

SECTION 4

Disperse

232

To Not Lope Soundlessly into the Dark

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Social and natural history have collapsed into (or finally revealed their true character as) a single thing, now that the planet is spinning wildly from the patterns we always thought constituted its invariable, natural behavior.

The bad new days call for unflagging pessimism. Beneath the rhetorical spume and our desperate grip on resilience discourses, any collective political will to truly face the effects of an injured Earth system is nearly nil. With water wars coming, the media apparatus is devising ways to make us feel giddy with the idea of space tourism. The fantasy of off-planet dispossession is looking for subscribers.

The world is *The Road*. "He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. ... Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it."¹

All is verging on chaos. Those who still valiantly fend off an implacable sense of defeat remind us that the Anthropocene is also a space of experimentation. This rogue guild of tinkerers, twisting lines of thinking and fissuring foregone conclusions, prods us to assume a relation of inadequacy, of heretical torsion. Incorrigibly, they refuse disaster as the only horizon. There are unexpected forms of life that can be tested, they remind us. There are ways of relating that can be calibrated to our novel, if harrowing, conditions. There are still worlds to be made at the end of the world.

In *The Road*, the boy crawls out through an escape hatch and we finally realize, after having

ourselves crawled across so many dark blocks of taut text for so many pages, that it's not the dead sun of the future that is casting its light on us. The novel, despite its persistent bleakness, knows that all is not over. Whatever this diaphanously encased abomination is supposed to do in the novel, mirror or allegorize, nest one harrowing parable inside another, it can be re-rendered as an index of that place where the book fears to go: to some end point in the disaster, some other side beyond intelligibility's edge, camouflaged as oneiric anomaly, where it's not just the landscape that has been decimated, but where the people who traveled that landscape have themselves vanished from the universe, "loped soundlessly into the dark." Systems and economies are dead, useless, canceled, voided like checks from a defunct bank. The author goads us to take our little apocalyptic narratives to the end and reminds us that we are not ready to go yet. Instead, we must go on, punch out escape hatches. As the impacts of climate change have begun to unfurl, the autonomous infrastructural life-support ecosystem is becoming the template of the present and a blueprint for the future.

The Anthropocene is frequently characterized in terms of relational entanglement, but this is now also overlaid with one of disentanglement, as the rich and poor both attempt to detach (in different ways and for different reasons) from catastrophic, entwined infrastructural networks and sites of environmental crisis. The rich use the possibility of disentanglement as an opportunity to design luxury bunkers and luxury floating islands. They commission future-proof, climate-disaster-ready yachts and seasteads. They buy into larger-scale "future cities" like Eko Atlantic City, a corporation- and bank-funded multi-billion-dollar walled, private "resilient"

development off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria, with its own autonomous power grid, water, security, and seawall. Alongside this, we have the manifold, often DIY, experiments by poor and working-class people in self-sufficiency, farming, going off-grid, building neighborhood mesh networks, harvesting rainwater, and trialing climate-change-adaptive crops and plants. The drivers of these experiments are multiple and often contradictory—security, profit, survival, community autonomy, resilience, readiness, love of this or that craft, refusing to live life as a spectator, and relearning and recreating human capacities, including the ability to care for others and oneself. The template is being applied to heterogeneous contexts and desires, and is producing new lifeways in the process.

During its first iteration, Mary Mattingly's *WetLand* (2014–2017) was docked on a pier on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. When approached along the bank, it seemed like a two-story brownstone that had succumbed to a sinkhole. The frozen image of a building being swallowed was made uncanny by the fact that it was surrounded by animated gardens and bee boxes. It all made for a strange, spatial—or even geographical—collage. Urban, rural, aquatic, farmland, and neighborhood signs were meshed and multi-temporal. The fallen structure on the way to becoming a ruin was enwreathed by a newly buzzing world of animals and plants. Expiration and gestation entwined; old world and new world at a cross-fade.

Inside the “fallen” brownstone was a commodious living space, a perfectly adequate work space, a performance space, and hydroponic gardens. Around its perimeter were vegetable and flower beds, chicken coops, beehives, water

catchment barrels, rudimentary banisters, and garden benches. Although not quite as easy to discern, *WetLand* also included rainwater purification systems, gray-water filtration, and a dry compost system. An infrastructurally autonomous structure, it was built only from materials drawn from the urban waste stream. Here we had a model of what can perhaps be done and a prod to a critical question of whether this is the endgame—“islandizing” a planet of individual microworlds.

Mattingly's works are often, at some level, experimental approximations—not of viable solutions in the face of climate instability, but of vexing questions that hide in our blind spots. Her works represent a reckoning with the disintegration of the systems that sustain our lives as moments of self-reliance and of regaining control. As icons of possible alternatives rigged out of scarps, they remind us that in adversity, we strive. More subtly and subterraneanly, the works also prompt us to ponder solutions without fear of bruising our vanity. They invite us to hazard questions of scale and scalability; the applicability of solutions in different contexts; the asymmetry of capacities among the members of a population—or between different populations; how external forces, like the law, often impinge and suffocate our spaces of experimentation.

Mattingly's *Swale* (2016–ongoing) is clever about its dealings with the law. A reclaimed barge navigates around New York waterways and serves as a platform for an edible and medicinal garden, employing marine common law to bypass long-established New York public land laws that make it illegal to grow or forage for food on public lands. *Swale* has a pragmatic and pedagogical dimension, raising plants and distributing them

free to the public, teaching us about the gaps and loopholes that naturally eddy between systems of laws. The work also has an underside that gambles with absurdity. Imagining the barge spinning forever around New York, forever pitting maritime law against public land ordinances in an esoteric formal legal squabble: one cannot help but find in this something like the repetition that vaudeville slapstick often relies on and, according to Mattingly, a folly. The barge must circle forever if it is to generate unmodified food and medicinal herbs. Its endless spinning is also a reminder of the interdictions that the city in its current form thrives on. The work, in its larger conceptual projections, is less about what happens on the boat than about the law's reshaping of those who loosen their dependency on the state, about how (potential) foragers are recast as criminalized nuisances and savage interlopers. They have to take to the water like pirates to survive.

Mattingly's *Wearable Homes* is a line of apparel designed to protect wearers from an already-existing disastrous environment of pesticide-laden food and polluted waterways. These garments include food pills; a water-purifying and drinking tube attached to the sleeve; and a water-testing tube trailing the fringe, like a 21st-century eco-cyborg tail. Gore-Tex, Outlast, waterproof Cordura, Solarweave UV—a suite of Anthropocene fabrics—combine to keep wearers comfortable in changing environments. The fashion-forward garment is also designed for climate collapse. It expands and floats. It has webbed water shoes. It brings us to imagine how we might inhabit permanently flooded cities, particularly when insurers pull out and buildings start crumbling, when drinking water turns saline and corporations control the supply

of bottled water, and disaster relief comes only to mansions via private helicopters. Is this atomized response the answer? Should we all become protected units? Or is the individual wearable home a first layer nested in ever-widening rings of infrastructure?

In one of Mattingly's *Wearable Home* sketches, the wearer's bowed head is covered by a hood with bendable photovoltaic cells and a satellite phone transmitter. Her body is hunched forward under a baggy suit that sags onto the floor. From this drawing, we infer humanity at its end, everyone cybernetically monitoring their own pulse through sensing nodes and feeding on mood-stabilizing pills, shielded from each other and the world outside. This is a scenario in some ways already present during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its enforced lockdowns, social distancing, endless Zoom interfacing, and remote living. The image tickles us into pondering future apocalyptic scenarios, a portrait of our moment. In being designed and distributed exclusively by a single Wearable Home Corporation, in the subtle sleight of hand of encasing an alternative experiment in corporate logic, Mattingly's life-providing garment offers a succinct image of our own Amazon times, in which a swelling corporate machine becomes the dominant purveyor of each and every means of life, from groceries and toiletries to media and the Essentials clothing lines—causal khaki stretch pants, quick-dry polo shirts, loose-fit performance shorts—the uniform of those who still have the means to get by. All, of course, delivered to us wherever we are, to better track our needs and locations and turn the data into fodder with which to invent our future needs and desires, turning us into flatter versions of ourselves.

In another image in Mattingly's *Wearable Homes* collection, a woman draped in a shimmering gold wearable home is walking away from the viewer through ankle-high flooding into a landscape of water. Lush mountains lie ahead in the distance. Above her, sunlight shines through storm clouds, bathing the woman, water, and mountains in gold. The woman is obviously deserting. But to where? If the glass-encased abomination in *The Road* signaled a non-space of absolute collapse, the lush mountains in the distance and the sunlight on them in Mattingly's drawing seem to mark a barren future that we continue to till, however futile, in an effort to unearth unforeseen possibilities.

The desert fathers abandoned a Roman Empire in ruin to establish monasteries and other life-ways to not only "people" Egypt's deserts but also make them blossom. In moments of crisis, people jump ship to create other civilizations and other ways of living together. We face the possibility of being more self-aware as participants in this process of civilizational dissolution and reconstitution than those who came before us. The drive to experiment and reinvent new tools for living (in all the variegated—soft and hard, constructive and deconstructive—senses of the word "living," which is, above all, irreducible to survival) is widespread, urgent, and may be the most viable path forward.

An unexpected trend in the US has been the refusal of so many people to, as former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich put it, "return to backbreaking or mind-numbing low-wage shit jobs."² It's a refusal that has produced record-high job openings, record-high rates of people quitting their job, and plummeting labor force participation rates. It's as if, spontaneous-

ly and collectively, the dream of abandoning the workplace that has motivated radical thinking for so long is being actualized. But the whole process feels enigmatic since, in place of a widely subscribed-to political call lying behind the desertion, it seems the very dynamics of socio-planetary instability are determining it. It isn't even knowledge of a coming collapse that is the catalyst, but merely a sentiment, an intuition, that things will never go back to how they were. It's a strengthening feedback loop, of course: the more we don't go back to how it was because it will no longer be how it was, the more how it was slides further away in the wake of our actions.

A fuzzy future, bereft of guarantees, is better than the present suffering we know exists. Whatever it was that kept the willingness to decamp from the status quo is falling away like the ice shelves that continually collapse into the sea. It's as if millions of people all at once looked up from their activity-transforming materials in order to begin to intervene in social relations. They became political actors merely by repositioning themselves, subtracting themselves from a process that was patterning their lives from its macro structural dimension to the very granular aspects of their everyday exchanges. Notably, much of this desertion of the workforce is occurring without any significant form of collectivity or solidarity (as in the labor struggles of the past). Still, these people are altering the very context of their lives, rather than attempting to slot themselves in the place that had been reserved for them. Their withdrawal wrests new possibilities from a barren future, in league with a new set of emerging desires to try things otherwise. Their refusal becomes a reconfiguration of life itself.

Arising within a burned-out, exhausted, and indebted population, the turn toward experimentation with other ways of living and the production of tools to enhance living amid the damage suggest at least an attempted mass exodus from existing civilizational apparatuses. If we can do it ourselves—not just knit scarves, but together provide our own means of existence at large scales—then why would we ever work for a boss? If we started considering what matters to us most and were able to shape our lives according to our own priorities, why would we ever give that control over our time and life back to jobs that break our backs and drain our souls to make others rich? Why would we continue to pledge ourselves to a system that needs to generate disposable populations and perpetuate suffering as a natural part of the way it runs? And why not start creating supply chains now, given the dismal state of global logistics networks? Why should the isolated person in a hazmat suit, traversing a broken landscape alone—as in Sturgill Simpson’s film *Make Art Not Friends*—be the endgame of our experiments?

Why not massive regional experimentation as well, territories of exchanges at once technical and logistical, circulatory, and cultural?

Beyond everything dark and negative, there is the faintest possibility that we will make something incredible from the wreckage: a secession of the plebs, 21st-century-style, and trialing the means to do so on an urbanized planet wracked by environmental and existential crises and governed by mind-melting algorithms and Big Tech platforms. For an Anthropocene in which capitalism continues to prevail is how we finally lope “soundlessly into the dark.”

1 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 110.

2 Robert Reich, “Is America Experiencing an Unofficial General Strike?,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/13/american-workers-general-strike-robert-reich>.