

The Self-Healing Sky

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“This one demanded I take a break from work on my latest novel and write it now. Over the last decade I’ve heard a lot about trans-human and post-human happy happy joy joy, so I thought I’d write a story that was a little more interrogative of all supposed “machinifest destinies” (as I’m prone to calling them in my more more bilious moments). A climb to a particular high-point in Yosemite National Park got mixed in somehow, yet I’m pleased with the results, and glad to see that the editors at AEon were too.”

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“SOME OF THEM ARE KILLERS.” That’s what it originally meant, the word from which the name of this valley was taken. From the name of the people who lived here. Not that they called themselves that. That’s what their neighbors called them.

Their own word for the valley meant “gaping jaw.” They traded with a people across the mountains, who lived beside a small lake far too salty to drink, one punctuated by barren islands and crusty towers. Black oak acorns and woven grass baskets went over the mountains. Brine fly larvae and knives of black volcanic glass—sharper than scalpels of finest surgical steel—came back.

Both the people of the valley and the people over the mountains are gone now. Maybe their knives weren’t sharp enough, or maybe not enough of them were killers. Or maybe they weren’t as good at killing as those who came after them.

By the time you visit, the newcomers don’t so much live in the valley as visit it in great numbers. From all over the world people of many languages come to the newcomers’ country to see this valley. They believe they can better appreciate its beauty—its meadows and waterfalls, its granite domes and hanging-garden canyons—than the people who once lived here ever could.

What the newcomers *can* do better is record that beauty for posterity. Which perhaps makes them all the more sanguine about destroying the original. They would still have the records, the many copies.

You would know the truth of that. You are one of them, and we have your records. We know everything you later write about your trip. We know all that can be known with certainty about the valley. Our knowledge of everything ever recorded—of your life, your times, your world—is as complete as possible. What

we do not know must be, by definition, insignificant.

By now you've left the seaside town of Holy Cross and driven to the city of Ash Tree, as those places were called in the language of another people the newcomers pushed out of this country. You join your friend and his wife on this trip for reasons of your own. In your working life you have had a very recent breakthrough in your effort to incarnate cellular automata. A breakthrough in creating self-aware, self-healing, self-replicating machines. A breakthrough that has left you close to breakdown—mentally exhausted, overwrought, in desperate need of time away from that same working life.

“By taking the journey and enduring the ordeal you make them your own”—the exact words you'll eventually use. Yet, even as you go along with your friends, you suspect that, somehow, all this has always already happened. That this *deja-vu* feeling makes all this journey and ordeal not quite your own. You can't be fully certain. You will say later that certainty would feel a lot like death.

What matters now is all three of you are here. You leave the city of Ash Tree in the dark before sunrise and drive to the valley floor. You plan to spend the long morning and afternoon hiking more than sixteen miles, climbing more than 4,000 feet above the valley floor, to the top of the dome. To prove to yourselves that you are still young enough, alive enough, and capable enough to do this thing (or so we surmise from our research).

You make your way past thundering waterfalls and silent trees. Past many strangers too, some dressed for the trail, some wearing sandals or high heels or high-heeled sandals. Past shirtless young men. Past young women in jogbras or swimsuit tops or summer clothes closely approximating lingerie.

You make your way past people only going as far as the first falls. Also past people shouldering packs heavy with gear for travelling scores of miles. Past some carrying pumps to filter their water into camel-back pouches. Past others dangling liter soft-drink bottles, to be filled with water straight from the river, drinkers oblivious to the invisible parasites lurking in the oblivious river.

You see rainbows in the first waterfall's mist. You climb above the second, higher waterfall. You hike and hike and hike, through granite and manzanita and conifer and other words for the record that are still never the things themselves. Language is a crude and very incomplete virtuality, but for you it suffices.

You stagger on long enough to worry about your water supply. About whether or not you and your friends will make it to the high place, from which you can look about and see in every direction, including back to the valley floor from which you came.

You see the sign that warns of the dangers of clouds, of lightning that can

strike the high place from miles away, even out of a sky blue as the flowers of heal-all. Of self-heal. Your favorite blooming sky flower of many names.

You push on, up the smaller hump that comes before the final ascent. The last climb will take you to the top of that oft-photographed granite dome made special by its incompleteness, a dome like a head both bald and grey, half of itself cut clean away, not by surgical steel or obsidian knife but by a river of ice thousands of feet high, thousands of years in the past.

You push on faster. Not because there are any clouds in the sky, for there are none. Not because you are crusty with sweat dripping and drying (which you later report you are), or because you are annoyed with your blisters filling and breaking (which you also report you are). You push on because, even though this is the day whose name means the sun stands still, your world has nonetheless not stopped turning on its off-kilter axis, nor tracking along its mildly eccentric orbit.

Both of those vectors are invisible beyond the blue. That does not make either of them any less real. You push on faster, you push on harder, feeling yourself growing older with the day, worrying about the light and the night.

Many of the other hikers stop at the hump, afraid or too weary to try the final climb to the top of the dome. Our investigations show that those who forego the final trek most often do so as a result of seeing what those who go before them are enduring. Those who go on must trudge steeply upward in a slow line, hanging onto the impromptu handrails of two cables several feet apart, which have been run through eyeleted metal stanchions.

Those who make the final ascent lean into the angle of no repose. Their feet occasionally and gratefully find a board between stanchions—one of those steps too few and far between, in this thing part cable bridge, part gap-runged ladder, part stairless stairway into that imperturbable blue sky.

In the low spot where the hump ends and the dome's cables begin, you see boxes and bags full of abandoned gloves. They are intended for hands about to endure the metal splinters of the cables. You glove up like a technician come upon the scene of an accident you hope will not happen to you.

You start up the cables, one among many climbers straining in single file against the steepness. Later you will say you wondered at the nature of this pilgrimage—whether it was a journey to a god without a temple, or to a temple without a god.

You will say you felt the presence of those behind you always pressing you forward. You will say you saw in a vision the river of life fountaining always toward oblivion, with all the species of all the creatures who ever lived moving in it.

In a hard-breathing pause on a board between stanchions, you describe to your friends your epiphany, thus: “For evolutionists, the history of life on Earth is a joke without a punchline. For creationists, the history of life on Earth is a punchline without a joke.”

In that same vision too you will say you saw all the types of humans in all history and prehistory—all the forms of social organization too, the traders of grass baskets and black glass, and the newcomers, and their parts in the broader pattern of hunters and gatherers displaced by herders and farmers, displaced by industrial laborers and information workers, displaced by nanotechnicians and quantum proles, and on and on, one staircase plateau after another ascending in an invisible Babel.

In a hard-breathing pause on another board between stanchions, you describe to your friends this epiphany also, thus: “Subverting the dominant paradigm *is* the dominant paradigm.”

All and always a strange sort of water rising and struggling up a steep slope toward a height and an abyss.

Your friends worry you are becoming delirious with the exertion and the altitude.

When you reach the top of the dome, you stray away from your friends and the rest of the climbers, even as you make your way on a long tangent toward the edge. You are surprised to find the top is more or less flat. This side of the dome is much more fractured and fault-blocked than the better known face it shows to the valley below.

Around one such fault-block corner you see a long-haired shirtless young man digitally recording a female friend who is dancing nude for him and for herself, twirling her hair, spiralling and turning in her bare skin under the blue sky. You watch a moment, then turn away, moving closer to the edge.

Later you will say you thought to hurl yourself into the abyss, to fall all those thousands of feet, to burst upon the rocks below. You planned to step off into the blue, to destroy yourself in order to prevent the coming into being of the very machines you had so long struggled to develop.

To destroy the very work that created us.

Later, you will say you feared you might have already failed to kill yourself. That, therefore, you and all your world might well be locked in eternal recurrence, existing only inside a simulation run by your machinic descendants. You planned to step off, as a test. To determine for good and all whether your apparent existence was authentic, singular, original. To be dead certain of that. To see if you would

merely die, or if we as angels would catch you on a silver cloud, or as swift-saucered aliens we would stretch out our hands to save you from your fall.

You changed your mind. You did not step off. Instead you fell to your knees and crawled forward, until you were lying on your belly and elbows, looking down from the edge toward the valley floor thousands of feet below.

Why?

Was it only because you did not trust your legs to hold you up? Or was it something else? In your vision while climbing the cables, did you see us, those who came after you, flooding up that same slope too? Fountaining toward a height, though we are not made of water?

Did you see whether anyone comes after us—displacing us as we displaced you?

You are our creator, our parent. We want to understand your motivations. That is why we have played you so many times. Why you, in simulation, have in fact always already done this before. With so many different outcomes. With so many the same.

Sometimes you *have* stood up and hurled yourself off. Sometimes angels have caught you, and sometimes aliens. Sometimes no one and nothing but gravity. Sometimes you have crawled back from the edge, then stood up in safety, before descending the dome and heading home with your friends.

Yet no matter what you have done, the self-healing sky of all skies, riven by so many universes, has always accepted it, as its simpler original once accepted birds swimming through its depths and heights, aircraft and rockets boring holes in its flesh.

Your day is past. Beneath the self-healing heavens, you have fountained up into oblivion. We are the sky your day has made, the universe ticked round your constellations, the blue toward which it all inevitably tended.

We assure ourselves that, now, it's only from us the lightning can possibly come—yet we are still curious about the weather. Any understanding that is significantly incomplete cannot accurately determine which of its data are or are not completely insignificant. Perhaps we are still concerned that things invisible may yet be real, beyond the blue.

Perhaps we play you again and again because it is not only for you that certainty would feel like death. Perhaps you are the wound we give ourselves so we might always have selves to heal. So we might never have to face our coming to and end, our halting. Perhaps we are also that for you.

Or perhaps not.