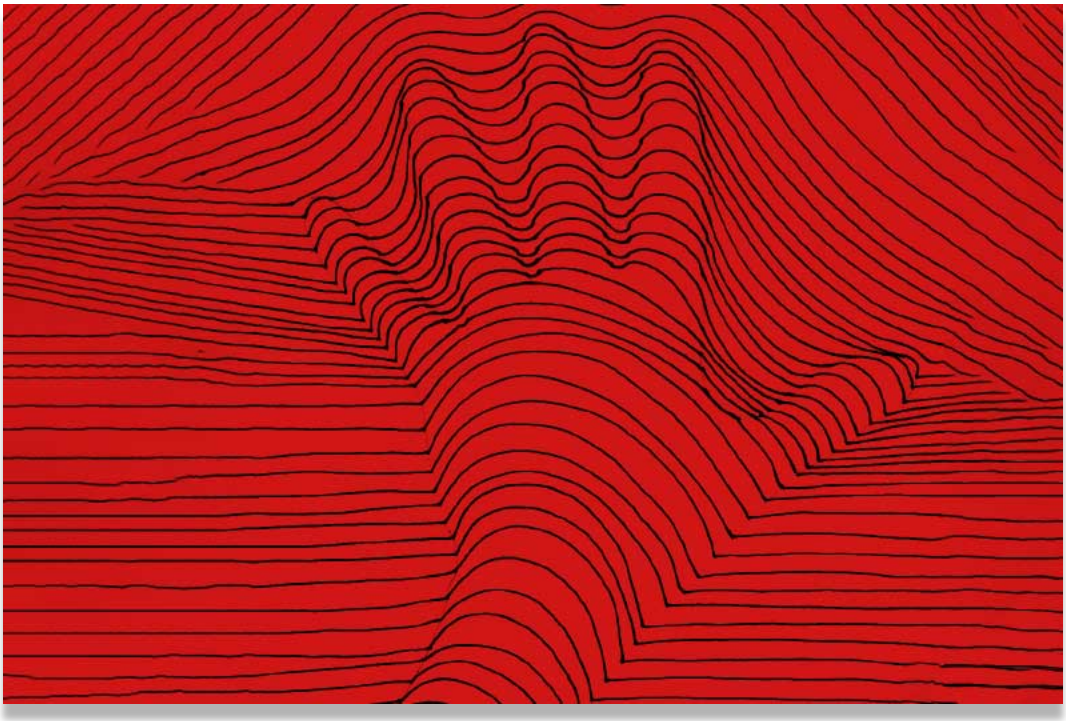

Five

Let's Have a Good Anthropocene

> *Most days we are bombarded with dystopian visions of future calamity through the media and general conversation … such visions run the real risk of becoming self-fulfilling.*
>
> — Seeds of Good Anthropocenes project

IT'S A DAILY RUN of man-bites-planet bad news. Yet there are those who see the Age of the Human as humanity's time to shine. We can reframe ourselves as something other than agents of planetary destruction. They admit the fault lies in us, not in the stars, but if our only views are negative, we will lead ourselves to a negative future.

They set out lofty goals of ecological "resiliency" and promote adaptive capacities. Aspirational voices call for "foodscaping," each yard planting a vegetable garden and fruit trees, neighbors sharing information about innovative ideas and transformational ways of living that will lead to a just and ecologically diverse world. The seeds of a good Anthropocene are planted from the bottom up. The biosphere might even be grateful.

Kindred spirits join them with a call for human labor working in the natural world as a valuable counterpoint. More than just thinking and talking about it, we need to stick our hands into the soil in the best traditions of gardeners and farmers. It can be a heroic narrative on par with Virgil's *Georgics*, a cycle of poems that frame Earth as the home of nature and human beings together. Instead of separating ourselves from what we've been looting, we should begin our toil wherever we have delivered body blows to the planet as we acquired prosperity.

"The Southern Piedmont in the United States serves an example of an area in which the Georgic narrative is not only a possibility, but a reality," says a professor at Nicholass School of the Environment, Duke University. He sees a successful human-natural creation producing ecological value in a place where cultivation of cotton led to serious land and human degradation. "The natural world is vulnerable to human action, but it's also a home entirely dependent for its survival on the quality of human beings and our willingness to relentlessly toil. The stories of these places reinforce the important, long and hard work that will be required to sustain our planet in the Anthropocene," he says.

You might start to feel bullish about the future after hearing these stories of new human seeds and the biosphere as a kind of mutual aid society.

They are stories of the West, where we still believe in our cultural uniqueness and ability to shape the world, and still praise the individual moral adventure. No matter how sincere the attempt to include the excluded communities and old beliefs about nature and planet, I'm not convinced we have slipped free of Eurocentrism. The politics of nature is still seen through a Western prism and a unique Western appreciation of nature. If it's climate change you are worried about, will the massive populations of Central and South Asia, once the lands and people for our empire building, buy into *our* beliefs about climate change, especially beliefs about how *they* should behave now in order to save the planet? That will be the test. So far, it seems to be failing.

It's a difficulty of scale. The little seeds we are asked to plant are seemingly simple. But you have to scale them up by billions. It seems we aren't terribly good at comprehending global scale. For example, those populations of Asia, whose are numbers are vast compared to any countries in the West, have greatly amplified global warming and climate change since they emerged from under the thumb of our empires and geopolitics to take up their own pursuit of capitalism. Without their buy-in to our calls for "global community" and "planetary boundaries" and a "safe operating space for humanity" the biosphere will not thank us after all.

And there is the doubly doubtful assumption that we can free ourselves from the "natural environment" as an ethically self-centered, homogenizing human species. We've had too much "conscious purpose" in our approach to nature, wrote

Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist, social scientist and cyberneticist. We have a lived a long time with a limited consciousness that answers only to questions of purpose. Purpose is the fundamental organization "I" and of science, medicine and technology. Purpose determines what we pay attention to. We end up with "a bag of tricks," says Bateson, rather than a wisdom rooted in "the knowledge of the larger interactive system."

Caroline Hickman of the *The Climate Psychology Alliance* is skeptical of heroes. "You have this difficult choice between anxiety and depression," she says, "and people are depressed by the feeling there is nothing they can do about it. The escape from this hopelessness is, 'Well, somebody will do something about it.' That's the fantasy of rescue. Now there is a dawning realization that rescue is not imminent, there's nothing on the horizon. We've got to do something ourselves."

Despite the professor's heroic Georgic narrative of the Piedmont Region, mountaintops in nearby Appalachia are still being amputated in the name of coal. Rather than tunneling, it is easier to just lop the top off.

There are also stories that bypass geology, climatology, biology and — more or less — the material world (and presumably anxiety and depression). They are stories of a kind of enlightenment implicit in the unfolding of the universe. We humans represent the universe becoming conscious of itself, which is how we will manage to strike a new balance for the planet and ourselves. Some are quasi-mythic narratives that blend human and cosmic history, science and religion into a big story in order to properly place humans in the cosmos. They often have immodest titles: *The Universe Story*, *The Great Story, The Epic of Evolution*, *Journey of the Universe*.

The Universe Story, for instance. Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and religion scholar admired by the professor from Duke, referred to himself as a "geologian." He predicted a future when the Earth will function so differently than it functioned in the past that the "entire complex of life systems of the planet will be influenced by the human in a comprehensive manner." This will bring a geological era of "mutually enhancing human-Earth relations" he optimistically christened the "Ecozoic." In other words, our species will step up to occupying the driver seat in

a good Anthropocene (a geological era that hadn't been proposed when Berry wrote his big story).

Other stories are simply a through line from the present to a more beautiful future when everything that seems extraordinary now no longer will. This future comes to us in hints and appearances, especially from our time among the non-human.

Quite hopeful, these stories. Rather than ruefully acknowledging that the fault lies not in the stars but in us, they seem to say we *are* the stars. But what if there has been a rupture in Earth history and our own ideas of an evolutionary advancement to a higher stage, and we ourselves are the disrupters? Rather than taking up a mantle of enlightenment, what if we realize we are like the detective in old film noir movie, who realizes he is implicated in the crime? Or we are like the hen in the bottle. It was placed inside as a chick and now it is too old and fat to get out. We throw up our hands and decide breaking the bottle is the only way out, which may terribly injure, even kill, the hen. Is that our reality now?

"IT'S A DIFFERENT WAY to connect people and nature," says my friend Ginny, an artist who works abstractly with paints and pencils and sumi-e ink, along with organic materials like teas, curry and coffee. She believes there is intelligence in form and gives her paintings titles like "The shape of real made visible." The geometry of circles often helps organize the canvas. Climate change, nature and meditation occupy her attention. I see her as a prophet of the Garden standing up against the prophets of doom.

Ginny has invited me away from my habitual café to a cat café to have tea. "It can be radically different from the world of today," she tells me, "There can be a fundamental changes in the human and environment relationship. We can change our values, social behavior, cultures, worldviews and all of that. It will be difficult. New ways always are. But things are happening at different scales."

Artists can invite us into an encounter and exchange with the world where we see it and ourselves differently. In this case the encounter is a matter of massive numbers, it seems to me. "Billions of people would have to commit to these changes," I say. "But even so, their hands aren't on the levers of power.

Governments would have to spend trillions in order to make any difference. I'm not seeing that."

"You need to have optimism," Ginny says. "I'm optimistic every time I plant my garden. At least I'm doing something, and others will to. The world can catch on. Anyway, my garden is good for the bees."

Ginny has a point. Simply going to the garden center and choosing which plants to bring home to your garden works at several scales — from bees, to worms, to respecting soil and hydrology, to changing ambient air temperatures, to turning our backs on petroleum-based fertilizers. We can hope this will be scaled up by billions of gardens and that it will make a difference. Maybe things happening on different scales at once is part of a new awareness. We get stuck thinking on the individual level because we are overwhelmed by massive things we can't even point to. It's a hopeless feeling, some call it climate grief.

Jonathan Franzen, an American novelist and essayist, is not optimistic. He wrote an essay "What If We Stopped Pretending?" The question isn't really a question. The way Franzen sees it "all-out war on climate change made sense only as long as it was winnable," and it's no longer winnable. "The goal has been clear for thirty years, and despite earnest efforts we've made essentially no progress toward reaching it." He has lost hope for human nature and countless calls for collective action to "roll up our sleeves and save the planet," and for meaningful political solutions from governments. Instead, he sees relentless demand for consumption and a Kafkaesque fiction of hope. "You can keep on hoping that catastrophe is preventable, and feel ever more frustrated or enraged by the world's inaction. Or you can accept that disaster is coming, and rethink what it means to have hope."

He argues that we should focus on helping the most vulnerable — human and non-human alike — to prepare for the worst that is certain to come. He would settle for a world where we stop killing birds by the millions year after year.

Franzen was rebuked by loud voices, like the Audubon Society, and quieter voices, like Kate Marvel, a climate scientist with NASA and Columbia University. Kate does not feel depressed or hopeless. She has no patience for those posing as prophets of doom. She believes that because we understand the driver of our

potential doom, it's a choice, not a foregone conclusion. But Earth won't break its own its own fever, that's up to us.

"I am a scientist," she wrote in direct response to Franzen, "which means I believe in miracles. I live on one. We are improbable life on a perfect planet. No other place in the Universe has nooks or perfect mountaintops or small and beautiful gardens. A flower in a garden is an exquisite thing, rooted in soil formed from old rocks broken by weather. It breathes in sunlight and carbon dioxide and conjures its food as if by magic. For the flower to exist, a confluence of extraordinary things must happen. It needs land and air and light and water, all in the right proportion, and all at the right time. Pick it, isolate it, and watch it wither. Flowers, like people, cannot grow alone."

But Kate does worry, "The thing about climate change that really scares me, more than going extinct, is how it's going change how we treat each other."

"WE'RE ALL CONNECTED," says Ginny. "That means if we hurt anything, we damage ourselves. But it also means we can stop hurting so many things and heal the whole of it. You know, whole earth and of all that. That's how it actually is."

I say to Ginny, "I get that there's a connection between me and my stomach bacteria, and all microbes. Maybe all of the animals. But the future feels like we're all trapped in the belly of the whale and it's getting hotter and hotter, and really rank and humid, and then rains and floods and so on. It turns out we created the whale. There's that connection too, us and the belly of the whale."

Ginny gives me a look you might give a young boy who is simply being a contrarian and laughs, "You do like to be a doubting Thomas, don't you?"

"Fair enough," I say. "Doubt is integral to my internal operating system. But how did we get so disconnected from the world that we allowed this to happen? Mesopotamian humans have been carving up the bisopshere for a long time."

She has an answer of sorts, "Regardless of the past, everything we do is not evil. The earth itself has revised our habits of thought with new ways to care for it. Some are small, and some big. We need to figure out the steps in between."

I admire Ginny for her patient confidence in the world as she sees it, and that it never strays into condescension toward anyone who sees a different world. But what if it doesn't turn out to be a good Anthropocene? How bad will it be? Maybe bad things trigger even more bad things until it's unimaginably bad. Should we urgently shut down pipelines and freeways as if there is no other choice? What if it's already too late, as Jonathan Franzen suggests, and we should plan for how to help the most vulnerable.

I think of the questions the philosopher Jeremy Bentham devised as an empathy test for us in our biosphere and all its co-inhabitants: "The question is not Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but Can they suffer?" I too wish for a world where we stop killing birds. But it seems hard to find limits for our hubris even if we say we are looking for them.

> *To see a World in a Grain of Sand, and a Heaven in a Wild Flower.*
> — William Blake