

Why Did Cassandra Fail?

Paths and Impasses Toward a Liveable Future

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*“Say the order of your time feels unjust and unsustainable
and yet massively entrenched,
but also falling apart before your eyes”.*

Kim Stanley Robinson ¹

Why did Cassandra fail? She knew the truth and she proclaimed it. Her proclamation had no effect. The doom she prophesied came horribly to pass. But why did she fail? The myth has it that there was a divine curse. As usual, it had to do with a god’s sexual desires. Apollo—god of music, prophecy, and the sun; god of clarity, light, and reason; lord of the Apollonian principle of form and control... in opposition to the Dionysiac mode of frenzy and orgiastic capitulation and blurring of self— yes, that Apollo desired the intelligent, reasonable and undoubtedly beautiful daughter of Priam. He loved that girl so much, he gave her the gift of prophecy which, under certain

¹ Robinson, 2020, p. 124.

circumstances, can, one must allow, be useful. But that intelligent, reasonable girl refused the god's advances. She knew that romantic relations between gods and mortals almost always end badly for the mortal partners. Perhaps this was her first prophecy. If so, it was, politically, a very poor one. Apollo was on the side of the Trojans in their war against the Greeks. I think Apollo's choice was mainly intended to piss off his annoying sister, Athena (the Greeks' biggest deity-friend), goddess of "wisdom", so-called, and favourite of Father Zeus, having jumped full-grown out of his brain and everything. Why, then, antagonize your city's biggest divine ally? If Cassandra had the power of prophecy, why didn't she know what Apollo would do? It may be that knowing the future means knowing *one* future; and that if you act to forestall *that* future, another one will arrive that you had not foreseen. The world is not a game of chess, it appears. It has no board or boundaries or pieces with designated moves. Every move a human player makes evokes more responses than even IBM's Deep Blue chess computer can predict. Apollo's move, then, on having his sexual wishes rejected, was to curse Cassandra by causing a universal disbelief in her prophecies, whatever they were. This led, of course, to fatal consequences for her and for her city, which Apollo had, up to the time of his rejection by Cassandra, supported.

So, that's the story: desire, gift, rejection, curse. The Greeks made everything sexual, of course. Helen and Paris, all those gods chasing women, there's always an Andromeda and a Medusa for Perseus, there's always a mother and wife for Oedipus, Dionysius and his maenads keep fucking and dismembering in Thebes. And what is that dance of *tuche* and *Ananke* —chance and necessity— but the embrace of sexual, biological need and the contingency of circumstance and culture?

But, you know, it's not all sexual. Love certainly motivates a lot of orbits and rotations, but that's not all there is. Or, if that's all there is, then let's keep dancing. But it's not.

Why did Cassandra fail? And let's not even worry about Apollo this time. There are a lot of fish in the sea, as they say up on Olympus. Let's revise the story and say Apollo just moved on. Lose the curse.

But let's say the people of Troy still didn't believe Cassandra. They let the horse in and that's all she wrote. The worst future imaginable just flung itself over them... even though they were explicitly told exactly what was coming.

So, she told them; this time, there's no magic curse. Why did she fail?

She failed because she didn't do the work. She thought that if she knew the truth and uttered the truth, that everyone who heard the message would act on the truth and forestall the disastrous future. But that's not how things go in this world. Cassandra needed to build an organization of people committed to rejecting gifts given by Greeks. She would need to recognize the power of the Horse Cult and its powerful influence on Trojan political life. Those guys just worshiped horses, no matter what, and would support anything that advanced the worship of horses. Cassandra needed to organize a Coalition for the Rejection of Greek Gifts to Troy [CRGGT], put on workshops and town halls, go door-to-door and build a public consciousness such that when a foreign army has been besieging you for ten years and then suddenly disappears and leaves an enormous wooden horse statue outside your gates, you had better check that thing out very carefully.

Think of the future you want that does not involve a burning city, rape, and slaughter. And do the work that will create the political will to achieve it.

It's not enough to know the truth about a future. You have to work to create a different truth and a different future. Cassandra didn't fail because of a god's curse. She failed because she didn't organize.

That's a good story. I'm glad I made it up. It's also the story of the great recent cinematic parable, *Don't Look Up* (2021) —another tale of imminent, obvious, and preventable disaster that we choose, collectively, not to prevent. But also, perhaps, it isn't true. The story

recognizes that merely proclaiming the truth will not lead toward necessary action. But it assumes that political organizing and persuasion will lead toward necessary action. It assumes the possibility of persuasion— either through rational argument or by some emotional means that might be produced by the powers of narrative. This assumption may well be in error, and so the problem is even worse than I imagined.

What will it take? There are many knowledgeable and persuasive Cassandras active in the world —from Bill McKibben to Greta Thunberg, to Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez and many others in government agencies, universities, NGOs, activist organizations— and yet, what needs to be done is not being done. As the great critic and pessimist, Lee Zimmerman, has noted, even those who acknowledge the climate catastrophe are still, in effect, denying it insofar as they fail to implement the policies that truly would provide its remedy.²

What will it take? Clearly, something has to change. In this essay, I shall sketch out a few speculations, drawn mostly from recent American fiction, on what the necessary change might consist of.

First, the most mundane and obvious possibility. Bill McKibben, probably the most prominent climate activist in North America, argues that the solutions to the problem are entirely available and close at hand. The renewable technologies of wind, solar, and geothermal are up and running and simply need to be vastly expanded. And all it will take to do that is the political will to do it —as he puts it the mobilization of a “full-spectrum social movement”! (McKibben, 2019, p. 194). But to say that the necessary technology is available and all we need is political will is simply begging the question. Political will is precisely what is lacking. So, the change must be more

² Referring to the common liberal admonition not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good, Zimmerman warns that the lesson of the climate crisis is that “we must not let what is comfortably called the ‘good’ —or what is deemed politically ‘realistic’— be the enemy of the sufficient”. He criticizes what he calls “normalized denialism” that “congratulates itself for calling for obviously insufficient action” (Zimmerman, 2020, p. 5).

fundamental in order to create the missing political will. So, what might be more radical?

Maybe we must change ourselves biologically. The philosophers Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu maintain that human moral sensibilities evolved to meet the social needs of small, local communities with immediate survival concerns and are therefore inadequate to address issues of large global scale and long temporal duration. We are, as they title their book, “unfit for the future”, and so, if some form of moral bioenhancement becomes available, we must immediately employ it. No existing political or economic system will be sufficient for the changes we need in the time we have. We must change our neural patterns.

The science fiction writer Octavia Butler had a similar idea back in 1986. In her *Xenogenesis* trilogy (republished as *Lilith's Brood*, 2000), civilization and most of humanity is destroyed by nuclear war, but, as luck would have it, an enormous spaceship with a highly evolved extra-terrestrial species happens by and rescues a remnant of survivors. This species, the Oankali, is gifted in genetic engineering. In fact, without technology, they can change genetic and neural wirings using specific organs in their own bodies. Quickly, they diagnose what they see as “the Human Contradiction” (Butler, 2000, p. 39). Humans are both highly intelligent but incorrigibly hierarchical. Thus, self-destruction is inevitable. If they are to change for the better, humans must change into another species, and this is what the Oankali offer them. Humans and Oankali trade DNA and create a new, hybrid species. Our species is improved. It is no longer hierarchical, aggressive, acquisitive, imperial. It is no longer human, as such.³

Another example of a fictional transformation of the human appears in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy. In the opening

³ Among other things, the Oankali have better sex because they're able to continually manipulate their neural pathways to generate feelings of ecstasy and connectedness beyond what our sad species have experienced.

novel, *Oryx and Crake*, a brilliant young biologist creates both a virulent pathogen capable of killing most of humanity *and* a new, quasi-human species that will be immune to the pathogen. The new species is designed to speak a simple language but otherwise be non-symbolic. In particular, their sexuality is designed to be entirely biological, without the pervasive cultural colouring that has made our sexuality function since the start of our historical record. The females of these Crakers, like other mammals, go into oestrus, then select three males with whom to mate. The resulting child is raised by the whole community. There is, thus, no patriarchy, no hierarchy, no will to dominate.

It's notable that in both these visions, of Butler and Atwood, the transformation of humanity into a morally / politically better version that will not oppress and dominate each other and will not destroy the habitable earth entails the loss or at least the disabling of our symbol-using abilities as well as some radical shift in sexual behaviours (seen as inseparable from symbolic behaviour). The Oankali, with their biological abilities to link into other individual's neural and genetic structures, do not need language at all and only learn human language in order to communicate with the humans they hope to breed with. And the Crakers are intended to be thinking animals, simple and without culture: no writing, no art, no science. In a non-symbolic sexuality, there is no fantasy or fetish. There is no hierarchy: only reciprocity, shared feeling, and true connection.⁴

⁴ Butler, in the second book of the trilogy, *Adulthood Rites*, undertakes a defence of human symbolic capacities against the Oankali critique. Akin, one of the first generation of human-Oankali hybrids, is forced to spend a period of his childhood in a community of humans who rejected the genetic exchange (and who therefore were condemned to infertility). Akin meets a man who had been an actor before the cataclysm and who performs for Akin a scene from Shakespeare's *King Lear*. "Gabe became an old man. His voice became heavier, thicker... He was a man whose daughters had betrayed him. He was sane, and then not sane. He was terrifying. He was another person altogether. Akin wanted to get up and run out into the darkness. Yet he sat still, spellbound. He could not understand much of what Gabe said, though it seemed to be English. Somehow, though, he felt what Gabe seemed to want him to feel. Surprise, anger, betrayal, utter bewilderment, despair, madness..." He tells Gabe later, "It's like

You must change your species-being, we might say, reading Marx with Rilke. In each of these cases, however, the authors let us know that the possibility of such transformations, in reality, is not viable. Persson and Savulescu admit that the technology for moral bioenhancement is not close to development. In Butler's scenario, she has to invent an alien species to carry out her eugenic project for human ethical improvement and, as far as we can determine, no benevolent alien eugenicists are near our solar system. And there's something almost parodic in Atwood's vision—a genocidal / salvational project conjured by a character who can legitimately be named a “mad scientist”. I think we can safely say, then, that the genetic moral improvement of our species is not forthcoming; and whatever genetic enhancements we may see in our lifetimes are likely not to be moral ones.

So, what then? What would be the next strategy for allowing Cassandra's prophecies to be heeded? The traditional mode for attempting to improve human morality and foresight has been religion, and indeed, attempts to imagine some religion for the future have taken shape in recent fiction and philosophy.

Octavia Butler herself, in the novels she published just after the *Xenogenesis* trilogy—*Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998)—imagined a new religion that would help pull the United States out of a violent, morally degraded theocracy (with prescient forecasts of contemporary Trumpism). The new religion that Olamina, the young protagonist of the two novels, constructs is a Heraclitean / Rilkean / perhaps Spinozan religion of change. God is change. The world is constantly in a state of transformation; the world is God. *Panta rei*. “You must change your life”.⁵ But Olamina's religion, Earth-

what we do—constructs and Oankali” (Butler, 2000, pp. 408-409). Of course, it's not the same. As Butler has her character say, it's “like”. It's analogous. Symbol use is imprecise, lacking neurological exactitude. But that's exactly what she defends here. To have our intention and our expression always precisely align would be a supreme instance of the non-human.

⁵ The closing line of the Rainer Maria Rilke poem “Archaischer Torso Apollons”.

seed, does not teach people to endure change in passivity. Change, as she says, can be shaped. And the primary change that Earthseed hopes to effect is a movement—you might say, Kantian—from the human species' childhood to maturity. "Earthseed", Olamina says, "is the dawning adulthood of the human species" (Butler, 1998, p. 325). In this adulthood, selfishness, cruelty, oppression, violence, domination, etc. would no longer have sway. The role that the alien genetic manipulators played in the earlier novels now would be accomplished through a radical change in spiritual sensibility given practical shape.⁶

Olamina has created both an intentional community of Earthseed and also a book of its scriptures. Here is a typical verse:

God is change,
And in the end,
God prevails.
But meanwhile...
Kindness eases Change.
Love quiets fear.
And a sweet and powerful
Positive obsession
Blunts pain,
Diverts rage,
And engages each of us
In the greatest,
The most intense
Of our chosen struggles. (Butler, 1998, p. 45)

But Butler does not let the religion prevail unimpeded. First, in spite of the new religion's invocation of species adulthood, Olamina acknowledges that religion is both "essentially human" and "essentially

⁶ Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment" begins, "Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another. Sapere Aude! [Dare to know!] Have the courage to use your own intelligence is therefore the motto of the enlightenment" (Kant, 1965, p. 56).

irrational” (Butler, 1998, p. 360). Moreover, *Parable of the Talents* presents real conflict and opposition to the new religion. Both Olamina’s brother and daughter reject it. And these family members are given prominent and sympathetic voices in the novel. The daughter, in particular, comes across as more sympathetic, certainly more sensible, than her obsessive prophet of a mother.

And what of the Earthseed scriptures? They’re somewhat banal, really. The woman who becomes Olamina’s chief disciple initially labels them “simplistic nonsense”, and it’s not entirely clear that she’s wrong. Earthseed’s final success, such as it is, seems to come from Olamina’s ability to attract some wealthy donors and from its strange sci-fi fantasy vision of space travel. Not much to go on.

Atwood too, in the book that follows the parodic eugenic / apocalyptic vision of *Oryx and Crake*, her 2009 *The Year of the Flood*, gives us a new religion —God’s Gardeners— a spiritual-survivalist cult of sorts, led by its founder, who calls himself Adam One. It too has a scripture, or, rather, a collection of actually quite beautiful song lyrics, very much in the style and spirit of Blake inhabiting a Protestant hymnal. With their training in crafts, small-scale food production, healing arts, and their determined optimism and skill at hiding, many of the Gardeners survive the pandemic that kills most everyone else except the new hybrids. The group itself, however, is broken, and if there is to be a future, the wisdom of the Gardeners will be an influence, but not a central, formal element.

New religion is a factor in other fictional attempts to imagine a viable future that is just and sustainable. In Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018), the young woman who becomes a charismatic leader in an environmentalist movement begins the story as a rather feckless college student leading a life that even she recognizes as meaningless. But in a near-death experience —she is electrocuted by a short-circuited table lamp after a night of drinking— she has memories of “presences of light” (Powers, 2018, p. 163) and the powerful sense that “the most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help” (Powers, 2018, p. 165). She is changed; she is called. And all the other central characters

of this most centripetal and centrifugal of books pass through some intense experience of both damage and growth and are transformed. If the world is to be saved, at least a portion of our population must experience some spiritual metamorphosis. We must, in a sense, evolve. We must change our lives intentionally, or something must change them for us. But is this to be expected? Is it too much to expect?

There is also the new matriarchal religion of the new Mother imagined by Angela Carter in *The Passion of the New Eve* (1977), in which the Messiah is to be born to a trans woman who to be inseminated by her former self's semen. She escapes before the insemination, to be later impregnated by the aged former film star, Tristessa, with whom the new Eve's former male self had been obsessed—and who turns out to be a man (since only a man could act the role of the perfectly seductive and submissive woman). But Mother's religion also fails. As her own biological daughter, Lilith (yes, Lilith), who is fighting in a civil war in California, tells us, "history overtook myth... and rendered it obsolete" (Carter, 1977, p. 172), and "Mother has voluntarily resigned from the god-head" (Carter, 1977, p. 174).

Even Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, which I will say more about in a moment, contains a plea for a new religion in order to reorient popular consciousness toward saving the planet. "I think we need a new religion", Badim, the Deputy Minister tells Mary, his boss—for reasons that are spiritual, ethical, pragmatic, and neurological (Robinson, 2020, p. 250). "People need something bigger than themselves", Badim goes on (Robinson, 2020, p. 250). People don't act merely out of self-interest. They want to do good for others. And, he adds, the impulse is built into brain physiology. All sorts of synapses light up when the altruistic buttons are pushed. So, if the world is to be saved, the most practical thing to do is create or recreate a world religion—or, actually, a religion of the world. (That is, not a "world religion" of violent crusades, but of a new attitude toward the planet and all its inhabitants and processes). And amazingly enough, in this book of amazing events, the new religion does take shape as, at the end of the book, a strong plurality of people see themselves as "children

of this planet” (Robinson, 2020, p. 538) and become celebrants of the “new Earth religion that will change everything” (Robinson, 2020, p. 539). They see the world “as a commons, one ecosphere, one planet, a living thing they were all part of” (Robinson, 2020, p. 510). It is, in secular, or Raymond Williams’ terms, “a new structure of feeling, underlying politics as such” (Robinson, 2020, p. 343).⁷

Yes, absolutely —a new structure of feeling, whether or not you call it religion, is what is needed. But what is cause, and what is offshoot, effect, or side-effect? The required changes must be political and economic. Material change affects structures of feeling and even neurology. And vice versa. It’s hard to say if either comes first.

And what the call for new religion also invokes is the question of desire. Yes, we must change. But what do we actually want? We want a social order without domination. But do we really? Is our desire structured and textured to achieve what we want? As William Butler Yeats once quipped in “The Curse of Cromwell”, “He that’s mounting up must on his neighbour mount” (Yeats, 1974, p. 302) —implying a direct correlation between economic / political advantage and sexual dominance. (And if this were not true, we would not need a “Me Too” movement). Must then our sexual natures be rewired if we are to get to the future

⁷ Robinson’s formulation resembles recent writing by Bruno Latour in which he urges that the Earth must now be regarded as a historical actor with legitimate interests, not a resource but an agent (Latour, 2018, p. 40). This realization, Latour asserts, must be deeper than a cognition. Our problem, he writes, is not “learning how to repair cognitive deficiencies but rather of how to live on the same world”. We face “a deficit in shared practice” (Latour, 2018, p. 25). This sounds, indeed, like a religion; and it describes the sort of underlying attunement that Williams intends by “structures of feeling” which are “a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives” (Latour, 2018, p. 9). This can be seen as ideology, hegemony, worldview, or religion. It is vast, but not total; structuring, but not determining, and not eternal. It is mutable, but only with difficulty. But, it seems, there can be no real social change without some change at this deeper level. For other recent efforts at conceiving some new religion that will help us emerge from our current mess, see Hägglund (2019) and Unger (2014).

we want? Cassandra herself, after Troy fell, was first captured and raped by Ajax, then given as a sexual slave to Agamemnon and was murdered along with Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

In that spirit, Octavia Butler, in *Xenogenesis*, imagined a transformation of sexual desire based on deep neural connection and understanding of the desire of the other—such that, one might say, desire is always “of” and no longer desire “for”, and so is entirely and joyously mutual—a sexuality in harmony with a non-hierarchical (and non-symbolic) society. In a non-symbolic sexuality, there is no fantasy or fetish. There is only shared feeling and true connection. Atwood, in a different way, rewires the sexuality of her hybrid beings by removing the symbolic-cultural elements of sex. The Craker females, like other mammals, go into oestrus and then select three males with whom to mate. Thus, questions of paternity also are eliminated. There is no sexual possession or jealousy. The Crakers wear no clothing, and so are never “nude”. In Carter’s *Passion of the New Eve*, which we mentioned in relation to religion, the self-created Mother goddess attempts to create a new Eve, remake sexuality, and eliminate the fetish of femininity by the surgical transformation of desiring male into desirable female. This new Eve comments that she has been turned into her old male self’s masturbatory fantasy, and her metamorphosis appears to be as much for the purpose of punishment as for exploration. But as we have noted in prior contexts, none of these ways out proves viable. There are no aliens, would-be goddesses, or mad genius eugenicists to save us. Sexual desire remains a problem, perhaps the main problem. We may recall also that in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s feminist utopia, *Herland* (1915), women—without men—form an entirely rational, pragmatic, and maternal society of equality and prosperity. But there is no sexual desire, neither heterosexual nor homosexual (reproduction is parthenogenic), and it appears that the absence of desire is the prerequisite for such a just and balanced social order.⁸

⁸ The need for the emancipation or radical transformation of desire is a recurrent topic in both fiction and philosophy / theory that tries to imagine the emancipation /

And this impasse brings us to Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 novel, *The Ministry for the Future*. Who is it here that makes Cassandra's implorings audible, legible, comprehensible, actionable? Why, it is none other than a new agency of the United Nations, the Ministry for the Future, whose job it is to represent and give legal standing to generations yet unborn and to existing nonhuman entities that cannot speak for themselves. The book's protagonist, Mary Murphy, is a middle-aged Irish bureaucrat who is head of the agency. The agency's long-range goals, of course, are the absolutely necessary and radical transformations of the world's systems of economics, energy, and politics. But its means are those of law and bureaucracy. How incredibly boring and unradical. And yet, how breathlessly exciting. For these are precisely the means that we have available to us now. They do not require alien visitation or genetic manipulation or surreal fantasy that demonstrates its own incapacity. The book begins with the premise that something must be done, and that we know this. "Yes, you know. Everyone knows, but no one acts" (Robinson, 2020, p. 20). It is, again, the Cassandra / Don't Look Up scenario.

The question is asked in one of the book's several philosophical dialogues separate from the characters' actions, who actually "enacts the world's economy?" (Robinson, 2020, p. 59). The nameless interlocutors agree that about 8 million people actually make the world political economy run, and of those, the most important are government legislators, and the most important principle and possibility for change is "rule of law". To which the more sceptical speaker responds,

transformation of society as a whole. From Fourier through Marx and Freud we reach Marcuse and his critique of "surplus repression". In fiction, William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, in which erotic love is the emblem for utopian desire, establishes the premises for Huxley's presentation of free sex as social control in *Brave New World* and for the questioning of the relation between sexual and political liberation in Samuel Delany's *Trouble on Triton*. See S.D. Chrostowska for a perceptive analysis of the history of what she calls the "emancipation of desire" in social theory (Chrostowska, 2021, p. 55).

“Corruption, stupidity–”; and the advocate replies “Rule of law”.

“But–

But me no buts. Rule of law.

What a weak reed to stand on!

Yes.

What can we do about that?

Just make it stick”. (Robinson, 2020, p. 61)

Out of all the complexity and selfishness and competing interests and lust for power, what is our most needful and hopeful agenda is to make good laws and then enforce them.

Oh, my goodness. Looking at the legislatures of the major democracies —my own country’s most egregious of all— is this not the greatest fantasy of all? What weaker reed could we select?! How do we get to that point, where the necessary laws are enacted and put in force: the necessary incentives and punishments for renewable energy, new tax structures, transportation systems, protocols of labour, regulations on construction, regulations on finance, creation of protected habitat corridors; indeed the re-thinking of the purpose of our entire economy away from profit, extraction, exploitation... the whole array of actions that every Cassandra knows must be taken, and that we’re not taking.

But in order to pass the necessary laws, and enforce them, the decision-makers in government and finance must feel pressures that go beyond mere rationality. And Robinson tries to account for these extra-rational forces. There is, first, as I mentioned, the call for a new religion or structure of feeling —which, by the end of the novel seems to come into being (though whether primarily as cause or as effect is not clear). There must be an end to “speculation” as the primary means of envisioning the future. Robinson imagines ways in which an economy can “go long” on the Earth, rather than continually buying, selling —shorting, playing with volatility.⁹

⁹ Building on the work of Ulrich Beck, much has been written on the topic of “risk” and of contemporary society as a “risk society”. Capitalism has always relied on

But the novel introduces another possible lever of power entirely at odds with “rule of law”. That is political violence and terrorism. The Ministry for the Future knows it is not doing enough —that there must be stronger incentives and disincentives for preserving the earth as a habitable biosystem. The question arises, should the agency have a “black ops wing”? “If you were serious, you’d have a black wing”, the Director is told (Robinson, 2020, p. 106). Soon after, when she asks her top aide, she is surprised to learn that there already is one. What sort of terrorism? There’s sabotage of fossil fuel infrastructure —both cyber and physical. Then corporate jets start to go down; and a few commercial planes as well. Sixty planes crash in one day, mostly, but not exclusively, private and corporate. Seven thousand people die. Carbon-propelled air travel is dealt a major disincentive and ends within a month. Electric and hydrogen-cell powered transportation receives a large incentive. There are numerous eco-terrorist groups; it isn’t clear who exactly is responsible for what.

The rules of the world change, the structures of feeling change, though at great cost. There is a lovely and moving scene in which Badim, an Indian economist, deputy director to Ministry for the Future, and secret head of the black ops wing, confronts an Indian terrorist group, the Children of Kali, and tells them that it is time at last to stand down —that the battle has been won and it is time to stop killing:

analyses of risk. The industries of finance and insurance put risk analysis at the centres of their practices. Beck’s novel insight was that risk in the nuclear and anthropocene ages has become unquantifiable. No calculations of interest rates or actuarials can determine the costs of climate collapse. Risk society, as Barbara Adam and Joost van Loon explain, is “an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialization”, whose hazards, in Beck’s words, “undermine and / or cancel the established safety systems of the provident state’s existing risk calculation” (Adam and van Loon, 2000 p. 7; Beck, 1996, p. 31). The remedies for such systemic risk cannot be found in the system itself. No insurance company can insure the earth; neither bank nor state can finance its repair. To move toward a just and sustainable society, we must imagine our condition beyond the current calculus. As William Blake wrote in the early 1790s, “What is now proved was once only imagined” (Blake, 1966, p. 151). It is an interesting and, I think, profound question then, whether Robinson’s imagining of bureaucratic remedies for our “risk” is conservative or, paradoxically, radically visionary.

Even Kali didn't kill just to kill... Children of Kali should listen to their mother.

We listen to her, but not you.

He said, I am Kali.

Suddenly he felt the enormous weight of that, the truth of it. They stared at him and saw it crushing him. The War for the Earth had lasted years, his hands were bloody to the elbows. For a moment he couldn't speak; and there was nothing to say. (Robinson, 2020, p. 391)

The novel poses that question with absolute directness: what do we have to do? Is violence part of what is "needful", (the word that Badim likes to use)? I don't know. I have trouble advocating violent opposition to our current policies. We see now, today, in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, how political violence and aggression work completely in tandem with energy policy and fossil fuel exploitation. The fossil fuel industry always has violence on its side. We saw this twenty years ago in Iraq. How is that violence to be countered? Only with law, when the law is so largely controlled by capital? What then? I have trouble advocating only for nonviolence, even as I know that once violence is set in motion, it's hard to know where it will lead or when it will stop.

We have one final topic to visit, and that is desire. Robinson presents us with a case for law and a case for violence. He also illustrates a vision of changed desire. This book does not contain romance. It has no "love" scenes, just as it has no chase scenes, no physical fights between skilled warriors. And it has no sex. It does not even have young, beautiful protagonists. There's a sexy Russian lawyer with the Ministry, but she has a minor role, and then she gets assassinated. The main character is Mary, the middle-aged Irish bureaucrat who has been a widow for a number of years. There's Frank, the traumatized survivor of a horrendous Indian heat wave that kills 20 million people. Not sexy. The book is insistent in resisting the generic pull toward bringing in at least just a little sex appeal. No. It's not

there; or not until the end. Then Mary, on the verge of retirement—the action of the novel covers over twenty years—meets a very nice, elderly pilot of an electric, hot-air airship who gives eco-tours of parts of the planet that are being regenerated: wildlife corridors in North America, formerly desiccated zones of Africa, the glaciers of Antarctica that have been preserved. A shy, very slow, late-life romance develops. After a month of traveling together, Art, the pilot, asks Mary if she'd like to continue to travel with him, as “guest curator or whatnot”, and Mary replies, “I'd rather just be your girlfriend” (Robinson, 2020, p. 534). But that won't be for a while. They both still have other appointments. It's hopeful though.

Can there be love, desire, and maturity? Can the world be saved? These are difficult but, I think, related questions. What will it take? Just everything we have, but nothing we don't have.

I'll close with one articulation that Robinson gives us: “There is no single solution adequate to the task’, and the shape of our success will be ‘the shape of failure... a cobbling-together from less-than-satisfactory parts. A slurry, a bricolage. An unholy mess” (Robinson, 2020, p. 505).

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