At the End of the World, Plant a Tree
Considerations for the End of Human Time

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§ depressive sibyls and the horizon of catastrophe

Many years ago, while walking across the Congress Avenue bridge in Austin, Texas – famously, the one whose concrete arches shelter a colony of a million or more bats – the science-fiction writer Bruce Sterling warned me about an occupational hazard those of us professionally interested in the future tend to stumble into at the onset of middle age. It's always tempting, he argued, for the would-be prognosticator to mistake the narrowing of their own personal horizon for that of the world's: "Projection! Rookie blunder."

I was not, at the time, middle-aged, but Bruce's point lodged pretty firmly in my consciousness nonetheless. Because what I was then, and still remain, is mildly depressive. Not enough to derail my life in any particularly obvious way, thankfully, but sufficiently so to leave me with a vivid, visceral sense of what a more serious case would feel like. And from this vantage point, it seems plain that all of the attritional dynamics that accompany, or maybe constitute, depression – the premonitory awareness of looming catastrophe, the progressive foreclosure of possibility, the certainty that any attempts at recovery or repair are mere abject futility – are things one is just as liable to project outward onto the world as any of the angst that attends the

process of aging. It's something I've had time to think about a good deal lately, in the course of this odd pandemic summer-in-abeyance: how much of the gathering gloom I perceive is actually out there in any objective sense, how much is just the distortive effect of my own depressive filter on the world?

Here, you make the call. This is what's in the two tabs most recently opened in my browser, neither of which have any overt connection to the pandemic. In one is Somini Sengupta's grueling *New York Times* account (Sengupta 2020) of how climate extremes disproportionately impact the most vulnerable people on Earth, limned with plenty of vivid and heartbreaking local detail; in the other, the Twitter stream of an artificial intelligence researcher named Gwern,[1] dedicated recently to musings about the GPT3 learning algorithm, and the swiftness with which it is likely to exceed human capability in a few specified domains of knowledge production.

They couldn't be more different tonally, texturally, in their relative concern for humanity or lack thereof, but what these two accounts have in common is the sense that profound and relatively near-term social reorderings are already baked into our way of doing things. And when I say "social reorderings," really what I mean is something more like a punctuation on our era. Both the journalist and the AI researcher leave the reader imagining a wavefront sweeping over the face of everyday reality and remaking it utterly, right down to the molecular level, and both lead that reader to the inescapable conclusion that whatever underwater earthquake triggered this tsunami to begin with, it was something that happened awhile back.

What do we call this curious regime of the unbearably drawn-out ellipsis we find ourselves inhabiting? Whether it resulted from the century or more in which we dumped greenhouse gases into an atmosphere more sensitive than we understood, or the gestation of something capable of outdoing us in the practice of our most cherished crafts in the racked processors of a blandly corporate research lab, it seems clear that some fatal change of state has already taken place. And all that is left to us now is to endure a more or less extended process of the consequences propagating through the interconnected systems of the world, until the point that they're made manifest in the everyday. In either case, whichever Sword of Damocles

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1 twitter.com/gwern.

hangs above us, the thread suspending it has already frayed and snapped; now we're just waiting, Wile E. Coyote-like, for gravity to do what gravity does.

Are both of these scenarios equally likely, though? It's hard to read usually jaundiced or constitutionally wary researchers discussing their impressions of GPT3 without getting a sense that something uncanny may well have stirred in the indistinct murk that separates mere "machine learning" from genuine "artificial intelligence." Trained on an unprecedentedly large corpus of human communication, the quality that GPT3 brings to bear on a problem domain might with some legitimacy be called "insight," inasmuch as it's no different, formally if not mechanically, from what we ourselves do when we write music, prepare a legal brief, diagnose a disease from lab-test results, or sketch out the spinal argument of an essay. If not this particular algorithm, then, surely its immediate successors will demonstrate to the most skeptical observer generative abstraction of a richness comparable to a talented human being, and therefore satisfy one of the basic criteria of "intelligence," no matter how we may otherwise tinker with the definitional goalposts.

And given such a capacity loose in the world, it becomes difficult to see how it does *not* radically transfigure all those fields of endeavor reliant on an underlying dynamic of pattern recognition and improvisationally variable but situationally appropriate response – which is to say, again, law, medicine, architecture, design and artistic creation, to name only a very few. But for all that, even now there remain a great many assumptions and dependencies standing between the ways in which we presently do things and a world remade by artificial intelligence. The thing being discussed in Gwern's Twitter stream may fall short of expectations, may never become consequent in the ordering of our daily lives, may simply never come to pass in any form its most fervent proponents (or critics) would recognize.

But heating? That's another story entirely. Far from being contingent, extreme heating is overdetermined; indeed, as Sengupta's article makes inescapably plain, for so many of us it's already here. Even if all the endlessly ramified operations of the global economy could somehow immediately, instantly and painlessly be rendered carbon-neutral, some degree of planetary heating would still be bound to happen. There remains some valid question as to just how much heating, where, and with just what impact on the delicately

equilibrated systems that sustain all Earthly life. But wherever one sets the confidence bounds around this remnant uncertainty, enough oil has already been pumped to the surface, enough coal has already been burned, enough of their carbon has already been liberated to tip the atmosphere into a new state of being. Again, a not insignificant number of people on Earth, most of them very poor, already know exactly what this feels like – the *Times* piece checks in with an Afghan refugee in Athens, a working-class family of Houston, a village in the petrochemical sacrifice zone of the Niger Delta, and a Ch'orti Mayan farmer in the "Dry Corridor" of Guatemala, among others – while the rest of us are just sitting around, waiting nervously for the bill to come due.

And this at 415 ppm carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and a single degree Celsius of warming, when both numbers are rising fast. On just a few moments' reflection, it's enough, easily enough, to convince me that whatever distortion I may be projecting onto it by virtue of my particular neurochemistry, the fundamental shape of Earthly reality is indeed every bit as fucked as it appears to be. The wager here isn't that big heat is coming, or even that billions of people will experience its deleterious effects directly and for themselves; those are certainties. The specific assertion I'm making is that the combined direct and indirect consequences of that heating will in fairly short order exceed the capacity of our social, technical, political and economic systems – in other words, our planetary civilization – to contain them. And if by "short order," I mean "at some point in the next ten to fifteen years," that's probably optimistic. This is our world now. These are the skies under which we will live out the rest of our days.

§ this place is not a place of honor, no highly esteemed deed is commemorated here

Having once accepted this, the question, of course, is what any of us can do about it. What happens when we not merely take the all-but-complete unwinding of everything we've ever known as a given, but face up to its implications?

One school of thought is straightforward: grab hold of everything you can, while you can, and fuck the rest. I promise you that this is only barely a gloss on the "case against helping the poor" elaborated by the ecologist Garrett Hardin in a 1974 article (Hardin 1974) on

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"lifeboat ethics," in which acts of murderous selfishness are justified on the basis of an amateurishly worked-out utilitarianism. It is Hardin's position that on an imperiled planet, we owe no debt of care whatsoever to those carefully depersonalized others whose claims to an equitable share of dwindling resources ostensibly threaten our own precarious ability to survive. Though, to be sure, nativism never requires intellectual rationalization, there is nevertheless a direct line from Hardin's I-got-mine ethics to the Orbans and Salvinis, the Pegidas and Golden Dawns, to all those who'd rather see climate refugees drowned in the Mediterranean than offered a new lease on life in Europe.

To a first approximation, anyway, there are no degrees of difference whatsoever between Hardin's depiction of things and that offered in Jean Raspail's notorious novel of the year before, *The Camp of the Saints* (Raspail 1994),[2] in which the "numberless disinherited people of the South," in taking flight from ecological catastrophe, swamp and overwhelm the last redoubts of a struggling European civilization. Astonishingly, though, if the distance separating Raspail's racism from Hardin's remains unmeasurable by any instrument known to science, the former is properly understood as a frank white supremacist and immediate forerunner of the contemporary extreme right, while one can in Current Year still use the latter's name in respectable company. His "tragedy of the commons" has passed into everyday language, despite being little more than a thinly-veiled, ideologically motivated and profoundly unempirical attack on the notion that people are capable of mutuality and self-regulation in their use of resources.[3] But if there really were such a thing as cancellation, Hardin would make a particularly strong candidate for it: not merely is his conception of things *prima facie odious*, his depiction of negotiation over the use of resources as necessarily a zero-sum war of all against all flies in the face of everything contemporary anthropology teaches us about human cooperation. Manifestly the

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2 Again, be cautioned that this is an explicitly white-supremacist work from an explicitly white-supremacist publisher, just as you'd expect of a text singled out for praise by the likes of Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller.

3 As we humans have been doing, observably and consistently, throughout our history, and methodically enough that an analysis of the conventions involved could win Elinor Ostrom a Nobel Prize (see Ostrom 1991).

production of a mutilated soul, this perspective requires and will receive no further consideration here.

Another school of thought counsels – and again, this is only the merest paraphrase – that the only way out of the crises besetting us is through. Nurtured on the strong linearity of historical materialism, the current known as left accelerationism argues that properly enlightened humanity ought to understand the hot dense mass of late capitalism as a gravitational slingshot capable of hurtling it toward a liberatory horizon, even as the clock draws closer to planetary midnight. We can leave the zero-sum scarcity games behind if we "unleash [the] latent productive forces" generated within capitalism itself, treating this stage of Amazons and Tencents slouching toward monopoly as a dialectical engine almost helplessly generating the very tools required to bring about its disassembly and eventual replacement.

In practical terms, this evidently means a commitment to the fastest and most aggressive possible elaboration of the information-technical capabilities that first become possible in late capitalism: ubiquitous networking, distributed sensing for near-real-time demand assessment, automated digital fabrication, autonomous intermodal logistics for fulfillment, and artificial intelligence for forward economic planning, with self-ownership of the means of production in the form of hybrid, transhuman entities encoded on a blockchain, and some degree of nanotechnological geoengineering thrown into the mix to mitigate or reverse (!) the worst climatological effects of the Anthropocene overshoot. So far as I understand it, the idea is to upend the surplus value theory by introducing factors of infinity into its equations, bringing the capitalist era to a formal conclusion and (not incidentally) liberating humanity from labor and drudgery forever. This would represent not so much the continuation of politics by technical means as its thorough ungrounding: an evacuation or even annihilation of the terms on which most of what we mean by political economy has rested for the past few hundred years.

Here I'm simply inclined to agree with Audre Lorde (2017) regarding the odds that one might ever dismantle the master's house with his own tools, let alone build with them something more felicitous, but accelerationists really believe this stuff. What's still more intriguing to me is that they arrived on the scene already equipped with a clear sense of what was preventing the emancipatory breakthrough from

igniting more broadly: anarchists, Wobblies and Bookchinian municipalists. "The most important division in today's Left," Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek maintain, in their seminal "#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics" of 2013, "is between those who hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology" (Williams and Srnicek 2013).

Srnicek and Williams (2015) develop this argument at significantly greater length in their subsequent book *Inventing the Future*, which at least has the virtue of dispensing with any cringey hashtags in the title (and contains a solid institutional analysis of neoliberalism into the bargain). But really most of the necessary stiletto-work has already been done by the coinage folk politics, which is both rhetorically effective and, as those of us with longtime experience of left organizing know full well, not without a certain snide justice. It's the hardened Leninist operative of Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* (1985), coolly regarding the hopelessly disorganized rabble of squatter "activists" next door, or the amphetamine-taut, black-clad Velvet Underground newly arrived on the psychedelic West Coast, sneering at the Grateful Dead and their fuggy-vague, buckskin-fringe acolytes. If it's not quite as repudiative as the term arch- or ur-accelerationist Nick Land uses to denote the folly and futility of conventional, all-too-human politics ("monkey business"), neither does it leave you with any doubt of their feelings regarding the sophistication of this way of doing things.

It's true that the limits of participatory and deliberative politics are painfully obvious to anyone who's ever attended a city council meeting, that radical "direct action" can all too often amount to little more than flyposted stickers and spraypainted slogans on the walls of a decidedly indifferent city, that a commitment to inclusion often means interacting with people poorly equipped to make productive contributions, and that making too great a fetish of horizontal organization is generally a fairly effective way of producing inertia. Moreover, it's not as if organizers are unaware of the perils lurking in an unconsidered embrace of the local for its own sake, or that sympathetic urban sociologists have not in fact developed a minor body of thought around ways to circumvent this "local trap" (see e.g., Purcell 2006). These dynamics are well understood, even or perhaps especially among that cohort the accelerationists regard as hopelessly

retrograde devotees of a corny and discredited mode of politics. But they scarcely seem like sufficient reason to dispense with a suite of powerful, widely-applicable, low-cost, low-barrier-to-entry tools for making change. And of course it's nothing short of absurd to depict the horizontalist left as an entity in any way capable of standing athwart, or even markedly slowing, the onrushing pace of technical development.

What makes my beef with accelerationism of this stripe more than just an(other) internecine slap-fight on the left has to do with the degree to which it props up an already quite dominant tendency in the culture. When accelerationists implicitly propose stepping back from the difficult, exhausting and emotionally taxing work of organizing for justice at the interpersonal and intercommunal levels, and counsel instead the deployment of technology to automate the revolution, what they are in effect doing is throwing in with a mindset I think of as calculative instrumentalism: a paradigm in which people are reduced to operands and generators of usefully actionable data, while the digital enumeration, quantification and characterization of population segments are more important than any subjectivity the individuals involved may happen to possess. It will likely not have escaped you, of course, that this is the selfsame model on which the reigning sociotechnical order is founded, the single set of values and framings underlying both the "surveillance capitalism" of the West and the draconian social credit systems of the Chinese state. So, however much it may be pleased to present itself as critical, accelerationism of the left displays a complacency with the present way of doing things that starts to look a whole lot like acquiescence, or even complicity. And in any event, it's hard to avoid noticing that the fully interlinked, frictionlessly globalized milieu on which accelerationists like Srnicek and Williams predicate their core argument was being eroded from beneath even as they wrote. (Even at its peak, late-capitalist modernity was never simply an open platform one might simply write an API for and run nifty socialist applications on top of.)

That erosion, which is only likely to worsen in the months and years ahead, presents this line of thought with a major problem. If, post-Haraway, it's become something of a cliché to observe that all of us are always already cyborgs of one sort or another, this nonetheless remains profoundly and intimately true: to live in modernity is to live in extension, spread out across a sprawling profusion of hybrid and

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heterogeneous life-support systems. For so many of us, our ability to act in the world – in not a few cases, our very sense of self – is undergirded by an elaborate and widely distributed infrastructure of pharmacomedical technics. The lineaments of our selfhood now come to us from the far end of a perilously extended supply chain, their journey to our doorstep subject to a litany of vagaries both entirely predictable (heavy weather, spiking fuel costs) and all-but-random (territorial disputes and regulatory frictions, piracy, difficulties securing insurance, ransomware attacks on the planning software, even volcanic ash in the stratosphere). Worse yet, constraints imposed by the universal late-capitalist doctrines of just-in-time manufacturing and lean inventory render each linkage along the way so tightly coupled to the next that the entire meshwork of connection has become brittle and acutely sensitive to disruption. And what political accelerationism of any sort rarely seems to reckon with is how very contingent all of this is, how easily it can all come crashing down.

To recall the first month or so of COVID lockdown, or still more so to look ahead to the endemic rigors of a hard Brexit, is to contemplate an existence without prosthesis or enabling technology, without reliable access to contact lenses, insulin pumps, mood stabilizers or hormones. Note that it doesn't take anything nearly so consequential as a four-degree Celsius rise in global temperature to achieve this, or the wholesale transfiguration of the terms of existence at the hands of a rampant AI. It just takes a government of not-particularly-capable placemen, faced with a situation whose mounting complexity has exceeded their ability to comprehend it, against a backdrop where whatever local, state and transnational institutions might have served as a check have all quite deliberately been hollowed out. If it seems like it might be difficult to slingshot forward to fully automated luxury communism under such circumstances, well, maybe that's because it plainly would be – unless, I suppose, you've got a far greater faith in the raw power of dialectics than I do. In fact, everything left accelerationists like Srnicek and Williams call for assumes the persistence of a sociotechnic settlement that is radically contingent and can evaporate, locally or globally, with the proverbial wave of a hand.

Giving them the benefit of the doubt, let's assume left accelerationists of the Srnicek-Williams tendency have been sobered by the unfolding of events since the publication of their #manifesto, and have latterly had second thoughts about the degree to which they

wish to place their bets on the ongoing availability of late capitalism as a platform on which to organize its own transcendence. Whether they've yet been tempered in this way or not, though, it's past time we start to think coherently and productively about a way of life – and a rewarding, just and fruitful one at that – based on tools and capacities to which we have permanent recourse, no matter what else happens.

§ the system was blinking red

It's not as if the understanding that we live on the upper floors of a teetering house of cards is especially unusual. If the unnerving fragility of the complex systems that underwrite everyday life in the wealthy North and its peak-development exclaves elsewhere is now the stuff of ordinary consciousness – underscored every time rolling blackouts are imposed or a Day Zero drought crisis looms – a sentinel twitching warning us that something in our way of organizing the world was dangerously off has resided in our collective awareness for half a century or longer.

Though manifestations of this awareness had shown up earlier, most notably in the groundswell of ecological activism that followed the publication of Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* and reached an initial culmination in the inaugural Earth Day of 1970, it first appeared to most of us in the form of a popular discourse around "sustainability." This was a framing which first started to gain traction during the decades leading up to the turn of the millennium, a period in which the impact of human activity on the ecosphere had finally become too difficult to deny, dismiss or ignore. Familiar to us as the stuff of governmental white papers, brightly-branded corporate social responsibility initiatives, "green" product design, municipal recycling drives, best-practice certifications and any number of philanthropic or academic funding opportunities, sustainability was a doctrine that aimed to preserve the mighty consumer engine of late capitalism (and its politically sedative effects) by tinkering at the margins of its world-heating repercussions, shaving a few points off the rate of change of the rate of change.

As anodyne and pointless as it might have been, though, it soon became clear that even this goal would remain beyond reach. And this was because sustainability harbored at its very core an outright lie: predicated as it was upon the relatively rapid drawdown of an irreplaceable store of fossil energy, there was not a single thing about

the achievement of modernity that ever could have been sustained indefinitely. It was a one-time shot, an all-or-nothing gamble on riding the high energy density of resources laid down millions of years in the past to a point at which planetary civilization would be capable of organizing itself around solar and wind power (Malm 2016). And while plainly acknowledging this state of affairs was out of the question – it would have cut far too close to abandoning the elucidating logic on which the late-capitalist bounty depended – by the time of Hurricane Katrina it was clear to most observers that the sustainability discourse was, as the British like to say, no longer fit for purpose.

By this time, however, an entire sector had grown up around sustainability, both a generator of potent alibis for business-as-usual and an employment scheme not without a certain economic salience in its own right. Rather than retiring this semantic niche, then, and standing down all the churn of discursive and economic activity it supported, what happened was a precession of the buzzwords. While sustainability still occasionally crops up as a topic of discussion among those individuals and institutions that are more than usually behind the curve, throughout the 2010s it was progressively effaced as an object of thought by a new term.

These days, the conventional institutional response to destabilizing climatological events is generally articulated in terms of a discourse of "resilience," defined as a system's capacity to retain its structure and function after having been exposed to some exogenous shock. And so long as we limit ourselves strictly to a consideration of the ecological and physical systems whose behavior the term was originally meant to describe, this is a perfectly useful concept. But as far back as 2013, the geographers Danny MacKinnon and Kate Driscoll Derickson were already arguing that as a prescription for human systems, this rhetoric – then just emerging from academia, and now of course inescapable across the public and private sectors – was just as intellectually bankrupt as the discourse of sustainability it was intended to replace (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013).

On a close reading, the rhetoric of resilience can be understood as a tacit admission that sustainability failed, and therefore, by extension, that the project of high-complexity human civilization on

Earth has already crested.[4] "Resilience" is to say that while we can no longer forestall the train of climate impacts bearing down on us, perhaps we can at least engineer our systems, social as much as technical, so that they recover from each successive setback in as timely and complete a manner as can possibly be achieved. I imagine that the advent of this new rhetoric came as some relief to the entire stratum of sustainability-oriented management consultancies, conference organizers, "thought leaders" and grant writers who were in danger of finding themselves in an untenable position; having styled themselves experts in the one thing, they most of them now pivoted smoothly to offer their insight into the other.

But again, an impasse. If somewhat obvious, the question MacKinnon and Derickson posed of the new rhetoric was nonetheless one nobody else seems to have thought to ask: if being resilient is to bounce back, just what is it we're supposed to be bouncing back to? If the order of things is currently unjust, that is, wouldn't attempts to restore the *status quo ante* following some disruptive pulse event stabilize that injustice, if not set it in stone? And isn't it adding insult to injury to ask that already-desperate communities shoulder the costs and burdens of this stabilizing work, all in the name of conserving or retaining a system that never once worked for them?

MacKinnon and Derickson wind up arguing that resilience itself ought to be tossed on the scrapheap, preferably to be supplanted entirely by a rather less totalizing approach they call "resourcefulness," more attuned to the needs and capacities of communities under pressure. And here the ear perks up, because of all the responses to societal collapse we've considered, resourcefulness seems to allude most directly to a capacity that one might nurture and develop, both personally and communally. Beyond a few bullet-pointed desiderata, though, and possibly out of an entirely justified concern that it not be reified and marketed in the same way that sustainability and resilience were before it, MacKinnon and Derickson don't say much about what resourcefulness might look like. Having established that their fundamental paradigm is "one in which communities have the

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4 In context, the metaphoric expression I might otherwise turn to in order to describe such a point of maximum development is precisely inapposite. Whenever it is that a "high-water mark" eventually comes upon us, it will be one that leaves the towers of our coastal cities waistdeep in the unrelenting waves.

capacity to engage in genuinely deliberative democratic dialogue to develop contestable alternative agendas and work in ways that meaningfully challenge existing power relations" (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013, 263), they never go on to flesh out the idea in detail.

But perhaps it's not their responsibility to do so. Sometimes diagnosis is contribution enough. Maybe it's up to us to develop this notion of resourcefulness further.

§ if I look hard enough into the setting sun

Of course, there are many different kinds of resourcefulness. Media theorist Alison Powell points out that "people are endlessly resourceful already, in the impossible conditions we all variously live in," and that "intersecting challenges invite different resourcing" (Powell 2020). This is undoubtedly the case, as will be affirmed by anyone who has witnessed the hustle and ingenuity it takes to eke out a dignified existence as a single mother, or a client of social services, or for that matter both. If many of us know people who model this sort of behavior in their own lives, though, or perhaps even are fortunate enough to be one ourselves, it still helps to have a common point of reference, something to point at and say: that, that right there is part of what I mean when I use this word.

For me, one useful point of reference is a wordless series of videos I've recently taken to watching on YouTube, in which a skinny, shirtless white man squats in a clearing somewhere in the jungles of Australia's Far North Queensland and – equipped with no more than the living biome around him and a working knowledge of physics – painstakingly bootstraps himself from just about literally nothing to a reasonable standard of comfort.

This is *Primitive Technology*, the life/work of someone named John Plant.[5] Given the locale he's chosen for his experiments, I confess to having significant concerns about the erasure of the ultimate sources of Plant's knowledge. But there's refreshingly little in the way of machismo to his videos, and absolutely none of the paranoia, coded racism and red-in-tooth-and-claw chestbeating otherwise endemic to the survivalist genre. In fact, Plant eschews the tacticool trappings entirely: the aesthetic is wabi-sabi, even "Zen-like." Think sandals of woven reed, not operator chic.

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5 Perhaps inevitably, the video series has been turned into a book (Plant 2019).

For all that Plant offers a perfect vignette of rugged settler-colonialist individualism in its preferred self-image, there are many qualities to appreciate about the *Primitive Technology* videos, and two in particular that I cherish. The first is the from-first-principlesness of them. All but naked in his clearing, Plant starts by hand-crafting the most basic tools: axe, awl, cordage. From this inventory of simple machines, each new thing he contrives allows him to essay some still more elaborate project, in an upward cascade of enabling technology that culminates (after an elapse which is elided in the videos, but which cannot be less than many weeks) in the comfort of a thatch-roofed, brick-walled shelter, complete with hearth and chimney and a water-hammer running in a nearby creek to automate the pounding of grain for dinner. If it's almost always a serious blunder to try developing a philosophical system from first premises, it's fascinating to watch someone developing the material substrate of an entire culture from a similarly cold start. It's like seeing the tech tree of a *Civ* game recapitulated in real life: *this* and *this* get you *that*; put all those together and you can make one of *these*. He might not have made it quite as far as Replaceable Parts (yet?), but Plant's rigor offers us existence proof that even if the material basis of our being falls back to virtually nothing, some real measure of its comforts can be rebuilt with insight, patience and humility.

The second thing I love about *Primitive Technology* is a little more subtle, and it's something I've inferred from glimpses rather than anything Plant's ever made a conscious decision to highlight: at their best, many of the things he makes by hand bear the imprint of a sophisticated aesthetic I'd be hard-pressed to call anything but "modernist." These potentially crude implements, with all their components harvested from the forest, are instead marked with a simplicity, refinement and regularity that feel – but perhaps this is my ignorance speaking[6] – like the signature of an advanced industrial-design culture. (Plant's vent-gridded furnace, in particular, might be the handicraft of some Flintstonian Jony Ive.) The lesson I learn from this is that even when starting from bedrock zero, those of us raised in a

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6   Again, thinking of this as in any way particularly contemporary might very much be an artifact of my prejudice; the Romans, notably, developed standardized rolling stock to support military logistics, and more broadly imposed what we'd now think of as interoperability standards on their imperial mobility infrastructure (see also Amale et al. 2000).

technically sophisticated, high-complexity civilization bring with us everything we've internalized about the design of technically sophisticated, high-complexity systems, and are thereafter able to apply these insights to everything we make. It may not be precisely what the accelerationists meant about late capitalism being a dialectical engine capable of generating the tools necessary for its replacement, but it is nonetheless an advantage and it can be put to use.

I wonder if I'm alone in perceiving in Plant's work a concern for care and nurture, or perhaps more simply for shelter from an environment whose implacable indifference might easily be mistaken for hostility. It seems implicit to me, though, that this is the purpose behind all his ingenuity, exertion and craft: he makes tools to make bricks, bricks to make walls, walls to make an enclosure, and ultimately an enclosure so he has a safe space in which to rest and ponder the further development of his technique. The Heideggerian progression of building, dwelling, thinking is intact in *Primitive Technology*, and it seems directed toward this particular end.

So here's a working definition of resourcefulness, based on my understanding of just what it is that Plant is doing. Its development first requires that we learn to see the world differently, teaching ourselves to scan the local environment through eyes attuned to the useful properties, capacities and affordances of the things around us. Second, we remind ourselves that utility isn't always simply ready-to-hand, and that some material or topological transformation might be necessary to release it from a given object (the reeds need to be carefully woven and braided before they can serve as cordage, the clay needs to be baked before it can bear gravitational load as a brick, and so on). Third, we apply to these tasks everything we carry with us from the years spent in a culture lucky and rich enough to achieve refinement. There may be something to be said, as well, for the cultivation of a critical metaskill on which all else would seem to depend, a general orientation toward openness, plasticity and skill acquisition. Finally, we understand that the point of all this is never resourcefulness-in-itself but resourcefulness-toward-something, and that the "something" in question is the provision of shelter.

Except in the very worst scenarios of societal collapse (by which point I, at least, would honestly be well past caring), I don't suppose that even profound disruptions would deprive us of the material bounty all around for long enough for the fabrication techniques

demonstrated in *Primitive Technology* to become practically useful in day-to-day life. So the most interesting questions Plant's oeuvre poses for me are analogical. How much of what he achieves in the register of materiality has parallels for the register of conviviality? Where would you start if the shelter you wanted to craft, under the least propitious circumstances, was psychic rather than physical, and scaled to the collective rather than a single individual? And of the tools you'd need to build such a thing, which do we retain access to, no matter what else happens?

One way of answering (and go ahead and assume it will be *my* way) can be found in precisely the set of qualities accelerationism looks down its nose at. Almost by definition, we will not experience the undoing as a single global event, but rather as one in an endless propagation of intermeshed local crises stretching far beyond our perceptual horizon in space and time alike. And whichever aspect of this hypersurface reveals itself to us at any given moment, it is something we will have to confront with the people around us, those who constitute our immediate physical community. It seems to me that under such circumstances, any effort at building up shelter from degree zero therefore involves a small-scale politics of local deliberation, based on the capacity to assess, propose, discuss, debate and decide. If anything, these skills become more and not less vital when a community finds itself under heavy manners, because the consequences of bad decisions and the costs of allowing even a small minority of members to becoming alienated from the group are that much starker. In this context, resourcefulness might mean nothing so much as refining our capacities to listen, to empathize and to hold space.

Put somewhat differently, the "localism, direct action and relentless horizontalism" that Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek find so unutterably corny strike me as having the signal virtue of Plant's tools. As organizing principles, they're robust and hardy, capable of being deployed at just about any time in just about any place by just about anyone, elaborated using only the things they have at hand and the resources even a modestly generous environment affords them. They require some skill, certainly, but no sensors other than the bodily ones we show up with, no calculation beyond the rudimentary tabulation involved in assessing the prevailing sentiment in a room, no storage beyond that a community wishes to dedicate to

the preservation of its institutional memory. They are always there for us to use. So it's imperative to resist depictions of this way of organizing things as somehow being retrograde, or not taking full advantage of the sociotechnical possibilities afforded by our particular moment. If anything, I'd argue that these techniques are more sophisticated than those imagined by the accelerationists, by virtue of developing greater and more broadly useful competencies in us, and being far better suited to a time of uncertainty and involuntarily mobility. (We will find that emotionally present conversation, in particular, is a portable technology in a way some elaborate armature of nominally postcapitalist automated responses to the problems of food, warmth and shelter simply is not and cannot be.) If organized with even a modicum of skill, too, communities knit together horizontally ought to display some of that desirable quality the otherwise awful Nassim Nicholas Taleb usefully defines as "antifragility," in that the bonds between people get stronger as stress is applied to them.

And consider, by analogy with that second factor of Plant's, that what I'm proposing isn't simply that we can gather in some latter-day folkmoot to discuss matters of concern, but that many of us will by now know how to do so with some refinement. We're not starting from nothing, as it happens, or not exactly: just as Plant's tools and engines bear the traces of their maker's origin in a refined industrial design culture, whatever convocations we devise ought to reflect our origins in a society where institutions at every scale run on reasonably consistent and well-assimilated rules of order. It's likely that enough of their rudiments have filtered down to us (whether through direct experience, or some reflection in the popular culture) that at least one or two people in every neighborhood-scale group have some sense of how to run a productive meeting. And for all the relative obscurity of newer innovations in democratic praxis like sociocracy,[7] a consensus-based form of governance in which groups of people agree to commit themselves to courses of action on the basis that they are "good enough for now and safe enough to try," these are nevertheless in the air, there to be experimented with and adopted if found useful.

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7 A basic introduction to sociocracy can be found at https://www.sociocracyforall.org/start-here/.

Perhaps more to the point, we carry with us the accumulated psychoemotional wisdom of the entire post-Freudian epoch, distributed throughout the culture as inspirational Pinterest quotes, lifecoach bromides and Peloton-instructor platitudes. We know what the Stoics demand, what the Twelve Steps involve, that there's always an opportunity to Fail Better and that The Body Keeps The Score. What if all our concern for such technics of self-care was a premonition, an antlike laying-in of stocks to sustain us against our hour of need? Plant offers us one roadmap to becoming the kind of people we'll need to be in hard times, when all we've ever known are good ones, and here is another.

While you could certainly and with some fairness choose to regard such decontextualized encapsulations as shallow, superficial and unsatisfactory, I prefer to think of them as *distilled*. Part of the project of becoming-resourceful, then, might involve committing such distillations to memory in a way such that recourse to them in difficult moments is all but automatic. It's in this light that I understand the mantra of "improvise, adapt, overcome" one of my drill sergeants hammered into us all throughout basic training, and that I only much later realized he'd copped from a lesser Clint Eastwood movie: I continue to live by it a quarter-century later, even knowing its true provenance, and have repeated it to myself often enough for it to have become an action pattern, a pre-conscious priming that still informs my response whenever I'm confronted with a new and challenging situation.

As Powell suggests, though, perhaps resourcefulness is merely a matter of recognizing and rewarding the currently undervalued competencies people already have – or, at the risk of asking still more of those who already shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden involved in keeping the world running, simply getting out of their way and letting them exercise those skills on a larger scale. This also implies a collectivity sufficiently primed and self-aware to have a map of its members' various skills, such that when faced with an emergent situation it knows just who knows how to cook for large groups, who you turn to when you need to pick a lock, who is able to train others in the basics of competent grief counseling, and so on. We could then define a resourceful community as one able to pluck the strands that bind it together and find just the right nodes resonating in response.

And better still: a community where, to the greatest degree achievable, folks cross-train, so useful skills are distributed across the entire network, and no one person has to bear the weight of being the only trained medic or mechanic or beekeeper. One of the signature insults of the neoliberal hegemony, of course, was the way it individualized everything, and in atomizing us deprived us of the support of a functioning sociality. But there is a direct relationship, or still better a feedback loop, between resourceful communities and the individuals that comprise them. One could imagine these capacities being developed consciously and in synchrony with one another, the achievement of such lifesystems forging a unexpected link between "organizing" in the Saul Alinsky[8] sense and that common in the military (where the term refers to scrounging, pilferage and other techniques of opportunistic and at best semi-licit acquisition).

§ at the bottom of the spiral lies the silence

All of this is moot, of course, if one happens to succumb to any of the numberless ways in which death finds people in the midst of societal unwinding. It's all too easy to imagine dying pointlessly of heat exhaustion when the power fails in the municipal cooling center you've sought refuge in, and the air conditioning along with it; of a cancer that might have been readily treatable in the days when chemotherapy drugs and replacement parts for the linear accelerator in the radiotherapy suite arrived by the palletload; being shot as a looter by a jumpy, hurriedly deputized teenager in hand-me-down body armor, when hunger and desperation have driven you onto the streets past curfew; smothering in the blackness because the coyotes have forgotten or simply did not care that refugees being smuggled in a shipping container need more ventilation than the Playstations listed on the manifest. Dying in the third "500-year flood" in ten years, in a freeway-leaping wildfire, at the hands of a bored sniper. But in any event dying. Though it would be foolish to argue that these are not, in some reasonably strict actuarial sense, among the most likely fates awaiting us in the period of maximum undoing, let's assume we manage to get past them and survive into some marginally more stable time after. What then?

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8 For the most concentrated expression of the ethos guiding the professional work of community organizing in the United States during the New Left era, see Alinsky 1971.

The most harrowing depiction of the end of the world I know is not any of the more obvious candidates – *Threads*, say, or *The Road* or even *The Last of Us* – but that contained in Béla Tarr's 2011 film *The Turin Horse*. Tarr's is a vision of civilization expiring without much in the way of violence, indeed almost without comment or notice, extinguished in the dark. And of all the causes of apocalyptic breakdown explored in film, fiction and game, the one on display here strikes me as being the hardest to prevent, and yet the most critical to prepare for and defend against.

The unique horror of *The Turin Horse* is that the sundering of connection at the undoing of this world appears directly related to a willed failure of communication. Tarr's protagonists, a peasant father and daughter marooned in a farmhouse at the far eastern edge of Empire, suffer from a disinclination to communicate with one another so profound that ultimately it is indistinguishable from an inability to do so. Divided first from the world and then from one another, they are molecules broken down to atoms which in their turn are broken down to nothing. They succumb to resentful, nullified silence as the systems of the world shut down and the light fades all around them.

Might they have survived if they had been able to forge a meaningful link to one another, or even worked out some kind of modus vivendi with the strangers who have come to plunder their well? Doubtful. The world is ending. But they go down to its end alone, and there is something in that which seems to multiply the awful desolation of it.

Here depressive projection may actually be rearing its head, because at the moment it feels like we are well on our way to that disassembly of the social, and everything it entrains. With COVID has come a clear premonitory sense that the most basic systems we rely upon for our health, connectedness and wellbeing, the maintenance of our bodily selves and of our communities, have started to sunder, tear apart and break down. Perhaps it just feels this way to me because the governments of the two polities in which I am the most emotionally invested, the United States and the United Kingdom, remain in the grip of almost uniquely incompetent managers, and answered the crisis with ineptitude so mighty it truly cannot be distinguished from active malice. It may well be the case that things wouldn't feel quite this apocalyptic if I lived in Wellington, or Seoul, or Taipei**...** but here we are.

And far from summoning us to any sense of common purpose, the official response to the pandemic on both sides of the Atlantic has exacerbated the fault lines that developed and were allowed to fester all through the long years of neoliberal complacency, with lethal consequences. After an initial and, I want to say, instinctual flush of high seriousness and mutual care, the popular reaction to the circumstances we find ourselves in has been broadly marked by an amplification of all the ugly qualities and characteristics that so often color the everyday late-capitalist lifeworld: solipsism and self-absorption, mutual wariness and hostility, preemptive irritation with the demands of others, and an evident conviction among many that to display thoughtfulness, consideration or vulnerability for even so much as a moment is to invite being taken advantage of. This has left an epidemiologically significant minority proudly, performative-ly unwilling to take even the most basic steps to protect vulnerable others – leaving a few feet between bodies on the sidewalk, say, or suffering the indignity of a few hundred micrometers of fabric over the nose and mouth – evidently because doing so would somehow abrade their sense of their own specialness. And so fiercely reactive is this minority, so ludicrously and ferociously protective of their per-ceived prerogatives, that it's nearly impossible to see how one might open conversations about this, even ones carefully couched in the language of accommodation and understanding. Indeed, it has oc-casionally been quite literally fatal to attempt doing so. If this seems faintly familiar, it ought to: it's nothing other than Garrett Hardin's armed selfishness.

It's instructive to regard COVID as simultaneously a preview of how our societies will respond to future catastrophes of similar scale – i.e., incoherently, with lethal consequences – and the first in a se-ries of such events that is already underway, that will progressively unweave the world, and that in so doing will make each successive shock harder to recover from. If the calamities we now face are phys-ical in nature, though, challenges whose contours are measurable in basic reproduction numbers or parts per million, the architecture of our response to them belongs firmly to the realm of the social. And what we can already see is that our failure to develop an ethic of sustained care for one another capable of bridging the real (and, it should be said, often legitimately founded) divisions in our society spells doom for any project of survival.

That way lies *The Turin Horse*. Each refusal of connection takes us one step closer to that miserable hovel at the tail end of human time, where we are all become strangers to one another and there is nothing left for us to do but watch the last guttering embers of everything that held us together turn to ash and dark and silence. If we wish to avoid that fate being piled on top (or concluding the sequence) of all the other sorrows waiting for us, we'll have to work for it.

§ where black is the color, where none is the number
The position known as anarchoprimitivism has always seemed like the silliest sort of conceit to me, prone as it is to macho posturing and eminently ripe for capture by ecofascism besides.[9] But the black joke is that time will make anarchoprimitivists of us all. It seems likely to me that those of us who do make it through an acute phase of rupture will live to see the large-scale state fail, in just about every way but in its capacity to organize harm. Materially, the effortless refinement and diversity of the products we've come to expect from our advanced industrial base will disappear from the world. The epochal tide of arrangements we're pleased to regard as "civilization" will recede from human lives, for the first time since the development of agriculture twelve thousand years ago, and the material-energetic settlement on which our lifeworlds are founded along with it. Our new circumstances will leave us with little choice but to get better acquainted with our own paleocapable selves, and whatever ability we retain to organize for collective survival at the most immediate local scale. And whatever this might imply in terms of our physical talents, it will most definitely require the capacity to remain emotionally present and available to the others around us, under conditions of shared, sustained and almost unbearable sorrow.

There will no doubt be those of you convinced that in arguing this I have, after all, projected my own morbidity onto the world, and that we'll surely retain the collective wherewithal to maintain into the indefinite hot future some semblance of our present-day ways of doing, making and being. About all I can do to try and convince you otherwise, at this late stage in the proceedings, is cite the well-known finding that depressives actually perceive the world more accurately,

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9 While, to be sure, its scholarship is open to question, the founding statement of contemporary anarchoprimitivism is unquestionably Zerzan (1988).

and that what our society is pleased to regard as psychological nor-malcy is itself a form of induced or willed self-deception, a functional adaptation to the overwhelming odds against stability and order in a universe unremittingly hostile to them. You don't need to hoist us up onto pedestals, or make some kind of apocalyptic sibyl of us. But when the stakes are this high, in this curious season of phony war or calm before the storm, perhaps it's worth listening carefully to the folks around you who happen to be afflicted with clarity of percep-tion: this is happening.

This is happening, as even the consumer market now recognizes. (Consider Vollebak, who sell a "50,000 BC Jacket" designed to ad-dress the needs of nomads traversing a darkening world, or similarly the tagline recently adopted by the Canadian technical-outerwear brand Arc'teryx, "Built for what's to come," which seems to allude to the onset of civilizational turbulence with sly, having-it-both-ways bad faith.) If even the market gets it, then so can any of us. I fully un-derstand that denial is a protective mechanism, and I'm sympathetic to those who, for whatever reason, would prefer to protect their raw pith from the terror, loss, sorrow and grief sure to afflict everyone who makes it through these next few years, to accompany them all the remaining days of their lives. But I'm no longer inclined to make concessions to those who persist in their refusal to acknowledge the thing which is right in front of us. In another context, we'd call their insistence on being furnished with ever-higher levels of evidentiary support "sealioning," and it is wasting time and energy we simply do not have. The thing we so greatly feared is come upon us.

My friend Alison, who I cited above, came through Terminal 5 at Heathrow a few days ago. She texted me a picture she'd snapped of the departures board, normally a full three columns across with flights, and on this day displaying a mere ten, heading anywhere at all. "Globalization as we knew it is over," she captioned the picture, and the inescapable truth of it landed on me in a way that reminded me of the gulf between what it is to know something intellectually and accepting it emotionally. What I was now forced to accept was this: We'd collectively crossed a threshold, somewhere in the early days of the COVID lockdown. We'd had other things on our mind, more pressing claims on our attention, and we'd barely noticed that the system of connections that bound the world together throughout my entire adult life – that had quite literally allowed me to live that life in

the way I did – had come undone, from the edges to the center. And we probably wouldn't be finding our way back to anything resembling wholeness. By the time the scale of the damage became clear, it was far too late to do anything about it.

Whatever your feelings about globalization, and mine are as ambivalent as those of anyone else attentive to its costs, it strikes me that whatever further unravellings of the world we may experience will be like that. In fact, Alison's reflections on what it felt like to pass through this new and unfamiliar Heathrow reminded me of nothing so much as my first experience of general anesthesia. It was like flicking a switch: even though I'd been told in detail what to expect, unconsciousness came on so swiftly, so suddenly and totally that I hadn't even realized it was happening until everything was all over; by the time awareness returned, I was on the other side. But then, many of the more significant ruptures bearing down on us will share that quality: we won't see them coming in any of the ways that matter, no matter how comprehensively we'd prepared for them or how much knowledge of their effects we'd managed to assemble in the run up to them. By the time we even notice these processes are underway, they will have run to completion. We'll just wake up one morning to realize that we no longer live in a world in which we have municipal garbage collection, or Amazon, or indeed an internet connection at all, because the circumstances that made them possible have ceased to obtain. And if there's anything at all we know about the kind of complex and tightly-coupled systems on which the continuity of our civilization is predicated, that in some meaningful sense constitute that civilization, it's that it is far, far easier to maintain them than it is to restore them once undone. The airport may reopen, in other words, but to what end if the airlines have collapsed financially, the pilots have been fired, the aircraft mothballed and the pushback tractors surrendered to the encroaching rust? Call all the king's horses and all the king's men, see if you can stitch the world back together again.

I do not mean to suggest that Hardinian selfishness and left-accelerationist ambition furnish us between them with a comprehensive catalogue of responses to the recognition of this truth, or anything remotely close to one. But for me they are exemplary of two deeper tendencies: on the one hand the perennial instinct to disguise our all-too-human panic and greed, prettying them up with claims to philosophy, and on the other the dream cherished by system builders

that they might tame the outer darkness with sprawling architectures of control. And it's clear that neither one of these is capable of offering us a useful guide to life in the years of maximum turbulence. Philosophy will not acquit its wielder of smallness and ugliness – not even the real deal, let alone Garrett Hardin's sad pastiche thereof. As for left accelerationism's "Promethean politics of maximal mastery over society and its environment" (Williams and Srnicek 2014, 360), well, it seems to me that if there's anything we've clearly had quite entirely enough of over the past hundred and fifty years, it's would-be Six Six Six Six and their claims to mastery. A little humility is surely in order. What is left for us to work with, however humble and dowdy and insufficient they may be, are the tools and tactics to which we have permanent recourse, and the imperative to make with them such shelter as we can, for as many as we can, for as long as we can.

There is an alternative, of course. Some will no doubt retreat into the comforts of a stance I think of as blackened quietism: fully accepting the true scale of the horror that has befallen us, while abandoning any pretense that one's own actions might mitigate it in any way, even when measured in degrees of harm reduction or palliative care. Blackened quietism is the pursuit of equanimity, contemplative stillness, and ultimately acceptance when faced with the end of all hopes. It would be easy to characterize this as a defensive crouch in the face of overwhelming suffering, a surrender to defeatism, even an indulgence in a luxury others do not have and an insult to those who have borne up under still worse conditions. I don't think it is any of those things. I happen to think it's a perfectly valid response to a world hellbent on concretizing the Buddhist truth that existence is suffering.

But it wouldn't be satisfying for me personally, and I'm willing to bet I'm not alone in this.

§ on f/utility, or: sleep has his house
There are relatively few things I have ever taken to heart from the Jewish ethical tradition which is my birthright. Among them, though, are a few lines attributed to a rabbi named Tarfon who lived around the end of the first century of the current era, later bound into the compilation of oral wisdom known as the Pirkei Avot. "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work [of repairing the world]," Tarfon insists, "but neither are you at liberty to desist from it". I have always found

Tarfon's charge electrifying, possibly because it is both bracing and comforting,[10] and I continue to turn to it for strength in difficult moments just as I do my old drill sergeant's mantra. In context, I interpret it to mean that we keep organizing, even when what we're doing, far from keeping entropy at bay, amounts to little more than shifting drifts and piles of washed-up flotsam around the terminal beach.

That word "entropy," though. It can be very tempting to understand politics in thermodynamic terms. We know that the directionality of the universe as a whole is toward disorder, and that while it is always possible to create local bubbles of order, there is a dissipative cost to this work that sheds a still greater increment of disorder, permanently and irrevocably, on that remaining outside the bubble.[11]

This is the law of the universe, and therefore the final horizon for any politics of the left. Right formations are always happy to create local order for a few by stealing it from an outside literally defined as an "externality" not worth accounting for. But this is not a strategy available to any tradition wishing to live up to its nominal commitments to liberation and equity.

In our time the chaos we have to contend with and somehow manage has become general, a tide of entropy loosed upon the world. But chaos falls earlier and more heavily on some. And central to Tarfon's charge, for those of us who enjoy relative privilege, is that we use it to balance the load. For that is the meaning of privilege: a shelter, however partial and temporary, from some of the forms of exigency to which bare life is otherwise exposed. The point of becoming-resourceful isn't, or isn't just, to secure our own survival. It is to survive so we are able to shade and nurture others and tend to them with care, amid the heat and dust and filthy trickle that reaches us from the former municipal water supply, in the face of a governing

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10 Try to think of another single-sentence ethical maxim that does that, from any wisdom tradition. It's a neat trick. (You may be familiar with the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast's gloss of Tarfon, which circulates widely, if generally without attribution, as one of those Instagrammable inspo-quotes. Entirely apropos to our considerations here, it begins by commanding that we "not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.")

11 For some reason I always think, in this regard, of the splendid headquarters of the VOC, the famed Dutch East India Company, in the docklands of Amsterdam, every last tick of its grandeur having been purchased at the cost of misery in the charred fields of West Java.

universal indifference to the narrow bounds within which life can be sustained.

And so we turn to the planting of trees. Consider, for a moment, what is involved in doing so in an entirely literal sense. It may appear to be the simplest of tasks, yet to plant trees in any number means drawing upon all the skills that bind us together as a human community: determining a need, devising a plan to fulfill it and cooperating on the execution of that plan. To do so with any prospect of success, further, requires that we invoke millennia of accumulated knowledge regarding which species are likely to prosper on a given terrain, what they require by way of commensals and companion plantings, and so forth. The result of that collective work and that recruitment of knowledge is nothing less than an expansion of life's domain, an extension of the broader network of being that has made shelter on this planet since prokaryotic microbes first appeared on it four billion years ago. (Indeed, strictly speaking, the intervention even transcends the boundaries that distinguish organic life from its environment: if you're intent on decarbonizing the atmosphere, there are few better or more practical things you could do than planting as many trees as possible.) One could certainly understand this planting as an act of agriculture, and therefore as a step toward reinforcing the long dominion of agriculture and its downstream implications over human consciousness. That is surely its readiest and most obvious interpretation. But it is also possible to see rooting a sapling in the Earth as an act of liberation, helping the seed live out its destiny as a full-grown organism in its own right, an environment in itself, a participant in a still broader ecosystem and a multiplication of possibilities where before there had been none. And not for any instrumental reasons of your own, but rather from a sense of service to others you'll never live to meet, or even the humility involved in accepting yourself as simply a seed's way of making another seed. As my friend David Madden observes (Madden 2020), this would be akin to an act of faith: a gesture toward a time yet to come, even when you know full well there is no future you or your survivors will inhabit or give name to.[12]

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12 An engaging popular account of the sociality and communicative richness of trees can be found in a book Madden and I often joke should have been named Arboreal Communism, Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Wohlleben 2017).

Is this futile? Quite possibly so. But then, futility is a curious thing, in that it is precisely not in the eye of the beholder; only the one who undertakes an act and experiences its consequences for themselves is in a position to judge whether or not it was pointless.

And for the depressive, anyway, the real question isn't primarily one of pointlessness, but of not knowing quite how to name the feeling one experiences when a darkening reality finally corresponds with one's perceptions of it, like one of those tests where the outlined circles projected onto your field of vision come into alignment. This feeling is nothing so untoward as satisfaction at the delamination of all things, but it definitely involves a certain relief, or even release. Thus, perhaps, the strangely affirmative character of this *savoir vivre* of life at the end of all human things, a life pursued in the negation of hope and the acceptance of doom. Indeed, this darkened landscape is lit by a flickering suspicion that, for those of us damaged by our long and harried passage through a world in which we never felt quite safe enough to drop our defenses, it is only such an acceptance that opens up the space in which qualities like equanimity, compassion and generosity might finally appear. And it is here in the ruin and wreckage, where such qualities might seem to tell the least, that is precisely where they matter most.

TRANSMISSION ENDS

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The title of this [contribution] is adapted from the Islamic hadith Musnad Ahmad 12491: "If the Hour were established upon one of you while he has in his hand a palm shoot, then let him plant it."

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13 Editorial note: This text first appeared as a booklet or "pamphlet" (the term is here changed to "contribution"), published by Libreria, London, 2020.

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