

THE STORY ISN'T OVER

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The poet Rainer Maria Rilke was in his late twenties when he moved to Paris. The rattling nineteenth-century city tormented his raw nerves as he struggled with the meaning of “some unspeakable confusion . . . called life” (qtd. in Banville 2013). As the story goes, the sculptor Auguste Rodin advised his young friend to visit the zoo, focus on one animal until he knew his every move and mood, and then write about it. Rilke chose a panther. Studying this animal oriented the poet in the world as “a real person among real things,” helping him reconcile with his change-making time and place (Banville 2013; Kentridge 2014). Rilke’s now well-known “The Panther at the Jardin des Plantes” helps readers feel a genuine experience shared across species. The poem’s three stanzas also are a helpful guide to contemplating what it means to live in a cage, which is critical when it comes to appreciating what may be both human and wild in our unfolding age.

Stanza I: Beyond us the world exists no more

Ceaselessly the bars and rails keep passing
 Til his gaze, from weariness, lets all things go, for
 it seems to him the world consists of bars and
 railings, and beyond them the world exists no more.

The *Anthropocene*—a name first suggested by scientists to signify a time of unknown length characterized by human domination of the world—is gaining wider currency. Living amid it, we may feel that, with the rest of life, our whole humanity has been imprisoned by members of our own species with no possibility of escape. Like the panther who loses the world by seeing only bars and railings, we may become weary of gazing at the bounds of Human Empire—a steeled system run on the principles of profit over generosity, efficiency over healthy beauty and emotion, and power over dignity. The unintended consequences of this system now enclose every being on Earth from land to sea and bedrock to atmosphere, though not yet to the stars (though we know the stars are in us). In such a state, what, if anything, could *wild* mean?

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In 1989, journalist Bill McKibben's best-selling book *The End of Nature* reported the increasingly perceptible transformation of the whole world by human beings. Of course, all living beings, just by breathing, alter things. But we humans now could see that we had *so* altered Earth, McKibben pressed, that we could bound its slowly spiraling time with a thin line marking where a "Before" ended and an "After" began. Indeed, crossing this threshold, the planet is now so different, he argued later, that it deserves a new name. He proposed *Eaarth* (2010).

To be clear, in suggesting a new name for our planet and in announcing the end of its nature, McKibben was declaring the cessation not of green mountains, meadow voles, wind, and rain but of *nature* as the *idea* of "a separate and wild province, the world apart from man to which he adapted, under whose rules he was born and died" (1989, 41). It was this *idea* of nature—as something wild out there beyond human reach and of which we were subjects—that had expired, he claimed.

As McKibben, in the 1980s, sat by an Adirondack Mountains waterfall, he knew that water, rock, and gravity were still water, rock, and gravity. But he also recognized that the reverberating consequences of Human Empire's activities now shaped the context of their presence. These activities included crossing seas to carry one land's fruits into another and severing them into "commodities" in exchange for a growing population of fewer wealthy and more desperate people; burning forests and bedrock-buried fossil hydrocarbons for expanding industry and speedy travel; plowing up long-coevolved intricacies of unique, diverse beings and upsetting their self-renewing relationships with soil; and replacing Earth's self-composting

gardens with genetically engineered monocultures of irrigation-requiring, chemically amended crop regimes. And now McKibben could feel the consequences as pattering raindrops from a smoke-and-ashes-smoggy-greenhouse-gas-ridden sky onto craggy mountains and Earth-quaking plains, rippling into flowing currents downstream and outward to the shores of a future too distant to apprehend.

Dominating human activities now are reversing billions of years of net self-augmenting trends in an unfolding, global, life-unmaking event. Worldwide soil fertility is slipping away faster—much faster—than it is building up (Montgomery 2010), carrying toxins with it. The world-of-life is losing species faster—much faster—than new ones are evolving, heading into an unprecedentedly precipitous mass extinction event (Ceballos et al. 2015). Earth's atmosphere, in record time, has gathered such a thickening climate-warming blanket of greenhouse gases as to make it dramatically unlike any to which current life is adapted (Pachauri et al. 2014). The effects of climate warming are reinforcing the ecological destruction and energetic disordering that brought it about—effects that include high and low precipitation extremes; lashed-up wind gusts; melting ice and rising and souring seas; and erratically revolving seasons, desynchronizing serial dependencies, stressing uncertainty. A predictable pattern of two harvests a year in eastern Uganda has been undone, for instance (Okollet 2009). And now one year brings ruining floods swarming with malaria-bearing mosquitoes, while the next brings droughts with heat intense enough to wilt plantains, sweet potatoes, corn, and coffee, while drying up wells, livelihoods, and prospects for future generations.

Yes, the Adirondack waterfall is still a waterfall. As keen-witted humans connect the dots, however, we perceive that its rocks and water (if not unrelenting gravity)—like the bloodrooted soils of its banks eroding into the distant sea, which is inhaling fossil hydrocarbon fumes from air into its brew of melted ice, dissolving coral reefs, and teeming plastics—no longer exist independently of us.

As scientists continue deliberations over a precise geological marker for the start date of the Anthropocene (Lewis and Maslin 2015), we may, meanwhile, more generally acknowledge a time of profound changes on Earth with causes rooted in human culture, which itself shows signs of changing as a result. Understood as a cultural phenomenon, the Anthropocene begins roughly in the nineteenth century (Marsh 1869, 8) with a shift in shared ideas about human responsibility for global-scale influence. It is a shift that includes a complex, unwanted accumulation of consequences of human

activities springing from the reductionist values of human imperialism—consequences cascading into a future of unknown length in uncertain ways. People who have crossed this line of altered awareness may appreciate the beauty, if not the health, of a real waterfall, the sky and sea, and of all Earth. With a rising consciousness that the world no longer exists beyond the expanded confines of Human Empire's influence, however, we may no longer experience the world as "other" and, paradoxically, also not feel alone. That is, we may feel, as McKibben puts it, both "lonely" and—as unable to escape the dominating presence of our own kind—"crowded, without privacy" (1989, 76).

In Manhattan, as I walk through Central Park, I listen for white-throated sparrows to sing come fall, having arrived from where they bred in the high north (Warren 2013). Their bright notes please me through winters of slushy sidewalks and short, cloudy days. As it seems to Rilke's panther that the world "consists of bars and railings," similarly, however, I can no longer hear the birds' voices apart from imposing human factors to which I contribute. That is, I can no longer hear the songs apart from the loud drone of the jet planes I fly in, the hum of my oil-heated radiator switching on, the whistle of my gas stove boiling tea-kettle water, and the words I read in an Exxon Mobil report (2015)—it is "possible," it states, but "difficult to envision" that governments will choose the path to net-zero carbon that would strand the company's billions of dollars in assets—blended with the cracking trees in spinning gusts and the emergency sirens accompanying the full-moon sea-surge flooding of 2012's record-smashing Superstorm Sandy. Nor, however, can I separate all this from more than four-hundred-thousand people, including me, whom McKibben's activist work with 350.org helped self-organize, moving down Central Park West two years later, chanting: "I hear the voice of the people singing / Exxon your kingdom must come down."

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Humans are responsible for profound global changes. Irrepressibly intensifying winds and lashing rains, gravity slipping soil, heat wilting crops, opportunistic "pests," and tidal upwellings demonstrate, on the other hand, that though empire tried to control it, nature has not become well trained. The sparrows' singing and the marching people's refrain likewise indicate that being entrapped is not the same thing as being tamed. There are uprisings of the Anthropocene that indicate some emergent reordering force that is deep, encompassing, and wild.

Stanza II: Like a dance of strength around a centre

Supple, strong, elastic is his pacing
 And its circle much too narrow for a leap
 like a dance of strength around a centre
 where a mighty will was put to sleep.

The people vitally march and chant, but to bring down the stubborn kingdom fueled by oil and gas—while entangled with it—still strikes most as an overwhelmingly confusing task. An exercise of dreaming might help one better understand such transformational complexity: From a bird’s eye perspective, we watch our own wills—like the panther’s feeling no hope of escape—quench faith and desire, shut their eyes, and sleep. But with half-conscious power, relentless, our urging bodies—with restless strength, un-resting, if not leaping—not only march but rise up to dance around their centers.

Those dancing may feel, with each contracting muscle, the heaviness of multitudes of humans and other self-willed forms consumed by human power—those deemed of use, like dark-skinned Africans, wide-girthed hemlocks, energetic fossil algae and fecund prairie soil, oil-brim whales, tasty-fleshed auks, and many bison. As each muscle relaxes, we may feel the lightness of those of no foreseen service thrown out, disarrayed, crushed, and despised for being odd, too little or too much—like all sorts of mussels, darters, and tiny rockwrens, monarch butterflies, carbon dioxide, wolves and big cats, the Havasupai, and the girl working at the checkout—that is, we feel the lightness of unmatting.

As we flex, we feel something we may have forgotten but long have known within our flesh and bones: Though currently entangled with an imposing human system, each being’s intimate intermingling with others is far more deeply essential in the enduring world-of-life. As we consciously reflect on this—and on the moon, sun, and universe of stars—we see that the end of the idea of nature apart from humans is the end, too, of the idea of humans apart from nature. This awareness begets mourning over lost parts of Earth that we belong to. It also upsets the rational-imperialist worldview, troubling the meanings of what many of us once thought we knew.

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“From a global perspective,” writes American novelist Jonathan Franzen, “it can seem that the future holds not only my own death but a second, larger death of the familiar world” (2015)—a world that we humans signify with words. We English-speakers of the civilizing West once said *wild, bird,*

flower, soil, city, ocean, wilderness, and hope and thought we understood what we meant. As empire builders, we also said *farm* and *road* and *factory* not long before we said *atmosphere*. And then *dumpage* bought grounds for ruination while those privileged fought to stay that way even as they proclaimed slaves' *emancipation* (OED 2015). We apperceived each word according to our culture's defining blueprints as an indomitable body with roots or feathers, a place of universities and sewers, big lands of fishes and bears, fruiting trees and safety, a tract to cultivate, a traveling way between places, smokestacked buildings for making things, the air around the earth, a costly site for piling excrement and mine tailings mixed with plastic forks, and release from captivity. But in our Anthropocene transition, we can see lines fading and redrawn, raising many questions about weaves of interrelations.

We can see the whole Earth as viewed from space. The wakes of ships and contrails of jet planes arc back and forth from place to place, carrying raw materials and their products, packages of everything, moving around all kinds of people and other species—some intentionally, like Peruvian guano to Great Britain's soils and Indian minas to New Zealand; some by accident, like tiny ticks on minas and the hemlock woolly adelgid from Japan and garlic mustard from Europe delivered to the United States—rapidly jumbling all sorts of materials and beings. While unseen currents, in mere seconds, transmit matter-altering ideas between neighbors next door or across a hemisphere—like how to dress as fashion conscious, bake a chocolate cake, and drill or prevent drilling an oil well. Where is there not a traveling way? Are there boundaries between oceans? Can we divide flowers, birds, and soils?

As from a distance, we keep watch as Earth slowly turns from sun toward moon, growing dark. We see ground constellations of lights flick on. These tend to be brighter not only where human populations are most dense but also in places of greatest wealth (NASA 2000; Davies, Lluberas, and Shorrocks 2012). The United States—one of the world's most brightly lit, populous, and wealthiest nations—has dumped into the whole Earth's atmosphere more than a quarter of the anthropogenic carbon dioxide of the past two hundred fifty years (Hansen 2007, fig. 27). Within the past decade, China has overtaken all other countries in carbon emissions and, though agreeing to mitigate (The White House 2014), has an expanding energetically consumptive population. India and Africa—that is, Uganda plus all its other countries put together—have each contributed barely 3 percent of rising greenhouse gases, and human numbers on their continents are among those mounting fastest. Worldwide now there are more than seven billion

of our species and counting. We all must eat, drink, warm ourselves, wear and build things, and travel to survive. Many want more, to prosper, quickly spinning outward in rutting traces. Where does a factory end and atmosphere begin? Can we clearly mark out nations or cities, farms, and wilderness?

In response to human expansion, Earth whirls in now on everyone, heedless of responsibility, rights, contracts, maps, and fences. And, so, therefore, as aroused by privileged hands—unjustly—most harshly delivers alarming, undesired, rippling consequences to those living in the least well-lit places (Pope Francis 2015). Can we really set off dumpage from human beings? What might hope represent today in a world of diminishing safety and for future generations of all life?

It is July's early dawn in near-Arctic-interior Alaska. I am running through hills under pale-gray skies, half asleep. As I come down a bend, my view suddenly opens onto a vast boreal forest reaching the horizon. The low-hanging sun appears so brilliantly red that, without willing it, I utter a loud "Oh!" and stop dead in my tracks. I hear a chickadee sing just then. I breathe in. My lungs feel heavy with yesterday's Fairbanks *Daily News-Miner* headline: "Wildfire season of 2015 may soon be state's worst." It is the not-too-distant veil of smoke rising from millions of acres of heat-stressed, lightning-struck trees that is coloring the solar rays. I breathe out. I feel the lightness of the wildfire carbon invisibly blanketing the sky and of the dark ashes that will fall back to Earth and renew the thin soil. On the warming planet, authentic hope—defined as this place—is likely to change, almost before our eyes, into bluebunch wheatgrass, sage brush, and buffalo berries or aspens rather than mossy white spruce and those that go with it.

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As we lose the familiar world, in bodies and words, there is much to lament. As we begin reapperceiving events in relation to the obdurate-entwinement of humans and the rest of nature, genuine tales of weary confinement unfold. But we may also sing, if not of escape, of mutual emancipation by something sailing through the openings between rails of a broken system—something that is still recognizable, strong and supple—a recomposing wild with which we may participate.

Stanza III: The pupils' curtain rises silently

Yet from time to time, the pupils' curtain
rises silently. An image enters, flies through

the limbs' intensive stillness
until, entering the very heart, it dies.

As if his will and strength are reconciled, the panther appears to pause now in his caged dance and, though quiet, to come mostly awake. His eyes blink as do ours, each glimpsing the other as through opposite sides of iron bars. Images of us enter the big cat, while the poet's words also fly pictures of him into us. We discover in this exchange, again, some essence that we share, which is far older than us, in our "very heart." Though those chambers are hard to reach, they are alluring and we long for entrance. That mutual yearning sparks a possibility: that hearts fierce enough to kill each other leap, with grace, into regenerative stories.

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In Wellsian time-machine fashion, imagine landing near the top of the world, in the northeastern reaches of what is now called Siberia. We've zoomed backward into the late Pleistocene some thirty-two thousand years ago. Earth's climate is slowly fluctuating on the threshold of another long cooling. It is a few thousands of years before the first human beings actually do arrive to this land that drains chilling waters into the Kolyma River—a wide rush of meltwater and rain—into the Arctic Ocean. The river's banks stretch out into steppe-tundra. In brief spring and summer, the vast place blooms with flowering plants. Their green leaves suck up the midnight sun's light, make sugar, grow, and hoard their sweets in fruits and seeds to grow future roots and leaves. This severe place is full, too, of plant eaters, including mammoths, woolly rhinos, musk oxen, reindeer, and ground squirrels. The squirrels carry multitudes of the faded flowers' nutrient-rich parts underground to their fur-lined burrows, injuring many of the mature germs, likely for better-keeping storage (Gyulai et al. 2011). There are carnivores, too, of course—wolves, wolverines, bears, foxes, and cave lions. Who knows who eats which of the squirrels leaving their caches behind, while those fed, uneaten, and uncached go on with living overhead? The deep chambers seal with windblown earth. The buried deposits wait in the dark, frozen more than thirty meters belowground in permafrost for hosts of generations.

Until now.

The Kolyma and its wide flanks of land have weathered impermanence over long ages with changing climates and shifts in plants and animals, in-

cluding extinctions—as of mammoths, rhinos, and cave lions—and new arrivals, including human beings. There are also constant lines of things. The place still blooms with many of the Pleistocene’s bequest of flowers—for instance, generations of *Artemisia*, *Phlox*, and *Silene* species—that carry on feeding herbivores, including ground squirrels. The squirrels no longer feed lions but do help sate foxes, wolves, and other meat-eaters. Joseph Stalin’s gulag prisoners have come and gone. Others have lived on. The Yukaghir hunters, the first people—that is, those who have endured longest here—have dwindled to mere hundreds. Most recently, lured by sparkling cities, some of them have moved away. An old remaining hunter sings:

My land, winter here is very cold
 Yet plants grow despite the cold
 My life is nearing its end
 but my land has remained the same as in the time of
 my youth
 It is good and generous
 it gives us everything
 and has not forgotten us yet. (Lecomte, c. 1994)

Today’s changes are unprecedentedly rapid, however, making it difficult to find footing on what stays constant. With Anthropocene climate warming, this good land—frozen for so many thousands of years—no longer remains so much the same across even one human generation (Banerjee 2013). But alongside death, generosity seems to endure. As the Arctic warms at a rate nearly twice the global average, the erosion of the Kolyma’s ice-filled banks has been advanced by melting permafrost, also sending alarming amounts of more carbon into the air. On the quieter side, the softening soil offered scientists the chance to find and excavate the ancient ground squirrel capsules—released, but as yet unthawed. Some are filled with hundreds of thousands of their hosts’ seeds and fruits. Many of these are biologically dead. But others, *Princess Bride*-like, are “only *mostly* dead”—that is, as imagined in the film, they are *as if* dead without the proper magic.

If we dig into the history of science, we find a preoccupation with magic (Fara 2009, 101)—in other words, with learning how to flow with nature’s enigmatic winds and waves into our desires. Magic’s rituals concocting brews and chants went to our heads some time back, however, and some got to thinking that our journeys would be easier if we could build more certain paths. Fruits, like hearts, however, cannot long be held without invit-

ing wonder at the blueprint-less mysteries from the past and future secrets they enfold.

So—as if bidden by a deep, complex urging—a group of scientists, curious, tried reaching into the squirrel-hidden stores of fossil plants to coax some of them to waking life. In their lab, just south of Moscow, the cotyledon of a sedge embryo enlarged but never left its seed to become leaves; radical cells of bearberry divided but did not form roots; a sourdock stopped just short of sending out its shoot, and a severed part of its cotyledon placed in agar found wherewithal to almost mend itself, formed calluses, but still aborted; as did, too, of special note, some radical bits of *Silene stenophylla*, a pale-flowering plant whose arctic legacy has gone on adapting and developing, remaining extant. Now, as if reaching back out, these ancestral shivers of thawing vitality forecasted future leaps.

The ancient plant-caching ground squirrels tended to leave unripe fruits, which were too immature to germinate, uninjured and intact. The ardent researchers carefully cut into some of the *Silene*'s paradoxically young fossil fruits and removed slips of their placentas. These, it turned out, had kept well with cold-protective and nourishing elements tailored for their undeveloped progeny. Taking cues from the plant, the scientists fed these tissues freshly concocted brews of salts and vitamins, splashed with coconut milk. In response, some of those tissues sent out shoots, then roots that took to soil, blossomed, and developed a new generation of fruits fecund with seeds.

Scientists, in their own words—voiced as human beings with both thoughts and feelings—were “amazed” and “excited.” Indeed, plain people around the world seemed to gasp collectively. The news of Earth's now far-oldest known flowering plant, first published in a top scientific journal (Yashina et al. 2012), was picked up immediately by venues worldwide. Headlines read like that of *The Guardian*, which announced on February 21, 2012: “Russian Scientists Regenerate Ice Age Plant.” The far-flung stories were accompanied by closeup portraits of a small, resilient beauty with five white heart-shaped petals and often repeated not only the word *regenerate* but also *revive* and *resurrect*.

What seems striking in these reports is not only the skill of the scientists helping the very old fruits bring forth their new flowers but how those fruits' flowering helped resuscitate widely in humanity—beside vital panther fierceness—ardent tenderness, joyful camaraderie, and shared relief at some fresh idea of the world-of-life not yet ending. As a recent *National Geographic* essay put it, “The story isn't over” (Krulwich 2015).

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This unended story is of the unmaking and remaking of sky-to-root-tooth-to-fruit-heart-to-eye-to-eye-to-sky wild. And, given grace to endure, it may include the ongoing evolution of humanity, turning through the *Anthropocene* into supple dancers reflecting our belonging with a multi-centered *Eaarth*—our belonging with a self-augmenting world-of-life that has, with our participation, quickly resumed billions-of-years-old movements of unfurling diversity and complexity, empathy with community, and freshening cultures of expanding consciousness reconciling knowledge and generous morality into an unknown future. For expressing such a new *idea* of an already budding offshoot of our own species, I propose a new name—*Homo generativus*.¹

Coda: Ritual for Wild, Now

Five, four, three, two, one . . . *silence*

In a symbolic gesture, the four-hundred-thousand voices gathered for the People’s Climate March in New York City went dead quiet in a moment for remembering. Each person in the crowd was encouraged to pay her own private honor to those already consumed, displaced, caged, and disarranged as a consequence of human empire.

Hear absences here.

Memory with lament postures us toward humility and away from overconfidence in ourselves. This orientation lifts up “a new kind of people” (Leopold 1944; Warren 2006, 264) to appreciate the multiple possible meanings of relationships—like that between human beings and *Silene*—without continuing an other-dominating legacy of past mistakes.

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After the silence, a swelling wave of blended shouts, chants and songs, banging pots and pans, and brass bands began downtown and moved up the street. The crowd cheered for ongoing life—for Earth’s remaining diversity of small and large, of useful and seemingly odd and useless human and other beings, for being themselves, who, sharing a persistent nature to

self-organize by complementing one another in their common cause, must swamp human empire.

Now, find the beat.

Participation in a chorus of desires entices us toward possibility and away from being overwhelmed by ourselves and overwhelming others. This membership quickens a new people to listen, smell, touch, taste, and see—to know—each other as unfathomable “very hearts,” longing beings, and to perform measures of skillful love, generatively.

Note

1. *Generativus*—with a blended meaning from works of natural historian Charles Darwin, ecological conservationist Aldo Leopold, psychologist Erik Erikson, mathematician and philosopher Brian Swimme, world religion and ecology scholars John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, and paleoanthropologist Rick Potts.

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