper mines and palm oil plantations? To the extent that powerful corner persists as if capitalist modernity were not an illusion the gulf will widen between it and a far greater number of people living already precarious lives threatened by the consequences. In a deranged climate the rich may face the same storms, but they have lifeboats.

And yet, the fundamental blame may be best laid on the lynchpin of all privilege — our ontological privilege as the human species among all species. Didn't that set the modern terms for distinguishing classes of people, for colonialism and for cleaving the world into "new" and "old" according to vast gaps in technologies? How the natural world and human role in it are conceptualized also determines the menu of mitigations for catastrophe deemed to be possible.

Perhaps I should leave it there because, even worse, it could turn out that Kurt Vonnegut was right: "We're terrible animals. I think the Earth's immune system is trying to get rid of us, as well it should."

ONE DAY, after we realized the COVID pandemic of 2020 wouldn't just go away if we stayed home and held our breath, Henry and I were back the cafe. There weren't as many tables in use as before but we had one, mindful of our time to keep it. I asked him, "Do you ever think about lions, tigers and bears?"

"We can leave more room for nature," Henry assured me. He imagines "new ecologic spaces" as part of what we must resolve to do. What, exactly, they look like, I'm not sure. He began a familiar tirade against Republican toadies and environmental deregulation (in a weird way it was comforting to hear it all again).

"No," I finally interrupted, "I mean stories we haven't been told since childhood, where characters and landscapes mattered equally, and children went into forests with almost no knowledge of how to proceed. They always come out because that is part of human existence and what we have to do to become aware."

I asked another question that wasn't really a question. "Isn't it a consequence of you and me being here at all, sitting in this café with our desires and cultural capital. We say 'well, I'm doing my part,' when we're still trying to understand what our part has been and what it will need to be now? Scale you and me up by the billions and that's a staggering number. That's the human scale in the Age of the Human. It tells us something about the scale of what has to be given up if we're sincere about taking an equal part in avoiding the catastrophe."

I doubt that Western modernity, insistent on its uniqueness, is up to the challenge of the scale of the catastrophe no longer at our doorstep — it's inside already. I doubt that Henry's world, a shimmering screen concealing implicit bargains and agreements to pursue economic growth without unpleasant sacrifices, and where science and justice are expected to intersect only now and again, is the world the astronaut saw moving in a blackness almost beyond conception.

But Henry does have a point about defeatism. There can be a smug leftist critique that hangs it all on capitalism, and then declares capitalism has won and the Earth is done. They fence themselves off inside intellectual *cordons sanitaires* and refer to their own scripts for neoliberalism and the asymmetric exchange of resources on which industrialization and the fossil fuel economy rests as a condition for its very existence.

It is possible Henry wants to love the world. If he were as plainly confident of his love as my friend, Carol, who also comes to café and is heartbroken because she loves the world, he might give up hurling spitballs. He might give up his faith in the sovereignty of humans. But like other loves it requires sacrifice and mourning.

*The Younger Brother is damaging the world. He is on the path to destruction.
He must understand and change his ways, or the world will die.*

— Luis Guillermo Izquierdo, Arhuaco mamó leader